

## Spanish colonial architecture as selective authenticity in historical digital games

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**ABSTRACT:** Buildings play a major role in computer games set in the past, both as gameplay components and as elements of historical realism. Varying on the genre of the game they perform different functions, from the transition and movement possibilities they allow the player in action-adventure games like *Assassin's Creed* (Dow, 2013) to sedentary headquarters in strategy and management titles such as *Age of Empires* and *Civilization* (Bonner, 2014). My goal with this paper is to analyse the purposes of Spain's colonial architecture in computer games set in the period of the Spanish Monarchy's rule overseas. In order to achieve it, I will use Adam Chapman's theoretical and methodological framework to understand the games' historical epistemologies and ludonarratives, and Salvati and Bullinger's concept of *selective authenticity* to analyse the role of these buildings in evoking the past and giving meaning to it. Aided by these lenses, I will try to unravel the master narratives behind these titles and how they give meaning to the history of Spain and its former colonies.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical game studies; Historical videogames; Selective authenticity; Semiology; Mythistory; Spanish Empire; Colonial Latin America.

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**RESUMEN:** *La arquitectura colonial española como verosimilitud selectiva en videojuegos históricos.*- Los edificios juegan un papel crucial en los videojuegos ambientados en el pasado, tanto como componentes interactivos como elementos de realismo histórico. Sus funciones dependen del género videolúdico en el que estén representados: desde las posibilidades o dificultades que presentan a la hora de moverse por los mundos virtuales en los juegos de acción-aventura como *Assassin's Creed* hasta los cuarteles sedentarios en juegos de estrategia y gestión. El objetivo del presente artículo es analizar el propósito que persigue la arquitectura colonial española en los juegos digitales ambientado en el periodo en el que la Monarquía Hispánica gobernaba allende los mares. Para lograrlo, se utilizarán el marco teórico y aparato crítico de Adam Champan con el fin de desvelar el enfoque epistemológico y ludonarrativo de estos juegos, así como el concepto de *verosimilitud selectiva* de Salvati y Bullinger para determinar el rol de estos edificios a la hora de evocar una lectura particular del pasado. Mediante estas herramientas, se sacarán a relucir las macronarrativas de las que beben estos juegos y cómo éstas dotan de significado a la historia de España y de sus antiguas colonias.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Estudios del videojuego histórico; Videojuegos históricos; Verosimilitud selectiva; Semiología; Historia mito; Imperio Español; América Latina colonial.

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## INTRODUCTION

Havana, early 18<sup>th</sup> century. After disembarking on Cuba's main port, I wander across the docks busy with the activities of sailors, merchants, and soldiers. I am unfamiliar with the city, so the first thing that crosses my mind is to locate some places of interest and, hopefully, find a clue that will lead me to my next objective. The first rational step would be taking a look at my map, but it is almost entirely blank. And despite the many traders around, no one seems to sell a city chart. Moreover, when I try to ask one of the Spanish riflemen squads that watch over the order in the piers for directions, they warn me to stay back and stick to my business. Therefore, the most reliable option I have left is to find a high spot. I look around and I identify the perfect place at my left: the bell tower of a church that stands above the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. Soon, I arrive at the temple's square, where I find the *Basilica Menor de San Francisco de Asís*, a sacred place built between 1719 and 1738 to be home of the Franciscan order. Peasants stroll, converse and do business covered by the shadow of its beautiful Baroque façade. I take my time to examine its multiple architectural elements: the three rounded archway doors, each one flanked by pilasters, crowned by the prominent central keystone; the little oculus above the lateral entries, the fenced niches of its second story, its multiple belfries... But what I seek with my examination is different of what an art historian or a Catholic devotee would find; the first, beauty, the second, God's majesty. My goal is more mundane: finding a way to climb the 42-meter high tower to reach its highest peak. Once I have made it to the top, I use my incredibly developed sight to scout the city surroundings. In that very moment, my once near-to-empty map is suddenly dotted with icons that point the location of treasure chests, sea shanties, assassin contracts, shops, and so. Since I have no more reason to stay squatted at the tower's spire, I briefly enjoy a last panoramic view of Havana before performing a leap of faith in order to continue my quest. Unlike the Franciscan monks that dwell in its base, for me the church has already fulfilled its role.

The former paragraph was a narration of a generic gameplay fragment of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft, 2013), a computer game and sixth major instalment in Ubisoft's best-selling franchise *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-2017). Set in different periods of the past, one of the series' main trademarks is the accurate portrayal of historical cities that users can freely roam. In this ludic interpretation of history, encapsulated in the series' motto '*the past is our playground*', monuments and buildings play a key role. This is, they are components the player interacts with and arranges not only to follow the game's goals, but that can generate in the process particular discourses of meaning-making about the past (Chapman, 2013). However, historical architecture does not play the same narrative role in all digital simulations of past. Although being an element that anchors a popular image of the past to the fictional world presented in the

game, these structures perform different functions in the explanation of early epochs depending on their relationship with the rules that govern them. Therefore, rules inform fiction or, in this case, a fictive version of the past, and vice versa (Juul, 2005 pp. 163-196). In this article I will delve into this idea and show how buildings associated to the Spanish Empire favour the emergence of particular narratives about the colonization of the Americas by this Peninsular kingdom, but by following different strategies depending on the game's genre. Game genres, unlike literary and film ones, not only set a mood or introduce the audience's expectations, but also determine how consumers interact with the ludic artefacts (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Pajares-Tosca, 2008 pp. 45-96). Therefore, they offer a range of narrative possibilities, pathways the historical discourse can flow through. I will prove that architecture is a pivotal component of the ludonarrative meaning-making about the past, which is different from academic literature, re-enactment, or historical drama on screen.

## THEORETICAL APPROACH

In the current sociocultural context, there exist many ways of giving meaning to the past. However, the sanctioned and most 'reliable' medium is still the written text. Furthermore, in order to be appreciated as objective by society, the historical explanation has to follow a number of ritualized guidelines. This means a particular kind of vocabulary, limited forms of expression, a certain distance between the author and her discourse, footnotes and bibliography to support her claims, etc. Moreover, to be considered truly objective, the historical discourse has to be placed in a renowned academic journal that will probably be read only by a handful of colleagues. The codes that rule over this specific form of communication may provide the information with scientific rigour, but it does not mean it may be entirely accurate. In fact, the apparent objectivity of this particular medium tends to discredit other formats that offer alternative explanations of the past. These forms have been pejoratively interpreted as popular ways of dealing with our heritage. Luckily, thanks to the linguistic turn tendencies popularized in the decade of the 1970s, since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century widespread types of relationship between past and present have started being accepted as legitimate by professional historians, even studied by them (De Groot, 2009). Regarding the audio-visual representations of the past, the works of authors like Marc Ferro (1988) and Robert Rosenstone (1998, 2006) opened a path that would be soon followed by scholars researching the videogame form. The increasing importance of visual communication in our mass-media society may made:

...possible that visual culture will once again change the nature of our relationship to the past. This does not mean giving up on attempts at truth, but somehow recognizing that there may be more than one sort of historical truth, or that the truths conveyed in the visu-

al media may be different from, but not necessarily in conflict with, truths conveyed in words (Rosenstone, 1998 p. 43).

We may argue that Rosenstone and his colleagues do not try to raise history on film to the status of History, but to take the discipline of History down from her ivory tower and put it at the same level of the remaining forms of heritage. This is, academic literature is only one of the possibilities of ‘getting closer’ to a past that no longer exists, but it is still cloaked in a scientific shroud. In Hayden White’s words,

The demand for the scientization of history represents only the statement of a preference for a specific modality of historical conceptualization, the grounds of which are either moral or aesthetic, but the epistemological justification of which still remains to be established (White, 1973: xii).

The impossibility of reaching an epistemologically objective knowledge about the past, not even by the most rigorous and honest research, sheds light to the true nature of the academic discourse. In an age labelled as post-modern, the scientific and aseptic status of the historical explanations derived from our disciplinary research has been put into question from a number of positions: feminism, post- and de-colonial studies, and media studies, to name a few (Jenkins, 1995 pp. 6-7). Its narrative status has been one of the main controversial positions through which the monopoly of knowledge by academic History has been attacked. Accordingly, the relationship of equivalence between ‘history’ and ‘the past’ is severed. The latter is understood as a reality bygone in all its vast complexity, from which we only conserve a limited number of data. Meanwhile, the former is comprised of the process of examination, critique and interpretation of these historical sources, resulting in knowledge narratively arranged in a specific form (White, 1992 pp. 17-39). Narrative is the communication strategy that makes the past comprehensive through a process in which different elements of the historical discourse are given a particular meaning and then connected in specific ways. In order to do so, historians draw from a number of *mythoi* that are shared not only with their colleagues, but also with their target audiences. Therefore, *mythoi* constitute the master signs common to the context in which history is written, the explanations that rule discourses with specific storylines (Jenkins, 1995 pp. 136-181). Institutionalized and scientized history, rooted in the Enlightenment and consolidated during the 19th century, has generated a number of practices and codes that mask the artificial nature of the historical discourse and equal it to the past (White, 1992 pp. 43-45). This point of view does nothing more than blurry a process of interpretation and representation that is articulated from the present and serves the future.

This is, narrativity is the way the past acquires meaning and becomes history. Additionally, if narrativity is the common point of most of the expressive forms exercised by human cultures, the Westernized historical discipline

is just one of many possibilities. And as any other narrative, it symbolizes historical events and processes by reducing the complex reality bygone to a number of specific signs full of meaning, therefore being allegorical (White, 1992 pp. 41-74). In order to face this, the only way history as a discipline may regain its honesty goes through making peace with its own fictiveness, and thus being able to generate spaces to criticize itself and, at the same time, allow other expressive forms to communicate with it.

Computer games can also be narrative tools, although the closing years of the last century saw the publication of two books that approached the video game from different perspectives that, at the moment, were considered antagonistic. On one hand, a Scandinavian scholar named Espen Aarseth published *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature* (1997). In what has become one of the seminal texts of game studies, Aarseth defined video games as dynamic structures that he identified as *cybertexts* in opposition to hypertexts: the ergodic nature of the former allows users to perform configurative actions that create new texts from a common base system, while the latter – for example, a web page – limit the interaction of the user to exploratory operations that does not alter the preconfigured structure of the texts. This revolutionary approach served as the foundation of what would be defined *ludology*, this is, the focus on the study of games as complex systems of rules which main function is enable the act of play. On the other hand, the appearance that same year of Janet Murray’s *Shakespeare on the Holodeck* (1997) introduced the conception of games as narrative artefacts. Using as a metaphor an immersive recreational device featured in the TV series *Star Trek*, the American author argued that video games were next step in storytelling techniques, thus succeeding literature and film. For her, the four characteristics of computer games – spatial, encyclopaedic, participatory and successive nature – permit the final understanding of the author’s creative vision by allowing the reader/user to manipulate the elements that configure the narration (Planells de la Maza, 2015 pp. 75-77).

These different approximations to the same object of analysis, although complementary, were interpreted as confronting ones. In a very short time-span (1997-mid 2000s) many scholars took positions beside one of these authors: the ones who embraced Aarseth’s perspective were proclaimed *ludologists*, while Murray’s colleagues were signalled as *narratologists*. In fact, the whole debate was fuelled by the perception of certain ludologists (Gonzalo Frasca, Markku Eskelinen, Aki Järvinen, Jesper Juul and Aarseth himself) that the study of games required a particular and independent area of knowledge – which Aarseth named *Game Studies* – but was instead being “colonised” by other disciplines such as literature, drama, theatre and film studies. To justify their position, they argued that games were just systems of play that could not tell stories by themselves. However, as time passed and more research on games from both sides was carried on – the DiGRA Conference of 2003 being a particular mile-

stone –, those who initially joined the rather intransigent lines of ludology finally accepted that games could be narrative tools, that games could tell stories (Planells de la Maza, 2015: 81-83). Especially interesting in this reconciliation process is the figure of Marie-Laure Ryan, whose efforts on combining both perspectives led to the conception of *ludonarratology*. Ryan understands games as simulators, in a very similar way to ludologists. However, she also claims that these systems, although not being narrative *per se*, are generators of potential narratives. In other words, through their systems of rules and the inclusion of signs, games create ludofictional worlds that players can explore creatively and each of them in a unique way (Ryan, 2006 pp. 197-203). Moreover, Ryan's proposal has helped overcome a debate that was being perceived as empty and allowed the emergence of fresh theories and methodologies for the study of digital ludic objects.

Roughly at the same time, the video game form started being addressed by professional historians. William Uricchio was the first author to scrutinize video games set in the past (Chapman, Foka & Westin, 2017: 1-2). He identified two broad categories of historical games: on the one hand, specific simulations that reproduced particular events in great detail; on the other hand, non-specific simulations deal with wider timespans and complex historical processes (Uricchio, 2005: 328-330). This early categorization has served authors like Adam Chapman (2013, 2016) to build a theoretical apparatus based on different epistemologies to the study of historical simulations. In addition, Uricchio was the first author in pointing the close relationship between commercial videogames and hegemonic master narratives about the past, although he saw the transgressive potential of the medium by stating that "...rather than relying implicitly on narratives of truth, progress, and the American way, a new dimension could be added to play, more coherently addressing history's rich complexity and relevance" (Uricchio, 2005: 336).

Moreover, historical discourse in the game form is constrained by the ontological status of the medium; this is, a ludic interaction between the player and the system. In order for them to be playful, computer games – unlike more serious simulations – tend to privilege fun over an attachment to correct and 'scientific' versions of the past. This is one of the causes why professional historians have traditionally not been interested in the analysis of these new ways of writing history or, in the worst case, claiming that games show a wrong and dangerous version of the past. However, those professionals that, instead, accepted the medium as a valid format have approached this tricky question from a smart point of view. Nowadays, among most of the historical game scholar community is accepted that games do not show an *accurate* version of the past, but an *authentic* one (Elliott & Kapell, 2013 pp. 357-369). In other words, most games – especially the commercial ones – are not about "...getting the historical facts correct', but [are] about getting the experience and expectations of the past 'right'" (Elliott & Kapell,

2013 p. 361). If *accuracy* seeks the fact in a correct way, *authenticity* is preoccupied in getting the right feel about the historical epoch remediated. Still, a key question remains: how does a game achieve an authentic feel? One of the most interesting answers points to a process of *selective authenticity*. Due to the factional nature of the medium, that obliges developers to make up characters and situations – although referential to a former reality –, creators have to recur to strategies that may link the fictional universe of the game to general historical consciousness. This said, *selective authenticity* "...may be understood as a form of narrative license, in which an interactive experience of the past blends historical representation with generic conventions and audience expectations..." and explain "...how game designers draw upon a chain of signifiers assembled from historical texts, artefacts and popular representations of..." history (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013 pp. 154). It is important to understand that, with audience, we are referring to a default, pre-conceived spectator.

The *authenticity* thesis has proven to be incredibly popular among scholars, because many use it as a category of analysis. Most of the studies agree in visuals being a crucial element in achieving an acceptable degree of authenticity, this is, historical realisticness. For example, a franchise like *Brothers in Arms* has to resort to visual sources, especially photography and newsreel fragments of World War II, just to compensate for the lack of realism in other parcels of history, such as the comradeship between combatants. 3D models of soldiers lack the dramatic force of real humans; therefore, developers included a bunch of real photographs in order to wake empathy among players (Rejack, 2007 pp. 411-425). Another example is *Assassin's Creed III*, a game set in New England during the American Revolution. Even though the game's representation of the social and racial relations in the English colonies of the New World might be problematic, by focusing on meticulously reproducing colonial architecture – especially its most prominent landmarks – creators achieved a high degree of authenticity (Shaw, 2015 pp. 4-24). Still, *authenticity* has its shortcomings and drawbacks. In *Call of Duty: World at War* – another game set in World War II –, archival footage works both an authenticator of the video game narrative but also undermines the player's immersion (Baron, 2010 p. 305). This tension between the expected feel about the past and the development of a pleasure experience of play always creates tensions that tend to favour the latter. In Rejack's words:

...the game displays a continual negotiation between a credible kind of re-enactment and a pleasing game experience (...) Any time the developers decide to include something that increases the game's verisimilitude [*with history*], this factor needs to be measured against how it alters the gameplay (Rejack, 2007 pp. 419-420)

Finally, *selective authenticity* strategies are often used to implicitly encourage particular explanations about the past and, at the same time, naturalise them. For example,

Gish sees in the use of these strategies a new form of historicism, because the authoritarian tone of many games with historical settings – he refers particularly to first person action games – does not leave room for questions, only to experience the past as it was. Therefore, the medium constantly re-appropriates history and adapts it to interested explanations, often related to reductive and jingoistic narratives (Gish, 2010 pp. 167-180). In a similar way, Hong states that too much focus on *authenticity* might be a tactic to avoid controversial historical issues but excluding them from the representation only perpetuates them. So, games tend to do a “...pragmatic pillaging of historical, mythical and ritual elements (...) according to games’ own technical, economic and cultural imperatives” (Hong, 2015 p. 36), leaving other spheres of reality – although past, and therefore lost – outside. To put it bluntly:

That is the tyranny of realism. It forces game makers and critics alike to focus too much on questions of accuracy, rather than emancipatory possibility. It is also indicative of how imagined audiences over-determine the stories companies are willing to tell (Shaw, 2015 p. 21).

This self-interested remediation of history has made scholars extend Uricchio’s affirmation of non-specific simulations as carriers of ideology to every game, not only those set in the past (Elliott & Kapell, 2013 pp. 362). Unfortunately, unlike other manifestations of life in society such as politics, economics, or education, games – as a medium – tend to be very careful not to be associated with a particular ideology. It is very common that developers justify the presumed harmless nature of their product’s content by stating that they were only pursuing an entertainment goal. And this is a useful tactic because the very nature of media is to make itself invisible. It is in the nature of media “...to invisibilise or neutralise their artificiality, their factitiousness, and most of all: their arbitrariness” (Nohr, 2014 p. 7). In other words, although their content may seem transparent – for example, a window to the past –, it is dishonestly blurred by the form – this is, the medium –. Therefore, when put in a particular context, “...media are not carriers but discrete and ideologically affected and formalized framings of circulation” (Nohr, 2014 p. 8). Moreover, a particularity of the specific medium of gaming is that it has become self-referential by appropriating certain dynamics of play and leisure and elevating them to the real of the myth and the ritual. The important thing here is that these myths and rituals are not arbitrary, but they are ultimately inflected by market imperatives (Hong, 2015 pp. 38-40).

Moving on to games dealing particularly with the past – but bearing in mind that, by default, every commercial game will carry the ideology of neoliberalism with it –, it is interesting how historical narratives are assembled. Elliott and Kapell, following authors like Lloyd S. Kramer, William H. McNeill, and Bruce Lincoln, stress the fact that the past featuring in digital simulations is not exactly history, but a different kind of construct called *mythistory*. Starting from the premise that myth is ideology in nar-

rative form, the authors continue stating that “...a story that contains a worldview is largely the purpose of not just a myth, but of history as well” (Elliott & Kapell, 2013 p. 362). The difference between professional history and those explanations of the past identified as mythical is that the former is built upon accurate facts arranged in a logical way – usually chorographical order –. However, behind this apparent scientific covering – based on the conventions of the discipline – lies a particular way of selecting, using and interpreting evidence that pursues ideological goals. Moreover, the little interaction between the product delivered by historian – the book – and the reader, who usually can only question the explanation mentally, reinforces its authoritarian nature in which an ideology is imposed. On the contrary, the playful nature of games – what justifies the medium, as accurate facts justify traditional history – allows players to explore all the possibilities within the developer’s model of meaning-making of the past (Elliott & Kapell, 2013 pp. 362-367). Therefore, both are ideologically pinned explanations, but they differ in their techniques and media/genre conventions.

Despite the differences mentioned above, digital games are influenced in a high degree by particular explanations produced by academic history. As a globalised medium produced from and for the West – although the dynamics are slowly changing, and Japan has always been the exception to the rule –, their historical discourses tend to privilege Western-centred narratives. European imperialism and colonisation is the *leitmotiv* of most of games ascribed to the genre of strategy and management, even those with no clear historical settings – for example sci-fi or fantasy –. Some of the most remarkable titles are *Europa Universalis*, *Age of Empires*, *Sid Meier’s Civilization*, *Empire Earth*, *Anno*, *Imperial Glory*, and *Total War*. There are ongoing studies on how they re-mediate imperialist master narratives or fail to address history from a non-Western point of view (Mukherjee, 2015; Dillon, 2008; Bonner, 2014; Donecker, 2014).

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

When this Eurocentric interpretation of history widespread across a medium and becomes hegemonic, it turns into a master narrative and, therefore, a myth. This is, general explanations about the world that are partially hidden in textual, visual, and performative discourses. I follow Roland Barthes’s semiological approach to the study of myths, that looks into artificial but naturalized ‘signs’ by analysing the sociocultural relationship between its two components: signifier and signified. The study of how a myth is embedded in a language – and video games are one of them because they have their own elements of signification (Pérez Latorre, 2012 pp. 23-39) – comes from a twofold perspective: the one of language and the one of myth. First, language builds its signs by the association between a physical element (a word, an image) and a mental concept. However, in the mythological system, the linguistic sign becomes a ‘form’ that is

parasited by the mythical signified, a particular concept that is ideologically charged. In order to be effective, the concept has to be subliminal, partly concealed in the form as a natural part of it. If its inclusion in the signifier makes it explicit, it loses its persuasive function, while being completely hidden makes it invisible and, hence, ineffective (Barthes, 1972 pp. 119-131). Therefore, the relationship between the linguistic sign and the mythical concept is a complex one, described by Barthes as:

...a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses its ambiguous signifier, at once intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural (Barthes, 1972 pp. 121-122)

Myth can be concealed in any type of linguistic signifier, architectural structures included. Barthes uses the example of a house typical from the Basque country in the middle of Paris to illustrate this process. In its geographical context of origin, this is, the North of Spain, the structural and decorative characteristics of the habitation blend in the landscape and does not explicitly interpellates the passer-by about its nature. However, when the viandant walks into a Basque-style chalet while strolling through the streets of Paris, the uniqueness of the house explicitly reminds her of its *basquity*, even though the structural and functional characteristics of the original dwelling are gone and the only ethnic elements it conserves are purely decorative: the asymmetrical roof with red tiles, the dark brown half-timbering, its wattle-and-daub front, etc. (Barthes, 1972 pp. 123-124). Here, the architectural signifier of the Basque country acts as a simplified form that, in the sociocultural context of the urban landscape of the French capital city, becomes a translucent recipient of the concepts of rurality and exotism, maybe signifying the instrumentalization of the countryside by the city dwellers. I argue that we can detect a similar process in the way buildings linked to specific historical nations are depicted in video games set in the past, acting as *selective authenticity* signifiers that, in relationship with the rules of the game, become significant that work inside the general master narrative of the ludic artefact.

TABLE 1. Myth as a semiological system (Barthes, 1972:113).

	Signifier	Signified	
Language	Sign		MYTH
	SIGNIFIER (FORM)		
	SIGN (SIGNIFICATION)		

Computer games, as any other language, require a specific set of tools for its analysis. Regarding to the epistemological nature of computer simulations of the past, Adam

Chapman proposes two wide bookend categories, any type of simulation fitting between them. On the one hand he puts the *realist simulation*; on the other, the *conceptual simulation*. For each case, the ludic aesthetic of historical description – this is, the way the game’s components such as rules, visuals, soundscapes, written language, etc. represent the past – differs radically. As the ones before him, Chapman uses Alun Munslow’s classification and applies it to both categories. Therefore, realist simulations have a number of characteristics that bring them close to reconstructionist epistemologies (Chapman, 2016 pp. 61-69):

1. They generally work by aiming to *show* the past ‘how it was’, i.e. as it appeared to historical agents of the time.
2. Realist historical simulations are most obviously characterised by their high-degree of visual specificity - visual detail, visual fidelity (realisticness), little metaphorisation, and encourage the ‘suspension of disbelief’.
3. Their use of stylistic techniques for visual ‘realism’ is drawn from a long cultural history of representation, especially the codes and tropes that are used by Western cinema.
4. Their scope is often limited in time and space, due to the cost of implementing realism in detail.
5. Tied to the diegetic level of the historical agent - at least in gameplay moments - and therefore tend to focus on small groups of individuals. They function as historical re-enactment tools, and to avoid problems of historical agency they focus on common historical agents with little power to influence grand events and processes.
6. The *aesthetics of historical description* mainly operate through the *audio-visual aspect*. Therefore, they feature heavy and detailed visual data loads.
7. Their discourses are easy for audiences to interpret because they easily engage with existing realist visual discourses and tropes from film or television.
8. The player has spatial agency/movement and control over the visual gaze/camera.

The other bookend is the conceptual simulation, a type of game that has a lot in common with constructionist epistemologies in the traditional academic sense. Although many types of ludic artefacts may feature elements of the conceptual simulation, this approach is the trademark of genres included in the strategy and management label. The following characteristics help us understand conceptual simulations as constructionist narratives (Chapman, 2016 pp. 69-82):

1. They tell about the past without purporting to *show* it as it appeared.
2. Are characterised by abstract audio-visual representations - similar to board game tokens such as cards and pieces –, use a lot of menus, symbols, charts and tables. These strategies of historical representation are in relation to abstract concepts constructionist historians generally use.

3. They demand a higher level of interpretation because aesthetics and graphics are not as detailed as those in realist simulations. There are multiple semiotic channels by which the historical representation is spread.
4. Representation mostly built through procedural rhetoric - “procedural rhetoric is the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively... its arguments are made... through the authorship of *rules* of behaviour” (Bogost, 2007, cited in Chapman, 2016 p. 71).
5. The *aesthetics of historical description* mostly operate through the *ludic aspect*. This means that the rules are the carriers of historical meaning, rather than the visual models.
6. Feature a macro scope that no human agent could possibly experience, but which at historical narratives traditionally operate, this is, work on the historian’s diegetic level rather than the historical agent’s.

This epistemological approach gives the researcher some hints of the narrative possibilities of the game he aims to study and a prediction of what he would encounter when diving into it. However, theory must be accompanied by some methodological tools in order to function. The latter have come in the form of an analytical framework consisting of five separated but overlapping categories that are key to comprehend how history exists in the game medium nowadays: time, space, simulation, narrative, and affordances (Chapman, 2016 pp. 17-22).

Time and space, though appearing as differentiated categories and their need of different analytical concepts, are often studied together since “... both, through play, control and determine time (history), and thus become singularly historical narrative” (Chapman, 2016 p. 112). Regarding time in digital simulations of the past, the author notices that it tends to feature in two different ways. One way is the real time structure, where it follows a 1:1:1 relation: this is, historical time equals the fictive time and also game time. This use of time is usually featured in realist simulations, this making sense because their focus on the experience of the historical agent. Realist time also favours the actualised re-enactment often found in realist simulations, this is, overcoming historical challenges of a physical nature – aiming, shooting and reloading a musket, sailing a boat, etc. –. On the other hand, conceptual simulations tend to feature a discrete time structure where historical time, diegetic time and play time are no longer equal. This temporal structure, however, allows the emergence of ludonarratives more similar to historical writing, because the player can stop and skip time in order to explore the game environment and use it to generate her own historical discourse. Tense is another variable of time in games, since it varies: realist simulations privilege the present tense, while conceptual ones often maintain some sense of both present and past tense

– while the player is experiencing the game, a lot of information is presented in past tense – (Chapman, 2016 pp. 90-118).

At the same time, space is the flipside of time. Playful landscapes are crucial because they determine “...what historical narratives the game can support by structuring what can be done by players and by functioning as a means of storytelling for developers” (Chapman, 2016 p. 100). Here we also encounter a dichotomy in how space is treated, since Chapman identifies two extremes: the narrative garden versus narrative canvas. The former can be found in realist historical simulations, acting as a long-embellished aisle the player explores in a rather linear way. Although she can take detours and stop in certain stages, the only way she can make the narration advance is by moving forward until she reaches the end. This type of playground has been compared to a rollercoaster because the player is encouraged to follow a specific route and face the challenges of actualised re-enactment while doing some kind of historical tourism, a performance not very different to jumping on a wagon in an amusement park (Reisner, 2013 pp. 247-260). Opposed to the garden structure is the space as canvas, where space is seen as a resource in which, and from which, players can craft historical narratives. The landscape is here conceived like a sandbox with elements the player, like an author, can rearrange in order to create his own historical meanings. The linearity of space as a garden is lost, and the player can fly over the canvas modifying it as she is granted new tools such as technologies – i.e. the domestication of crops and animals, the Norfolk four-course system, the steam machine -, political systems – i.e. feudalism, absolutism, democracy -, military units – i.e. cataphractii, musketeers, Panzer IV tanks -, and remarkable buildings – castles, factories, Ankor Wat -, to cite a few examples (Chapman, 2016 pp. 100-106). Therefore, space as canvas does not offer “...the promise of a retelling that will probably never take place, but the active process of discursive writing through play” (Chapman, 2016 p. 105).

However, both space as canvas and space as garden share some remarkable characteristics. One is the constant identification of space with power. The virtual landscape is designed as a thing to conquer, control and exploit, be it by eliminating the contenders that populate it or by owning and extracting its natural resources. These dynamics result in narratives obsessed with colonialism, imperialism, warfare and other forms of domination (Chapman, 2016 pp. 106-109).

The third and fourth categories of analysis are narrative and simulation, and they should be studied together, too. Games, as narrative products, follow certain strategies and feature particular elements that allow certain ways of storytelling. We can differentiate two types of storytelling in games: framing narrative and ludonarrative. The former describes a discourse very similar to film, where the player becomes a passive viewer as she is not allowed to actively interact with the narration. It usually appears in the form of cut scenes that aim to add drama and meaning to the gameplay sections and also, in the

case of games set in the past, to localise the action in a particular time and place. However, frame narrative moments are also used to introduce *framing goals*, a concept that will be explained further. In opposition to framing narratives we find ludonarrative. Unique to games, this narration need the player active engagement to advance and reveal itself. The elements bonded to this type of narrative are the *lexia* and the *framing controls*, that will be explained in depth in the following paragraph. Ultimately, the ludonarrative must be understood as the combined effort between the developer and the player to generate a number of historical discourses. Thus, the user is not completely free to build the explanation of the past she wants but has to work with the elements designers have created – and with their meanings – in order to create her preferred discourse.

Regarding the elements, we have mentioned three of them: *lexia*, *framing controls*, and *framing goals*. The first one is composed of “...combinable ludic representations of agents, objects, social structures, architecture, processes, actions and concepts (...) that affords players particular actions in relation to a particular representation and the construction of the *ludonarrative* that is formed through the player combining these *lexia* in particular ways in their gameplay” (Chapman, 2016 p. 123). This is, every object, option, and item the player can interact with – both actively and passively – is a *lexia*. This makes almost everything in a game a *lexia*. However, they alone have little value: they become meaningful when combined. This is done through the *framing controls*, “...syntactical structures that govern the usage of *lexia*, determining the possible constitutive relationships between a game’s semantics (...), prevent the ludonarrative from becoming completely incoherent and/or becoming non-complicit with the intended *framing narrative*, ensuring that possible combinations of *lexia* maintain some kind of coherency” (Chapman, 2016 p. 125). Finally, the *framing goals* set the objectives of the game: what the player, through the combination of *lexia* thanks to the *framing tools*, has to achieve in order to complete a section, a level, or even the game.

The last category of analysis of Chapman’s methodological framework are *affordances*. This concept is taken from J.J and E. J. Gibson, and it explores the relationship between the environment and animal – including human – activities that are permitted by it. Chapman considers this idea key to the study of games in general and ludic digital representation of the past particularly, because “...games, as particularly interactive media, are especially concerned with the relationships of the past *afforded* (what could or could not be done) rather than simply what things or events *were*, at least in their gameplay” (Chapman, 2016 p. 174). The type and nature of affordances a certain game allows is restricted by a number of factors: the ludic and entertaining nature of the game – tends to be above all, since games are *ágon* and need to be fair in order to allow players win –, technical and technological possibilities, cultural pressures, genre tropes and conventions, market demands – including the target audience expectations –. Furthermore, especially interesting for historical games is the fact that “...affor-

dances are also likely to be partially determined by their referential status, i.e. evidence, the developer-historian’s understanding, interpretation and ideology, and epistemological and story/content decisions” (Chapman, 2016 p. 174). Depending on how a game manages and establishes its affordances, it can behave in a way or another. Chapman sees three key possibilities: games designed as heritage environments, games acting as re-enactment experiences, and games performing as the historian’s toolbox (Chapman, 2016 pp. 173-175).

The first category compresses all realistic games that allow players stroll and sightsee simulated environments of the past. For example, in *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* the user is encouraged to explore the streets of Paris during the French Revolution and see how they looked like – or, more precisely, how do we think they looked like –. She can climb monuments and pay attention to architectural details or understand the social and cultural function of these buildings by watching *non-player characters* (NPCs) interact with and around them. Therefore, games can become a powerful learning tool for some aspects of history, a tool that, however, has to be used critically. In this kind of games, player is encouraged to explore an experience the past-as-history, in a very similar way to heritage sites. Spatial agency is crucial to these simulations, since it determines the degree of exploration of the virtual space: the more spatial agency, the greater the possibilities. Furthermore, the level of accuracy is very important in these products, since their appeal and goal are closely linked to how exactly they can simulate the physical appearance of the past (Chapman, 2016 pp. 173-180). Some franchises that excel in this trade, for example the aforementioned *Assassin’s Creed* series in which “...players are offered the exploration of heritage environments representing the Holy Land during the Third Crusade, Renaissance Italy, America during the War of Independence and Seven Years War, the Golden Age of Piracy Caribbean, Paris during the French Revolution and Victorian Era London” (Chapman, 2016 p. 179). This means that “...the narrative format of *Assassin’s Creed II* encourages its player to interact with its in an imaginative and interpretive way” (Dow, 2013: 227).

Games as re-enactment share most of the qualities of games as heritage, since they are also favoured by the *realist simulation* of the past. In fact, most of heritage games are also tools for re-enactment, since they user-controlled character tends to be a historical agent. These games feature challenges that go beyond the simple sightseeing and demand the player to historically understand *lexia* and manipulate them in order to advance. These two principles lead to separate types of challenges: *exploratory* and *performatory*. He follows Linderoth (2013) and defines the former type of challenge as the ones in which “...the challenge lies in knowing what action to take, but performing the action is relatively easy” (Chapman, 2016: 182), while the latter kind “...are those wherein the player is supposed to take are generally clear, but taking these actions can be challenging” (Chapman, 2016 pp. 182) and rely on the user’s ability to correctly perform them. However, games and the way they input player ac-



tion – this is, through the use of controllers and buttons – fail to train the player in the *performatory affordances* these challenges entail. This is, a player cannot experiment the difficulty of successfully aiming and firing a rifle in the same way a soldier did. However, she can experience almost the same *exploratory challenges* as the historical agent: for example, knowing that staying behind cover would increase her chances to survive or that firing a small weapon against enemy armour is of little use (Chapman, 2016 pp. 182-186). Although the consequences for each one is different – games have negotiable consequences and war doesn't (Juul, 2011 pp. 41-43) –, the *affordances* remain very similar. Furthermore, due to the physical nature of the challenges and affordances these realistic games feature, Chapman argues that the type of re-enactment they allow is an *actualised* one, against the *empathic re-enactment* that focus on feeling and need bodily involvement (Chapman, 2016 pp. 186-188).

Open-ontological game structures, those featuring in conceptual simulations and linked to constructionist epistemologies, also set challenges and allow affordances. However, they do it in a different way from realist simulations. Through their use of time and space, these games present *exploratory challenges* similar to the ones the historian finds when approaching the past. Through their numerous *lexia* and varied *framing controls* they also permit a level of creativity way beyond the capabilities of the reconstructionist simulation. Although the player is free to arrange the elements of the past in the way the historian does, her liberty is constrained by the value given by the developers to the *lexia* and the *framing controls*, restrictions often placed by already existing theories, ideology, and argumentation. “These spaces provide us with ready-made structures within which to perform these experiments, preventing them quickly becoming overwhelming or incoherent, while still allowing us significant narrative agency” (Chapman, 2016 p. 190). Therefore, the type of *affordance* these simulations encourage always produce counterfactual narratives allowing the player to write alternate histories by using the tools and practices of the historian applied to a particular interpretation of history, this is, the historian-developer's (Chapman, 2016 pp. 189-194, 231-257).

## CASE STUDIES

In this section I will apply the aforementioned tools to the analysis of the two selected products: *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal, 2013) and *Age of Empires III* (Microsoft/Ensemble Studios, 2005-2007). Why have I selected these games, and not different ones? First of all, both games fall into the category of Triple A products, a category characterized by big budgets, capital-intensive and high sales – regardless of the type and size of the market, from the mainstream to the *niche* –; this is an approach derived from the analysis of production rather than discourse or reception (Nieborg, 2017: 17-18). Second, because they offer a good example to test Chapman's classification of historical simulations. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* falls more into the *realist*

*simulation* family, while *Age of Empires III* is closer to the *conceptual simulation*'s end of the spectre. However, both possess elements typical from the opposite type of game, this makes their strategies of historical representation almost hybrid and makes their comparison easier. This will also help me bring the ludo-semiological analysis to its limit, in order to see which signs are linked to a particular kind of tradition of representation and which ones are common to the video-ludic language in particular – and the audio-visual language in general –. And lastly, because their release dates, separated by almost a decade, can give us hints of the politics of historical representation in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Age of Empires III

Let's start with the analysis of the older one. *Age of Empires III*, as the number on its title points, is the third instalment in the franchise that has the same name. The original *Age of Empires*, released in 1997, became an emblematic example of the Real-Time Strategy genre, which flourished in the closing days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The setting chosen for the first instalment was a broad interpretation of the Ancient Era, mixing playable ‘civilizations’ like Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks and Shangs, to name a few. The years 1999-2000 saw the commercialization of the first sequel, *Age of Empires II* and its expansion pack: this time players were taken to the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. If we follow the logic of numbers, *Age of Empires III* would have been the natural next step of the franchise. However, between *Age of Empires II* and *III*, Ensemble Studios produced a *spin-off* focused on a mythological interpretation of Ancient history. This is important to note, since *Age of Empires III* is, chronologically speaking, the successor of the first two instalments, but its game design draws from *Age of Mythology*.

Like most of real-time strategy games, a typical game of *Age of Empires* consists in developing a civilization and recruiting an army to overwhelm rival factions. In the vanilla version of the game, users can choose to play as one of the following colonizing powers: the British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, German and Ottoman empires. The framing objective is, therefore, the military domination of the game's canvas space. Games are played on a map that represents a particular region of the American continent and can be explored from a bird's-eye view. Each player starts with a tiny settlement consisting of a town centre and a number of settlers. In order to raise a powerful military force, users have to collect three types of resources – food, wood and coin – that are spread across the map and use them to build different types of structures. Buildings, in general terms, serve a number of purposes: production of soldiers, extraction of natural resources, improvement of unit and structure's characteristics and abilities, development of technologies, and defence<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, the player also has to explore the uncharted parts of the play space in order to locate more resources – including experience for the player's explorer –, make contact with native set-

tlements and trade route outposts, and discover the location of her enemies' settlements. Once one player's civilization is developed enough, she can send her armies to vanquish the rivals' bases. An average game is won when all the enemies' structures are destroyed or when all the rivals withdraw from the game.

As playful *lexia*, buildings work as fundamental means of victory. While playing the former role, the construction of structures is necessary for the development of the game, and each type fills one or several roles, some of them crucial ones. For example, town centres and houses are fundamental in every colony: the former allows the construction of the settlers that will gather resources and build more structures, while each one of the latter slightly increases the maximum of population the settlement can support. Other structures are optional, but in order to win the player has to build a combination of them: barracks, stables, and artillery foundries produce military units; while mills and farms allow settlers to gather food from the earth – therefore allowing to move from a hunter-gatherer economy to one build on agriculture and livestock –. Furthermore, outposts, walls and forts play a defensive role and dominate the map by blocking the path of enemy units or actively attacking them when in range. In fact, every building is an indicator of the player's domination of the play space. Defending them with military units is as important as attacking the enemy's own structures, since the destruction of a building has harmful effects on the player's economy. Stated briefly, buildings are the core of *Age of Empires III* game mechanics.

Although some factions have a unique type of building, this is not the case of the Spanish empire. Spanish settlers can only build structures common to all nations;

what makes them unique is their visual characteristics. The architectural style of Spain's buildings is characterized by white stucco walls and terracotta roof tiles. These are the two *selective authenticity* elements that indicate these buildings belong to the Spanish traditions, since the structure of the buildings is generally common to all nations. However, these construction elements are not exclusive of Spain, they are exactly the same for Portugal. Therefore, in *AoEIII*'s logic, Iberian empires are equivalent. Beyond the visual aesthetics, Spanish and Portuguese buildings are governed by rules common to all civilizations, with the exception of a few unique military units. The fact that both games and the periods of history they are simulating follow a chronological progression is symptomatic of the master narrative behind the franchise. Furthermore, the discrete time structure of the game affects the visual components of architecture in a progressive way. Each game starts in the so-called Discovery Age and, in a loose interpretation of the Early Modern period progression, players invest resources in advancing to the next one, which are Colonial Age, Fortress Age, Industrial Age and Imperial Age. Each new age allows the construction of new buildings and units, and the research of new technologies and power ups. The more advance a nation is, the higher the possibilities of defeating its enemies. Moreover, the building's visuals change slightly in each Age. However, instead of following the architectural styles' progression of Early Modernity – Gothic, Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassicism... –, buildings simply become more elaborated. Complexity and progress is here equal to more decoration, while the core of the *selective authenticity* elements of architecture remain the same.



FIGURE 1: Two examples of the Spanish Town Centre. To the left, the model for the Colonial Age; to the right, the same building in the Industrial Age (Microsoft Studios/Esemble Studios, 2017. Screenshots by the author).

On the other hand, *AoEIII* introduced a new mechanic to the series: the Metropoli system. It is the player's headquarters and represents one of the most important cities of each colonizing power. While in a match, players can go to their Metropoli's menu and draw support for their settlements in the New World in the form of a card deck. Each card represents a type of bonus that goes from additional units and power-ups to free structures and resources. Metropoles obtain experience after each match and therefore can level up, giving players points to unlock new cards that can be used to build more powerful decks. Furthermore, cards are linked to the architectural landmarks of metropolises. These are either important but generic places, such as Harbour, Cathedral and Manufacturing Plant, or an emblematic and unique building. London, for example, is home to the Tower of London, while Seville displays a three-dimensional replica of La Torre del Oro. The type of card found in a building not only depends on the type of structure but also on the civilization the player has chosen.

The actions the cards of each civilization allow the player to perform add meaning to the nature of each empire's presence in America. I will use two examples to show how they shape the historical discourse about the different nations. The building known as the Military Academy is depicted as the Tower of London for the British faction and as la *Torre del Oro* for the Spanish. Their cards are linked to the production and betterment of military units; however, the type of soldiers they provide or improve are different. Spain's tower procures mainly pikemen, crossbowmen, *rodeleros* and lancers - the last two types are unique to the Spanish faction-. On the other hand, London's well-known fortification allows the shipment to the colonies of longbowmen, musketeers, grenadiers and the powerful Congreve rockets, Britain's exclusive piece of artillery. Although a single game of *AoEIII* goes approximately from the Age of Discovery to the end of the 18th century, each empire's military power is linked to a specific period in time: Spain's to the 16th century, England's to the 18th. This makes *AoEIII*'s historical discourse pretty deterministic, making it fall in traditional explanations of the rise of the Spanish presence in the Americas, linked to the Catholic Monarchs and the figure of the Conquistador (Prescott, 1834; Thomas, 1993; Kagan, 1996) and deeming its presence in the following centuries as unimportant, unattractive and, ultimately, a handicap for the Spanish player. The second example is the Cathedral building, which is interesting to analyse both visually and ludically. Aesthetically, Seville's cathedral is an imitation of the Florentine temple of *Santa Maria dei Fiore* - therefore denying Spain's unique architectural manifestations and merging it into a broader "Mediterranean" style. Ludically, the cards it allows to obtain are pretty the same as each other nation's cathedrals, with a noteworthy exception: a card named 'Inquisition'. When used, this card increases the area of sight of the player's units. The ludic metaphor is easy to grasp - no one can hide from the accusative sight of the Spanish Inquisition. Here we see how game genre pressures turn

an institution associated, in orthodox historiography, to the underdevelopment of Spain - and by extension of its colonies - into a ludic advantage while still conserving a part of its meaning. In summary, although the game allows every European power to win the scramble for the New World, the *selective authenticity* markers it gives to each nation keep backing a deterministic and orthodox explanation of history.

### Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

*ACIV:BF* is the sixth major instalment of Ubisoft's blockbuster action-adventure franchise. The *Assassin's Creed* series follows the adventure of a lineage of stealthy warriors called the assassin's, who wage an eternal war against the Templars, an organization that seeks world domination. In each game the player takes control of a modern descendant of the lineage who, aided by a machine called Animus, relives the memories of his ancestors. The story of *ACIV:BF* protagonist, the captain and assassin Edward Kenway, is set in the Caribbean at roughly the beginning of the 18th century - a moment in history popularly known as the Golden Age of Piracy. The game merges fact and fiction, since its main quest follows Edward's hunt of renowned historical figures turned templars - governors Woodes Rogers and Laureano Torres de Ayala, for example - and search for a marvellous relic that belonged to a fictional civilization long lost. To achieve his goal, Edward has to procure himself a ship and a crew, in order to be able to fight his way through the two imperial powers that dominate the region: England and Spain. Most of the gameplay time is spent sailing while avoiding or fighting and looting the armadas of the aforementioned empires, or infiltrating port towns like Kingston, Nassau and Havana. Both facets of the game, the naval and the urban, inform us about the ludic and visual roles played by architecture.

*ACIV:BF* is an action-adventure game with a lot of sandbox components that give freedom to the player to roam its fictional world. Its general ludonarrative development is as follows: the player starts as a humble pirate and gradually becomes powerful enough to overcome each challenge the game presents. This is achieved by upgrading both Edward's equipment and the *Jackdaw*, Edward's flagship, by investing money and resources in them. There are different ways to gather currency: by completing main quests and side quests of different types, mugging storehouses, looting enemy ships, pickpocketing pedestrians... However, upgrading eventually hits a threshold that only can be surpassed by moving on the game's storyline. Playing the main quests makes available new zones of the Caribbean, until all the game's world map is available to explore. Furthermore, before making a new zone fully available for the first time, the player has to conquer the fortress that controls the territory. These fortifications are the first important ludic element of architecture in *ACIV:BF* I will examine in this paper.

As the *Jackdaw* approaches a fort, the structure starts firing defensive volleys with its multiple artillery batter-

ies. The player has to perform evasive maneuvers while destroying its defences, after that she disembarks to begin the second phase of the combat. There, the user has to guide Edward across the battle between his crewmen and the defenders, killing the fortress's officers in the process. Once all of them are defeated, Edward has to reach the top of the citadel and assassinate its commander. Then the fort is conquered and stops being a threat to the player, no longer blocking travel routes. In fact, from that moment on the structure becomes a base in which the player can shelter. It gives protection against nearby enemy ships, offers a number of services and quests, and hides treasure chests and other extras. Visually, all forts are almost the same: each one of them made up from the combination of different architectural elements – walls, crenels, towers, ramps, courtyards, etc. Pretty much the same way as in *AoEIII*, the fort's components act as *selective authenticity* elements that can be arranged in a number of logical ways, and while not being accurate representations of real Caribbean castles, they still act as signifiers of the Spanish empire's architecture thanks to the use of stucco walls, terracotta roof tiles, windows with rounded archways... To wrap it up, its ludic function is to become first a challenge and then an opportunity, signalling the dominance of the player's avatar, a pirate, before the European powers.

Buildings in urban landscapes are one of the most important *lexia* in *Assassin's Creed* and, with making the past a playground, one of its trademarks. Most of the player's amusement comes from climbing walls, running

across rooftops, and performing air assassinations by jumping off them. The avatar can go through almost every urban structure; therefore, buildings mean no obstacle in the player's movement. This is interesting, since *ACIV:BF* lies closer to the *realist simulation* category, but the game space is not exactly the *garden* type. In missions, buildings and quarters play an ambiguous role: neither completely being an advantage nor a total disadvantage, too. Urban structures can offer Kenway a stealthy path to its objective, allowing him to reach it avoiding guards; but in the rooftops of buildings tend to be home to sentinels that can spot the assassin and raise the alarm. Towers offer a panoramic view of the city, helping locate interesting landmarks, and also serve as references in the maze of the city, while walls block the avatar's vision and can hide enemy soldiers behind them. Therefore, the ludic outcome of a building greatly depends on the player's ability to use it in her advantage.

However, there are some noteworthy architectural structures that play a specific ludic role: restricted areas. These are delimited spaces in which the player cannot enter without being attacked. Areas like these are few and often mark the location of an important quest or treasure, and included in an iconic historical edifice. In Havana, the main Spanish city of the game, one of these locations is *Castillo de la Real Fuerza*. The Cuban fort, built during the third quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, has been accurately reproduced in *ACIV:BF*. Its majestic walls and impressive defenses have the same ludic purpose as the real-life castle during the Spanish rule in the Antilles: to keep pirates away, Kenway included. It is one of the examples of an-



FIGURE 2: Castillo de la Real Fuerza as pictured in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*. Source: *Assassin's Creed Wiki* (consulted 19/07/2018).

other strategy of *selective authenticity* often used by Ubisoft, and that consists in placing fidedign portrayals of emblematic structures in more or less authentic cities in order to boost the immersive feeling of its games. Regarding Spanish landmarks in Havana, we can find the following ones: *Basilica Menor de San Francisco de Asís*, *Castillo de la Real Fuerza*, *Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta*, *Castillo del Morro* and *Catedral de la Habana*. This is, three fortifications and three temples. This particular selection of monuments cuts down the presence of Spain in America to the military and religious spheres, stressing the evangelizing and repressive aspects of the empire while neglecting others, such as the agricultural, industrial or bureaucratic ones<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, the majestic scale of the monument is a fundamental criterium in the process of *selective authenticity*, since it makes history more appealing to the player. This often generates tensions between the pressures exerted by the game form and the high degree of historical authenticity the team behind the franchise pursues. *ACIV:BF* offers us an interesting example in the form of a discussion between the pirate simulation software's fictional developers. The debate, which revolves around the inclusion of the *Catedral de la Virgen María de la Concepción Inmaculada de la Habana*, can be found in the Animus's database and reads the following:

(Note: As much as I love this building – truly “music set in stone” – we simply can't use it. 1748 is far too late for this Virtual Experience. Around 1720 it would be a small, rough church rising from drained swampland. Sorry. – DM)

(Note: What? We're selling climbable buildings! We'll fudge the dates. – ML)

(Note: I am not on board with fudging dates. – DM)

(Note: Here at Abstergo Entertainment: Beauty before Truth. Not for us John Keats and his tidy odes. Truth is Beauty? Beauty is Truth? People want to see landmarks. – RL)

(Note: However you justify it, just shorten the damn name. – JM) (Ubisoft, 2013)

Despite the stress put by the producers of the *Assassin's Creed* in the historical fidelity of the franchise, visual and monumental authenticity is privileged over strict chronological accuracy. *Catedral de la Habana's* is not the only case of chronological inaccuracy: the same goes with the church of *San Francisco de Asís*, whose construction was not completed until 1738, way after the events of the game are over. The privilege of the architectural monumentality over historical exactitude derives from the framing narrative of the game series, a storyline based on the secret war between assassins and templars. Monumental buildings reinforce the sense of grandiosity and the importance of the player's task. In *Assassin's Creed*, history is represented as an epic process: the games focus on key events, feature renowned historical figures that aid the player, and puts the protagonist at the centre of decisive historical incidents. Furthermore, the inclusion of tall buildings offers more possibilities to the franchise's main *framing control* me-

chanic – the dynamic movement of the protagonist, who transits the play space performing runs, climbs, jumps and other techniques from the *parkour* style. To sum up, the combination of the movement's framing controls with the framing narrative of the games turns historical landmarks into spaces of the past the player can dominate.

## CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, history can come in many forms, and the narrative characteristics of the digital ludic medium allow it to embed discourses about the past. The videogame industry has developed, in its almost fifty years of existence, a particular language consisting of the combination of different meaningful elements that, following Chapman's terminology, we have labelled *lexia*. These *lexia* are arranged in specific ways according to the possibilities allowed by the system of rules that govern the ludofictional world of the game: *framing controls*. The discourse derived from the sanctioned combinations of *lexia* becomes part of a narrative about the past when the ludic elements make use of the strategy of *selective authenticity*, this is, when they evoke images and ideas not necessarily true, but the ones that make audiences feel they are interacting with history. Elements of selective authenticity are not exclusive of a particular form, in fact, what makes them powerful is their transmediality, because their ubiquity aid them to become embedded in the audience's minds.

The goal of this article has been to unveil how a particular *lexia* of games set in America during the colonial period (1492-1800s) participate in the emergence of specific discourses about the past. I have chosen to analyse the architecture related to the Spanish Empire using the interpretative framework of ludosemiology. Based on Barthes's theories of myth, the analytic method consisted in separating the linguistic signifier – the visual portrayal of architecture – and its ludic signified – the rules that govern the representation –, and finally place their relationship in the general canvas of the game's general ludonarrative. The goal of the process has been to unveil the ultimate signification of the *lexia* analysed, and how these signs support a certain historical master narrative.

3D models of Spanish architecture follow a pattern of *selective authenticity* that draws from the cultural context of the region these games were developed: North America. It is also important to bear in mind that the audience these games are targeted to has to recognise the buildings as Spanish. A major fraction of this audience is North American, and the rest of the global market has a general idea of how Spanish architecture traditionally looks like, since it has been exposed to paintings, films, postal cards and advertisements that offer a reductionist image of this mode of expression. Most of these images are linked to the American movement known as the Spanish Colonial Revival that took place between the 1890s and 1930s and spread replicas of Spanish buildings across many cities of the United States, from the East Coast to the West (Kagan, 2010 pp. 37-58).

Although the visual elements of selective authenticity draw from the same source, each videogame genre makes use of them in a different way, regarding its particular strategies of representation that are linked its ludic specificities and, as Chapman proposes, its epistemological approach. As an example of Real-Time Strategy game, *AoEIII* draws from architectonic elements that resemble the colonial architecture of Spain, linked to the Spanish Colonial Renaissance movement, and arranges them in generic ways pre-determined by the game's spatial and identificatory necessities. Barracks have the same skeleton for the British and Spanish, what changes is just the envelope. On the other hand, *ACIV:BF*, in accordance with the politics of representation of its producer, makes use of fictional 'replicas' of real historical monuments, accurately reproduced, but its politics of representation are also informed by ludic pressures.

Finally, each game encapsulates one of the two sides of the same coin: the historical master narrative of the American way of progress. *AoEIII* does it by stressing the role of the United States – and her historical predecessors, from the Spanish conquistadores to the English settlers – in taming and civilizing the New World. Thus, it draws from the deep-rooted narrative of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis that links the development of North American democracy to the imperatives the wild frontier set upon pioneers. Meanwhile, *ACIV:BF* integrates its buildings in the fight of freedom, incarnated in Edward Kenway and the assassin order, against the tyranny of despotic empires: British and Spanish alike. Therefore, Spain is just a 'skin' of a grand narrative that the US and its ideological-entertainment complex tries to impose upon a globalized market and audience.

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## NOTES

- 1 Saga and Parra (2017) have developed the concept 'Arquitecturas para el Sistema' (Architectures for the System) to define the types of settlements allowed to the player to build in real-time strategy games such as *StarCraft* and *Command & Conquer*.
- 2 We can find a hint of this kind of design in Saga and Parra's (2017) broad classification of cities for the metaverse. They have placed cities like Havana in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* under the category of re-enactment based on already existent towns, commonly found in Triple A games that have made realist depictions of urban spaces as one of their most appealing perks.

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