Authenticity: Depicting the Past in Historical Videogames

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Abstract
This paper will be examining the role of authenticity in videogames as a means of engaging with the past whilst also providing its own depiction of history in a way that supports player engagement. It will also explore how this can subsequently contribute to, and inform, the wider understanding of past events that are outside of the lived experiences of the players. This will primarily focus on the historical settings that revolve around modern British history (for this paper 1837-1945) as there are instances during this time span that have become idealised forming a part of 'collective memory' (Chapman, 2016) that is looked back to, sometimes fondly, which can be expressed through videogames and other mediums.

The core example through which this will be explored is via an examination of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015) which is set in London during the reign of Queen Victoria; specifically 1868. This is the ninth entry in a series that has continued for over a decade. Its overarching narrative revolves around the power struggle between the freedom seeking Assassin Order and the authoritarian Templars who want to consolidate the strength of their power and influence from behind the scenes.

Through this fictional narrative set in a historical setting, and exploration of *Syndicate* will help to explore the validity of an approach within the videogames medium that could be argued to be moving towards a focus on authenticity rather than accuracy in its depiction of the past and how this potentially results in a more effective experience of the past within the context of this interactive medium.

Keywords:
Videogames, Assassin's Creed Syndicate, authenticity, accuracy, nostalgia, simulation, history

Introduction

Much like *Assassin's Creed Syndicate,* there are multiple examples of videogames[1] utilising historical settings as the backdrop to the gameplay that is provided and in turn exploit the interest that people have in those time periods. Commonly this has centred around the horrific events that occurred during World War II, which provides a historical narrative that can be easily attuned to the gameplay mechanics of videogames due to its binary participants and distinguishable *heroes and villains*.

With World War II dominating the historical landscape of the videogames medium, other instances of modern British history have been largely overlooked. It is for this reason that *Syndicate* stands out, despite the era encompassing Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) having been explored in other mediums[2]. Therefore, the developers have had to *gamify* the historical narrative presented by introducing a fiction that provides opponents within the game for the player to contend against (which were introduced in previous entries in the series). Meanwhile, to legitimise the presence of this fiction, the developers felt the need to create an as authentic depiction of London as technically feasible (budget depending) to help gain the attention of players (consumers).

This paper will address why the focus on authentically recreating a digital depiction of 1868 London was crucial for the developers and the type of nostalgia that is generated from this approach. This paper also addresses how this supports the fictional narrative that is created for what still purports to be a *historical videogame*. The distinction of historical videogame will also be addressed within the broader context of this paper as it applies to videogames that utilise settings from the past whilst claiming to be historically *accurate*, yet ironically producing a videogame that results in

1 A significant number of entries from the *Call of Duty* series (2003-) and *Battlefield* series (2002-), *Brothers in Arms* (2005-2014), *Valiant Hearts* (2014), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (2004), and *Total War* series (2000-) are just some examples that use historical settings.

2 Examples including *Sherlock Holmes* (1887-) and the multitude of depictions across different mediums, *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *The Prestige* (1995 [novel] and 2006 [film]), *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1995).

something less credible than the self-professed fiction of *Syndicate*.

A Digital Depiction of the Past

This paper does not claim that the core aim of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015) is to provide a radical reinterpretation of the United Kingdom during the reign of Queen Victoria. But it does posit that there has been a conscious effort on the part of developers at Ubisoft Quebec not to create a depiction that satiates the nostalgic desires that exist towards the British Empire and instead provides a contemporary reflection upon that period from the past. However, outside of its own fictional narrative, it does not provide a radical reinterpretation of the past, yet it is cautious in its approach and there appears to be a tacit understanding of its potential power to influence those playing *Syndicate*. Later this paper will examine the role that videogames like *Syndicate* have within the wider context of collective memory and the significance of this in connection to 'Postmemory' (Hirsch, 2008). As the medium has continued to evolve this recognition has become more implicit, which has seen videogame developers act more cautiously with how they depict some elements of the past. Despite this, it is not yet been universal, and some gameplay genres and time periods have taken longer to adjust their use of the past.

World War II videogames have been a staple within the historical videogame subgenre. In large part, because it can be simplified as a conflict between *good versus evil* with clear binary belligerents. Furthermore, events such as the Second Battle of El Alamein which is depicted in Activision's *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward, 2005) has subsequently been determined as significant within the documentation of history and that brings a value to the credibility of *Call of Duty 2* that the developers do not have to create themselves. Therefore, it has been claimed by Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler (2007) that videogames are only left with qualifying the extent to which 'war in general is a bloody and unpleasant business'. They go on to state that:

> The central tenet of the *Call of Duty* series is not to produce a historically accurate depiction of the Second World War. Instead, it is to present a visually exciting, fast-paced shooter game in which the player kills many bad guys to get to the next level. In essence, then, the core motif of the game is not World War Two at all – it is killing things in the fastest and best manner. (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2007).

This type of videogame can, therefore, be criticised for using these important and horrific moments from the past to give the impression of authority, but MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler argue that the game (and the developers) have not earned the right to claim this authority. Implying that the events that are depicted are used to provide shock and awe, rather than a genuine reflection upon the horrors of the past.

Unlike the aforementioned WW2 themed videogames, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* has created a depiction of London that has to justify its overarching narrative. Whilst it shares a story that can be defined as *good versus evil*, its core characters and events that the player undertakes are fictional, except these elements are wrapped up within a *real* historical setting. *Syndicate* is also a very different genre of videogame, both in terms of narrative and gameplay, as the player spends a considerable amount of time in an *open world* depiction of London which they are free to explore at their leisure. Therefore, the player has more time in which they might notice environmental flaws, or geographical inaccuracies, that would likely be overlooked in a First-Person Shooter (FPS) like a *Call of Duty* game. This is likely to have contributed to why authenticity is deemed by the developers of *Syndicate* to be so important for historical videogames like theirs.

Authentic ≠ Real

Before examining further how the developers implemented an authentic depiction of London, it is necessary to state that the way in which the term *authenticity* appears to be understood by those in the videogames industry (and shared by the author of this paper) is only one of the ways that it can be defined. A broader understanding of authentic can be to describe something as being 'of undisputed origin of authorship', or in a weaker sense a 'reliable, accurate representation' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014). Although this does not stand in as a universally agreed upon definition for authenticity, in part due to different fields and disciplines appropriating it differently, and because the videogames medium increasingly considers authenticity and accuracy to be separate designations rather than two sides of the same coin. The field of business, on the other hand, understands it in the context of the relationship between businesses and consumers. Yet it does provide a basis that informs the position taken up by the videogames medium. During a TED Talk, Joseph Pine (2004) outlined one of the clearer definitions of authenticity, that it is 'being

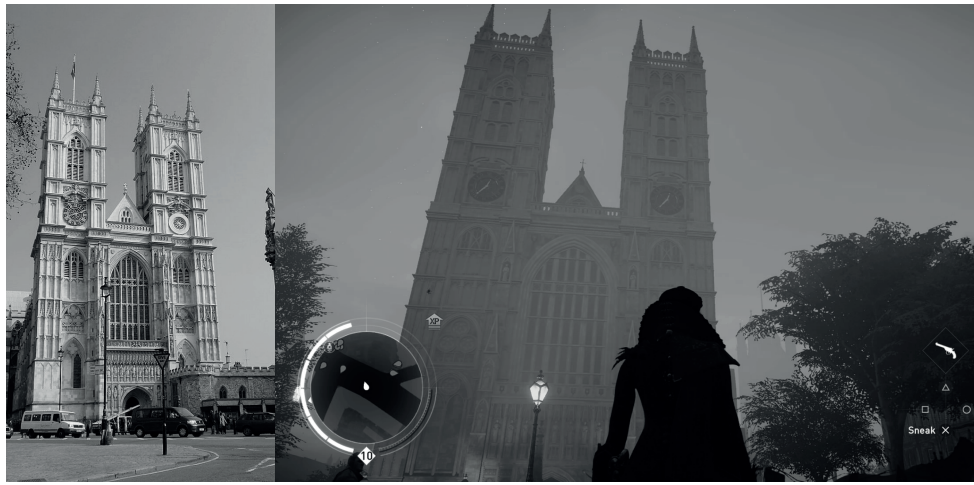
true to [it]self' and 'being what [it] says [it is] to others', in other words, authenticity is tied to truth and the pursuit of the 'real' as opposed to being 'fake'. Where the significant evolution of the term begins to become apparent is the introduction of 'Real-fake' and 'Fake-real'; the former 'is what it says it is but not true to itself' (where you can see behind the façade) and the latter 'is true to itself but not what it says it is' (such as Disneyland which commits to pretending it is a magic kingdom).

It is this connection between fake and real (irrespective of the sequence between the two terms for now) that is significant to the evolution in how we can think about the term authenticity and how it has been appropriated when discussing videogames with historical settings. These videogames are not, and do not claim to be, *real*, the fact that the player is engaging with a videogame which provides them with a digital world to interact with is explicit. Therefore these experiences are *fake*, but that does not make them inauthentic, because they are sincerely rendered to be authentic (Gilmore and Pine, 2007, p. 87 and 90). These fakes, as is the case of *Syndicate*, can be argued as both a 'Real-fake' and 'Fake-real', for it appears to be London from 1868 yet makes no effort hiding the videogame that exists behind the digital façade, in addition, it is truthful in its creation of digital depiction which it commits to in its engagement with the player.

In practice, there was a determined approach by the developers of *Syndicate* as to how they constructed their digital depiction of London from 1868 to satiate their desire to provide something authentic enough for those playing the game (aka the consumers). Key landmarks are present, but some receive more attention than others, for notable buildings like Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace, Ubisoft aimed for a one-to-one recreation. *Syndicate*'s world designer Jonathan Dumont states that the landmarks in the game are 'mostly authentic', because of the texture work that can be different to the real version, due to the development process and the assets the artists have available (Williams, 2015). Jean-Vincent Roy – *Syndicate*'s resident historian – stated that 'authenticity is important. But it's a video game' (Sapieha, 2015). Roy expands on this during an interview:

> It was clear to us from the start, especially after we visited London and saw how huge and contrasting the city is, that it wouldn't be even remotely feasible to do a simulation of Victorian London. It was much more important to us – and more interesting – to do a highly authentic impression of London. For the most part we've made choices aware of the reality, then we tweaked reality a bit to fit gameplay, aesthetic, and creative decisions that kept the player at the forefront of the experience. (Sapieha, 2015)

The above quote from Roy acknowledges the design decisions that transition the focus away from accurately recreating London and instead attempting to provide an 'authentic impression' (Sapieha, 2015). It would be far too time-consuming and costly to realistically create a digital version of Victorian London, but the developers can only stray so far whilst still claiming to provide a *version* of London. Therefore, the key landmarks are still present, but their position in the London area are not always accurate, distances between streets, and even the location of some of the boroughs is inaccurate; notably Whitechapel. Yet, this does not do enough to pull the average player out of the experience, especially not at first. It is also likely that for many players this will be their first instance of exploring a version of London freely, in turn, this will contribute to defining their perception of the city.



Left: Photograph of Westminster Abbey. Right: Screenshot of Westminster Abbey as recreated in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*[3]

3 Photograph sourced from Wikimedia Commons (Σπάρτακος, 2013). Screenshot from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* captured by author.

The development of *Syndicate* suggests a shift towards a focus on authenticity from one on accuracy. This is highlighted based on an interview where lead writer for *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), Corey May, revealed that the team 'try to be as historically accurate as possible, technology and fun-factors allowing […] When [they] do diverge from the historical record it's almost always because … it makes the game a better game' (Bertz, 2012). Alex Hutchinson, *Assassin's Creed III*'s *(AC3*) creative director, stated that his aim was to strike a balance between an entertaining and playable videogame that was also historically accurate despite being a work of historical fiction (Elliott and Kapell, 2013a, p. 8). Hutchinson also points out that 'the office tagline is "history is our playground" … we take it very, very seriously. We do a lot of research; we have historical advisors on staff' (Trombley, 2012). This tagline is still in place six years later and now promoted by Maxime Durand, resident franchise historian, who argues that this approach helps to 'make history accessible' (Batchelor, 2018a).

The way it makes history accessible is a potential strength for the videogames medium as it enables players an alternative form of interactive engagement with history in a way that other mediums cannot. However, this same form of engagement can simultaneously weaken the understanding. By their very nature, videogames require the input of the player, therefore accommodation must be made for the presence of the player in the historical narrative, which is why grand fictitious narratives are interwoven within broad historical narratives to enable this. This is also reinforced by the creative director for the first *Assassin's Creed game*, Patrice Désilets, who stated that from a gameplay perspective '[they] didn't have to do a lot of compromises because [the cities'] architecture is already made for climbing' (Bajda, 2018) (which provides players with the freedom to explore the various locations across the series). At the start of the series, when Désilets was still involved, research was informed by pictures rather than visiting the locations, as was the case with London and *Syndicate*, despite this, the goal for that team was still to be 'as accurate and thorough in their research as possible'. However, they also did not want the historical background that was supporting the game to become too convoluted, resulting in a '30 second Wikipedia rule', this meant 'if it takes less than 30 seconds to find it on Wikipedia, then it should be the truth' but 'if it takes you three weeks in the old books in Oxford, then who cares?' (Bajda, 2018).

As with other mediums, videogames are 'purchased with the expectation of being entertained', as succinctly put by Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger (2013, p. 153), which in part has contributed to the criticism that the medium faces when it does address historical subject matter. Salvati and Bullinger (2013, p. 154) introduced the term *selective authenticity* to outline the way in which signifiers from historical texts, artefacts, and popular representations are utilised by videogame developers (for their case study World War II). The aim behind favouring selective authenticity is to propose an alternative to the privileged position of 'inquiry and explanation' whilst also claiming that there can be a benefit to the 'dramatic storytelling'. Videogames provide the player with the ability to engage with and *play* with the past in a self-contained simulation. This can subsequently result in a 'destabilise[d] linear narrative', but selective authenticity enables enough authority to the narrative licence taking place to combine *realistic* historical representations with ludic conventions and *filmic* fictional narratives.

Previously the extent to a videogames accuracy was largely dependent on the technological power available to the developers to utilise in their game to (re)create these detailed locations. Whilst the medium is yet to reach the stage of creating complete simulations that are accurate to the millimetre, they can create a depiction that is visually *close enough*, one that can be deemed *photo-realistic*. A greater risk is posed from the uncanny at breaking the sense of immersion for the player. Therefore, a focus on establishing authenticity over accuracy is important as the *selective* approach helps to contribute to the experience (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013, p. 157). Douglas Dow supports this approach and adds that a lack of accuracy can help to *enhance* authenticity in a historical context (Elliott and Kapell, 2013b, p. 213). This explains the role of the fantastical narrative of *Syndicate* and the wider *Assassin's Creed* series and is explored via the historical veneers present in *Assassins' Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2009) which Dow explores further.

Simulacra and Disneyland

Syndicate presents one of the rare occasions[4] where the city of London is depicted in a videogame, unlike the film medium where London is constantly utilised for its iconic landmarks, and in recent years convenient tax breaks (BFI, 2016). Videogame developers either create their own fictional world or very often recreate one of the sprawling cities from the

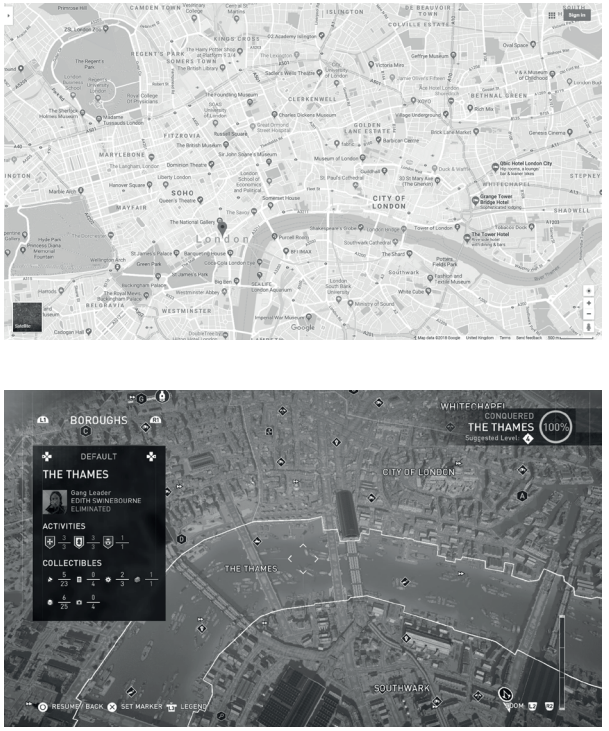
4 Although not the only depiction in a videogame, other examples include: *Midtown Madness 2* (2000), *The Getaway* (2002), and *ZombiU* (2012)

United States of America. It is, therefore, relatively novel for players to have an opportunity to explore a digital playground of London, let alone one set in 1868. The existence of this playground draws comparisons to Jean Baudrillard's description of Disneyland and his wider theory around the simulacrum. Baudrillard states that the famous theme park is:

> [P]resented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (1994, pp. 12–13)

Douglas Dow has also made the comparison between the depictions present in the *Assassin's Creed* series and Baudrillard's understanding of the *real*. Dow argues that via a Baudrillarian perspective exploring the Florence that appears in *Assassin's Creed II* 'immerses the player in a simulation of the city and blurs the distinction the representation and the real' (Dow, 2013, p. 218). Like how Baudrillard sees Disneyland, Dow describes the depiction of Florence in *AC2* as a simulacrum, as this version 'purports to be a true representation of Florence, but that presents a false likeness instead' (2013, pp. 218–219). This is different from Disneyland, which remains aware of status as a copy, and imitation, instead the focus is on *seeming* authentic rather than being accurate. Dow argues that the version of Florence in *AC2*, which has modified the street plan, lacks some of the major landmarks, whilst adding monuments that were built after the year the game is set, is a 'perversion of imitation itself – a false likeness'(2013, p. 219). In turn, Dow affirms his statement that this Florence is a simulacrum, in line with Michael Camille's description, which 'calls into question the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is represented' (2013, p. 219). Given the inaccuracies present in this depiction it would be assumed that *AC2* fails in its efforts of providing a believable copy, but that only becomes apparent providing the player is *aware* of these inaccuracies. For most players this is not the case, therefore the illusion is not shattered, as they know it is not the *real* Florence, but the illusion they are engaging with is seemingly a real *copy*, which helps them remain engaged in the simulation.

The notion that representations can contribute to determining perceptions and how this relates to the real is one that, perhaps unsurprisingly, has been explored by Baudrillard. Dow argues that Baudrillard would have stated that exploration of *AC2*s representation of Florence would undoubtedly influence a player's experience if they eventually visited the real Florence. Having explored the simulated version players are subsequently denied 'an authentic experience of the city' because they will continue to view it through the refraction of the videogame (Dow, 2013, p. 223). This is at odds with Baudrillard's analysis of the relationship between Disneyland (the simulation) and Los Angeles (the real) in which the simulation is to help strengthen the believability of the real.
Dow mentioned that for Baudrillard 'there can be no authentic experience', as what is believed to be real is not necessarily the case (Dow, 2013, p. 224).



Top: Screenshot of London from Google Maps. Bottom Screenshot from a map view of London present in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*[5]

5 Both screenshots captured by author.

The London that is depicted in *Syndicate* no longer exists, aside from key landmarks and the shape of the Thames through central London, the city today is vastly different. There are some roads that remain today that can be found in *Syndicate*, for those who know where to look, yet ironically it is those very people who will be disappointed, as this is not a to-scale recreation. The alternative could be a highly accurate, but hollow experience, a lifeless, but accurate, shell of 1860s London that fails to provide the player with a better insight into London of that time via a somewhat inaccurate, but authentic, depiction. It is this approach that can take into consideration the influence of the collective memory that exists of that period whilst also contributing to it going forward.

Collective and Cultural Memory

Knowledge, or just a general awareness, of the past is immensely beneficial to both an individuals and wider societies understanding of the circumstances that contributed to the contemporary cultural/political climate that exists. The wide-ranging media that is available can contribute to this understanding and build upon the groundwork laid out during general schooling. This can be understood via cultural memory studies, which Jason Begy (2015) describes as an interdisciplinary field that is concerned with how a 'culture interacts with and constructs its past'. He goes on to state that the importance of bringing the discussion of [video] games as historical texts is because analysis can subsequently begin to consider *how* the past is constructed and *why* it has been done in certain ways. This relates directly to the example of *Syndicate* and its depiction of London in 1868.

Modern history still looms over contemporary society, even though there are notable epochs that no longer remain within living memory. Despite this, the significance of these, such as World War I, has a strong presence in what Adam Chapman refers to as 'collective memory' (Chapman, 2016). Chapman builds upon the understanding of collective memory, that being a 'collective framework that organises and constructs memory' (2016), this is shared in the consciousness of a population; for this case study the United Kingdom predominantly. This is 'commonly supported and reproduced in popular (as well as often official) cultural discourses' (2016).

Chapman also utilises the term 'postmemory', which was used by Marianne Hirsch (2008) to describe 'powerful traumatic historical events' that took place the generation before the current one. The period covering the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) could be considered traumatic to some, but within the United Kingdom it is often looked back upon fondly; *nostalgically* it could be said. These *memories* present today of Victoria's reign are certainly not as strong as would have been experienced by a second generation of the end of her reign, nor is it as strong as memories following the World Wars. Yet the presence of Queen Victoria's reign does still linger, and continues to contribute to the British consciousness, one that associates the period with that of strength and greatness, a time when the British Empire spanned across the world. With the British Empire no more, for some there is a longing for what has been lost, even though they themselves have not directly lost anything, ironically it could be claimed that in the years since they have gained a great deal.

Syndicate is therefore in a perilous position, as using this period as the backdrop to its brand of ludic historical *simulation* has the potential of unintentionally indulging the controversial aspects of Britain's history and the identity that can form around this; with damaging consequences. However, it also has the opportunity of reshaping the collective memory and therefore the perception of that period. The latter appears to be the approach that the developers have leaned towards. This is altering the narrative of history as it will be putting it through the lens of contemporary society; the significance of which is identified by E.H. Carr (1986) later in this paper. Therefore, the necessity of authenticity is even more crucial to help provide the environmental support (in-game) for this alternative understanding of the past to be accepted.

Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia

The reign of Queen Victoria has long since left living memory and now lives on via postmemory and with-it notions of Britain's empire which some would state, experienced a golden era during this time. Yet despite it no longer existing London still does, albeit in a form that both retains aspects from that time whilst also having evolved substantially since then. Recreating a depiction of London from 1868 can be deemed a nostalgic act, but the type of nostalgia it exhibits can be described in one of two ways. This is based on the distinction outlined by Svetlana Boym (2007) between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia.

Restorative nostalgia stresses the home part of the word *nostos* and tries to reconstruct the notion of the transhistorical lost home.

Whereas reflective nostalgia concentrates on the *algia*, the act of longing, and delays homecoming via a sense of wistfulness and irony, albeit desperately. Oddly, restorative nostalgia does not deem itself nostalgia, instead considers instilling truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia 'dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity' (Boym, 2007).

Bjorn Schiermer and Hjalmer Bang Carlsen (2017) unpack this distinction further, stating that:

> Reflective nostalgia knows it is 'nostalgic'; restorative nostalgia does not. Whereas restorative nostalgia believes in the possibility of arresting the modern acceleration of cultural change and restoring a past 'space' – a past 'homeland' – reflective nostalgia knows it is impossible to arrest time and thus makes the opposite move; it historises what it touches and immerses itself in the melancholy of the ever lost. In short, in restorative nostalgia what is past is not entirely lost, and in reflective nostalgia what is entirely lost is not past. (Schiermer and Carlsen, 2017)

The latter description of reflective nostalgia is apt regarding *Syndicate*, as the London that it is depicting is lost, but it has not past because of its inclusion in media such as *Syndicate* and therefore it can still be addressed and explored. It would be easy to describe *Syndicate* as an attempt at restorative nostalgia, given that it seemingly recreates London of 1868, but that is a by-product of its intent. The game does not try to reclaim 'nostalgic notions' of the height of the British empire as a lost homeland. Rather, in keeping with reflective nostalgia 'dwells on the ambivalence' and 'does not shy from the contradictions of modernity' (2017). It addresses what is known from that time via the lens of a multi-cultural team of developers that are primarily, but not exclusively, based in Quebec Canada. Although it is worth remembering that Canada has been in a position where the sphere of influence from the UK had a direct impact upon the country and ties between the two still exist today. The result is a piece of media packaged as collective memory that is versatile and the way it can be understood can adapt to various audiences from distinct locations.

With the role of restorative nostalgia trying to reconstruct the 'lost home' (Schiermer and Carlsen, 2017), it could be seen as an exercise of bringing collective memory into action, even though it has forever been lost and cannot be brought back, despite nostalgic longing. Whereas reflective nostalgia is complemented by the inclusion of authenticity as there is an acknowledgement of what has been lost, and as is the case with monuments in Florence, the original is replaced with a replica, resulting in an authentic copy of the past that provides an insight into the history of that location. Reflective nostalgia is not an act of deception, but an open awareness of the corporeal limitations and tries to provide an exercise in exploring the past.

Screenshot from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* depicting child factory workers

Syndicate does not present an idealised past (Greenberg, 2013), children are depicted working in factories and Indie might be the *Jewel of the Empire* but the subjugation of the country is still addressed directly. Reflective nostalgia is used to address the past whilst also providing a location and narrative to justify the gameplay featured in the game. Like the other videogames in the series (both before and after) there are gaps in the historical depiction, after all, it is telling an authentic, not an accurate tale, but by exploiting these gaps the voice of the game can stand out and provide a more even and engaging experience for the player (Donlan, 2018). They are aiming to create something that is authentic enough to pull the player into the experience and make them *feel* like they have a better understanding of London from 1868, whilst also engaging in a fictional narrative.

Putting the History into Historical Videogames

There can be a conflation between history, the past, and the truth. That each collates directly to one another. That history describes the past and that is the truth of what took place. Whilst history might be predicated on informing present and future generations what took place in the past, to state that what it depicts as pure truth can be overstating the matter. This concern has notably been highlighted by E.H. Carr during his talks that comprised his infamous book *What is History?* (1986). This work is not a direct attack upon the competency of the work of historians, but he does raise his concern that a historian cannot escape their 'own position in time' (1986, p. 2). Later stating that if a historian looks at a specific period of history 'through the eyes of [their] own time, and studies the problems of the past as a key to those of the present' then the historian will likely result with a 'purely pragmatic view of the facts' which in turn would distort the past to serve the pretences of the present (1986, p. 21). This criticism of the historian can be argued to the approach that *Syndicate* takes, although what pretence of the present it is serving is open to interpretation.

Carr also states that 'the facts of history never come to us "pure"', explaining that these facts have subsequently been 'refracted through the mind of the recorded' in other words our understanding of the so-called 'facts' is dependent upon those who have since unravelled these aspects of the past to compile their historical narratives (1986, p. 16). Although, this is predicated on the assumption that the facts were accurate and/or representative at the time they were recorded. Therefore our image of the past has been predetermined by people 'with a particular view' who consciously or unconsciously decided which facts were worth preserving. (1986, p. 7)

This is where *history* risks being just a *veneer* for the ludic core of a videogame, and why the distinction between accuracy and authenticity is important. The extent to which authenticity is incorporated and how it is done so is crucial to examine, as it could be a *lazy* way of making a normal gameplay genre game stand out, or it could be a way of melding gameplay and history together to explore a time period in an impactful and engaging way. One where devotion to accuracy might be counterproductive but focusing on authenticity can be an efficient compromise. This presents a distinction between a game *just* being *historical* and being one that is an 'authentic historical game', the key being that the extent of its authenticity 'reasonably model[s] the historical systems in terms of both elements and casual and correlative relationships' (McCall, 2018)[6]. Therefore, if the details, 'especially superficial details', are not strictly accurate, but the depiction that is available *feels* 'right' and can still be supported by some historical evidence, then authenticity can offer a more efficient form of providing a successful historical experience. Thus, making the 'authentic historical game' a preferable choice for developers over the stricter historically *accurate* game (McCall, 2018).

Ultimately, the main aspect to consider is the inherent interactivity that the videogame medium provides. Videogames can provide an experience of the past that is unique, putting the player into a world resembling another time and place. The extent to which that experience is *accurate* and/or *authentic* should be dependent on the ludic mechanisms the developers want to utilise. When thoughtfully integrated, the player can have meaningful access to a postmemory that could very well influence the wider collective memory.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the use and development of authenticity as an approach by videogame developers to efficiently provide players with interactive means of engaging with a depiction of history. This has used the example of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (and to a lesser extent *Assassin's Creed II* and *III*) to unpack the ways in which historical authenticity can be used in videogames and how this differs to that of historical accuracy. The distinction between authenticity and accuracy is important to identify for it helps to define the form that historical videogames take. It also provides an alternative approach that attempts to satiate the desires of the medium's audience, despite a vocal minority that calls for, what it perceives as, accuracy at all costs; despite the logistical and/or contemporary issues that are at play. Yet the approach that favours authenticity has become a crucial way to accommodate the player in an interactive depiction of the past.

Selective authenticity has been recognised to provide a ludic piece of media with a sense of authority that can help aid the player in their exploration of a historical period, despite there being gaps within the accuracy in the experience created. This proports the notion that a strict focus on accuracy can itself pull the player out of the experience, in large

6 This is from part of a Twitter thread that McCall posted as he was trying to re-examine his previous definition of authentic within the context of historical videogames and update it in line with his current writing and understanding.

part due to the player's position within the experience with the potential freedom to disrupt the accepted chronology of events. It is therefore why specific events and historical figures are interwoven with fictional narratives. Both are used to complement one another to provide a cohesive experience that can still provide an insight into that historical period that the player might not have otherwise gained.

It has been argued that history and the past are not strictly one and the same, as regardless of the intentions of an author, there is likely to be an inherent bias in the way that they organise and structure the depiction they create. In addition to this, E.H. Carr (1986) has outlined the deficiencies that can exist with the historical 'facts' that historians often (but not exclusively) depend on. Via this line of thinking, the approach taken by the videogames medium, which can also play quite loosely with its depiction of the past, does not appear quite as radical because of this recognition. This can also give credibility to using historical elements as a basis for myth-making which can provide the backbone of a historical setting in a videogame, which appears to be the approach the *Assassin's Creed* series has moved towards with its most recent entry *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Batchelor, 2018b; Ubisoft Quebec, 2018).

Videogames like *Syndicate* can be viewed as an example of postmemory. Whilst the frequent appearance of this in the medium has tended to revolve around World War II to highlight 'powerful traumatic historical events' (Hirsch, 2008), *Syndicate* focuses on a period which more often in today's cultural consciousness in the UK is attributed with misguided optimism. In which there are those who look at the fractured nation of today and compare it with a nostalgically ideal – albeit wildly inaccurate – notion of the British Empire (Younge, 2018). The developers of *Syndicate*, however, have not indulged in this perversion of postmemory, instead, they have engaged with the act of reflective nostalgia, recognising that the past they are depicting has been lost, but has not past. There is an ambivalence which the videogame unconsciously dwells on resulting in a depiction that both represents Queen Victoria as a benevolent ruler whilst also questioning the subjugation of the subjects across the Empire at home and overseas.

As the videogame's medium continues to grow, and its reach broadens, so too does the potential for more videogames to address other periods from the past. It can also be hoped that more critical and/or alternative perspectives can be explored. Moving in this direction has the possibility of avoiding the disadvantages of nostalgia, as these videogames could be less reliant on creating realistic landmarks or including ludic mechanisms that infer activities that had significant implications in the past (such as colonialism which is a major component of the *Civilization* games). Rather than embracing the longing of outdated notions of what might seem to be the *good old days* (more so from a British perspective) that videogames directly combat and challenge these nostalgic notions instead.

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