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FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

THEMATIC SECTION

From the Victorian Era to the American Experiment: Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

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*In the historical blink of an eye,
video games have colonized our minds and invaded our screens.*

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca

Between April 9 and 11, 2025, the invited editors of this thematic issue of *VIA PANORAMICA* convened the International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Videogames*, while simultaneously teaching an undergraduate course with the same title at NOVA FCSH. Both Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo dedicated their PhDs to exploring video games within the context of literary and cultural studies. Pereira, fully funded by FCT, wrote the first PhD dissertation on the topic defended at NOVA FCSH, which has now been published in book format under the title *Para um Estudo do Mundo Transmediático Neovitoriano: As Guerras Anglo-Zulu e Anglo-Bóere através da Literatura e dos Jogos Digitais* (2025), introducing the study of the subject in CETAPS at a PhD level. Bispo soon followed, writing a FCT-funded PhD dissertation entitled *Por Entre Espelhos, Covas e Ecrãs: a Criança Transgressiva de Lewis Carroll e suas Reinterpretações no Videojogo* (2025).

From Pereira's and Bispo's shared interest arose the desire to join efforts and organize not only an academic event of international scope, but also an undergraduate course entirely designed by the two invited editors. The conference and the course became part of a collaborative endeavor

between CETAPS's research strands "Culture, Science, and the Media" (which has since been dismantled) and "American Intersections", both included in CETAPS's research area *Anglophone Cultures and History*. These two initiatives proved extremely successful, bringing together scholars and students who shared the passion for video games, as Pereira and Bispo did in an intimate setting that encouraged the fruitful exchange of ideas. While the conference took place in mid-April 2025, with the leading scholars Dom Ford, Heike Paul, and Barbara Braid as keynote speakers, the course lasted for the entire second semester of the 2024/2025 school year.

The conference, the course, and the work developed by Pereira and Bispo in their PhDs can be subsumed under the label of game studies, an academic discipline that emerged in the late 1990s (Wills 2019, 14). Some of the foundational works of game studies include Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998), and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997) (Wills 2019, 14). With an initial focus on how to interpret games and what differentiates them from other media formats, early game studies scholars engaged in the ludology versus narratology debate, encouraging Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul to defend "player-centered interpretation[s]" of games (Wills 2019, 14-15). However, current research has broadened game studies' scope, engaging with different aspects, including the cultural dimension of gaming (Wills 2019, 15), with works such as *Victorians and Videogames* (2025), edited by Lin Young and Brooke Cameron, and *Gamer Nation: Video Games & American Culture* (2019), by John Wills, as notable examples.

Myths and their ludic representations are just one of the ways game studies intersect with cultural elements. Chris Baldick in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) describes myths as "[a] kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms" (2015, 235). Such a definition is closely related to the one presented by Richard Slotkin, who states in "Mythogenesis" (2007) that "[m]yths are stories drawn from a society's history, which have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology, and explicating the meaning and direction of its history" (2007, 1). These conceptualizations relate to myth criticism, prominent during the 1950s and 1960s and characterized by Baldick as a form of literary interpretation that

perceives literary works as expressions of overarching mythic patterns and structures (2015, 236). In *The Myths that Made America* (2014), Paul, one of the conference's keynote speakers, stresses that myths, one of the components of the "biography" of a nation-state (Anderson 2006, 204), and their criticism are relevant to the study of literary texts (2014, 26). This thematic section contends that myth criticism is equally useful for understanding other cultural artifacts, namely, video games set in Victorian or American contexts.

As Essaka Joshua explains in "Myth and Victorian Literature" (2018), myths played a decisive role in the Victorian era, which roughly corresponds to Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), although scholars vary in the precise time boundaries. Myths were a primordial means through which Victorians engaged with both the past and the present and conceptualized themselves (Joshua 2018), repeatedly referring to mythic constructions such as the angel in the house and the gentleman, analyzed by Filipe Furtado and Maria de Teresa Malafaia in *O Pensamento Vitoriano: Uma Antologia de Textos* (1992). Victorian studies and the examination of Victorian myths exhibit a continued relevance, partially due to the rapid development of neo-Victorianism, defined by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010) as incorporating texts that are "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (2010, 4). Many games fall into the neo-Victorian category, engaging with Victorian myths, such as *80 Days* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015), and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015), all of which are objects of study by articles featured in this issue.

American myths are also often remediated through a plethora of video games of different genres, which clearly reference, in various ways, some of America's foundational mythic narratives tied to the project of American nation-building and the discursive construction of a homogeneous American national identity (Paul 2014, 12). Among these narratives are the myth surrounding Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), and the supposed "discovery" of the American continent by the Europeans in 1492, the myth of the Promised Land, inaugurated by the Pilgrims and the Puritans, the myth of the American West, with agrarianism and expansionism as its two basic tenets (Paul 2014, 314), and the myth of the self-made man, indissociable from the expression "from rags-to-riches". All of them are subsumed under the umbrella myth of the American dream, as argued by Paul, besides appearing under the arc of the dominant ideological paradigm in the history and

18 practice of the field of American studies, namely American exceptionalism, which can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805-1859) assertion that "the position of Americans was quite exceptional" (Paul 2014, 16, 13-14). Digital games, however, often establish a not so unproblematic relationship with the myths they refashion, and may celebrate them, validating the exceptionalist discourse and portraying the United States as a "predestined entity and (still) unfinished utopian project" (Paul 2014, 12), or even contest them, highlighting the voices of those excluded from the American foundational mythology (Paul 2014, 12) or debunking that same mythology entirely. Yet, in most cases, they do so simultaneously.

This thematic issue, the first of two, emerges from the creative conjunction of game studies and myth criticism in relation to Victorian Britain and North America, including articles written by participants of the conference held at NOVA FCSH and by students of the course taught at the same institution, even though it also features works by other scholars. Cátia Ferreira's article, entitled "Victorian Times Reimagined: The case of *80 Days*", is a good example, presenting an analysis of the video game adaptation of Phileas Fogg's epic journey, originally depicted by Jules Verne (1828-1905) in *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1872). Slaven Lendić and Ines Munker, who both attended the conference, explore *Bloodborne* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* in "The Subversion of Victorian Morality in *Bloodborne* (2015)" and "Gentlewomen, Fallen Men and Caged Birds: Playing with Victorian Myths in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*", respectively. *80 Days*, *Bloodborne*, and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* exhibit a neo-Victorian nature, and their analysis engages with Victorian culture and its myths in different but complementary ways. Angel Todorov, author of "GUN: Representations of North American Myths and Stereotypes in the Controversial 2005 Western" and a former student of Pereira and Bispo, focuses on the Western video game *GUN* (2005), while also establishing parallels with *Assassin's Creed III* (2012) and *Red Dead Redemption* (2010). Mariano Falzone, who wrote "'Death Is a Mercy': The American Monomyth of the Superhero in 2005's *The Punisher* Video Game" and who participated in the conference, delves into the vigilante superhero myth, again from an American standpoint, just like Todorov's text. Finally, Catarina Ricardo's "Reimagining Western Femininity Through Ellie in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*", originally developed in the context of the course taught by Pereira and Bispo, combines American studies, myth criticism, and gender studies. Together, these six articles testify to the pervasiveness of Victorian and American myths in video games, ludic artifacts which virtually

occupy the most intimate spaces we inhabit, as Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca so eloquently put it in the epigraph to this introduction (2024, 2). 19

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