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FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

THEMATIC SECTION

Victorian Times Reimagined: The case of *80 Days*

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ABSTRACT: Digital games have emerged as a viable medium for reimagining historical myths and narratives through interactive storytelling. As Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010) argue, neo-Victorian media often engage critically with the past, blending historical memory with postcolonial and gendered critique. This article explores how the critically acclaimed digital game *80 Days* (2014) reimagines Victorian tales through its branching narrative and distinctive steampunk aesthetics, promoting a critical reinterpretation of Victorian values. Departing from a traditional retelling of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), the game presents an alternate history shaped by speculative technology and global perspectives.

Drawing on Fraser's (1998) analysis of the Victorian quest romance and Campbell's (1949) concept of the monomyth, the study examines how *80 Days* both adopts and subverts classical narrative structures. The game's thematic richness is further explored through semiotic and thematic analysis, revealing how recurrent motifs, such as

RESUMO: Os jogos digitais emergiram como um meio eficaz para reimaginar mitos e narrativas históricas através das suas narrativas interativas. Tal como argumentam Heilmann e Llewellyn (2010), os *media* neo-vitorianos envolvem-se frequentemente numa leitura crítica do passado, combinando memória histórica com crítica pós-colonial e de género. Este artigo explora de que forma o aclamado jogo digital *80 Days* (2014) reimagina narrativas vitorianas por meio de uma narrativa ramificada e de uma estética *steampunk* distintiva, promovendo uma reinterpretação crítica dos valores vitorianos. Ao afastar-se da recontagem tradicional de *A Volta ao Mundo em Oitenta Dias* (1873), o jogo apresenta uma história alternativa moldada por tecnologia especulativa e perspectivas globais.

Recorrendo à análise de Fraser (1998) sobre o romance de aventura vitoriano e ao conceito de monomito de Campbell (1949), este estudo examina como *80 Days* adota e subverte estruturas narrativas clássicas. A riqueza temática do jogo é explorada através de análise semiótica

social hierarchy, innovation, and exploration are embedded in player choices and narrative outcomes. These are interpreted through the lens of game studies frameworks, including Aarseth's (1997) ergodic literature, Juul's (2005) half-real systems, and Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric.

The findings demonstrate how *80 Days* reimagines Victorian culture by combining creative technology with historical authenticity, emphasizing intersections of gender, colonial, and class hierarchies through interactive engagement. This study contributes to game studies, digital humanities, and Victorian studies by demonstrating how digital games can retell historical myths while fostering critical thinking about the past and its continued relevance today.

KEYWORDS: digital games, Victorian narratives, *80 Days*, steampunk, interactive storytelling, thematic analysis, semiotic analysis, neo-Victorianism.

e temática, revelando como motivos recorrentes, como hierarquia social, inovação e exploração, estão incorporados nas escolhas do jogador e nos desfechos narrativos. Estes são interpretados à luz de quadros teóricos dos estudos de jogos, incluindo a literatura ergódica de Aarseth (1997), os sistemas semi-reais de Juul (2005) e a retórica procedimental de Bogost (2007).

Os resultados demonstram como *80 Days* reimagina a cultura vitoriana ao combinar tecnologia criativa com autenticidade histórica, enfatizando as interseções entre gênero, colonialismo e hierarquias de classe através da interação do jogador. Este estudo contribui para os campos dos estudos de jogos, das humanidades digitais e dos estudos vitorianos, ao mostrar como os jogos digitais podem recontar mitos históricos e promover uma reflexão crítica sobre o passado e a sua relevância atual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: jogos digitais, narrativas Vitorianas, *80 Days*, *steampunk*, storytelling interativo, análise temática, análise semiótica, neo-victorianismo.

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have become a dynamic means of reinterpreting historical myths and legends through interactive storytelling (Pfister 2020; Chapman 2016). Among history-based games, *80 Days* (inkle, 2014) stands out as a singular example of how Victorian narratives can be retold and reimagined through steampunk aesthetics and player-driven narrative design. Based on Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), the game allows players to traverse a speculative 19th-century world, encountering diverse cultures and confronting the moral and ideological legacies of Victorian imperialism.

This article examines how *80 Days* reconfigures Victorian narratives not only through its branching storytelling and speculative aesthetics, but also through its capacity to engage players in ideological critique. The study is grounded in a dual theoretical framework that combines Campbell's (1949) monomyth – used to trace the structural arc of the player's journey – with Fraser's (1998) analysis of the Victorian quest romance, which provides a genre-specific lens for interrogating imperialist adventure narratives. These are complemented by neo-Victorian theory (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 2010), steampunk aesthetics (Gibson & Sterling 1990; Dinello 2005), and key concepts from game studies, including ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997), half-real systems (Juul 2005), and procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007).

Methodologically, the study employs thematic and semiotic analysis to examine how *80 Days* represents and critiques Victorian values. Thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs, particularly exploration, innovation, social hierarchy, and the hero's journey and the Victorian quest romance. Meanwhile, semiotic analysis interprets signs and symbols in character design, environments, and dialogue to uncover their ideological significance. This dual approach enables a nuanced reading of how narrative structure, aesthetic choices, and player agency intersect to produce a layered critique of Victorian culture.

By situating *80 Days* within the broader context of neo-Victorian media and digital humanities, this article contributes to ongoing debates about how games can function as cultural memory and cultural critique. It argues that digital games are not only capable of retelling historical myths but also of transforming them, inviting players to question dominant ideologies, inhabit alternative perspectives, and co-author new understandings of the past.

1. VICTORIAN NARRATIVES ACROSS MEDIA

The term “Victorian” has long transcended its historical boundaries, evolving into a cultural shorthand for a set of values, aesthetics, and ideologies associated with the British Empire’s apex. While Queen Victoria’s reign (1837-1901) was marked by industrial progress, imperial expansion, and rigid social hierarchies, contemporary uses of “Victorian” often reflect a selective and stylized memory of that period, as Hillard (2020) and Ho (2012) observe. In media and literature, this memory is frequently filtered through nostalgia, critique, or speculative reimagining.

In contemporary media, the term “Victorian” is often deployed in ways that detach it from its historical specificity. The rise of neo-Victorianism has led to a proliferation of works that reimagine the 19th century in light of current concerns about gender, race, empire, and technology. As Maier, Ayres, and Dove (2022) and Primorac (2017) argue, this genre engages with Victorian themes through a postmodern lens. This includes not only literature and film, but also digital games, which offer interactive spaces for negotiating Victorian myths and ideologies (Kapell & Elliott 2013; Reinboth 2023).

Digital games such as *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, *The Order: 1886*, and *BioShock Infinite* exemplify how Victorian aesthetics are repurposed to explore moral ambiguity, technological anxiety, and social critique. Esser (2021) and Sigoillot (2020) demonstrate how these games frequently employ steampunk and retrofuturist aesthetics, genres that blend 19th-century design with speculative technology to create worlds that are both familiar and estranged. Steampunk, in particular, has become a visual and narrative language for interrogating the promises and perils of industrial modernity (Esser 2024).

One of the most enduring literary sources for Victorian-era values is Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). Although Verne was French, his novel reflects and amplifies British imperial ideologies, particularly through the character of Phileas Fogg, who embodies the rational, punctual, and emotionally detached English gentleman. As Sinnema (2000) notes, the narrative’s emphasis on global mobility, time discipline, and technological mastery aligns with Victorian ideals of progress and control. Verne’s work has thus become a touchstone for later reinterpretations of Victorian narratives, including in digital games that both draw from and critique these imperialist foundations (Rughiniş & Matei 2016).

The use of “Victorian” in global and non-English contexts raises important questions about cultural framing and historical memory. For instance, the digital game *80 Days* reimagines Verne’s narrative across 150 cities and diverse cultural perspectives. Can such a game still be called “Victorian”, or does the term risk reinforcing a Eurocentric frame that the game itself seeks to dismantle? Llewellyn (2009) and Ho (2012) argue that neo-Victorian works must engage “knowingly” with the period, rather than merely using it as an aesthetic backdrop. In this sense, *80 Days* participates in neo-Victorian discourse while also challenging its boundaries (Whitney 2021).

The contemporary fascination with the Victorian era, whether nostalgic, critical, or speculative, reveals its persistent relevance as a site of cultural negotiation. Digital games, with their capacity for interactivity and multiplicity, offer unique opportunities to reimagine Victorian narratives not as fixed historical accounts but as dynamic, contested terrains.

2. STEAMPUNK, RETROFUTURISM, AND PLAYER AGENCY IN VICTORIAN-THEMED DIGITAL GAMES

Building on the cultural and narrative contexts outlined above, this section develops a theoretical framework for analyzing how digital games engage with and reinterpret Victorian narratives. Unlike literature, film, or television, which typically present fixed narrative structures, digital games offer a distinctive mode of historical and cultural engagement. They combine storytelling with rule-based systems that invite players to actively participate in the construction and transformation of narrative worlds, enabling a more immersive and participatory reimagining of the past.

Victorian-themed digital games often draw on the genres of steampunk and retrofuturism, both of which blend nineteenth-century aesthetics with speculative technological imaginaries. Steampunk, inspired by authors such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, is characterized by steam-powered machinery, brass fittings, intricate gears, and Victorian fashion fused with industrial design (Gibson & Sterling 1990; Dinello 2005). Retrofuturism, closely related, imagines futures as envisioned from the past, combining nostalgia with futuristic speculation to interrogate the promises and anxieties of modernity (Guffey 2006).

However, steampunk is more than an aesthetic. As Nally (2021) and Danahay (2024) argue, the “punk” in steampunk signals a countercultural critique of industrial capitalism, consumerism, and imperial nostalgia. Emerging as a subcultural movement, steampunk embraces DIY ethics, recycling, and anti-corporate values, echoing the ethos of the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement. This ideological dimension is particularly relevant for understanding how digital games use steampunk not only to evoke a retrofuturist world but also to question the imperialist and capitalist assumptions embedded in Victorian narratives.

To analyze the narrative structures of these games, it is useful to consider Campbell’s (1949) monomyth, or hero’s journey, which outlines a cyclical pattern of departure, initiation, and return. This model has been widely adopted in literature, film, and digital games, where it is often reconfigured to accommodate branching narratives and player agency (Delmas *et al.* 2007). In games, the monomyth provides a flexible template for character development and thematic progression, allowing players to inhabit the hero’s role and shape the journey through their choices. Titles such as *Journey*, *The Witcher 3*, and *Mass Effect* illustrate how the monomyth can be adapted into nonlinear, recursive, or fragmented experiences.

Yet, while the monomyth offers valuable insights into narrative structure, it is not ideologically specific to the Victorian period. To address the historical and cultural specificity of Victorian-themed games, it is necessary to consider the Victorian quest romance as a complementary framework for understanding these games. Fraser (1998) and Caserio (2012) describe this genre as one centered on white, upper-class English male protagonists who journey through colonized territories, asserting dominance and “civilizing” the Other. These narratives reinforce British imperial ideologies, presenting exploration as conquest and moral superiority.

By juxtaposing the structural flexibility of the monomyth with the ideological critique embedded in the quest romance, it is possible to better understand how digital games both inherit and subvert Victorian narrative traditions. Games may adopt the formal structure of the hero’s journey while simultaneously undermining its ideological underpinnings through character inversion, ethical dilemmas, and alternative perspectives.

Foundational game studies theories further illuminate how games function as hybrid systems of rules and fiction. Aarseth (1997) describes games as ergodic literature, requiring non-trivial effort from players to traverse and interpret. Juul (2005) characterizes games as half-real systems, combining real rules with fictional worlds, while Bogost (2007) introduces procedural rhetoric, emphasizing how game mechanics simulate and critique real-world systems. These frameworks underscore the capacity of games to engage players in meaning-making processes that are both narrative and systemic.

Steampunk and retrofuturist games, in particular, leverage these affordances to encourage critical engagement with Victorian myths. Games such as *BioShock Infinite* and *Dishonored* incorporate ethical dilemmas, technological speculation, and social hierarchies into their mechanics and world-building. Pérez-Latorre and Oliva (2017) and Esser (2021) show how these elements allow players to explore and sometimes subvert nineteenth-century ideologies through interactive engagement. In *Dishonored*, for instance, players navigate a Victorian-inspired city rife with political intrigue and fantastical inventions, where moral decisions impact both social order and narrative outcomes. Similarly, *BioShock Infinite* uses its steampunk setting to interrogate utopian ideals and the contradictions of progress.

Player agency, in the sense of the capacity to make meaningful choices that affect the game world, is central to this ludic reinterpretation. Recent research emphasizes that agency involves not only the ability to influence outcomes but also the alignment of player motivations with character objectives, fostering immersion and protagonism (Bódi 2023; Stang 2019). This alignment enables players to experience Victorian myths as dynamic systems open to examination, critique, and transformation. Moreover, the interactive nature of games encourages players to engage critically with nineteenth-century ideologies, often revealing their entanglement with contemporary concerns (Pereira 2022; Reinboth 2023).

This participatory model of historical engagement distinguishes digital games from other media. Through procedurality and player choice, Victorian myths are transformed from static narratives into dynamic experiences shaped by individual and collective agency.

3. THE CASE OF *80 DAYS*

Building on the theoretical and critical frameworks established earlier, this section presents *80 Days* as an empirical case study. The game exemplifies how interactive media can reimagine and critique nineteenth-century narratives through steampunk aesthetics, branching storytelling, and meaningful player agency. Drawing on Campbell's (1949) monomyth as a structural tool and Fraser's (1998) Victorian quest romance as an ideological lens, the analysis explores how *80 Days* both inherits and subverts traditional narrative conventions to interrogate Victorian values.

3.1 Methods

This study employs a dual analytical approach combining thematic and semiotic analysis. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), identifies recurrent patterns in narrative content that reflect cultural values and player experiences. The game's dialogue, descriptions, and narrative outcomes were closely read and replayed across multiple sessions, with data coded into clusters representing key thematic concerns.

Semiotic analysis complements this by examining signs and symbols in the game's textual and visual components. Drawing on Barthes (1967) and Chandler (2007), this method explores how character design, environmental details, and dialogue encode ideological meaning. In *80 Days*, visual elements such as attire, architecture, and technology serve as markers of social status, cultural identity, and historical critique.

Importantly, the analysis is grounded in the dual narrative framework introduced earlier. Campbell's monomyth provides a structural lens for understanding the player's journey, while Fraser's quest romance framework enables a critique of the imperialist logic embedded in traditional Victorian adventure narratives. This combination enables a nuanced reading of how *80 Days* both adopts and subverts genre conventions.

3.2 *80 Days*

Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) is reimaged in multiple layers in the 2014 interactive fiction game *80 Days* by inkle Studios. The game incorporates steampunk aesthetics, a strong emphasis on player agency, and branching narrative design (Rughiniş &

Matei 2016). Players take on the role of Passepartout, Phileas Fogg's valet, and must travel the world. Every playthrough offers a different narrative experience due to the game's network of potential paths and outcomes.

The game's speculative 19th-century world blends historical authenticity with creative speculation. Its steampunk-inspired setting offers different viewpoints on identity, empire, and technology by reimagining historical narratives. Academic research highlights how the game's speculative setting subverts dominant historical narratives and gives voice to underrepresented groups. According to Rughiniş and Matei (2016), the game combines history and biography, enabling players to experience world events while encountering characters rooted in their own political and cultural contexts.

A key component of the game's design philosophy is player choice. It invites players to critically interact with themes of exploration, cultural encounter, and social hierarchy through its nearly 150 cities and innumerable branching encounters. The narrative richness of the game, which encourages players to investigate various ethical, cultural, and geopolitical facets of the 19th-century world, is just as important to its replayability as its mechanical complexity.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

The game's narrative and interactive design engage with and reinterpret important aspects of Victorian culture and narratives. This section identifies and examines recurrent themes that influence the player's experience. Four major themes are covered: exploration, innovation, social hierarchy, and the reimagining of the hero's journey through the lens of Victorian quest romance. Each theme is examined in terms of its role within the narrative, its portrayal in the game world, and its influence on the player's engagement with Victorian myths and ideals.

3.3.1 Exploration

Exploration is a major thematic and structural axis in *80 Days*, shaping the player's experience through branching narrative architecture. Moral decisions and personal choices influence each journey across the steampunk-infused world.

The game decentralizes the European perspective, undermining the colonial gaze. Characters such as Behiye bint Kasim, a female Ottoman pirate, and Aodha, a female Indian

mercenary leader, subvert dominant narratives of empire and progress. These interactions elevate historically marginalized voices and encourage players to critically analyze the ethics of exploration and the power dynamics inherent in travel.

This decentralization is further illustrated in a route where *Passepartout* uncovers a secretive resistance network in Istanbul, an underground society that actively subverts imperial control. Rather than serving as an exotic backdrop, the city becomes a site of ideological contestation, inviting players to engage with alternative historical narratives. Similarly, a detour to the Arctic city of Qausuittuq reveals a democratically governed haven for Indigenous peoples, prompting reflection on alternative models of governance and autonomy and challenging the notion of European superiority.

The 80-day time limit reflects Victorian preoccupation with productivity and technological progress, yet detours and curiosity are rewarded. Richer narrative experiences often result from staying in cities, engaging in dialogue, or taking alternate routes, subtly challenging the imperial logic of utilitarianism.

3.3.2 Innovation

80 Days recontextualizes Victorian optimism regarding technology by employing innovation as both a narrative driver and a thematic lens. Steam-powered trains, mechanical elephants, and submersible ships are not merely decorative; they influence gameplay, narrative progression, and ethical decision-making.

For example, choosing to travel on a mechanical elephant in India or the *Waterlily* submersible across the Pacific affects speed, cost, and narrative outcomes. These choices reflect the Victorian obsession with mobility and progress, while also inviting reflection on how innovation intersects with ethics and cultural specificity.

A journey aboard the *Waterlily*, a hybrid ship and submersible, between Yokohama and San Francisco, not only showcases steampunk aesthetics but also forces players to weigh the risks of underwater travel against the speed it offers. The decision is not merely logistical but also symbolic, as it foregrounds the tension between technological ambition and human vulnerability. Similarly, choosing a mechanical camel in the Arabian Desert introduces ethical

dilemmas surrounding the exploitation of local resources for technological gain, reframing innovation as a site of cultural negotiation.

The steampunk aesthetic blends futuristic machinery with Victorian design, prompting players to question linear narratives of progress. Player agency further complicates this theme, as choices between speed and experience, or efficiency and ethics, mirror tensions between industrial ambition and moral responsibility.

3.3.3 Social Hierarchy

Social hierarchy is a structural and thematic undercurrent in *80 Days*. As Passepartout, a working-class valet, players navigate a world shaped by class, race, gender, and colonial hierarchies. His liminal position allows access to diverse social groups but also exposes him to exclusion and prejudice.

This dynamic is reflected in how certain travel routes or accommodations are restricted based on attire or reputation. For example, in Vienna, Passepartout may be denied access to a luxury train unless dressed in refined clothing such as a tailcoat or monocle. In St. Petersburg, wearing a Russian Gentleman's outfit allows negotiation of train schedules, illustrating how class performance affects mobility.

The game also challenges gender norms through encounters with female characters who occupy roles traditionally denied to them in the 19th century. Isabella Asisara, a Mutsun airship captain, leads a technologically advanced vessel and speaks of reclaiming autonomy from colonial powers. Aodha, a mercenary leader in India, defies patriarchal expectations by commanding a group of fighters after surviving a near-death experience.

Colonial hierarchies are similarly interrogated. In Dakar, Passepartout may witness local resistance against colonial officers who treat Indigenous characters with suspicion. In Haiti, players encounter a flourishing superpower led by Black revolutionaries, which subverts imperial narratives and repositions technological and political agency.

Mechanically, social hierarchy is embedded in the game's branching structure. Passepartout's reputation stat affects dialogue options and access to routes. For instance, being perceived as dependable or stylish opens up cooperative interactions with locals and

officials. In Timbuktu, players may confront slavers and choose to intervene or remain complicit, highlighting moral agency within oppressive systems.

These examples illustrate how *80 Days* employs both narrative and mechanics to critique Victorian assumptions about class, gender, and empire, transforming the social hierarchy from a static backdrop into a dynamic system of negotiation and resistance.

3.3.4 The Hero's Journey and the Victorian Quest Romance

The hero's journey in *80 Days* is reimagined through interactive storytelling and reframed through the ideological lens of the Victorian quest romance. Drawing on Campbell's monomyth, the game presents a cyclical journey of departure, trials, transformation, and return, shaped by player agency.

Passepartout's role as a valet subverts traditional heroic archetypes, questioning whose stories are told and who gets to be the hero. This inversion aligns with Fraser's critique of imperialist narratives, where the protagonist is typically a white, upper-class English male asserting dominance through exploration.

Players face logistical, moral, and emotional challenges; choosing between saving time or helping others, engaging in romance, or supporting uprisings. In one path, Passepartout is invited to join a rebellion in Manila, where he must choose between aiding local resistance or preserving his master's schedule. In another, he may fall in love with a revolutionary or be forced to choose between personal loyalty and political conviction. These branching paths complicate the notion of heroic progress and introduce ethical ambiguity.

The game's mechanics reinforce this reimagining. Time pressure and resource management (balancing money, health, and reputation) force players to make difficult decisions that reflect Victorian ideals of efficiency and control, while also exposing their limitations. For example, choosing a slower but safer route may allow for deeper cultural engagement, but it risks missing the deadline and failing the journey. These trade-offs foreground the tension between imperial ambition and human empathy.

Passepartout's internal reflections, recorded in journal entries and dialogue, reveal a growing awareness of the world's complexity. In some routes, he expresses doubt about the morality of their mission or admiration for the people they meet. These moments of

introspection mark a departure from Fogg's detached rationalism and signal a transformation rooted in experience and empathy.

The return to London, if achieved, is not merely a triumph of speed but a culmination of ethical and emotional growth. The game thus transforms a classical narrative structure into a dynamic, player-driven experience that invites critical engagement with Victorian ideals and their imperialist underpinnings.

3.4 Semiotic Analysis' Results

This section presents the results of the semiotic analysis, focusing on how *80 Days* uses signs and symbols in character design, environments, and dialogue to reflect or subvert Victorian ideologies. These semiotic elements are not merely aesthetic choices; they shape the player's understanding of the game world and its cultural dynamics.

3.4.1 Character Design

Character design in *80 Days* operates primarily through minimalist illustrations and rich textual descriptions, rather than detailed visual modeling. The game uses attire, naming, and narrative framing to signal social status, cultural identity, and ideological positioning. Upper-class characters are described wearing elaborate Victorian attire: tailcoats, corsets, and top hats, signaling wealth and conformity to social norms. Working-class characters are often introduced with references to utilitarian garments and practical accessories, emphasizing labor and mobility.

Passepartout's attire can be customized by the player, and these choices influence how he is perceived in different cities. For example, wearing a monocle and tailcoat in Vienna grants access to elite spaces, while simpler clothing may lead to exclusion or suspicion. Isabella Asisara, the Mutsun airship captain, is described as wearing a blend of Indigenous and steampunk elements, symbolizing resistance and technological agency. In New Orleans, the character of Death is personified as a woman whose gothic and surreal narrative presence challenges Victorian binaries of morality and rationality.

These character portrayals rely on symbolic cues embedded in the game's text and stylized visuals, inviting players to interpret identity and ideology through a combination of aesthetic suggestion and narrative context.

3.4.2 Environments

The environments in *80 Days* are rendered in a stylized, minimalist visual style, supported by rich textual descriptions that convey atmosphere, cultural context, and ideological framing. Cities are introduced with brief illustrations and narrative cues that evoke their geopolitical significance and aesthetic character. For example, the domed skyline of Istanbul or the mechanical cranes of Hong Kong are not intricately visualized but described in ways that suggest industrial ambition and imperial reach.

Qausuittuq, the floating Arctic city governed by Indigenous peoples, is framed through narrative as a symbol of autonomy and postcolonial futurism. The mechanical city in India, which moves on massive wheels, is described as a self-sufficient entity, critiquing colonial extraction and reimagining mobility. The Zulu Federation, with its robotic war animals and fortified cities, employs steampunk motifs to invert colonial narratives of technological superiority.

Environmental symbols such as steam vents, brass fittings, and airship docks are referenced in text and stylized visuals, functioning as markers of industrial progress and ideological tension. These elements invite players to interpret space as a site of negotiation between empire, innovation, and resistance. The juxtaposition of historical and speculative elements encourages reflection on the linear narratives of progress often associated with the Victorian era.

3.4.3 Dialogue

Dialogue in *80 Days* is a central semiotic tool, crafted with period-appropriate rhetorical nuance. It reveals character ideologies, social hierarchies, and cultural tensions through branching conversations and embedded choices. Rather than relying on voice acting or detailed animations, the game uses written exchanges to convey tone, status, and worldview.

In Manila, players can engage with revolutionaries who contest imperial control and invite Passepartout to join their cause. In Serbia, a local engineer expresses resentment toward Western exploitation and pride in regional innovation. In Peru, a merchant discusses the impact of British trade policies, offering a nuanced view of economic imperialism. In the Zulu Federation, dialogue with a local commander reveals pride in technological autonomy and resistance to colonial incursion. In New Orleans, conversations with the personified figure of Death challenge Victorian moral binaries and introduce surreal philosophical reflection.

Characters speak in ways that reflect their social position: colonial officers use formal, authoritative language, while resistance leaders and laborers speak with urgency and conviction. These exchanges are not didactic but dialogic, offering space for reflection and choice. The player's responses shape the narrative trajectory, reinforcing the game's commitment to interactive meaning-making.

Together, these semiotic dimensions – linguistic interaction and ideological framing – underscore how *80 Days* constructs a layered critique of Victorian ideology. By embedding meaning in carefully written dialogue, the game transforms its textual aesthetic into a vehicle for cultural interrogation.

3.5 Discussion

The empirical findings from *80 Days* reveal how interactive storytelling, thematic complexity, and semiotic design converge to produce a critical reimagining of Victorian ideologies. When interpreted through the theoretical lenses of neo-Victorianism, narrative theory, and game studies, the game emerges not merely as a historical simulation but as a dynamic medium for ideological critique and cultural negotiation. The thematic and semiotic analyses demonstrate how player agency, branching narrative structures, and symbolic environments work together to interrogate dominant narratives of empire, progress, and social hierarchy.

This interpretive process is anchored in the dual narrative framework, which combines Campbell's monomyth and Fraser's Victorian quest romance. While *80 Days* draws on the structural arc of the hero's journey (departure, trials, transformation, and return), it deliberately subverts its ideological foundations by casting Passepartout, a working-class valet, as the protagonist. This inversion destabilizes the conventions of the quest romance, which

traditionally centers on elite English male explorers asserting dominance over colonized territories. Instead, the game foregrounds ethical complexity, cross-cultural empathy, and moral agency, aligning with Fraser's critique of imperial adventure narratives and Delmas *et al.*'s (2007) insights into the fragmentation and personalization of interactive storytelling.

The thematic analysis reinforces this ideological shift. Exploration, typically framed as conquest in Victorian literature, is reimagined as a process of cultural encounter and resistance. Routes through Istanbul, Qausuittuq, and Manila reveal alternative models of governance, autonomy, and rebellion, decentralizing the European gaze and amplifying historically marginalized voices. Innovation, while visually expressed through steampunk aesthetics, becomes a site of ethical negotiation. Technologies such as mechanical elephants and submersible ships are not merely fantastical devices but narrative tools that prompt reflection on the costs and consequences of progress. These speculative elements function as retrofuturist provocations (Guffey 2006), exposing the contradictions of Victorian modernity.

Social hierarchy, another core theme, is rendered as a dynamic system rather than a static backdrop. *Passepartout*'s shifting reputation, access to routes, and interactions with characters of varying status illustrate how class, race, and gender hierarchies are embedded in both narrative and mechanics. Encounters with figures like Isabella Asisara and Aodha challenge patriarchal and colonial norms, while the player's decisions – whether to intervene in oppression or remain complicit – highlight the game's procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007). These mechanics simulate real-world systems of power and resistance, transforming gameplay into a form of ideological critique.

The semiotic analysis further supports these findings by showing how character design, environmental cues, and dialogue encode cultural identity, resistance, and historical memory. Stylized depictions of cities, hybrid attire of revolutionary figures, and rhetorically nuanced conversations all contribute to a layered critique of Victorian values. As Barthes (1967) and Chandler (2007) suggest, these signs are culturally loaded; in *80 Days*, they are mobilized to foreground hybridity, contestation, and alternative modernities.

Finally, the game's procedural structure (its rule-based systems, branching paths, and time constraints) embodies Juul's (2005) concept of half-real systems. The tension between speed and experience, efficiency and empathy, mirrors the ideological conflicts of the

Victorian era. Players are invited not only to navigate a speculative world but to co-author its meaning, embodying Aarseth's (1997) notion of ergodic literature, where narrative emerges through effort and choice.

In sum, *80 Days* exemplifies how digital games can function as critical media. By integrating interactive storytelling with steampunk aesthetics and thematic depth, the game reimagines Victorian myths in ways that are politically resonant and historically reflective. It invites players to engage with the past not as a fixed narrative but as a contested terrain open to reinterpretation, resistance, and transformation.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how *80 Days* reimagines Victorian narratives through the affordances of digital games, offering a participatory model of historical engagement that is both critical and creative. By integrating steampunk aesthetics, branching narrative structures, and meaningful player agency, the game transcends conventional historical representation to become a site of ideological negotiation and cultural critique.

The dual narrative framework based on Campbell's monomyth and Fraser's Victorian quest romance has proven essential for interpreting how *80 Days* simultaneously adopts and subverts classical narrative conventions. Passepartout's role as a working-class protagonist reframes the hero's journey, foregrounding ethical dilemmas, emotional growth, and cross-cultural encounters in place of imperial conquest. This narrative inversion challenges the ideological assumptions embedded in traditional Victorian adventure stories and aligns with broader neo-Victorian strategies of reappropriation and critique.

Thematic and semiotic analyses reveal how the game engages with Victorian ideals of exploration, innovation, and social hierarchy, not to reinforce them, but to expose their contradictions and reimagine their legacy. Through stylized environments, symbolic character design, and dialogic interactions, *80 Days* encodes resistance, hybridity, and alternative modernities. Its procedural systems composed of time management, branching paths, and reputation mechanics, function as rhetorical devices that simulate and interrogate the moral and political tensions of the 19th century.

By situating *80 Days* within the broader context of neo-Victorian media and digital humanities, this study affirms the capacity of games to act as both cultural memory and cultural critique. It contributes to ongoing conversations about how interactive media can reframe historical narratives, challenge dominant ideologies, and invite players to co-author new understandings of the past. In this way, *80 Days* is not simply a game about the Victorian era; it is a reflection on how history itself can be retold, contested, and transformed through play.

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