



VIA
PANORAMICA

Revista de Estudios Anglo-Americanos
A Journal of Anglo-American Studies

FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

THEMATIC SECTION

The International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games

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Between April 9 and 11, 2025, NOVA FCSH hosted the International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Video Games*, organized within the context of CETAPS's former strand "Culture, Science, and the Media" and also the "American Intersections" strand, both part of the research area Anglophone Cultures and History. The conference took place in the intimate setting of the Salão Nobre at Colégio Almada Negreiros, formerly known as Colégio dos Jesuítas. This historical building was gradually constructed during the second half of the nineteenth century and was overseen by the Companhia de Jesus, before being later occupied by the Portuguese army and subsequently transferred to NOVA University Lisbon (NOVA FCSH). Throughout the three days of the conference, CETAPS's secretary, Cristina Carinhas, and the organizing committee, namely Rui Mateus, Alice Carletto, Mariana Cruz, and Beatriz de Almeida Santos, as well as Tânia Cerqueira, despite being in Porto, provided unwavering assistance and ensured everything ran as smoothly as possible.

With twenty-five participants from different corners of the world presenting individual or joint papers and three keynote speakers specializing in the topics addressed by the conference, the event was divided into 8 panels. "Panel 1: Revisiting the American West and the American Dream" and "Panel 8: Perspectives on Colonization and American Warfare" focused on American studies, examining video games such as *The Oregon Trail* (2021), *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), *American Arcadia* (2023), the *Pokémon* franchise, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), and *The Punisher* (2004), among others. "Panel 3: Narratives of Contagion and Religion", "Panel 5: (Neo)Victorian Masculinities and Feminitities", and "Panel 7: Moral Ambiguities and Remarkable Victorians", in turn, approached video games engaged with Victorian and neo-Victorian topics, specifically *Vampyr*

(2018) and *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), to name but a few. Other panels, such as “Panel 2: (De)Mythifying Digital Spaces”, “Panel 4: Heroic Archetypes”, and “Panel 6: Ludic Cinema and Playful Characters”, broadened the scope of video games addressed by the participants, discussing *The Lord of the Rings Online* (2007), H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and *The Sinking City* (2019), *Layers of Fear* (2016), *L.A. Noire* (2011), *Disco Elysium* (2019), and ludic narratives featuring Sherlock Holmes and his associates.

Throughout the conference, members of the executive committee, besides Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo, attended and moderated the panels, contributing to an atmosphere open to the active exchange of ideas, as exemplified by Gabriela Gândara Terenas, Iolanda Ramos, Isabel Oliveira, and Fátima Vieira, the latter of whom travelled all the way from Porto just for the event. Finally, the conference concluded with a guided visit to the National Museum of Contemporary Art, organized by Pereira with the assistance of Terenas and of NOVA FCSH staff, allowing participants from different countries to connect Victorian and American mythic discourses with nineteenth and twentieth-century Portuguese art.

KEYNOTE LECTURES: DOM FORD, HEIKE PAUL, AND BARBARA BRAID

The International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Video Games* featured three keynote lecturers, Dom Ford, Heike Paul, and Barbara Braid, who kindly accepted Teresa Pereira's and Jéssica Bispo's invitation to visit NOVA FCSH and share their expertise at the event.

Dom Ford was the first to speak, opening the conference with a paper entitled “Mytholudics: Games and Myth”. Ford, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bremen, where he conducts work in the Media and Religion lab at the ZeMKI Centre for Media, Communication, and Information Research, has recently published *Mytholudics: Games and Myth* (2025), which is largely linked to the paper he presented at the conference. The keynote lecture explored mytholudics, a framework for understanding how games make meaning as myth and through it, drawing on Roland Barthes' conceptualization of myth as a means through which meaning is expressed and on Frog's mythic discourse analysis, “a modern folklore approach” that positions myths as “models for understanding the world and things in it” (Ford 2025, 6). Through mytholudics, mythic discourse analysis was adapted to the study of games connected to Victorian and American myths, taking into

account the games' specificities, particularly in relation to virtuality, nonlinearity, and performativity (*ibidem*), as explained by Ford.

Chair of American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg and director of the Bavarian American Academy in Munich, Heike Paul, author of acclaimed theoretical works such as *The Myths that Made America* (2014), was the second keynote lecturer, presenting "American Myths in Times of Crisis". In it, Paul, who has held fellowships at Harvard University, the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, and the Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles, and who has twice served as Visiting Harris Professor at Dartmouth College, explored foundational mythic narratives. According to Paul, myth criticism has long attempted to do more than simply celebrate and heroize American myths of origin, instead engaging in revisiting the flaws and blind spots of mythic stock characters and stories (Paul 2025, 3). However, as the recipient of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize contended in her lecture, this revisionist engagement with celebrated mythic narratives has in recent times come under attack by those pursuing "agendas of restoration, revanchism, and destruction" (*ibidem*).

Finally, Barbara Braid, Assistant Professor of English at the Institute of Literature and New Media, University of Szczecin, Poland, presented "Rewriting Victorian Biomyths in neo-Victorian Biofiction", a topic she also explored in "Biofiction and the Neo-Victorian Crime Novel: The Case of the Brontës" (2024), "Queering the Female Writer in Screen Biofictions: *Daphne* (2007) and *Shirley* (2020)" (2024), and "Queer Heritage and Strategic Humour in Recent Screen Biofictions of Emily Dickinson" (2024), among others. As Braid argued, biofiction, "a type of literary or audiovisual text that offers a new version of a historical persona" (4), specifically when neo-Victorian in nature, reimagines Victorian figures, both the most famous and those that have been largely forgotten. In doing so, biofiction frequently highlights the most scandalous aspects of its subjects' lives or reinterprets their biographies in relation to contemporary understandings of identity and society (Braid 2025, 4). As a result, biofiction is highly revisionist, engaging in "the process of mythologization and de- or re-mythologization" and employing emblemization, revision, anachronism, metafiction, and parody to reconfigure what Braid terms Victorian biomyths within the context of neo-Victorian texts, including video games (*ibidem*).

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HOW TO CITE

Pereira, Teresa (2025). “The International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games”. *VIA PANORAMICA: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, vol. 14, n.º 2, 2025, pp. 149-152. Web: <http://ojs.letras.up.pt/>. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/2182-9934/via14_2re