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Victorian and American Frames of
Reference for Digital Games

THEMATIC SECTION

Interview with DOM FORD

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The following interview with Dom Ford, transcribed here, took place in Lisbon during the International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games, hosted by NOVA FCSH and CETAPS from April 9 to 11, 2025.

Teresa Pereira [TP]: Dom is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bremen, where he's part of the Media and Religion Lab in the ZeMKI Center for Media, Communication and Information Research. His current research focuses on how communities in digital games are formed, maintained, and negotiated between players and developers. He also works on role-building and myth-making in digital media more broadly. His first book, *Mytholudics: Games and Myth*, will be published with De Gruyter in 2025. And Dom is going to talk to us about that book today. So, good morning, Dom. Thank you for accepting our invitation. That's very kind of you.

Dom Ford [DF]: Thank you for having me. It's been wonderful.

TP: First of all, I'd like to ask you, where did the idea for mytholudics come from? And what does it actually mean?

DF: Well, yeah, in some ways, it's been a long time coming for me. It's kind of the framework I felt I needed when I started looking at games. When I was an undergraduate, Arthurian romance was my big love, as were video games. And I was in an English department, starting to read and study, read and write about games. And I just kind of felt I was mostly working through a Barthesian lens of myth and semiotics and reading games through that lens as well. And even at that point, I felt that there was something missing, like the aspect of play and interactivity, that these theories that I was working with didn't quite get at.

This was kind of the framework I felt I needed back then. Then I went off and did other things. Until, a few years later, I came to the PhD. And I think, actually, I was on to something in my undergraduate work and started developing this idea. Mytholudics is, thus, this way of saying that I think myth is a good way to look at games. You have *mytho*, and then you have *ludics*. *Ludics* comes from the Latin for game, *ludus*. So, if you think of mythopoetics, for instance, mytholudics is a way of saying, how does play work through a lens of myth? And that was really my guiding question. And how do we analyze games? How do we interpret these game worlds in a way that, at least, I felt was satisfying and hopefully other people would find useful and satisfying as well?

TP: Thank you. Our next question is, how are myths and video games connected to one another?

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DF: The more I read about myth and folklore, as well as games, of course, the more I found similarities between them. And I think, at least in my understanding of myth, I see myth more as a way of expressing meaning. And it's kind of a way of modeling the world around you.

I like to use the example of music theory and the circle of myths. Northrop Frye does this as well. It's this idea that working with all of sound is really quite overwhelming, and it's not really possible to do. You need some kind of structure over it. And there's no real reason why we then choose the 12-tone division of the octave and the notes A, B and C and so on. But what it does is give us a workable structure that offers us something, does things for us, and allows us to produce decent music. Essentially, with enough variety as well.

I think myth is doing something similar to reality in a way. And then what I think games are doing is the same process, but emulated. So rather than kind of – and this is very reductive, and a lot of people who work with fiction will get mad at me for this – but fiction is then this way of interpreting reality in that sense or making a comment on reality. And games, I think, at least a lot of games, are this kind of way of emulating reality. And so, what that means is it's creating something that you inhabit, have to behave within, and do things within. That means you have to internalize that way of understanding the world so that you can act rather than, again, being violently reductive, reading about someone acting in a world. I think in that sense it's very similar because they make you behave in a similar way. One in the real world and one in the game world, you take on a way of understanding the world or the game world, and then you act within that environment.

I really think there are these two main elements, right? There's the constative and the performative. The constative being the things that don't change – the words on the page or, in a game, the words scripted in dialogue. You have maybe the spatial organization of the game world. You have the art stuff. You have many constative elements. But unlike

120 most novels and other media, there's also the performative element, right? That's what you do.

And this is also very similar to myth. I think with myth you have, yes, you obviously have stories, and you have these really important artworks and so on. But you also have ways of behaving. You have social relations, right? How do you perceive the brother-brother or brother-sister relationship? Those are just different. And that's not really a story. That's a way of relating to people.

You also have, of course, rituals, rites and behaviors that you believe you have to do to get by in daily life. And so, I think that's similar for games as well. You have all these meaningful elements you can look at. But you also just have the moment-to-moment moving around the world and how you treat NPCs. Because it's a simulation, it can then be much more constrained or afforded, right? So, you can only do these certain things to NPCs. And then we can look at that and wonder: "Okay, is the only way that you can interact with NPCs to kill them?" That says something about this game world. Other points of reflection might be: "Do you have many different dialogue options?" or "Do you have even, as in for instance *Façade*, the ability to type text freely?"

Examining elements such as these subtly changes how you interact with the world. And that changes what the world is in a kind of ontological sense, I think. And so, I think they're very connected in this ontological way. And that myth is a way of structuring reality and the world around us. Games, I find, are a way of emulating that same process in a simulated world rather than our own.

TP: Okay, thank you. I also wanted to ask you, how does mytholudics work? And throughout your book, I also noticed that Roland Barthes and Frog were relevant. How are they relevant in relation to mytholudics?

DF: I mentioned Barthes earlier as one of the great inspirations for me. From Barthes, I was able to draw two main things: first, the idea that myth is not something we've left behind. Many older theorists talk about myth as something of the past and as something

that we have now dispensed with. Because we are supposedly now in the age of rationality, we're done with myths, which are a thing of primitive peoples; second, through his examples, Barthes shows that myth is everywhere and is always operating in different things and to different ends. As a result, myth is those two things: it's modern and not of the past, and it's also a way of expressing meaning rather than an object. I never like definitions of myth that conceptualize it as a sacred story, because I find that limiting. Barthes gets at it better when he says it's a way of expressing meaning.

Barthes refers to different concepts in relation to myth, such as naturalization and tautology. While the first relates to how things, behaviors, rituals or hierarchies become naturalized, the second addresses the idea that myth justifies itself in a very cyclical relationship. "Why is this the way it is? Because it is how it's always been." And because of that, it justifies itself, going round in circles like that.

The problem with Barthes and twentieth-century critical theory in literature is its lack of operability. It's very fluffy, lyrical and almost poetic in the way it approaches things. I was kind of grasping for something a bit more concrete and operationalizable.

I was looking into folklore studies and how people approach comparative or intra- or intercomparative analyses of societies and their ways of thinking. I came across Frog's method, which I owe a lot to in this. Mytholudics is really built on top of mythic discourse analysis. Frog's method of analysis focuses on Old Norse and Finno-Karelian societies, which is a very different subject matter for me. The basic unit of the method is an integer, which is about identifying the abstracted basic units of the story or society, and splitting them up into concretized and abstracted elements. Let's say you have Zeus-Poseidon. That can also be abstracted as brother-brother or god-god, and you can compare that abstraction to them. What that might mean is that Zeus and Poseidon's tempestuous relationship feeds into how people perceive a brotherly relationship. Maybe it doesn't fully define it, but it feeds into it. You might also have the three God structure, the Three Norns or the Three Fates. The three-goddess structure is very common in many Indo-European religions. You can compare how those work in different contexts and what they mean. And you can also put them into more isolated events.

One example would be Thor slaying the Midgard serpent, which might then be abstracted to a hero slaying a monster or a devil. These all feed into each other, oscillating between the concrete and the abstract. While I was studying this topic, I thought that it would work really well for games. You can isolate particular gameplay moments, core loops or gameplay, and then compare them between games and between things. Consider, for instance, in *Skyrim*, the two Civil War quest lines, one about the Stormcloaks and the other about the Imperials. If you abstract them, you notice that they essentially are the same quest line, with the roles reversed. Either the player as General Tullius kills Ulfric Stormcloak or the player as Ulfric Stormcloak kills General Tullius. And you do it in the same way, right into the ending, in a very modular way.

I really value this kind of modularity, because I think games are not experienced by everyone in the same way. Again, a violently reduced example: we all experience a novel in roughly the same way. We read the same words in the same order, broadly speaking, and even though there are obviously counterexamples, we're meant to read a novel from page one to the last page. In games, people might go do quests in a different order, they might be a different kind of avatar. Or they might behave differently. For example, you can do a pacifist playthrough of *Skyrim*, you can be a sneaking, stealth archer or you can be a summoner and not really fight. The same game can be approached in all these different ways. This kind of method focuses on how those approaches might mean different things and might reconfigure the mythic space that we're dealing with.

To come back to the question of how it works, the point is not to narrativize what happens in the game, but to keep it modular and focus on isolated moments. I like to use a metaphor of constellations and orbits. These isolated moments are loosely connected to one another, but not in any linear way, and you're putting them in these abstracted forms, comparing them to one another. While doing so, you should ask yourself if a given isolated moment orbits something in particular. My example of *Call of Duty* in the book orbits the central construction of the hero victim. You notice that all these individual, modular, isolated elements contribute towards either the victimhood or the heroification of the soldier, forming a really strong sense of the soldier as a hero victim. To conclude, Barthes

is the inspiration and the way in and has a lot of these key concepts, and then Frog is really the way to operationalize it.

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TP: Throughout your analysis, you decided to focus on heroism and monstrosity. Can you elaborate on that? And why did you select these specific topics?

DF: There's a level of arbitrariness to it. Basically, I think mytholudics works well with a lens, a guiding question or a site of inquiry. If I'm looking at *Call of Duty*, maybe I want to ask what kind of war hero it produces, or whether it produces a war hero at all. You should have some sort of guiding question, as well as a lens. So, I was thinking about what I could do, and there were more topics that didn't make it in the book that I would like to develop in the future.

I ended up going with heroes and monsters partly because they're a pair that complement each other. A very common kind of mythic structure is that the monster rises, and then the hero has to rise to face it. Generally speaking, you don't have a hero, and they have nothing to fight. You can probably find examples, but you'll usually have a hero and a monster. They complement each other, and I can see how these different game examples, as well as heroes and monsters, play off one another. I would even dare to say that every society has heroes and monsters in some form. It's one of the few things I would dare to say is culturally universal, which is always a very dangerous thing to say. But I can't think of any examples of a society that would be unfamiliar with the concept.

We're already used to thinking of heroes and monsters in very mythological terms. Because of this, I felt that approaching heroism and monstrosity was familiar ground on which we could build a theory, showing what it is and how it works. We're used to thinking of the hero as a mythologized individual and the monster as a mythologized enemy. Even though both heroes and monsters are concrete, they also represent abstract ideals or their opposites, such as fear and anxiety. Additionally, both occur quite ubiquitously in games, despite not being present in all games, as is the case with simulation games like *SimCity*, which don't really have a hero or monster, and you can still apply it to that. But I felt like

heroes and monsters are such strong, guiding concepts in role-playing, adventure and shooter games.

In a shooter game, it's fairly straightforward who the war hero is. However, is there a monster, and what is it in the context of the game? Perhaps in *Call of Duty*, Arabs and Russians are portrayed as monsters, a portrayal that can be achieved through tactics. Their face is always obscured, implying that their humanity is somewhat removed. Their speech is very rarely subtitled or translated for you. Of course, there's this idea that if you understand these languages, your experience of Arabs and Russians in shooter games is different.

That's an example I use in my analysis of *Ghost of Tsushima*, related to the Mongol invasion of Japan. For the English speaker who doesn't understand Japanese or Mongolian, which is probably most of the players in Europe and North America, we are given the translation of the Japanese speakers but not of the Mongolian speakers. This is part of the monsterification process addressed previously. They're not monsters like dragons or ogres, but they are made into this monstrous enemy. I think this becomes an interesting lens through which to see how games set up what is good and evil, or what you're meant to be for or what you're meant to be against. I think all those things combined to make it feel like a natural choice of lens.

One thing I want to stress, however, is that these are by no means the only lenses. Community was the other one I was going to look into, but didn't.

TP: While I was reading your book and listening to your keynote lecture, I sometimes felt that we could replace the word myth with ideology. Would you care to comment on this, and where do you draw the line between myth and ideology?

DF: That's a question I get a lot, specifically in reviews and from people who read the book or listen to me talk about it. It's a really difficult question. In some ways, the cop-out answer I could give is you can call it ideology if you like, I'll call it mythology, and we can part ways there. The answer I give in the book is that an ideology is a more grand, totalizing thing. They're very closely related, but an ideology would be a gathering of a series of

mythologies into a totalizing meta-mythology. I'm not fully satisfied with this answer, but it's the best way I can describe how I feel about it. A myth would be more modular and granular, maybe, and it could be put to different uses. An ideology is one of the things that directs those myths to that use.

One example I would use about that is Nazi Germany and the way it employs and appropriates Germanic mythology. Germanic mythology is not exclusively the domain of Nazis, and it's not the only thing it can possibly be associated with. But the Nazis gathered it together in order to – with their fake runes and things like that – bolster their more totalizing story or vision for how the world works or should work.

In that sense, an ideology I would best describe as a meta-mythology, a gathering together of mythologies. As I said, I'm not fully satisfied with that answer, and I would welcome others to challenge it. But that's the best I've got for now.

TP: Thank you. Also, in your book, you briefly engage with the debate concerning procedural rhetoric. So why did you prefer not to use procedural rhetoric?

DF: I think procedural rhetoric does have legs, but it also has some limitations to it. Procedural rhetoric comes in in mytholudics and in the book in question, such as how do we engage with games? How do we access that meaning of myth? How do we encounter it? What do we do with it?

Being once again violently reductive, procedural rhetoric is to games what reading is to books. It's this mode of accessing and interpreting and, as Miguel Sicart puts it, learning from the inscribed message in the game. I agree with Miguel Sicart when he says that play is more relational than it is interpretive. There's more agency within the player to reconfigure and relate to what they are seeing. As a result, the role of play is more relational than it is interpretive. In procedural rhetoric, it's generally speaking interpretive. And the meaning is more inscribed in the game as an artefact, whereas I see the meaning more in that relation between the artefact and the player, the way you play.

Again, the way you play and the way you interpret, both of those can be very, very different. White supremacists love the Stormcloaks in *Skrim*, because that's their way of relating to those myths within the game. Plenty of other people enjoy playing with the Stormcloaks. It doesn't mean they're all white supremacists. Instead, it's a way that works with their style of play. There's even a really interesting paper by Michelle Westerlaken, who plays *Breath of the Wild* vegan. This reveals all sorts of interesting things about the game, like how difficult it can be to get certain stats without being able to eat meat, or wearing different gear that they're not allowed to source from.

The other way I think that procedural rhetoric kind of falls down is that I don't think procedures really hold meaning in and of themselves. I think they always require some kind of semiotic context. A good example that I like to use for this is a game by Jordan Magnusson: *Loneliness*. He calls it a "not-game", so maybe it's not the best example. But the gist is that you are just a tiny black dot in a white void, with groups of black dots around you. As you move towards them, they scatter. Then you move towards another group, and they scatter. And you move towards another group, and they scatter. This game is thus seen as a metaphor for loneliness and has been used in the past as a major argument for procedural rhetoric: "Look, this game is just black dots and nothing else, and yet we can clearly see it's about loneliness". However, it's only about loneliness because the title is *Loneliness*, and it has a message at the beginning and at the end that talks about loneliness. You could just as easily reframe it to be about contagion. You are contagious, or you are a zombie, and the other people are trying to escape your contagion. Now suddenly it's about something else. It means something completely different because the semiotic framing has changed.

I think another good example is if you look at something like *Portal* compared to a shooter like *Call of Duty*. They have more or less the same mechanics: the player points at things and then shoots. You shoot something from the portal gun, and it does something elsewhere in the game world. However, with *Portal*, you are creating portals to move in different ways and solve puzzles. In a shooter game, you're shooting enemies, and the meaning of that changes depending on whether it is a Smurf, a duck or a Russian. While not useless, I think procedural rhetoric just doesn't capture as much of the game's meaning

as its proponents think it does. In my view, much of the meaning comes from the semiotic framing around it and the way we relate to both the procedure and the semiotic framing. Does that make sense? 127

TP: Yeah, it does. Thank you. So, final question. How can mytholudics be useful for game scholars?

DF: I hope it can be useful as a framework for analysis. This is why the book is split into a theoretical section, where I describe it, and then ten game examples through these two lenses of heroism and monstrosity. I wanted to provide a bunch of different examples of how you can use mytholudics for an analysis. Those game examples can be taken standalone. This means you can read them as an essay, but maybe the method won't make much sense in those cases. Hopefully, they mean something without having to go back into the theory. I really hope that people can port this method and use it to analyze games and to figure out what's going on. And you can do this in different ways, I think.

I've used the lenses of heroism and monstrosity. I've also, in a separate paper, used it to consider the FromSoftware's *Souls* games. The *Dark Souls* series is often seen as a spiritual series, because the games are not set in the same narrative fictional universe. Yet, when I play *Elden Ring* for the first time, and I meet a non-player character (NPC) called Patches, I know from playing *Dark Souls* that that NPC is going to betray me. You can tell a lot about how the quests in the game will go, what the bosses will do or what will happen in each area. There are similarities between the *Souls* games, also at a thematic level. What do fire or dark mean in these games? As a result, mytholudics can assist game scholars in making these connections between games in a variety of different ways.

In the book, there are a bunch of examples of either game series or individual games. Then, this separate paper I have is about a game developer and what those games share mythically. They share, if not a fictional universe, then a mythical universe. They share many of the same integers and the same mythic integers. You can also think of a genre. Does a genre have a particular set of myths that underpin it? We might talk about farming sims like *Stardew Valley* and the like as having some capitalist underpinnings. City builders

would be a classic example of that as well, that's very often following a neoliberal ideology in terms of the way they tax things. However, there are also games within the same genre that explicitly go against that. In *Workers and Resources: Soviet Republic*, players build a Soviet republic. Even though the game engages with the same myths as *Stardew Valley*, it does so from an oppositional stance.

As you can see, you can perform a mytholudic analysis by genre or even by time period. It would be quite interesting to see, for example, if shooters of the early noughties have a particular relationship to the Middle East and Russia. Those are some maybe more obvious examples. But I think there could be really interesting, different ways of slicing it that can make this method have true comparative value. And so, I hope people do use it.

I've seen a few studies. There's an online conference on myth and games that I sadly was sick when the deadline was coming up, so I couldn't submit to. But I've seen in the Book of Abstracts a couple of people just straight up using mytholudics to analyze a game or a series. That made me really happy because that's exactly how I want to see game scholars using it. I would like mytholudics to do for them what it did for me: unlock how games intuitively work for me to construct meaning. Narrative approaches to games don't quite work. They get you so far, but they don't quite work. Procedural ways into games also work but they don't fully work. Mytholudics provides us with a way of merging games and making sense of them without narrativizing them, without making them into a "everyone plays *Skyrim* in the same way", because they don't. How can we keep that messiness but also make some sense of it? And so I hope that's what is useful for games.

TP: Thank you so much for this. Thank you.

DF: Thank you so much.

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