



VIA  
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# NEW PERSPECTIVES ON GAME STUDIES

## Victorian and American Frames of Reference for Digital Games





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### Victorian and American Frames of Reference for Digital Games

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## Preface

JOANA CAETANO

Executive Editor

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One of the most inspiring texts about our craft is George Steiner's *Lessons of the Masters*, in which he declares that "there is no craft more privileged [than the calling of the teacher]. To awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one's own; to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make of one's inward present their future; that is a threefold adventure like no other". I have been fortunate to have had inspiring teachers such as these throughout my student years. Today, as a teacher and the executive editor of VIA PANORAMICA, I have the opportunity to reciprocate in sharing my love of literature with other researchers.

By creating a platform for young scholars to experiment, publish and engage in dialogue with other researchers, and by participating in their own initiatives to share my own ideas, I aim to promote learning and curiosity among students and early-career academics. This is, I believe, a purpose as personal as it is professional, and nothing gives me a greater sense of accomplishment and joy than witnessing their passion for literature and learning grow. It was with this in mind that I presented VIA PANORAMICA at the beginning of July in the Utopian Studies Society / Europe International Conference. Sharing with Junior and Senior researchers from many countries the amazing work that our guest-editors and early-career researchers have been doing to promote VIA PANORAMICA, and trusting us with their work, is something our editorial team has been very proud of and grateful for.

It is also with a great sense of responsibility that we witness the activities of our CETAPS' junior and early-career researchers from Lisbon and promote them by publishing the continuation of the enriching outputs coming from the conference on Victorian myths and video games, and the report of the Winter Doctoral Symposium. It is in safe and

10 enriching spaces like this that they find the tools and the company to test their ideas and evolve as scholars. These are the types of initiatives that VIA PANORAMICA is eager to promote.

### THE THEMATIC SECTION

As was the case with the previous one on “From the Victorian Era to the American Experiment: Mythic Foundation Narratives in Video Games”, Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo curated this new thematic section, offering new perspectives on Video Games Studies. Due to their enthusiasm and passion for the power of video games, we have a diverse range of publications (multiple articles on different topics, a review, and an interview) that offer a broad and deeper understanding of this medium, which, as I mentioned in the previous issue, has become a vehicle for social and cultural analysis.

### THE VARIA SECTION

Our VARIA section comprises three contributions that will appeal to all Anglo-American researchers. Ricardo Namora’s analysis of genre-bending narratives, Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*, focuses on the golden era of the so-called “non-fiction novel”, “seeking to describe the difficulties in defining the sub-genre within the context of an overarching theoretical quest which aspires to determine the exact terms of a notion of “fiction” in a literary framework”. “Meet me at ringside: ‘non-fiction’ novel as a one-punch literary phenomenon” is, indeed, a voyage through the intricacies of this sub-genre that, surprisingly, starts with Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier.

From the ringside to a completely different arena, in “Buckingham Palace and the (re)invention of tradition(s): the flag, the gate, and the balcony”, Miguel Alarcão takes us to the imagery of the English Royal Family and to a realm of perceptions, nuance, and subtext. Through a decoding of heavily marked historical symbols of the monarchy, Alarcão treads the sinuous path of “what seems to be” and “what (really) is”.

To close this issue, we are pleased to publish the report of the third edition of CETAPS’ Winter Doctoral Symposium. This is but a sample of the incredible work junior researchers have been doing in promoting cooperation and scholarship. Ana Brígida Paiva

and Beatriz de Almeida Santos report that another successful meeting brought together junior researchers from different countries and cemented networks of young scholars. We hope to publish their articles in a forthcoming issue.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This issue would not have been possible without the dedication and tireless efforts of the guest editors, Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo, whose enthusiasm and unwavering commitment to the study of video games and their potential as a pedagogical medium have been instrumental throughout the last two issues.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the team of reviewers, whose expertise, generosity, and thoughtful feedback have significantly contributed to maintaining the quality and rigour of the contributions published in this issue. My heartfelt thanks also go to the authors, whose trust in the journal and commitment to advancing knowledge have made this publication possible. It is a privilege to share your research with our readers.

Finally, I wish to extend my deepest appreciation to Professor Gualter Cunha for his constant support, encouragement, and generous guidance throughout the preparation of this issue.

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THEMATIC SECTION



## Introduction to Thematic Section

TERESA PEREIRA

NOVA FCSH/CETAPS

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Almost two decades ago, in his 2008 book *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, Frans Mäyrä argued that games had become incredibly popular. According to Mäyrä, the rapid rise of digital media and information technologies had made games “one of the most fascinating uses for these new interactive devices” (4). As a powerful cultural force, games had come to play a prominent role in the lives of people in industrialized countries, and the game industry had grown into “a global creative powerhouse” (Mäyrä 2008, 4), worth more than 30 billion dollars annually. In the fifth edition of *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, published in 2024, even though the book was originally released in 2008, Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca describe a world where games and play have become “ever-present” (1). As they put it, “[i]n the historical blink of an eye, video games have colonized our minds and invaded our screens . . . video games have exploded exponentially . . . until they are now everywhere, from tiny mobile phone displays to ostentatious wall-mounted plasma TVs” (2). In 2026, games continue to endure, permeating everyday life in various ways.

The popularity of games has been accompanied by the emergence of game studies, which in 2008 was still a relatively young field, not widely recognized as a proper discipline, as Mäyrä explained (4). Regardless of this, by the time Mäyrä’s book was published, game studies had already become established both as a topic of academic research and as a branch of study taught at universities, with its own object of inquiry (games and play), as well as its own terminology, theories, and methods. During the first decade of the millennium, an expanding community of theorists also dedicated their time to conducting research, publishing journals, and organizing conferences on games (Mäyrä 2008, 4). For their part, Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca, writing in 2024, trace

16 the development of game studies to its “humble beginnings in the 1980s” (3), followed by an acceleration in the study of games that mirrored the rapid increase in their popularity. Since the late twentieth century, several publications have proposed new theoretical frameworks, and the field itself has “grown into a coherent and established player” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2024, 3), with research also growing in quantity and quality. Dom Ford’s *Mytholudics: Games and Myth*, released in 2025, is one example of recent scholarship on games.

The pervasiveness of games and game studies becomes evident when considering that what was originally intended as a single thematic section at the International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games had to be divided into two sections due to the high number of submitted articles. As in the previous thematic section, this one brings together articles that explore American and Victorian frames of reference in relation to games, beginning with Giorgi Razmadze’s and Diogo Oliveira’s articles, respectively entitled “Waste Labor and Capitalist Mythology in Total Refusal’s *Hardly Working*” and “Pikachu Goes West: A Cultural Analysis of *Pokémon*’s Western Adaptation”. While Razmadze focuses on *Hardly Working* (2022), which appropriates *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) and relates to the myth of the frontier, Oliveira considers *Pokémon* and its Americanization. Maria João Brito’s “‘Come, Watson! The Game is Afoot!’: *Sherlock Holmes*. An Adventure in Videogames” is next, delving into the realm of Victorian Britain, tracing the adaptation of the celebrated detective Sherlock Holmes and his mythos into video games over the past four decades. The articles close with Rui Mateus’s “Mapping Middle-earth: Cartographic Representations and Transmedia Storytelling in *The Lord of the Rings Online*”, which examines the online ludic instantiation of Tolkien’s fantasy world.

The articles are followed by a segment dedicated to Ford, one of the conference’s keynote speakers. Besides being an editor of *Eludamos*, Ford is currently working as a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Digital Narrative at the University of Bergen, as part of the LEAD AI program. Previously, he was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bremen, within the Media and Religion lab at the ZeMKI Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, after finishing his PhD at the IT University of Copenhagen’s Center for Digital Play (“about me”, n.d.). His first book, mentioned above, was published by De Gruyter, and a review of it is included in this thematic section, along with an interview I conducted with Ford at the conference on his new book.

I would like to conclude this introduction by acknowledging the work and assistance of all those who gave up some of their time to make sure these two thematic sections of *VIA PANORAMICA* were published. First, I am profoundly grateful to Joana Caetano, the journal's executive editor, for inviting Jéssica Bispo and me to guest-edit the thematic sections of *VIA PANORAMICA* dedicated to the conference. It was a privilege to work under Joana's guidance, and I thank her for all her patience and support. Next, I thank Jéssica Bispo, who agreed to guest-edit this thematic section with me, as well as the peer reviewers, whose contributions were essential to improving the articles submitted to the journal. I am also deeply grateful to Ford, who agreed to be interviewed for this thematic section and who never refused to offer me feedback whenever I requested it, always with thoughtfulness and generosity. Finally, I thank the authors themselves for entrusting us with their work. I hope the final result is as satisfying for everyone involved as it has been for me.

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# Waste Labor and the Capitalist Mythology in Total Refusal's *Hardly Working*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores *Hardly Working* (2022), a four-channel video installation by the Austrian media collective Total Refusal, which appropriates the open-world environment of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) to critique capitalist mythology and the representation of labor. The film foregrounds non-player characters (NPCs) – a washerwoman, street-sweeper, carpenter, and stablehand – whose labor, while visually present in the game, is functionally meaningless and algorithmically repetitive. By removing the player-avatar and focusing on these peripheral figures, Total Refusal reconfigures the game's spatial and narrative hierarchies, transforming it into a site for Marxist critique.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Guy Debord and Georg Lukács, the article examines how *Hardly Working* engages themes of alienation, discipline, spectacle, myth, and class consciousness. The analysis reveals that *Red Dead II* perpetuates a frontier mythology that

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa *Hardly Working* (2022), uma instalação de vídeo de quatro canais do coletivo austríaco de media Total Refusal, que se apropria do ambiente de mundo aberto do videogame *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018), da Rockstar Games, para criticar a mitologia capitalista e a representação do trabalho. O filme coloca em primeiro plano personagens não jogáveis (NPCs) — uma lavadeira, um varredor de ruas, um carpinteiro e um tratador de cavalos — cujo trabalho, embora visualmente presente no jogo, é funcionalmente desprovido de significado e marcado pela repetição algorítmica. Ao remover o avatar do jogador e concentrar-se nestas figuras periféricas, o coletivo Total Refusal reconfigura as hierarquias espaciais e narrativas do jogo, transformando-o num espaço de crítica marxista.

Com base nos enquadramentos teóricos de Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Guy Debord e Georg Lukács, o artigo examina de que forma *Hardly Working* mobiliza temas como a alienação, a

20 aligns with neoliberal ideals of freedom, individualism, and market inevitability, while simultaneously erasing the structures of labor that support this fantasy. By presenting NPCs as digital laborers caught in Sisyphean loops, *Hardly Working* exposes the game's ideological function: to normalize and aestheticize capitalist exploitation.

Total Refusal's work operates through remediation, transforming a commercial video game into a critical visual performance. The installation's observational style and moments of algorithmic rupture allow for a Brechtian distancing effect, encouraging spectators to question the "naturalness" of digital labor and its real-world analogs. This article situates *Hardly Working* within a broader discourse on media, power, and representation, arguing that it exemplifies how artistic interventions in digital spaces can reveal the hidden logics of capitalist systems and provoke critical reflection on labor, visibility, and consent.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Labor, Capitalist Ideology, Total Refusal, Video Game Critique, Marxist Aesthetics.

disciplina, o espetáculo, o mito e a consciência de classe.

A análise revela que *Red Dead Redemption II* perpetua uma mitologia da fronteira alinhada com ideais neoliberais de liberdade, individualismo e inevitabilidade do mercado, ao mesmo tempo que apaga as estruturas laborais que sustentam essa fantasia. Ao apresentar os NPCs como trabalhadores digitais presos em ciclos sisifianos, *Hardly Working* expõe a função ideológica do jogo: normalizar e estetizar a exploração capitalista.

A obra de Total Refusal opera através da remediação, transformando um videogame comercial numa performance visual crítica. O estilo observacional da instalação e os momentos de ruptura algorítmica produzem um efeito de distanciamento brechtiano, incentivando os espectadores a questionar a "naturalidade" do trabalho digital e os seus análogos no mundo real. Este artigo insere *Hardly Working* num debate mais amplo sobre media, poder e representação, argumentando que a obra exemplifica como intervenções artísticas em espaços digitais podem revelar as lógicas ocultas dos sistemas capitalistas e suscitar uma reflexão crítica sobre trabalho, visibilidade e consentimento.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Trabalho Digital, Ideologia Capitalista, Total Refusal, Crítica dos Videogames, Estética Marxista.

Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) immerses players in a sprawling, hyperreal Wild West at the dawn of modern capitalism. The game's narrative follows Arthur Morgan of the Van der Linde gang as they struggle to survive amid the advance of state power and markets. Although *Red Dead II* has been praised for its meticulous open world and emotional storytelling, it also reproduces a long-standing frontier mythology: the idea of America as a "wide-open land of unlimited opportunity" for the rugged individual (Slotkin 1998, 5). In this mythic vision, individual freedom and social mobility are paramount, and the state exists chiefly to protect property and order. History is romanticized or ignored, and exploitative social relations appear as natural.

The Austrian media-arts collective Total Refusal intervenes in this digital fantasy with their installation *Hardly Working* (2022). This four-channel video work ethnographically observes the routines of four NPCs (non-player characters) in *Red Dead II*: a laundress, a street-sweeper, a carpenter, and a stablehand. Using game mods and cinematic techniques, Total Refusal forces the player's camera toward these background characters, revealing their unending, purposeless labor loops. In moments when the game's algorithm "glitches", these characters break from routine and display unexpected behaviors that hint at human vulnerability. As one critic notes, the film "sheds a limelight on the characters that normally remain in the background of video games" and shows how their "labor routines, activity patterns, as well as bugs and malfunctions, paint a vivid analogy for work under capitalism" (Sondhi 2024).

This article examines how *Hardly Working* uses the aesthetics of documentary, video art, and gameplay to critique capitalist ideology. The game *Red Dead II* provides a simulacrum of a capitalist "paradise" – a frontier society where freedom is offered to a lone outlaw while economic and racial exploitation are invisible.

### 1.1. THE FRONTIER MYTH AND THE PROMISE OF WILD WEST CAPITALISM

The American West has long been mythologized as a space of unlimited opportunity and self-fashioning. Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "frontier thesis" (1893/1920) saw the West as a "meeting point between savagery and civilization" where rugged individualism

and democracy were forged (Turner 1920, 389). In this narrative, the frontier is “romanticized and idealized”, framing westward expansion as both a natural right and an inevitable historical progression. Once the Western frontier was legally closed by the 1890 Census, its legend continued to shape national identity through novels, films, and folklore (Slotkin 1998, 5).

By the late 19th century, capitalism had fully asserted itself as the dominant social order in the Anglo-American world. As Europe became industrialized, American bourgeois interests sought new “virgin” territories and resources overseas, now largely unavailable at home. Colonization and violence against indigenous peoples accompanied this expansion. Though historians and critics have thoroughly documented these colonial and genocidal underpinnings (Wolfe 1999; Slotkin 1998), popular culture often obscures them, focusing instead on the frontier as a site of freedom and progress. As the main character in Elia Kazan’s film *The Sea of Grass* (1947) mentions: the land is soaked with natives’ blood, but he prefers to forget it. This circumstance is almost always disguised and downplayed in works of the frontier genre. However, it is precisely this circumstance that underlies the frontier mythology.

*Red Dead Redemption II* is set in 1899, at the tail end of the “Old West” era. The game’s narrative implicitly contrasts a disappearing wild frontier with the encroachment of an aggressive capitalist state. Structurally and visually, the game draws heavily on Western tropes – cowboys, gunslingers, lawmen, gold rushes – and on turn-of-the-century American iconography. As Robson Bello observes, *Red Dead I* and *II* are “two of the most ambitious historical representations of the American West”, and both depict the “end of the mythical ‘Old West’ through the arrival of civilizational progress” (2024, 47-51). In Rockstar’s world, players find themselves in fictionalized states like New Hanover and Ambarino, facing railroads, banks, taxes, and an encroaching national authority as the frontier closes. On the surface, this world feels immersive and “authentic”, but it is also a construction – a game designed for entertainment and profit, deeply influenced by the frontier myth.

In the game, capitalism hides behind the notions of choice and individual freedom. The protagonist, Arthur Morgan, is a criminal, yet he is assigned the role of an independent subject, able to move freely within the game’s open world. Representatives of authority appear only during minor events (e.g., to prevent a robbery from a store), and the police function as symbolic antagonists in the game: they are often unseen but carry symbolic

significance for Arthur and his gang. This model can also be explained through the lens of the state's role in classical liberalism, according to which the primary (if not sole) function of the state is the protection of private property.

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The oppressed classes are invisible in the game. Their interests are neither protected by law nor by the state. In one narrative thread, Arthur's gang frees imprisoned workers (though this gesture is not driven by any intent to fight for their rights). The game features numerous NPCs trapped in the loop of anonymous labor – and it is precisely these figures that *Total Refusal* focuses on.

The mythology of the frontier in *Red Dead Redemption II* is presented in synthesis with the broader American capitalist myth. The national narrative of the United States is tied to the idea of land acquisition and individual opportunity, as Hart describes: “From the beginning... land was the supreme object of appropriation” (1998, 114). Even after becoming a state, this myth persisted in the belief that anyone could succeed at any cost. This cornerstone of capitalism is clearly reflected in Victorian novels, for instance: Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848). Each of these works centers on an orphan or outcast who achieves success either by fate or through deceit. Such narratives reinforced the belief that success – often at the expense of others – is the natural condition and destiny of selected individuals. In short, 19th-century culture developed the idea of individual freedom while concealing and remaining silent about its dark side – the harm inflicted on others (Bradstreet 2006). At the same time, a single path to social mobility was consolidated – the miraculous one – suggesting that rising to the upper classes is only possible by fate, and that those who fail to do so simply lack divine favor. In the case of the game, God's role is played by the algorithm's predetermined logic.

## 2. TOTAL REFUSAL'S *HARDLY WORKING*: EXPOSING INVISIBLE LABOR

*Hardly Working* (2022) is a 20-minute, four-channel video installation that appropriates gameplay footage from *Red Dead Redemption II*. Filmed on location in the game world via mods and in-game cameras, the piece avoids Arthur Morgan entirely. Instead, it gives priority to four background NPCs who “normally fade into the

24 background” of the game: a laundress, a stable worker, a street-sweeper, and a carpenter (Sondhi 2024).

*Hardly Working* premiered at the 75th Locarno Film Festival (2022) in the Pardi di domani competition and has since been screened at major international venues, including transmediale (Berlin, 2023), the Austrian Cultural Forum (New York, 2023), and Dokfest Kassel (2022). The film received the Best Short Film Award at the Viennale and the Golden Dove at DOK Leipzig, underscoring its resonance within both art and documentary contexts. Critics have praised its hybrid form, blending machinima aesthetics with Marxist critique to expose the ideological structures of digital labor. As the Locarno Festival catalog notes, the work is “an ethnographic exploration of the work and daily life of non-player characters, the digital extras in video games. Their labor loops, activity patterns as well as bugs and malfunctions paint a vivid analogy for work under capitalism” (Locarno Film Festival 2022). This reception situates *Hardly Working* within a broader current of contemporary media practices that merge gameplay and critical observation to interrogate algorithmic capitalism.

Each NPC is captured in long, uncut takes as they repeat their everyday routines. For example, the street-sweeper endlessly cleans the same stretch of road, the laundress continuously washes clothes in a basin, and the stablehand repeatedly feeds animals. The film’s style is deliberately clinical and observational. As one reviewer notes, these characters are “observed with ethnographic precision” (Sondhi 2024), and it reminds us of Robert Flaherty’s style. In observational documentary filmmaking, reality is grasped through sustained observation – a method similarly employed by the creators of *Hardly Working*. In effect, the camera adopts the role of an anthropologist in the Wild West: it watches the digital underclass with detached curiosity, over an extended period, allowing subtle variations to emerge.

What emerges is startling. The labor these NPCs perform is utterly meaningless within the game’s economy. None of their tasks produces any useful game item; the watchful player never benefits from the street being clean or the laundry being done. Their actions are purely “surrogate”: they exist only to create the illusion of a functioning society for the sake of the player’s immersion (Arendt 1998, 42-44). The film accentuates this by showing the characters’ fruitless repetitions and by sometimes overlaying narration and music that highlight the absurdity. Notably, *Hardly Working* also seizes on the moments

when the game's algorithm breaks down. NPCs occasionally glitch: the washerwoman might freeze in place as clothes float, the stableman might walk out of the barn mid-task, the street-sweeper might turn to stare at the camera. In these glitches, the NPCs appear unexpectedly human – scratching their noses, shrugging, or looking confused. The director's voiceover comments, "when the algorithm shows inconsistencies, the NPCs break out of the logic of total normality, and appear touchingly human" (Total Refusal 2022).

By focusing on NPCs, Total Refusal inverts the usual player-centric perspective in video games. In games, players are taught to concentrate on main characters, narrative arcs, and visible points of action (bank robberies, shootouts, story missions). Meanwhile, NPC laborers are the invisible background that "provides the stage for the protagonist's activities" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009, 37). *Hardly Working* reverses this hierarchy: the four NPCs become the protagonists. The filmmakers describe this inversion as a kind of "media guerrilla" tactic. As Jason Sondhi explains, Total Refusal "self-describe [themselves] as a 'pseudo-Marxist media guerrilla focused on the artistic intervention and appropriation of mainstream video games'" (2024). In practice, their method is to intervene in the game world through software mods, curate sequences of gameplay footage, and frame it with critical narration. This approach mixes art, scholarship, and activism. In one of their earlier works (*Operation Jane Walk*, 2016), they led an urbanist tour inside a shooter game, similarly juxtaposing high theory and violent gameplay (*idem*, 70-73). *Hardly Working* continues this line of intervention, but now with Marxist theory in explicit sight.

Importantly, *Hardly Working* is not a real documentary or a manufactured cinematic scene; it is a video art installation built entirely within the game engine. The film's four-channel format means that it can be displayed in an art gallery as an environment. Viewers might walk among screens showing different NPCs, perhaps even in a loop. This remediation – representing a game within the format of art film – is critical to the argument. In remediating the game, the artists force players/viewers to attend to details normally ignored. As Bolter and Grusin describe, remediation "amplifies the message" of new media by refashioning it with older media forms (1999, 48). Here the digital video game becomes a quasi-anthropological film, and the player's interactive freedom becomes a spectator's passive viewing. This shift from game to film is itself a

26 comment on agency: the players' ability to act is removed, leaving only the scripted NPC labor as the subject.

The film's content immediately challenges the *Red Dead II* narrative. In the game's storyline, the Van der Linde gang presents itself (at least rhetorically) as fighting for freedom and equality. But *Hardly Working* reveals that in the game's world, ordinary folk do not share that freedom. Instead, they are trapped in repetitive toil for no purpose. We will argue that this shift of focus is laden with theoretical meaning. The four characters in *Hardly Working* become symbols of Marx's proletariat – alienated laborers who produce nothing for themselves and are invisible to the “owner” of production. Their ceaseless, pointless work is a tableau of capitalist exploitation taken to the extreme: *Red Dead II*'s Wild West may promise individual freedom for its heroes, but in reality, it depends on the limitless, unpaid labor of background extras. In the following sections, we unpack this claim through Marxist and cultural theory.

## 2.1. ALIENATION AND THE FETISHISM OF NPC LABOR

A central insight of Karl Marx's critique of capitalism is that it fundamentally alienates labor and obscures social relations. In his analysis of commodities, Marx famously shows how the labor of private individuals becomes a social force divorced from them. In capitalism, the products of workers' labor acquire a quasi-mystical existence. “The social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour”, Marx writes, so that social relations between people take the form of relations between things (Marx 1990, ch. 1). In other words, the connections binding producer and society are hidden behind the commodity.

In *Red Dead II*, an NPC like the carpenter embodies this alienation. He repeatedly hammers wood, but the game's world never sees a finished chair or building. His labor is “simply a loop” enforced by code, as the filmmakers note: it “neither results in a product, nor does it change anything about [his] status quo” (Total Refusal 2022). He embodies Marx's idea of the “commodification” of labor – he expends human effort, yet gains neither consciousness of himself as an individual with agency, nor ownership of what he produces. Instead, his labor has been abstracted into routine for the sake of gameworld

ambience. The fruit of his work is invisible: the wood he moves does not lead to visible change, and his own body remains fixed in place as if grafted to his machine of labor. 27

Marx also emphasizes that commodities are not just useful things, but also fetish objects. Fetishism means that social relations and power appear as properties of commodities rather than of people. In *Hardly Working*, the NPCs' repetitive actions have become fetishized. The game's engine uses them to "congeal" the social landscape. For example, the game might use the street-sweeper's routine to animate the town, but not allow the player to experience any effect from it. The product of his labor – a clean street – is no more real than the particles of dust he sweeps, and both vanish from representation as soon as the loop resets. Thus, his actions become a kind of abstract "texture" of the world, a fetishist background detail. The player never engages with his labor as labor; it remains a signifier with no signified, creating only the appearance of a functioning society. This mirrors Marx's observation that the commodity "stands on its head" and seems to act on its own (Marx 1990, ch. 1). The NPC's work has become a fetishism: it is a complementary element of city life, but it masks the real goals of the game's creators, who are, willingly or unwillingly, engaged in the remediation of the capitalist system.

Viewed through this lens, Total Refusal's film is demystifying. By zooming in on what is normally backgrounded, *Hardly Working* makes the fetish visible. The camera focuses on the NPCs' empty gestures – nearly the only product of their labor – and the voiceover explicitly draws the analogy: these characters are "digital Sisyphus machines" with "no perspective of breaking out of their activity loops" (Total Refusal 2022). In a sense, the film attempts to decode the "social hieroglyph" of the gameworld. As Marx argues, understanding capitalist society requires reading the commodity form like a cryptic script. *Hardly Working* can be seen as performing that reading: it takes what appeared to be normal "background scenery" and reveals it as a commentary on production and exploitation. In doing so, it invites players (and viewers) to perceive the NPCs not as innocuous scenery, but as laboring individuals – albeit ones separated from the products of their labor.

This theme resonates with the Victorian context sketched earlier. *Red Dead* //takes place when capitalism's logic has reached the Western frontier. Its world is a "capitalist paradise" for some: Arthur Morgan and his gang enjoy the freedom to seize

28     railroads and banks, while the state is portrayed as a minimal force. But *Hardly Working* shows that this paradise has its proletariat. By aligning game NPCs with Dickensian or Brontëan characters who toil in obscurity, the film suggests a continuity: from Victorian factory workers to Western homesteaders, capitalism's myth of mobility is built on the unseen backs of laborers. Marlow, Marx, and Lukács would all recognize these NPCs as signs of exploitation disguised by ideology.

## 2.2. THE SPECTACLE OF THE FRONTIER

Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle is a useful lens for understanding the role of images and narrative in *Red Dead II* and in *Hardly Working*. Debord famously declares, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord 1983, §4). In a capitalist society, according to Debord, all lived experience is "sacred only insofar as it is representation" (Debord 1983, §1). The frontier world of *Red Dead II* is itself a spectacle: it is an object of consumption whose images unify the player's gaze. The game's vast landscapes, cinematic cutscenes, and iconic motifs (cowboy hats, saloons, Mount Rushmore) constitute a coherent "Weltanschauung" – an objectified ideology (*idem*, §5-6). Players come to experience the West through its simulation, just as mass society consumes film, TV, and adverts.

In the spectacle, the underlying relations of production are hidden behind images. *Red Dead II* provides an expansive, meticulously realized world, but it is "the autonomous movement of the non-living" (*idem*, §3) insofar as nothing in it lives beyond code. The NPCs are part of the spectacle precisely because they serve to reinforce the image of normality. Their work ensures that horses graze, townsfolk exist, and civilization seems self-perpetuating. But when Total Refusal's film detaches the camera from the main narrative and focuses on these characters, it disrupts the spectacle. It shows that the "stream of representation" is not seamless: glitches intervene, humanization emerges, and the artifice is revealed. In Debord's terms, *Hardly Working* briefly breaks the picture into pieces, exposing the separation between lived life and its representation.

Moreover, Debord argues that the spectacle "is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production" (*idem*, §6). That choice, in *Red Dead II*, is to frame

history through a particular ideological lens. The game takes a stance on capitalism: it is ambiguous, but it largely valorizes the outlaw as hero against an oppressive state. By contrast, the spectacle conceals the true current: the guerrilla gaze of *Hardly Working* asserts that capitalist power is flowing and self-affirming beneath the surface. The background labor of NPCs is “the permanent presence of [the spectacle’s] justification” (Debord 1983, §6) – an unnoticed affirmation that this world’s order is the only one possible. By making this presence visible, the film undermines the spectacle’s naturalness.

In practical terms, the remediation from game to four-channel video breaks the “ordinary” way the player interacts with the game. A player cannot normally focus on an NPC for ten minutes straight; the game either reassigns that NPC’s path or simply resets the player’s mission. In the film, the spectators are forced to sit and watch. This creates a Brechtian rupture: the viewers become estranged from the game’s storytelling. Rather than being absorbed in action or dialog, one becomes hyper-aware of the mechanics. Debord would say that the spectator is momentarily freed from the false unity of the spectacle and can see it as the constructed totality it is.

### 3. THE CONCEPT OF SLAVERY FROM CLASSICAL GREECE TO VIDEO GAMES

Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* provides another way to interpret the NPCs’ routines. Arendt distinguishes between three fundamental modes of human activity: labor, work, and action. Labor is the process of sustaining life – it corresponds to the necessities of the “animal laborans”. It is cyclical and never completed: one must continually eat, wash, and maintain one’s survival. Work (*homo faber*) produces a durable artifice or “world” – it is oriented toward building a human environment (e.g. houses, tools, artworks). Action is political life in the public sphere, involving speech and plurality. Crucially, Arendt argues that modern mass society has elevated labor at the expense of action. People come to view everything primarily as ways of living, subsisting, and consuming (Arendt 1998, 474-75).

The four NPCs in *Hardly Working* epitomize labor stripped of any work or action. Their activities have no meaningful end product – they are chores performed for their own sake, infinite and circular. This is precisely what Arendt identifies as the condition of

the animal laborans: “the ultimate source of all work” being subsistence itself (*idem*, 248). In the film, we see each character caught in a loop akin to Sisyphus: the washerwoman washes endlessly but never dries; the street-sweeper never reaches the town’s end. Their labors produce nothing durable or novel. In Arendt’s terms, they lack the creative dimension of *homo faber*. There is no enduring “world” left behind by their toil.

Arendt also observes that when labor becomes the sole focus of society, humans risk being treated as beasts of burden. She cites Aristotle: the ancients saw slaves as mere instruments. In *The Human Condition*, she writes that in modernity the activity of “bare maintenance” expands into the public sphere, and people become accustomed to regarding others as means to an end (1998, 241). Total Refusal explicitly invokes Arendt’s terminology: the NPCs are likened to “animal laborans”. They are shown not as individuals, but as biological engines moving according to algorithmic necessity. The film’s narration even echoes Arendt’s language: these are “surrogate actions that generate no social benefit” (Sondhi 2024). This phrase could only have come from reading Arendt. Indeed, the website accompanying *Hardly Working* says: “In light of Hannah Arendt’s description of ‘animal laborans’ ... the NPCs as individuum are an exaggeration as their work performance actually manifests their status” (Total Refusal 2022). By highlighting how useless these actions are – literally, they sustain nothing and even serve no one in the game – the film underscores Arendt’s point that such labor, when isolated from politics and creation, dehumanizes its performers.

Arendt’s concept of a “waste economy” also seems relevant. In a key passage, she describes how modern society channels the life process itself into the public realm, resulting in “tremendous contempt” for mere biological life (1998, 444). The economy becomes an endless cycle of consumption and disposal. In *Hardly Working*, the NPCs’ work is wasteful: clothes are washed but never needed; streets are swept only to be dirtied again; buildings are maintained but never progressed. One might almost see each frame as a literal tableau of Arendt’s warning: “the things appear and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process in their midst” (Arendt 1998, 452). Though the film does not quote Arendt verbatim, it visually embodies her analysis. Each scene looks like a “life process” kept busy yet accomplishing nothing, the quintessential condition of animal laborans. The NPCs do not even consume the products of their labor; they simply enact it.

By framing the NPCs this way, *Hardly Working* not only illustrates Arendt's distinctions but also critiques the game's narrative promise. If *Red Dead II* claims to give the player freedom and agency (action and work), the NPCs have none – their only activity is labor. In *Red Dead* mythology, outlaws assert their humanity against an exploitative world; in *Hardly Working*, we see the exploited hidden figures whose “human value” is measured only by their ability to sustain the system (Arendt 1998, 468-69). In this sense, the film dramatizes the idea that in a capitalist society turned upside-down, one's humanity is recognized only insofar as one works to sustain others.

As Tiziana Terranova (2000, 33-58) and Julian Kücklich (2005) note, digital entertainment often depends on invisible “free labor” and “playbour”, where user engagement is simultaneously a form of production. *Hardly Working* extends this critique to the algorithmic workers inside the game world, literalizing the fusion of play and labor that underpins platform capitalism. Similarly, Patrick Jagoda suggests that experimental games can reveal the contradictions of neoliberal economies – a role *Total Refusal* assumes through machinima practice (2020, 6). This reading complements recent discussions in game studies that explore labor and agency within digital environments (Bogost 2007, 1-65). Games often simulate productive work as play, masking exploitative structures through interactivity – a phenomenon *Hardly Working* critically dismantles.

### 3.1. ALGORITHMIC DISCIPLINE

Michel Foucault's studies of power and discipline offer another perspective on the NPCs. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyzes how modern institutions (prisons, factories, schools) produce “docile bodies” through constant surveillance and regulation (1995, 135-61). For Foucault, power operates less by overt coercion and more through the subtle organization of space, time, and routines. The goal is to make individuals effective and obedient, to “fold the body, to correct gestures and behaviors” in detailed ways (*idem*, 138). Power is exercised through norms and procedures that shape action at every moment.

In *Red Dead II*, the enforcement of routine is done digitally. The game's software algorithm acts as the disciplining force for the NPCs. They have no will of their own; every

32 motion is scripted, triggered by invisible parameters. This is very much like Foucault's panopticon: the NPC is always potentially observed by the algorithm (or by the player), so they internalize a habit and repeat it without question. The moment an NPC deviates (for example, due to a glitch), the code often snaps back into place or even "punishes" the NPC by resetting it. In *Hardly Working*, such a moment might show the NPC stumble or look around, only to be quickly snapped back to routine. These glitches are akin to alarms signaling a breach in discipline.

We can say that *Red Dead II* instantiates what Foucault might call a "political anatomy of detail" (1995, 140). Each NPC's body is minutely controlled: patterns are repetitive, timing is exact. They obey their loops as if in a prison or factory regime. Even though the NPCs are not humans, the film invites us to see them as human proxies in a ritual of power. When the stablehand reaches under the bench and scratches himself (as seen in the *Hardly Working* trailer), it is striking because such a small personal action is normally withheld under the game's discipline. The fact that he does it when the system falters makes that moment "human" – it reveals that the body has needs outside the planned program. Foucault notes that discipline manufactures bodies ready to "both obey and produce" (*idem*, 137). The NPCs both produce the ambience of civilization and obey the algorithm absolutely. The film frames them like laboring prisoners.

This perspective also highlights the role of the police and state in *Red Dead II*. In the game, sheriffs and Pinkerton agents serve as the human enforcers, analogous to how factories have foremen or prisons have warders. But the NPCs never interact with these figures; they are effectively "total normality." In one scene in *Hardly Working*, two NPCs stand motionless next to each other with no interaction: "A relation of relationlessness. They form no such thing as a community", notes the film's narrator (Total Refusal, *Hardly Working* 2022, 00:15:52). This image suggests how, even among the laborers, there is complete surveillance and isolation: each is alone in her loop. This mirrors Foucault's point that discipline fractures solidarity by making each person responsible for self-regulating. In the virtual world, each NPC is simultaneously self-monitoring and monitored by the invisible code.

Finally, Foucault's insight into modern power extends to the digital environment. The software and hardware of *Red Dead II* function as a panoptical machine. The NPCs are subsumed under the game's logic. This is a microcosm of what some theorists call

“algorithmic governmentality” in contemporary capitalism. If Foucault studied 18th-century prisons and factories, Total Refusal’s film suggests we now have 21st-century algorithms controlling lifeless laborers. By anthropomorphizing the NPCs when they glitch, *Hardly Working* also gently humanizes them as potential subjects of resistance. In one shot, an NPC breaks out of the routine. This is like a body escaping discipline, however fleetingly. The film thus borrows from Foucault the idea that power is exercised on bodies through norms – and that resistance might be as simple as a skipped step or an unexpected gesture.

### 3.2. SIGNS, MYTH, AND IDEOLOGY

The semiotic dimension of *Hardly Working* can be approached through Roland Barthes’s theory of myth and advertisement (1972). Barthes showed that what appear to be transparent or neutral images (e.g. advertisements, photographs, magazine covers) often carry ideological messages beneath their surface. In mythic form, specific historical content is presented as “natural”. For instance, a milk advertisement might not only sell milk but also subtly “transmit an idea of the natural order” in which farmer, cow, and family have fixed roles (Barthes 1972, 42).

In *Red Dead II*, the entire graphic design is a form of mythmaking. Every poster and symbol in the game suggests that the frontier world is wholesome or heroic. For example, store signs, wanted posters, and the iconic image of the white-outlined bandit all contribute to a seamless “Western” aesthetic. Total Refusal’s approach is akin to a Barthesian analysis of such visual culture. By isolating a background character and her immediate setting, the film forces us to read the details. The color of her clothes, the dirty street, the tool in her hand – these visual signs gain new weight. In one freeze-frame, the laundress’s apron with a quaint pattern is seen next to the river’s grime; together, they silently narrate class and gender roles (Milestone & Meyer 2012, 164).

A Barthesian might note that the laundress’s work, though invisible in narrative, is presented by the game’s art as charming “domesticity”. This image, once isolated, reveals how the game naturalizes a social order: clean clothes magically appear for the family to wear, maintained by unnamed others. The film’s focus on the clothes being washed shows

34 the ideological subtext: the labour of care is rendered invisible. Through sustained observation, *Hardly Working* demystifies this “magic”. It unpacks the ads of the gameworld (for there are many posters of horses, guns, and so on in the backgrounds) to show who serves and who benefits.

More broadly, Barthes argues that bourgeois culture erects its ideology at the level of detail (1972, 128). In *Hardly Working*, every detail – the color of paint the carpenter holds, the broken lantern the sewer sweeps under – might be read as a trace of ideological meaning. The installation, by amplifying background visuals, reminds us how capitalist ideology circulates through everyday cultural forms that shape understandings of social behavior, gender roles, class hierarchy, morality, and belief. For Barthes, mythic images enact a kind of silent propaganda. In the case of *Red Dead II*, those images make the frontier seem familiar and “natural”, smoothing over its violence and exploitation. *Hardly Working* interrupts the smooth narrative: the street-sweeper’s broom becomes not just a tool in an ad but a symbol of unseen toil. The film forces the spectator to confront those ideological layers.

By applying semiotics, the analysis links back to Debord: images mediate relations. The difference is that Barthes teaches us to decode those images. In *Hardly Working*, the images of labor are presented without the player’s usual context or justification. They stand naked before us. In a way, the collective voiceover performs a Barthesian decoding, pointing out the absurdity of each scene. The spectacle’s gloss is stripped off, revealing “ideological signification” (Barthes 1972). For instance, we might notice that the street-sweeper is male and dressed modestly, while the washerwoman is female and in rags – silent signs about gendered labor divisions. The film, like a Barthes essay, insists these are constructed signs, not natural givens.

### 3.3. CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND MANUFACTURED CONSENT

Finally, we consider how *Hardly Working* fits into the formation (or interruption) of class consciousness. Georg Lukács argued that under capitalism people perceive the world through distorted lenses of ideology (Lukács 1971). The proletariat, he claimed, is atomized and only by developing class consciousness – the recognition that “the capitalist

class in its entirety is his enemy” – can a worker see beyond the “false consciousness” of everyday life (*idem*, 89). In *Red Dead II*, the player’s perspective is at first Arthur’s: an outlaw with dreams of freedom. The experiences of generic workers are invisible, so the player can ignore the collective interests of that class.

*Hardly Working* serves as an anti-ideological intervention. By showing the NPCs’ grinding routines, the film invites identification with them. The spectator might start to see these characters not as mere background but as fellow humans – indeed, as human laborers. This awareness is a first step towards Lukácsian class consciousness: noticing one’s own exploitation (or that of others) and recognizing that the order of things serves a ruling class. The NPCs have no line of sight to each other or to the gang; they do not know Arthur’s name. In Lukács’s terms, they are “false selves”, objects of consumption for the player (Lukács 1971). *Hardly Working* tries to shatter that illusion by making each NPC an individual focus. The institutional “false apperception” is suspended.

In broader media-theoretical terms, this relates to Chomsky and Herman’s critique of the media. They argued that mass media serve to “manufacture consent” for the existing system, normalizing capitalism as natural and inevitable (Herman & Chomsky 1988, 1-17). *Red Dead II*, as a blockbuster cultural product, arguably participates in such a process. It normalizes frontier violence as entertainment and implicitly endorses some capitalist tropes (even while critiquing others). The world’s inequities are justified as historical progress. In Chomskyan terms, the video game “frames” its narrative so that players internalize a certain worldview without question.

Total Refusal’s work can be seen as an attempt to counter this. By remixing a commercial game into an art piece, they operate as a dissident media force. The film highlights the “plausible deniability” of the ruling class within the game: the bosses (railroads, banks) remain in the background, unseen, while the exploitation is laid bare. As Lukács would say, they are helping “the class become visible as a class-for-itself” (1971, 69-70). There is a direct analogy drawn in the draft text (though unattributed) between the NPCs’ exploitation and “manufacturing of consent”. This analogy reflects the idea that normal, everyday people can be lulled into obedience by spectacle. Here, the video game – a leisure product – becomes a site of consent formation, and *Hardly Working* calls that bluff.

Thus, *Hardly Working* can be interpreted as a piece of ideological work itself: it endeavors to awaken a critical perspective. It implies that any user of *Red Dead II* (or any mainstream game) might be living under a “capitalist myth” without realizing it. By breaking the frame, it urges media consumers to question who really profits from their fantasies. In Lukácsian spirit, Total Refusal reminds us that to “see the world as it really is”, one often needs a mirror held up (Lukács 1971). This film is such a mirror for players of a wild-west fantasy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Aristotle once justified slavery by treating some humans as natural tools; such views prevailed until Marxism showed them to be barbaric fiction. Yet as the world entered the 21st century, forms of servile labor have not disappeared – they have reappeared in new guises. The oligarchs and elites no longer rely only on ancient doctrines; they now shape our beliefs through media and culture. As Noam Chomsky warns, modern power is frequently maintained by the subtle “manufacturing of consent” – by making the existing order seem normal through images and narratives (Herman & Chomsky 1988, 1-17). In this context, video games have become among the most influential cultural forms, especially for younger generations. They frame history, myth, and social relations in ways that seem real to the player. For many players, *Red Dead Redemption II* is not a history book, but it is a highly convincing world. It tells a story about capitalism: that it brings individual freedom, rugged justice, and frontier adventure.

Total Refusal’s *Hardly Working* intervenes in this story, insisting that the “freedom” of Arthur Morgan is parasitic on a hidden system of exploitation. The film’s shining of light on NPCs does more than critique a single game; it stands in for a broader critique of our society’s background laborers – the invisible, the precariat, the “essential workers” whose toil is so often taken for granted. By aligning NPCs with Arendt’s animal laborans and Marx’s proletariat, *Hardly Working* imagines a Western where the hero is, paradoxically, the washerwoman or the sweeper.

In doing so, the film performs an act of defetishization. It uses the tools of visual art to peel back capitalist ideology. The spectatorship becomes an act of learning:

witnessing these hidden cycles prompts the viewer to question what they took for granted. This aligns with what cultural theorists call the fostering of class consciousness. If Lukács called for a revolution of awareness, *Hardly Working* is a small revolution of the gaze. It says: look at who really has to work so that the world can appear to run smoothly.

Ultimately, *Hardly Working* reveals the persistence of the frontier myth even in virtual form: the myth promises a neutral, open space of freedom, but in practice this is a matter of who is visible and who is backgrounded. In the game, the player is “the hero”, the free agent. In the art piece, we are confronted with those who lack freedom, repeating banal tasks under algorithmic surveillance. This inversion exposes the capitalist story as constructed: the righteousness of individual outlaws becomes comic or tragic when set against the endless line of background laborers. The work invites us to see beyond the mythic narrative to the material (even digital) conditions that sustain it.

*Hardly Working* thus exemplifies how media-art can participate in critical visual culture. It merges video game and film analysis, Marxist critique and aesthetic experience. In a world where digital media increasingly shape our perception of reality, the film stands as a reminder that what we see is often a thin layer of spectacle. Beneath it lie power and labor. As Debord teaches, the spectacle “is the heart of the unrealism of the real society” (Debord 1983, §6). By turning our attention to the society behind the spectacle, Total Refusal offers a model for critical engagement: the informed viewer does not passively accept the Western frontier as given, but interrogates it.

The title *Hardly Working* encapsulates layered irony. On one level, it evokes the colloquial phrase suggesting leisure or idleness – “hardly working” rather than “working hard”. Yet the film’s subjects, endlessly repeating futile labor, are simultaneously “hardly working” and condemned to perpetual work. The phrase thus condenses the contradiction at the heart of capitalist ideology: that even non-productive or invisible labor is essential to the appearance of productivity. In this sense, the title performs the same ideological inversion that the film critiques.

In conclusion, the Austrian collective’s intervention shows that even blockbuster games are not beyond critique. By patiently watching a virtual sweeper sweep a street for twenty minutes, we are forced to reckon with the mundanity of work and the way our culture invisibly venerates it. The film’s method – close observation, theoretical framing, and an insistence on the humanity of “programmable” characters – suggests that resistance

38 to ideology can begin simply by looking. The NPCs of *Red Dead Redemption II* may be digital, but their plight is real in its symbolism. They carry out the waste labor of a capitalist mythology, and *Hardly Working* grants them a moment of visibility. In that moment, the myth falters: the frontier, we see, was never as free as we were told.



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# Pikachu Goes West: A Cultural Analysis of Pokémon's Western Adaptation

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the Americanization of Pokémon games, examining how they were transformed from Japanese video games into a worldwide cultural phenomenon by engaging with scholarly discussions, including Koichi Iwabuchi's idea of "culturally odorless" exports and Anne Allison's concept of "enchanted commodities". The analysis concludes that Pokémon's success in the U.S. stems from meticulous, strategic cultural adjustments that created a hybrid identity for its characters. Although certain Japanese and Eastern elements, such as *kawaii* aesthetics, *kaiju* influences, and *otaku* collecting practices, were retained, Nintendo of America deliberately adapted the franchise for local audiences. These adjustments include the recurring censorship of Eastern religious symbols, the comprehensive renaming of characters, and an emphasis on masculine ideals of competition, mastery, and conquest.

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo analisa a Americanização dos videojogos *Pokémon*, debruçando-se sobre o modo como os jogos digitais mencionados se transmutaram num fenómeno cultural global. Para tal, o trabalho que aqui se apresenta dialoga com conceitos como a noção de exportações "culturally odorless", proposta por Koichi Iwabuchi, e o termo "enchanted commodities", cunhado por Anne Allison. De um modo geral, esta análise conclui que o sucesso de *Pokémon* nos Estados Unidos da América decorre de um processo meticuloso e estratégico de sucessivas adaptações culturais, que visam criar uma identidade híbrida para as personagens dos videojogos. Embora certos elementos japoneses e de teor oriental, como a estética *kawaii*, a influência *kaiju* e as práticas de coleção *otaku* tenham sido preservados, a Nintendo of America adaptou deliberadamente os seus artefactos culturais de modo a satisfazer os

42 Moreover, the paper emphasizes the importance of paratexts, such as promotional materials, the anime series, movies, and the trading card game, as central to shaping the Western consumer's engagement. Lastly, this article explores the role of the Pokémon World Championships and their influence on the games' narrative, while critically evaluating the current state of the competitive scene, concluding that Nintendo of America's portrayal of Pokémon as a global character is largely limited to wealthy Western nations, which impedes true universal accessibility to the game.

**KEYWORDS:** Pokémon, Paratexts, Localization analysis, Americanization, Masculinity.

desejos de públicos locais. De entre as alterações exploradas ao longo do presente artigo, destacam-se a recorrente censura de figuras religiosas orientais, alteração dos nomes das personagens e a representação de um ideal masculino conectado a concepções patriarcais de competição, mestria e conquista. O trabalho enfatiza, ainda, a importância de paratextos, nomeadamente materiais promocionais, a série *anime*, filmes e o jogo de cartas colecionáveis, centrais para atrair o consumidor ocidental. Por fim, a análise incide sobre o papel desempenhado pelo Pokémon World Championship na narrativa dos jogos digitais, ao mesmo tempo que avalia criticamente o atual estado da paisagem competitiva, concluindo que o retrato de *Pokémon* como uma figura global, concebida pela Nintendo of America, está limitado a nações ocidentais enriquecidas, impedindo, assim, um verdadeiro acesso universal aos videojogos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pokémon, Paratextos, Análise de localização, Americanização, Masculinidade.

In 2024, nearly thirty years after its Japan debut, *TIME* magazine reported that Pokémon had become the world's most valuable media franchise, worth nearly \$100 billion (Erickson 2024, 53), overtaking Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse. A remarkable achievement for a video game that, according to creator Satoshi Tajiri, felt like “a baseball player (sliding) into second base even though you know you're going to be out” during development (“The Ultimate Game Freak” 2024, 25). In fact, his doubts were understandable: the Game Boy's popularity was declining and, when the game was first launched in Japan in 1996, Nintendo did not believe it would be successful. Additionally, Nintendo of America was not keen on importing the project from overseas, making Pokémon set up to fail from the outset.

Despite Nintendo's executives' understanding of the video game's risk of failure, they continued to invest heavily in marketing and planned to turn it into a franchise. For example, in August 1998, just a few months before the North American release, a “poké-themed celebration” (Intreglia 2024, 10) was held in Topeka, Kansas. That day, Kansas's capital was renamed “Topikachu” and decorated with Pikachu-shaped Volkswagen Beetles covered in stickers with the slogan “POKÉMON: GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL!”. Courtney Mifsud Intreglia notes that a local newspaper called the event a success, stating, “They came, they saw, they sold” (*idem*, 12). Despite early worries, Pokémon was expected to be a success in the United States when it was launched on September 28, 1998.

Still, not everyone was enthusiastic, especially *TIME* magazine, which published an article in November 1999 criticizing the franchise. One year into “Poké-mania”, the magazine staff wrote that the franchise had incited “criminal” and “delinquent” behavior because of its trading card game, claiming that the game's “problem” was encouraging “acquisitiveness” and questioning “Is Pokémon payback for our get-rich-quick era?” (Chua-Eoan and Larimer 2024, 27). However, *TIME* magazine seems to have changed its view of Pokémon, as shown by its February 2024 special edition featuring 10 collectable covers of 10 different monsters.

Regardless of these criticisms, from the moment the copies of *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* appeared on the shelves of game and toy stores in the U.S., it was clear that the creatures were there to stay. However, for Pokémon, crossing the Pacific was not simply about crossing a translation boundary, but also about entering a new culture and

the offices of Nintendo of America, where project managers were primed to redefine what the franchise was, how it should be understood, and who it was for.

This research focuses on the adaptation of Pokémon for Western audiences, particularly in the United States, applying a framework that concerns media studies as well as cultural anthropology, more specifically, Koichi Iwabuchi's concept of Japan's "culturally odorless" exports, Anne Allison's theory of "enchanted commodities", and Jonathan Gray's theory of "paratexts". To a lesser extent, the article also hinges on George Ritzer's concepts of globalization, glocalization, and cultural imperialism, as well as on Pramod K. Nayar's critique of the raced digital divide.

Koichi Iwabuchi's book *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (2002) considers Pokémon as a classic example of Japan's "culturally odorless" exports, which are successful because they do not demand everyday Japanese characteristics during consumption. Thus, the scholar distinguishes this process from Americanization by arguing that Pokémon games do not seek to export a Japanese lifestyle, since their success stems from being products devoid of national characteristics, allowing them to become global without seeming "foreign".

Equally useful for this paper is Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006), where the author argues that these exports are not empty but "enchanted", mixing cuteness with power and intimacy with acquisition: "this is a business of enchanted commodities. Play creatures like Pokémon are packaged to feed a consumer fetishism" (Allison 2006, 16), thus making "the object one 'gets' both thingified (valued economically) and personalized (cute monsters inspiring affection, attachment and love)" (*idem*, 197-199).

Lastly, it is argued that Pokémon's success in the United States relied on a dual strategy of cultural adaptation and immersive world-building. On one level, the franchise utilized paratexts, such as promotional materials, anime, movies, and the trading card game, to build a universe that exceeded explicit Eastern or Western identities. Nevertheless, for this world-building to appeal to a Western audience, substantial cultural reworking of the game was necessary. Accordingly, this paper outlines how Nintendo of America methodically changed themes concerning religion and views of masculinity to safeguard the game's malleability, thereby allowing the franchise's global "world" to settle in the U.S. market.

This paper is organized into three main sections. First, the section “Kawaii, kaiju, and otaku: understanding the cultural foundations of Pokémon” demonstrates that, despite Western localization, fundamental elements remain in the narrative through analyzing the franchise’s core Japanese cultural structures, including *kawaii* aesthetics, *kaiju* influences, and *otaku* practices. Next, “Neither Japanese nor American: Pokémon as global characters” assesses Nintendo of America’s cultural adaptations, such as the censorship of Eastern religious motifs and the role of paratexts in guiding consumer engagement. The section “What is a Pokémon master to do after finishing the game: Pokémon’s competitive landscape” thoroughly examines the official competitive landscape organized by Play! Pokémon. Lastly, the section “The Pokéworld after the World Championships” examines the geographic evolution of the in-game universe, tracing the transition from older, Japan-inspired Pokémon regions to modern, Western-inspired ones.

## 2. KAWAII, KAIJU, AND OTAKU: UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF POKÉMON

The narrative structure of a Pokémon game is highly conventional. The developers have maintained the same formula throughout all nine generations of the game: the main objective of Pokémon games is always to become the best Pokémon trainer in the region. Each game begins with the protagonist waking up in their youth bedroom and greeting their mother (most games do not show the father), who tells them that the local Pokémon expert is waiting for them at their lab just a few steps away. Then, the gamer picks one of three rare Pokémon, battles his or her rival (who was also invited to choose a Pokémon), and starts the adventure. In all main games, the goal is to catch as many Pokémon as possible and to defeat all eight Gym Leaders, who get tougher each time. Then the gamer must challenge the Elite Four and defeat the Champion. At the same time, the gamer must stop a criminal organization, known as the “evil team”, and face the rival’s challenges. After finishing the main story, access to restricted areas is granted because the gamer is now “strong enough”. These areas allow to complete the Pokédex, an encyclopedia with entries for all the Pokémon available for capture in the region. After completing it, the gamer is awarded a printable diploma, confirming his or her status as a Pokémon master.

This narrative remains a product of its time, a phenomenon that Allison explores in her essay “Pocket Capitalism and Visual Intimacy: Pokémon as a symptom of post-industrial youth culture”. The scholar argues that, because of the 1991 burst of the Japanese Bubble Economy, the country’s youth “are seen to symbolize the collapse of Japan’s collective culture and the excess of materialist hedonism”, defining this crisis as the coming of a speculative, consumer “millennial capitalism”:

(It is) symptomatic of the global mapping of neo-liberalism . . . and migratory movements that mark the twenty-first century, what I call ‘millennial capitalism’. In an economy that has shifted from prioritizing labor to one centered on consumption, a speculative and presentist logic has replaced the modernist belief in progress organized by hard work and savings. Fortunes and futures are now pinned down on . . . get-rich schemes, lotteries, gambling, magic. (Allison 2013, 199)

The author argues that Pokémon “mimics contemporary times”, acting as a “playspace that both reflects and reimagines contemporary conditions of speculation, fragmentation and digitalization” (*idem*, 200). Fundamentally, the scholar claims the game works as preparation for contemporary capitalism: by managing digital monsters as hypothetical possessions within a complex media landscape, young children stop playing a videogame and begin learning precise habits essential to inhabit a consumer-driven society.

Moreover, Allison draws attention to the inspiration behind the game, since Tajiri was an insect collector, growing up in a town that was yet to be overtaken by industrialization, whose activities involved spending “long hours studying, raising, and collecting bugs”, as well as “adventure, discovery, mastery” and “trading and sharing with others” (*idem*, 202). Tajiri created a “post-modern insect collecting . . . a medium that conforms to children’s mobile, industrial lifestyle” (*idem*, 203).

However, Tajiri had another passion, which was video games, and was an avid gamer, or *otaku*. In his essay “Notes on SuperFlat and Its Expression in Videogames”, writer and artist David Surman notes that an *otaku* is obsessed with collecting and fandoms, especially characters, “the fetish object of the *otaku*” (2008, 2). Additionally, the phenomenon “has been instrumental in distributing the aesthetic and cultural values of Japan and so offers an imaginary different from hegemonic America” (*idem*, 4). Here, Surman conveys the idea that the *otaku* challenges the dominant Western predilection for

realism and linear narrative by focusing on the “database”. Essentially, the *otaku* prefers categorizing and obsessing over characters, which disturbs the typical American model of entertainment that focuses on a journey. To understand this disturbance, it is important to analyze Hiroki Azuma’s construction of the “database model” of postmodernist consumption (*idem*, 32). In his book *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animal*, published in English in 2009, the author argues that in Japanese subcultures, modern consumers have abandoned the “Grand Narratives” (Azuma 2009, 29) in favor of non-linear data units. In Pokémon’s case, on the surface, Western audiences are given a linear coming-of-age story. However, the true engine of the videogame and franchise is completely database-driven: the player peruses the Pokédex not as a narrative tome but as a referential database, where enjoyment comes from collecting digital species. By focusing on the growth of character data over a linear narrative, Pokémon essentially reorganizes the traditional Western “Grand Narrative” by substituting it with the “database model”.

In addition to *otaku*, the authors introduce the concepts of *kaiju*<sup>1</sup> and *kawaii*<sup>2</sup>. Allison explains that Pokémon belongs to a character culture that combines both postwar imaginaries, such as *kaiju* movies, and *kawaii* (Allison 2006, 199). Furthermore, the author notes that entertainment produced in Japan is significantly different from American entertainment. While shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) reflected the country’s domestic stability and post-war pride, Japanese audiences watched movies like *Godzilla* (1954), which represented the anxieties of the time (Allison 2008, 12). The scholar suggests that *kaiju* films like *Godzilla* reflect the fears of those traumatized by atomic bombings and war destruction, symbolized through towering monsters.

On the other hand, as explained by Allison, Japan is also capable of producing products belonging to an aesthetic the author classified as “techno-animism: animating contemporary technology with spirits and commodities with spirits and recuperating cultural traditions”, essentially an “intermixture of the old (spirituality) with the new (digital/virtual media)” (Allison 2006, 21). Pokémon inherits the world of *kawaii*, *otaku*, and techno-animism, operating as a textbook for collecting, transforming, and developing affective attachment.

Cuteness in the Pokémon world is not only an aesthetic but also a form of power. For example, one of the most powerful Pokémon in the first generation is Mew, a small,

cat-like creature with a light pink body, large blue eyes, and a long, thin tail with an ovoid tip. Additionally, the developers created a mutated version of Mew called Mewtwo, a powerful legendary Pokémon that serves as the main antagonist in the first Pokémon movie. Even in the first-generation games, Mewtwo is already seen as a threatening, disturbing creature that has isolated itself in a remote cave, accessible only to true Pokémon masters.



Figure 1. Image of Mew (left) and Mewtwo (right). Official artwork by Ken Sugimori for Pokémon FireRed and LeafGreen. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

I argue that Mew and Mewtwo's story in the video games reflects classic Japanese entertainment, such as Godzilla, by mixing elements of *kawaii* and *kaiju*. In the first generation of the game, players are tasked with locating a hidden key inside the ruins of a building called Pokémon Mansion. They must press a series of switches to locate the key. Near the switches are various journals, each containing an entry that tells the story of Mew and Mewtwo. According to a journal found in the Pokémon Mansion ruins, Mewtwo becomes a vicious Pokémon that originates from Mew and kills the scientists behind the experiment. The mansion, inhabited by hideous entities, such as Poison-type Pokémon, is invaded by burglars and mad scientists. Although Mewtwo's strength is more prominent, Mew ends up being the most powerful Pokémon, displaying the ability to give life to other creatures. This story demonstrates how *kawaii* and "soft" creatures demonstrate their power in the Pokémon world.

Mewtwo's Godzilla-like arc, depicting themes of man-made creation and unexpected consequences, inserts a distinct Japanese cultural "odor" into the story. This

depiction showcases a soft-power approach in which conventional Japanese motifs subtly influence the franchise's global appeal while maintaining its cultural core. Additionally, the story of Mew and Mewtwo differs between the American and Japanese versions. In the Japanese version, the scientists close the Pokémon Mansion diary with "I cannot control it", emphasizing an inner struggle and moral regret. Conversely, in the American version, they close with "It has vicious tendencies", simplifying the conflict into a straightforward battle between humans and monsters, removing the nuanced internal moral conflict present in the Japanese version.

Another example of how *kaiju* movies influence Pokémon is Tyranitar, which has a Godzilla-like *kaiju* design. The monster's original Pokédex entry states that it is "[e]xtremely strong, it can change the landscape. It has an insolent nature that makes it not care about others". A name such as Tyranitar evokes the word "tyrant", a cruel, absolute leader, associating the creature with the archetype of despotic, ancient malice. Additionally, it was one of the first Dark-type Pokémon, giving off a threatening presence. This type originates from the "Aku", which translates to "evil" in English. The attacks of this Pokémon are intended to reflect its malicious nature; thus, they are called "Beat Up", "Thief", "Fake Tears", or "Sucker Punch".



Figure 2. Image of Tyranitar. Official art by Ken Sugimori, released in Pokémon HeartGold and SoulSilver.

Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia – The Original Pokémon Community*.

This analysis is consistent with Allison's argument that Pokémon's greatest strengths lie in figures like the franchise's mascot, Pikachu, exemplifying a "cute yet powerful" polymorphism (Allison 2006, 16). Additionally, Pokémon's cuteness is a literal form of soft power. *Kawaii* figures, such as Pokémon, helped solidify the concept of "Japanese Cool", a term that has endured well into the 21st century. The term "Japanese

50      “Cool” was coined by journalist Douglas McGray in his article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” for *Foreign Policy*, where he stated that

(...) instead of collapsing beneath its widely reported political and economic misfortunes, Japan’s global cultural influence has only grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower. (2002, 45)

The positive outcome of the Pokémon franchise is exemplified by McGray as one of the most important examples of Japan’s expertise in transmitting mass culture globally across mediums like video games, anime, and merchandise since it was broadcast in 65 countries and made the cover of *TIME* magazine in 1999. For example, in 2015, *Business Insider* reporter Hunter Walker wrote that President Barack Obama, during his visit to Japan, used the opportunity to thank the Japanese for all their “cool” inventions, such as “karate, karaoke. Manga and anime. And, of course, emojis” (Walker 2015)

Thus Iwabuchi’s claim that Pokémon is entirely a “culturally odorless” Japanese export, because the product does not evoke a Japanese lifestyle when consumed. However, I argue that Pokémon incorporated qualities that could not be erased once it was exported to the United States, specifically the influence of *kaiju* films, *kawaii* characters, and the ethos of character collection among *otaku*. Furthermore, elements of Pokémon had to be entirely reworked by Nintendo of America. Thus, despite the franchise not being originally “culturally odorless”, this article argues that the game had to be forcefully revised to fit the American setting. The necessity of this adaptation demonstrates that the original material contained diverse cultural markers that had to be removed to ensure its global success.

### 3. NEITHER JAPANESE NOR AMERICAN: POKÉMON AS GLOBAL CHARACTERS

While not explicitly based on a religious framework, the first Japanese Pokémon releases included various elements with spiritual overtones that were later removed in the Western releases. In the first generation, numerous Buddhist statues and spiritual figures were replaced by Diglett, mole-like Pokémon. This process is more clearly visible in the second-

generation Pokémon games, such as Gold, Silver and Crystal, as illustrated in Figure 3. The Japanese sprites for the “Sage” and “Medium” trainer classes<sup>3</sup> depict them with hands clasped in prayer and holding traditional prayer beads, respectively. However, the international localization altered their sprites entirely, effectively removing the Japanese “cultural odor” and championing Western generic imagery.

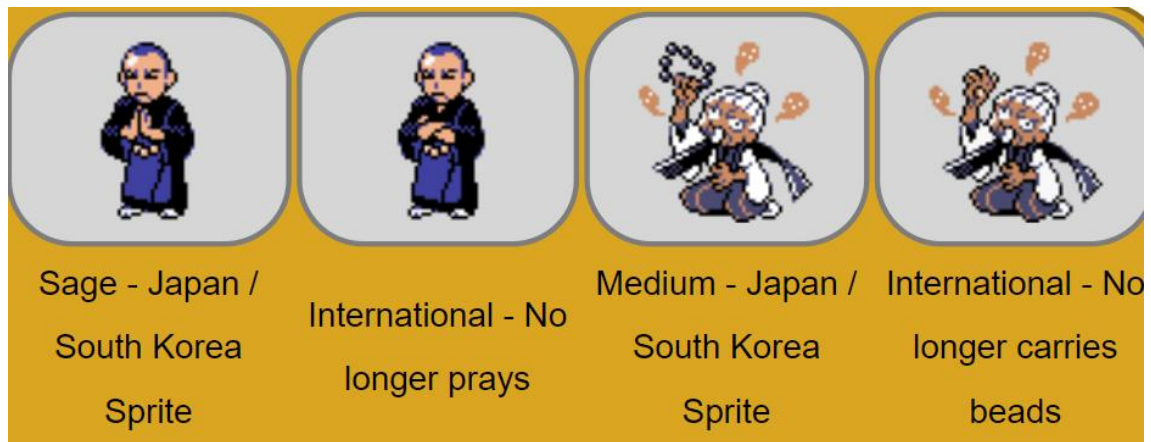


Figure 3. Image of Sage and Medium in the second generation of Pokémon, Pokémon Crystal Version.

Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

These changes can be traced back to Gail Tilden (who was the Pokémon project coordinator at Nintendo of America) and her comments about how the game would be presented in the United States, which already asserted the necessity of adapting Pokémon for a Western audience: “To the best of our abilities, we have tried to prevent kids from feeling that these characters come from Japan . . . because we want to promote the impression that Pokémon are global characters” (Allison 2006, 234).

This corporate goal flawlessly elucidates what George Ritzer identifies as the tension between “globalization” and “glocalization”. For Ritzer, globalization aims to maximize profits, standing for imperialistic aspirations of transnational corporations to force their standardized products over various global markets, while glocalization proposes to customize these global goods to harmonize fluently with the subtleties of local culture (2011, 174). Moreover, Ritzer argues that a “global-glocal” struggle is quite common, because globalization is “the flow of ‘nothing’ (as opposed to ‘something’), involving the spread of non-places, non-things, non-people” (*idem*, 175). Thus, Tilden’s approach exposes this paradox: if Nintendo is to pursue its “global” aspirations, then a “glocal”

52 outlook is needed in order to customize it for an American ecosystem, before becoming a universal commodity.

Further, other decisions suggest Nintendo of America wanted to link Pokémon with the U.S., with the most obvious example being the names of the first games: in Japan, children played Pokémon Red and Green, while American children played Red and Blue, referencing the colors of the country's flag. Another example was renaming almost every Pokémon or changing the characters' original names: Professor Okido became Professor Oak, the default name of the main character changed from Satoshi to Red, and the anime's protagonist Satoshi was renamed Ash as well.

Masculinity was also an important issue for Nintendo of America. Interestingly, Tajiri said in an interview that American children understood Pokémon better than the Japanese because they focused more on the masculine character, the trainer, rather than the creatures ("The Ultimate Game Freak" 2024, 23). Still, the project coordinators recognized that gender would be a key factor in its success. For example, Pikachu was chosen as the franchise mascot to attract "younger and female viewers as well as their mothers" (Iwabuchi 2004, 63). However, the emphasis on *kawaii* characters eventually cost the company some influence over the male players, as Samuel Tobin argues. Speaking about his experience as a teacher, he states the following about Pokémon:

For the older boys in the school where I taught, an interest in Pokémon, which had been compatible with masculinity in the fall semester of the year, became increasingly problematic in the spring, when many of the boys began to display their masculinity by demonstrating that they had outgrown Pokémon. (Tobin 2004, 242)

Tobin's remarks illustrate a cultural discrepancy in how "cuteness" in Pokémon is consumed by its audiences. Whereas in Japan, consuming *kawaii* is normalized for various ages and genders, Western paradigms of masculinity oblige adolescent boys to remove themselves from contexts that will make them seem "soft" or "domestic". As products that validate masculinity, Pokémon games are limited. The strategic repositioning of the games demanded a comprehensive deletion of what scholars Syke Jones and Lex Lancaster term the "revolutionary aesthetics of vulnerability" inherent to *kawaii* culture, presented in their paper "Kawaii Revolution: Understanding the Japanese Aesthetics of 'Cuteness' through Lolita and Madoka Magica" (2021, 48). They claim that *kawaii* characters are designed to

suggest “a particular interactive stance”, where the object “must be cared for or treated gently” (*idem*, 49). However, in adapting the games for Western audiences, Nintendo of America realized they needed to rewrite this tension between the *kawaii* character and the player.

Moreover, from the beginning, Nintendo of America stressed the presence of human characters, especially male ones. An official game guide features the human characters Ash, Professor Oak, and the villainous leader of Team Rocket, Giovanni. The player is confronted with the differences between Oak and Giovanni: Oak captures Pokémon to improve society, while Giovanni aims to capture them to dominate the world. The player must emulate Oak and defeat Team Rocket. Meanwhile, the player is regularly challenged by a rival named Gary, as the guide explains. In a setting where all the main characters are men, the player must rise above them all, becoming a sort of alpha male by catching and controlling these creatures to beat opponents in battle. In a scenario ruled by male figures, the narrative burdens the player with the task of beating them all, even his mentor Professor Oak, who uses Pokémon for the betterment of society. This depiction of dominance strengthens particularly American ideals of hegemonic masculinity, where manhood is accomplished through contest, takeover, and order. It opposes a depiction of shared harmony, and the Americanized guide structures the journey as a mission for control, conquering nature, establishing superiority, and overpowering other men.

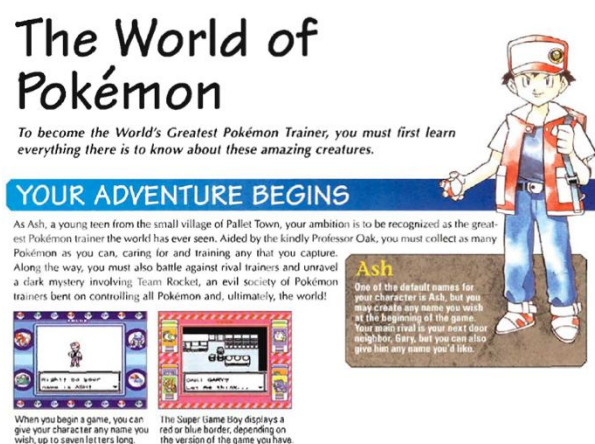


Figure 4. Excerpt from *Pokémon Red and Blue Player's Guide*, published by Nintendo in 1998.

This analysis of Pokémon supports the previously stated view about *otaku* culture. In his book *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, Patrick W. Galbraith argues that the *otaku* culture from which Pokémon and its creator emerged was mainly shaped by men who were “reluctant insiders of the hegemony of masculinity seeking alternatives” (2019, 10). Instead of aiming for social dominance and the “reproductive maturity” of the Japanese salaryman, these men sought “alternative social worlds” centered on affection (*idem*, 8). As this paper notes, Nintendo of America reversed this.

Continuing with the analysis of the guide, the book encourages players to catch as many Pokémon as possible. It is reasonable to assume the game connects owning Pokémon with mastering them. In the U.S., these ideas were combined with marketing campaigns emphasizing “more color and dynamism” and “bigger and louder” than its Japanese counterpart (Allison 2006, 244). The now iconic slogan “Gotta Catch ‘Em All”, created by Hasbro, was nearly censored by the FCC because it was seen as too blunt about consumerism (*idem*, 245).

Pokémon’s true Americanization occurred with the introduction of paratexts, which were vital for the franchise’s success. This includes entryway and *in media res* paratexts, as defined by Jonathan Gray in *Show Sold Separately* (2010). Gray describes entryway paratexts as trailers and TV promos because these “take the first steps in filling a text with meaning” (2010, 48). In Pokémon’s case, these paratexts include the anthem-like slogan “Gotta Catch ‘em All” and the promotional videos sent to American households explaining how Pokémon worked. These videos were produced in the context of the anime but additionally served as an introduction to the games. Along with the slogan, these entryway paratexts framed the game as a competitive, cumulative quest, with Ash as a moral guide and role model. Furthermore, *in media res* paratexts are also influential, such as the “Who is That Pokémon?” recap and strategy guides, designed to teach players how to evaluate a Pokémon’s rarity and skill, ideas that can be applied both in schoolyard conversations and retail aisles (2010, 177). Eventually, these resources transformed the act of playing the game into a form of data mastery, guaranteeing that Pokémon worked as a rigorous universe. These traits of competition and accumulation differ from the unpretentious consumption of “cute” creatures: by measuring Pokémon through statistics and rarity, young boys could relate to the game without having to negotiate their masculinity.

#### 4. WHAT IS A POKÉMON MASTER TO DO AFTER FINISHING THE GAME: POKÉMON'S COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE

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While the official competitive program Play! Pokémon was created by the Pokémon Company International, the first competitive Pokémon tournaments began in Japan, called Nintendo Cups, which were the primary format for competitive Pokémon, as well as the official one, until 2004, when the format changed and the events started being hosted in the United States.

##### 4.1. Considerations about competitive Pokémon

Considering Pokémon's narrative, competitive Pokémon can be viewed differently from other esports, since it is not merely an addition but an indispensable effort to support the Americanized narrative of control. Since the Western localization of the franchise purposely altered the game away from the Japanese notions of symbiotic companionship and redirected it towards Americanized individualistic conquest, the narrative requires an infinite field for performing dominance. The main goal of Pokémon is to become a Pokémon master, which is only achievable after collecting all the available monsters in the game. In the United States, this was reinforced through paratexts, as previously noted. After completing this goal, players feel empty because there is no visible change in the game. Once they receive the diploma, they are left alone with their achievements and no other rivals to challenge. The desire to collect every single character can only motivate players so much; for the game to continue thriving, there needs to be something beyond that. Thus, competitive play reframes the “Master” from a static title into a dynamic position that must be continually affirmed through battle.



Figure 5. Image of Pokémon diploma from the game Pokémon Red Version. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

Competitive Pokémon represented that “something”, an argument comparable to the analysis by Marc Steinberg in his book *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012). When discussing characters, worlds, and consumption, Steinberg cites an example from Otsuka Eiji’s *A Theory of Narrative Consumption* (1989), in which the author examines the popularity of collectable characters associated with each bar of Bikkuriman Chocolate. Although there was no particular narrative connecting the characters, the children who collected them started creating their own stories. Thus, Steinberg writes that child consumers were attracted by this grand narrative and sought further access to it through continued purchases of the chocolate, leading Otsuka to conclude that the focus was neither the chocolate nor the sticker, but rather the “‘grand narrative’ itself” (Steinberg 2012, 178).

Once players reach Pokémon master status, they build their own story by competing against others. Training Pokémon remains a key activity in the game, primarily to qualify for competitive events that ultimately crown them as Pokémon masters. However, after becoming a “master” in the game, the new objective is to defend the title against other players who have also received the same honor, maintaining it in the social sphere. Although training and battles occur within the game environment, competitive Pokémon serves as an extension to the main storyline, created by players and organized under the supervision of Pokémon Company International. As Steinberg notes regarding chocolates, “the reader as a consumer must continue to pursue the next narrative fragment” (*idem*, 181). The Pokémon Company International provides the platform and characters, leaving players to develop the metagame and associated elements, guaranteeing the narrative of “mastery” never ends.

At first, Azuma’s arguments about “database consumption” being favored over “grand narratives” seem inadequate in Pokémon’s case. The game, then, presents a paradoxical attitude. On the one hand, the competitive metagame validates Azuma’s arguments, since players need to strip the digital creatures of their places in the game and transfer them to databases to evaluate their battle potential. On the other hand, this battle potential is channeled through meaningful community lore, validating Otsuka’s “grand narrative” argument as well. For instance, Jun Park’s famous Pachirisu, a seemingly useless Pokémon, was instrumental in helping the player win the 2014 World Championships.

Ultimately, it is the consumers' abiding want for narrative that sustains competitive Pokémon. 57

#### 4.2. How accessible is competitive Pokémon

Competitive Pokémon is played in double battles, a format available since the third generation of the game. It is a standard battle format, so it is familiar to competitive players. Moreover, beyond the in-game story, players can engage in online practice and battle others. This way, they will understand the metagame, which will help them build teams and train Pokémon.

After this, the player can start exploring ways to get an invitation to the Pokémon World Championships, where top players from around the world gather to determine who is the greatest Pokémon master, including Asian players who operate outside the Play! Pokémon system. To receive an invitation to Worlds, players must earn Championship Points. To earn significant Championship Points, players need to participate in Championship Series Events. According to the official website, there are currently 10 events scheduled for the 2026 season in Europe and Latin America, 2 in Oceania, and 7 in North America. Although the Championship is meant for an international audience, there will be no events in Africa. Essentially, aside from North American players, participating in these events will require extensive travel.

Pramod K. Nayar highlights the geographic exclusion of Africa as part of the “raced digital divide”, pointing out institutional inequalities. He states that cultural influences in technological systems are mainly shaped by “First World” countries or the Global North, where media is closely linked to global financial flows (2008, 2). By omitting Africa from tournaments, companies like Nintendo and Play! Pokémon reinforce what Nayar calls the “elite construction and appropriation of the public sphere”, essentially creating a form of digital apartheid that excludes the “undesirables” (*idem*, 3). This barrier hampers players from the Global South, as participation requires considerable capital. Travel expenses, such as airfare and lodging in major North American cities, can make participation difficult for lower-income regions. Additionally, except in 2022 and 2023, the World Championships have always been held in the United States, which favors local players. Since the competitive circuit extends the gameplay experience, the U.S. maintains a dominant position in this ecosystem.

This firm determination to host the World Championships in the United States is consistent with Ritzer's definition of "globalization", which is the "imperialistic ambitions of nation-states, corporations, and organizations, and their imposition throughout the world" (*idem*, 173). In the case of Pokémon, an asymmetry emerges once again. Even though the franchise originated in Japan, its competitive circuit is dominated by Western influence. This influence grants American players an advantage that subtly imposes an American narrative onto the Pokémon. Interpreted through Ritzer's definition of "cultural imperialism", by which cultures "impose themselves, more or less consciously, on other cultures" (*idem*, 163), the decision made by Nintendo and Play! Pokémon ensures that the otherwise borderless digital journey of the player is fundamentally validated within the United States' territory.

#### 4.3. The Pokéworld after the World Championships

As previously noted, the United States maintains a dominant presence within the Pokémon competitive scene. In fact, the West has definitely exerted its influence in the Pokéworld since 2009, when the United States took over the series' competitive format.

Until the fourth generation of the game, *Pokémon Diamond and Pearl*, released in 2006, Pokémon was always set in Japan. The first generation takes place in the Kanto region, which shares its name, while the second generation, Johto, was based on the Kansai region. Similarly, the third generation's region, Hoenn, was based on the island of Kyushu, and the fourth generation's Sinnoh, as well as its prequel's Hisui, was based on Hokkaido.

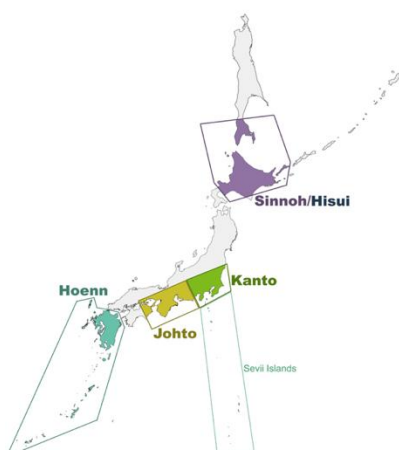


Figure 6. Image of Pokémon regions juxtaposed with their Japanese counterparts. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

Starting with the fifth generation, *Pokémon Black and White*, the games are now set in Western-inspired countries. As of the latest ninth generation, more Pokémon games are set in Western-inspired regions than in Japan. The fifth generation takes place in Unova, inspired by New York City, and the seventh in Alola, inspired by the Hawaiian Islands. Meanwhile, France inspired Kalos, in the sixth generation; England and Scotland inspired Galar and the Crown Tundra Isle of Armor, respectively, in the eighth; and Portugal and Spain inspired Paldea in the ninth.

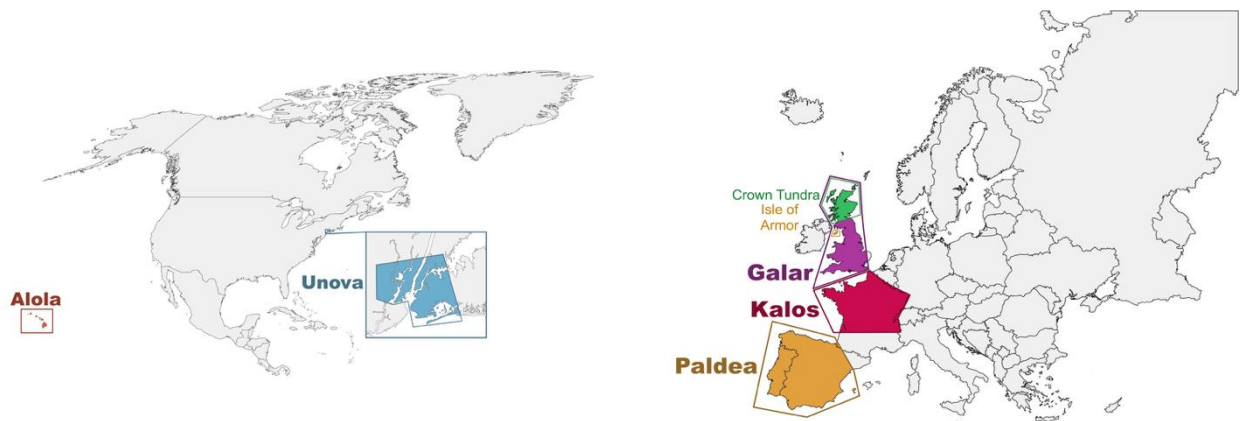


Figure 7. Image of Pokémon regions juxtaposed with their Western counterparts. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

It appears that Gail Tilden’s mission to transform Pokémon into global icons has been successful. While the first four generations of the game benefited from a shared cultural and geographic framework, later entries reflected Pokémon’s fragmented approach, with the transition to Europe-inspired settings such as Kalos (France), Galar (United Kingdom), and Paldea (Spain and Portugal). For instance, unlike Johto’s Ecruteak City, which offers a culturally authentic representation of Kyoto, Kalos’s Lumiose City functions as an artificial collage of Paris’s iconic landmarks, such as La Défense, prioritizing visual spectacle over environmental credibility. As a result, the visual identity of later regions in the Pokémon games often leans into “kitsch”, creating a discrepancy between

60 the environment and the creatures designed to inhabit it, and operating as Ritzer's "globalization of nothing" (2011, 171). Ritzer defines "nothing" as "social forms largely devoid of distinctive content", as opposed to "something: largely fully social forms; those rich in distinctive content" with localized meaning (*idem*, 172). When Pokémon games reduce European landscapes to sanitized tourist tropes, the franchise prioritizes exportable, empty products over genuine ones, creating a disconnect between the environment and the creatures designed to inhabit it.

This change is related to the global spread of competitive Pokémon from the United States to other parts of the world. In fact, it could be argued that the Pokémon Company International is trying to "capture" more players from Europe by representing their countries, then drawing them into the competitive scene. After hosting competitions in the United States, it only makes sense for the games to be set in the West as well. Then, Play! Pokémon would have one more reason to host more tournaments in Europe, since the games are also set there. This strategy operates through the dynamics of "globalization" and can be seen as an example of cultural imperialism: by means of a "nothing" representation of European spaces, new audiences are drawn to the game. Furthermore, this justifies expanding its physical tournament infrastructure across the continent and actively exporting an Americanized competition onto a global stage. Thus, what once began as a Japanese product is redefined by Western values and circulated as a global export, where mastery becomes the universal language of the game.

Lastly, Gail Tilden's mission to make Pokémon more global is still ongoing. If Nintendo of America truly wanted Pokémon to be accessible worldwide and set everywhere, then they would also include the African continent or Latin America. However, Nintendo of America is well aware that this would not meet their needs. This is best understood by recalling Iwabuchi's arguments: "While Pokémon might be perceived as 'ours' in many parts of the world, there are still many people living in poverty who cannot afford to consume Pokémon and for whom Pokémon therefore might carry the despairing sense of belonging to others (Iwabuchi 2004, 73).

Given the current format of competitive play and the direction the games are taking, it is clear that Pokémon and the West are connected, and it is unlikely the series will return to Asia. Instead, the series appears to continue to adhere to a model of selective globalization, emphasizing the Global North and presenting this as its "global" reach.

Throughout this article, it was argued that Pokémon's success in the United States was due not only to good translation but also to a significant cultural reworking of the original content. What started as a single video game expanded into a full-fledged franchise, encompassing an anime series, a trading card game, toys, merchandise, and several films. This franchise can be seen as a paratext, as it taught American children how to engage with the game. In this way, the so-called "Americanization" process happened both inside and outside the game cartridge.

Nevertheless, the source text is not entirely devoid of cultural significance. As a game, Pokémon retains signs of Japanese culture, such as *kawaii* aesthetics, *otaku* collecting habits, and *kaiju* influences. However, at the same time, Nintendo of America censored certain parts of the game, such as religious references, renamed characters and monsters, altered the colors in the original games' titles, and the marketing campaign was more aggressive.

Furthermore, it is argued that masculinity was an important aspect for Nintendo of America. Pikachu's "cute yet powerful" rhetoric was welcome, but the official guides repackage the message with mastery through rivalry and victory over evil teams. Thus, given the trajectory of recent titles and the existing structure of competitive play, Pokémon seems to be undergoing a stable cultural repositioning toward the West. However, the franchise appears assured to pursue a strategy of prioritizing the markets and aesthetics of the Global North.

The competitive scene then extends this narrative after the end credits roll. With the Play! Pokémon circuit, it gives players a new task, ensuring they keep playing until a new title is released while continuing the collect-and-master storyline. The metagame is how the game takes on new meaning, shifting the focus from emotional affection to *kawaii* creatures to calculated optimization: the player is no longer a child collecting cute monsters, but an intelligent tactician mastering an intricate system to claim superiority over others, reorganizing a relaxing, domestic hobby into a highly competitive one.

Where does all this leave Pokémon?

The franchise now exists in a state of cultural hybridity, functioning as a product that is neither fully Japanese nor American. However, to become a truly universal brand, it

62 must move beyond its current focus on the Global North. By limiting its narrative mainly to wealthy Western economies, Pokémon risks confining its cultural reach to a specific socioeconomic group rather than achieving a genuinely worldwide influence.

Ultimately, there is significant potential for further academic research into the Pokémon export phenomenon. It would be valuable to examine how the game was distributed to additional markets, including Europe and Latin America. Since most games were translated into German and French, it would be relevant to analyze the changes these versions underwent and their subsequent effect on the local audience reception.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kaiju* is a genre-specific term that refers to the gigantic Japanese cinematic monster films such as *Godzilla*. Scholar Chon Noriega argues these narratives “reveal a self-conscious attempt to deal with nuclear history and its effects on Japanese society” (2006, 41), as they are rooted in post-World War II cultural and political anxieties.

<sup>2</sup> According to scholar Sharon Kinsella, *kawaii* “essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak” (1995, 220). Furthermore, the author describes the typical *kawaii* character as “small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round . . . non-sexual” (*idem*, 226). Pokémon’s mascots, such as Pikachu and Eevee, are stylized mammals, a mouse and a fox, respectively, whose physical proportions are round, infantile and non-sexual.

<sup>3</sup> Trainer classes in Pokémon are a recurring archetype assigned to Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) in every generation of the game. Each class serves as a thematic category that defines their visual appearance (sprite) and the types of Pokémon they use. Since every NPC within a certain class shares the exact same sprite, the censorship of the “Sage” and the “Medium” effectively deletes their cultural representation from the entire universe of the game.

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# “Come, Watson! The Game is Afoot!”

## Sherlock Holmes: An Adventure in Videogames

MARIA JOÃO BRITO

NOVA FCSH / CETAPS

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the most famous fictional characters in crime fiction, Sherlock Holmes, made his debut in 1887 in the detective story *A Study in Scarlet*. Since then, the detective, created by the British writer and physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), has been portrayed in multiple formats worldwide, including video games.

In the first part of this article, I will examine the sociocultural context of the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras, which aligns with the timeline of the Sherlock Holmes canon. The following section provides an overview of video games centred on the character of Sherlock Holmes. Since 1984, Holmes has been adapted across myriad gaming platforms, beginning with Beam Software’s text-based adventure *Sherlock* for the Spectrum and Commodore, and continuing to 2025 with *The Beekeeper’s Picnic: A Sherlockian Adventure* for PC,

**RESUMO:** Uma das personagens fictícias mais emblemáticas da literatura policial, Sherlock Holmes surgiu pela primeira vez em 1887, no romance *A Study in Scarlet*. Desde então, o detective criado pelo escritor e médico britânico Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) tem sido constantemente representado nos mais diversos meios de comunicação, a nível global, incluindo o universo dos videojogos.

Na primeira parte deste artigo, será analisado o contexto sociocultural do final da Era Vitoriana e do início da Era Eduardiana, períodos que coincidem com o arco temporal do cânone original sherlockiano. A secção seguinte apresenta uma visão geral dos videojogos centrados na personagem de Sherlock Holmes. Desde 1984, Sherlock Holmes tem sido adaptado para diversas plataformas de videojogos, desde a aventura textual *Sherlock*, da Beam Software, aos sistemas Spectrum e

developed by Afoot Games. This article aims to explore how Sherlock Holmes has influenced the video game industry and evolved to meet the challenges of adaptation as an iconic character who has transcended both time and space.

**KEYWORDS:** Sherlock Holmes, Victorian era, Crime Fiction, Videogames, Mythmaking.

Commodore, e prolongando-se até 2025 com *The Beekeeper's Picnic: A Sherlockian Adventure*, para PC, do estúdio Afoot Games.

O presente artigo propõe-se a examinar como a personagem Sherlock Holmes influenciou a indústria dos videogames, analisando os mecanismos que sustentam a sua reinvenção narrativa. Sherlock Holmes, enquanto entidade ficcional sujeita a um processo de mitopoesia, representa um caso de intermedialidade, cuja relevância ultrapassa fronteiras.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Sherlock Holmes, Era Vitoriana, Literatura Policial, Videogames, Mitopoesia.

The character of Sherlock Holmes first emerged during the late Victorian era (c. 1870 to 1901, the final decades of Queen Victoria's reign). This period was marked by significant industrial expansion, social disparities, and the consolidation of the British Empire. During Queen Victoria's reign, Britain's imperial reach extended across multiple continents – from North America to Africa, Asia, Oceania – driven by territorial ambitions. Consequently, these territorial acquisitions were accompanied by a zealous desire to explore areas perceived as foreign or primitive, fostering a distorted sense of duty to “civilize” them. Furthermore, as a result of this expansion, London became the centre of international finance and trade. This growth underscored London's position as a dominant global force, and its influence on economic, cultural, and political affairs during this era was unmatched by that of any other city (Marx and Charlot 1995). As the capital of a vast empire, London attracted migrants and immigrants alike, all seeking a better life. The city of London became an overpopulated melting pot: “(...) in 1800 London's population had been around a million. By 1881 it had soared to 4.5 million, and by 1911 to over 7 million” (Porter 1995, 205). Thus, as the city grew more prosperous, many inhabitants found themselves laboring under grueling conditions, which they were forced to endure in overcrowded slums. These living conditions contributed to a dramatic rise in both criminal activity and social problems, including prostitution, opium dens, and wretched children. London became a city of disparities: on one hand, the West End, a symbol of privilege; on the other, the East End, characterized by poverty. This social disparity persisted throughout the Edwardian age, which lasted from the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, under the reigns of both King Edward VII and King George V. Additionally, Victorian London was a microcosm of broader cultural tensions that defined the era. The period was marked by a profound dichotomy between tradition and innovation. Although traditional religious values and conservative social norms remained deeply rooted, they were progressively challenged by scientific advancements and progressive thought. The publication of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) groundbreaking book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favorite Races in the Struggle for Life*, in 1859, which argued that human existence is the result of a long biological process rather than divine design, unsettled a society caught between two

70 opposing vectors: science and religion. From this point onward, the unique nature of humanity – traditionally understood as divinely ordained creatures – came into doubt, and the concept of “the double”<sup>1</sup> emerged (Furtado 1987). Robert Louis Stevenson’s (1850-1894) *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s (1854-1900) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Bram Stoker’s (1847-1912) *Dracula* (1897) are prime examples of Victorian anxieties concerning alterity (Terenas 2018), the fear of the Other, and the decline of the gentleman epitome. The figure of the Victorian gentleman became established as a cultural symbol, inspired by principles of honor and morality associated with medieval chivalry, serving as a model of conduct for the rising middle class. The gentleman represented an idealized version, embodying a set of qualities that reflected the image the upper strata of the middle class wished to project. In this sense, Holmes epitomizes the Victorian mindset: the concept of alterity, maintaining a public identity as a groundbreaking detective while keeping a private side that is introspective, mysterious, and reliant on drugs, which he claims stimulate the mind. This duality is not merely incidental; it reflects the broader Victorian preoccupation with the contrast between public persona and private reality. In the stories, Sherlock Holmes possesses unique knowledge and skills unmatched in his field. This renders him an invaluable asset to Scotland Yard, which occasionally seeks his guidance, as Holmes himself asserts: “I suppose I am the only one in the world. I’m a consulting detective. Here in London we have lots of Government detectives and lots of private ones. When these fellows are at fault they come to me, and I manage to put them on the right scent” (Doyle 1989, 17).

This statement not only highlights the uniqueness of his profession but also underscores the respect and reliance he commands within the investigative community. Holmes is not merely a solver of mysteries; he is a restorer of social justice, someone who rebalances society. Within this framework, Holmes emerges as a Victorian superhero, his actions evoking the revival of chivalric ideals (Klein 2002), highly fashionable in the mid-nineteenth century, such as honor, courtesy, and bravery. Furthermore, he exemplifies the traits of a true gentleman, as defined by Smiles, presenting himself as “honest, truthful, upright, polite, temperate, courageous, self-respecting, and self-helping” (Smiles 1859, 328). Through his conduct, ethical code, and professional expertise, Holmes not only solves crimes but also emerges as both a product and a model of the Victorian gentleman ideal.

In 1887, with the publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in “Beeton’s Christmas Annual”, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first presented Sherlock Holmes, a character who would assume a prominent place not only in literature but also in film, television, and video games. The enduring popularity of Holmes is no mere accident; rather, it reflects the public’s fascination with narratives that blend the excitement of mystery with a sense of verisimilitude. Readers see themselves reflected in Holmes, the consulting detective, as well as in Watson, the physician and chronicler. This dynamic partnership, akin to a superhero duo, functions as a narrative magnet, drawing the reader into the detective’s adventures. From the outset, Doyle’s stories were accompanied by illustrations that enhanced both the atmosphere and the accessibility of the narratives (see Figure 1). These images did not serve as mere embellishments; instead, they complemented the text, providing readers with visual cues that deepened their immersion in Holmes’s world. The interplay between text and image was particularly significant in the late nineteenth century, as these illustrations often served as readers’ first visual encounter with the fictional detective.



Figure 1. Sidney Paget. *The Adventure of the Silver Blaze*, “The Strand Magazine”. December 1892, p. 646.<sup>2</sup>

In the Sherlockian canon, the interrelation between text and image has been evident from the beginning; the visual representation of Sherlock Holmes provides an additional

72 dimension to the narrative, enhancing the character's realism in the reader's perception. Thus, the construction of the character occurs both within the stories and in the collective imagination through this combination of materiality and visuality. Today, the image associated with the fictional detective differs greatly from the earliest illustrations featuring Holmes. The British illustrator David Henry Friston (1820–1906) created four illustrations to accompany the first story. These illustrations depict elements related to Holmes, such as the bowler hat and moustache. However, today only the cloak and magnifying glass remain associated with the character. Notably, the magnifying glass symbolizes both the character and the period. The association with this object has become an enduring symbol, reflecting the Victorian belief in scientific observation, as noted by Christopher Pittard:

The iconic image of Holmes with a magnifying glass (sparingly used in Doyle's texts) exemplifies a wider trend in late Victorian detective fiction equating the detective with the supposed mechanical objectivity of the camera lens (Pittard 2019, 141).

The evolution of Holmes's visual identity owes much to the work of the British illustrator Sidney Paget (1860-1908), whose illustrations redefined the detective's appearance. Paget's depiction introduced the deerstalker hat and imbued the artwork with a dramatic flair that heightened the stories' emotional resonance. His contributions extended beyond mere portraiture; by strategically placing illustrations throughout the narratives, Paget established a visual rhythm reminiscent of what we now recognize in contemporary graphic novels. This form of sequential art anticipated later developments, demonstrating how integrating text and image can enhance narrative complexity and reader engagement. Hence, Paget not only defined Holmes's physical traits and iconic character but also introduced a sequential art style recognized in graphic novels. Thus, the construction of Sherlock Holmes as a cultural icon has always depended upon the synergy between written and visual representation. From the earliest Holmes stories to modern digital adaptations, the character's identity has been shaped by the interplay of narrative, illustration, and evolving audience expectations. The contemporary image of Holmes – so distinct from Friston's original conception – attests to the enduring influence of visual storytelling in literature.

### 3.1. Early Text-Based Adaptations (1984–1986)

Sherlock Holmes's video game genesis dates back to 1984. The game, simply titled *Sherlock* (see Figure 2), was developed by Philip Mitchell at Beam Software, which was then a subsidiary of Melbourne House in Australia. Designed for the ZX Spectrum 48K, this game set an early standard, paving the way for future adaptations of the literary character into an interactive format. *Sherlock* is a text-based adventure game (an interactive experience in which gameplay is primarily conveyed through written language) structured for single-player participation, immersing the user in the role of Holmes. The player is tasked with investigating a double murder that has taken place in Leatherhead, Surrey. This narrative-driven format not only stimulates the player's deductive reasoning skills but also presents a significant degree of interactivity.



Fig. 2 “Sherlock”. Philip Mitchell, Beam Software, 1984, screenshot.

That same year, the American publisher Bantam Software released *Sherlock Holmes: Another Bow* for the Commodore 64. Like its predecessor, this game was a single-player, text-driven adventure, although it incorporated visual illustrations displayed above the narrative text. The gameplay features time constraints, requiring the player to act more efficiently. The player once again assumes the persona of Sherlock Holmes, who finds himself embroiled in a complex murder investigation aboard the steamship *Destiny*. The narrative setting is particularly intriguing, evoking the enclosed, intense atmosphere characteristic of classic detective fiction. What sets this game apart is its inclusion of real historical figures such as the inventor Thomas Edison, artist Pablo Picasso, and illusionist

Harry Houdini. These figures are not merely background characters; they are interactive, providing opportunities for observation and interrogation. This blend of fictional and historical elements enriches the narrative, encouraging players to make connections with cultural and scientific contexts. The inclusion of illustrations enhances the immersive experience, allowing a vivid visualization of scenes and characters. In 1986, the United States-based company Ellicott Creek Software released a text-based game titled *Sherlock Holmes: The Vatican Cameos* for the PC (MS-DOS) and Apple II platforms. The game's title derives directly from a subtle narrative reference within Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's crime novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, published in 1902:

I had observed some newspaper comment at the time, but I was exceedingly preoccupied by that little affair of the Vatican cameos, and in my anxiety to oblige the Pope I lost touch with several interesting English cases (Doyle 1989, 457).

By centering their game around this detail, the developers not only pay homage to Doyle's Sherlockian literary legacy but also sharpen the players' curiosity to explore a story within the Sherlockian canon. In the same year, the United States-based company Sculptured Software released a video game adaptation of the board game *221B Baker Street* for platforms such as the Commodore 64/128, IBM PC, Apple II, and both the Atari 8-bit and ST systems. This graphic mystery adventure sought to digitally recreate the intrigue and deductive challenges of its analogue predecessor. The title alludes to Sherlock Holmes's residence on Baker Street. *221B Baker Street* supported both single-player and multiplayer modes (up to four participants). Within the game, players could assume the roles of four iconic characters from the Sherlockian canon: Sherlock Holmes, Dr John Watson, Inspector Lestrade, and Irene Adler. Set in Victorian London, the game presented thirty distinct cases, each demanding investigation, analytical thinking, and deductive reasoning. As players roamed across a virtual London, they assumed investigative roles. Players had to collect clues, question suspects, and gather evidence. The primary goal was to solve the mystery and return to Baker Street with the correct resolution. The game honors its board game heritage<sup>3</sup> while serving as a digital portal to the immersive world of Sherlock Holmes, offering a structured and stimulating environment for players.

### 3.2. Expansion and Illustration (1987–1988)

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*Sherlock: The Riddle of The Crown Jewels* was released in 1987 by the United States-based company Challenge, Inc., and made available on platforms, such as PC (MS-DOS), Commodore 64, Amiga, Macintosh, and Apple II. This game belongs to the single-player text-adventure video game genre. The narrative is set in 1887, coinciding with the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria. The story opens with Sherlock Holmes engaged in his morning routine of reading the newspaper. He notices an announcement stating that the Tower of London has been closed to the public due to unspecified security concerns. This unexpected closure during such a major national event arouses Holmes's suspicion. Soon after, Holmes is approached with a request to investigate the theft of the Crown Jewels. Sensing the possibility of a setup, Holmes chooses not to undertake the investigation himself; instead, he assigns the task to Dr John Watson. This narrative choice shifts the game's perspective, placing the player in the role of Watson rather than Holmes. As Watson, the player is responsible for questioning potential suspects and conducting investigations across several of London's historical and cultural landmarks, such as Big Ben, Madame Tussauds, and Westminster Abbey. Although the game is inspired by Doyle's principal Sherlockian literary characters, it does not directly adapt any of Doyle's original stories. Instead, it combines fiction with the factual event of the 1887 Golden Jubilee, which took place on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> June that year. This integration of fiction and historical reality creates a factual narrative within the game. Moreover, it not only pays homage to Sherlockian literary origins but also offers an immersive experience at the intersection of history, literature, and digital culture. Three video games were released in 1988, each inspired by the character of Holmes. The first of these, *Sherlock Holmes: A Matter of Evil*, was developed by David Court of the United Kingdom-based studio Creative Juices. This title, released specifically for the ZX Spectrum 128K, is a text-based adventure created using the Professional Adventure Writer (PAW) software, a tool particularly popular among interactive fiction creators of that era. The same year marked the release of *The Raven*, developed collaboratively by Alan Bolger and Stephen Kee of 8th Day Software, a United Kingdom-based company. Much like its predecessor, *The Raven* was designed for the ZX Spectrum 128K and utilized the PAW software. However, it distinguished itself by incorporating hand-drawn illustrations above the textual narrative. This approach combined visual and literary storytelling, offering players a more immersive experience

than text-based formats could. Set in 1893, *The Raven* places Holmes within a narrative that begins with an invitation from Professor Vybes, who intends to demonstrate innovative methods for treating the criminally insane. The narrative swiftly transitions into a murder mystery upon Holmes's arrival at the manor, compelling the player, who assumes Holmes's role, to investigate the crime while contending with threats to their personal safety. This structure not only reinforces the conventions of detective fiction but also highlights the interactive potential of video games as a medium for immersive storytelling. According to a review in *Crash* magazine, "*The Raven* is extremely sophisticated and brings together all the humorous and horrible elements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" ("Adventure Trail: *The Raven*" 1988). The third title from that year is *The Case of the Beheaded Smuggler*, authored by Kez Gray and Patrick Walsh and published by Mental Images, another United Kingdom-based company. This game, designed for the ZX Spectrum 48K, adopts a text-based format. Set in Victorian London, the game has the player assume the role of Sherlock Holmes. The player's task is to solve the mystery by identifying the murder weapon, discerning the motive, and ultimately exposing the perpetrator. The game's design focuses on deduction and narrative engagement, which aligns with the enduring appeal of Holmes as a character associated with intellectual rigor and methodical investigation. Collectively, these three titles employ similar technological platforms – the ZX Spectrum and PAW software – and each narrative demonstrates the complexity of Holmes's fictional universe and its capacity to engage players in problem-solving stories.

### 3.3. Multimedia Innovation (1990–1996)

In the 1990s, four Sherlock Holmes-themed video games were released. The first title, *Sherlock Holmes: The Lamberley Mystery*, is a text-driven adventure developed by the British author Ian Eveleigh and released by the United Kingdom-based Zenobi Software for the ZX Spectrum 48K. Drawing from Doyle's Sherlockian universe, this interactive narrative is set in 1887. The plot begins at Baker Street, where Sherlock Holmes receives a telegram from his brother Mycroft, who requests Sherlock's investigative expertise on behalf of a colleague, Dr Fordham. The gameplay revolves around following narrative cues and solving challenges, emphasizing the player's problem-solving abilities. In 1992, *The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes: The Case of the Serrated Scalpel* was developed by the North American studio Mythos Software and published by the United States-based

company Electronic Arts for platforms such as the 3DO and IBM PC. This instalment is a single-player graphic adventure, distinguished by its verb-oriented, point-and-click interface. The narrative unfolds in late 1888, centering on an event inspired by the infamous Jack the Ripper murders, one of the most notorious unsolved criminal cases of the nineteenth century. The game not only places the player in the atmospheric Whitechapel district but also draws on the historical anxieties and social realities of the time, thereby enhancing immersion and narrative complexity. The interface itself reflects a broader transition within adventure gaming, moving from textual or command-line interactions to more visual and interactive environments. Next, between 1991 and 1993, *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* was both developed and published for DOS by the United States-based company ICOM Simulations, Inc. This interactive adventure, designed for a single player, comprises three volumes, each presenting a set of distinct cases to unravel. What distinguishes this game from its contemporaries is its innovative use of multimedia technology, specifically its distribution on CD-ROM and integration of live-action video sequences featuring actors Peter Farley as Sherlock Holmes and Warren Green as Dr Watson. This pioneering approach not only enhanced narrative immersion but also anticipated subsequent trends in interactive media, where the boundaries between film and gameplay blend. Furthermore, the game's emphasis on logic-based investigation translates the legacy of Doyle's Sherlockian canon into a digital format. Finally, *The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes: The Case of the Rose Tattoo*, released in 1996, is another single-player, point-and-click graphic adventure set in Victorian England. This video game, developed by Mythos Software and published by Electronic Arts for the IBM PC, combines visually evocative Victorian-era motifs with a narrative steeped in period authenticity, offering players an immersive digital experience (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3. *The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes: The Case of the Rose Tattoo*, Mythos Software, 1996, screenshot.

In this interactive narrative, players are invited to assume the perspectives of both Dr Watson and, subsequently, Sherlock Holmes himself, thereby engaging directly with the investigative process and the intricate unraveling of a series of crimes with implications for national security. A distinguishing feature of this title, as with its predecessor, lies in its forward-thinking use of multimedia technology. The developers utilized the then-novel CD-ROM format, which allowed for a more expansive game world, improved audio, and the inclusion of full-motion video sequences – an innovation achieved by filming live actors against a blue screen. This method, while technologically ambitious for its time, lent a unique visual presentation that set it apart from other adventure games of the era. The video game draws heavily upon the enduring literary personas of Holmes and Watson as conceived by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Nevertheless, the game does not adapt any specific storyline from the Sherlockian canon. Instead, it explores entirely new narratives, offering players fresh mysteries while remaining faithful to the spirit and character dynamics. This creative choice reflects a broader trend in the video game industry, in which the Holmesian mythos serves as a basis for inventive storytelling rather than a strict adaptation of the established canon.

### 3.4. The Frogwares Era and Genre Hybridisation (2002–2010)

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In 2002, the Ukrainian company Frogwares developed and released the video game *Sherlock Holmes: The Mystery of the Mummy* for Microsoft Windows (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4 “*Sherlock Holmes: The Mystery of the Mummy*”, Frogwares, 2002, screenshot.

This release represents another entry in the point-and-click adventure genre. Players are invited into a first-person, single-player investigative experience, assuming the role of Holmes himself as he endeavors to unravel the enigmatic disappearance of the archaeologist Lord Montcalfe. The unexpected success of the game not only validated Frogwares’ creative direction but also laid the foundation for an enduring series of Sherlock Holmes adventure games, comprising 10 main titles. The series’ inception is thus emblematic of both the resilience of the Sherlock Holmes character in new media and gamers’ craving for stimulating content. Therefore, Frogwares released the second instalment, *Sherlock Holmes: The Case of the Silver Earring*, in 2004 for Microsoft Windows. The title was distributed in Europe by the British publisher Digital Jester and in the United States by Ubisoft. Set in 1897, the game introduced an innovation: players could alternate between the roles of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, thereby enriching the investigative process and allowing for a more exquisite exploration of narrative events. The central mystery, an intricate series of murders occurring during a birthday celebration, provided a layered narrative structure that demanded analysis and deductive reasoning. By 2006, Frogwares had developed and published *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* for Windows, the third entry in the series. This title marked a significant departure from previous instalments by merging the rational world of Doyle’s detective fiction with the

80 supernatural horror of H. P. Lovecraft. Holmes and Watson were then confronted with an organization that venerated the ancient deity Cthulhu. This symbiosis of genres not only expanded the series' thematic range but also illustrated Holmes' adaptability across a variety of narrative contexts. The following year, in 2007, Frogwares continued to experiment with intertextuality by releasing *Sherlock Holmes: Nemesis* (known in France as *Sherlock Holmes versus Arsène Lupin*). This fourth instalment, for Windows, brought together the worlds of Doyle and Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941), pitting Holmes and Watson against the legendary French thief Arsène Lupin. The narrative structure, set in Victorian London, adopted a "cat-and-mouse" dynamic, as Holmes and Watson try to stop Lupin from stealing artefacts from institutions such as the National Gallery and the British Museum. The inclusion of hidden-object gameplay elements alongside traditional point-and-click mechanics signaled a desire to innovate within the established adventure format. In 2009, the series confronted one of the most infamous figures in true-crime history in *Sherlock Holmes versus Jack the Ripper*, released for both Microsoft Windows and Xbox 360. Set in late Victorian London, the game placed players in the roles of either Holmes or Watson as they sought to reconstruct the sequence of events surrounding the notorious Whitechapel murders. The first-person perspective was maintained, offering an immersive investigative experience that required players to meticulously examine crime scenes and synthesize evidence in pursuit of the serial killer. This instalment further underscored Frogwares' commitment to historical authenticity, narrative complexity, and the continuous reinvention of Holmes's character within interactive media. In the same year that Warner Bros. released *Sherlock Holmes: The Game Is Afoot!*, the company also produced and launched *Sherlock Holmes Mysteries* for the iPad, thereby demonstrating a clear recognition of the growing significance of mobile gaming platforms in the early 2010s. This particular title places the player in the role of Sherlock Holmes, whose objective is to exonerate a person convicted of murder. In 2010, Frogwares released *Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery of Osborne House*, the sixth entry in their ongoing series. This video game was the first designed for the Nintendo DS, utilizing the platform's unique hardware features such as the stylus and touch screen. The result was a point-and-click adventure that emphasized puzzle-solving and code-breaking, thereby aligning with the cognitive challenges characteristic of the Sherlockian canon while also appealing to the Nintendo DS's younger, puzzle-oriented demographic. Additionally, in 2010, Ukrainian

studio Waterlily Games contributed to the Holmes gaming franchise with *Sherlock Holmes and the Hound of the Baskervilles*. The game's mechanics centered on the search for clues and the assembly of evidence. By 2012, Frogwares continued to expand the Holmes universe with *Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery of the Frozen City*, developed for the Nintendo 3DS. In this title, the narrative places Holmes in the midst of a mysterious snowstorm that has frozen the Thames River, a scenario that not only provides dramatic nuance but also introduces unique puzzles to the platform. Following *Sherlock Holmes versus Jack the Ripper*, Frogwares developed and released *The Testament of Sherlock Holmes*, the sixth mainline entry in their series, available for Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, Xbox, and PlayStation 3 and 4. This single-player, third-person adventure places players in the role of Holmes, requiring them to scrutinize evidence and employ deductive reasoning to prove their own innocence in a murder case.

### 3.5. Mobile Expansions and Revival (2014–2025)

In 2014, the Australian digital studio The Project Factory developed and published *Sherlock: The Network*, a mobile application for iOS and Android platforms inspired by the contemporary BBC television series *Sherlock*. This title reimagines the Baker Street Irregulars – the group of streetwise informants from the original stories – as a digital network of collaborators assisting Holmes in his investigations. The hidden-object game format, combined with the narrative framing of multiple concurrent cases, reflects both the episodic structure of the television adaptation and the interactive nature of modern mobile gaming. That same year, Frogwares released *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments* for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3 and 4, Xbox One, and Xbox 360. As the seventh entry in their series, the title explicitly echoes Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866).<sup>4</sup> The game's structure allows for ten distinct endings, each shaped by the player's cumulative choices. The player is tasked with resolving six individual cases, meaning that every decision influences the narrative's progression. In 2016, Frogwares continued the Sherlock Holmes video game series with *Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter*, developed for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One. This instalment blends traditional investigative gameplay with an alternative exploration of Holmes's family history. The inclusion of five different cases, each shaped by the player's interpretive decisions, reinforces the series' commitment to branching narratives and

replayability. By 2021, Frogwares expanded the series with *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One* for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One. Uniquely, this title presents a younger Holmes investigating the circumstances surrounding his mother's death, thus providing both a psychological depth and an origin story absent from earlier iterations. In 2022, the Melbourne-based studio Escape Pod Games released *Detective Tales: A Study in Scarlet* for Microsoft Windows, drawing inspiration from Doyle's original 1887 novel. This co-op, point-and-click adventure game is specifically designed for two players, with one embodying Holmes and the other Dr Watson. By requiring collaborative problem-solving, the title not only reinforces the partnership between Holmes and Watson – a core element of the original Sherlockian canon – but also enhances gameplay dynamics that align with the increasing popularity of cooperative gaming experiences. In 2023, Frogwares released the tenth entry in their Holmes series: a remake of the 2007 classic *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened*, featuring updated graphics and enhanced gameplay. It was launched on Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4 and 5, Xbox One, and Series X/S. In March 2025, Afoot Games launched an interactive point-and-click experience for Microsoft Windows titled *The Beekeeper's Picnic: A Sherlockian Adventure*. Drawing direct inspiration from a segment of Arthur Conan Doyle's 1917 story *His Last Bow*, which portrays the detective's retirement, where he is presented as living in relative seclusion, devoting himself to apiculture and scholarly study:

“But you have retired, Holmes. We heard of you as living the life of a hermit among your bees and your books in a small farm upon the South Downs.” – “Exactly, Watson. Here is the fruit of my leisure ease, the *magnum opus* of my later years!” He picked up the volume from the table and read out the whole title, *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen*. (Doyle 1989, 964)

Players assume the role of a retired Sherlock Holmes (as depicted in Figure 5), who now resides in Sussex and has devoted himself to beekeeping activities.



Fig. 5 “The Beekeeper's Picnic - A Sherlockian Adventure”, Afoot Games, 2025, screenshot.

Within this narrative framework, Holmes’s retirement is quickly disrupted while he arranges a picnic for his longtime companion, Dr Watson. Holmes soon becomes embroiled in a series of enigmatic cases. The game leverages these scenarios not only as an homage to Doyle’s final portrayal of Holmes but also as a mechanism to intertwine narrative depth with classic gameplay elements. Significantly, *The Beekeeper’s Picnic* does more than simply adapt the original story; it consciously pays tribute to the early era of digital gaming. By employing pixelated graphics and point-and-click mechanics, the developers evoke the early aesthetics and interactivity of adventure games, blending literary storytelling with the nostalgia of retro-video-game design. In this way, the adaptation honors both Doyle’s Sherlockian canon and the roots of the gaming industry, inviting gamers to experience Holmes’s world through a retro-inspired digital video game.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the character of Sherlock Holmes was first introduced by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1887, during the Victorian era, a period characterized by a duality between rigid religious and social values and significant scientific advancements. Holmes embodies gentlemanly ideals and heroic qualities, restoring society’s balance through his methodical investigations and the subsequent resolution of criminal cases. Additionally, Holmes has transcended his nineteenth-century literary origins to emerge as a timeless figure within the ever-shifting complexity of global popular culture, including film and video games. The portrayal of Holmes in digital media has developed alongside advancements in gaming

technology. Early iterations, on fourth-generation consoles, such as the ZX Spectrum during the 1980s, relied on text-based adaptations. By the 2020s, with the emergence of ninth-generation consoles, adaptations showcased 3D graphics, reflecting a transformation in both the medium and the character. This progression highlights how depictions of Holmes have adapted in tandem with technological innovation in gaming. Furthermore, those initial incursions into digital storytelling, though limited by the technology of their time, continue to evoke nostalgia and hold enduring appeal for retro gaming enthusiasts, as evidenced by the 2025 release of *The Beekeeper's Picnic: A Sherlockian Adventure*. Thus, the evolution of video games not only demonstrates Holmes's adaptability as a character but also underscores the nostalgic appeal of earlier gaming eras, drawing a direct line from the simplicity of 8-bit visuals to the complexity of modern digital worlds with sophisticated 3D graphics and immersive mechanics. Video game adaptations of Holmes have achieved more than merely preserving the core attributes of Doyle's original creation. They have actively expanded the boundaries of the Sherlockian universe, inviting players to assume the roles of Holmes, Watson, and occasionally other figures within the narrative canon. These interactive experiences often diverge from canonical material, presenting alternative storylines and challenges. In doing so, they offer players a deeper connection to the world and methods of Sherlock Holmes, the consulting detective. Notably, most of these games draw inspiration from Doyle's characters and the unique atmosphere of Victorian London, yet they innovate by diverging from traditional narratives and introducing fresh perspectives. This willingness to reinterpret the Holmes mythos illustrates the character's enduring relevance. In addition, Sherlock Holmes's presence in video games attests to the public's ongoing fascination with criminal investigation, deductive reasoning, and logical analysis. As technological advancements continue to reshape the possibilities of interactive storytelling, even more immersive and innovative Sherlockian video game experiences are expected. Like Holmes himself, the game is destined to remain perpetually afoot, ensuring that Doyle's legendary detective will continue to captivate audiences for generations to come.

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<sup>1</sup> The motif of “the double” is a pervasive cultural and literary theme that extends back to Antiquity, functioning as a symbol of duality, ambivalence, and the tension between self and other, emphasizing the double as an externalized projection of internal anxieties, fears, or desires, thereby bridging literary, cultural, and psychological interpretations of the motif. In classical mythology, figures such as Narcissus or Castor and Pollux illustrate early manifestations of mirrored selves and dual identities. Philosophical and literary traditions further elaborated the concept: in Plato’s dialogues, the tension between appearance and reality can be interpreted as an early form of self-division. The theme persisted in medieval and Renaissance literature, often associated with moral or spiritual reflection, appearing in tales such as the medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 14th century), where characters confront mirrored or symbolic counterparts, and in Renaissance works like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1600) and *Macbeth* (1606) (Botoso 2021), which explore psychological duality. The doppelgänger evolved into a central theme in Romantic and Gothic literature, continuing into the Victorian era, where it frequently explores psychological duality, identity, and the tension between public and private selves.

<sup>2</sup> Image source: [https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/The\\_Adventure\\_of\\_Silver\\_Blaze](https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/The_Adventure_of_Silver_Blaze).

<sup>3</sup> Board game adaptations of Sherlock Holmes gained wider visibility in the late twentieth century, beginning with *221B Baker Street: The Master Detective Game* (1975) [Byrne 2016], which employed competitive case-solving mechanics grounded in Sherlockian deduction, followed by *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* (1982) and its subsequent expansions, which shifted the emphasis toward narrative interpretation and an immersive, text-based investigative experience playable in single-player or cooperative modes (Shashko 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The intertextual dialogue between the game and the Dostoevsky novel is reflected in its engagement with themes of moral responsibility, ethical deliberation, and the psychological consequences of transgression. Frogwares’ transposes the Dostoevskian literary explorations of guilt and conscience into participatory decision-making within a digital framework.

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# Mapping Middle-earth: Cartographic Representations and Transmedia Storytelling in *The Lord of the Rings Online*

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to examine the cartographic representation of Middle-earth in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*) and assess its resemblance to the literary descriptions in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. By contrasting the video game's map with the geographic and environmental details provided in Tolkien's narrative, this article will explore how the game developers interpreted the detailed world of Middle-earth as an interactive digital landscape. The analysis will focus on key locations in regions such as Eriador and Gondor to assess how closely the terrain and landmarks align with Tolkien's text.

Special attention will be given to the interweaving of world-building and transmedia storytelling that brings a deeper sense of immersion into *LOTRO*, and which demonstrates how the game developers

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste artigo é examinar a representação cartográfica da Terra Média no jogo de interpretação de personagens *online* e em massa para multijogadores *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*) e avaliar a sua semelhança com as descrições literárias em *The Lord of the Rings*, de J. R. R. Tolkien. Ao contrastar o mapa do videogame com os detalhes geográficos e ambientais fornecidos na narrativa de Tolkien, este artigo irá explorar a forma como os criadores do jogo interpretaram o mundo detalhado da Terra Média e o transformaram numa paisagem digital interativa. A análise incidirá sobre locais importantes em regiões como Eriador e Gondor, de modo a avaliar até que ponto o terreno e os pontos de referência correspondem ao texto de Tolkien.

Será dada especial atenção ao cruzamento entre a construção de mundos e *transmedia storytelling*, que proporcionam uma sensação



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adapted a fictional world designed for storytelling into a functional game map. In the context of transmedia storytelling, this article aims to assess how *LOTRO* is more than a by-product of a novel by expanding and introducing new aspects, like visual and sound effects, and interactivation, that allow the players to experience Tolkien's world beyond what is conveyed through the text, highlighting areas where *LOTRO* expands upon or deviates from the source material.

By examining Henry Jenkins's ideas on transmedia storytelling and Mark J. P. Wolf's theory of world-building, this article offers insight into the intersection of storytelling, geography, and interactive design, particularly the audiovisual elements that reinforce immersion in the game world.

**KEYWORDS:** J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, transmedia storytelling, video game, world-building.

mais profunda imersão no *LOTRO* e demonstram como os criadores do jogo adaptaram um mundo ficcional concebido para a narrativa a um mapa funcional de jogo. No contexto de *transmedia storytelling*, este artigo pretende analisar de que forma o videojogo *LOTRO* é mais do que um simples produto derivado maioritariamente de um romance, ao expandir e introduzir novos aspetos, como efeitos visuais e sonoros e interatividade, que permitem aos jogadores experienciar o mundo de Tolkien para além do que é transmitido no texto, destacando áreas em que o *LOTRO* expande ou se afasta do material de origem.

A partir das ideias de Henry Jenkins sobre *transmedia storytelling* e da teoria da construção de mundos de Mark J. P. Wolf, este artigo pretende oferecer uma perspetiva sobre a interseção entre narrativa, geografia e design interativo, em particular, os elementos audiovisuais que reforçam a imersão no mundo do jogo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, transmedia storytelling, videojogo, construção de mundos.



The world of Middle-earth, created by English fantasy author J. R. R. Tolkien and featured in his seminal work *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), has been the subject of many interpretations since its publication in the 1950s. From films, television series, and video games, Middle-earth has expanded beyond the novel, creating new horizons for readers, viewers, and players.

One case in which the world of Middle-earth has been explored in detail is the 2007 MMORPG *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*), which gave players an immersive gaming experience of Tolkien's world. Maintaining a high degree of faithfulness to the source material, *LOTRO* delves into the many regions that make up Middle-earth while expanding the horizons of this large map, going beyond the scope of the novel and turning *LOTRO* into an important case of transmedia storytelling.

This article aims to explore the connections between the novel and the video game and to establish common points between the descriptions provided in Tolkien's text and the game's visual landscape, where, in some cases, the terrain was adjusted to suit the gaming experience. Landmarks from the regions of Eriador and Gondor will be analyzed, demonstrating how the game reinterprets certain features of the novels by giving them images and sound.

One of the main goals of the video game is to provide an immersive experience for the player. Immersion plays an important role in media and has been a central feature of world-building. This concept was addressed by Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories", where he stated that it was a fundamental part of the act of subcreating, as will be demonstrated in the analysis. The concept of immersion was later taken up by Mark J. P. Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012).

The article will first provide an overview of *LOTRO*'s history and gameplay, shedding light on the video game's evolution over the years. Secondly, it will be important to understand how world-building and the principles of transmedia storytelling are fundamental to *The Lord of the Rings Online*. Finally, the article will include a discussion of various landscapes within the video game to understand how they were adapted from the novel into a different medium, namely, that of the video game.

By analyzing and comparing Tolkien's novel and the *LOTRO* video game through the lens of transmedia storytelling, this article aims to contribute to the existing Tolkien scholarship by exploring the continuously expanding world of Middle-earth.

## 1. *THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE*: HISTORY AND GAMEPLAY

*LOTRO* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game originally developed by Turbine, now known as Warner Bros. Games Boston, and is set in the world of Middle-earth from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (1937). It was released in 2007 with the title *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* and, in 2016,<sup>1</sup> development of the game was transferred to Standing Stone Games. The first package of *LOTRO*, as the video game is commonly called, included the wider region of Eriador, in the north and east of Middle-earth, and contained eleven regional maps: Ered Luin, Shire, Bree-land, Lone Lands, Trollshaws, Evendim, North Downs, Forochel, Angmar, Misty Mountains, and Eregion. Additional maps included Ettenmoors for Monster Play and Frostbluff, accessible during the Yule Festival in the winter.

In 2008, the first expansion pack, *Mines of Moria*, was released, earning the game much praise from critics who stated that this extension is “a wonderful marriage of content and art design that further strengthens the developer's knack for storytelling” (VanOrd 2009). *Eurogamer* argued that “Turbine has created a harmonious, tight and seamless addition to the *LOTRO* game-world” (Zitron 2008), while *WarCry Network* called it “the best fantasy MMORPG yet created” (Moreno 2008). *Mines of Moria* allows the player to explore nine distinct maps within Moria itself, following the passage of the Fellowship of the Ring. The expansion also includes the map of Lothlórien and the legendary weapons feature.

Ever since its initial release, *LOTRO* has expanded into other regions of Middle-earth. Additional expansion packs include *Siege of Mirkwood* (2009), *Rise of Isengard* (2011), *Riders of Rohan* (2012), *Helm's Deep* (2013), *Mordor* (2017), *Minas Morgul* (2019), *War of Three Peaks* (2020), *Fate of Gundabad* (2021), *Before the Shadow* (2022), *Corsairs of Umbar* (2023), and *Legacy of Morgoth* (2024). Each of these expansions added new regions of Middle-earth to explore, unique features, like the mounted combat option

in *Riders of Rohan*, new factions and crafting tiers, a new level cap that, as of *Legacy of Morgoth*, goes up to level 150, and a set of epic quests to be played in these maps. 93

By 2017, the standard edition of the game included only four entirely free regions of Eriador (Ered Luin, Shire, Bree-land, Lone Lands), and the player could either purchase other regions or expansions through the official website or acquire them through the *LOTRO* store by using *LOTRO* points, acquired during the gameplay. In celebration of the game's fifteenth anniversary in 2022, all expansions prior to *Helm's Deep* were permanently made available for free.

*LOTRO*'s gameplay features numerous elements that enable thorough exploration of Middle-earth, enriching the gaming experience. In order to create an avatar, the player must choose a race and class, combinations that range from Elf Hunter to Dwarf Champion to Hobbit Lore-master, and others, each with a unique skill set. The player gains experience by completing quests and earns rewards from killing and completing both quests and deeds. Added features include owning a house and mounts, working in up to three crafting professions, performing quests and instances with other players by engaging in the fellowship mode, and playing the epic storyline that begins in Bree shortly after Frodo leaves the Shire. Following the main storyline means closely following the protagonists of *The Lord of the Rings*, interacting with them on multiple occasions, and playing various side quests that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the success of the Fellowship of the Ring.

## 2. FROM NOVEL TO VIDEO GAME: WORLD-BUILDING AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

*LOTRO* takes Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as its primary source of material. This gives the video game developers plenty of space to expand the world of Middle-earth, even beyond the main storyline of *The Lord of the Rings*. The appendix section in the third part of the novel, *The Return of the King*, contains much information that gives insight into Middle-earth's past, explored in detail in *Shadows of Angmar*, as well as the events from after the War of the Ring, featured in *Mordor* and subsequent expansions. The development of the game falls under Middle-earth Enterprises, which

94 owns the rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* but not to any other source material created by Tolkien and his heirs.<sup>1</sup> As such, this article aims to focus exclusively on the material provided by *The Lord of the Rings* novel in order to analyze and compare the maps and geographic features of both novel and video game.

The video game engages with what American media scholar Henry Jenkins considers “transmedia storytelling”, a term he coined in 2003 that addresses the potential each medium has in expanding a work in any form. Jenkins states that:

[i]n the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. (Jenkins 2003)

Furthermore, he argues that transmedia storytelling is “the art of world-making” and it consists of a “process of designing a fictional universe that will sustain franchise development, one that is sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story feels like it fits with the others” (Jenkins 2017).

Applied to *The Lord of the Rings Online*, Jenkins’s idea suggests that the game serves as an expansion of Tolkien’s imagined world, one with which the player can interact closely by controlling a character and exploring Middle-earth. Moreover, it serves as an expansion of Tolkien’s ideas about fantasy and immersion, in particular the belief that both author and reader engage with the secondary world by entering it, “to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside” (Tolkien 2006, 143). In addition, it complements other mediums in which Tolkien’s world appears, like Peter Jackson’s film adaptations (released between 2001 and 2003), additional video games in the franchise, and the novels themselves.

In world-building theory, following Mark J. P. Wolf’s principles developed in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, the construction of an imaginary world happens through invention and aims for completeness and consistency to make the world believable to the audience (2012, 33). Wolf’s ideas are grounded in Tolkien’s notions about subcreation, a concept that appears in his essay “On Fairy Stories” and about which he argues that a secondary world must maintain the “inner consistency of reality” (*idem*, 138). About the transmedial expansion of an imaginary world, Wolf argues

that it can occur through growth (*idem*, 245). Wolf states that “transmediality also suggests the potential for the continuance of a world, in multiple instances and registers” (*idem*, 247), which is seen in *LOTRO* with the multiple expansions released over the years and that extend beyond the main storyline. An example is the continuation of the epic quest following Sauron’s defeat; it requires the *Mordor* expansion pack, and the quests take place in various locations of Middle-earth. One particular quest involves destroying the fortress of Dol Guldur immediately after Sauron’s fall. In Appendix B of *The Lord of the Rings* novel, it is stated that “when the Shadow passed, Celeborn came forth and led the host of Lórien over Anduin in many boats. They took Dol Guldur, and Galadriel threw down its walls and laid bare its pits, and the forest was cleansed” (2002, 1069). The game invites the player to witness and play out this moment, participating in the fortress’s invasion and interacting with the characters leading the attack. In the end, the player talks to Galadriel to conclude the quest objective, and she says: “At last the fortress has been cast down. Its dark walls can no longer hide the works of Sauron. Rejoice with the Golden Host, . . . for a time of trouble and woe has come to its ending, and you played your part in it with grace and with skill” (*LOTRO*). This is merely one of the many examples in which *LOTRO* extends beyond the main storyline of the novel while maintaining, at the same time, a faithful portrayal of the world of Middle-earth by capturing, for example, the style of Tolkien’s writing in the game’s dialogues.

About *LOTRO*, and in the context of transmedia, Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup assessed the potential the video game had in offering new interactive features to the players so they could be fully immersed in the world of Middle-earth:

Our previous work about the online multi-player game *Lord of the Rings Online* shows how players tried to make sense of the new instantiation by comparing it with the books or the films in terms of affordances: what new experience could the game offer them? The most valued affordances were the fleshing out of the topos into an actual 3D space that they could navigate and explore with their virtual bodies, and the possibility of acting within the world and not just be a spectator, as they had been with the books and the movies. Having to take decisions and participate in some epic battles knowing that their contribution helped the cause of Frodo was extremely motivating for them. (2020, 143)

96 As Klastrup and Tosca argue, transmedial worlds are experienced differently depending on the media in which they appear. This article thus examines several geographical spaces in Middle-earth and compares how they have been adapted from the book to the game. By contrasting the map's features with the geographic and environmental details in Tolkien's narrative, the goal is to explore how the game developers interpreted the detailed world of Middle-earth as an interactive digital landscape. This occurred by expanding the world beyond descriptions in the novel and including forms of visualization, auralization, and interactivation, all of which are part of the gameplay experience.

Wolf describes each of these three essential aspects of transmedial expansion in detail. He states that visualization adapts words "into still images, moving images, or three-dimensional objects [providing] scenes of rich detail, visuals which suggest much" (2012, 253). Within Middle-earth, this form of expansion can be found, for example, in the illustrations of artists such as Alan Lee and John Howe, which, in turn, served as inspiration for Peter Jackson's film versions of *The Lord of the Rings*. Auralization, on the other hand, involves the addition of sound to the imaginary world, which may include "turning words or imagery into sounds, or translating story material into voices, sound effects, music, and ambiance" (Wolf 2012, 258). This aspect contributes to the video game's immersive quality, which relies on music to convey specific sensations to the player, as explained in more detail in the next section. To visualization and auralization, Wolf adds interactivation as a fundamental feature of transmedial expansion, arguing that "a model of the world . . . must be constructed which can be interacted with by the user, which usually includes the exploration of the world's spaces, the witnessing of events in the world, and interaction with other characters in the world" (*idem*, 260).

About *LOTRO*, Neil Randall and Kathleen Murphy describe the process of transmediality by focusing on the importance of added material as an improvement to the player experience, emphasizing the expansion of the source material. They describe it thus:

Players need to be able to step into the world of the adapted story and spend a significant amount of time in that world, exploring its many locations and engaging with the characters and objects drawn from or even simply suggested by the source text. In addition, to meet the same requirement of long-term immersive player involvement, videogame adaptations must expand the scope of the original story, allowing players to meet added characters performing added tasks and fitting into

added plots and subplots. They must allow players to explore what is happening in that world beyond the scope of the storyline presented in the source. (2012, 121)

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The game is not simply an adaptation, but, once again, an expansion of an existing imaginary world. This idea is corroborated by Wolf, who affirms that worlds like that of *LOTRO* “are designed after their respective worlds from other media, but exist alongside them as separate worlds with their own separate histories that accrue as players play them” (2012, 262). Beyond the borders of the novel’s world, the additional regions of Middle-earth in the video game enhance *LOTRO*’s immersive quality and believability through links with the main storyline.

In the instances where the video game extends beyond the source material, Wolf finds that the aforementioned visualization, auralization, and interactivation are important for immersive experience. Wolf argues that “[d]uring the move from one medium to another, forms of mediation may be lost or gained, causing the material of a story or world to be changed” (*idem*, 250). In short, each of these transformation processes consists of adding elements to change the source and adapt it to a different medium, in this case, from novel to video game. Adding the visualization component means transforming the written word found in the novel’s descriptions into images (*idem*, 253). Similarly, the addition of sound (auralization) becomes an equally important step, as “[s]ound is naturally immersive, surrounding the listener in space, providing atmosphere and evoking emotional responses” (*idem*, 257). This quality resonates very strongly with Tolkien’s works, as the world of Arda was created by the music of the Ainur. According to Fanfan Chen, harmonism “contributes to the creation of an imaginary world that echoes Nature’s music” (2014, 73). Together with harmonism, the onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance in Tolkien’s novels, “feed readers’ imagination and enlighten comprehension” (*idem*, 74). Sound is also important because it contributes to the identity of each place in the video game, adding qualities to each region that match their atmosphere, such as, for example, the baleful music that plays in the map of Angmar, an especially threatening place, which contrasts with the jolly songs played in the Shire map, relaying feelings of peacefulness and happiness. The Shire is described in the novel as a “pleasant corner of the world” with mild weather and whose inhabitants were used to peace and plenty (Tolkien 2002, 5). On the other hand, the land of the Witch King is called, at one point, “the dread realm of Angmar” (826), and mentions of the place are often accompanied by words that convey

98 negativity, such as “shadow” or “evil”. This feature is an important component of the sense of place, which will be discussed later in the analysis of the video game landscapes. The feature of interactivity may be a result of the previous features, as sound and image are required for interactivation to take place.

Despite the many changes and additions to the source material that make the video game a unique experience, which can be seen as a “separate world” with “separate history” (Wolf 2012, 262), *LOTRO* relies heavily on the descriptions of Tolkien’s novel to make the landscapes more appealing to those who are already familiar with the world of Middle-earth. It is the inclusion of the features described before that gives shape to the interactive world of the video game and marks it as an extension of a world that exists in other media.

### 3. MAPPING LANDSCAPES IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE*

Diving into the world of Middle-earth in *LOTRO*, the main goal is to examine several examples of how the game developers expanded the descriptions offered by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*. Through the many maps and regions of the game, it is possible to follow the journey of the characters in the novel very closely and precisely, tracing their every step. In addition, the type of fantasy written by Tolkien, commonly called epic fantasy,<sup>2</sup> pays special attention to the landscape, which is described in detail in the narrative. In parallel, the video game gives the player a detailed scenery in each of the playable regions, from the Green Hills of the Shire to the desolation of the plains of Gorgoroth in Mordor. This section aims, therefore, to comparatively analyze multiple landscapes in both novel and game, looking at similarities and differences that contribute to a deeper immersion in the video game, enhancing the player experience.

One example that is worth exploring is the Stone of Erech. This landmark appears in the third part of the novel, *The Return of the King*, and is located in Gondor. It consists of a black stone shaped like a globe on top of a hill. According to the novel, it had been set there by Isildur, who had brought it from Númenor, to be a meeting place and to establish an alliance between Gondor and the Men of the Mountain. Here, the Men of the Mountain swore fealty to Isildur, but failed to keep their oaths. So, during the War of the

Ring, Aragorn travels the Paths of the Dead and summons the Men of the Mountain to meet him at the Hill of Erech so they may fulfill their oath. In the novel, it is described as a place of dread and of memory:

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[L]ong had the terror of the Dead lain upon that hill and upon the empty fields about it. For upon the top stood a black stone, round as a great globe, the height of a man, though its half was buried in the ground. Unearthly it looked, as though it had fallen from the sky, as some believed; but those who remembered still the lore of Westemnesse told that it had been brought out of the ruin of Númenor and there set by Isildur at his landing. None of the people of the valley dared to approach it, nor would they dwell near; for they said that it was a trysting-place of the Shadow-men and there they would gather in times of fear, thronging round the Stone and whispering. (Tolkien 2002, 771-772)

The video game seems to capture this landmark accurately. The Stone of Erech is as described in the novel except for its size, which has been enlarged in the game to be more than “the height of a man” (*idem*, 772). A series of epic quests that are part of “Vol. IV. Book 1: The Road to Gondor” leads to this event, in which Aragorn summons the oathbreakers. As the player leaves the Paths of the Dead, following Aragorn and the Grey Company, they enter the Blackroot Vale and the region of West Gondor. In the map of the Blackroot Vale, the Hill of Erech, with its Black Stone, is the area’s most relevant landmark, being faithful to the book description, not only physically, but also by the other characteristics attributed to it. As the novel states, people in the region referred to it as a “trysting-place of the Shadow-men” (*ibidem*), and no one dared approach it. This is also referred to in the game in the quest “Book 1, Chapter 4: Atop Erech”, in which Celegdal tells the player the following:

You may think me a fool, but I feel certain that some great evil came out of the mountains and sped with unnatural haste through the Vale. On moonless nights, some claim to have seen the Dead dancing atop the Hill of Erech, east of here. Is it true? I cannot speak to that, but I will tell you that no one in Morlad leaves his door unbarred when the time comes to blow out his candles. (*LOTRO*)



Figure 1: Stone of Erech (*LOTRO*, Blackroot Vale, 7 April 2025)

To convey this sense of fear in the game, approaching the Stone of Erech causes Dread, an effect that reduces the amount of morale, which consists of the player's health bar, and it compares to the fear the population of the area feels. Furthermore, there are several oathbreakers circling the Hill, one of which is seen going around the stone itself, as Figure 1 shows. The game includes a Session Play instance ("Those Who Are Dead"), which allows the player to witness past events, in this case, replaying the moment Isildur makes the alliance with the Men of the Mountain, which is a case of transmedia storytelling that expands from what the readers find in the text. Players are allowed to visualize the interaction between Isildur and the inhabitants of the region closely, providing new insight into Aragorn's summoning during the Third Age of Middle-earth. This process enhances immersion by adding image, sound, and interaction in this area of the game, extending beyond the imagination of reading the novel, as Wolf proposes in *Building Imaginary Worlds*.

Some of the landmarks that appear in *LOTRO* are only very briefly described in Tolkien's novel, but the video game manages to capture these seemingly less important places in detail, offering a deeper immersion into the world of Middle-earth. One such example is the Last Bridge, located on the border between the Lone Lands and the

Trollshaws. Despite seeming unimportant in the narrative, the appendices give more information on the area where it is located, stating that the realms of Cardolan and Rhudaur were separated by the River Hoarwell, or Mitheithel (Tolkien 1015), making the Bridge a crossing point within the older Kingdom of Arnor.

In *LOTRO*, the Last Bridge, seen in Figure 2 below, is a part of several quests and one deed, marking this as a point of interest on the map. The deed, “The Road to Rivendell”, adds some information about the Bridge:

[b]eyond this bridge the domain of Men ends. While the Lone-lands have long been left desolate and rarely-travelled, the lands beyond are altogether wild and untamed. Only the well-seasoned wanderer or skilled adventurer would brave the Trollshaws alone. (*LOTRO*)



Figure 2: *The Last Bridge (LOTRO, The Lone Lands, 7 April 2025)*

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Last Bridge is crossed by Aragorn, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin after Frodo is stabbed by the Nazgûl. As Aragorn explores the Bridge, he finds an object that determines his choice to go forward safely, interpreting it as a sign of hope:

Before long [Strider] came hurrying back. ‘I can see no sign of the enemy,’ he said, ‘and I wonder very much what that means. But I have found something very strange.’

He held out his hand, and showed a single pale-green jewel. 'I found it in the mud in the middle of the Bridge,' he said. 'It is a beryl, an elf-stone. Whether it was set there, or let fall by chance, I cannot say; but it brings hope to me. I will take it as a sign that we may pass the Bridge; but beyond that I dare not keep to the Road, without some clearer token.' At once they went on again. They crossed the Bridge in safety, hearing no sound but the water swirling against its three great arches. (Tolkien 2002, 196)

The beryl found by Aragorn is also of importance in the game, and it is referred to as Glorfindel's beryl. As Aragorn feels hope in the novel by the presence of the beryl in the Bridge, the player can use the stone in the quest "Chapter 5: Hiding in the Dark" as a buff of inspiration.

Concerning the Last Bridge, the game offers a form of interactivation in which the player must cross the Bridge to start the deed "The Road to Rivendell", simultaneously completing its first objective. Additionally, the process of transmediality gives the player a clear illustration of the place described in the novel by providing the image of the bridge in the game, which is very close in description to that given in the novel, with the three arches that characterize this structure. Another element of importance in the game is the inclusion of the sound aspect, the auralization, which is reflected in the sound of the river, mixed with the map's music in the background, providing an enlarged experience of the place (Wolf 2012, 257-258).

Another landmark worth analyzing is the statue of the King of Gondor, found in the place called the Cross-roads. In both the novel and the video game, the Cross-roads is an important location on the map, where two roads intersect. From the east, the road comes from Minas Morgul and goes west to Osgiliath, and from north to south, it crosses the land of Ithilien and continues to the lands of Harad. The statue of the king, facing Osgiliath and Minas Tirith, is the most emblematic landmark in the area. It appears in the novel when Frodo, Sam, and Gollum are on their way to the Morgul Vale, and it is described thus:

The brief glow fell upon a huge sitting figure, still and solemn as the great stone kings of Argonath. The years had gnawed it, and violent hands had maimed it. Its head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst

of its forehead. Upon its knees and mighty chair, and all about the pedestal, were idle scrawls mixed with the foul symbols that the maggot-folk of Mordor used. Suddenly, caught by the level beams, Frodo saw the old king's head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. (Tolkien 2002, 687)

During the player's first passage through the Cross-roads, the statue is visibly weathered by time, and the head has been replaced by a stone painted by the servants of Sauron. The scenery around the statue and the atmosphere of the area are gloomy, reflecting the feeling the reader gets from the novel during Frodo's passage.

The novel demonstrates a very strong sense of place in this area. The concept of sense of place is a fundamental part of spatiality studies, and it is particularly relevant to discussions of space in imaginary worlds, whether in literature or in transmedia. Sense of place "is used to describe unique or distinctive qualities that give an identity to particular areas or regions" (Ryan 2016, 7). In other words, it is the *genius loci*, the "essence" of the place, which is used when referring to "positive bonds of comfort, safety [or] fears, disorientation, and dislike" (*ibidem*). During Frodo's journey at the Cross-roads, the narrative repeatedly shows these feelings associated with place. First, it is described through the lack of light: "[b]ut no day came, only a dead brown twilight. In the East there was a dull red glare under the lowering cloud: it was not the red of dawn" (Tolkien 2002, 683). Furthermore, "[t]he afternoon, as Sam supposed it must be called, wore on. Looking out from the covert, he could see only a dun, shadowless world, fading slowly into a featureless, colourless gloom. It felt stifling but not warm" (*idem*, 685). These descriptions generate feelings of unease: "[s]tanding there for a moment filled with dread Frodo became aware that a light was shining: he saw it glowing on Sam's face beside him" (*idem*, 686). The light, which in the following moment brings the crown to the king's head lying on the ground, symbolizes hope for healing the world,<sup>3</sup> which is a healing of the land that is, in turn, related to the sense of place and to what Yi-Fu Tuan calls topophilia, described later by Eric Prieto as a "bond between a person and a locale [that] emphasizes the importance of creating a strong 'sense of place', i.e. a sense of that place's uniqueness and value" (2017, 60). In both the novel and the video game, the sense of place is a strong part of the world-building and the immersive quality that keeps the reader/player engaged with the storyworld. Bo Kampmann Walther adds the "[t]ension within the text is fashioned so as to mimic the gloomy prospects of Frodo's continuous journey, and in building this

104 tension an image of both similarity and contradiction, or sameness and difference, arises” (2020, 125). This notion comes from the contrast between the land of Mordor to the east and the realm of Gondor to the west. The novel and video game depict this difference in the landscape at that moment and later, adding to the spatiotemporal dimension of both stories.

The second interaction with the statue occurs later, and in the video game the player has more agency than in the first interaction. After the battle in Minas Tirith, when Aragorn leads an army through Ithilien to the Black Gate of Mordor, the Cross-roads is a stopping point. The quest chain that takes place in Osgiliath (After Battle) includes two quests related to the statue’s restoration: “The Fallen King in Ruin” and “The Fallen King Renewed”. The bestowal dialogue in the first quest mentions the dilapidated state of the monument, and the player is asked to repair it:

‘Yes, I am Arandol. As you can see, the repairs are behind schedule. Orcs have defiled the statue, removed the head, and scrawled unintelligible markings all over it. First those Orkish poles will need to be removed, then that vile head must come down. If you are able, the statue’s original head should be retrieved and placed back atop its shoulders.’ (*LOTRO*)

Thus, the player is actively engaged with the healing, which completely changes the atmosphere of the area. With the destruction of the Dark Tower in Mordor, the influence of Sauron’s realm ends, affecting the surrounding areas. When the player ventures into Osgiliath (After Battle), the contrast in the Cross-roads is clearly visible, as displayed in Figures 3 and 4, since the skies are now clear and the statue appears clean and in better detail. The sense of place in this renewed area contributes to positive feelings, giving it a new identity altogether.



Figure 3: Statue at Cross-roads before the battle (*LOTRO*, South Ithilien, 7 April 2025)



Figure 4: Statue at Cross-roads after the battle (*LOTRO*, South Ithilien, 7 April 2025)



The quests in the game closely follow what is seen in the novel during Aragorn's passage in the area, when the men repaired the statue by replacing the head:

The hideous orc-head that was set upon the carved figure was cast down and broken in pieces, and the old king's head was raised and set in its place once more, still crowned with white and golden flowers; and men laboured to wash and pare away all the foul scrawls that orcs had put upon the stone. (Tolkien 2002, 866)

At this intersection of storytelling, geography, and game design, the player is encouraged to pay close attention to the details conveyed in the novel, which are then transformed into playable situations set in landscapes that capture the essence of Tolkien's work. Once again, this adds an immersive quality to the player's experience, with natural sounds and visual elements that provide a more complete experience of space in the world of Middle-earth, where players can contribute to the success of the multiple characters that appear in the novel. Again, this seems to expand on Tolkien's ideas about fantasy and the reader's imagination, and, in the case of the video game, the player's interaction.

One of the greatest challenges in developing this video game is capturing every minute detail of the novel, which seems to be, in part, the aim of the game creators, and the game appears to be very faithful in bringing the world of Middle-earth into a new medium. Furthermore, integrating all components of image and sound and having players interact with these spaces is also part of the creative process required in transmediality. For players who are very acquainted with *LOTRO*, the experience of playing may demonstrate that the Middle-earth of *LOTRO* is rendered in very close proximity to the material in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In addition, the game may influence one's reading of it. So, these experiences complement one another in order to make this world as rich as possible, offering multiple opportunities to explore it. This experience is the aim of transmedia storytelling, as Henry Jenkins argues: "[t]he narrative extensions are read as legitimate in so far as they fit into the world as previously constructed and as meaningful in so far as they encourage us to look at that world through new eyes" (Jenkins 2017).

Despite offering a new perspective on the world of Middle-earth, which it does in many aspects, others are as close to the novel as possible, and the new additions are in the form of visualization, auralization, and interactivation. One such case is the entire map of the Shire, which is probably one of the most symbolic spaces in *The Lord of the Rings*

*Online*. Playing the game may change one's reading experience regarding, for example, Frodo's flight from the Shire very early in the novel. It may become easier to picture Frodo's journey with Sam and Pippin, their meeting with Gildor and their trek in the Marish, where Farmer Maggot lives, thus making *LOTRO* a main reference of Middle-earth. In the video game, it is also possible to trace the vestiges of this journey between Bag End and Buckland, and locate the mentioned towns of Woodhall and Stock, as well as the Golden Perch Inn, which is mentioned briefly by Pippin in the novel. This back-and-forth between novel and video game contributes to a deep dive into Middle-earth.

Furthermore, the video game maintains the sense of place associated with certain areas of the map, such as Scary, a small settlement on the edge of the Shire map next to an old quarry. In the game, the quarry has been overtaken by spiders, which makes the name a fitting one. However, the name originates from the word "scar", which comes from the Old Norse *sker* and means "high cliff" or "rocky cliff" (Hammond and Scull 2005, 775). In both cases, the name confers identity on the place, and both the novel and the video game use it playfully.

## CONCLUSION

Going beyond the scope of the novel, the developers of *The Lord of the Rings Online* have expanded the world outside the borders of the main storyline of the book, bringing into the fold some regions outside the main area of Middle-earth, creating links between the story and threads that are continuations, but were relegated to the appendix sections of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This is in accordance with the process of transmediality defined by Randall and Murphy, mentioned earlier, which they state requires the video game to go beyond the source material (2012, 121). Fulfilling this task, *LOTRO* is undoubtedly a game worth exploring if one is looking for an immersive experience of the world of Middle-earth.

The aim of this article was to provide insight into the transmedia adaptation of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for video games. By contrasting the landscapes described in the novel with the imagery and sound provided in *LOTRO*, this study proposed to demonstrate the intricacies of world-building and transmedia storytelling and how they are

108 woven into the video game, expanding the existing world into a new interactive landscape that can be explored by the players.

By placing various studies of Tolkien's work into dialogue, it is hoped that this article will make a positive contribution to the current scholarship on this author. Similarly, studies of world-building and transmedia provide a relevant theoretical framework for the study of *The Lord of the Rings* novel and *LOTRO*, making this contribution even more valuable to the study of literature and media.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Tolkien sold the rights to both novels to United Artists in 1969, which were eventually sold to what would later be Tolkien Enterprises, now called Middle-earth Enterprises (Dotinga 2012). In addition to *LOTRO*, the company holds licenses for video games such as *The Hobbit* (2003), *The Lord of the Rings: Gollum* (2023), and *The Lord of the Rings: Return to Moria* (2023).

<sup>2</sup> Epic fantasy is described as a narrative that "deals with the founding or definitive and lasting defence of a Land" (Clute 1997).

<sup>3</sup> As they pass the statue, Frodo and Sam notice a shift in the atmosphere of the place, as the crown reappears in the king's head: "Look, Sam!" he cried, startled into speech. 'Look! The king has got a crown again!' The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed" (Tolkien 2002, 687).

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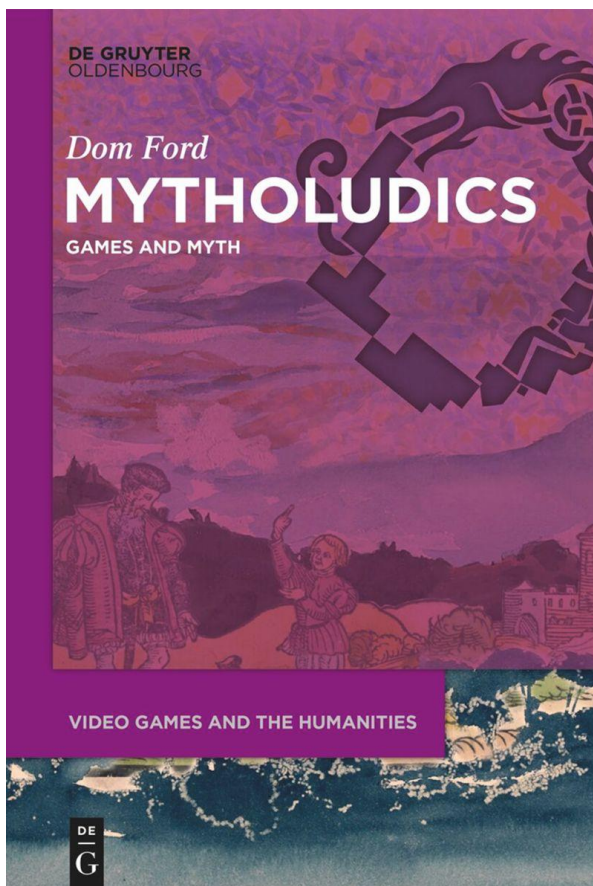
Ford, Dom. *Mytholudics: Games and Myth*.

Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2025.

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While the discipline of game studies, generally defined by Frans Mäyrä as “a multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter” (2008, 6), can arguably no longer be considered new, all those venturing into it have probably been confronted with the methodological dilemma of how to analyze a game. The study of games has existed for quite some time, especially within the disciplines of history and ethnography, as demonstrated by classic works such as *Games of the North American Indians* and *A History of Chess*, published respectively by Stewart Culin (1858-1929) in 1907 and Harold James Ruthven Murray (1868-1955) in 1913 (Mäyrä 2008, 6).

In recent decades, however, literary scholars, among other humanities researchers, have also turned their attention to games, with notable examples including Espen Aarseth, who wrote *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* in 1997, and Janet Murray, author of *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, released in the same year (Mäyrä 2008, 8). Dom Ford, a former student of English literature, builds on this longer tradition in his new book *Mytholudics: Games and Myth*, published by De Gruyter in 2025 as part of the series “Video Games and the Humanities”, by providing game studies scholars with a framework for analyzing games *as* and *through* myth.

Initially conceived as Ford’s PhD project and developed under the supervision of Hans-Joachim Løvind Backe, *Mytholudics: Games and Myth* begins by stressing the enduring nature of myth, which Ford understands as “a way, a form, a mode of creating, asserting, negotiating and expressing meaning” (2025, 2). Highly adaptable and persistent across time, myth is an essential part of culture and finds expression in games, among many other possible sites of mythic expression, as Ford argues (*ibidem*). Games, however, appear to differ from other media because, according to Ford, their unique affordances allow myth to inform and permeate a singular combination of phenomena, namely “play, worlds, simulations, and narratives” (*idem*, 4). While at times conflating myth with mythology, a problem the author addresses by clarifying that mythology refers “to a system as a whole” and myth to “a smaller unit within that” (*idem*, 6), Ford combines a hermeneutic approach based on Roland Barthes’s mythology with Frog’s mythic discourse analysis (*idem*, 307). In doing so, Ford proposes analyzing games both *as* and *through* myth. Whereas looking at games *as* myth, an approach Ford describes as “naïve”, allows for an understanding of the game itself as a kind of mythology, “an instantiation or realisation of a particular model for understanding the world”, seeing games *through* myth implies recognizing that games are influenced by myths that exist outside them (*idem*, 6). A “mytholudic” analysis, a term coined by Ford, allows for a fruitful combination of both approaches: “We must understand the gameworld on its own terms before we can trace its heritage, but we will always find we cannot fully understand the gameworld without also relating it to the broader culture in which it is situated” (*ibidem*).

Following its introductory section, and excluding the concluding remarks, *Mytholudics: Games and Myth* is divided into four chapters: the first two are theoretical in nature, whereas

the latter two adopt a more practical approach. As Ford himself recognizes, the chapter “What Is Myth?” is “a violently abridged, whirlwind tour of the many meanings of myth as a term” (*idem*, 7), but its main purpose is to build toward the conceptualization of mytholudics, defined in “Towards Mytholudics”, the second theoretical chapter. Here, the author explains that virtuality, nonlinearity, and performativity come together in a unique way in games, representing the parameters that should be taken into consideration when analyzing games *as* and *through* myth (*idem*, 63). Ford also adds that mytholudics “describes a mythological approach to understanding how games make meaning that focuses on these aspects of games” (*ibidem*), allowing for the identification of the elements of games that are meaningful and the ways in which they are meaningful. The remaining two chapters put theory into practice, giving the book a refreshing didactic quality while focusing on heroism and monstrosity by analyzing ten game examples. At no point does the analysis feel detached from the theoretical issues previously addressed, and these final chapters lend mytholudics a solidity that a purely theoretical discussion could never hope to achieve.

The book does present some minor problems, however. Despite the fact that games are clearly perceived as cultural artifacts, cultural studies are only mentioned in the context of some bibliographic references. The discussion surrounding ideology and how it differs from Ford’s understanding of myth also feels rushed and oversimplified, and could have benefitted hugely from engaging with authors such as Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Louis Althusser (1918-1990), to name just two examples. A similar oversimplification is also present when the author addresses literature in comparison with games, particularly in the introduction, where Ford states that “the words in a novel will always be in the same order” (*idem*, 4). While this is not entirely incorrect, it fails to account for the full scope of experimentalism associated with modernist and postmodernist works published during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. All of this is easily explained, however, by the fact that Ford’s main objective was to conceptualize mytholudics and provide a framework that other game scholars could apply to their own work. And that is precisely what he was able to achieve.

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## 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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# ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES

## VARIA SECTION



# MEET ME AT RINGSIDE: “non-fiction” novel as a one-punch literary phenomenon

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**ABSTRACT:** The text will focus on the golden era of the so-called “non-fiction novel”, seeking to describe the difficulties in defining the sub-genre within the context of an overarching theoretical quest which aspires to determine the exact terms of a notion of “fiction” in a literary framework. Two exemplary works from the period will be described, and the strategies put into force by both their authors (Truman Capote and Norman Mailer) – in order to enforce a certain idea of (non) “fiction” –, albeit multimodal and sometimes inconsistent, will be compared. That idea of “fiction” entails, as will become apparent, decisive side implications on the definitions of crucial terms such as “narrator”, “tale”, “account” and even “History”, calling for a deliberate rarefaction of these categories in order to accommodate an uncommon, unmatched sense of “presence”.

**KEYWORDS:** Non-fiction novel, History, narrative, presence, objectivity.

**RESUMO:** Este texto concentrar-se-á na época áurea do chamado “romance não-ficção”, procurando descrever as dificuldades de definição do sub-género no contexto da demanda teórica de largo curso que aspira a decretar os termos exatos para uma noção de “ficção” no quadro literário. Serão escolhidas duas obras paradigmáticas do período, contrastando-se as estratégias multimodais e, por vezes, inconsistentes, utilizadas pelos dois autores (Truman Capote e Norman Mailer) para fazerem valer uma certa ideia de (não) “ficção”. Essa ideia tem, como se tornará aparente, implicações laterais decisivas para a definição de termos cruciais como os de “narrador”, “estória”, “relato” e mesmo “História”, produzindo uma rarefação deliberada dessas categorias a fim de acomodar um sentido de “presença” incomum e irreplicável.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Romance não-ficção, História, narrativa, presença, objetividade.

On the evening of March 8 1971, a sports event of unimaginable significance took place in New York City: the heavyweight championship bout between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. In the aftermath of the turmoil brought by a decade-long struggle over Civil Rights, the involvement in the Vietnam War and the emergence of a powerful counter-culture, America was virtually split in half. Ali (formerly Cassius Marcellus Clay), a tall, outspoken virtuoso of the ring, had dodged the draft and been stripped of his heavyweight championship of the world. While waiting for the appeal on the ruling, Frazier, a short, relentless puncher with marathon-like stamina, had snatched it. When they were finally scheduled to face each other at Madison Square Garden (the Mecca of boxing before the casinos in Las Vegas, Atlantic City and Miami became the most coveted venues for championship fights), the split in American society became ever more evident. Ali taunted Frazier from the minute the contracts were signed, calling him a “monkey” and an “Uncle Tom”, and accusing him of being the white man’s favorite.<sup>1</sup> The pun grew in significance and media attention. Seeing himself as the paladin of coherence and the defense of black people’s rights against the white oligarchy, Ali was intent on becoming the champion of all African-Americans. Incidentally, Frazier (who was also black) was to be demoted as a symbol of white dominance and prejudice. Uneducated, but righteous and humble, “Smoking Joe” took the blow deeply and never forgave Ali for the off-the-ring massacre. Inside the fourteen ropes, however, he refused to quit before a far more talented foe, and pounded Ali for fifteen rounds (knocking him down in the fourteenth) *en route* to a unanimous decision victory, thus retaining the belt. The “Fight of the Century” was over, but what happened that night would forever be subject to debate.

Of course, the bout drew enormous attention and was witnessed first-hand by a parade of celebrities. Among them were two of the most recognizable authors of 20<sup>th</sup> century America: Truman Capote and Norman Mailer. Though very different in literary and personal style, Capote and Mailer got along well, especially when it came down to one of their common passions: professional boxing. On the evening of March 8 1971, they shared a moment of conversation at ringside.<sup>2</sup> Both were by then still reaping the rewards of highly influential works, deemed as poster-books of a loose sub-genre described as “non-fiction novel”. Capote, 1965 *In Cold Blood*, showed a subheading which read “A true account of a multiple murder and its consequences”; Mailer, 1968 *The*



*Armies of the Night* (to which he added four similar works in the following years), presented itself as “History as a Novel/The Novel as History”. Thus, both were apparently self-conscious of the anticipated placement of their works within the literary dynamics of classification and arrangement. But what exactly would this amount to in the late 1960s? What consequences did it have? Or, why was a peculiar mix of fact and fiction so appealing to authors (and readers alike) at a particular point in literary history?<sup>3</sup>

Though well-established as fiction writers, both Capote and Mailer had a long history of immersion in the journalistic style.<sup>4</sup> Also, both were recognized by resorting to the autobiographical mode in their prose fiction. These facts are crucial to understanding the works that made the two (among others, of course) famous and accomplished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although the historical novel has been present for many centuries (and will be for decades to come), the genre inaugurated by Capote, Mailer, *et al.* seemed, on all accounts, rooted in the postmodern spirit of the times, thus transcending the typical compositional strategies and motifs used by the first. Bold, unsettling, crude and sentimental at once, fast and seemingly based on factual descriptions of contemporary events, deliberately challenging common-sense notions about the putative relations between report, depiction and fantasy, *In Cold Blood* and *The Armies of the Night* set new standards for literary classification, and even criticism. From its inception, there was little agreement about what to call it, so the genre (or style) came to be somewhat loosely referred to under a set of descriptions: “creative non-fiction”, “faction”, “non-fiction novel” being the most recognizable.<sup>5</sup> The descriptive resorting to the construct “fiction”, however, did more to hinder than to help a potentially less polemic definition of the genre.

For, in order to describe something as being “non-fictional”, one must be able to satisfactorily describe what “fiction” is. As literary theory will have it, a number of essentialist and/or ontological explanations as to the nature and modes of existence of literary fiction were argued for, to little or no avail. Fiction is slippery, has no infallible method of proof and, as a concept, is easier to apply than to define. This means, perhaps, that only by enforcing a pragmatic, case-by-case stance, will we be able to identify – even if only approximately – what counts as literary fiction and what doesn’t. Accordingly, and logically, the same is to be said about “non-fiction”.

In the 1998 revised edition of his glossary of literary definitions, J. A. Cuddon refers to non-fiction literature as “faction”, describing it as a “portmanteau word” for a genre of which the “notable examples” are, precisely, Capote and Mailer (plus Alex Haley, author of *Roots*). In his words, “faction” denotes “fiction which is based on and combined with fact ... a vague term at the best of times ... its usefulness has been questioned” (Cuddon 1999, 302). It is then contrasted with: i) the historical novel which, by definition, seems impervious to the possibility of major changes in its nature by the addition of fictional elements; and ii) television which, to the same extent (by virtue of its visual nature), allows placidly for the use of fictional elements. What is, then, that makes the retelling of contemporary fact-based events so unlike other fact-based narratives? The answer seems to lie in two trivial, yet disparate, circumstances: i) that the events may still be fresh in readers’ minds; and ii) that the style of telling is as “contemporary” as the events themselves.

If, however, differences between disparate forms of fiction based and/or rooted in fact (i.e. real events and/or real people) are more or less easy to determine – if only in empirical terms –, differences between fact and fiction are, as hinted above, far more difficult to settle. In his influential 1957 book on literary criticism, Northrop Frye refers to the “fictional modes” as follows:

In literary fictions the plot consists of somebody doing something. The somebody, if an individual, is the hero, and the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of the postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience. Fictions, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero’s power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same. (Frye 1990, 33)

Plot, the central element of every narrative instance, seems thus very similar in both fiction and non-fiction. Even if we take for granted that fictional plots are, to some extent, created *ab ovo* by their authors, whereas non-fictional ones seem to escape the deliberation of the storyteller – a common-sense assumption –, it is clear that the development of the story depends upon an agent and actions performed by that agent. Following this line of thought, it would be easy to determine who the “hero” is in *AN* – a man called Norman Mailer, referred to in the third person by the raconteur: “the phone

rang one morning and Norman Mailer ... picked it up” (Mailer 2018, 4). In *CB*, on the other hand, prominence (and, also, descriptive objectivity) is claimed by the first-person narrator from the onset: “All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned ...” (Capote 1992, 2).<sup>6</sup>

So, to a large extent, the “non-fictional” pact between author and reader is, apparently, in need of further tuning. Interspersing novel and history, or stating the willingness of turning a narrative of true events into a work of literary art, then, are instances of the same *relocation* of the pact (curiously, though, both Mailer and Capote seemed nonchalant as to the possibility that at least some parts of their reports could be easily disproven by other credible first-hand witnesses to the events). Still, concerns as to the measuring of works of literary art as either “history” or a “true account” are, precisely, a negation of fictionality *plus* a particular opening to posterity – in a way similar to the evidential dynamics of courts of law or politics.

By way of conclusion, we may at this point state that: i) in both *AN* and *CB* genre dynamics are deliberately blurred from the onset (right away in the subheadings), thus rendering intransitive descriptions of “fact”, “fiction” and “non-fiction” useless in the context; ii) in both *AN* and *CB*, the “matter-of-fact” or “true” accounts of historical, proven events are liable to future fact-checking (both by definition and also due to time-proximity with the events) – something which is bound to disturb the expected objective relation between the facts and their textual retelling.<sup>7</sup> What is it, then, that renders “non-fiction” so prone to deliberate self-sabotaging by its very authors?

Characteristically, perhaps, Frye’s description of “non-literary prose”, biased though it is by strictly connecting the genre with public speeches by historical figures, can shed a bit of light on what may broadly be an insight into prose, when used in non-fictional contexts. He writes that

As these examples show, we are moving rapidly away from literature towards the direct verbal expression of kinetic emotion. The further we go in this direction, the more likely the author is to be, or to pretend to be, emotionally involved with his subject, so that what he exhorts us to embrace or avoid is in part a projection from his own emotional life. As this increases, a certain automatism comes into the

writing: the verbal expression of infantile-centered hatreds, fears, loves, and objects of adoration. (Frye 1990, 328)

It is somewhat surprising that, trying to describe “non-fiction”, Frye ends up listing a set of features that are common to both fictional and non-fictional uses of prose. Indeed, literature – in its broad sense of “story-telling” – cannot escape a sense of movement, in its double existence as both authorial and narrative displacement. Authors are, in more ways than one, compromised with their subject, fictional as it may be, and typically they establish a sort of causality bond with all items in the accounts they produce, something that applies indistinctively to characters, places, itineraries, and actions.

Moreover, literature is always, in part, an emotional projection by the author, the degree to which that process becomes “visible” in the narrative being arguably the only subject of debate. Something which, of course, renders Frye’s contention that literature is, in the end, all but a multifarious extension of human emotions, redundant. So, in trying to firmly establish the terms of existence of “non-fictional prose”, Frye is (unwittingly, perhaps) providing a general description into which a potentially large number of both fictional *and* non-fictional occurrences may fall. Plus, he seems intent on equating literature with fiction, and something else (perceived under a utilitarian point of view, but not fully described) as “non-literature”.

However, although lacking a strict line of demarcation between history, journalism and political pamphleteering, on the one hand; and, on the other, literary fiction prose, Frye’s description fits perfectly with the mentioned works by Mailer and Capote.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, both *AN* and *CB* rely heavily on emotional projection, empathy with the subject matter and, ultimately, a set of obsessions which, under a certain point of view, may be described by some as “infantile”. Motivations, however, were quite different: as it becomes apparent in both texts, Mailer, on his part, revels in his own active participation in the events, while Capote uses his narrative skills to obscure the fact that he *didn’t* have an active involvement in the events, but rather in the resolution of the criminal case that followed. The obvious circumstance that there exists a massive disproportion between the widely considered public impact of both events (the march on Washington and the murder of the Clutter family in rural Kentucky), furthermore, is merely incidental: it plays no part in the generic or notional descriptions. Seemingly, storytelling abilities seem impervious to the subject matter in more ways than one (at



least in those cases in which the storyteller is able to provide its readers with sufficient detail as to the setting, the characters and, of course, its own role in the tale). 137

In that respect, however, both authors' stances differ deeply. Although, as hinted above, i) having shared the event or having been partly alien to it does not, in any way, impart on the nature of the event itself or the modes of presentation; and ii) some narrative strategies may exert influence on the interpreter's way of tackling the information presented, common ground between the two authors stops here. Mailer, on his part, is extremely self-aware of the dual role he is playing, even if he chooses a belated moment of the record to confess to it. He claims that

The Novelist in passing his baton to the Historian has a happy smile. He has been faster than you think. As a working craftsman, a journeyman artist, he is not without his guile; he has come to decide that if you would see the horizon from a forest, you must build a tower ... [s]o the Novelist working in secret collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study – at the greatest advantage – our own horizon. (Mailer 2018, 225)

The novel reaches its final stages. Mailer, the novelist, is apparently through with his business and eager to pass on the burden of proof of his own historical accuracy to the *proper* specialists who will eventually fact-check his narrative. Still, they seem to have shared a common platform and agree on the basics of the tale. Working together, it is unlikely that dissent between the two sides would have been felt at all.

Besides, there is also a veiled admission by Mailer, the novelist, that, in the process, he himself played the role of a historian, a clear and undeniable fact given his direct role in the march on Washington and the events surrounding it. There is, however, something very intriguing in the description of this relay: it is the work of the novelist *plus* the work of the historian that builds the tower from which, with the proper equipment, it becomes possible to fully grasp the implications of a massively significant social event. The accruing of fact *and* fiction (or, at worst, a biased first-hand account of events) seemingly *elevates* viewers' stance and provides them with the proper lenses – thus equipping them to grasp both the full horizon and the minute details hidden within

it. In a way, then, the public significance of the marches plays no part in the narrative's mode of presentation, *but* is paramount to its justification.

On his part, Capote has to tackle a double difficulty: the fact that the Clutter family murder had no public impact outside Finney County, Kansas; and the fact that, although he forged strong friendships with relevant actors in the murder case (notably Alvin Dewey, the chief detective and Perry Smith, one of the assassins), he was neither a relevant witness to the crimes nor to the subsequent investigation.<sup>9</sup> So, for the most part of the book, he tries to compensate for the lack of first-hand knowledge with both descriptive saturation *and* a sort of affective throughput by which the narrator depicts the actors' feelings and emotions as if they were his own. This compositional strategy is deemed, seemingly, as the key to retell a "true account" of the murders and of the inquiry which followed. Minute detail, added to by a self-conscious, deliberate and holistic appeal to plausible human feelings, emotions and thoughts – even though put into force by a third party –, seems to suffice to bridge the gap between *non-presence* and *narrative authority*. Capote, the narrator, is utterly at ease in describing the context, surroundings and landscapes, actions and motivations, even the inner thoughts and possible connections of those thoughts with practical affairs. Moreover, he is fully at ease in depicting the sentimental enchainment of past events, individuating them and reattaching them to their respective agents:

Mr. Clutter liked Bobby, and considered him, for a boy his age, which was seventeen, most dependable and gentlemanly; however, in the three years she had been permitted "dates", Nancy, popular and pretty as she was, had never gone out with anyone else, and while Mr. Clutter understood that it was the present national adolescent custom to form couples, to "go steady" and wear "engagement rings", he disapproved, particularly since he had not long ago, by accident, surprised his daughter and the Rupp boy kissing. (Capote 1992, 9)

Capote waves his reliability as the quintessential storyteller at all times. Aiming at the reader, and at the special, enigmatic, conventional pact inevitably established between teller and listener, writer and lector, he establishes minuteness and depth as the chief caveats of his tale. The "*as if*" which glues all the impossibilities of fictional discourse together is, in Capote's case, redirected at himself as an author and teller: all the

particulars, piled up and accounted for, reestablish his own authority. They mean, roughly, “I am telling you this *«as if»* I was there”.

Mailer, on his part, *was there*, and thus is intent on ascertaining his position as a first-hand witness to the events. His worries are not, as in Capote’s case, trying to render an incident which went under the radar of public attention less anonymous. Quite the opposite, actually. His main concern is to *correct* public perceptions of an event of worldwide magnitude, told and retold by a myriad of journalists, eyewitnesses, onlookers, bystanders, commentators and some opportunists. The appeal to history, implicitly conceived as a bastion of empirical accuracy and emotional detachment, is paramount to his overall strategy. Working for posterity, in a way that reverberates his own institutional biases and political viewpoints, he heads for the future, looking for a means of retrospective adjustment. Absolution by history is, for that matter, a common illocutionary manoeuvre – used extensively in some of the speeches Frye pointed out as examples of “non-fiction”. To strengthen his claim, Mailer directly addresses the press and its treatment of the protests, reassessing his insider stance and adopting a sardonic tone to denounce the official media’s wrongdoing in relation to the events. So, in a way, he is both in and out of his skin as a journalist, in and out of his skin as a novelist, in and out of his skin as a (unwilling, perhaps) historian. Still, he seems to be looking for a safe place to stand among all the antinomies, something he finds in the solid, reassuring haven of objectivity:

The method is then exposed. The mass media which surrounded the March on the Pentagon created a forest of inaccuracy which would blind the efforts of an historian; our novel has provided us with the possibility, no, even the instrument to view our facts and conceivably study them in that field of light a labor of lens-grinding has produced. Let us prepare, then (metaphors soon to be mixed – for the Novelist is slowing to a jog, and the Historian is all grip on the rein), let us prepare then to see what the history may disclose. (Mailer 2018, 225-6)

The *bête noire* is, then, the so-called “free press” and its poor treatment of subjects. In Mailer’s case, due to biased opinions and inaccuracy, possibly even to obscure political agendas. In Capote’s case, due to insufficient data and a conscious belittling of an otherwise important event. Excess of information and bias, on the one hand; lack of

ample information and empathy on the other. Features which, in both cases, seem to be corrected only by i) a generous selection of the relevant facts, and ii) the tailoring of those facts into a recognizable literary framework called a *novel*.

What is it, then, that novels possess which enables them to *correct* or *add* to events (or collections of events)? In *AN*, the process is multifarious. It encompasses a blend of descriptive oversaturation, first-hand knowledge, political opinion and a string of second-degree strategies such as the appeal to history and the symbiosis between narrator and main character. In *CB*, differently, the key is verisimilitude. Despite its original description as a “true account” (present right away in the subtitle), the book almost lures the reader into a limbo in which there is a parallel recognition of two opposite, indisputable facts: i) that the narrator *wasn’t* there; and ii) that he knows so much that it becomes comfortable to imagine that everything *must* have happened as we are told. The famous description of fiction as a “willing suspension of disbelief” thus reemerges in a perhaps surprising context: that of a “true account”. In a sense, it seems, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic rhetoric is, after all, potentially applicable to *all* narratives.<sup>10</sup> A finding which refers back to the theoretical difficulty in finding demarcation lines between fiction and non-fiction – exemplified above in Cuddon’s description. For the formal, traditional categories of the narrator are blurred to the limit:

The graves of the Clutter family, four graves gathered under a single gray stone, lie in a far corner of the cemetery – beyond the trees, out in the sun, almost at the wheat field’s bright edge. As Dewey approached them, he saw that another visitor was already there: a willowy girl with white-gloved hands, a smooth cap of dark-honey hair, and long, elegant legs. She smiled at him, and he wondered who she was. (Capote 1992, 408-9)

The alternation between true fact (a description of a place) and a plausible event (a description of people and their attitudes) seems to be, therefore, the guarantee of a modicum of likelihood which contributes heavily to reassure the reader.

In Capote’s case, the overlap between verifiable and loose facts is frequently triggered by a simple arithmetic operation, by which the hard fact is followed immediately after by an indirect affective consideration, very likely to have happened in

the exact same terms as those of the account. In Mailer's case, quite differently, indirect considerations are permanently sidelined in exchange for *direct* opinion. Usually, and similarly to Capote, the hard fact is presented first (with roughly the same degree of descriptive saturation), only to be supplemented by acrimonious judgment presented in such detail that the reader is left to ask where exactly lies historical objectivity.

The mechanics of the telling thus seem to lure the reader into a second narrative level, after guaranteeing a firm, fact-grounded context on which that same reader can rest for a while before moving on. That the further movement will afterwards meet with affective regards, acid critique or polemic remarks is irrespective of the general strategy. The narrator's "presence", whether transparent, camouflaged, or vociferous, is at all times entangled with an intentional precariousness. Towards the end of both novels, however, the circle seems to close. A need for reassurance pops up, as if to reassert the initial terms of both accounts (truth, on the one hand, history on the other). Presence, in one case, or resorting to the historian's helping hand, in the other, plays a crucial role in wrapping up the fundamentals (and consequences) of both narratives. The goal seems to be, to a large extent, that of taking the reader back to the point of departure, and to the mentioned strategies behind all reading and interpretive acts:

Obviously, three of the murders Smith committed *were* logically motivated – Nancy, Kenyon and their mother had to be killed because Mr. Clutter had been killed. But it is Dr. Satten's contention that only the first murder matters psychologically, and that when Smith attacked Mr. Clutter he was under a mental eclipse, deep inside a schizophrenic darkness ... (Capote 1992, 360-1)

Deferred as they may be, the explanations presented *do* contribute to a feeling of completeness, adding to a sense that the narrator "must have been there" – to put things bluntly, descriptions of human feelings are a universe away from medical views about human actions. Thus, the "retrieval" of the narrator's presence in later stages of the telling contributes to a general feeling of *fait accompli*, even though, as predictable, the order of explanation is in many ways different.

While in Capote's case the ultimate gloss is filled with empathy, personal feelings and external opinions, in Mailer's there is a wider, bitter, self-deprecating reasoning:

Whole crisis of Christianity in America that the military heroes were on one side, and the unnamed saints on the other! Let the bugle blow. The death of America rides in on the smog. America – the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people – if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn – was then the will of God. Great and dangerous idea! If the locks did not turn, then the will of the people was the will of the Devil. Who by now could know where was that? Liars controlled the locks. (Mailer 2018, 295-6)

Ultimately, it seems that narratives do not survive (or, at best, shed part of their weight) without opinion. On its hand, then, the expression of an opinion is used for a final stand in the later stages of both narratives. It is, after all, well known that judges at ringside are typically prone to reward fighters who keep the action going until the final bell sounds, and much the same happens with both readers and boxing-goers alike. The thrill, though, is even higher when a late knockout wraps the night.

Anticipated labels are, ultimately, crucial to both narrative consumers and hardcore prizefight fans. Whenever you set out to watch a “welterweight non-title bout”, you typically develop the same prior strategies and expectations you use when fetching a “historical novel” to read in the coming days. The impact of the labeling “true account” or “history” appended to any novel automatically redirects our attention, positioning interpretive stances into a definite, fact-bound frame nurtured by a sense of probability. Inside the covers (or else inside the ropes), however, we understand both how easy it is to intentionally sabotage early-posted tagging and continuously play hide-and-seek with the reader.

Cuddon is, after all, right: theoretical claims to define a literary genre called “non-fiction novel” are sometimes misleading and, more often than not, unable to find the common traits which glue together a sufficient number of occurrences. The phenomenon, moreover, seems by now to be long dead and gone: short-lived, though intense and highly successful, it has been consistently overshadowed by competing narratives and overwhelmed by a corrective movement that has led to the reestablishment of a generic *status quo* dating back to the late-18<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the spirit of the times, embedding a public hunger for journalistic objectivity and a thirst

for no-nonsense retelling, plays a decisive role in the making of the sub-genre. It is as if for a decade or so, reading people demanded to be served with the healthy, contrived menu of factual objectivity, only to slowly resort yet again to the opulent banquets of the tale, the lore and the “what if?”.

At some junctures, then, attempts at definition become utterly futile, and the only thing we are left with are disenchanted descriptions of objects which appeal to us, and this is probably what eventually happened to “non-fiction novels”. Still, to some extent, both Capote and Mailer anticipated the posterity of their works beforehand, by the mere fact of labeling them in a precise way, resorting to utterly ontological categories such as the “truth” and “history”. Although theories are typically set *after* a significant number of occurrences have happened in a *certain* way, it still is, as I expect to have demonstrated, impossible to imagine a suitable theoretical framework for such a motley storytelling – something which may help to explain the elusiveness of the sub-genre and its comparatively short life. Of course, some individuals seem to have an innate tendency to try to predict what will come next, although perfectly aware that literary texts are not exactly like weather forecasts or stock market predictions. For some others, to recognize that compelling books (just like exciting boxing bouts) don’t come up too often, is in the end simply enough.



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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a wrap-up of the pleasantries exchanged between the two in the context of their trilogy of fights (March 1971 and January 1974, both in New York; October 1974 in Kinshasa, Zaire), see the following article: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2011/nov/08/muhammad-ali-joe-frazier>.

<sup>2</sup> They were both covering the fight for respectable publications, Mailer for *Life* magazine and Capote for *Rolling Stone*, and thus had press passes.

<sup>3</sup> For reasons of economy, *In Cold Blood* will be referred to by the acronym “CB” and *The Armies of the Night* as “AN” from this point on in the text.

<sup>4</sup> During the early 1940s, while launching his career as (primarily) a short-story writer, Capote worked in various capacities for at least three periodicals – among them, notably, *The New Yorker*. Mailer, in turn, had a decades-long media career and was a herald for the 1960s “new journalism” writing style – a mix of literary and newspaper report strategies applied to descriptions and events.

<sup>5</sup> The description “creative non-fiction” was popularized by Lee Gutkind and his eponymous literary journal, whereas “faction” is a portmanteau word blending the words “fact” and “fiction”. The scholarly definition most widely used is “non-fiction novel”, summarized by David Herman *et al.*, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*

as follows: “Non-fiction novels are narratives depicting actual contemporary events and using the styles and techniques of fictional discourse. A story the author witnessed and/or investigated is presented in dialogues and dramatic scenes (rather than in historical summaries), from the point of view of the people involved (rather than from an objective, distant point of view), and it provides an immersive context in which the narration of actual events is as lively as the presentation of fictional worlds. Unlike historical novels, non-fiction novels focus on contemporary themes and dispense with fictive story elements. Since journalistic validity is part of the author-reader contract, authors frequently legitimise their knowledge in paratexts or metanarrative commentary.” (Herman *et al.* 2005, 397).

<sup>6</sup> Even if Frye doesn’t allow for the instantiation of a “collective hero”, a mob, in *AN*, the crowd plays a very important role in plot development and the succession of events. Still, “Mailer”-the-hero is ever-present as protagonist, to the point of sabotaging the importance of the collective character, heightening or downplaying its influence almost at will. *CB*, however, seems to present a different set of difficulties. These arise, at first, from the fact that Mailer, the author, actively participated in the crucial events retold by Mailer the character (preparation of the demonstrations, public lectures, arrests and violence), whereas Capote did not (he was not present during the assassinations, the first stages of the investigation and the arrest of the criminals). Still, that seemingly crucial difference is blurred by the fact that Capote also played a decisive role in the sequence of events which unfolded after the Clutter family murder. Although his heroes are, subsequently, the members of the Clutter family, police and law enforcement members, or even the murderers themselves, they all seem to stand in a subordinate position in respect to the narrator – Capote himself – whose insider stance renders his position ubiquitous.

<sup>7</sup> In *Fiction and Narrative*, Derek Matravers summarizes the tension as follows: “My view, in short, is that representations can be put to different uses: to teach, to persuade and to entertain being three of them. Representations also come in two varieties, thin and thick; or, rather, representations exist along a continuum from the very thin to the very thick. The traditional distinction, between representations that are fiction and representations that are non-fiction, is entirely unhelpful. It does not match any intuitive divide amongst the above.” (Matravers 2014, 47). The point, which is persuasive and well argued for, follows a clear and sound description of the theories of fiction by eminent scholars Donald Currie and Kendall L. Walton. For a further discussion using both Currie and Walton, plus Searle, Rorty, Wayne C. Booth, Frank Kermode, Michael Riffaterre and Peter Lamarque (among others), see my 2014 book *Teoria da Literatura e Interpretação*, chapter IV (“Jogar ao faz de conta”).

<sup>8</sup> It becomes clear that Frye deplores what could be described as a political use of literature. Stuck as his description is to a limited array of public speeches urging listeners to take action, go into war or oppose some social or public *status quo*, he stealthily

146 argues for a literature without *pathos* – and, by extension, to the consideration of literature as a “pure” form comprising *ethos* and, to a lesser extent, *logos*. An occultation of the author (or speaker) is, in this context, paramount.

<sup>9</sup> Herb Clutter, his wife Bonnie and children Nancy and Kenyon were shot to death in their rural home in Holcomb, Kansas, on November 15 1959, during a botched robbery by former convicts Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. Both were eventually sentenced to death and hanged in 1965.

<sup>10</sup> The reference is to Coleridge’s widely recognized motto with respect to the effects of poetry, penned in his 1817 work *Biographia Literaria*, defined as “that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith”. The description has been the subject of much debate and analysis in literary theory and criticism, as well as in narrative theory.

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# Buckingham Palace and the (re)invention of tradition(s): the flag, the gate, and the balcony

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To Professor Teresa Pinto Coelho  
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**ABSTRACT:** At a time when Britain/the United Kingdom is mentally heading towards yet another royal succession, I will be looking briefly at three examples provided in recent decades by Buckingham Palace as the official seat of the British Head of State and thus a space deeply invested with historical, institutional, and symbolic meaning(s); a space where, at different times, and in changing contexts and circumstances, arcane traditions and all their attending rituals and conventions keep on being invented, enacted, and performed.

**KEYWORDS:** Buckingham Palace, British monarchy, Royal Family, the monarchy and the media, Royal symbols and traditions.

**RESUMO:** Num momento em que a Grã-Bretanha/o Reino Unido se prepara mentalmente para uma nova sucessão régia, comentarei rapidamente três exemplos facultados, em décadas recentes, pelo Palácio de Buckingham enquanto residência oficial do Chefe de Estado britânico e, por conseguinte, um espaço profundamente investido de sentido(s) histórico(s), institucional(is) e simbólico(s); um espaço onde, em épocas diversas e em contextos e circunstâncias variáveis, tradições vetustas e todos os rituais e convenções a elas adjacentes continuam a ser inventados, encenados e representados.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Palácio de Buckingham, Monarquia britânica, Família Real, a monarquia e os media, símbolos e tradições reais.

The existence or subsistence of monarchies in the 21st century remains, as we know, a debated issue and, unsurprisingly, one sometimes heavily tinged with ideology, notwithstanding the scientific rigour and objectivity required and expected of anyone academically involved in studies of royalty. Often criticized as outdated, anachronistic, almost “feudal”, and certainly elitist,<sup>2</sup> monarchies, even constitutional ones, can be derided as to some extent “undemocratic”, if only in the sense that monarchs are not elected and voted for (or against, for that matter!). In the words of a socialist historian,

It is the inevitable function of a constitutional monarchy to act as a brake and therefore to slow down the process of political and economic reform. This is held to be a desirable result. Is it?

(...)

There is something to be said for conservatism (...); there is much to be said for radical change; the defects of gradual reform are greater than is commonly supposed — and it is gradual reform which the British constitution and monarchy inevitably promote. (Taylor 1984, 207-208)

In *Down with the Crown* (1999), another A. Taylor has studied the origins and development of British anti-monarchism from the 1790s to Princess Diana’s death (1997), an event to which I shall return at the end. For the time being, however, I would simply note that the hostility against the regime is all too obvious in Graham Smith’s title, *Abolish the Monarchy: Why we should and how we will* (2023).

Conversely, monarchies can be praised and defended for embodying a hazy, timeless sense of historical identity and continuity, to say nothing of their mediatic, touristic, and commercial iconicity and hence their “value” — in every sense of the word (material, cultural, moral, ethical...) — as a merchandising asset and an “invaluable” source of revenue.<sup>3</sup> As Krishan Kumar points out: “The monarchy (...) goes up and down in popularity, depending (...) on the day-to-day behaviour of this or that member of the royal family. But most commentators stress the overall commitment, even affection, for the



monarchy as an institution” (2017, 16).<sup>4</sup> In the Preface to *Royal Fever: The British Monarchy in Consumer Culture*, Cele C. Otnes and Pauline Maclaran wonder:

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What would British consumer culture (...) be like if its Royal Family had never existed? (...) as researchers of consumer behaviour, we focus on how people engage in and with contemporary consumption practices and the goods, services, and experiences associated with this particular monarchy. (2015, xi)

The issue of whether or not the Royal Family is a worthwhile burden on the national budget and public expenditure (due to royal prerogative and privileges, taxation, the Civil List pensions, etc.), as well as the abolition of monarchy itself, lie beyond the scope of this paper, not disregarding the Crown’s laudable efforts to “modernize”, in the “Cool Britannia” of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> I will simply quote Laura Clancy, to whom:

(...) media representations of the royal *family* are staged as affective and ideological projects to distance the monarchy from issues of capital and inequalities and ‘produce consent’ (...) in the public imagination, (...) the reproduction of power and privilege happens in tangent with, and through, affective notions of family and other forms of benevolence, belonging and identity in media culture. In sum, the corporate power of monarchy (the Firm) is disguised through media representations of the royal *family* (the Family Firm). (2021, 4-5; see the whole chapter 2, 63-92)

Irrespective of pros and cons, evaluated by social and political journalists, commentators, and academics,<sup>6</sup> monarchies are obviously anchored on tradition, but, as Eric J. Hobsbawm has shown in his “Introduction” to the volume co-edited with Terence Ranger (1987), traditions can be (re)invented, not merely passed on and immutably perpetuated.<sup>7</sup> This process ensures that, rather than being “stuck in time”, monarchies, as the living organisms they truly are, can develop and evolve,<sup>8</sup> adapting and adopting, consciously or unconsciously, their own survival strategies,<sup>9</sup> and always striving to (seem to) keep in touch with their subjects and their needs, hopes, moods, cares, causes, and concerns. In Hobsbawm’s words, “[i]t is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so

interesting for historians of the past two centuries” (1987, 2); whereas John McCormick argues: “One of the great strengths of the British monarchy (...) is that it has been more adaptable than many of its now-extinct continental European counterparts (...) The adjustments being made (...) are just the latest in a long series (...) it has had to make to meet new styles, expectations, and political realities” (2003, 95).<sup>10</sup> And, as Kate Nicholl recalls, no small part was played by Queen Elizabeth herself (1926-2022),<sup>11</sup> whose life Robert Lacey once described as “(...) an obstacle course beset with booby traps” (1977, viii) and whose birth centenary (April 2026) this article seeks to commemorate. Indeed, the sheer length of Elizabeth’s reign (70 years), as well as the multiple and wide-ranging political, social, and cultural transformations that Britain experienced since her accession to the throne (1952), could hardly fail to accommodate change and renewal, a trend which will certainly continue under King William V.

At a time when the United Kingdom is mentally heading towards yet another royal succession, due to Charles III’s failing health, I will be looking briefly at three examples provided in recent decades by Buckingham Palace, considered not in the cold austerity of its architecture,<sup>12</sup> nor in its materiality as a monumental house, but rather in its capacity as the official seat of the British Head of State and thus a space deeply invested with historical, institutional, and symbolic meaning(s); a space where, at different times, and in changing contexts and circumstances, arcane traditions and all their attending rituals and conventions keep on being invented, enacted, and performed; a space now made public, shared, and watched at world level, thanks to the media, social networks, and communicational platforms.

Curiously enough, the same Walter Bagehot (1826-1877) who noted, long ago, that “[w]hen there is a select committee on the Queen [Victoria], the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic” (2001, 54), also wrote: “To be invisible (...) is to be forgotten... To be a symbol, and an effective symbol, you must be vividly and often seen” (qtd in Cannadine 1987, 119).<sup>13</sup> And *heard*, I would add, considering the now “traditional” royal address at Christmas, broadcast for the first time — and thus “invented” — by George V (1910-1936) in 1932, ten years after the foundation of the BBC (1922).

In Cannadine’s view, “[t]he combination of the novelty of the media and the anachronism of the ceremonial rendered royal ritual both comforting and popular in an age

of change” (1987, 142) and the emerging importance, in the 1930s, of the media and of public image (including *sound*) was famously highlighted and explored in the film *The King’s Speech* (2010), directed by Tom Hooper, featuring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helen Bonham-Carter. It would therefore seem sensible to ponder how the (in)visibility of the Crown, with all the complex dialectics it entails, should be managed in(to) a global and hypermediatized 21st century.

Dealing with all these issues would inevitably require a research project much larger than the one suggested in the present article. I will simply focus on the three items contemplated in my “Lewisian” title, but before I do so, I would like to quote a passage of a little book I bought in 1973, when, aged just 14, and fascinated by the historical information provided in the coursebook of the 8th grade, I was starting to ponder doing English Studies at university level: “As the sovereign’s power diminished and the spotlight of communications probed deeply into the everyday life of the Royal Family, so has the job of being sovereign, king or queen, or a member of the family, become more arduous to perform” (Taylor 1971, 1).

## THE FLAG

In the gloomy and dramatic days following Princess Diana’s tragic death in Paris (August 1997), while the Royal Family remained in Balmoral, and Kensington Palace was being flooded by a sea of flowers in loving memory of “The People’s Princess”, as Tony Blair, the then recently elected Prime Minister, dubbed her, there was no flag flying at half-mast in Buckingham Palace, a fact largely perceived by the British people as showing lack of feeling, sensitivity, or empathy (if not, as many argued at the time, some semiconscious, unspoken sense of remorse, and moral guilt).<sup>14</sup> Although Diana was no longer part of the Royal Family, having obtained the divorce from Prince Charles (1992), her popularity had risen after Martin Bashir’s interview for *Panorama*, the revelation of Charles’s ongoing affair with the now Queen Camilla Parker-Bowles, and Diana’s own involvement in humanitarian campaigns at world level, including such causes as AIDS/HIV and the landmines left in Angola; furthermore, she had retained the title of Princess of Wales and William, her eldest son, was (and is) in the front line of succession. After a few days of

152 intense public pressure, political advice, and media coverage, the Union Jack finally flew at half-mast.

As Cele C. Otnes and Pauline Maclaran recall, “[t]he Queen was genuinely surprised at the public outcry over her decision not to fly the Royal Standard at half-mast and to treat the death as a *family* tragedy rather than as a *national* matter” (2015, 54; my emphasis). This point is taken up and expanded in a footnote: “The Royal Standard is only flown when the monarch is in residence, and the Queen was at Balmoral (...). It is never flown at half-mast, even when the sovereign dies. In a *compromise move* (my emphasis), the Queen agreed to allow the (...) Union Jack (...) to fly at half-mast (...) on the day of Diana’s funeral” (*idem*).<sup>15</sup> However tactical or tactful this decision may have been, it helped to appease the British public opinion, and to abate the anger targeted at the Windsors.

## THE GATE

The comments made might also apply to the planning and management of the Princess’s funeral, from Paris to Westminster Abbey (and finally Allthorp), but this would take us far and away from Buckingham Palace. Suffice it to mention that when Diana’s coffin went past the Palace, it was greeted *outside*, **not** *inside*, the gates by Queen Elizabeth herself, who respectfully lowered her head, thus paying both a personal and an institutional homage to her former daughter-in-law (please see the video below). A decision to stay *inside* the Palace grounds and *behind* its barbed ironwork would have increased, physically as well as symbolically, the distance between the Queen and her subjects; moreover, it might convey an image of Elizabeth as somehow bound by, tied down to, or “caged” within the cold formality of State protocol. From the point of view of political marketing and communication — let alone intuition —, the skilful management of private/royal vs. public/common(er) space helped to draw together crown and country, a bond that had been severely strained in the preceding week.



[YouTube Video Link](#) (4:25)

## THE BALCONY

“Yet such is life ...” in sorrow and in joy, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse. Although the tradition of royal appearances on the balcony of Buckingham Palace dates, in fact, from the long Victorian period, its mediatic symbolism was greatly increased after the coronation of George VI (1936) and the famous V-Day celebration (1945), especially on festive occasions (Coronations, Royal engagements, weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries, Trooping the Colour, etc.). The following video recalls some of the most important and significant moments along the way:



[YouTube Video Link](#) (2:28)

As we have just heard, the Queen's decision to ban Harry and Meghan, the Dukes of Sussex, from the balcony in the 2022 Jubilee, rather than a personal punishment inflicted by a grieved grandmother, was a direct outcome of their decision to leave the Royal Family (2020), thus assuming institutional proportions. Once again, as in the examples provided above, in all the speculation about the relationship between the royal brothers, and, finally, in the radical and unprecedented banishment of the former HRH Prince Andrew, Duke of York (now simply Andrew Mountbatten Windsor) from both the Royal Family and the Royal Lodge (2025), state and family affairs strike us as intertwined in (and for) the public eye through mass media communication, broadcast, and protocol. Actually, any soapbox-like incident or scandal involving members of the Royal Family, greedily explored and amplified by the tabloid press, may also play a part in narrowing down popular perceptions of social distance between "them" and "us".<sup>16</sup>

Like Edmund Burke (1729-1797) once wrote, "(...) by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete" (1986, 120). Bearing in mind A. J. P. Taylor's observations, quoted at the beginning, I believe patterns of "gradual reform" to be indeed paramount in English culture and civilization; however, neither *intrinsically negative* nor *necessarily incompatible* — and why should they have to be? — with those of progress and evolution, held dear by the "Whig interpretation of history", famously examined by

Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979) in 1931. To prove the point, two institutional examples from Church and State could be adduced here: firstly, Betty Boothroyd's election as Mrs. Speaker (1992-2000), making her the first Chairwoman of a male-dominated House of Commons; secondly, Bishop Sarah Mullally's nomination, in October 2025, as the new (and first female) Archbishop of Canterbury. To say nothing of King Charles III's and Pope Leo XIV's historical meeting and joint prayer in the Vatican (2025), an event which might be symbolically interpreted as "reforming" the spirit of the Henrician/Anglican Reformation (16th century).

To claim that the three examples discussed above, topical as they admittedly are, have given (or will give) birth to new traditions would perhaps be going too far. Only time will tell, but, as we know, precedents, once invented, can originate and become traditions. The brief comments made on the flag, the gate, and the balcony illustrate not just the British love of pageantry and their celebrated sense of compromise, but also their ability to review, reform, renew, and reshape practices, rites, and conventions, thus helping preserve a "United Queendom".

## Queen appears on Buckingham Palace balcony at end of platinum jubilee celebrations – video



[Guardian Piece and Video Link \(1:39\)](#)



VIA  
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Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos  
A Journal of Anglo-American Studies

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was presented at the International Conference "Queen Elizabeth II: Life, Times, Legacies", held at NOVA FCSH (17th-19th April 2024).

<sup>2</sup> As Edward Shils points out, "Hereditary monarchies deal with the determination of succession in a simple way; lineage and order of birth prescribe the heir to the throne. Hereditary monarchy is legitimized by the belief that sovereignty resides in a lineage" (1981, 187-188).

<sup>3</sup> See Rosen 2003, 39-46 and McCormick 2003, 91-95. A critical view of the topic is put forward in Laura Clancy's introduction and chapter 1 (2021, 1-62); in a lighter but very informative vein, see also Baker, 2020, especially the chapter "On your bike" (pp. 391-404).

<sup>4</sup> “(...) twenty years after many political and media pundits (...) sounded the death knell for the British monarchy, the institution is alive, well, and demonstrating more momentum than ever before in popular and consumer culture” (Otnes and Maclaran 2015, 283).

<sup>5</sup> “The Queen (...) made matters worse by opening Buckingham Palace to the public and charging them for entry. She ‘meant well’, of course — as with the previous decision that the Royal Family should start paying income tax. Both moves were thought of as modernisation, or ‘opening up’. But in fact they could only be opening down, levelling things monarchical into a society (...) where greed had eclipsed class. All that was sacred could but be profaned (...) when the idols asked meekly to be costed and tried to put their own price on the mysteries. What they were encountering was former subjects who had (...) half-mutated into citizens (...) in a society still unprogrammed for citizenship” (Nairn 2011, xxi). Despite the time gap, Nairn’s words could be compared with Walter Bagehot’s, quoted in the main text.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Storry and Childs, eds., 2017, pp. 23-24 and 281-283, namely the views that “[p]erhaps the most enduring stereotypical version of Britain is that which revolves around the idea of monarchy” (23), and “[m]onarchy in Britain is a fact of life. It forms part of Britons’ psychological (...) make-up, if only through the knowledge that people are subjects rather than citizens” (281).

<sup>7</sup> “Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet, (...) in its modern form it is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. ‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. (...)”

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules (...) of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” (1987, 1) In order not to stud my text with quotations from Hobsbawm, I suggest the reading of the whole introductory piece” (1-14).

<sup>8</sup> “To understand how and why monarchy has mattered here, one needs to look not just at tradition and custom, but also at disjunctions and at change over time. (...) The apparent antiquity of monarchy (...) masks considerable discontinuities in terms of evolution and the dynasties involved” (Colley 2014, 44-45). Likewise, in his assessment of Edmund Burke’s political ideas, C. W. Parkin presents society as “(...) an organism whose parts are deeply formed by their common life, with a tempo of change and a cumulative growth of its own. It is a living thing which reaches out into past and future” (1969, 123).

<sup>9</sup> As Paul Connerton argues, “whenever the social institutions for which ‘old’ traditions were designed begin to crumble under the impact of rapid social change, a widespread and

instant invention of new rituals occurs. The invention of ritual turns out to be both a general problem and a phenomenon of particular interest in post-traditional societies.” (2009, 51)

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Rosen recalls that “[i]n August 1996 it was reported that the most senior members of the royal family had begun to hold regular meetings of what they called The Way Forward Group, at which proposals for the future of the monarchy were discussed. Among the possibilities considered were ending the monarch’s role as head of the Church of England, allowing kings and queens to marry Catholics, allowing female members of the royal family equal rights to the throne, and restricting membership of the royal family to the monarch, the consort, and children and grandchildren who are direct heirs” (2003, 45).

<sup>11</sup> “Queen Elizabeth II’s success and popularity is rooted in her ability to adapt and evolve in the modern world. This has not always been straightforward or easy. Circumstances, family tragedies, and scandals (...) have forced her to reinvent the institution of monarchy in order to secure its future” (2022, x) and “[t]here may never be another Platinum Queen, but the modern monarchy she has fashioned over seventy (...) years will live on” (2022, 256).

<sup>12</sup> The former Buckingham House was rebuilt for George IV (1820-1830) from 1825 onwards by John Nash (1752-1835) and later by Edward Blore (1787-1879); the first British monarch to live in the palace was Queen Victoria (1837-1901), whose Memorial stands right opposite (Bahamón 2007, 97).

<sup>13</sup> “(...) all royal representations are stage-managed and precisely manufactured, and indeed royal visibility is balanced with a paradoxical but co-dependent *in*visibility, to ensure monarchy retains its mystique” (Clancy 2021, 20; this point is taken up on p. 65).

<sup>14</sup> For the suggestion of a possible analogy between the two “hunts” (the stag’s and Diana’s) in the film *The Queen* (2006), see Alarcão, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See also Jonathan Mayo’s article, recollecting, twenty years on, the week after Diana’s death ([Why didn't Buckingham Palace fly flag half mast for Diana? | Daily Mail Online](#)).

<sup>16</sup> As Antony Taylor puts it, “[b]y demonstrating the fallibility of our ‘betters’ and directing attention towards their failings, they have an implicitly levelling effect that erodes the mystique of monarchy and makes us feel better about ourselves” (1999, 240).

BA in Portuguese and English Studies (1981), MA in Anglo-Portuguese Studies (1986) and PhD in English Culture (1996), awarded by NOVA University, Lisbon, where he held the post of Associate Professor (Retired 2025). Director of the Central Library (2001-2009) and Co-Coordinator of the Faculty's earliest research group on Medieval Studies (1999-2004).

Colloquial Assistant in Portuguese at the University of Birmingham, UK (Late 1980s).

He has published two books, five co-editions and c.100 articles in Festchrifts, proceedings and academic journals on English/British Culture(s), Medieval English Studies and Anglo-Portuguese Studies.

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# CETAPS' Winter Doctoral Symposium

## (THIRD EDITION)

ANA BRÍGIDA PAIVA & BEATRIZ DE ALMEIDA SANTOS

CETAPS/NOVA-FCSH

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The third edition of the Winter Doctoral Symposium took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2025, at NOVA-FCSH (Lisbon), continuing a tradition established in the previous two editions of bringing together doctoral candidates and early-career researchers working within the scope of English-language literatures and cultures. Conceived as a peer-led initiative, the yearly Winter Doctoral Symposium intends not only to provide a platform for early-career researchers to present their work, but also to provide opportunities for CETAPS' junior researchers to organize academic events and build international networks within a supportive and welcoming environment. The 2025 edition remained faithful to this mission by offering a two-day programme that included five thematic panels, two keynote lectures, and several informal moments designed to promote dialogue and productive exchange among participants.

The 2025 edition of the Winter Doctoral Symposium followed a peer-led structure designed to promote both academic and organizational skill development. Instead of the traditional division between an Organizing Committee and a Scientific Committee, the event was coordinated by a team of Organizers (in alphabetical order, Ana Brígida Paiva, Beatriz de Almeida Santos, Catarina Moura, Gonçalo Santos, Miguel Oliveira, and Rui Mateus), in charge of logistics, communication, and overall event management; complementing their work, a group of Peer Mentors (in alphabetical order, Alice Carletto, Carlotta Pisano, Francisco Simãozinho Martins, Inês Vaz, and Mariana Cruz) took on exclusively academic responsibilities, namely approving proposals, curating thematic

162 panels and providing support and constructive feedback to presenters during the symposium.

The 2025 edition also had the support of volunteer Student Helpers (in alphabetical order, Ana Sofia Santos, Chiara Cataldo, Oktawia Firlej, and Rui Daniel Ramos), ranging from undergraduate to master's and doctoral students. Their assistance with registration, materials, and on-site logistics contributed to the smooth running of the event and provided valuable hands-on experience in the backstage work of academic event organization. According to Ana Sofia, the symposium also served as a "great networking experience", where the smooth coordination of the organizing team allowed the student helpers to engage meaningfully with researchers in different stages of their academic careers. By involving students in the "backstage" work, the symposium also allows peer-to-peer mentorship and practical skill-building within CETAPS and NOVA-FCSH.

The Winter Doctoral Symposium follows a rotational organizational model that encourages mentors and organizers to transition into new roles across editions, ensuring continuity while creating ongoing opportunities for professional development. The symposium also intends to integrate any interested early-career researchers connected to CETAPS, welcoming participants and team members across postgraduate programmes and universities. Additionally, to facilitate communication during the two days of the symposium, organizers create a temporary WhatsApp group every year, which is used by participants to share essential information, last-minute notices, photos, and resources, as well as to encourage informal networking. After the event concludes, participants are invited to join a larger, permanent WDS WhatsApp network (active since 2023), which brings together participants from all editions and serves as an ongoing community space where members share calls for papers, promote upcoming events, and continue developing the connections made during the symposium.

The 2025 edition of the Winter Doctoral Symposium saw significant international participation, with both first-time presenters and returning contributors. Presenters from Romania, Türkiye, Belgium, South Africa, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and different Portuguese institutions contributed to the event's interdisciplinary dimension, the increasing number of returning participants testifying to the growing visibility and continuity of the symposium.

Following the opening remarks made by Professor Gabriela Gândara Terenas (Executive Coordinator of the Department of Modern Languages, Cultures and Literatures at NOVA FCSH and Board Member of CETAPS), the first day of the third edition of the Winter Doctoral Symposium opened with a panel entitled “Translating Journeys”, chaired by Organizer Ana Brígida Paiva, exploring the intersections between translation and literary history. Adriana Dragomir from the University of Craiova compared different Romanian translations of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, highlighting the cultural and linguistic negotiations involved in rendering Rushdie’s cultural references and linguistic hybridity. Her colleague, Madalina Gabriela Valcu, also from the University of Craiova, examined the multiple translation trajectories of Edgar Allan Poe in Romania through a polysystemic perspective. The panel concluded with a presentation by Günes Yamanoglu, of Erzincan Binali Yildirim University, currently a visiting PhD researcher at the University of Lisbon, who outlined the historical development of translation in Türkiye and considered its cultural role during the Republican era.



Photograph 1 Jéssica Bispo

After a brief coffee break, the audience reconvened for the first keynote lecture, delivered by Jéssica Bispo from NOVA-FCSH (also a previous Winter Doctoral Symposium Organizer) and chaired by Peer Mentor Inês Vaz. Bispo's talk, "Representing Victorian London's East End in a Neo-Victorian Video Game Adaptation of Lewis Carroll's Alice Novels", focused on the subject of her doctoral research and examined how Victorian cultural imaginaries can be reinterpreted through contemporary media. During Q&A, Jéssica shared her PhD journey, as she had recently passed her viva and has since started lecturing at NOVA FCSH. As a past member of the Winter Doctoral Symposium's organizing and scientific committees, Jéssica reflects on the symposium's evolution into "a well-established platform that fosters genuine academic exchange, networking and community building". She believes the symposium's "intellectual diversity" and "growing sense of shared purpose among early-career researchers" are the qualities that truly set it apart from other academic gatherings. For Jéssica, the transition from organizer to keynote was a "formative moment" in her academic career. Jéssica also highlighted "sharing innovative research, fostering collaboration, and strengthening the sense of community within our field" as some of the symposium's strong suits.



*Photograph 2 Panel*

Following a lunch break, the afternoon session resumed with a panel on “Alternative Futures, Apocalyptic Realities”, chaired by Organizer Beatriz de Almeida Santos. In this panel, returning participant Noémie Mil-Homens Cavaco from UC Louvain examined postgrowth imaginaries in Jenny Offill’s *Weather*, highlighting the novel’s engagement with ecological anxiety.



*Photograph 3 Noémie Mil-Homens Cavaco*

Leon Bomela Loombe, Postdoctoral Fellow from the University of Cape Town, explored the narrative possibilities of ethnographic fiction in representations of artificial intelligence, while returning participant Patrícia Sá, from the University of Lisbon, reflected on the emotional landscapes and ambivalent representations of forests in J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. As returning speakers, PhD Candidates Noémie and Patrícia both viewed the symposium as a welcoming event, with Noémie acknowledging the support and

interest shown in her research and stating that this event motivated her to continue her thesis work. Patrícia also stressed the importance of student-led events in building peer networks, especially given the “isolating patterns of research” often found at the doctoral and post-doctoral levels, highlighting the added value of the networking session in this year’s programme.



*Photograph 4 Patrícia Sá*

Similarly, Leon Bomela Loombe found the event pivotal as he transitioned from postdoctoral work into independent publication. Leon described the symposium as a “rigorous academic platform and a space of affirmation”, praising the “atmosphere of intellectual generosity” that encouraged him to situate his research within broader global dialogues. According to Leon, the environment was uniquely suited for early-career

scholars to take intellectual risks; he noted that the diversity of the presentations allowed participants to “reconsider the boundaries between literature, culture, translation and technology”, ultimately reaffirming the necessity of interdisciplinary spaces that empower emerging researchers. Following the symposium, this collaboration continued as Leon presented an online guest lecture on May 14, 2026. Moderated by symposium Organizer Ana Brígida Paiva, the lecture focused on his research and upcoming Bloomsbury publication regarding Afrofuturism, artificial intelligence, and postcolonial imaginaries.



*Photograph 5 Leon Bomela*

The first day of the symposium concluded with a second coffee break, followed by an informal networking moment, which provided space for participants to exchange ideas, learn about publication opportunities within CETAPS’s range of publications – including *VIA PANORAMICA*, the *Journal of Anglo-Portuguese Studies* (REAP/JAPS), and *Translation Matters* –, and further strengthen emerging connections in a more relaxed setting. This activity was designed around playful academic collaboration: participants

placed their names in a bag and were paired randomly, with each pair invited to invent a creative joint paper title that combined their research interests. This academic “speed dating” exercise successfully sparked conversations that continued during the conference dinner, strengthening connections and new potential collaborations.

The second day of the Winter Doctoral Symposium began with the panel “Anglo-Portuguese Intersections”, chaired by Peer Mentor Francisco Martins. This session focused on cultural and historical points of contact between Portuguese and Anglophone contexts. Maria João Brito from NOVA-FCSH examined female scientist characters in contemporary historical fiction, explaining how Portuguese and Anglophone narratives represent women working in scientific and technological fields. Ana Rita Brettes, also from NOVA-FCSH, presented a case study on Lisbon during the Second World War, drawing on the work of Neill Lochery and Margarida Magalhães Ramalho to examine the city’s literary and historiographical portrayals.

After a mid-morning coffee break, the symposium continued with the panel “(De)Constructing Identities”, chaired by Peer Mentor Mariana Cruz. This panel included a paper by Francisco Simãozinho Martins from NOVA-FCSH, who examined questions of sexuality, paratext, and the figure of the hare in *Willobie His Auisa*. Lourenço de Almeida Duarte, also from NOVA-FCSH, analyzed themes of ageing and shadow in the work of António Lobo Antunes, and Marina Tomas, from the University of Osijek, explored representations of otherness, haunting, and isolation in the contemporary Irish drama of Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh.

After lunch, the second keynote lecture was delivered by Joana Caetano from the University of Porto (CETAPS/FLUP), chaired by Organizer Rui Mateus. In her lecture “Ursula K. Le Guin’s Hainish Ethics and Poetics”, Caetano examined ethical frameworks, world-building practices, and speculative imaginaries in Le Guin’s work, exploring the intersections between literary creativity and social philosophy. Beyond her presentation, Caetano – who serves as the executive editor of the journal *VIA PANORAMICA* – pointed out the connection between the symposium’s goals and the journal’s mission, as both are CETAPS initiatives dedicated to providing a platform for emerging researchers to publish and discuss their work. Building on this shared purpose, Caetano noted that witnessing the growth of early-career academics is “a purpose as personal as it is professional”, stating:

It is in safe and enriching spaces like these that [students] find the tools and the company to test their ideas and evolve as scholars. These are the types of initiatives that we should continue to promote.

In this sense, by promoting “learning and curiosity”, both the Winter Doctoral Symposium and *VIA PANORAMICA* function as complementary pillars within CETAPS, encouraging young scholars to take their first steps in formal academic publication.

The final panel of the symposium, “Multimedial and Intermedial Storytelling”, chaired by Peer Mentor Alice Carletto, brought together two presentations that considered the aesthetic and institutional dimensions of contemporary drama. Derya Alim, from the West University of Timișoara, reflected on award-giving tendencies in the Pulitzer Prize for Drama between 2010 and 2024, while Nela Hachlerová, from Masaryk University, examined intermedial aesthetics in the experimental plays of Sam Shepard. Beyond the academic exchange, participant Derya Alim noted that the symposium provided a much-needed emotional boost for early-career researchers. She described the event as a “wonderful experience” that helped counter the typical “anxiety, stress, and perfectionism” of doctoral work. According to Derya, the combination of formal panels, networking events and informal dinner conversations “reminded me why I fell in love with this lifestyle and this field”. This inspiration has already translated into concrete action, with Derya currently collaborating with Organizers Ana Brígida Paiva and Beatriz de Almeida Santos to organize initiatives that intersect their shared research interests.

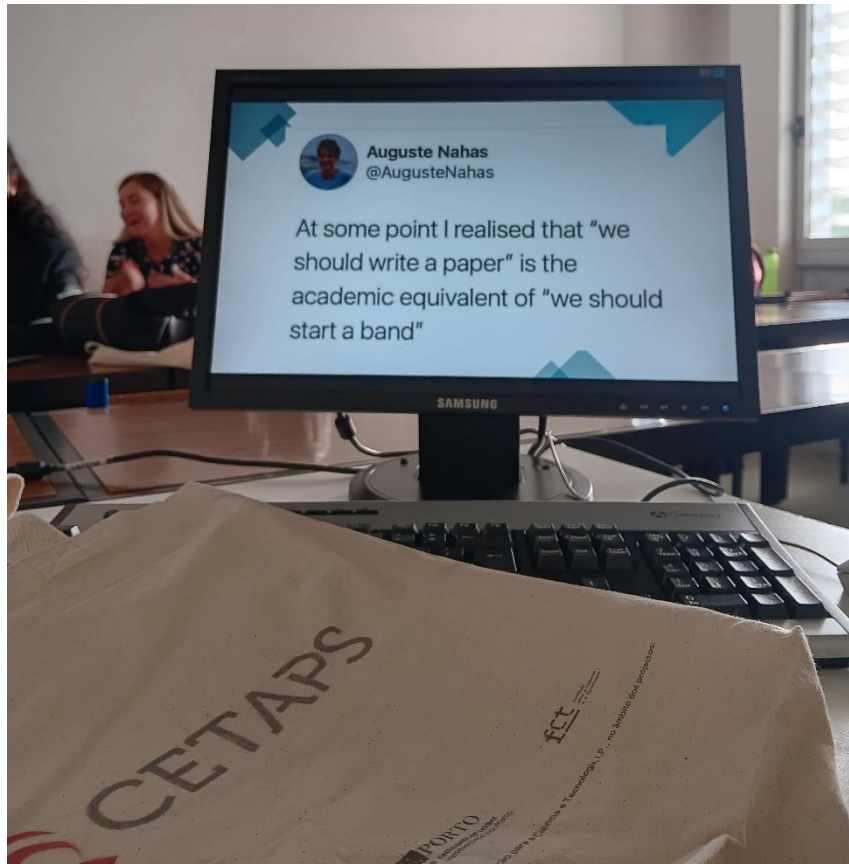
The symposium concluded with brief closing remarks summarizing the event and expressing appreciation for the contributions of participants, keynote speakers, Peer Mentors and the organizing team (including Student Helpers). Across all three editions of the symposium, most participants have highlighted the event’s peer-led organizational structure as a central factor in its continued success. The fact that the Winter Doctoral Symposium is organized by fellow early-career researchers contributed to an atmosphere that participants consistently described as collegial and supportive, reinforced by clear communication channels and structured opportunities for informal interaction.

The third edition of the Winter Doctoral Symposium thus successfully fulfilled its ongoing mission of creating a space where emerging scholars can present their research, develop professional skills, and engage in meaningful conversation across disciplinary boundaries. The quality of the presentations, the responsiveness of the audience, the

170 enthusiasm of returning presenters, and the strong commitment demonstrated by the organizing team and Peer Mentors reaffirm the relevance of this annual event within the research community at CETAPS, NOVA-FCSH and beyond.

The symposium's impact is perhaps best measured by its longevity. As Pedro Mora-Ramírez (Universidad de Sevilla), an attendee of the inaugural 2023 edition, notes, the Winter Doctoral Symposium is not merely a “one-off academic event”, but rather the beginning of “ongoing collaboration, friendship, and intellectual growth”. An important factor in this continued engagement has been the symposium's WhatsApp group, which has evolved into a resource for sharing information about academic events. Jennifer Tubbs (Texas Tech University), who joined the community during the second edition in 2024, emphasizes that this community continues to provide value long after the closing remarks, noting that she still uses the group regularly to track calls for papers and keep in touch with peers. In fact, the professional synergy fostered here has led to tangible academic outcomes: Jennifer is currently revising a paper for a journal edited by a fellow attendee, a testament to the “rewarding extension of the connections formed at the symposium”.

As CETAPS' Winter Doctoral Symposium looks toward future editions, the latest 2025 edition stands as a testament to the continued growth of a vibrant and internationally engaged community of doctoral and early-career researchers. Looking ahead, we hope to welcome new CETAPS postgraduate students into the team (whether as Organizers or Peer Mentors), ensuring that future editions remain a collaborative and evolving space for emerging scholars.



*Photograph 6 Networking*

## HOW TO CITE

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