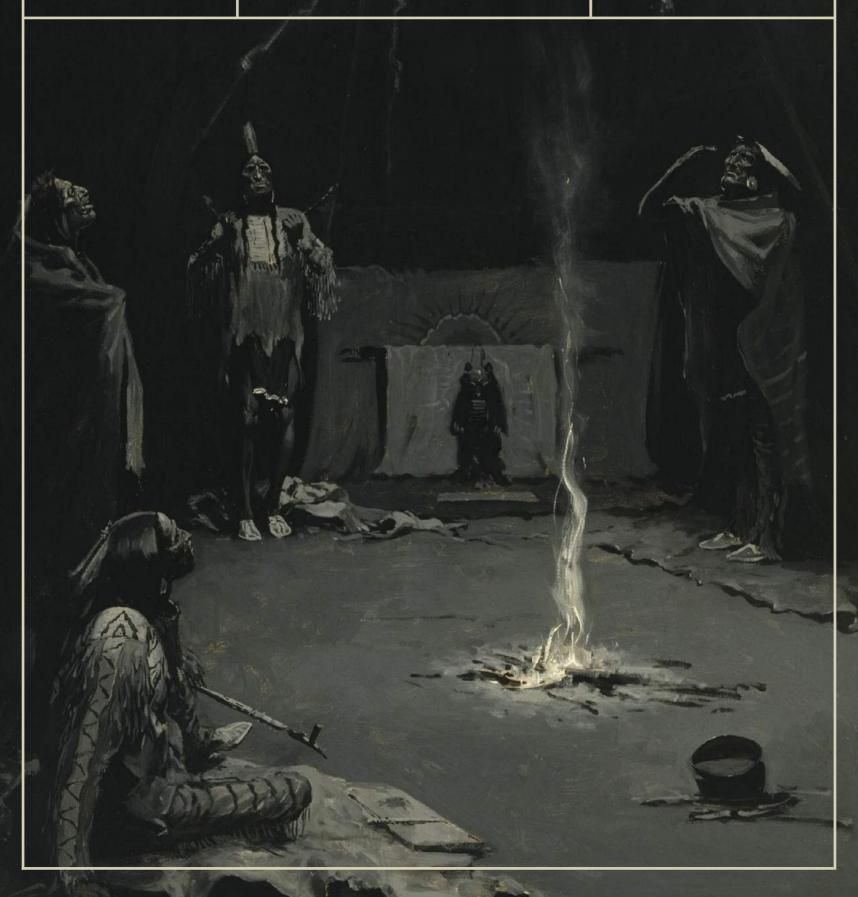
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Alberto Venegas Ramos was born in Badajoz in 1988. He lived in Nogales, Extremadura and graduated in History from the University of Extremadura. Later, he studied different masters on historical research and teaching practice. He has taught in Geography, History and History of Art in Madrid for three years. Student of Social and Cultural Anthropology by the UNED and doctoral researcher in the public uses of History. Director of the magazine Presura and collaborates in different media of press and critic of videojuegos.

@albertoxvenegas / correodealbertovenegas@gmail.com

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Presura tries to work on the axis where research and divulgation are united. It works through contributions of original texts. Each month we publish a different number related to a theme (eg, Ethnicity and Videogames, Final Fantasy, Politics and Videogames, Music and Videogames, Black Isle, Art and Videogames, etc.).

Each theme is announced in time for whoever is

interested can write comfortably. You can see the calendar of publications in the own web. If any of the topics you have interested enough to write the first step is to take a look at our style recommendations, the second to contact us through the editor's address and director (correodealbertovenegas@gmail.com / editorial @ Presura.es) and the third one, before writing, is to take another look at our writing and shipping rules.

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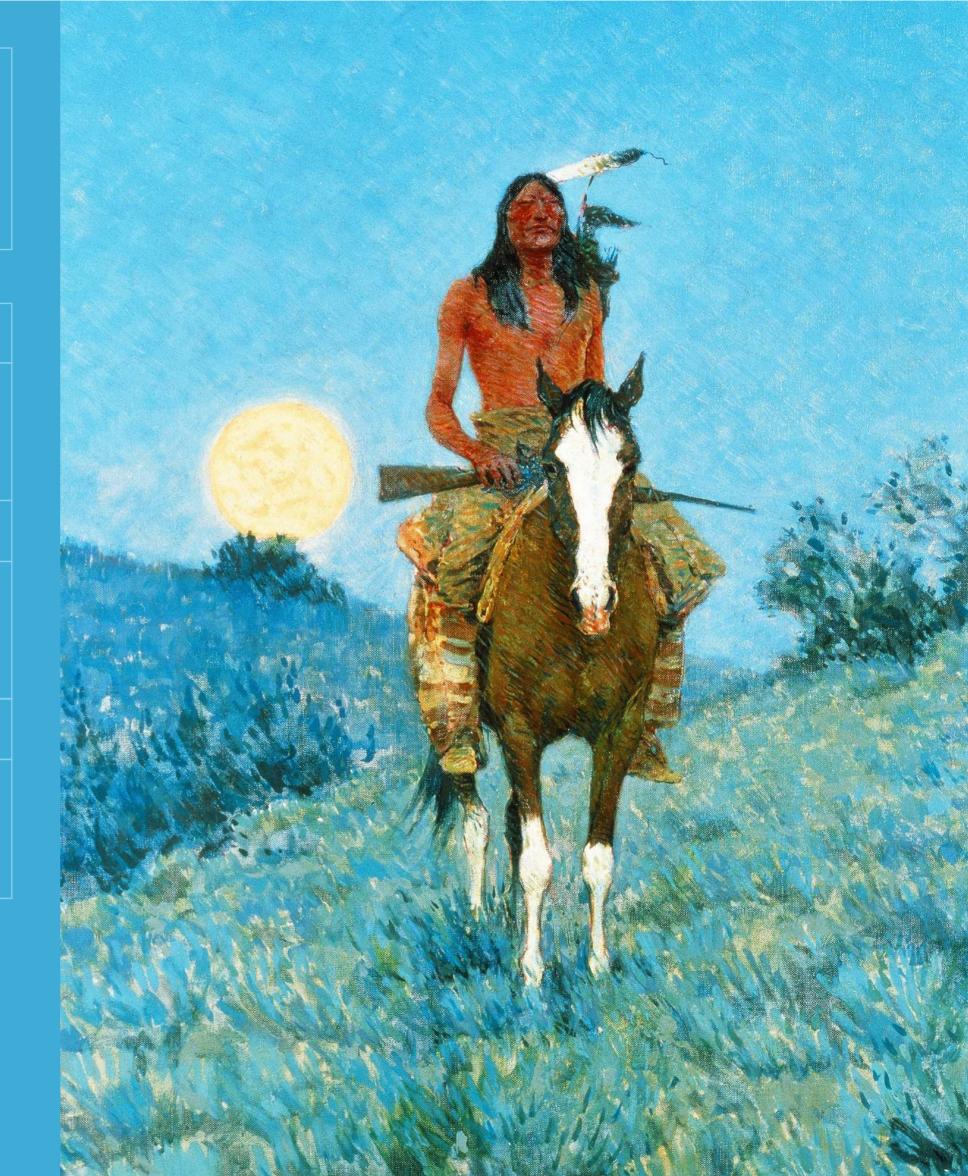
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FEDERICO PEÑATE DOMÍNGUEZ.

Fede Peñate Domínguez fell in love with the past for the first time when they were little. Responsible for this were computer games such as 'Age of Empires' and 'Commandos: Behind the Enemy Lines', which made them want to, in the future, make a living by writing history. In order to achieve this, they studied an Undergraduate in History at Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. A Ma. in Contemporary History was the next step, and they chose Universidad Complutense de Madrid as their new alma mater, where they currently work. Nowadays, Fede are more interested in history rather than in the past, and therefore they are researching how the computer game medium makes claims about the past and, therefore, becomes a historical form. Despite the myths of the Spanish Empire being their main research topic, they are interested in any discourse regarding popular history in pop culture artefacts.



KONSTANTINOS DIMOPOULOS.

Konstantinos Dimopoulos is a game urbanist and designer, with an engineering degree, a MSc in city and regional planning, and a PhD in urban planning and geography. His site is the aptly named www.game-cities.com.



Daniel Muriel holds a PhD in Sociology. He is a Postdoctoal Fellow with funding support of the Basque Government at the University of Salford (UK) and the University of the Basque Country (Spain). Daniel is an experienced researcher and author on identity, cultural heritage, science and technology studies, experts and video game culture. He has published numerous papers and chapters in internationally renowned journals and publishing houses, has participated in various international conferences, and is a regular contributor to popular media. Daniel has also been a visiting Guest Member of Staff at Newcastle University (UK) and Visiting Researcher at the University of Buenos Aires (Argentina). He is co-author, with Professor Garry Crawford, of the upcoming book Video Games as Culture (Routledge). Website: https://danielmuriel.com/.

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Frederic Remindran.

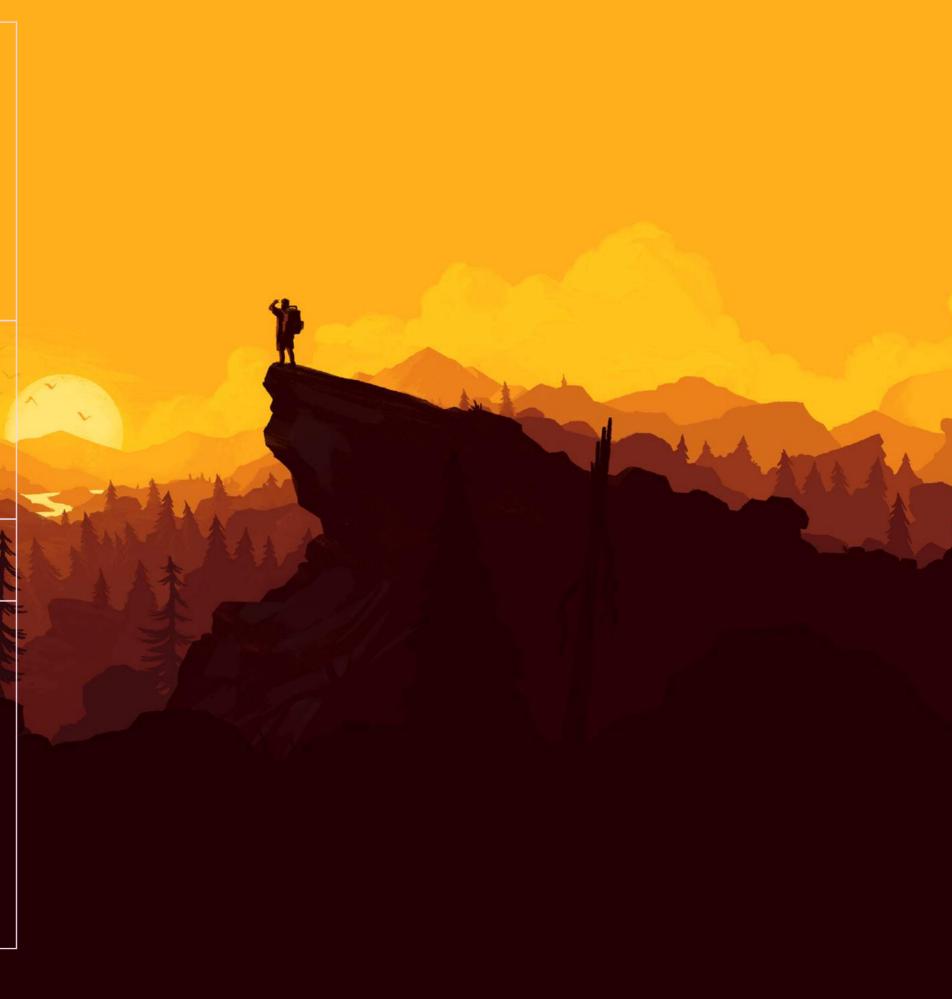
TRACING THE SOCIAL

LESSONS FROM FIREWATCH AND EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

BY DANIEL MURIEL

Traces – what is left after an action – are fundamental to understand the reality we inhabit. Video games such as Gone Home (Fullbright, 2013), Bloodborne (FromSoftware, 2015), Sunless Sea (Failbetter Games, 2015), The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013), Portal (Valve, 2007), Half-Life 2 (Valve, 2004), and Bioshock (Irrational Games, 2007) have used the notion with great skill. They intelligently introduced the idea of «trace» as part of their mechanic and narrative universes. Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (The Chinese Room, 2015) and

Firewatch (Campo Santo, 2016) join this distinguished list of titles, where traces are handled according to their significance. Drawing on Bruno Latour's work on the social as the articulation of heterogeneous elements and Michel Maffesoli's reflections on the eternal instant, I examine the way in which both Firewatch and Everybody's Gone to the Rapture help us understand how the social bond is forged (and torn) in the banal, the superficial, and the mundane, which is, in the end, what we all have in common.



TRAGES OF THE SOCIAL

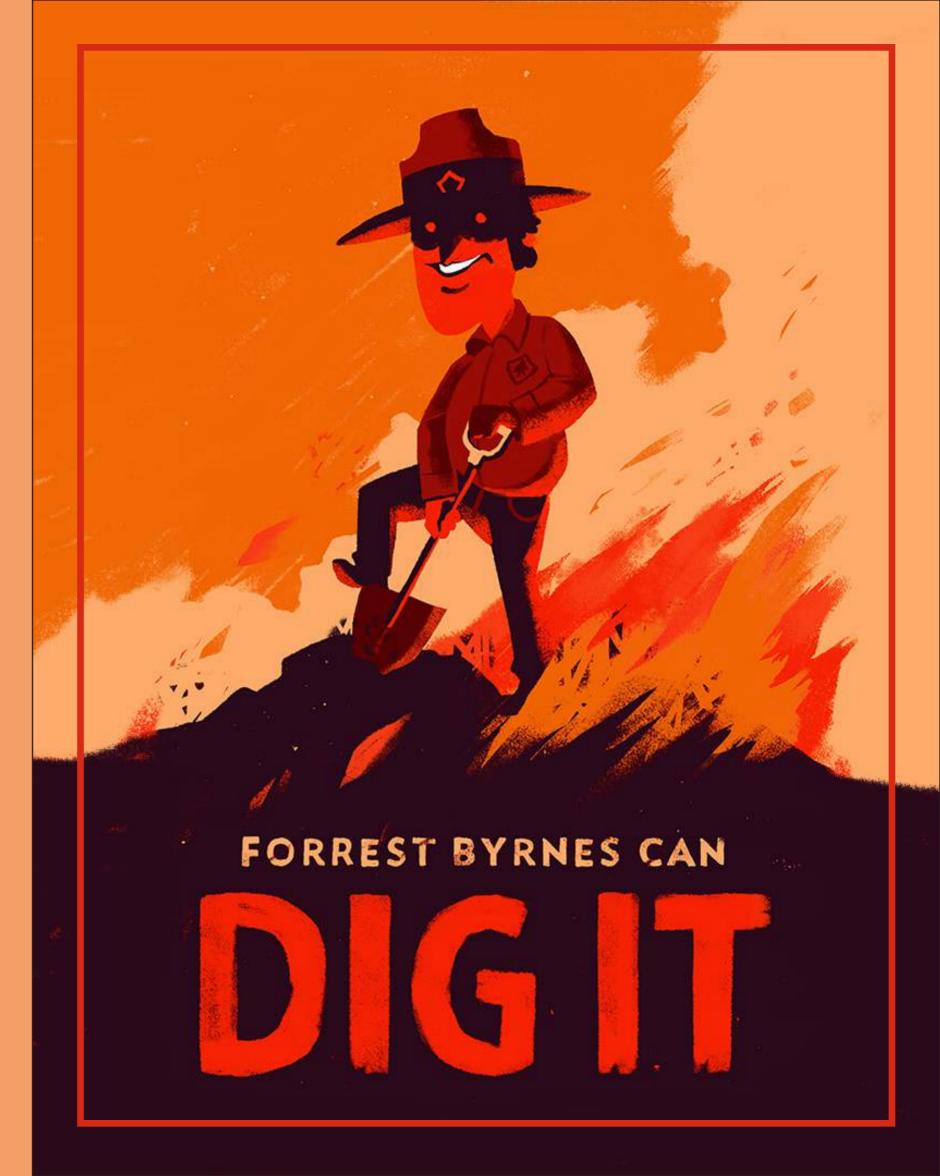
What is social reality? Or to be more specific: What are sociologists referring to when they talk about the social and social reality? Answering these questions involves moving beyond considerations of a theoretical or methodological order, as they not only point toward a specific form of doing sociology but to the reality that is being studied. They imply an ontology of the social, that is, the model of social reality assumed by every theoretical starting point. In his book, Reassembling the Social, Bruno Latour (2007) proposes the use of a sociology of associations in contrast to a traditional sociology of the social. He starts from the premise that the social is not a substance. According to this approach, the social is not the material from which things, events, relationships, factors, practices, structures and, in general, any element of reality can be made. In short, the social is not a property or state of the real, but is instead the process through which the real is constituted.

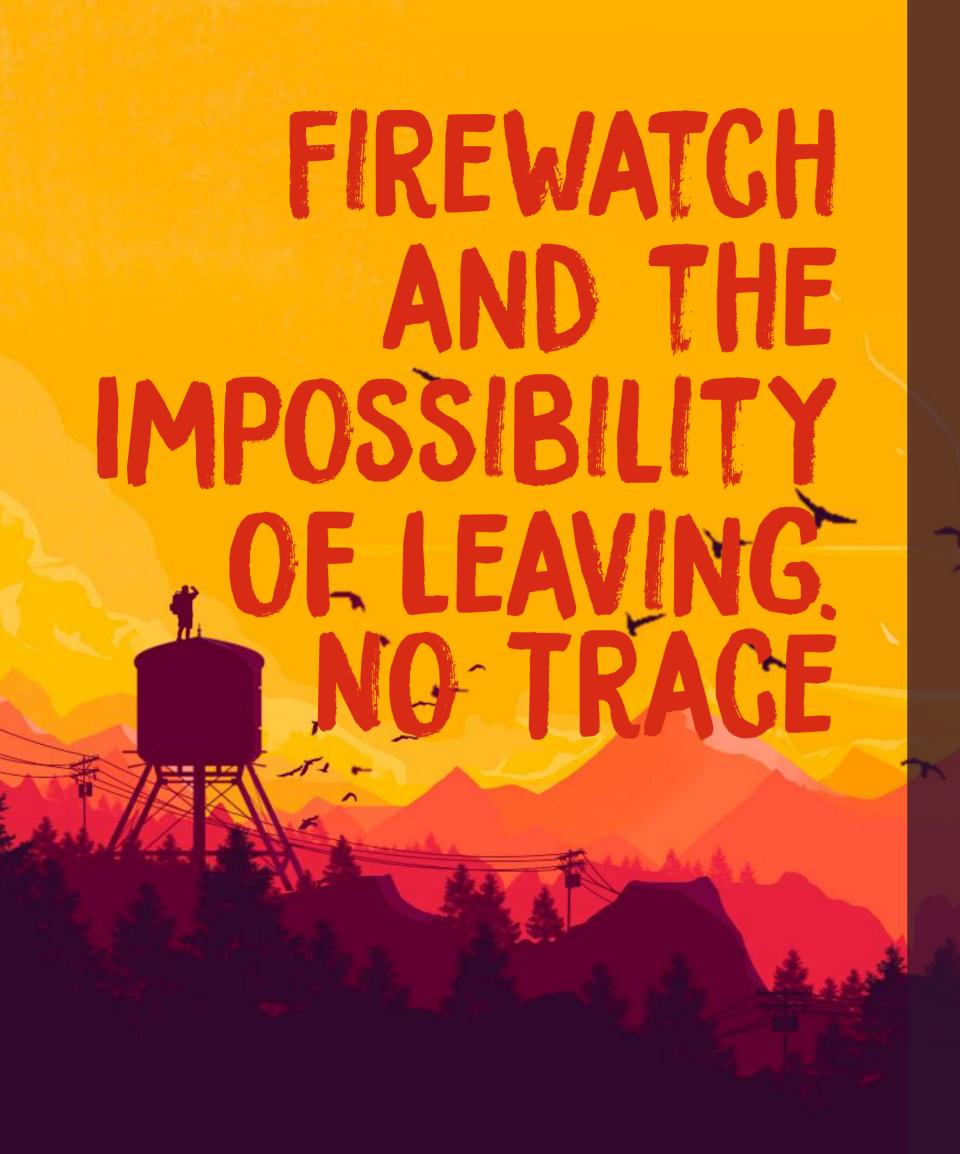
If, for Durkheim (considered one of the «founding fathers» of sociology), as found in his The Rules of Sociological Method, 'the first and most basic rule is to consider social facts as things' (2014: 29), here the social is not a substance, but is considered as the product, always contingent and in continual reproduction, of the articulation of distinct ingredients: actors, associations, processes, practices, etc. Attention is focused on movements, displacements and transformations through which the social is made and unmade, which permits us to explain and observe the emergence of formations, structures, institutions, relations and social agents.

In this regard, all (re)production of the social leaves traces. These are the remains that the social produces and appear in the form of discourses, memories, notes, inscriptions, laws, texts, works, buildings, organigrams, pamphlets, etc., things that can be mapped. It is a principle of the social that permits its traceability, its moni-

THE SOCIAL IS NOT A PROPERTY OR STATE OF THE REAL, IS THE PROCESS TROUGH WHICH THE REAL IS CONSTITUTED.

toring; in short, enabling the possibility of doing sociology (it is also applicable to the vast majority of disciplines). Without remains, without traces, without marks or footprints, it would be impossible to do so. The social is «visible only by the traces it leaves» (Latour, 2007: 8).





The X-Files, the cult science fiction TV series created by Chris Carter, is invariably linked to its popular leitmotiv: The truth is out there. However, as the series' fans surely know, there are more phrases – turned into principles – that are indelibly embedded in the collective imaginary of its universe such as I want to believe, Resist or serve, or Nothing disappears without a trace. I will focus on the latter idea, 'nothing disappears without a trace', because it also presupposes a particular ontology: everything that is and does something will always leave an impression, a mark, or a trace. Without those traces, without signs of any kind of activity or transformation, then, we will not be able to deal with or understand that reality. Moreover, it would be a non-existing reality for all intents and purposes, part of the unthinkable. May Chris Carter have read Latour?

Firewatch is the perfect title to deepen our understanding of this approach, to teach us the importance of traces as the fundamental sign of activity and existence. Towards the end of the game, let's not enter into too much detail, we can read at the bottom of a handwritten note the following words: "Leave no trace". The intention of whoever wrote the note was to not leave any trace. The irony of the discovery is so formidable that we can almost see how reality falls apart at the seams. Those who did not want to leave a trace ended up leaving one when they indicated they did not want to do it. After all, like in Latour's theory, reality is formed by these discontinuous traces; it is how we know it exists, moves, and transforms.

And traces are a constant in Firewatch. Traces that convey to us that the impenetrable peacefulness of the forest is nothing more than the canvas where a vivid universe, traversed by both trivial and heart-breaking events, is captured. With the exception of some portraits, we will not see any human face throughout the game; we virtually will not come across with any living thing either. It is not necessary. We have the notes that two forest rangers interchanged in the past, the marks that a bear has left on the surface of a tree's trunk, the charred remains of a controlled burning, a trail of beer cans, belongings that were abandoned in haste, a bag that hangs from some branches, open wounds in the shape of guilt with which the past reminds us that our soul was torn apart. Marks, footprints, and traces. And at the top, in her watchtower, Delilah, who could easily be the echo of a past life that we pick up with our walkie-talkie.

The fact that the event that triggers the beginning of the story rests on the terrible experience of the loved one that progressively loses her memory – that set of traces that links us with the world and its inhabitants, sinking into oblivion, reinforces the importance of the trace. Without it, we are nothing; or worse yet, we do not know that we were. Then, like Harry, fleeing is the only thing we can do. But nothing disappears without a trace.



Everybody's Gone to the Rapture proposes an experiment. As in those thought experiments that proliferate in philosophy, theoretical physics, and social studies of science, the game suggests a hypothetical scenario: What if we could be privileged witnesses of the instant that follows the end of the world? What would we experience? What would have been left behind? What aspects of our lives would be relevant? The Chinese Room's work enables us to navigate the calm that comes after the storm, dwell in the eternal instant of Maffesoli's theory, and pay attention to the traces of a past social life: those carved on the territory, on the buildings, on the objects that were hastily abandoned. The calmness of the environment, the suspension of time, and the majesty - horrifying and tragic at moments – of the landscape, is what allows us to notice those traces. And among them, the echoes of conversations, occurrences, and reflections of a more or less recent past. Echoes that, as a reverberation in the continuous space-time, briefly alter the post-apocalyptic peace.

Those echoes, which are outside time, give the experiment full meaning along with the physical traces (handkerchiefs tainted with blood, the rooms' layouts, chairs in a circle, dead animals, projectiles containing nerve agent, maps, open suitcases, drawings, books, notes on a blackboard, graffiti, memos, posters announcing a play, broken objects, abandoned cars, and so forth). All those elements are able to give meaning to the situation because they empty the universe of the noise of the social that it is always enveloping (and masking) it. By doing so, it allows us to observe the fundamental elements of the real, even if these are just a series of disjointed and disorganised fragments. Precisely, the controls of Everybody's Gone to the Rapture are designed to be part of an unhurriedly contemplative dynamic, since, unlike most video games, it is not possible to run (although the game enables the possibility of a small speed increase, which is, nonetheless, continuously interrupted). Thus, the game forces us to think inside its ephemeral eternity.

According to Michel Maffesoli (2001), once the historic, linear, and teleological temporality of modernity is broken, what emerges is the non-time of the everyday life ritual. Everybody's Gone to the Rap

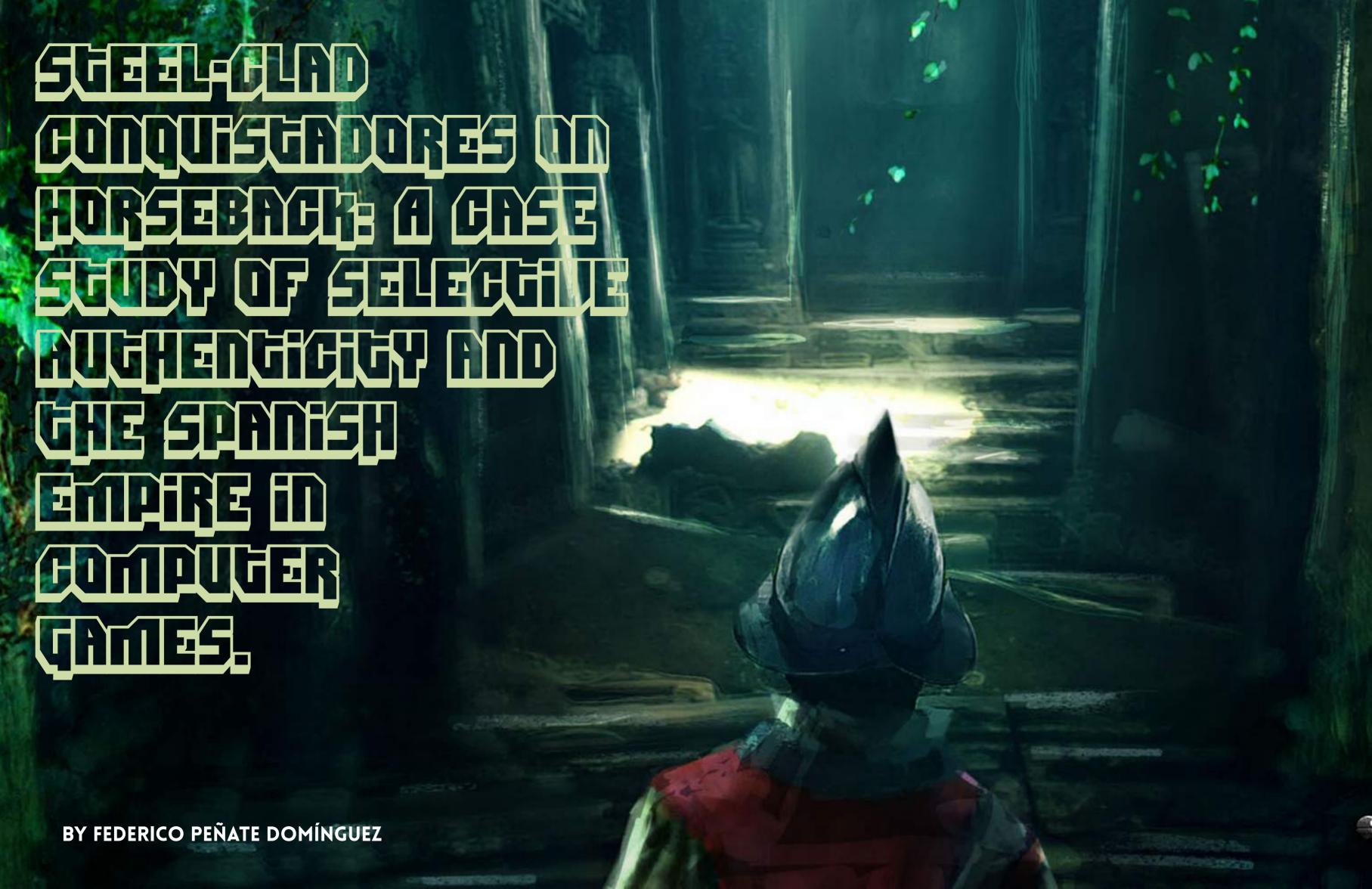


TRAPPED IN THAT ETERNAL INSTANT, THANKS TO THE FORCE THAT TRIGGERS THE RAPTURE, WE ARE IN A BETTER POSITION TO UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING.

ture is a theoretical experiment brought to life in the shape of a video game. It is a very efficient experiment, which let us explore how social bond is forged and torn through the traces that the mundane, the quotidian, the superficial, and the banal leave behind. The particularities of the stories narrated, which are about personal relationships, fear, love, failures, projects, betrayals, mistakes, knowledge, a sense of community, and so on, are irrelevant. The important thing is that The Chinese Room's work shows us the fundamental mechanisms by which we are able to grasp a tiny part of meaning in the maelstrom of the social. Trapped in that eternal instant, thanks to the force that triggers the rapture, we are in a better position to understand everything.

All in all, what Firewatch and Everybody's Gone to the Rapture teach us is a simple but valuable lesson: Understanding social reality means we understand the traces it leaves behind.





The term empire is extremely popular. It might make people think romantically about the rise and fall of Ancient Rome, nostalgically remember the British rule over the Seas, or stand in awe before the image of legions of stormtroopers crushing the rebel resistance in the name of the Galactic Empire. Although historians and political scientists may disagree with the ambiguous use by mass media of this controversial concept, no one can question its popularity in pop culture products. Videogames, especially those inspired in the past, excel in the indiscriminate use of the word. From the seminal Age of Empires (Ensemble Studios, 1996) to the not so popular Empire: Total War (The Creative Assembly, 2009), developers have used this broadly interpreted historical category to tell interactive tales about marvellous discoveries, epic conquests and mighty rule.

Many of these games are set in the Early Modern period, when the first great European expeditions took place and the first transoceanic empires rose, only to fall and be replaced by the expanding pressures of their competing neighbours. Therefore, it is only natural that the representation of the "empire upon which the sun never sets" is privileged in these products. The phrase, coined during the rule of King Phillip II of Spain, made reference to the rule of the Spanish branch of the House of Habsburg over a vast and complex set of territories that spanned across the globe. The most part of these lands were discovered accidentally when Cristopher Columbus, a sailor commissioned by the Catholic Monarchs, set foot in the island of La Española in 1492. Beyond the Antillean isles where Europeans initially settled laid a vast, unexplored continent that attracted many adventurers form the Iberian Peninsula and the recently conquered Canary Islands. Thus began the historical process known as the Spanish Conquest of the Americas.



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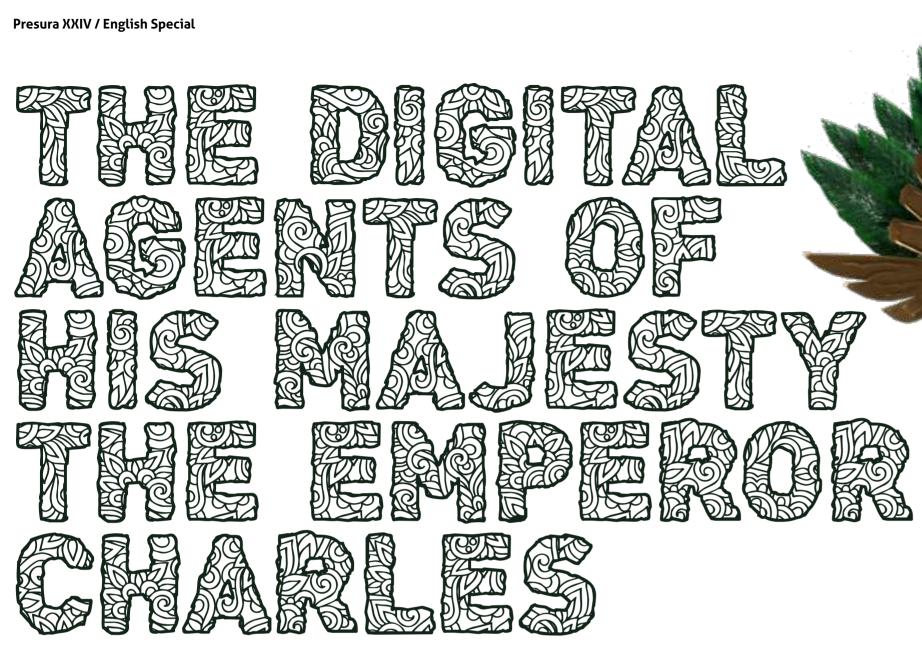
CONQUERORS BOTH WIFUAL AND MYTHICAL:

Such a decisive event, considered one of the most important milestones of the Western culture, has been subject to the scrutiny of the historians since the day it began. It is also very present in the collective memory and the public history, praised by ones and criticized by others. The Conquest is a topic of discussion that never goes old, and thus it is prone to interested interpretations that have blurred reality with myth. Here, we follow the claims of Elliott and Kapell when they say that the version of the past presented by games draws more from myth than from historiography (this is, how historians make meaning of the past). Furthermore, the aforementioned authors state that myth is an endemic element of any form of history, be it popular or academic. This is why they use the term 'myth-history', in order to stress that "...an 'ideology in narrative form' or a story that contains a worldview is largely the purpose of not just myth, but of history as well" (Elliott, A. B. R. & Kapell, M. W., 2013: 362). This results in a process where "...game designers often integrate, willingly or not, myths and inaccuracies into products that are sold as 'historically accurate'" (Holdenried, J. D. & Trépanier, N., 2013: 108).

The same authors make another interesting point when describing how games represent the past. Due to the ludic nature of these products, by which the player's actions are noticeable in the game world and influence it, games cannot be historically accurate. Their accuracy becomes compromised the moment the user is granted agency to change the past. This is why games can deal only with authenticity. While accuracy is often associated to historical realism, an authentic depiction of history is the one that gets the feeling of the past 'right'. In other words, one that resonates with the idea of the past audiences have. This 'realisticness' (the term Galloway uses to describe those military shooters that attempt to look real) is neither absolute not constructed in arbitrary ways, but follows a number of rules that Salvati and Bullinger (2013) have named 'selective authenticity'. These are the strategies followed by the developers when they build their ludofictional worlds and consist on the selection of a number of sings from historical texts, images, and popular representations of the period. After that, creators proceed to arrange these signs following particular narrative conventions that can be easily understood and interpreted by audiences. The elements necessitated by the 'selective authenticity' differ, depending on the period depicted and the type of game. As an example for their theory, Salvati and Bullinger coined the term 'Brand WWII' to describe the three core elements of the strategies followed by first-person shooters set in the Second World War to feel 'authentic': follow cinematic conventions, rely on documentary authority, and feature a strong technological fetishism.

Obviously, the process followed in the representation of Spain in games set in the Early Modern period is needed of signs different from the ones of the 'brand' mentioned above. They also vary depending on the type of historical simulation they are part of. The current study will only focus on a few examples of games ascribed to the broad category of strategy and simulation, which includes Real Time Strategy games (RTS), Turn Based Strategy games (TBS), and 4x games (explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate). Many of these games are 'conceptual simulations' of the past that follow a constructionist epistemology of history, and their narratives tend to be 'open', often 'ontological'. This is, they are digital playgrounds where we can actively create our own version of history through a number of tools given by the developer, and therefore change the course of it (Chapman, A., 2016). While not all the games analysed in this section give the amount of freedom to the player that characterise the 'realist simulations with open-ontological narratives', they follow the same strategies of authentication regarding the Spanish Conquest of the Americas, which is their top subject.





The authentic image of the conquistador featured in strategic simulations is very specific. We can use the conquistador unit included in the critically acclaimed RTS Age of Empires II: The Conquerors (Ensemble Studios, 2000), as the paradigmatic example. The visual representation of this warrior is symptomatic: a man on horseback, wearing a steel plate and a characteristic steel helmet, and armed with a musket. Although other games do not offer the emblematic condensation of most of the myths of the Spanish conquest in a single unit as AoE II does, they still offer a recurring image of these European invaders. For example, the 4x franchise Sid Meier's: Civilization (Firaxis Games, 2001-2016)

transmits a homogeneous view of the conquistador despite the changes introduced to the unit by every new instalment. It appeared first in Sid Meier's Civilization III and was visually represented as a steel-clad horseman armed with a lance and followed by a war dog. The next game in the series almost did not change this portrayal, discarding just the dog. Additionally, the release of Civilization V brought no changes to the established practice. Finally, the recent Civilization VI got rid of the horse and gave conquistadores gunpowder weapons, turning them in a more powerful version of the musketeer unit. Despite the noteworthy changes, the Spaniard adventurer's martial uniqueness is



linked either to the warhorse or to the firearm. Finally, the last example of this trope comes from Medieval II: Total War (The Creative Assembly, 2006). The game displays two types of conquistadores: those unmounted and those who fight on horseback. Despite stepping off the tradition of the harquebuses by arming these men with steel swords and shields or lances, the warriors still wear steel cuirasses and helmets.

These visual representations of the agents of the Conquest are highly problematic. Firstly, the conquistador is commonly shown as a mid-aged white male displaying an outstanding beard. This representation is an easy one because it merges two traditions encouraged by the videogame medium: while it privileges a mythical perception of the conquistador, it also reinforces the image of the traditional videogame hero. Furthermore, this partiality resonates with the historiography's regrettable tradition of focusing on a version of history that privileges the agency of the European male while undermining the role of other human groups. Although this is an archetypical image, these adventurers were few in comparison with other groups and definitively could not achieve the Conquest alone. Among the forgotten groups we can find women, black African and Indians. Regarding the former, the chronicles tell about the deeds of female conquerors that either travelled to the New World following their husbands or crossed the Ocean by their own initiative seeking fortune or just to escape from the suffocating social roles of the Old World. Both played an active and crucial role in que invasion of America, not only by caring about their male counterparts but also fighting Natives and rival Europeans.

The most astonishing example is Catalina de Erauso, a woman who dressed as a man and spent years fighting by the side of her male comrades and having sexual encounters with female lovers. Furthermore, this white male-centred representation actively excludes the importance of black Africans and allied Natives in the Conquest, without whom only a few Europeans could have not defeated the vast armies the Indian peoples deployed before them.

Unfortunately, many authoritarian explanations of the Conquest focus on the fact that the fall of the Americas before bands of few but highly trained and well equipped Spaniards was inevitable. Frist, we have to bear in mind that most of the Spaniards who partake in the Conquest were not professional warriors, but worked as artisans: blacksmiths, tailors, carpenters were a majority. Regarding to the myths about their equipment, Jared Diamond, an ornithologist that tries to explain the development of every human society based on geographical factors and the domestication of particular species, claims that:

THE VIDEO GAME MEDIUM IS MATURE ENOUGH TO WRITE THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY

"When we consider the advantages that Spaniards derived from horses, steel weapons, and armor against foot soldiers without metal, it should no longer surprise us that Spaniards consistently won battles against enormous odds" (Diamond, J., 1998: 77).



This belief is broadly spread among game developers, and presents a narrative that dates back to a time when the Conquest was taking place. The men involved in it wrote texts explaining how, with the help of God, they could have been victorious before so many pagan enemies. These narratives follow the fashion of the chivalric romance and add a huge amount of religious providence to the mix. However, the particular advantages brought by the steel plate and helmet and the harquebuses are not highlighted in these testimonies. Where does its spread use in videogames come from, then? We can find the answer in latter pictorial representations commissioned by the conquistadores and their heirs, and also in the master narratives that explain world dominance in terms of technological development. On the one hand, the portraits and folding screens depicting the period, commissioned from the 17th century onwards, represented the Spanish invaders wearing full armor and helmets, and usually fall in anachronisms. In truth, steel protection became a disadvantage in the climates and landscapes of America and most conquistadores simply wore leather doublets and hats or adopted the type of protection used by Indians, for example the Aztec cotton vest known as ichcahuipilli. In the case of handguns and cannons, very few were deployed during the Conquest. Additionally, their small numbers entailed a low performance, plus they were difficult to use in the humid battlegrounds of South and Central America. Contrary to the steel sword, which became the decisive weapon since it could easily cut through the light armor Native warriors wore. Furthermore, the initial advantage the use horses brought was rapidly contested by the techniques developed by the Indians





to dismount Spaniards and reduce the performance of their horsemen. However, in computer games the representation of the musket and the warhorse is privileged while the steel sword becomes a common weapon to almost every faction.

Going back to the chivalric records written by those educated conquistadores, we can see that religion played a crucial role in the explanation of their success. These narratives gave God a prominent role, presenting Spaniards as mere tools of His will. The conquerors also claimed that they were aided in battle by divine forces, manifested in the figure of the Virgin Mary or, more frequently, in the form of Santiago, patron saint of Spain. According to the Christian discourse, the warrior saint had actively helped the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula defeat their Muslim counterparts during the Reconquista. Due to the interpretation of the Conquest of the Americas as an extension of the Crusade against infidels and pagans, it is only natural that conquistadores justified their actions with religious explanations. This produced a circular and self-reinforcing discourse by which the victories of Spaniards against their Pagan foes became inevitable due to God's will, while these victories justified that God was by their side. In computer games we can see the example of AoE II's conquistador, who yells "Santiago!" when ordered to attack an enemy unit. However, a more remarkable ludic representation of this idea is the one featured in Sid Meier's: Civilization VI (Firaxis Games, 2016). This game's conquistador benefits from a strength bonus against enemy forces following a different religion than his. Furthermore, when close to a friendly religious unit (a missionary or an inquisitor, for example) this strength bonus is reinforced, making the conquistador a fearful enemy for those players who do not worship the same

THE RUNGS THE COMOUNS

The present study is limited to visual representation of the characters and units associated to the Spanish Empire in games addressing Early Modern empires. We have left outside the analysis those games included in the broad genre of action and adventure, since the nature of their ludonarrative necessitates from different strategies of selective authenticity. These products, gathered under the term 'realist simulations with deterministic narratives' by Chapman (2016), privilege less symbolic representations and are very influenced by cinematic narrative traditions. However, for an analysis of strategy and management games to be complete, one has to pay attention to how unique rules regarding Spain merge with the overall system of rules that govern the game. The 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost, I. 2007) emergent from these interactions, this is, the discourses produced by the tension between the player's agency and the game's mechanics, make the strongest claims about the past. Although the audiovisual content referential to history is key to understand how game developers perceive certain parcels of the past, it is in the ludonarrative where creator's claims achieve their full potential (Chapman, 2014). A good example of the latter is Holdenried and Trépanier's (2013) piece included in Playing with the Past. It focuses on how the system of rules of two wargames adapt the different concepts of dominance between Spaniards and Aztecs during the conquest of the latter's empire. While Age of Empires II: The Conquerors turns to traditional and often outdated explanations based on the fragility of Montezuma's Triple Alliance and the Spaniard's superior warfare technology, Medieval II: Total War makes an interesting point by putting Aztec chieftains at the centre of their army's moral system and also allowing the Spanish faction to recruit Native allies.

Finally, we want to end the present study highlighting a historical element missing in most of the digital simulations of the past: disease. Triple A games with historical settings tend to forget that epidemics played a crucial role in historical processes in general, and in the Conquest of the Americas in particular. A study of the ideologically parcelled

representation of the indigenous people of the Americas in computer games has shown that the ravages of diseases such as smallpox, malaria and typhus (to cite a few examples) are nowhere to be found (Mir, R. & Owens, T., 2013). In the case of the Spanish Conquest, Pizarro and his warband reached the Inca Empire shortly after the end of a civil war that confronted two contenders to the throne after the smallpox killed its legitimate heirs. Developers argue that the inclusion of these factors would dramatically affect gameplay by reducing player agency, and therefore they consider wiser to leave epidemics out of the picture. However, we can find successful and clever examples of playful creations that put the disease at the core of their ludonarrative: Plague Inc. (Ndemic Creations, 2012) and Pathologic (Ice-Pick Lodge, 2006) are just two of them. Although its randomness could make epidemics a difficult variable to implement, the aforementioned examples demonstrate that it is not impossible to do. Furthermore, what the historian-developer's unwillingness tells us is that digital simulations of the past still draw from historical explanations dating from



the 19th century. This is, they focus on the tale of great men and great nations that prove their right to rule by defeating their enemies through the use of violence (Venegas Ramos, A., 2016). However, nowadays the video game medium is mature enough to write the history of Humanity, and the Spanish Conquista in particular, by leaving the myth of the mounted musketeer back in the Iberian Peninsula.

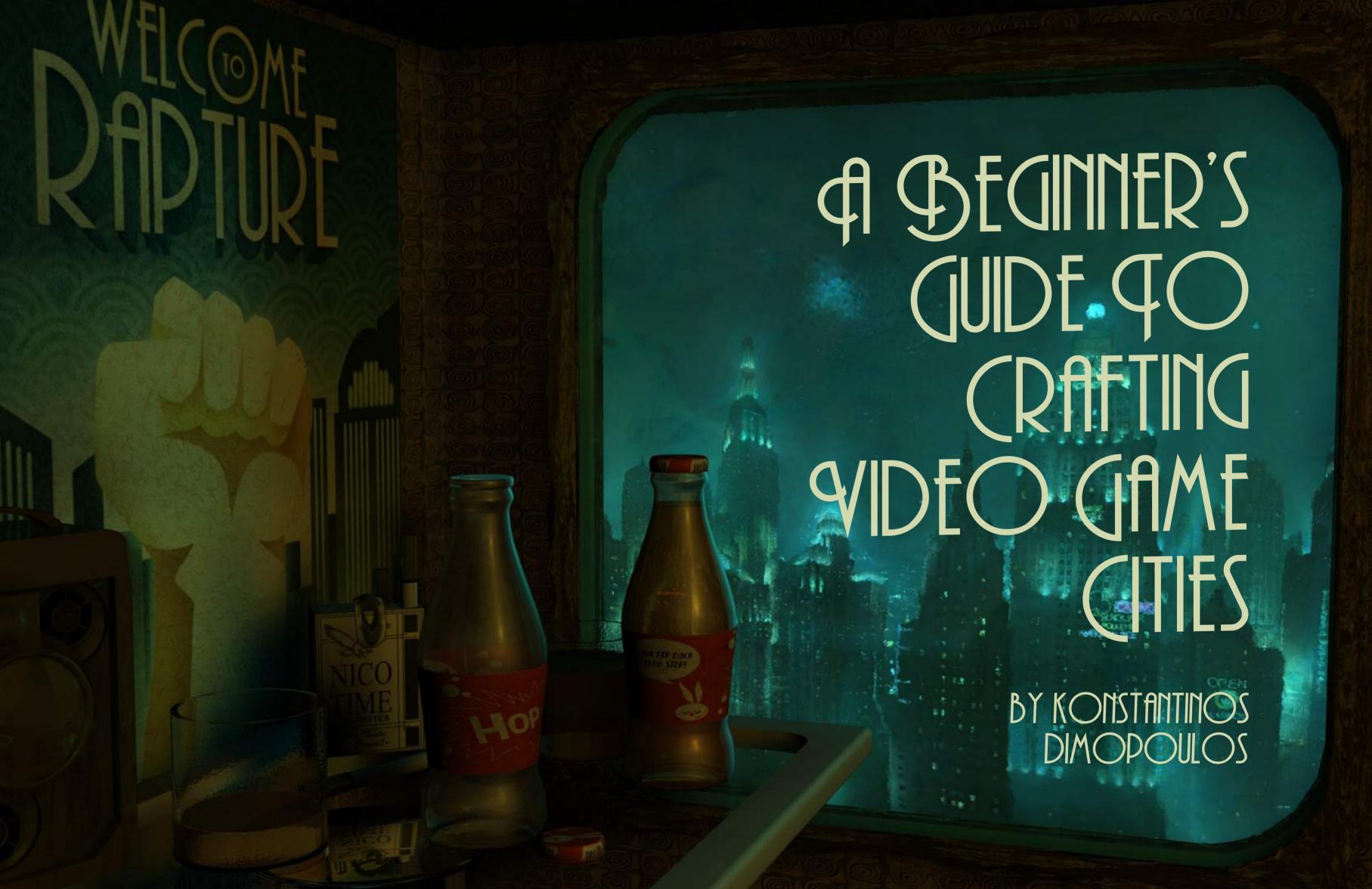
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RAPTURE AND CITY 17 ARE TWO ESSENTIALLY RAPE EXCEPTIONS.

From the underwater, art deco wonders of Rapture (2K Boston, 2K Australia, 2007) to the oppressive urban environments of City 17 (Valve, 2004), cities are far too common a setting in modern videogaming. Then again, they also happen to be a commonplace backdrop of contemporary everyday life, incredibly rich hubs of a myriad human interactions, and thus also the birthplaces of most of our modern art.

Cities, history's unparalleled centers of human creativity and drama, are the places where the majority of us actually live, work, love, create, dream, and occasionally kill each other; they simply have to serve as the imaginary settings for our sporadic conjuring of mythical entities as well. Cities are sources of constant inspiration, and with 54 per cent of the world's population already residing in urban areas (United Nations, 2014), and the accelerating rates of global urbanization, one should expect them to play an ever increasing role in the ways we, an urbanized species, shape our culture.

Of course all art is not the same, and

each medium is bound to take differing approaches when tackling urbanism, but we would be wise to admit that, generally, games rarely do cities right. At the moment iconic, unique, and immersive as both Rapture and City 17 might be, they are two essentially rare exceptions to the prevalent non-immersive game city.

Immersion, you see, an elusive and much sought after quality of game worlds, demands believability, and believability in the case of cities is never easy to achieve. Excellent art design, exciting levels, and even clever architecture are not enough. A city, no matter how exotic it might have to be, can only be believable if it makes sense. If it feels real and complex enough to fulfill the many expectations of experienced city dwellers.



Cities, as most types of settlements, are rarely done right in games by failing to feel real; not by failing to be imaginative.

Supposedly sprawling metropolises are presented as little more than simplistic towns trying to pass for stereotypical CBDs, garages able to house hundreds of cars are found underneath small villages, fantasy cities sport inns-to-houses ratios of 1:2, buildings in medieval settlements look absolutely identical to each other, everyday life is commonly reduced to repeating animatronics-inspired scenes, roads are too wide, vehicular traffic too obviously scripted if not entirely forgotten, and, sadly but frequently, things simply fail to feel right.

Getting comfortable with the basics of urban planning and the geography of cities, while finding cost effective ways of conveying a city's richness and complexity, though a wise way towards crafting believable urban environments, can admittedly be both difficult and time-consuming work. It is no wonder then that cities are often treated as mere backdrops. As lifeless, boring yet beautiful backgrounds lacking any sense function, and thus failing to convey any meaningful civic illusion.

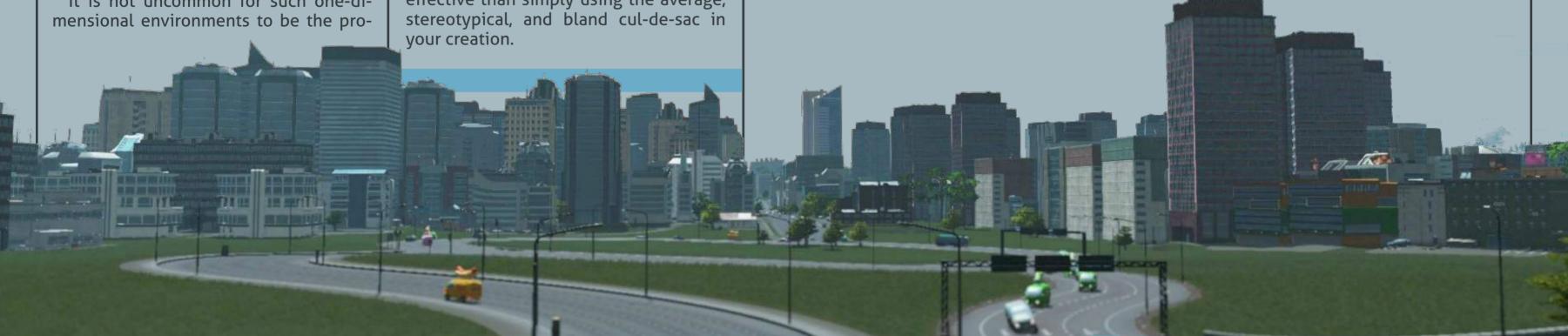
It is not uncommon for such one-di-

duct of overtly simplistic approaches. Settlements are often, and wrongly, seen as mere sums of arranged buildings, imagined as essentially homogenous, approached as creations of pure architecture, or even as formations simple enough to be fully captured via a rudimentary road plan or an evocative piece of concept art. In reality though, cities can neither be understood nor designed as elaborate building complexes and extensive mood pieces.

In order to become the complex, beautiful, dynamic, and very exciting formations that they should be, imaginary, interactive cities have to first and foremost be cities. That is, they must enable and embody all the functions that can make them urban. So, even if all you need to show are a few facades, a small hub, or a couple of 3D neighborhoods, you have to at least vaguely have a full, functioning city in mind. Something as simple as a rough sketch on paper should be better than nothing, provided certain basics like the economy are in place.

Knowing that a particular set piece is taking place in, say, a suburban cul-desac of an average sized US city in the Midwest with breathtaking mountain views, a religious population, and a rich history in mining during the 1970s, is much more effective than simply using the average, stereotypical, and bland cul-de-sac in vour creation.

CITIES, AS MOST TYPES OF SETTLEMENTS, ARE RARELY DONE RIGHT IN GAMES.



Inevitably the question that now arises is the one considering the actual crafting of a rudimentary city. What should you have in mind? What should you aim to sketch, describe, and populate on paper before jumping into level design, and the creation of your neighborhood hang-outs or street level concept art? What, in a nutshell, are the very basic aspects of your city? What are cities?

There are dozens of definitions I could provide you with in order to answer that last question, and they would all have to be at least partly lacking, and simultaneously mostly correct. But, getting too technical, and opening theoretical cans of worms is never a good idea.

What you actually have to keep in mind when designing a city is that its functions -- what it does and facilitates -- are paramount. They are the backbone on which its form and structure are based. According to Max Weber (Weber, 2003: 53) it is, after all, not its size that differentiates a city from a village, but its functions. They are effectively the spatial expression of economical and social reality, and are the forces around which the urban environment is shaped.

To provide you with an example, the crucial urban functions of a contemporary city would be commerce, production, the circulation of capital, housing, human reproduction, transportation, employment, innovation, and even culture and ideology.

It is these functions that dynamically change throughout history, and help sett-lements evolve into new urban forms; that make cities what they are. Of course, certain core urban functions, those that define all cities throughout history as cities, never really change. All cities, real and imaginary, ancient and future, are their people, their economy, their buildings, their infrastructure, their roads, their habits, their history, their architecture, their climate, their topography, their stories, and their art.



They are also a myriad of other things such as their sky, idioms, smells, colors, customs, and street furniture (if any), but more importantly they are always and without exception works in progress, dynamic, and internally differentiated. Being the results of complicated histories, and homes to a huge variety of people means that the energies within a city never rest. Oh, and as Bulmenfeld (1972) wisely noted, the importance and multitude of human interactions within each urban center simply cannot be overstated

What's more, due to each city being an essentially unique creation, each one will have to showcase its very own distinct feel and logic (with the notable exceptions of repeatable formations such as military or company towns), as well as a selection of elements such as distinct materials or unique sorts of neighborhoods. Obviously, most videogame cities do tend to either ignore such realities, or tackle them haphazardly. Then again, many game cities do miss much more obvious things than these.

It is, for instance, frequent for them to lack an elevation map or any sort of topography, public spaces, a ranked road and transportation network, well thought-out streets and vehicles, evidence of a functioning infrastructure, something resembling a sensible city life, street furniture, realistically planned land uses, crucial activities, in-game functions showcasing the organization of space, buildings under construction and of various ages, mundane images of everyday life, or flora and fauna.

Such omissions are mostly due to approaching cities in the wrong way, and not necessarily a result of limited resources and time. Even when attempting to create a town with a single and overbearingly dominant function, a holy city for example, one of the simpler urban formations in real life, things can easily go wrong when approached without a plan. When holy cities, historically impressive creations of "times [when religion] has been the supreme function of a great city" (Lynch, 1984:142), are treated as glorified shrines they are bound to be missing crucial elements.

The significance of the place, especially to its intended virtual users, and the ways a modestly sized settlement could be a symbol of religious values, social

structures, and the nature of the universe, have to be taken into account instead. They can never be ignored or overtly abstracted, and the core function can only shine when its supporting ones are given the care they deserve. Instead of starting by building an exquisitely complex system of temples, designers should ask themselves questions regarding the sleeping arrangements of pilgrims, the feeding of the city, the non-religious aspects of its economy, the dress-codes of the devout, the organization of marketplaces, the selling of offerings, and how things and people move around in it.



How should a city, any city, be tackled? One approach would be, especially when an existing or historical urban formation is to be approached, to use its actual city plans and regional topography, and modify them according to our purposes, each other, and the medium. Sometimes an existing place could also serve as inspiration for an utterly imaginary one. Famous fantasy capital Ankh-Morpork (Terry Pratchett, 2006), for example, is mainly based on Tallinn and central Prague, but also employs elements of 18th-century London, 19th-century Seattle, and 20th century New York.

Even if the choice is made to begin designing a game city based on a real location, its creation should always start off by the designer answering a set of questions.

First of all, where is the city? As Lefebvre (2006: 83), wisely put it, "the raw material from which space is produced is nature", and that is exactly why the natural environs, topography, and the location of a city are an important decision. They will have to be carefully considered, and they should influence the lore behind the city's founding. They will indeed serve as our raw material basis. Probably even define the materials used in the city's architecture; ancient Athens' extensive use of marble wasn't merely the result of a taste for white stone, you see, but the result of the abundance of the material in nearby mountains.

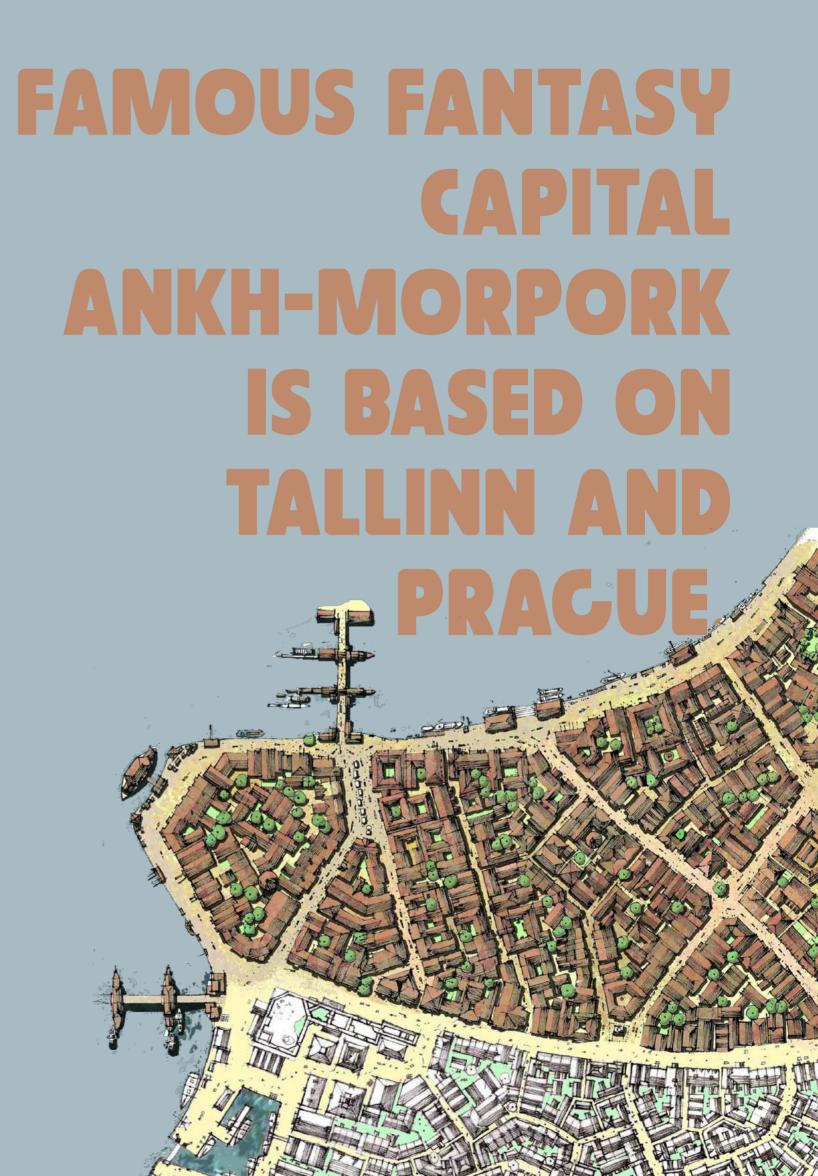
Initial placement of a city could of course be a given -- Sherlock Holmes' London will have to remain in the wider region of actual London -- though the need to conjure its location out of thin air could easily arise. In this case, the overall geography could be randomly/procedurally generated, imagined, or base itself on an appropriately modified existing location. One could use French Polynesia as a starting archipelago, and add, subtract,

change, and re-purpose islands in order to construct one's oceanic megacity.

Not unlike the interconnected sci-fi islands of an urbanized archipelago, a steep mountain can be profound, and full of character. As can a deep lake, or two peaks separated by a picturesque canyon. A natural harbour, on the other hand, would also dramatically impact the local urban economy, and thus possibly define a city's history to quite an extent. Location, you see, is not only about the natural environment. It is about its societal formations too, as well as the interplays of the wider geography. The proximity of your city to other towns, cities, resources, hubs, nations, and rich forests can thoroughly influence it.

WHERE AND WHEN ARE TWO CRUCIAL ASPECTS OF ANY CITY.

After a location has been picked or crafted, the matter of when must be settled. Where and when strongly influence a city's functions and history; urban form and structure are produced by said functions, and shaped and detailed by a place's history. Keep in mind that determining size, the immediate next step, will also be crucial. A town and a metropolis simply do not behave or look the same way.



Assume, if you will, that we are looking to create a relatively isolated town for a horror game. Here's a rough idea of an early approach:

The first question is "where", and as creating something more original is always more entertaining, let's place the city in Norway, where, among other things, it's bound to earn a very interesting name too.

The next question, "when", I'd answer by choosing the 19th century, which would allow for many elements of modernity, but also for darkened, isolated towns. When and where would also guide me when tackling the topography issue. Norway's stunning coasts and fjords are too dramatic a setting to ignore, and, especially during the dark winter, perfect for fostering isolation,

Now, how big should this 19th century fjord town be? Not very actually, as a modestly sized settlement would make sense both historically and geographically. It would also be less expensive to construct assets-wise, yet still offer enough variation and provide with adequate space to play in.

As for the town's functions, it would firstly have to provide housing for its residents (residence), rudimentary roads for them to move around (transport), and jobs (economy). Structuring the place around fishing should work well, and would also provide us -- after some research -- with a ton of intriguing bits of applicable fishing history (and legends).

The city's functions would then have to include everything around the fishing industry (long range transportation, storage, retail and wholesale, logistics, boat repairs, fishing supplies, actual fishing, etc), and all the key functions of the 19th century European city, including a town hall, a hospital, probably some public spaces, but most definitely not a football stadium.

Add to this hints of 800 years of layered history beginning from the Viking era of half-forgotten ancestral shrines and the first stone temples, to the more modern harbor expansions of the 18th century, and those contemporary, properly capitalist factories of canned fish meat, and you've already got a solid foundation for a vibrant city.

Using said foundation, coming up with districts, specific places, and sub-areas of the city that feel right shouldn't be too difficult, and neither should imagining the general structure, form, and organization of the whole settlement.

An older section of cramped, dilapidated stone-and-timber buildings where the poorer fishermen and factory workers live near the harbor would be instantly conjured. Close by, one can assume, would be an indus-



Obviously, a city set in early 20th century New England, a rather popular choice for Lovecraftian horror, would be radically different. It would have to be better connected to its hinterland, probably larger, with a more evolved economy, richer infrastructure, and thus more specialized buildings and more obvious planning. It would also have to include the elements from the following and far from exhaustive list, some of which it would have to share with its Norwegian counterpart:

Vehicles, people, trees, urban furniture, garbage, abandoned stuff, city utilities, newspaper offices, bus stations, telephone centers, railway stations, sanitariums, public libraries, courthouses, police departments, jails, shops, taverns, clubs, hotels, graveyards, national guard armories, post offices, speakeasies, banks, squares, roads, corporations, offices, telegraph and telephone lines, hospitals, schools, factories, houses, villas, roads, secret societies, libraries, and theaters.

Not forgetting such elements can work wonders, but what really matters is the understanding that everything embedded in space, be it a harbor, an old crumbling church, or even a Norse monument, has been constructed on its particular place for a purpose. Always keep in mind that whether it is the will of a planning authority, a guild, a family, a real estate developer, a club, a god, or even an insignificant individual, each and every element of the urban space exists for a reason. It has essentially been planned.

Every building, every bench, every road, every bridge, every house, every facade, every arcade has a purpose, and has been built in an attempt to achieve it and satisfy a need. Said purpose may not be instantly (or at all) discernible to all, and may have over the course of history been lost, thus allowing the original building to evolve into something else entirely (old downtown factories are commonly turned into livable lofts), but it originally was there.

For your very own, very interactive imaginary city to feel real, believable, and immersive, you really do have to design it with this simple truth in mind: things have to make sense.

IF WE WANT AN IMAGINARY CITY TO FEEL REAL.



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