Playing with history in *World of Tanks*: Negotiated readings, historical realism and cultural memory

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Abstract

This study focuses on United States-based players of *World of Tanks*, a historical battle arena game that features many playable tanks based on their actual historical origins, mostly from the World War II and postwar eras. Through a partnership with the game's developer Wargaming.net, we conducted interviews with 20 players of *World of Tanks* who indicated that they are interested in history generally or military history specifically. Our findings indicate that playing *World of Tanks* is one dimension of a broader spectrum of interacting with history as a kind of leisure activity. Players put history in service of their own interests and recreational enjoyment, while acknowledging that historical accuracy is a moving target that must be balanced with elements that shape gameplay structure, competitive potential, and player agency. This study contributes to scholarship on the experiences and motivations of people who play historical games, situates interest in historical games within a broader array of history-related leisure, offers insights for historical game developers interested in players' cultural and social context, and notes the limitations of games to teach about the past.

Keywords

Historical games, negotiated readings, qualitative, interviews, online games, military games, cultural memory, speculative and alternate history

Introduction

Media texts, including films and video games, are powerful ways through which people learn about the past. In some cases, media texts like literature and film impact how collective images of the past are created (Erll, 2008b). Video games are another way this process of shaping cultural memory occurs. The field of historical games studies has interrogated how video games can impact players'

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understandings of the past (Chapman et al., 2017). In particular, games that center on World War II – especially titles in the *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* franchises – have received considerable attention in this literature (e.g., Kingsepp, 2015; Penney, 2009). This paper focuses on the game *World of Tanks*, a historical battle arena game featuring playable tanks from different historical eras. Because many tanks featured in the game are from the World War II era, we use the scholarly attention given to World War II cultural memory and video games as a launching point to understand how the game allows players to interact with and learn about the past.

World War II games are likely popular because the conflict has permeated the memory of the world (e.g., Liu et al., 2005; Paez et al., 2008). In the United States, it has even taken on a nationalist mythological significance (Bullinger and Salvati, 2011). There have been hundreds of films about it made both during the conflict, such as the 1944 film *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, and more recently, like the 2017 film *Dunkirk*. Docuseries about the era permeate the History and American Heroes Channel cable networks in the United States. Titles in video game franchises like the afore-mentioned *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* franchises center around the era. Therefore, people who are interested in the conflict have a multitude of media texts to consume and discuss with others. These texts have led to a certain mythologizing of the war, which Bullinger and Salvati (2011) dubbed 'BrandWW2'. The authors focused their attention on the mythologizing of World War II in the United States and posited that this mythologizing came about when the children of World War II veterans started creating media about the war. Earlier media representations made during the war, such as films, were usually part of an organized propaganda effort (Koppes and Black, 1987), and these later cultural depictions often drew on the conventions of those earlier media portrayals (Bullinger and Salvati, 2011).

The pervasiveness of World War II in United States popular culture makes it a useful starting point to understand historical games. In fact, many popular historical games that focus on the era, especially first-person shooter games, communicate a distinctly United States-centric understanding of the war (Kingsepp, 2015). But other games that play with this era of history allow for different interpretations. This paper focuses on the game *World of Tanks*, which was developed by the Belarusian gaming company Wargaming.net. In addition to being developed outside the United States, *World of Tanks* is also different from games like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* that dominate this literature because it is not a first-person shooter but instead a battle arena game featuring historical tanks from different eras, especially the two World Wars and the Cold War. As a result, *World of Tanks* blends historical time periods by allowing tanks of different eras to interact with each other. Therefore, this paper seeks not only to understand how players see playing *World of Tanks* as fitting alongside other modes of engaging with the past but also how the game balances realism with gameplay features and how these features allow players to interact with alternate and speculative histories. These themes lead us to understand how *World of Tanks* and other historical games teach players about the past.

Contextualizing history, cultural memory and historical games

History and cultural memory

In the last few decades, many people have turned to history as a leisure activity, whether that be by visiting museums, participating in reenactments or consuming media texts related to history (De Groot, 2016: 2–5). History permeates popular culture through books, films, television, and games. As a result, these mediated representations of history, especially when they come from amatuer historians, contribute to the creation of cultural memory (De Groot, 2016: 4). Cultural memory is

defined as 'the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts' (Erll, 2008a: 2). As a field, cultural memory studies sits at the intersection of the cognitive process of individual memory, representations through institutions and media and social processes and therefore occurs at two different levels: the individual and the collective (Erll, 2008a). Oftentimes, what a society re-members collectively about an event is based on media depictions that a community sees, discusses and circulates (Erll, 2008b). For example, in the United States, mass media and popular culture like movies and music strongly influence collective memory, whether that be in a positive or negative way (Lipsitz, 1990). This idea emphasizes that media shape cultural memory, and social processes must surround these media texts and the groups that interact with them. Events that are saturated with media images become part of cultural memory.

Multiplayer video games based on historical events are one way that cultural memory is created. Historical video game developers often encode hegemonic messages into games (Hammar, 2019). In particular, first-person shooter games based on World War II like certain titles in the *Call of Duty* series have attracted considerable recent scholarly attention (e.g. Höglund, 2018; Pötzsch, 2017; Ramsay, 2015; Salvati and Bullinger, 2013). Games about World War II contribute to the formation of cultural memory, but a lot of this is dependent on the players; while some players approach the historical content uncritically, making them susceptible to accepting the games' blindspots, others engage in critical reflection on history through playing the games (Kingsepp, 2015).

Historical games

Historical games are defined as 'those games that in some way represent the past, relate to dis-cussions about it, or stimulate practices related to history' (Chapman et al., 2017: 367). These games are a natural extension of other modes of playing with the past, such as historical reenactments, model building, and table-top games (De Groot, 2016: 159–161). These games raise the issue of historical accuracy. The field of historical games studies is less concerned with whether a game is historically accurate, however, and more concerned with how such games interact with the past (Chapman et al., 2017). Many developers and players of historical games consider a game accurate if it reproduces the past as it was or as they were taught it was, and game developers especially point to accuracy being important in representing particular objects from history (Copplestone, 2017). Historians and other cultural-heritage practitioners emphasize the importance of historical accuracy due to the potential for video games to become sources of historical information for players, thereby potentially teaching them something about the past (Copplestone, 2017).

As a result, many scholars have highlighted the potential for video games to teach about the past (McCall, 2016; Metzger and Paxton, 2016; Schut, 2007; Squire, 2005). While some studies are optimistic and suggest that playing historical games can increase students' understanding of history (Squire, 2005), others suggest that students who play historical games still view those games' historical content with suspicion, feeling that nonfiction books and documentaries are more his-torically authoritative (O'Neill and Feenstra, 2016). Nevertheless, players often learn about history from these games. Many players, in fact, see games like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* as highly accurate and note that playing them helps them learn about history, sometimes even encouraging them to do their own research about the events depicted (Penney, 2009; Salvati and Bullinger, 2013).

Historical games have limitations and biases, however. For example, because many historical games are combat games, they have a bias toward masculine, systematic and spatial presentations of history; in other words, they focus on military elements, players and other game elements have clearly defined roles within the game system, and they more often depict historical spaces rather than events (Schut, 2007). Furthermore, simulation games in the first-person shooter genre, like *Call*

of Duty and *Medal of Honor*, emphasize elements like story, genre and particular details over historical commentary about the past; this is referred to as 'selective authenticity' (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013). This 'selective authenticity' leads games to incorporate documentary imagery and accurate historical weapons and information technologies (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013). A separate but related issue is the idea of 'selective realism', which emphasizes what is not depicted in a game (Pötzsch, 2017). For example, games can influence how players see the past by only depicting certain levels of violence (Pötzsch, 2017). As a result, depending on their genre and what games choose to depict or not, historical video games can influence the ways that real events are depicted.

Making sense of historical accuracy and historical authenticity in media is a contested endeavor, due to the negotiation between creators, audiences and the historical sources that inform their respective perceptions of historical representations (Alvestad and Houghton, 2021; Wright, 2017). It is not enough to simply present historical information to approximate historical accuracy; players also engage with a mutually constitutive process of the mental state of immersion and feeling that a game is particularly authentic (Mochocki, 2021: 972). For some players, even historically authentic games that include 'some speculation and non-factual details' are still expected to closely trace facts and narratives that lend themselves to historical accuracy (Burgess and Jones, 2021: 15). It has also been suggested that the focus on historical accuracy might even foreclose the potential to 'imagine history otherwise' in gaming contexts, but moving away from this practice would require game developers to reframe their imagined audience (Shaw, 2015).

As players may use games to learn about history, games allow them to engage with history as both entertainment and knowledge (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013). Expanding on previous scholarship from Rosenstone (2001, 2006), Pötzsch and Šisler (2019) argued that one way games can present history is as simulation, which is especially important to understand how games relate to the creation of cultural memory. In fact, historical games allow players to play with the past, but some modes of portraying the past specify what elements of the past can be played with and which cannot (Metzger and Paxton, 2016).

Deployments of history

In representing the past and creating these boundaries, historical games draw on a number of deployments of history, some of which are more concerned with notions of accuracy and others of which play with the past. Three of these deployments – monumental, antiquarian and critical – draw on Nietzsche's (1876/1997: 67–77) scholarship (see also Landy, 1996: 17–19; Metzger and Paxton, 2016). Monumental history is about valorizing the past and often emphasizes heroes (Metzger and Paxton, 2016). Nietzsche (1876/1997) conceptualized antiquarian history as overly reverent and thus extremely limited (p. 75). Essentially, this deployment of the past seeks to reproduce historical details as they were, emphasizing accurate historical details and ultimately leading to the valorization of historical figures and artifacts (Landy, 1996: 18–19). This deployment of history is popular among historical combat games (Metzger and Paxton, 2016). Critical history gives players more agency than the previous two and treats the past as something to be changed (Metzger and Paxton, 2016). As a result, critical history is more likely to be used than monumental or antiquarian history when talking about playing with or reinterpreting the past.

In addition to these deployments, Metzger and Paxton's (2016) analysis of historical games introduced other deployments, including wishstory, composite imagination and legitimization. Building on critical history, wishstory works with alternate histories but does not explicitly reference the 'true' historical facts (Metzger and Paxton, 2016). Composite imagination mixes different historical periods (Metzger and Paxton, 2016). Finally, legitimization is often deployed

during the creation and marketing of a game; this deployment of history seeks to communicate that a game is historically accurate, often through touting the involvement of historians in creating the game (Metzger and Paxton, 2016). As a result, this deployment is brought up when games purport to be accurate, likely in the antiquarian sense.

Games and military technology

Because historical games often involve war or combat, many historical games place a special emphasis on accurate historical weapons. Players may be attracted to these historically detailed games because they have a penchant for military technology or specific historical weapons (Payne, 2009; Salvati and Bullinger, 2013). For Salvati and Bullinger (2013), this penchant stemmed from a desire to experience a past conflict (particularly one in which an ancestor fought) vicariously and to wield power through a weapon. As such, the authors also note that many history buffs who play games like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* enter these games specifically looking for accurate historical weapons. Many of these players see weapons as a central part of the gaming experience and prefer the virtual weapons to be as faithful to their real life counterparts as possible; some players even own actual versions of the guns they play in games (Lukas, 2009). Furthermore, players of military video games and of World War II games in particular are interested in playing with realistic weapons and can even learn about these weapons through these games (Penney, 2009). In depicting accurate weapons, many of these games use the antiquarian deployment of history (Metzger and Paxton, 2016) and may thus be appealing to a particular player who wants to see these weapons accurately portrayed.

Historical game players and negotiated readings

While a handful of literature has studied players of historical games, in general the field of historical games studies has only recently focused on audiences (Chapman et al., 2017). Older works focused on war games and their players had tangential focuses on history and memory (Huntemann and Payne, 2010). Penny (2009) observed how the settings of games within historical contexts affected player perceptions through the presentation of historical authenticity. The study analyzed player attitudes of World War II shooters against attitudes around science fiction shooter games. The study found that players of World War II games were more likely to be slightly older (30s and above), to be conservative and to have stronger feelings about politics than the science fiction players. Furthermore, the World War II gamers self-reported taking the historical content of the games seriously, noting that it made them feel like they were experiencing the war and valuing realism and authenticity in the games' presentations of history.

However, more recent work implies that the relationship between historical games and their players are more nuanced. Apperly (2018) examined how players of historical games contextualize their experiences in relation to wider game communities. Of note, Apperly observed 'that players establish negotiated positions in relation to the 'official' history presented, which draw on their own experiences of local and popular culture' (p. 16). Beavers and Warnecke (2021) noted that historical game audiences perceived games as less historically authentic compared to other visual media such as television and film. Thus, the relationship between a historical game and its players may lie less within narratives of historical authenticity but rather how that authenticity is negotiated between player expectations and experiences.

Chapman (2012) argued that games position players as both readers and writers through the action of playing and manipulating a game space. Hammar (2019) noted this process of playing

allows the construction of memory as players reconcile their agency and choices against ingame discontinuities. These game experiences provide a means of decoding the game's particular narratives and story space. Hall (2007) argued that producers of media texts encode particular meanings into media which are in turn decoded by the recipients of the message. Scholars such as Hammar (2019) emphasized the roles of encoding in game spaces, particularly how they can limit the range of interpretations. The encodings themselves may also be limited as Mukherjee (2017) noted that encodings of history may bias dominant retellings of history while drowning out more nuanced perspectives. Penney (2009) noted that military games in particular follow a trend of romanticizing war and have the potential to act as soft power, pressing narratives of western military acuity through the language of historical authenticity.

Yet, the decoding processes vary between receivers and there is room to investigate how such interpretations of media messages in games play out across wider audiences. As Apperly (2018) noted, players may reject presentations of histories within games and weigh them against personal, local or communal knowledge of events. In engaging with media, readers practice negotiated readings where they become active agents in decoding messages and appropriating media images to personal experiences (Fiske, 2010: 115–116). Within negotiated readings, receivers partially accept the message of the producer but modify it to their own social contexts. These negotiated readings are situated within lived experiences (Jenkins, 2018). As new media expands to allow readers to share, compile and debate their particular interpretations of cultural events, the formation of cultural memory shifts to collective forms of democratized sensemaking (De Kosnik, 2016: 2).

World of Tanks

World of Tanks is a team-based online battle arena game with a focus on 20th century historical tanks, particularly of the World War II and postwar eras. In the basic mode of the game, players choose a tank from one of nine different countries and five tank types and enter a battle in teams of seven to 15. The battle ends when one team has captured the other's base or destroyed all the other team's tanks. The tanks that players can choose are all based on real historical tanks, down to the particular engine type, radios, tank treads, armor thickness and shells they originally used. However, players can enter battle with tanks from different eras and different countries, some of whom were enemies in historical combat, on the same team. Thus, *World of Tanks* balances accurate historical tanks with gameplay elements that allow players to play in situations that are historically inaccurate.

Nevertheless, with its eye towards replicating historical detail in the tanks, *World of Tanks* can be considered a historical game. Unlike the more popular first-person shooter or strategy games that much of the historical games literature analyzes (e.g., Pötzsch and Šisler, 2019; Salvati and Bullinger, 2013), it focuses on vehicles. This eye for detail and the ways that Wargaming.net promotes it (Baker, 2016) show that *World of Tanks* uses Metzger and Paxton's (2016) antiquarian and legitimization deployments of history. Wargaming places a heavy emphasis on history and preservation in its promotions and even its real world events and celebrations, often featuring real tanks, supporting museums and engaging with historians. However, the game employs selective realism (Pötzsch, 2017) in that the only violence it depicts is the destruction of tanks; no loss of human life is depicted. It also engages with critical, wishstory and composite imagination history (Metzger and Paxton, 2016) by allowing players to play with tanks from different eras and different countries on the same team.

With its emphasis on accurate historical tanks, *World of Tanks* attracts players who have an interest in history; many of its players are older and interested in military history, with many having served in the military (Baker, 2016), if not in World War II itself. *World of Tanks*, however, was

developed by a company from the former Soviet bloc, which has different cultural understandings of historical events like World War II that the game features than the West. This makes it a foil to many other games that focus on World War II from the United States' perspective (Kingsepp, 2015). Nevertheless, the current study focuses on US-based players from the game's North American server; as a result, much of the scholarship on cultural memory specific to the United States (e.g., Bullinger and Salvati, 2011; Lipsitz, 1990) is relevant here. These players engaged with history through *World of Tanks* based on their own cultural understandings of World War II and other historical events.

Methods

This project used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with players located in the United States who play on the North American server of *World of Tanks*. Leveraging our research group's academic partnership with Wargaming.net, we co-designed a recruitment screening survey with in-house researchers that was distributed through the *World of Tanks* game. The survey screened participants based on their interest in history through four items; each item consisted of a 5-point Likert scale. This screening survey yielded 72 people who indicated that they have a strong or very strong interest in history, military history, and historical games, and 20 agreed to participate in an interview. Participants had a median age of 45 years old and a mean age of 46, with the youngest being 23 years old and the oldest being 80 years old. All but one of the participants (95%) self-identified as men, which aligns with the almost entirely men player population of *World of Tanks*. Participants were offered a small amount of compensation (approximately $20–25 USD) through in-game currency upon completion of a research interview. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Interview questions focused on participants' interactions with other players and the affordances of the *World of Tanks* game, their relationship with history and historical hobbies, and connections between their interests in history and *World of Tanks*. While we often asked participants overtly about how they feel about historical accuracy in games, some participants brought up the term organically. Interviews were conducted remotely on a platform of the participants' choosing (which included phone, Skype, Discord and Zoom), and the audio was recorded and transcribed.

We conducted qualitative thematic analysis on the interview transcripts using an iterative coding scheme in Nvivo. First, three of the authors read through the transcripts noting repeated or otherwise interesting concepts that surfaced from the research conversations. Next, we compared notes with each other, went back through the transcripts to refine our coding scheme, and did a second pass through all of the transcripts to identify themes. We then separately tested the themes on transcripts of interviews and compared our final coding distributions to ensure that we had reached methodological consensus. We settled on three broad themes as follows: 1) historical points of reference and military symbolism, 2) gameplay experience versus historical accuracy and 3) playing with alternate histories. Throughout these themes we see an interplay between *World of Tanks* as a game experience, personal player experiences and player preferences. These relationships are highlighted in how players manage elements of historical realism, attention to technical historical details and specifications, interpersonal player behavior and gameplay strategy.

Theme 1: Historical points of reference and military symbolism

North American players of *World of Tanks* are often drawn to the game because they have an explicit interest in history. This usually occurs for one or both of the following reasons: enjoying history as a hobby or having a personal or family connection to history or the military. As a result, these players

engage with *World of Tanks* as part of a larger interest in understanding or learning about the past. From this, *World of Tanks* also becomes a launching point for some players to either increase their interest in history in general or to increase their knowledge of particular time periods and weapons.

Many players of *World of Tanks* see their interest in history as a hobby. Unsurprisingly, many players expressed an interest in World War II history, especially its military history, including tanks. This demonstrates the sustained popularity of BrandWW2 in North American popular culture (Bullinger and Salvati, 2011). Other players expressed interest in other eras close to World War II, including World War I and the Cold War, both of which inspired tanks featured in *World of Tanks*, and others had some interest in medieval or renaissance history, which are not featured in the game. Given that this study focused on US-based players interested in military history, it is unsurprising that a number of players also expressed interest in the American Civil War. Despite these varied interests, many of these players of *World of Tanks* talked about how they live out their interests in their daily lives. Players for whom history is a hobby discussed a range of historical-related activities, like reading and learning about history, collecting historical artifacts, building models, visiting museums and participating in reenactments. All of these are activities that De Groot (2016) discussed when he talked about history becoming part of people's lives as a leisure activity.

Other players described their interest in history as more personal, either because of growing up surrounded by history or having a personal or family connection to the military. For example, Alexander described growing up in an environment that made him want to learn about history: 'When I was a kid, definitely growing up, like every single town we visited, we did travel around a bit. We had to go to museums, the first thing we do is look at museums'. Museums, in fact, are a critical way in which people engage with the past (De Groot, 2016: 2). Other players talked about parents, grandparents, or other relatives who had served in past conflicts, including the American Civil War, World War II and the Korean War. One participant mentioned that all four of his grandparents were involved in World War II. In many cases, this personal connection to the past drove players to develop an interest in military history, which furthers the idea that genealogy and family history are serious ways in which many individuals interact with the past (De Groot, 2016: 67). Furthermore, the ways that many of the participants recall the World War II era in particular echo Bullinger and Salvati's (2011) description of BrandWW2: this mythologizing of the past started with the descendants of veterans. These ties can stimulate interest in and support for the military. For example, Xavier spoke at length about what his father's service in the Korean War meant to him:

> One of the things my, my sister just just got some presents for my brother's birthday. And she found a picture of my dad next to a helicopter in Korea with his hat and his uniform on. And so she put that picture onto the front of a bunch of coffee cups for the, for there are six of us in the family, three boys and three girls. So we each got a little member, you know, little memorabilia of him through that, through that picture. So, you know, once again, it was a great way to connect as a family. And it was, it was a great way to connect over his service…. So that military connection runs deep in my family. And it's deep, deeply rooted. And I think that has a lot to do with, you know, first of all my gratitude for for men and women that have served in the armed services…. And so that's important to me, you know, and that historical aspect is important to share with my kids…. And, and that's what I that's, that's the fact that I that's the reason why I strive for accuracy in my military information. That's the reason why I get to I'm interested in in boats, in military ships and in planes. And in, you know, regalia like medals that you that they give you, you know, for bravery or acts of, you know, going above and beyond the call of duty.

For this player, a family connection to the military made him more interested in both history and the military. He also expressed strong support for the military. This suggests that some players of *World of Tanks* in the United States are not different from many of the players of *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* that Penney (2009) studied in their support for the military and 'strong defense' ideology. It also lends support to the idea that military-themed video games often contribute to the military-entertainment complex (Robinson, 2012). This player's personal connection also drove him to want to see the past represented accurately.

For many players, *World of Tanks* is intrinsically linked with history, and these players' interest in history drew them to *World of Tanks*. Daniel explained, 'And so one of my core reasons for initially being attracted to this game, in fact, was because it was a cool, like, there were a lot of World War II era tanks. That was a period of history I was really interested in and I saw, Oh, that's cool. And I get to drive a tank'. This player's feelings suggest that *World of Tanks* fits in with many other forms of playing with the past; much as with activities like historical reenactments, playing a game like *World of Tanks* allows players to engage with the past in more embodied ways (De Groot, 2016). Players of other war games like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* note that such gameplay allows them to experience the past in a way that is almost like fighting in actual combat (Penney, 2009). However, for players of *World of Tanks*, this means embodying military technology, specifically tanks. This relates to the theme of players having a penchant for military technology, particularly Salvati and Bullinger's (2013) explanation, which relates to wanting to experience a past conflict vicariously. In this case, it is clear that part of the allure of *World of Tanks* is getting to control real historical weapons.

While many players came to *World of Tanks* as a way to play with simulated history, it increased or stimulated interest in history for others. For example, Victor notes, 'So I always like to learn something, or do something that's going to teach me. And I think that one of the things that participating in *World of Tanks* is done is that I'll go look up the tanks that I'm playing outside of the game and actually look for, you know, what it was like, in real life?' For other players, *World of Tanks* made them more interested in history, as Meredith describes: 'Yeah, I mean, it [history] was not something that was of particular interest to me when I started getting into the game. But it definitely has increased my knowledge, kind of freaked my mom out sometimes if I'm watching TV with her, and I'm like, Oh, that's a t 304585. And being able to identify different kinds of tanks'. As a result, we see that players specifically reference that their knowledge of historical weapons increased because of playing *World of Tanks*. This is likely because *World of Tanks* employs selective authenticity (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013) in that it focuses on replicating the details of tanks accurately. As a result, players feel that they can learn about specific historical weapons merely by being exposed to such weapons in the game.

Because the presentation of history in *World of Tanks* is almost entirely based on historical weapons, it deploys this militaristic perspective on history (Schut, 2007) and is selectively realistic (Pötzsch, 2017) in that it does not represent violence against humans. Therefore, *World of Tanks* may not make players understand the totality of past conflicts, meaning that its role as a teacher of history is limited. However, it does seem to stimulate interest in the past and knowledge of weapons. This aligns with previous scholarship that suggests that playing historical games makes some players more interested in the historical events depicted (e.g., Penney, 2009). *World of Tanks* has been shown to make players more interested in learning about history and these weapons, even if they were not interested before playing the game. As a result, *World of Tanks* may act as an educator in a limited capacity, showing players about tanks and making them interested in learning more for themselves. This leads to the question, then: how does *World of Tanks* balance the need to be historically accurate while presenting a good gameplay experience?

Theme 2: Gameplay experience/aesthetics vs historical accuracy

Players in *World of Tanks* expressed an awareness of the disconnect between managing an enjoyable gameplay experience among as many players as possible (typically known as balancing) and conforming to accurate portrayals of history. There is an underlying tension that a positive gameplay experience could only be maintained through taking liberties in how some tanks are presented in the game. Our findings suggest that a desire for a positive gameplay experience and a desire for historical accuracy were not mutually exclusive for participants. Rather, players acknowledged that the two often stood as coexisting concerns that the developers were challenged with balancing.

Players' disconnect with the historical liberties taken in *World of Tanks* varied in nature and scope. Some players noted the oddity of historically opposing sides, such as the Germans and the Soviets in World War II, having tanks on the same team. Other comments noted the oddity of tanks from different eras fighting each other. Others mentioned breaks between the gameplay experience and real world battle mechanics, such as damage to tanks being repaired or cannons reloading at unrealistically fast rates. Yet these feelings of disconnection did not exist in isolation, but were felt in tandem with the gameplay experience. Clark noted the following:

> Which is, so it's starting to become one of my pet peeves with *World of Tanks* is, you know, granted, there's some things you have to forego, in the name of game, playing a game. Like if you knock out an enemy tank tread, you don't want to sit there and spend a half a day waiting for the tank treads to, you know, get reassembled. But on the other hand, if you know, like, an artillery piece can fire twice every minute. And then here you are waiting for two minutes to load and fire when we lose that feel for history. Though Wargaming has a habit of what they call balancing the tanks for gameplay. And they're on the threshold where myself and my colleagues are like, you know, if you keep pushing it, we're gonna stop playing, because it's just not fun anymore.

This participant acknowledged concessions that Wargaming.net had to make in favor of preserving the game experience over historical realism. These concessions were received with differing sentiments based on player preference. The participant noted that tank tread repair in *World of Tanks* was much faster than real life, but noted that this liberty enhanced the gameplay experience. By contrast, the same participant noted artillery reloading in the game as unrealistically slow, which hampered the gameplay experience. Similar to Burgess and Jones' (2021) observations, the historical settings created expectations for the game to present itself as accurate. Yet this desire for accuracy clashed against the experience of *World of Tanks* as a game. Other historical games took liberties with its historical representation to accommodate for the variety of player experiences. *World of Tanks* took a similar approach in terms of tank designs. Notably, in Clark's case, there was a recognition of this simplification of history and the practical reasons behind it. This coincides with Apperly's (2018) findings as players negotiated discrepancies between the game's presented history through their own personal knowledge. *World of Tanks* also gives an interesting case in observing the role of antiquarian deployments of history (Nietzsche, 1876/1997) in relation to games. In *World of Tanks*, the antiquarian deployment of history is represented through its detailed depiction of historical tanks. But that does not guarantee that players process these histories as authentic, as authenticity is co-constituted through the process of immersion in the game (Mochocki, 2021). The level of immersion with the game's historical authenticity varied with what players sought out of the experience. Some players expressed desires to balance the technical specifications of different tanks to more accurately reflect real world mechanics. Others expressed dismay over having the advantages of their particular tanks removed for the sake of game balance. In terms of cosmetic

elements like skins and decals, others expressed interest in being able to personalize their favorite tanks despite these decorations not being era accurate. The clashes between the changing gameplay balance, the antiquarian deployment of history and player expectations create barriers to the immersion which make breaks in how players process the authenticity of the presented history.

This flexibility is further emphasized by *World of Tanks'* nature as a game. Salvati and Bullinger (2013) note that poststructuralist history writing is much more akin to a subjective form of literary critique that 'entails creative interpretation guided by the historian's selection of materials' (p. 155). Similarly, Penney (2009) argued that historically based games evoke a nuanced decoding of the game's source material, mixing dominant readings alongside alternative decodings. As an interactive experience, players of *World of Tanks* blend the medium's conventions alongside their expectations. The players' expectations are satisfied through how the game displays its historical aesthetic, whether through technological accuracy or the use of particular aesthetic pastiches. This negotiation between audience expectation and the conventions of the medium can be seen in Jeffrey's comments:

> I don't mind that they're inaccurate, as long as it's improving the gameplay because, I'm not one of these where I believe that it has to be accurate to the point that the gameplay suffers. Because, and ultimately, it's a game. And it's a game for you to have fun with. And in the game, if historical accuracy throws that off, and makes it to where the game is not enjoyable, I believe you need to do whatever you can to try to keep it as accurate as possible, but then also keep it to where gameplay is key.

From this participant, we see a nuanced decoding of *World of Tanks*. The conventions of games push toward a positive experience anchored in playfulness. Yet that sense of playfulness runs counter to the audience expectation of a rigid, static history evoked by the game's historical aesthetic. Games may thus be a contentious medium for engaging players with history as players' dynamic expectations of playfulness may run counter to static forms of historical knowledge. *World of Tanks*'s status as a game also allows discursive play with alternative or speculative histories.

Theme 3: Playing with speculative and alternate histories

Players routinely brought up how playing *World of Tanks* is a way for them to engage with speculative and alternate narratives about World War II history. As a reminder, players selected for our study are a part of a broader subculture of *World of Tanks* players whose interest in the game are linked to their established interests in military history. Taken together, knowledge of history and acceptance of historical inaccuracies in service of enjoyable gameplay enable players to develop an interpretive relationship with the game material. *World of Tanks* becomes a staging ground for creative negotiated readings (Hall, 2007) of weapons, battlefields and country alignments for players interested in historical details.

Some players, instead of focusing on the ways that particular countries or battles could have changed the outcome of World War II, were more interested in how the game represented specific tanks relative to their own knowledge of their technical and functional details. While most participants accepted tank performance that deviated from historical accuracy for the sake of enjoyable gameplay options, some noted that they disliked games that went too far beyond the technological limits of the time period. *World of Tanks* was routinely held up as an example of a game that enabled speculative play through World War II mechanics within what they perceived as acceptable creative license. While the artillery concern that Clark mentioned is an example of players feeling that game developers went 'too far', most participants pointed out that there was some identifiable level of

unrealism beyond what was necessary that would make the game difficult to play given their historical knowledge. In this way, while historical games generally offer opportunities for players to play with the past, *World of Tanks* seems to afford specific ways of relating to and playing with the past that align with its gameplay constraints while simultaneously foreclosing options that do not fit into its competitive structure (Metzger and Paxton, 2016).

Other players described how *World of Tanks* works as a speculative outlet for their interests in military strategy and history, noting that the game allows them to play through scenarios that could not have happened. While the level of detail and battle mechanics varied, the quote below from Daniel is an example of how some *World of Tanks* players have specific interests in particular countries like France:

> In part because it was a kind of vicarious thing to see what could have been if France hadn't been immediately captured in World War II. Because their growth was so stunted so quickly because they were immediately invaded. They had no time to build anything up like the Americans or the British did. And so tanks like the BDR and the ARL-44 are really cool to me because they represent what could have been if France had been successful in defending themselves.

This player shows that *World of Tanks* allowed him to play with wish fulfillment related to France's involvement in World War II. Chapman (2012) noted that historical games position players as not only receivers of history but also as potential authors. This sort of authorship is situated in a player's knowledge of historical events (Apperly, 2018). As a result, *World of Tanks* also engages with Metzger and Paxton's (2016) wishstory deployment of history by allowing players to indulge in playing with this alternate history through personal and communal knowledge. Engaging with alternate history and speculative play is also a way of connecting with enduring narratives in broader popular culture. Some participants described their engagement with alternative history as a means to explore power fantasies and grand narratives that show up in other media that they enjoy. As Alexander put it:

> Like I liked World War II, I think it's a good analogy because Star Wars is based off World War II, I think. I tend to find that knowledge of a topic leads to me being interested in it in all other areas of my life, including games or movies. I think peoples' brains work that way where it's like, their interest from something else makes you want to find other things like that in all the categories in real life, including games.

With this in mind, playing a historical game like *World of Tanks* engages not only critical cultural memory through comparative media consumption but also encourages players to make connections to their interests in dimensions of their life that otherwise have little to do with video games (De Groot, 2016; Kingsepp, 2015).

World of Tanks gameplay can also be a generative site in which players put specific technical details and material objects in conversation with one another in ways that were impossible in the historical periods in which they emerged, like the aforementioned player who was quoted being interested in French tanks that never saw the real world battlefield. *World of Tanks*, as a result, plays with Metzer and Paxton's (2016) notion of composite imagination by combining different periods of history. These creative acts and negotiated readings of game artefacts lead to the development of alternative histories, which are then free to inform player experiences in a variety of ways. Whether they function as a pleasurable escape from the historical record, a way of exploring the possibilities that were never realized for a particular tank design, or engage with both real and imagined military

prowess of specific countries, historical games like *World of Tanks* offer playable alternate histories for diverse meaning making ends.

Playing with tanks from different eras and countries also introduces opportunities for players to speculate about how *World of Tanks* as a mediated system 'really works'. One popular example among players is the idea of 'Russian bias' where the game favors Russian tanks given that the game's developer Wargaming is based in Belarus, a country with strong cultural ties to Russia. Interestingly, this is one area where some players, as the quote below from Joseph exemplifies, seem to think the alleged historical inaccuracy is somehow functionally different from the other alternate historic elements in the game. Joseph said:

> I mean, anyone you play with, either through game chat, like random people, or even like the friends I play with, and the clan mates, you know, they all say the same thing, which is, you know, the game devs were Russian. So the Russian tanks tend to be, I won't say, overpowered. But overall, they seem to do a little bit better in their class. In a lot of cases, you know, their armor seems to be a little better, they seem to have a little more damage. And it's, you know, the, the big thing is, like, I don't even know how to describe it. When I'm in a non-Russian tank shooting at a Russian tank, it seems like they seem to bounce a whole lot more than any other nation. And part of it is the way they're designed, you know, they do have the round turrets that are designed to bounce, but it also is just, it seems oddly suspicious that, you know, the, the Russian tanks for what they were based on historical records are as good as they are in the game.

For the US-based players in our study, the act of pointing out Russian bias as an exceptional kind of alternate historical material reflects a cultural narrative that centers US military dominance. In this way, the idea of Russian tanks being inherently superior in some sense contradicts these players' mediated nationalist sentiment, often shaped by BrandWW2. As Payne (2016:209) writes, video games are 'powerful vessels for the exploration of nationalisic myths', and community speculation about the performance of Russian tanks illustrates how this tension surfaces in *World of Tanks*. Whatever different players define as 'Russian bias' is positioned as exceptional and incongruent with the alternate historical play that they otherwise accept as essential to the overall gameplay experience.

Conclusion

Overall, based on our interviews, *World of Tanks* enables players to put history in service of their own interests and recreational enjoyment. Many players have an interest in history as a hobby that served as a gateway to playing *World of Tanks* initially and continuing to play over a number of years. In this way, playing *World of Tanks* is one dimension of a broader system of interacting with history as a kind of leisure activity. Many participants acknowledged that representations of historical subject matters in *World of Tanks* such as tank designs and battlefields are shaped by constraints from *World of Tanks* needing to be fun, functional and appealing to the broadest audience possible. *World of Tanks* can afford to be accurate in minutiae like engine types and tank treads, but it must balance this accuracy with an engaging gameplay experience. In the game, tanks reload more quickly than they would have in real life, and Soviet and German tanks can play on the same side, for example. This creates an engaging gameplay experience for many players, albeit a frustrating one for those players who come to the game looking for an accurate experience.

As a result, the overall sentiment of the interviews situates historical accuracy as a moving target calibrated to player and game developer interests. *World of Tanks* indulges its history buff players

through attention to detail in tank designs but allows leeway in accuracy to appease other players. Given that historical accuracy is limited to tank designs within the game and even these are shaped by gameplay constraints, *World of Tanks* functions in limited capacity as an educator of history, mostly by inspiring players to conduct their own research about historical weapons.

As we have shown through this analysis of United States-based *World of Tanks* players who are interested in history, these players' experiences of *World of Tanks* are shaped by the US nationalistic myth of BrandWW2; the game is often a way for these players to engage with this period of history they are already interested in. These players' thoughts about the game reinforce the idea that World War II is a powerful force in US culture and that they subscribe to ideas of US military dominance. BrandWW2 and a view of US military dominance permeated players' personal experience even though their experiences were often embedded in personal stories and family histories. As a result, just as BrandWW2 promotes a specific image of World War II within US culture, US-based players of *World of Tanks* interact with and learn about history through the game with this lens. For example, when Russian tanks perform better than US tanks in the game, US-based players ascribe this to developers' bias, rather than to a potentially accurate depiction of the past. It is thus important to consider how certain historical pastiches moderate player community relationships with history. Beyond its competitive dimensions, the game environment of *World of Tanks* is an opportunity for players to explore how alternate and speculative historical narratives about military technologies function as negotiated readings that contribute to cultural memory.

Limitations and future research

The current study has a few notable limitations, especially related to participant selection. Our participants self-selected, as they had to first complete the in-game screening survey our partners at Wargaming deployed and then had to respond affirmatively to our email inquiries about being open to an interview. While our sample skewed heavily towards men, this reflects the player population of *World of Tanks*, but future research should include a greater number of women and gender-diverse players to interrogate further whether the interest in military technology and pervasiveness of a view of US military dominance among players are gendered or not.

Furthermore, *World of Tanks* creates a unique opportunity to study cultural memory because it blends historical eras, thus allowing players to experiment with alternate and speculative histories. As *World of Tanks* and other historical games have global player communities, future research could see how players across different cultures read games that allow for playing with alternate and speculative histories and nationalistic myths. Specifically, *World of Tanks* has a large player community in Russia and other player communities in other parts of Europe and Latin America. However, our sample only included players from North America. Comparing how these groups approach the construction of history and national myths may help understand how groups contextualize contemporary events.

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