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# Manifestos for History

Edited and Introduced by  
Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan  
and Alun Munslow

*Dimensions of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). Adler writes that 'first-order disciplines' employ a common methodology to produce empirical knowledge about a specifically defined subject matter. 'Second-order disciplines' concern themselves with the critical examination of concepts, methods and assumptions used by first-order disciplines. That is not to say that they presume to resolve disputes within first-order disciplines; they are more like midwives. (The analogy is Wittgenstein's.)

59 Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *American Historical Review* 103:5 (December 1998): 1514.

60 New York: St Martin's, 1965.

61 I am indebted to Robert Rosenstone for this formulation, as for so many other insights. See Rosenstone's important statement, 'The Historical Film as Real History', *Filmhistoria* 1:1 (1995): especially 21-2. For a popular expression of the idea that film and video are replacing the written text, see Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Fawcett, 1995). For a deeper, more interesting (and enthusiastic) analysis by a partisan of what he interprets as the 'video revolution', see Mitchell Stevens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). I read Rosenstone as a much-needed corrective to Birkerts' all-too-fashionable despair and Mitchell's all-too-easy optimism.

62 I borrowed this phrase from Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988): 230.

## 10 Alternate worlds and invented communities

### History and historical consciousness in the age of interactive media

Wulf Kansteiner

According to conventional academic wisdom, the Western utopian tradition began in 1516 with the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*. Since that point, utopian writings in the West have followed a curiously sensible path. Despite occasional flights of fancy, literary explorations of alternate worlds have generally stayed within the realm of the possible. The descriptions of the good life in the rational, egalitarian societies anticipated by More, Wells and Marx as well as the dystopian visions of persistent human irrationality and imminent self-destruction predicted by Swift, Huxley and Orwell always 'displayed a certain sobriety, a certain wish to walk in step with current realities'.<sup>1</sup> Utopian writers have foreseen the kinds of technological wonders, totalitarian systems and ecological disasters that had not yet occurred but appeared likely to occur soon, given the conduct of contemporary societies and elites.

Unfortunately, the Western utopian tradition of thinking on the cusp of new developments has encountered two significant roadblocks. The collapse of communism has aborted the most productive and ambitious strand of modern utopian thinking and other utopian traditions have not fared much better. It has become increasingly difficult, for example, to imagine the scientific breakthroughs of tomorrow. By the time our utopian fantasies appear in print they have already been outdated by the rapid development of contemporary computer and communication technologies. Utopia has been undermined by widely shared derision for egalitarian social fantasies and the astonishing technological dynamics of neo-liberal consumer culture.

The following reflections will hopefully avoid this fate by shifting the focus of utopian enquiry even further away from writing about possible alternate worlds, and reporting instead on very likely, imminent cultural developments. This chapter does not present a large-scale social vision and engages only with a very narrowly circumscribed aspect of modern technology. I relate research about the formation of historical consciousness to analyses of contemporary video-game culture because the latter has reached a stage of development that, among many other important consequences, will change how people acquire a sense of history. As a result of technical advances and

artistic achievements, video-game culture, since its inception intriguingly interactive, is poised to reach a level of narrative complexity that will allow games fully to displace traditional linear narrative media like books, films and television. For the first time, narrative competency and historical consciousness will be acquired through fully interactive media which will provide consumers of history products with an unprecedented degree of cultural agency.<sup>2</sup> Historical culture can and will be radically rewritten and reinvented every time we turn on our computers. Once we pass this threshold, which I fully expect to happen before these lines are published, our collective memories will assume a new fictitious quality.

We have known for a long time that collective memories are psychologically and politically useful fabrications, but in the past these memories were invented through mediated or face-to-face communication and were therefore, in important respects, beyond our control. We could turn off our televisions and refuse to talk to our grandparents but sooner or later we would find ourselves involved in discussions about the past with colleagues or family members or encounter representations of the past in the media, and we would use these discussions and representations to orient ourselves in the world. We needed others to acquire a sense of history and a sense of self. Scholars have exploited this fact. They assumed correctly that while the content of our invented traditions could be completely fictitious, these traditions nevertheless, at least for most healthy individuals, revealed insights into their real group identities. Consequently, in research about collective memories, not the memories but the collectives were the targets of our scholarly ambition.

In the age of interactive media these scholarly assumptions and conclusions will gradually no longer apply. New digital technologies and formats will allow us to invent the content of our memories *and* the collectives which sustain them in such a compelling fashion that we will no longer need others to develop a psychologically functional sense of self. This development will undermine the axioms of collective memory studies but that should be the least of our concerns. As collective memories become private concoctions with regard to content and social foundation one of the most important platforms for social exchange, which has played a decisive role in the reconstitution of Western democracies since the Second World War, will cease to exist and will have to be replaced with other sources of democratic legitimacy. After 1945 and again after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, European societies engaged in processes of self-reckoning to craft new collective identities for the post-fascist and post-communist worlds, and at least during some periods these efforts of coming to terms with the past had considerable social depth.<sup>3</sup> Such processes are unlikely to repeat themselves in a thoroughly interactive cultural environment in which individuals no longer depend on centralised institutions of cultural production like film and television to develop their collective memories. Why would you and your friends get excited about a TV series like *Holocaust*, let alone engage in intergenerational discussions

about such a production, if you had already had a chance to craft and manipulate at will a wide range of factual and counter-factual scenarios about the history of the Second World War and the Nazi crimes?

### Historical consciousness

Professional historians have been primarily concerned about the proper reconstruction of past events and have been largely indifferent about the precise effects of their writings on lay readers. That lack of curiosity about the empirical origins and characteristics of historical consciousness did not prevent them from inventing authoritarian visions of national solidarity for European nation states of the nineteenth century. German historians were particularly ambitious in this regard. Having brought the blessings of a professional ethos to the study of the past, they were eager to share the fruits of their invention with their German brethren and designed top-down, authoritarian visions of national history for the citizens of the Prussian Empire.<sup>4</sup> After 1945 the German historical profession reluctantly abandoned its fantasies of national grandeur. Attempts to influence the popular German historical imagination were now pursued with considerably more humility and, after a generational turnover in the 1960s, the traditionally very conservative historiographical establishment even came to appreciate the virtues of democratic debate. Two opposing political camps and visions of history competed with each other. The majority faction of conservative politicians and academics worried about an identity vacuum that West Germans allegedly faced after the collapse of Nazism. Their political concept of anti-totalitarianism became a great success, but they failed in their efforts to develop a compelling new national historical identity for the Cold War era. Some of their colleagues on the left of the political spectrum drew more radical conclusions from the Nazi catastrophe. They assumed that the challenges of having to explain the origins of fascism to younger generations and finding the basis for a new democratic identity might involve a fundamental revision of some tenets of German historicism. In the context of these efforts they returned to Enlightenment traditions, hoping that they would find liberal inspiration in the writings of the luminaries and scions of German idealism.<sup>5</sup>

Since historicist hubris and belated liberal historiographical self-reflexivity have frequently coalesced around the term 'historical consciousness' (*Geschichtsbewusstsein*) scholars working in and about Germany have spent more time exploring the concept than their colleagues abroad. As a result, we can tap into an extensive body of writings on the subject which is often compatible with parallel explorations of heritage and collective memory in the Anglo-American context, although the German discourse distinguishes itself through its unabashed Enlightenment optimism about the possibility of analysing collective memories objectively and influencing the formation of future historical consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of West German efforts to come to terms with the Nazi past, Karl-Ernst Jeismann has provided a formulaic definition of historical consciousness that has become the main reference for all discussions about the topic since the 1970s. In his assessment the faculty of historical consciousness integrates interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations for the future into a single coherent interpretive framework.<sup>7</sup> This definition obviously raises as many questions as it answers and in the 1980s and 1990s German scholars developed more rigorous and extensive theoretical models pertaining to the acquisition and characteristics of historical consciousness. We will focus on two of these contributions: the theoretical insights of the historian and philosopher of history Jörn Rüsen and the writings of the social psychologist Jürgen Straub. Both have developed far-reaching explorations of the concept of historical consciousness that have recently been translated into English and have begun to play an important role in the field of collective memory studies.

In 1983 Jörn Rüsen proposed an ambitious model of historical consciousness that shares Jeismann's didactic concerns but is designed to cover all phylogenic and ontogenic stages of human development. Rüsen identifies four types of human historical consciousness that often coexist in everyday life but have developed successively in the course of human history. The most basic type, the traditional historical consciousness, focuses on founding acts and rituals which represent the common origins of a group, produce a strong sense of continuity between past and present, and justify a seemingly immutable set of moral values. In the second stage of development groups and individuals perceive the past in more abstract but not necessarily more flexible terms. From the vantage point of an exemplary historical consciousness concrete historical events and processes represent a much smaller set of underlying rules for temporal change and principles of moral conduct. The third type of consciousness, the critical type, regards both traditional and exemplary perceptions of the past with great scepticism. Collectives whose members embrace this critical perspective seek to deconstruct any sense of continuity between past and present and identify with counter-narratives which call into question the validity of historical precedents and universal rules.<sup>8</sup>

Rüsen emphasises that the first three types of consciousness are essentially static; from the traditional, exemplary and critical perspectives, past and present are interpreted within stable transhistorically valid parameters which reflect some collective Ur-event, timeless laws of human conduct, or their absolute negation. Only the last and most advanced type of historical consciousness, which Rüsen calls the 'genetic type', can perceive and process change on the level of historical events *and* on the level of the interpretive strategies which we employ to make sense of the past. This most complex way of interpreting the past for the first time allows human beings to develop historical identities and moral values that include the possibility, even necessity, of their transformation within a process of communication over

time and space. Collectives with genetic types of historical consciousness have an exceptional ability to acknowledge and embrace otherness, for instance, through the idea of universal human rights. For Rüsen, the genetic type is a thoroughly modern phenomenon which, postmodern scepticism notwithstanding, exemplifies the possibility of progress in history and historical consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Rüsen highlights three characteristics of historical consciousness that are particularly important for our purposes. In his assessment, historical consciousness always takes the linguistic form of narrative and therefore requires for its development narrative competence and narrative media. In addition, historical consciousness is the prerequisite for and is inextricably intertwined with moral judgement and moral action because it mediates between our values and our behaviour towards others. Finally, historical consciousness is a faculty we use constantly; it 'serves as a key orientational element, giving practical life a temporal frame and matrix'.<sup>10</sup>

Rüsen's refreshingly optimistic and extensive engagement with the question of historical consciousness has not remained unchallenged. Postmodern-inclined critics, for example, reject his optimistic view of narrative which they perceive as a negative cultural force with dubious ideological and normalising effects.<sup>11</sup> But even academics who are much more sympathetic to Rüsen's point of view take issue with his emphasis on the moral function of historical thought. For the cultural psychologist Jürgen Straub, Rüsen's model fails to grasp the specificity of historical consciousness as an essential form of human intelligence, which Straub seeks to conceptualise as a fourth type of human rationality next to theoretical and practical reason and aesthetic judgement. In pursuit of this goal Straub has developed preliminary thoughts towards a comprehensive psychology of the historical construction of meaning which offer another excellent vantage point for a critical look into the future of historical consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Straub stresses the important psychological and social functions of historical consciousness. Thinking and acting historically means acknowledging and coming to terms with the constant changes of human existence in an effort to avoid the adverse emotional and psychological consequences that the realisation of this existential instability entails. Historical consciousness accomplishes this important task by constructing relations of continuity and discontinuity, of identity and difference, between historical events and by presenting past, present and future as part of a complex but meaningfully structured world. This seemingly contradictory process of synthesising heterogeneity, which conceptualises history 'as the unity of its differences', can be accomplished only through narrative.<sup>13</sup> Only narrative is a flexible yet sturdy enough hermeneutic tool to acknowledge difference and sublate it within consistent overarching interpretive frameworks which are psychologically and politically useful.

For Straub, history and historical consciousness are not reflections of any natural past, although past acts of interpretation and symbolic mediation

inform our historical narratives. History always belongs to the present and 'acknowledges no temporal limits: everything that has been, is, or could be, might be its material'.<sup>14</sup> Despite this flexibility, individuals cannot invent history at will because they and their narratives are always subject to the existing rules of plausibility. In fact, Straub conceptualises historical consciousness very much like a collective memory. Although historical consciousness is in many ways linked to autobiographical memory, historical narratives can only function as carriers of historical consciousness if they successfully reflect the identity of a social group. In addition, Straub insists on another interesting qualification in his definition of historical consciousness which highlights his Kantian agenda. He argues that historical consciousness is a rational cognitive faculty, it is 'a rationally oriented ability to construct history as well as to justify action historically'.<sup>15</sup>

For a critical observer of the contemporary cultural scene many elements in Rüsen's model and Straub's theoretical remarks may appear questionable. Is it really possible to reduce all forms of historical consciousness to four ideal types? In what precise sense of the word can we characterise contemporary historical culture as an expression of reason? Are there no forms of critical historical consciousness that exist outside of narrative? These are valid, obvious questions even if one does not subscribe to a postmodern point of view. Unfortunately, a close look at the imminent utopia of an interactive historical culture does not settle the discussions between the contemporaries of Habermas, the grandchildren of Kant, and their postmodern critics. Instead of confirming or alleviating our fears about narrative, reason and typological classifications, a critical analysis of video-game culture calls into question one of the keys axioms that Enlightenment theorists of history and their opponents hold in common. We have long assumed that the values and vectors of historical culture and historical consciousness are collectively produced invented traditions even if that assumption has led to very different conclusions about the political purposes and self-critical potential of these traditions. Now we might have to realise that historical consciousnesses can be invented and reproduced independently of any social context. In the past, the smallest unit of historical consciousness was a group of two individuals; in the future that smallest unit will be only one person and a computer. That seemingly small adjustment in scale will have radical consequences for the evolution of human consciousness, including historical consciousness.

### Video-game culture: presence and immersion

From books to television and video games, media have undergone 'an evolution of make-belief'.<sup>16</sup> Books provided narrative interpretations of the world, television added visual simulation, and video games offer for the first time the opportunity to interact with alternate universes and change essential characteristics of cultural products in the process of their consumption. But the triumph of interactive media has been handicapped by the games'

lack of visual sophistication. Television has for many years retained a simulative edge over video games because it delivered more compelling images of real and imagined worlds than interactive media. If we trust the assessment of experts, that is changing as I write these lines: a new generation of video-game graphics will seamlessly integrate animation and documentation and thus attain an unprecedented level of visual realism.<sup>17</sup> As a result, video games now outperform all other media and cultural products in the competition for consumer attention. The seductive combination of interactivity with realistic images, sound and haptic input appears irresistible. Among the many statistics one could quote in this context, the following might suffice: games are displacing television as leisure activity;<sup>18</sup> game sales have surpassed Hollywood box-office receipts;<sup>19</sup> and in Germany and the USA, children and adolescents use computers predominantly for playing video games.<sup>20</sup>

As we reach the often anticipated but hitherto rarely reached utopia of the blending of real and represented worlds, scholars are struggling to develop new terms to understand the computer media revolution. One of the most promising of the new concepts is the notion of presence, which is paradoxically defined as the perception of non-mediation on the part of the media consumer.<sup>21</sup> The concept of presence is dynamic and multidimensional; it incorporates all aspects of media use and focuses on the feelings of video gamers which might change rapidly as a result of exposure to different types of virtual play and different social settings. In essence, the cognitive social construct of presence is triggered by a very productive interaction between media biography and media technology. The intense perception of realism involved in this experience depends on how consumer expectations about realistic representations are matched by current communication technology.<sup>22</sup> In this spiral of hope and delivery, the devil is in the details. It is not sufficient for media to be interactive; they also have to offer a speed and range of interactivity that correspond to the consumers' desires about their interactive experience.<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, it is not sufficient for video games to appeal to all senses; they have to provide the right mix of specific sensory input, for instance by simulating binocular disparity or by using the latest advances in neurological research for the imitation of realistic engine vibrations.<sup>24</sup> The virtual world has to present a manageable challenge, neither too slow nor too fast in its response to player input and appealing to all senses without overwhelming the player.<sup>25</sup>

The secret is to attain an equilibrium equidistant from boredom and alienation. The right media package delivered at the right time to the right people is supposed to transpose the gamer into the famous state of flow in which he is sufficiently challenged to be engrossed in the game without being overwhelmed by the tasks presented on the screen.<sup>26</sup> The condition is also described by the more technical term 'immersion', defined as a psychological state in which the gamer is effectively isolated from all other virtual or non-virtual stimuli surrounding him.<sup>27</sup> Immersion takes place within evolutionary boundaries but it is not necessarily easily induced.<sup>28</sup> For the video-game

industry, the gamer represents a moving target. He might acquire new skills or forget old ones or change his aesthetic preferences, for instance, as a result of communication with peers. Consequently, the media packages are constantly updated and recalibrated, although within fairly narrow limits. Since it is so difficult to hit the target by designing a completely new game, game developers tend to replicate the structure and content of past commercial successes, updated by new technology.<sup>29</sup> As a result, mainstream gaming culture features a fairly narrow range of genres, content and aesthetics.<sup>30</sup> The limits of interactive media have not yet been rigorously tested – to the chagrin of media scholars who would love to receive more data for empirical research and theoretical enquiry.

Immersion is best conceptualised as occurring on a scale of varying intensity and within a wide range of media settings and should be carefully historicised. The introduction of new media has always triggered intense anxiety about their powerful negative effects on society.<sup>31</sup> The fears which accompanied the rise of radio, film and television might have been linked to waves of popular immersion into the new media because the experience as well as the fears seemed to have subsided once the new technology settled into routines of consumption and lost its simulative edge for most listeners/viewers. The experience of immersion should also be related to different stages of human development, which helps us understand why very traditional media settings, such as television, may have intense immersive effects on some viewers. Young children, for example, might feel transposed into the scenes they witness on TV and might suffer harmful psychological consequences precisely because they cannot yet differentiate between the virtual and the real even when dealing with such a relatively old technology as television.<sup>32</sup>

Placing the rise of interactive media within its larger historical and ontogenetic contexts highlights several important characteristics of the new media. Today's video games seem particularly appealing to adolescents because the existing game formats are well suited to help them meet their specific developmental needs.<sup>33</sup> Some researchers have therefore concluded that keeping youths away from Game-Boy, joystick and mouse might border on parental neglect.<sup>34</sup> But video games have already left the ghetto of adolescence – in 2004 the average age of gamers was thirty-three – because the members of Generation X, the first generation to play widely and consistently, are moving up in age and because video games increasingly feature ontogenetically adult formats, for instance by including complex narrative structures which are particularly appealing to post-adolescent consumers.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it seems very unlikely that the wave of immersive experiences that has accompanied the introduction of interactive media will subside fairly soon, as has been the case after the introduction of non-interactive media. The immersive effects will persist not because interactive media mark such a radical departure from traditional linear media (which they certainly do) but because multi-sensory interactivity approaches the

sensory and cognitive limits of the human species that are unlikely to change any time soon. Video games do not just feel like they require our complete attention, a feeling gamers probably share with the first generation of moviegoers; the games actually approach the thresholds of human data absorption and reaction speed and therefore promise long periods of immersive entertainment.

The experiences of immersion and involvement, which transport the gamer into a virtual space, may have intriguing consequences for the development of individual and collective identities and memories. In addition to perceiving virtual objects like real objects, video-game players can develop feelings of spatial presence towards figures in the game. Depending on the sophistication of the virtual environment the perception of co-presence with others may even rise to the level of a sense of access to other intelligent beings and a feeling of mutual awareness and recognition between players and figures.<sup>36</sup> For many gamers, the experience of co-presence and the chance of developing a sense of intimacy and community with others represent the *raison d'être* of their gaming activities. That applies in particular to fans of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG), who enter large, detailed and continuously existing virtual environments for extended periods of time and might form strong ties to other players which often lead to other contact through email and telephone or even face-to-face meetings.<sup>37</sup> But MMOGs are only the tip of the iceberg. In contrast to popular perceptions of video games as a pastime for lonely, socially inept nerds, most video-game playing is pursued as an intensely social activity organised in complex, layered networks of symbolic exchange. Friends and strangers meet off- and online to explore virtual worlds, compete and co-operate with each other, and discuss their virtual adventures.<sup>38</sup>

Until recently, emotionally satisfying relations in virtual environments have been primarily conducted between avatars – figures in the game that are directly controlled by players. Through their virtual representatives, gamers can display the degree of social competency and spontaneity that is essential for a fully developed sense of social co-presence. But advances in artificial intelligence increasingly blur the line between avatars and computer-controlled agents which (or perhaps better *who*) engage in sophisticated verbal and non-verbal exchanges with avatars and may appear authentic, especially to players who are used to interacting with virtual figures of various sophistication.<sup>39</sup> The exchange with a virtual environment that effectively simulates body movements and offers the opportunity to manipulate inert objects and build extensive social networks allows players to develop a new self-consciousness. As Biocca has argued, this virtual self-presence involves at least three different levels and bodies: the player's actual body, her virtual body and her mental models of herself.<sup>40</sup> As these bodies and mental images interact with each other the self can assume different, more or less integrated and persistent real and virtual identities, each with its own history and social grounding.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the virtual side of things might easily appear more real

and more desirable – for two important reasons. Within the game environment players have a control over their lives and relations that they never have in real life.<sup>42</sup> In addition, again in contrast to real life, they are both participants and eyewitnesses of their virtual exploits since they watch themselves fight, negotiate and collaborate with others on the screen.<sup>43</sup> As a result of this dual vision and unprecedented sense of power, they may develop particularly strong affinities and attachments to their socially constructed virtual lives, identities and memories. We should therefore not be surprised if the collective memories which have been constructed within, or in communications about, virtual worlds assume a psychological and social persistence that exceeds the staying-power of conventional collective memories which have been adopted by families, professions and other groups as a result of personal contact and the use of traditional media. Since all collective memories are fictions, the media and social forums which deliver these fictions in the most attractive formats should easily outperform less appealing outlets. Memories of virtual worlds and virtual interactions will become our most cherished memories and therefore our most powerful and real memories.<sup>44</sup> This does not mean that virtual and real worlds will seamlessly merge, that consumers will not be able to differentiate between the two at the point of consumption. But with hindsight the difference will indeed evaporate and the virtual world, experienced with the intense pleasure of controlled interactivity, will become the memory of choice.

### Games and narrative

Scholars of interactive media have traditionally assumed that video games are essentially a non-narrative medium because for many years interactivity and narrative linearity could not be reconciled with each other. In the past, game designers seemed to have had two options. If their product featured the kind of well-crafted, detailed and suspenseful storyline that readers and viewers enjoy in books, film and television, they had to limit interactive choices severely in order to protect the integrity of the story and deliver it to the consumer in one attractive, coherent package. Alternatively, if they increased the interactive choices of their game it made little sense to spend the time developing a complex narrative structure because their customers would pick the narrative apart in the process of playing the game and never find, let alone come to appreciate, the well-designed overarching story.<sup>45</sup> The development of the video-game industry seemed to confirm this perception. Consumers put a premium on interactivity and showed little interest in narrative complexity. As a result, a separation of labour emerged between different media formats. Traditional linear media continued to meet society's narrative needs whereas video games satisfied the new hunger for interactivity, especially among younger generations.

But in recent years we have come to realise that the incompatibility between narrative and interactivity occurred during a phase of transition

from old to new media. Technological innovations and the gradual disappearance of the generational divide between users and non-users of video games have turned the design of interactive narrative games into a lucrative business.<sup>46</sup> The dilemma was not solved by offering the player a choice of many different narratives which exist side by side in the virtual game world and take the player on a variety of linear journeys to different endpoints. Instead, successful interactive games define the basic elements and rules of the story in such a way that the player can take different turns at any corner in the virtual world and create his own narrative universe. The game does not feature any rigid, overarching storyline or storylines but a vast variety of plot options which, according to the desire of the player, can assume a different narrative form every time the game is played. Far from undermining interactivity, these emergent narratives enhance attachment to the virtual world because they cast the player into the roles of creator and witness of her own narrative worlds and thus intensify the experience of presence.<sup>47</sup>

As this brief survey of the study of narrative in video games indicates, communication scholars rightly emphasise that traditional and interactive media offer very different narrative products. Books and films generally present one linear storyline that cannot be altered by their consumers, whereas the latest generation of video games offers sophisticated emergent narrative that may assume a radically different form and structure every time the game is played. This differentiation is certainly important but it should not tempt us into constructing false dichotomies. Just because traditional media deliver stable, coherent and linear narratives at the point of distribution, this does not mean that these linear stories are reproduced at the point of reception. We know of many examples that show how consumers selectively absorb events, figures or plot structures from linear media like films and books, subsequently integrate them into a different narrative context, and in the process radically alter the political, ethical or aesthetic impetus of the original media story. Consequently, if we focus on the construction of narrative at the point of reception, traditional and interactive media differ only in degrees; both are used very selectively, although video games, at least in theory, can offer substantially more narrative flexibility and diversity than their predecessors.

### Invented communities and the limits of historical taste

But interactive media mark a more radical departure from the past in another respect, and that innovation is particularly important for the construction of collective memories and identities. Every person can already create their own private historical narratives but they will soon also be able to invent a whole community of virtual fellow-travellers with whom to share these narratives. Thus a single person can invent a whole historical culture consisting of a past, various interpretations of that past, and a social community that believes and cherishes those interpretations and turns them into a vibrant, lived historical

consciousness. Moreover, it will be possible to reinvent and recalibrate these cultures and communities any time one turns on the computer. The construction and deconstruction of invented traditions and collective memories will be accelerated to unprecedented speeds.

MMOGs are currently the only virtual environments that can reliably give players the feeling that they are part of a larger social network. Some theorists have therefore celebrated MMOGs as the realisation of Habermas's utopia of communicative action.<sup>48</sup> But MMOGs are just an intermediate phase in the evolution of virtual sociability. Players will always appreciate and demand the illusion of being part of a social community but in the future that illusion will be easily produced by software programs, and players will no longer have any way of knowing if they are really communicating with other individuals or if they are simply cavorting with figments of their own and their computer's imagination.<sup>49</sup> As avatars and non-player characters (NPCs) become indistinguishable for the average player it will no longer be possible (and perhaps not even desirable) to find out to what extent the virtual community, with which one identifies and whose collective memories one shares, is controlled by humans or computers.

So why have we not already entered this radical postmodern nirvana of virtual remembrance? Some reasons have already been mentioned. Video games have not yet taken a radical narrative and NPC turn because the technology is still in its infancy and because older generations, who are the primary consumers of narrative media and have not been raised in an interactive environment, find it difficult to make the transition at this point in their lives. But there are other, political factors which explain why interactive media have not yet begun to offer the full range of alternate worlds that we would expect to see. The video-game industry is dominated by US companies which steer a particularly conservative course and hesitate to produce anything which might give offence to the political and media establishment in the United States, even if that decision prevents them from taking advantage of fabulous profit opportunities. Pornography represents the best example for this self-censorship.<sup>50</sup> There is a lot of money to be made for the company that launches the first state-of-the-art pornographic video game but none of the mainstream contenders has dared to take on that challenge for fear that they would be targeted by the US religious right. History is a somewhat less controversial but also risky terrain. What would happen if Rockstar were to put out a game on the Civil War or the Second World War that featured the full counter-factual potential of interactive technology, including the options of reversing the abolition of slavery and calling into question the occurrence of the Holocaust?<sup>51</sup> These examples of unsavoury revisionism explain why the existing Second World War games like the 'Wolfenstein' series rarely stray from the safe path of blood and gore and US heroism.<sup>52</sup> But the attempt to keep the genie in the bottle and interactive entertainment technology within the limits of the historical taste of the US mainstream will fail sooner rather than later. Video-game technology is rapidly spreading around the

globe and many players have developed programming skills that match the expertise of highly paid professionals.<sup>53</sup> *Jihad: The Video Game*, if it does not already exist, is just around the corner.

## Conclusion

It might be important to emphasise again in what respects interactive historical cultures will be very similar to linear historical cultures. Video games offer fabulous opportunities for counter-factual historical exploration but that is not a new phenomenon. Twentieth-century historical culture already displayed a great fondness for counter-factual scenarios which pursued such important questions as how history might have changed if Hitler had survived the war and/or the Nazis had won it.<sup>54</sup> In the future, however, one will not need to seek out subcultural communities to indulge one's counter-factual inclinations; counter-factuals may be experienced in real and/or simulated social settings and in the privacy of one's own software program.

Interactive media will not necessarily have more influence over collective memories than traditional media had in the past. The visual culture of the twentieth century already determined the moral orientation of our historical consciousness at the expense of other sources of historical wisdom, like friends and family members. Research has shown, for example, that Germans born in the 1980s systematically misremembered the stories that their grandparents told about life in the Third Reich. The younger generations reinvented their grandparents' testimony according to the moral compass provided by the Federal Republic's official memory culture which the adolescents had encountered in textbooks and the visual media. In this editing process the grandparents were recast in the roles of resisters and victims of the Nazi regime even if their testimony blatantly contradicted their grandchildren's benign versions of their life histories.<sup>55</sup> In the future, however, the memories of family members will not be recalibrated according to the moral demands of a centralised, politically correct elite culture but according to the values and imperatives of a very local, yet very powerful, virtual community which exists only on the young generation's servers and hard drives.

Temporary experiences of presence and immersion notwithstanding, most people can differentiate between media experiences, both interactive and linear, and real-life experiences, but they lose that ability with hindsight – especially, but not exclusively, with regard to virtual experiences. In October 2006 the *New York Times* reported that companies like SONY BMG, Sun Microsystems, Adidas/Reebok and Nissan are invading the virtual world by buying shops and advertising space in the video-game environment *Second Life*, which is populated by the avatars of a million subscribers. The companies as well as the subscribers pay real dollars to the game's owner Linden Labs for their virtual selling and shopping privileges. These activities have attracted the attention of the US Congress, which plans to tax virtual

monetary transactions and have led to the foundation of a *Second Life* Liberation Army which opposes the commercialisation of the virtual world, stages virtual attacks on *Second Life* consumer outlets, and demands voting rights for avatars on the board of Linden Labs.<sup>56</sup> These dizzying interactions and exchanges demonstrate how much the virtual and the real world are already integrated. We might still be able to keep the two apart in everyday life but will we really be able to remember accurately where we first saw an ad for the latest Nissan automobile or where we watched that fabulously authentic colour footage of Hitler's suicide in the bunker? The advertisement executives who are experts in invading people's memory and laying the seeds for the shopping decisions of tomorrow were among the first to realise that they have to follow consumers into the virtual world. Anybody who wants to shape the collective memories of the future should heed their advice and compete for the privilege to build the monuments, museums and historical media in the virtual worlds of *Second Life* and its competitors.

It might be difficult to abandon the utopian enquiry into virtual worlds and its exciting theoretical implications but we should return, at least for a moment, to our less exciting concerns about the historical consciousness of today. What can we tell enlightenment optimists like Rüsen and Straub after our excursus into the academic world of video-game research? The publications neither prove nor disprove the assertion that historical consciousness exists only in and through narrative, although they confirm that narrative innovation will play a decisive role in the next generation of video games. The scholarship on interactive media also does not offer any conclusive insights into ethics of future historical cultures, although it is difficult to imagine that they will not have a strong moral, even moralistic dimension. After reviewing the literature it appears more difficult to accommodate Straub's demand that historical consciousness should be conceptualised as rational cognitive faculty; that suggestion seems to imply that most of today's historical culture, linear or interactive, does not rise to the standard of representing a historical consciousness. But the research on interactive media focuses critical attention on the terms of the definition of historical consciousness that have largely been taken for granted, such as communication, community and collective. In the age of interactive media the social construct 'historical consciousness' will take on a radically different quality because we will experience community in different ways. Video games produce the uncanny ability to communicate with oneself while creating the impression that there is a real other involved in that communication. Inscribed into the new media is a persistent simulation of collectivity which will permit us to reproduce collective memories without friction, resistance or the occasional reality-check that tended to intrude into our private worlds and memories in the age of linear, centralised media. As a result, collective memories and historical consciousness as we perceive of them today might simply cease to exist.

Expressed in Rüsen's terms, interactive media can take on the appearance of a sophisticated genetic historical consciousness while systematically

undermining the very possibility of such a genetic identity. According to the logic of Rüsen's model, that means nothing less than the return to static modes of consciousness in a period when our historical culture looks more diverse than ever. But then, I have always had the suspicion that the fourth stage of Rüsen's model was a utopian vision dressed up as realistic analysis, a vision we have failed to realise in the second half of the twentieth century and that will be even more difficult to attain in the virtual cultures of the future.

## Notes

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## 11 Being an improper historian

Ann Rigney

### I

Some ten years ago, Lynn Hunt, influential spokesman for the 'cultural turn' in historical studies, noted that scholars from various fields in the humanities were finding new common ground:

Are we on the verge of a more general cultural studies that will replace the separate compartments of *history*, *literature*, *art history* and the like? Yes and no. Yes, we are all borrowing from each other more and more explicitly. Engravings are no longer just illustrations but also evidence for historical arguments. Police reports, memoirs, conduct books, and autopsy reports are not just historical sources but also models, influences, and sources for 'literary' texts. But no, we are not all reading our documents in the same way: *historians* ask different questions from their colleagues in other fields, and even when they use the same sources, they use them somewhat differently.<sup>1</sup>

Reading Hunt's vision of a 'general cultural studies' as a 'colleague from another field' (I work in a department of literary studies and was also trained in such a department), I was surprised. Not by the idea that there have been lots of exciting exchanges across traditional disciplinary boundaries in the last decades and that scholars working within the human sciences have been converging on particular issues and sharing theoretical wares: these are undeniable (and welcome) developments which are still ongoing. What is surprising rather is the fact that even as Hunt looks forward to a redrawing of the traditional divisions between 'history, literature, [and] art history', her pen slips back into the familiar groove of the bipartisan divide between 'historians' and 'their colleagues in other fields'. The implication is that scholars can approach the same documents in different ways depending on what they want to know, but that 'historians' as a group collectively do things that are different from all of their colleagues elsewhere. In Hunt's view of things (and I use it here simply *à titre d'exemple* to illustrate a more general attitude), there is a critical divide within the human sciences, located between