

DIGITALIZING HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

What is a “historical” video game, let alone a successful one? It is difficult to answer this question because all our definitions of history have been constructed in a linear-narrative cultural context that is currently being challenged and in large part displaced by digital media, especially video games. I therefore consider this question from the point of view of historical semantics and in relation to the impact of digital technology on all aspects of the historiographical operation, from the establishment of digital archives, to the production of e-texts, to the digital remediation of visual modes of historical representation. Seen from this dual perspective, video games appear to participate in a process of spatialization and virtualization of historical semantics. In the first place, video games have begun to detach the notion of history from its double reference to the past and to the real—“what essentially happened”—that it had acquired at the end of the eighteenth century. Second, they also challenge the semiotic production of “historic events” that has characterized the construction of modern historical consciousness. Historical video games, in other words, replace representation with simulation and presence with virtuality, thereby marginalizing the oscillation of the modern historical imagination between historical facts and historic events, transcendence and immanence, representation and presence. Although digital reworkings of historical semantics have not produced any grammatical transformation of the signifier, history—nor does this essay propose one—I do argue that the impact of video games on our contemporary historic(al) culture is of paradigmatic proportions similar to those described by Reinhart Koselleck for the dawn of the modern age. Focusing on one of the most successful contemporary video games, Sid Meier’s *Civilization*, I show how the remediation of cinematic genres by video games is pushing the processes of de-temporalization and de-referentialization of history toward the formation of a new notion of the historical that may be conceptualized as the inversion of the classic Aristotelian paradigm: history has replaced poetry and philosophy as the realm of the possible.

I. INTRODUCTION: *HOLOCAUST II. SURVIVOR*

Welcome to what the *New York Times* calls the “final solution” in history video games. You can choose among five modes of interactivity, real identities, and avatars. Play in *Bystander* mode, and you will be an ordinary German between 1935 and 1945 in the position of either helping Jews or contributing to their downfall. Play in *Shoah* mode and you will be a “victim,” a European Jew (or Communist, or Gypsy—other categories are under construction for *Holocaust III*) in 1929 Germany, and make decisions that might lead you and your family to salvation or destruction. Play in *Sonderkommando* mode and you will be a camp inmate seeking to survive. Play in *Final Solution* mode and you will be an SS officer on trial at Nuremberg (the only SS identities available in this version) who may or may not have personally ordered the elimination of camp

inmates, but has to mount a defense of what he has or has not done. Play in *Coming to Terms with the Past* mode and you can be the historian who will assist the Nuremberg prosecutor in trying a perpetrator or the lawyer who will defend him. Chosen your mode of historical interaction? Ready to play? Put on your *Holocaust II Virtual Reality Multi-Player Environment Gear* and connect to *USC Shoah Foundation Institute* (<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/>), click on the *Holocaust II* hyperlink and begin playing in *Bystander* mode. Or, connect to the *Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance* (www.museumoftolerance.com) to play in any of the other modes. Click on the *Holocaust II* portal, receive a documented historical identity and . . . make history.

Holocaust II does not exist as an actual video game, at least not to my knowledge, not at the time of my writing this essay. But I wanted to begin with a fiction of my trained imagination because after having spent months researching video games, I have not been able to conceptualize the criteria by which one can be distinguished from the others as being “historical,” let alone which of them would qualify as a “successful” example of historical representation in the digital mode. My invention of *Holocaust II* is plausible in terms of the technological state of digital environments today, but it responds to the conditions of a historical imagination trained by the reading of written history and the analysis of traditional forms of historical representation (monuments, museums, films). It projects a digital-interactive fantasy that I consider successfully “historical” insofar as it would probe the ethical-aesthetic limits of both literal and figural representations of the Holocaust,¹ and would respond to some key challenges that video games pose to our “scholarly assumptions” and to modern historical culture as a whole.²

Holocaust II would confirm, for example, Wulf Kansteiner’s observation that the formation of collective memories or historical consciousness in the digital age will differ dramatically in a “thoroughly interactive cultural environment in which individuals will no longer depend on centralized institutions . . . to develop their collective memories.”³ Players of *Holocaust II* would construct their historical consciousnesses from the interactive space of their private screens, the virtual communities of avatars, and the “factual and counterfactual scenarios about the history of World War II and the Nazi crimes” that the game would conjure up for them.⁴ Another key aspect that *Holocaust II* exemplifies is the challenge that “virtual experiences” bring to the differentiation between “media experiences, both interactive and linear, and real life experiences.”⁵ As Kansteiner suggests, “anybody who wants to shape collective memories of the future should . . . compete for the privilege to build the monuments, museums, and historical media in the virtual worlds” of video games.⁶ Integrating interactivity with the “real-life”

1. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

2. Wulf Kansteiner, “Alternate Worlds and Invented Communities: History and Historical Consciousness in the Age of Interactive Media,” in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, S. Morgan, and A. Munslow (London: Routledge, 2007), 131-148.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 143.

5. *Ibid.*, 141.

6. *Ibid.*, 144.

identities that the Tolerance Museum or the USC Shoah Foundation (formerly the Visual History Foundation) would provide for any player entering the immersive space of the video game, *Holocaust II* would surely provide virtual memories of something perceived as real.

Yet even in such an interactive environment certain traits of linear historical culture would be remediated and by no means disappear.⁷ Just as film and television remediated a number of literary and popular cultural forms of communication, while not replacing altogether the influence that texts and transgenerational communication had on the formation of collective memories, so interactive media will not entirely supplant traditional institutional forms of historical consciousness. Anniversary commemorations, monument inaugurations, and debates on Hollywood epics will still take place in the digital future as they do in the present, and will provide counterweights to the virtual experiences of the historically real afforded by video games. In fact, several scholars have pointed out that the digital might be no “revolution” at all, but just one more process of remediation.

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that like all media revolutions before it, digital media remediate other media in search of newer and greater ways to create “immediacy,”⁸ hence video games’ reliance on perspective, the cinematic language of editing, and, more generally, the immersive experience generated by a narrative book when perceived as a “window” onto a world.⁹ Yet in one important respect digital media differ decisively from traditional linear media. In contrast to their predecessors, digital media achieve immediacy via hypermediacy. Their ability to make us forget the medium, and thus achieve an immersive effect of presence (immediacy), depends on their mimicking the logic of a reality in which media are ever present and we are used to their presence as *part* of our reality. This paradoxical relationship between immediacy and hypermediacy may be the most striking trait of the age of digital interactivity, and it goes a long way toward explaining why certain early forms of digital immediacy, like virtual reality helmets and gloves, have all but disappeared notwithstanding their early promise of changing all aspects of visual culture. Virtual reality apparatuses provided immediacy without hypermediacy, and therefore produced a sensory experience of the real, but not as immersive an experience as the one afforded even by the most primitive video games such as *Pong*, which remediated the perpendicular shot from the top of an arena or aerial balloon, typical of television coverage of sports events.¹⁰

On the other hand, the dialectic between immediacy and hypermediacy also operates in the other direction, that is, traditional media also remediate in response to the challenge of newer technologies and modes of immediacy. In this respect, Bolter and Grusin suggest a first important corrective to the direction that research should take in exploring the impact of digital technology on contemporary and future historical culture. Although video games represent the most

7. Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

8. *Ibid.*, 96.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 161.

sophisticated and popular form of interactive remediation, one cannot analyze them in isolation from the impact that digital technology is having on the whole field of historical production, from archives to textual and visual representations of history. This essay will therefore take a more technological rather than media-centered approach, extending Kansteiner's analysis to forms of digital encroachment upon traditional media in order to explore how they relate to the fully interactive characteristics of video games. Yet in doing so, this essay will also attempt to address the major question raised by Kansteiner: how do interactive media affect our conceptualization of historical consciousness itself?

As my video game fantasy exemplifies, the answer to this question is particularly difficult, because as historians and theorists of history belonging to the last pre-interactive generation, both our historical imagination and our conceptual frameworks have been constructed in response to linear media. Thus, when I invented *Holocaust II*, I imagined it precisely according to basic assumptions that are not formed in response to interactive media. In the first place, I took for granted that historical consciousness is related to collective memory—hence the choice of a historic event such as the Holocaust. Second, I hung my definition of “historical” on the game's reference to a documentable “real” in the past, provided in my fantasy by the link to digital archival institutions such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the USC Shoah Foundation. Both of these assumptions represent the foci around which have rotated most debates in the past few decades among historians and philosophers of history, defenders of traditional historical epistemology, and their postmodern and poststructuralist critics. And yet, as Kansteiner suggests in the last part of his essay, it is entirely possible that “interactive media” oblige us to focus precisely “on the terms of the definition of historical consciousness that have largely been taken for granted.”¹¹ For Kansteiner, these terms consist in our notions of “communication, community, collective,” and ultimately “identity,” all radically modified by the building up of interactive communities of avatars playing history online. But the challenge might extend even further to the heart of historical semantics. Digital technology may have already produced a reconfiguration of what we mean by “historical” in the first place.

II. HISTORY AS VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

To date, the impact of the digital on the practices of professional historians seems to have been both uncontroversial and welcome. H-Net can be likened to a perpetual annual conference, with everything from plenary speeches to intense private conversations. Robert Darnton's authoritative push for e-books has raised the awareness among historians that hypertext offers them possibilities for non-linear and “layered” forms of narrative.¹² No wonder then that some historians may even be enthusiastic about this aspect of digitalization. As Edward L. Ayers puts it, “history may be better suited to digital technology than any other human-

11. I anticipated this challenge in my fantasy, paying homage to the seriality of postmodern temporality by imagining *Holocaust II* to be *already* part of a series.

12. Go to <http://www.historians.org/PRIZES/gutenberg/rdarnton2.cfm> (accessed July 25, 2008).

istic discipline.”¹³ This is so, in the first place, because “the hypertextuality of digital texts allows for a multiplicity of semantic connections among data,” and hence the opportunity to “move toward more complex forms of analysis,” but also because it offers innovative ways to reconfigure narrative along nonlinear paths.¹⁴ For example, Ayers suggests, historians can use “maps as organizing structures, as portals into the narrative, rather than mere illustrations” and thereby fulfill the call to update their narrative strategies that the likes of Hayden White have been advocating for decades, without necessarily falling into the still threatening mode of literary fiction.¹⁵ In fact, Ayers muses, the digital offers historians the possibility of exchanging their control on “representation” for the freedom of “interactivity” and the levitating effect of “immersion” typical of video games.¹⁶ Historians, however, do not seem to have taken the bait, at least not yet. Digital history-telling à la *Age of Empires* or *Gettysburg!* has not made any inroads in the historical profession, and the number of e-books published by the American Historical Association is still less than one hundred. This, of course, is because of several factors, not the least being the value given to e-publications in merit and tenure reviews. Yet there seems to be a significant imbalance between the slow and half-hearted embrace of the narrative potential of hypertext and the unqualified enthusiasm for the digitalization of archival sources. The latter is by far the most welcome and most extensive sign of digitalization in historiography.¹⁷

Although only twelve percent of the world’s population is estimated to have access to the web, digital archives have made archival research more accessible to non-professional users. On the one hand, the advent of digital technologies has been decisive both in increasing exponentially the number of people who perform archival research, and in providing them with the option to augment online archival sources through the submission of personally selected items. On the other hand, the ready accessibility of archival material online has necessarily affected the ways in which knowledge is produced, assimilated, organized, and exchanged by historians.¹⁸ In particular, according to Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz, digitalization has begun to foster among historians “a greater sense that in [their] daily practices, [they] are performing from a script,” and has also prompted “a critical re-evaluation of the scripts [they] are performing.”¹⁹ This way, digitalization can be seen as

13. Edward L. Ayers, “The Pasts and Futures of Digital History,” <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastsFutures.html>, quotations on pages 1 and 6 (accessed July 25, 2008).

14. *Ibid.*, 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 4.

16. *Ibid.*, 6.

17. Among the most prominent are The Virginia Center for Digital History <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/index.php?page=VCDH>, and The Center for History and New Media, at George Mason University Washington DC, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/> (both accessed July 25, 2008).

18. According to a recent dissertation on the topic, “Overall, digital technologies have defined the twenty-first century archive in several ways. They have: 1) raised new preservation challenges; 2) augmented the volume of collected records; 3) given added privilege to the nature of the search engine itself and its selection parameters; 4) increased outreach; 5) eased the process of professional archival research; 6) improved the practice of photographic restoration; and 7) allowed the integration of localized forms of knowledge.” Lucia Ricciardelli, “Visual Culture and the Crisis of History: American Documentary Practice in the Postmodern Era” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, December 2007), 48.

19. Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern)

realizing at last the democratic potential of American historiography expressed by Carl Becker in his famous dictum that “Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities.”²⁰ Furthermore, digitalization has achieved democratization by simultaneously domesticating post-modernism into a pragmatics of “performance consciousness.”²¹

This being the case, there is a deeper dimension to this process of “democratization” best revealed by the *September 11 Digital Archive*.²² This archive realizes the democratic mission of digitalization by consisting exclusively of document files uploaded by Everymen and Everywomen. Accordingly, one can even find a minority of “conspiracy theory” emails and statements among its thousands of collected emails, videos, images, and audio files.²³ A specific mark of its “popular” nature can be found in the collection of documents called “‘Satan in the Smoke’ emails,” which received a specific heading in the “browse” section of the archive.²⁴ The democratic ethos is pushed to the forefront by the minimalist approach to archivization adopted by its organizers: the uploaded files are organized according to their medium (e-mails, audio-video, stories, images, and so on) and no “subject” catalogue directs the visitor toward any particular interpretive framework. Significantly, the “Satan in the Smoke” collection was not selected or labeled by the archivists, but donated and uploaded by a single user, and it appears under the browse heading “emails.” So in what sense does the archive fulfill its stated mission “to collect, preserve and present the history of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath”? What does “history” mean in this context? Surely not the exploration of historical causes or explanations for the event universally named *nine-eleven*, of which there is no trace anywhere on the site. Nor even the utilization of the uploaded material to produce multilayered narratives and interpretations of its experience. In fact, according to its director, Tom Scheinfeldt, the archive is specifically prohibited by statute from allowing users to construct creative narratives of the sort envisioned by Ayers.²⁵ The *September 11 Digital Archive* thus seems to equate history *with* experience rather than action, and to witnessing rather than making. In so doing, it alerts us to—and partakes in—a momentous process of re-semanticization of the modern notion of “history” itself.

As Reinhart Koselleck has long pointed out, the birth of the modern (Western) conception of history can be dated to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when a three-part process of “transcendentalization,” “temporization,” and “singularization” led to the notion of capital-H “History” (the ensemble of all human

Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 184.

20. Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” *American Historical Review* 37 (Jan., 1932), 234.

21. Cook and Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power,” 184.

22. <http://911digitalarchive.org/index.php> (accessed July 25, 2008).

23. The *Archive* contains more than 150,000 digital items, a tally that includes more than 40,000 emails and other electronic communications, more than 40,000 first-hand stories, and more than 15,000 digital images. In September 2003, the Library of Congress accepted the *Archive* into its collections, an event that both ensured the *Archive*’s long-term preservation and marked the library’s first major digital acquisition.

24. http://911digitalarchive.org/gallery_index.php (accessed July 25, 2008).

25. Phone conversation with Tom Scheinfeldt, the *Archive*’s Director, available at <http://www.foundhistory.org/claudio.mp3> (accessed July 25, 2008).

actions in time), the semantic collapse of “history” with “the past,” and the opening of Western consciousness to a “linear” and “progressive” view of historical time.²⁶ This process also involved the transfiguration of the ancient conception of history as a trans-temporal reservoir of moral lessons (*historia magistra vitae*) into the idea of “historic eventfulness” masterfully captured by Kant in 1792, in *The Contest of Faculties*.²⁷ Here, Kant argued that the French Revolution was no mere historical fact or process but a “*signum*” (*demonstrativum, rememerativum, et prognostikon*) that demonstrated retroactively and for all future time the transcendental and progressive nature of the historical process. Thus Kant gave philosophical articulation to the idea of “historic-ness,” discursively associated with “speech,” “site,” and “event.” It projected the “historic event” out of the realm of the real and into the semiotic realm of our consciousness as a “sign” that simultaneously re-narrativizes the relationship between past and present, and opens the latter toward a (new) future.²⁸

Seen in this semantic context, the first salient aspect of a digital archive specifically dedicated to the defining historic event of our times is that the main request made by its visitors to the archivists was, from the beginning, to provide them with “9/11 FAQs.”²⁹ Rather than signify the event, this popular request for presenting “facts,” that is, answers to frequently asked questions, marks the distance of our times from the origins of both the transcendental notion of the “historical” and the immanent codification of “historic-ness.” In fact, if we consider the apotheosis of historic signification of 9/11 summarized in the Presidential mantra “everything changed on nine-eleven!” the archive’s stress on “fact-ness,” and its staunch refusal to narrativize, and thus constitute the “Event” 9/11, could not be more explicitly counter-historic.³⁰ At the same time, it also contrasts with the traditional goal of archives to be the treasure chest of historical narratives with its stated metahistorical purpose “of using these events as a way of assessing how history is being recorded and preserved in the twenty-first century and as an opportunity to develop free software tools to help historians to do a better job of collecting, preserving, and writing history in the new century.”³¹

The *September 11 Digital Archive* thus alerts us to a momentous process of re-semanticization taking place under the sign of the digital. On the one hand it affirms the idea of history *qua* experience that reifies facts into “FAQs” as if they were a footnote to what counts as historical, that is, the experience of onlookers *qua* experience. On the other, it brings forth a new notion of presence that is neither immanent nor transcendental, but properly “virtual” because it calls attention

26. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 21-38.

27. Immanuel Kant, *The Contest of Faculties and Other Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 182; original emphasis.

28. Claudio Fogu, “Actualism and the Fascist Historic Imaginary,” *History and Theory* 42 (2003), 196-221.

29. *Ibid.* {reference doesn't seem right}

30. Tom Scheinfeldt: “We were contacted by the Sloan Foundation about submitting some kind of a proposal to do something about 9/11 just after the attacks, in September. We submitted our proposal for a digital archive in October. Funding was awarded in December. And the Archive was launched to the public in January 2002.” Email dated March 6, 2008.

31. <http://911digitalarchive.org/about/index.php> (accessed July 25, 2008).

to the act of witnessing and its digital dissemination, rather than to the rhetorical construction and perception of “real presence” in the act of representation. In so doing, the archive also signals a profound transformation in the rhetorical code that sustained the oscillation between the historical and the historic in the modern historic(al) imagination.³²

III. FROM REPRESENTATION TO IMMERSION IN MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION MEDIA

As the grammatical notion of the “historic present”—that is, the use of the present tense instead of the past in historical narration—plainly reveals, the idea of historic-ness is rooted in the rhetorical construction of *presence* in narrative. In fact, the genealogy of historic-ness takes us right back to the Greek rhetorical effect of *enargeia*—literally “vividness” or “palpability”—achieved by great historians like Thucydides when they described events from the perspective of a witness to the event, thereby identifying the reader with that witness.³³ Translated into Latin as *evidentia*, the rhetorical link between the effect of presence and the signification of historical truth found theological institutionalization in the Catholic conception of representation built on the dogma of the Eucharist, which posited the “real presence” of the body of Christ in the host. Thus codified, *enargeia-evidentia* sustained not only the “power of images” in the development of Christian-Western culture, but also, and in particular, the codification of “presence” in all visual modes of historical representation.³⁴ This dual trend has come to a key point of conjunction with the invention of cinema.

From its inception, *enargeia* found its most powerful and congenial medium in the early “cinema of attractions,” with its taste for wonder and its production of a spectator-witness of distant and simultaneous presents.³⁵ This early cinema exploited the sensory appeal of the image rather than the narrative realism afforded by editing. Soon, however, the aesthetic prerogatives of narrative asserted themselves, pushing the realism of the new medium toward a long-lasting subordination to the law of literary genres.³⁶ Characteristically, the remediation of cinema along narrative-literary lines found privileged expression in the creation of the genre of the historical feature film.³⁷ At the same time this new genre also managed to give the witness-effect of *enargeia* its most powerful translation in visual terms. By definition, the realism of all historical feature films—including

32. I discuss this oscillation with particular reference to fascist modes of historic(al) representation in my *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

33. Carlo Ginzburg, “Ekphrasis and Quotations,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 50 (1988), 4-22.

34. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), and Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary*.

35. Lauren Rabinovitz, “More than the Movies: A History of Somatic Visual Culture through *Hale’s Tours*, IMAX, and Motion Simulation Rides,” in *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture*, ed. Lauren Rabinovitz and A. Geil (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 102.

36. Rosenstone, 13. {need details; this is the first time this has been cited}

37. Vivian Sobchack, “‘Surge and Splendor’: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic,” *Representations* 29 (Winter 1990), 43.

historical romances, epics, and period films—has come to rely upon the poetic rules of narrative construction upon which all feature films have come to rely. The past is made “present” to the viewer-witness by means of historically accurate and detailed *mise-en-scene*, continuity of action, eye-level point of view, and continuous editing. Historical features, so to speak, push the screen toward degree zero of visual representation in order to transform the viewer into a direct witness of the action represented. In this sense the historical film genre as a whole can be considered both the grave-digger and the Jonah’s whale of the early cinema of attraction. On the one hand, its success in attracting the middle classes to the new medium helped the two-hour-long story-like feature film become the norm in cinema the world over. On the other, its continuous search for new ways to effect a sense of presence kept alive the association between the new medium and the search for a sensory stimulus that would bring the viewer into the space of the representation. Nowhere is this dual process better exemplified than in the characteristics and longevity of the Hollywood historic(al) epic.

“It is like writing history with lightning!” famously affirmed historian-President Woodrow Wilson after viewing *Birth of a Nation* in a private White House screening in 1914. “Lightning” here stood, and has continued to stand, for the “expansive, hyperbolic, even hysterical acts of cinema,” associated with the “spectacular possibilities” of the historical epic.³⁸ As Vivian Sobchack explains, “the Hollywood historical epic is not so much about the narrative accounting of *specific historical events* as it is about the construction of *general historic eventfulness*, . . . accomplished by creating equivalence and reciprocity among the epic ‘historic’ cinematic production, its historical narrative content and histrionic form, and its ‘historic’ reception.”³⁹ In other words, the epic genre can be credited with having merged and simultaneously amplified the spectacular effect of wonder of the cinema of attraction with the narrative impulse of the Hollywood feature film. Unsurprisingly, this merging has been greatly enhanced by the development of digital technology. In fact, after a period of crisis and decline between the late 1960s and mid 1980s, the genre has rebounded and returned to its earlier splendor precisely thanks to the increasing malleability of the image (for example, *Schindler’s List*, 1993), the editing (*JFK*, 1991), and the *mise-en-scene* (*Gladiator*, 2000) made possible by digital manipulation.

The technological capability to produce digital reconstructions of past places and events that seamlessly merge with analogic forms of representation without disrupting the viewer’s sense of verisimilitude has thus brought spectacle back to the center of cinematic culture and the historical feature film. Yet unlike its early forms based on the operatic overwhelming of the spectator’s senses, digital spectacle is put in the service of deconstructive strategies. In *Forrest Gump* and *JFK*, for example—two of the earliest examples of digitally manipulated historical features—digital technology was used for the first time to intentionally blur the boundary between the historically real (that is, recorded) and the historically fictional. While neither of these films yielded a “pre-reflective” sense of “Being-in-History,” they both projected the corollary idea that “reflections on history are

38. *Ibid.*, 28.

39. *Ibid.*, 28-32.

of no consequence on acting historically.”⁴⁰ Whether epic or not, the cinematic representation of history under digital conditions no longer has any constraints on its ability to make any place or event from the past visually present on screen, through digital manipulation of single shots or computer-generated sequences. But what this means is that we identify past-ness more and more with “place” rather than time, and we get more and more used to experiencing a “virtual” sense of the past’s presence in representation. In the process, temporal experience itself is being divorced from historical representation. To put it in rhetorical terms, in digitalized cinema, *enargeia* has begun to be detached from both the historical and the historic, and history is no longer *made* present, but is virtual.

It is therefore not surprising to find the staunchest resistance to the encroaching of the digital in documentary filmmaking, that is, on the end of the wide spectrum of cinematic forms of historical representation furthest removed from the historical epic. Threatened by the destabilization of the historically “real” initiated by the virtually present, documentary filmmakers have shied away from utilizing digital technology, and none more forcefully so than the undisputed master of historical documentary art, Ken Burns.⁴¹ This is quite understandable if one thinks of the “Ken Burns effect” as designed to highlight the very indexical quality of photographs as fluid and “moving” windows onto the past. To reinforce the message, in *The Civil War* Burns’s camera stood still while capturing landscapes at the exact time of the events in the past they were supposed to evoke. Romantic and emotional, Burns’s epic art initially refused the digital in order to endow with “natural-ness” the indexicality of photographic reproduction. It is therefore quite significant that in his last enterprise, *The War*, Burns abandoned his stance against digitally restored and manipulated footage. Shedding none of its emotionalism and overly sanctimonious pretense to a “bottom-up” historiographical approach, and still disdainful of the historical profession’s inability to capture “the experience” of World War II, *The War* allows “place” to spell American-ness. Contrary to the claims of the filmmaker, *The War* is not at all the story of four American towns during the war, but that of Everyman in Everytown America. The vividness of the Ken Burns effects in the new picture is startling precisely because we were used to the patina of the old ones. And when, at last, we see “red blood” in the footage—as Burns cues us to think in interview after interview—then, and supposedly only then, we finally acknowledge that the Good War was also a “bloody” conflict.

Quite possibly, with its forty million viewers, the most popular piece of historical thinking in American film to date, Burns’s *The War* manages to be quite a bit more “manipulative, nostalgic, and nationalistic” than any of his previous productions, but in one key respect it also provides the counterweight to the post-modern *Forrest Gump*.⁴² Cultural historian Paul Fussell, himself the author of

is this really what you mean? it's confusing

40. Vivian Sobchack, “Introduction: History Happens,” in *The Persistence of History*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

41. Ricciardelli, “Visual Culture and the Crisis of History,” 53.

42. Nancy Franklin, “In the Trenches: Ken Burns on the Second World War,” *The New Yorker* (September 24, 2007). http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2007/09/24/070924crte_television_franklin (accessed July 31, 2008).

the historical bestseller *The Great War and Modern Memory*, appears repeatedly in the film identified as “infantry.” Similarly, the most authoritative and interesting figures in the film, Samuel Hynes and Quentin Aanonson, are identified as “a fighter pilot from Minneapolis” and “an Army pilot from Luverne.” Coyly, Burns never identifies them, respectively, as a distinguished Princeton literature professor, and the author of an award-winning documentary on the Pacific theater of war. The omission is telling because it points to the fact that Burns jettisoned on purpose the authorial *duetto* of historians McCullough and Foote, which had worked so well in *The Civil War*, in order to offset the loss of indexical purity with the appeal of unmediated “experience.”⁴³ On this score, Burns’s turn to the digital seeks to approach the encoding of history *as* experience that we have already found in the digital archive and in the digitalization of the epic film.

At the same time, it confirms the gradual shift of cinematic experience toward forms of immersive environment aimed at counteracting the traditional identification of the modern spectator with a disembodied gaze, that is, a “watcher” separated from his or her body and the space of the representation by the darkness of the movie theater. The digitalization of spectacle in epic feature films and documentaries is not an isolated or temporary phenomenon, but one confirmed by the rising popularity of 3-D cinema, IMAX, and motion-simulation ride-films, all made possible by digital technology. According to Lauren Rabinovitz, these post-modern forms of the “cinema of attractions” engage “multiple senses,” thereby defining the “cinematic experience not as a purely visual relationship to a screen but as a pleasurable, physical self-awareness of coordinated perceptions within an architectonic space.”⁴⁴ However marginal—and not so much anymore after the recent success of the 3-D version of *Beowulf*—digital spectacles and ride-films available in theme parks and theaters alike “attempt to affect and promise embodiment as a prophylactic against a world of continuous disembodiment.”⁴⁵

In fact, the process has even reached as far as academia where costly “virtual reality historical re-creations,” such as the *Digital Roman Forum*, are being produced by the UCLA Cultural Virtual Reality Laboratory (henceforth CVR Lab).⁴⁶ *The Forum* is a 3-D reconstruction of the ancient Roman forum in 400 C.E. that can be accessed via computer or “experienced” in the three-screen facility of the CVR’s Lab. Diane Favro, CVR Lab’s founder and director, proudly defines the *Forum* a “re-creation” as opposed to the more “scientific-sounding term ‘visualization.’”⁴⁷ The terminological distinction is appropriate precisely because Favro sees the *Forum* as being in line with the “immersive simulations of ancient cities” created by the Barnum and Bailey Circus in the 1890s.⁴⁸ On the other hand, she also insists on its scientific status by defining re-creation as “knowledge representations” based on the conjectural paradigm of historiography associated with

43. *Ibid.*

44. Rabinovitz, “More than the Movies,” 102.

45. *Ibid.*, 104.

46. <http://www.cvrilab.org/> (accessed July 31, 2008), now folded into the UCLA Experiential Technology Center.

47. Diane Favro, “In the Eyes of the Beholder: Virtual Reality Re-creations and Academia,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Supplementary Series Number 61 (2006), 323.

48. *Ibid.*, 324.

the practices of microhistory.⁴⁹ Both references, however, end up begging the question of simulation.

Quite grand in scale and endowed with a system that reproduces and modulates the sound of Latin speech, as one is “driven”⁵⁰ around the Roman Forum, the digital *Forum* lacks systematic means to make a “rigorous and systematic distinction between proofs and probabilities,” which (in theory) constitute the epistemological creed of microhistorians.⁵¹ It thus comes much closer to the epic scope of *Gladiator* (2004) and the epistemological status of a “simulacrum”—in the Baudrillardian sense of the word—than to the tale of Menocchio’s adventures. In fact, in order to re-create the architectural environment of classic Imperial Rome, one of the sources of “knowledge” for the *Forum* is the famous “plastico” of Imperial Rome commissioned in 1936 by Mussolini from the architect-archeologist Italo Gismondi, which contained quite a number of “aggrandizing” elements, and which has also inspired Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas, *Gladiator*, and another virtual re-creation by the ETC called *Rome Reborn*.⁵² Undoubtedly, the *Digital Roman Forum* pushes the boundaries of historical scholarship toward the pleasure of simulation and the embodiment of presence through virtual reality scenarios. To judge its claims to scientific status is not the aim of this discussion. What needs underscoring is that like Burns’s still camera, the *Forum* pushes the boundary of digital technology toward its opposite, the analogical, by projecting, for example, skylscapes at different times of day and calling them “Lightscape study of shadows cast in the Roman Forum at 10:00 a.m. on June 21, A.D. 400.”⁵³ This is done, quite appropriately, for studying the lighting inside and outside of buildings.⁵⁴ But the “knowledge representation” of a precise time and date derived from astronomical algorithms—when, in fact, on that specific day it may have rained in Rome—throws us into a space of sensory presence in which the disembodied voice of Cicero himself—as we approach the southwest corner of the *forum magnum*—transports us away from representation and delivers us to immersion.

Digital encodings of historical-ness in epic features and documentary filmmaking, 3-D motion-simulated ridefilms, auditory-stimulated virtual reality reconstructions, and so on, all participate in fostering a shift from questions of representation to issues of sensory immersion that redefine history as the *experience of the virtually past*. From the point of view of historical semantics, the digitalization of historical traces and representations seems to point in two new directions: first, toward the *virtualization* of history, and away from both the transcendental and immanent conceptions of historical action, representation, and consciousness that have characterized the Western historic(al) imaginary

49. Personal interview with Diane Favro on December 11, 2007.

50. A computer operator “drives” the simulation in the UCLA visualization lab.

51. Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), 12.

52. <http://www.romereborn.virginia.edu/> (accessed July 31, 2008). The project was realized with the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at Virginia Tech. See also http://www.commission5.isprs.org/3darch07/pdf/guidi_etal.pdf (accessed July 31, 2008).

53. Favro, “In the Eyes of the Beholder,” 328.

54. Interview with Favro.

from the late eighteenth century onwards; second, toward a *spatialization* of historical experience, away from the temporal axis of narrative forms of historical consciousness. These, then, are the two processes that we find operating in the codification of history in video games.

IV. "REWRITE HISTORY WITH THE GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME"

Returning to my initial video-game fantasy, it should now be clear that its key modality, that is, the availability of five options to anchor the player-avatar to historically documentable identity roles, relied on a notion of history untouched by the virtualization and spatialization of historical experience instantiated by digital technology. If I were to reinvent *Holocaust II* now, I would not hesitate to organize it as a "strategy game" in which the objective would be to build and run an extermination camp as efficiently as possible. Certainly this is a huge ethical step back from the offering of five modalities connected to historical identities, but an equally huge step forward toward the "greatest game of all time" and its promise to "rewrite history," namely, *Sid Meier's Civilization* (henceforth *SMC*).

Thus boasts the official website for *SMC*, and, as far as "greatest game of all time" is concerned, the description might be quite fitting.⁵⁵ The exponential distance between this video game and its most immediate rivals—except for *The Sims*—in terms of sales, spin-offs, and web-presence, makes it easy to point to this product as *the* standard of "success" in the category of "Godlike" strategy games.⁵⁶ This is even more the case if one considers the number of public reviews and academic analyses dedicated to it. Magazines as diverse as *Time* and *Rolling Stone*, *PC World*, and *GameSpot* have repeatedly declared different editions of *SMC* "Best Game of the Year."⁵⁷ Few general treatises on video games omit a detailed discussion of *SMC*, and at least one collection of essays and numerous e-reviews and journal articles have already been dedicated to this game.⁵⁸ Yet all the critical attention lavished on *SMC* is prompted less by its being the "Best Game Ever" than by its claim to "rewrite" history.

Like many other games, *SMC* evolved from a board game of the same name, and was inspired by strategy games such as *Empire*, *Sim City*, and *Railway Tycoon*, and, since its creation in 1991, it has already gone through four expan-

55. <http://www.Civ3.com> (accessed July 31, 2008).

56. Godlike strategy games are games in which the player has to achieve a complex goal playing against the computer's artificial intelligence or other players seeking to achieve the same goal. Besides its own four editions, *SMC* can be credited with being the direct inspiration for a number of strategy games, such as *Alpha Centauri*, *Colonization*, *Civ City: Rome*, *Gettysburg!*, *Europa Universalis*, *War of Empires*, and the new hybrid *Civilization IV: War of Empires*.

57. On Amazon.com *Civilization III* has more than 500 customer reviews, with the first review apparently read and rated by more than seven hundred people ("234 of 724 people found the following review helpful," Amazon earnestly reports). http://www.amazon.com/Atari-04-22252-Civilization-3/dp/B000051C8D/ref=pd_bbs_sr_2?ie=UTF8&s=videogames&qid=1210786306&sr=8-2 (accessed July 31, 2008).

58. See, for example, Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 252-256, and Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 85-106. The collection of essays has been published only in Italian by Matteo Bittanti with the title *Civilization: Storie virtuali, fantasie reali* (Milan: Videoludica, 2005).

sions.⁵⁹ Although expert players will make sophisticated distinctions among the different editions—not always praising the latest—all of the game’s versions have maintained a certain “historical” character that has determined the game’s continuous appeal—in contrast, for example, to its much less successful spin-off *Alpha Centauri*, which projects the history of human civilizations in future time and space. In *SMC* the player chooses to *act* as the historical leader (Lincoln, Chairman Mao, Cleopatra, Caesar, and so on) of one of eighteen historical “civilizations” (United States, Russia, Egypt, but also Iroquois and Maya), which he or she must *develop* against rival civilizations over a 6,000-year span. The rivals are operated either by the computer’s artificial intelligence or by other players in the online version, and pursue the same or alternative strategies of development. To “develop,” however, means a number of different things in *SMC*. In the first place, it means to *resist the passing of time*, that is, the 6,000 years the player has to win the game. Second, it means pursuing one of a number of options the player has for winning the game. It can mean to eliminate, destroy, or conquer all rival civilizations, or to colonize and control a huge percentage of world territory and population, or to develop through trading, diplomatic, cultural, and military relations a hegemonic position over all rival civilizations. It can also mean, quite simply, to reach the highest score within a certain time-frame decided with other players or the computer. Finally, it can even mean being the first to complete a space ship to fly to Alpha Centauri—where supposedly one could continue playing the homonymous game created by Meier.

Whatever its creator meant, enthusiasts credit *SMC* with “rewriting” the very notion of “history” according to postmodernist or poststructuralist principles through the composite utilization of self-reflexivity, irony, creative anachronism, counterfactualty, and so on.⁶⁰ They praise its anthropological temporal sweep, its emphasis on technology and culture, and, above all, the fact that playing *SMC* amounts essentially to playing in “what if” mode by constructing scenarios *against* both historical reality (what historians say Lincoln did as President) and historical plausibility (tanks may be attacked and even destroyed by Greek triremes). Predictably, critics of *SMC* have pointed out that the game does not “rewrite” history at all, because it *negates it altogether*. In other words, *SMC* does not measure up to the definition of history it intends to rewrite, for it uses names and likenesses of well known world leaders from the past, and invokes technological, political, economic, and social realities, but does not combine them into something that one could call a representation or interpretation of “what essentially happened” in the past. And yet critics and enthusiasts alike seem to share some common terrain. The critical discourse around *SMC* stabilizes its referent, h/History, as either a discourse anchoring representation to the real past that *SMC* supposedly does not measure up to (critics), or as a transcendental Grand Narrative of mankind in time waiting to be deconstructed by video games such as *SMC* (enthusiasts).

is “resist” the right word? I’m not sure what you mean here.

59. Kacper Poblocki, “Becoming-State: The Bio-Cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier’s Civilization,” *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology* 39 (2002), 164.

60. Matteo Bittanti, “L’utilità e il danno del videogame per la storia,” in *Storia e problemi contemporanei* 11 (2007), 16-32.

Both of these perspectives, however, end up downplaying an aspect of *SMC*'s rewriting that pertains to the instability it introduces in the referent h/History. From our perspective, *SMC*'s success as history can only be ascertained in reference to the intersecting processes of digital remediation and resemanticization of history, that is, in relation to other genres of historical simulation in this medium, and to the virtualization and spatialization of history that we have observed at the level of the digital archive and the remediation of cinematic representation. Let me explain.

Let's start at the end and focus on the game's last objective—the escape to Alpha Centauri, which, besides alerting us to the *intergaming* literacy that characterizes the activity of videogaming, also points to a key characteristic of *SMC*. *SMC*'s main claim to fame is its high number, and very complex system, of variables, including personality traits attributed to past leaders (from which a player can choose). These variables characterize the economic and political systems one can develop and combine, the cultural wonders and great scientists one can choose to pursue or emulate, which, as a whole, account for the sense of non-linear, unlimited options (inexperienced) players have at their disposal. One variable, however, remains linear and rigidly defined by the game designers: the technology tree that contains eighty technologies that players have at their disposal for pursuing their chosen goals. In this key respect, critics rightly charge that no matter the playfulness and sense of freedom experienced by its players, *SMC* contains an indisputable ideological kernel, which identifies it as a quintessentially Western-American creation. It projects an image of the civilizing process characterized by technological determinism and progress.⁶¹

Even without this technological teleology, on several grounds *SMC* would surely have raised all the political eyebrows it has in fact raised: for its politically incorrect use of “barbarians” as a recurrent disturbing element randomly appearing in the game but never making it to the status of civilization;⁶² for its identification of civilizations with national groups and states;⁶³ for its imperialist bias that makes it easier to win by conquering territory rather than developing cultural wonders;⁶⁴ or, more simply, for identifying liberalism with “giving every civilization a chance to become the USA.”⁶⁵ In fact, unifying all of these ideological critiques is not technological determinism *per se* but the common refrain that the game is structurally based on “anachronism” and is therefore quintessentially “anti”-historical. In this way, charge its critics, *SMC* instantiates the pernicious effects of the postmodern critique of historical knowledge.⁶⁶ Ironically, however, these critics make their argument on the basis of a textualization of the game; that is, they reify “play” into narrative, and criticize *SMC* as representation rather than simulation, interactivity, and immersion.

61. *Ibid.*, 165. {this page number doesn't seem right, if this ref. is indeed *ibid.*}

62. Christopher Douglas, “Hai scatenato un'orda di barbari! Compiere indiani, giocare e definire discipline,” in Bittanti, ed., *Civilization*, 40-64.

63. Poblocki, “Becoming-State,” 167.

64. Barry Atkins, “La storia è un'assurdità: Civilization come esempio di barbarie storiografica,” in Bittanti, ed., *Civilization*, 72.

65. Poblocki, “Becoming-State,” 172.

66. *Ibid.*, 171.

In the first place, *SMC* is a masterful exercise in what Ian Bogost calls procedural rhetoric: the art of effective persuasion and expression “through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.”⁶⁷ Game designers are “procedural authors” who create procedural models of external or imagined systems and impose sets of rules that create particular possibility spaces for play. To play is to move in the space defined by that set of rules, and in so doing the player creates a procedural rhetoric that makes claims about the world. In this respect, *SMC* “represents history with rules of interaction rather than patterns of writing” in ways entirely comparable to both the anthropological scale and the “procedural history” offered by Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*,⁶⁸ though, far more than in Diamond’s book, procedural history in *SMC* rotates around the space of possibility rather than around the constraints of the conjunction of environmental, political, and social factors that have determined it. Second, whatever the strategy, winning in *SMC* is to learn the procedural code of the computer. The logic of the game therefore always pushes the player toward the internal logarithm rather than the outside referents it mobilizes. Real names of nations and world leaders, their images and words, all serve to instantiate the “historical” as general referent in the game, but not as something to be represented. Playing *SMC* is therefore much closer to acting in drama than narrating in literature or representing in painting.⁶⁹ Above all, gaming is a matter of role-playing, simulation, immersion, and interaction, not representation. And it is on this score that *SMC* excels.

SMC’s procedural rhetoric makes this game a quintessential “machine for producing speculative and conditional” historical scenarios, which is precisely how simulations are defined in video-game theory.⁷⁰ Furthermore, its interactivity is guided by a mixture of the two modalities of pleasure associated with videogaming: it is *ludus* insofar as the game is a win-or-lose proposition, but it is also *paideia* insofar as the principal element of pleasure resides in its being a strategy game that invites its player to multiply and test an *n* number of strategies for winning rather than seeking progression to a higher level of difficulty. Finally, procedural and interactive elements of the game come together to give *SMC* a very peculiar immersive quality. Continuous technological-aesthetic developments—such as the new 3-D graphics of *Civilization IV*—have sought to augment *SMC*’s realism in order to sustain the typical effect of immersion that consists in “forgetting the medium” in all forms of representation, including video games. In *SMC*, however, immersive realism is only secondary. The main source of immersion in this game is the very confrontation between player and

67. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, ix.

68. *Ibid.*, 125. References to Diamond’s book as a model for *SMC* are ubiquitous in the favorable literature. See, for example, Alex Burns, “Apprendimento ludico digitale e simulazioni di macrostoria,” in Bittanti, ed., *Civilization*, 157.

69. On the question of narrative and theater in video games, see Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), and Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

70. William Uricchio, “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 334.

computer's artificial intelligence, which hides a "deeper level of collaboration."⁷¹ The stimulus to learn the computer's procedural code makes the pleasure of gaming rest on how much and how fast this learning becomes intuitive, smooth, and rapid. One's pleasure depends on one's "becoming computer-like," melding with it, and, as it were, "self-dissolving."⁷² This cyborgian image might be a bit extreme, but it captures a trait common to all positive assessments of *SMC as history*: *SMC* embodies a postmodern vision of history in its operation and play, rather than in the texts or subtexts it produces, as its critics charge.

Rightly so, it is in the procedural rhetoric of the game that William Uricchio finds a compendium of poststructuralist propositions, and Matt Bittanti an instantiation of both Hayden White's call for a modernist mode of historical representation and Robert Rosenstone's list of postmodern historiographical practices.⁷³ From a related perspective, Barry Atkins points out that *SMC* is a perfect example of "creative anachronism" because its mixing of temporal disjunction with historical figures, buildings, and artifacts can be "perceived only insofar as the player already knows the events associated with that historical figure."⁷⁴ Finally, several scholars have remarked on the perfect fit between *SMC* and the counterfactual or "virtual" notion of historiographical practice advocated by Niall Ferguson and an ever growing number of scholars.⁷⁵ Like written experiments in virtual historiography, *SMC* is credited with dislodging history from its prolonged association with determinism and with contributing to highlighting the role of contingency at all levels of the historiographical operation. It should therefore not come as a surprise that, in direct antithesis to ideological critiques, there are even those like Kurt Squire who have strongly advocated (and implemented) the use of *SMC* for didactic purposes.⁷⁶

Each of the scholars mentioned above has produced highly sophisticated analyses of *SMC*, which deserve a much more detailed discussion. But although their case for *SMC*'s status as an application of postmodern or poststructuralist principles is sound and convincing, their discussion needs to be inserted into a wider consideration of the remediation processes that characterize video games *more than any other medium before or after*. Unlike literature or cinema, video games were *born* from a pure act of remediation: the remediation of board games.⁷⁷ More recently, however, the remediation process has clearly shifted to cinema. In the first place, more and more video games are produced as spin-offs of successful movies. This is the case, for example, of *Call of Duty 2*, *Medal of*

71. Ted Friedman, "Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space," in *Discovering Discs: Transforming Space and Genre on CD-ROM*, ed. G. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 2005). <http://www.duke.edu/~tlove/civ.htm> (accessed July 31, 2008), 12.

72. *Ibid.*, 3.

73. Uricchio, "Simulation, History, and Computer Games," 332; Bittanti, "L'Uilità e il danno," 6-12.

74. Atkins, "La storia è un'assurdità," 71 (my translation).

75. Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Basic Books, 1996).

76. Kurt Squire, "Replaying History: Learning World History through playing Civilization III" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2004).

77. Especially *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974).

Honor, Brothers in Arms, Battlefield 1942, all inspired by *Saving Private Ryan*.⁷⁸ Second, over the past two decades, advances in digital technology have allowed better and better graphic interfaces to insert video-game action in tridimensional environments. Cinema has been key to this process of remediation, providing video-game designers with the language of point-of-view, editing, shots, and sequences, which is now ubiquitous in the construction of video-game simulations, and which is augmented by the insertion of pseudo or real film clips inside video games. As we have seen, even *SMC* has benefited from this process, with its third and fourth edition introducing visual elements that have very favorably impressed its users. In fact, so-called history video games as a whole have benefited most directly from this remediation of cinematic conventions and have evolved into several subgenres.

At least two significant subgenres that owe everything to remediation have developed side by side with Godlike strategy games like *SMC*. On the one hand are event-driven strategy games often—but not always—based on military conflicts. These rely on very detailed, documentary-based reconstructions of a historic event or site that is evoked, among other things, by the visual texture of the game.⁷⁹ Here, in games such as *Battle of the Bulge*, *Versailles 1685*, or *Making History: The Calm and the Storm*, the player is exposed primarily to the full pedagogical virtues of “virtual” history. Yet just as in the *September 11 Digital Archive*, this process of virtualization deconstructs the historic-ness of the events referred to, by insisting on the analogical appeal of the historical simulation. Similarly, the whole genre of historical *first-person-shooter* games, in which the player acts through an avatar whose field of vision is identified with the entire screen, has utilized cinematic remediation to disentangle immersion from *enargeia*, the effect of presence related to the act of witnessing. This immersion in simulated historical action might suggest a strong intensification of presence, but all the evidence points to the contrary. The use of film clips in all of these games to signal the “historical” status of the simulation that follows contributes to a sharp separation rather than a merging of the two of them. This phenomenon is particularly observable in highly politicized video games such as the Italian *Il rosso e il nero* (the red and the black) in which the player is invited to choose either the identity of an antifascist partisan or that of a fascist fighter, and to participate with other players online in a replay of the Italian civil war named Resistance (1943–1945). Contrary to all expectations, many players engaged in this game have declared that they have played in both modalities, thereby indicating that even in this case—as we have seen with *SMC*—identity is a function of game-playing (not vice versa), and that the traditional idea of history in video games is thoroughly de-referentialized and virtualized.⁸⁰

It should be clear by now that *SMC*—like most other strategy games—is best appreciated as a remediation of the Hollywood historic(al) epic. Like its model,

78. Bittanti, “L’utilità e il danno,” 43.

79. For example, *Napoleonic Computer Game Anthology*, *Battle of the Bulge*, or *Versailles 1685*, *Making History: The Calm and the Storm*.

80. The same can be also said of “American” highly charged games such as *JFK Reloaded*, *Waco Resurrection*, and *9/11 Survivor*.

SMC speaks directly to the representation of history in consciousness, but unlike the cinematic epic it does not do so through the excess of its representational apparatus, or the extra-diegetic construction of the film *as* historic event. In line with digital encroaching in the cinematic medium, *SMC* literally transforms time into space. When you switch on a computer and install the game you are transported into the familiar realm of a cinematic historical representation, which includes an epic soundtrack midway between *Gladiator* and *Chariots of Fire*. Your gaze, however, is identified with a bird flying over a non-time-specific scenario, which comprises an Assyrian-like temple in a Mayan-like city with New York City and the Eiffel Tower in the background. This reference to a spatial pastiche constitutes a clue to what follows. The game begins with a small illuminated area at the center of a dark screen. That is your territory; around you is only darkness. Soon the game will bring you to establishing a settlement, which, by a combination of luck and skill, will expand to thrive for 6,000 years—or perish from trying. The narrative input to transform “place into space,” as Ted Friedman puts it, is therefore there from the beginning to make sure the story of *Civilization* is understood as a “spatial story,” the “drama of a map changing in time.”⁸¹

In the video-game epic mode, gone are the historic event and the historic site. The digitalization of history in video games thus brings together spatialization, virtualization, and simulation to complete the elimination of representation as the medium that anchored historical action to historical consciousness. Without representation, the Aristotelian opposition between history and poetry comes to a point of reversal. For Aristotle the former was inferior to the latter because it only spoke of what *had* happened, rather than what *may* happen. Digital history enters the twenty-first century exclusively under the sign of the possible; we are now interested only in what may happen and are no longer concerned with what has happened.

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81. Friedman, “*Civilization* and Its Discontents,” 12.