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Editorial

Paradise Lost: Romanticizing as Playing the Imagined Past

Paradise Lost is not only the title of John Milton’s famous epic poem (1667) but also a philosophical-theological notion linked to and emerging from the Fall from Eden in Genesis. It expresses – or imagines – the human experience of a definite rupture in history, with its inextinguishable urge to return to the time before the rupture and its yearning for an idealized version of this past. Throughout history, this longing has been expressed in artwork, architecture, and literary works, and it is perhaps best observed in the Romantic era, with its preference for the past, the future, and the contemporary exotic.

Today, the notion of “Paradise Lost” has far from disappeared, finding post-modern manifestations in contemporary art and literature as well as in the revival of (secular) nationalism and (religious) fundamentalism. The 20th and 21st centuries have also seen the emergence of new arenas for narratives and iconographies of “Paradise Lost”: popular culture and digital games. Within the field of game studies and the history of digital games, their technological developments, their game play, and their graphics and user interface design, the notion of “Paradise Lost” can be traced in three ways.

In the past decade, the game industry has been witnessing a surge in retro-gaming as a kind of narratological, ludological, visual, and technological longing for the early age of gaming. For example, some modern games have (re-)introduced the concept of perma-death (WASTELAND 2 [Deep Silver, AT 2014], HADES [Supergiant Games, US 2020], XCOM [various, 1994 – present], the Diablo series [DIABLO, DIABLO II and DIABLO III, Blizzard Entertainment, US 1997 – present]), and retro-graphics has become a deliberate design approach in contemporary games (CUPHEAD [Studio MDHR, CA 2017], CELESTE [Matt Makes Games, CA 2017], UNDERTALE [Toby Fox, US 2015]).

The industry – and the consumer – has also witnessed the emergence of various remakes of old-school classics (1942 [Capcom, JP 1984], BALDUR'S GATE [various, 1996–2016], ODDWORLD: ABE'S EXODDUS [GT Interactive, US 1997] and ODDWORLD: SOULSTORM [Oddworld Inhabitants, US 2021]). In other words, the present longing for the past, or for the early (or golden) age of gaming, manifests itself in and through the game.

Some games explicitly employ and reflect on the idea of a rupture in human history, that is, the loss of an earlier (potentially utopian) state that is yearned for but beyond reach (for example, HORIZON ZERO DAWN [Guerilla Games, NL 2017]). This lost period could be medieval times, paradise, pre-9/11, pre-COVID in light of prolonged lockdowns, and so forth.

The current issue presents contributions from scholars and also from professionals and practitioners who have been involved in or witnessed key developments in the gaming industry. In their own way, the essays either reflect on games reimagining the past (Bosman) and providing users with opportunities to experience and engage with such a reimagined past (Bainbridge), or they bear witness to processes of game development (Uskoković). Yuan situates this process of reimagining in a Daoist religious and cultural context, and Krottmaier and Zuanni flesh out the (sometimes hidden) moral choices players face when romanticizing the past in and through digital games.

For this issue, we had the pleasure to talk to game designer Ken Wong. Wong was the lead designer of the game MONUMENT VALLEY, released in 2014 by ustwo games ltd. The game received the 2014 Apple Design Award, and reviewers almost univocally praised it for its immersive experience and beautiful aesthetics.¹ The aesthetics of the game and how reviewers responded to the design prompted us to reach out to Wong. In our conversation, Wong talks about the idea of giving back as driving the game design process and about colonialism, history, and original sin, and he walks our readers through the design process behind the game. We also reached out to ustwo games ltd, and they kindly allowed us to use a screenshot of the game as cover for this issue. We thank ustwo games ltd and hope the cover image encourages our readers, in particular those who might not consider themselves video gamers, to approach digital games not as simply a mundane leisure activity, but as a rich arena for social and cultural discourse.

1 AppleInsider 2014; Marchiafava 2014.

As editors, we think that both the successful aesthetics of MONUMENT VALLEY, the immersive M.C. Escher-style graphics, and the ideas that emerged throughout the game design process make visible social phenomena relevant to scholars of religion as well as social scientists. Or, drawing on our conversation with Wong: the time (2014) was ripe for a game like MONUMENT VALLEY to be released.

Frank Bosman, guest editor of this issue and known for his work on religion and video games, introduces this issue in his article “Video Game Romanticism: On Retro Gaming, Remakes, Reboots, Game Nostalgia, and Bad Games”, in which he explores interrelated but distinguishable notions like “retro gaming”, “remakes”, “reboots”, “game nostalgia”, and “bad games”. Bosman discusses all these concepts based on a communication-oriented analysis of video games, differentiating between text-external and text-internal forms of game romanticism. This leads him to the conclusion that video game romanticism, in all its forms, categories, and modes, unites the gamer communities’ longings for an unspoiled, idealized past by, in, and through the medium of video games.

William Sims Bainbridge, a sociologist and scholar of religion and technology at the National Science Foundation, provides us with a study entitled “The Virtual Rebirth of Paganism”. In his article, he discusses the opportunities provided by digital technologies for bringing to life mythologies as well as past times and past cultures. Such a bringing-to-life often involves a reimagining of the past, that is, a combination of history and legends, in a time of vast cultural transformation. Bainbridge looks at these processes of reimagining the past from the perspective of repaganization and argues that video games can be a tool in and for these processes of repaganization.

Vuk Uskoković is a scientist and engineer. His contribution, “Skool Daze: A Plea for Dissentience”, provides a unique insight into how the gaming industry developed and how specific milestones influenced future developments. While Uskoković does not write from a religious studies perspective, his contribution is important for scholars of religion and video games. Particularly valuable is his argument, as scientist and engineer, that both sciences and the arts are “exercises in imagination”. This imaginative element provides a space for scholars from various disciplines to meet and discuss worlds of meaning we collectively and individually contribute to. He invites us to reflect on the close relationship between imagining, reimagining, creating worlds of meaning, and technological development and possibilities.

Ye Yuan is currently undertaking doctoral research at the École Pratique des Hautes Études – PSL, Paris, with a project on religious practices in central Hunan from the mid-18th century to the mid-20th century. Yuan’s article, “Reconfiguring Daoist Cultivation in a Video Game: A Case Study of AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR”, is an important discussion of how Chinese popular culture engages with philosophical and religious traditions and ideas. In his case study, Yuan demonstrates how the video game AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR (GSQ Studio, CN 2019) draws on, borrows from, and reinterprets Daoist ideas and traditions. Yuan analyzes how religious and cultural traditions, in other words a look into the past, are being reimagined in popular culture if and under what circumstances such reimaginings might be considered “authentic” and whether “authenticity” actually matters.

Sina Krottmaier is a research assistant at the Centre for Information Modelling, Austrian Center for Digital Humanities, University of Graz, with a research focus on video games, and Chiara Zuanni is Assistant Professor in Digital Humanities at the University of Graz, Austria. In their contribution, “Paradise Lost – And Found Again: METRO 2033, the Ghosts of the Past, Moral Choices, and Game Rewards”, they discuss how the game METRO 2033: REDUX (4A Games / Deep Silver, UK/AT 2014), set in post-apocalyptic Moscow, weaves situations into the game play that prompt the player to engage in a moral evaluation. The player can gain moral points, which have an impact on the outcome of the game. Importantly, Krottmaier and Zuanni discuss how the game romanticizes and criticizes the past and how these representations are linked to the hidden moral system in the game.

The Open Section features a contribution by Brent Yergensen, associate professor of Communication at the University of Texas at Tyler. Yergensen discusses the film LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT, a 2015 production by Rodrigo García. The film imagines Jesus’ encounter with the devil during his 40 days in the desert. Yergensen offers us his thoughts and analysis of the film in light of the notion of evolutionary faith instinct. The concept of faith instinct, Yergensen explains, emerged in public discourse in the context of evolutionary theory in the years preceding the release of the film. Yergensen not only looks at the film through the lens of faith instinct discourses, but also analyzes how García illustrates and visualizes the concept.

This issue demonstrates the richness of academic discussion of game nostalgia and its actuality. Understanding the present is always connected to collective understanding of the past and its appreciation and appropriation in the present. The future is only understood when it has become its

past. The present is in between, forever challenged to negotiate what was and what is strived for. Nostalgia is a powerful tool in this negotiation, and scholarly research into the nostalgia phenomenon is both necessary and inevitable.

We thank our contributors and invite our readers to indulge in the intellectual richness of their contributions. And in the spirit of this issue, we also invite our readers to imagine themselves sitting in a comfortable chair in the library of a country house. The fireplace radiates warmth and emits a hissing, popping, and crackling. As you read these articles, you sip a cup of tea, a glass of whiskey, or whatever allows you to go back to an evocative past. Enjoy!

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