

## Article

# New Perspectives on Old Pasts? Diversity in Popular Digital Games with Historical Settings

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**Abstract:** With their increasing popularity, digital games have come to stage notions of history and the past for ever broader circles of recipients, thereby shaping what is understood, interpreted, and negotiated as history in popular contexts. Digital games with historical settings not only adopt already successfully popularized and widely mediated images of history. They also integrate current social debates into the historical worlds they construct and recreate. Using three highly popular representatives of the medium as examples, this article examines how the debates about diversity and the representation of People of Color, which have intensified in recent years, inscribe a particular social self-image into the mediated staging of history and thus offer new perspectives on the past.

**Keywords:** diversity; digital games; videogames; Assassin's Creed; Red Dead Redemption; Kingdom Come: Deliverance; popular culture; popular history

## 1. Introduction: Diversity in Society and Popular Culture

In the pluralistic and multicultural present of the Western world, diversity has ceased to be a phenomenon of exclusively academic research and political debate. Looking at popular media such as recent film and television series or other popular formats such as commercials and music videos shows how prominent the topic has become. For example, a commercial for a German discount grocery store displays a diverse cast in its promise of the good life for—really—everyone; a globally operating online mail order company emphasizes cohesion as a core value. Diversity as the epitome of an enriching coexistence of various identities appears here less as an appeal or moral imperative than as a reality that has long been lived and that only needs to be more consciously perceived or made visible.

Similarly, social and cultural diversity is by no means a peculiarity of modernity or especially of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The debate about its recognition is not even limited to the recent past and present, as medieval and ancient societies discussed diversity under catchwords such as *poikilia*, *variatio*, and *diversitas* (Toepfer 2020, pp. 131–34). From a historical perspective, then, diversity and talking about it are by no means new.

However, something is different today. In 2022, at the very latest, diversity seems to have become omnipresent and an almost universally applicable cipher in political, economic, and cultural contexts. It has demonstrably attracted attention in different spheres of society, as a normative position that is emphatically made popular, pushed by highly diverse social groups, and as an exhibition of an already popular, i.e., measurably noticed, theme in popular culture (cf. Werber et al. Arts 12: x; Arant et al. 2019).

In this context, the term and concept of “diversity” constitute an attempt to establish a certain (partial) social model, according to which the self-development of the individual can be reconciled with ideas of social justice, sometimes only after fierce resistance, if at all (Toepfer 2020, pp. 139–40). In recent years, it appears, hardly any other debate has led to more conflicts and disputes at more family celebrations and company parties, to more public commentary, op-eds, and social media noise.

However, diversity as an object of intense negotiation is not limited to the present. Rather, a broader view quickly identifies past events and their cultural interpretation in



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terms of a contentious politics of remembrance. This is illustrated, for example, by debates about the changing of street names with historical references that are now viewed critically or about the removal of monuments and statues that are considered problematic: Should Hindenburgstraße continue to bear this name? Should the monument to a general who represents oppression and exploitation in the contexts of slavery, colonialism, and warlike expulsion remain, or should it be removed? The tendency to give different identities (social, gendered, cultural, or religious) a greater relevance in memory and historical culture is thus bound up with conflicts and arguments in present-day debates.

As broadly effective motors and mirrors of diversity, not only but especially in historical contexts, popular media and the images of history they present take on an important role. Although still relatively small in number, more and more popular films, literary works, comics, and digital games, which often attract the attention of many across social or cultural boundaries, retroactively afford previously underrepresented groups a historical presence (Lopez 2020, pp. 17–20). As such, they have produced a representation of historical diversity that is in line with recent research in historical scholarship but that, at the same time, also opens the floodgates to confirmations of existing stereotypes as well as to new forms of stereotyping that fail to meet the complexities of historical realities and trade in established clichés. Thus, it is not surprising that popular images and interpretations of past forms of diversity often facilitate further discussion. As a result, it is primarily the popular media that reveal which historical processes, groups of people, and events a society considers relevant or conflictual at a given point in time. It is precisely the popular media, some of which are consumed by the millions and thus shape the everyday experience of broad segments of the population, that can serve as a seismograph for shifts in perspective on the past and unfold the positions from which history is considered, told, staged, or played (Luhmann 2017, p. 9; Chapman 2016, p. 7; Döring et al. 2021, pp. 4–9).

As a still relatively new but increasingly recognized element of the popular mediascape, digital games have joined the debates on diversity past and present. Digital games that make use of historical settings offer new dimensions of staging and perceiving the past through their inherent interactive access to history and their individually intensive as well as mass reception (Köstlbauer et al. 2018, pp. 7–8). Compared to games with present or future settings, historical games add another dimension to the question of whether the representation of diversity is appropriate to the context presented in each case. This is so because appropriately handling history in games is additionally charged with elements steeped in a society's cultural memory and its debate on the proper interpretation of specific historical events (Hammar 2019, pp. 33–36; Eril 2017, pp. 135–37).

The games' approaches to past worlds open a broad complex of questions that can be asked of the past represented in each case: On what kinds of diversity, e.g., ethnic, religious, sexual, do games with historical settings focus? To what extent does the representation approximate the historical reality of the staged identities? Even more important for the placement of the medium in the discourse is the relationship between currently prominent processes of negotiation and the underlying historical realities. To what extent does the digital game—as with other media—project contemporary sensitivities back onto past worlds by representing diverse identities that in the concrete historical context did not exist, as the individuals belonging to them did not enjoy the possibilities for action and freedom depicted in the game? Does diversity popularize a (new) perspective on history that undermines what we typically understand as the high-low distinction? In the case of diversity, “high” appears as a normative claim to adequately represent social realities, while “low” refers to the incorporation of the phenomenon for economic purposes, for example, in a way that neglects historical hierarchies and power structures (cf. Werber et al., Arts 12: x). Moreover, if this is so, how does this change already successfully popularized notions about the past that are at best only loosely connected to historical realities?

This article seeks to answer these questions on the basis of a selection of very popular digital games that present ethnic and racial diversity in past worlds, i.e., excerpts from the historical lives of People of Color. With the term People of Color, we refer to all groups of

people who have experienced and/or are experiencing discrimination and exclusion and who have encountered and/or continue to encounter various forms of inequality due to cultural or physical attributions assigned by the white mainstream in a society, especially in relation to skin tone and color (Lopez 2020, p. 6; Hunter 2007, pp. 237–38).

In past iterations of digital games, People of Color were at best marginalized and usually presented in stereotypically exaggerated ways, if they did appear at all (Gray 2020, pp. 243–44; Mukherjee 2017, pp. 103–5; Srauy 2019, pp. 479–81; Dickerman et al. 2008, pp. 23–26). This is even more surprising given the fact that the gaming community is by no means homogeneous or even largely white and male. People of Color make up a significant part of this community worldwide; in the USA, they even constitute the majority (Kiel 2020, p. 205). At the same time, many players have been calling for more diversity and a stronger stance on social issues by development studios and publishers for quite some time (Yee 2015; Le Ngoc 2021). This process also includes, as one example among many others, the active use of live-streaming platforms by Black gamers to expose racism in the gaming culture and community and to deconstruct hegemonic narratives in digital games (Gray 2020, p. 241).

If we look on the consumer side, it seems obvious—even if only for economic reasons—that game developers should be more and more open to the fact that players who have experienced racism or discrimination in their own lives have different approaches to the (lack of) cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in digital games.<sup>1</sup> In stark contrast to this, the games industry in particular, similarly to the case of Hollywood (Erigha 2015, pp. 80–83), has also repeatedly been said to lack diversity and even to have a “diversity problem” (Ramanan 2017). Women, and especially members of ethnic and racial minorities, are significantly underrepresented on the producing side of digital games, in contrast to the consuming side (Browne 2020). For example, an international survey revealed in 2018 that only one-third of the world’s game developers belong to groups that are considered non-white (Land 2020, p. 93). Finally, it can be expected that popular, i.e., broadly noticed, media products tend to be more mainstream in favor of worldwide marketability and thus use diversity less as a social challenge than as an additional representational element and feel-good factor (Hammar 2019, pp. 64–66, 81). It is precisely this multilayered tension among recipients, producers, and economic factors that is reflected in the finished product of the game and that makes a critical look at this segment of diversity representation particularly appealing.

Similar to the increasing representation of women and, more recently, queer identities (e.g., Fink 2018; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Ruberg 2019; Schwarz 2023, pp. 155–79), this area of societal diversity in popular digital games does garner even more attention in academic analysis (e.g., Wainwright 2019, pp. 119–52, 196–206; Hammar 2019; Mukherjee 2017; Murray 2017). This has given rise to an international field of research within which this article situates itself.

The three games with historical settings selected for our purpose come from the action-adventure genre. With at the most an elaborate narrative and a visually detailed open game world, this genre offers multilayered interaction possibilities and thus provides the prerequisites for a detailed representation of diversity, which we can approach through the analytical lenses of narrative, visual design, and game mechanics, i.e., the rules of a game and the possible interactions between players and the game that result from the interplay of these rules and the players (Frasca 2003, pp. 221–37; Schwarz 2011, pp. 75–77; Schwarz 2021, pp. 567–77). Moreover, the three exemplary games chosen for our analysis cover very different historical, geographic, and cultural time periods and spaces. This range enables a comparison of historical representation and the inclusion of diversity aspects that is sensitive to the temporal distance between the present of game production and use and the staged past. The first game we examine is *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018), which sold over 45 million copies worldwide and charted at number one in Germany immediately after release, with its Wild West setting in the United States of the late 19th century dating back just 120 years (Leschnikowski 2022; Game 2018). We then turn to the content addition

(DLC) to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013), which is entitled *Freedom Cry* (2013) and addresses a culture on the threshold of modernity with the Caribbean slaveholding societies of the 18th century. In contrast to the immensely popular *Black Flag*, sold at least 15 million times, we can assume that *Freedom Cry* sold significantly less, probably a few million copies (Andric 2023). In several respects, the world of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), our third game, which is modeled on the European Middle Ages of the early 15th century, is the furthest removed from the everyday lives of 21st-century players. In the first week after its release alone, about one million copies were distributed; by the second week, the title was among the bestselling games in many European countries, including in Germany, and had sold more than five million copies by mid-2022 (Strohhut 2022; Pinsker and Weber 2022, p. 194).<sup>2</sup>

These three games allow us to examine, by way of example, if and how the debate about and the claim for diversity have entered the popular medium and how this, given the analysis of only three—though highly popular—games may expand the images of history that games offer to their users, what the relationship is between representation and historical reality, and how this may modify the understanding of history underpinning the digital game worlds. By way of our approach, it is also possible to investigate potential motives for specific types of representation, which can of course be normatively based as part of high culture. Development studios may also be concerned with adopting newer, more 'appropriate' perspectives on history and, instead of exhibiting what is already popular, focus on attaining politically correct attention to diversity in the sense of, for example, Moritz Baßler's concept of the New Midcult (Baßler 2021, pp. 145–47). At the same time, however, digital games are economic goods in addition to being artistic and entertaining products. Therefore, the histories they stage must be globally connectable and broadly comprehensible, and thus saleable worldwide (Schwarz 2020, p. 27). If diversity already attracts much attention in popular culture, an indicator of its prominence in so-called low culture, this can be an equally valid reason for the producers to integrate it more substantially into the games as a means of generating additional popularity.

## 2. Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Popular Action-Adventure Games with Historical Settings

### 2.1. Object and Subject in the Slaveholding Society of *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*

The very popular game series *Assassin's Creed* is the most successful series of historical games, with more than 200 million units sold as of September 2022 (Schwarz 2023, p. 30). It was also comparatively early in turning its attention to a highly complex phenomenon to which ethnic and racial diversity is central: 18th-century slavery in the Caribbean. Remarkably, it did so as a DLC to a main game that deliberately played with an ambience ringing with positive connotations in popular culture that it wanted to address in the gaming community.

The main title of the series is *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Its Caribbean setting was so strongly marked by a modern vacation flair that the game director described the gaming experience as historical tourism (Schwarz 2019, pp. 52–53). Entering the so-called golden age of piracy at the beginning of the 18th century, players were able to sail through a Caribbean space characterized by rapaciousness and idyllic sceneries based on popular models to meet prominent pirates such as Blackbeard, and thus to live out their dreams of an adventurous buccaneering existence. The DLC *Freedom Cry*,<sup>3</sup> released about half a year later, presented the same green islands, palm-studded beaches, and crystal-clear turquoise seas, but it cast the world of the European colonies in a different light. Instead of the exotic pirate setting with its adventure romance from the main game, the players now experienced a moralizing mission to free slaves, attaining a completely different perspective on this particular historical period.

To support this thematic shift, a new Black protagonist was presented with Adéwalé, whose life story from runaway slave to pirate (as first mate on the protagonist's ship in the main game) to assassin in the name of justice represents a personal story of emancipation.

At the time of the game's plot, which is set in 1735, such a transformation from slave to liberator was only open to very few enslaved people and constituted a risky possibility for individual maroons, that is, runaway slaves from plantations, to change and improve their living conditions (Reeder 2017, pp. 83–87).

As the plot of *Freedom Cry* highlights the disenfranchisement, exploitation, torture, and murder of enslaved people from the 18th-century Caribbean world, any lightness of the main game has disappeared. In the DLC, the people taken from Africa to the Caribbean, or their descendants, become an important element of the game's plot, which is set in the French part of the island of Hispaniola and highlights the historical background of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) (Lauro 2017). In the main game, their presence was still limited to individual side characters, such as Adéwalé, the role of staffage on a plantation to be plundered by the protagonist, or as an additional element in a colorful mixture of peoples in the region. In contrast, in *Freedom Cry*, people taken from Africa provide not only the protagonist but also all of his important companions and a large part of the characters that bring life to the game world.

The usually dominant people of European descent appear solely as oppressors to be fought, such as slave traders, slave owners, and overseers, so that a mediating or otherwise positively occupied figure from this group is missing and the conflict between oppressors and oppressed is necessarily carried out violently (Hammar 2017, p. 375). Insofar as white persons appear in the narrative, they are representatives of the elites, such as the French governor of that part of the island or officers, i.e., representatives of the colonial system or persons supporting it and thus opponents of the players. This role is emphasized, for example, through racist statements put forward by these characters or acts of violence committed by them against enslaved People of Color. For example, the French governor, who is the last assassination target of Adéwalé, says in his death throes: "Those slaves . . . but they are not human" (*Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*). This, of course, is to enhance the legitimacy of the fight against these 'whites,' who, as a group, appear remarkably homogeneous.

While the majority of the Black population may appear as victims, as maltreated and persecuted individuals in need of rescue, other People of Color besides the protagonist have been able to establish themselves in this world of whites, especially the self-confident and educated brothel owner Bastienne Josèphe and the strong-willed and feisty Augustin Dieufort, leader of the maroons. The underground group of former slaves, which Adéwalé also joins, fights the colonial system and demands the island's independence from France. Josèphe and Dieufort, alongside Adéwalé, not only take on their roles in the plot; they also fulfill game-mechanical functions as quest givers, which provides them with a large share in the game's narrative and—within the game's ludic possibilities—with a significantly more complex personality than is the case with other characters. Both embody different facets of life at the lower end of the social scale in a slaveholding society, a runaway slave wanted by the colonial powers, on the one hand, and a former prostitute forced to cooperate with the oppressors, on the other.

This is equally true for the people they represent, namely the escaped slaves, whose freedom is always at risk and who must be ready at any time to fight for their lives. The prostitutes in Josèphe's establishment are not enslaved, but they pay for their freedom with sexual exploitation. During the game, however, hardly anything is said about either group: the players learn nothing about the backgrounds and developments that led to the social constellations depicted, nor about the exact living conditions of these men and women. What opportunities were open to them? Where did the limits of their freedom or lack of freedom lie? This and other details remain unclear. We also learn little about Josèphe's and Dieufort's individual stories, though the game's plot shows them as skillful actors in the effort to preserve and exploit an independence that was always at risk, in the game's sense of supporting the still completely disenfranchised People of Color.

The large remainder of People of Color appear primarily as targets of liberating actions on the part of the protagonist, a role in which players most often encounter them (Mukherjee

2017, p. 68). It is noticeable that the enslaved to be freed may well die during the action, which differs from the ways in which the figures are usually depicted in the *Assassin's Creed* series. This is due to the mechanics of the game, as the number of the enslaved to be freed is also a reward for successfully completing the task. The more skillfully players proceed, the more profit they will obtain from the action. In itself, this is a motivating gameplay element, if the action could not be repeated as often as desired, i.e., if the death of the unfree remained without negative consequences.

In addition, due to the gameplay, the enslaved whom players can free from plantations, auctions, or ships serve as resources for in-game progress. Progress in the game's narrative is only possible if a certain quantity of enslaved people is freed and recruited for the maroons, and improvements to the character and his ship can only be obtained in this way. Translating slaves into gameplay capital in particular, and thus instrumentalizing and quantifying them, earned the game criticism shortly after its release for its less-than-reflective portrayal of a serious topic (Görig 2014) and for the blatant contrast to *Freedom Cry's* overarching narrative, which calls for the self-determination and independence of the Afro-Caribbean population. Here, a clear dissonance arises between the game's message and its fundamental game mechanics.

The situation is somewhat different when the liberation of the enslaved becomes the subject of the actual game narrative. The mission "Down with the ship" takes up different aspects of the topic and hints at various moral pitfalls of a fight against slavery. In it, Adéwalé must intercept a slave transport with his ship to prevent the Africans caught on the ship from ending up enslaved in Port-au-Prince. To do this, the ship carrying the enslaved must not be sunk—that would result in failure of the task—and the warships accompanying it must be destroyed before Adéwalé can free the people on the slave ship. The challenge is fairly easy to solve gameplay-wise, but the game narrative explicitly states that the military escort will begin shelling the slave ship in the aftermath of the attack to prevent the liberation of those on board. This takes place regardless of how prudently players act because a situation always arises in which Adéwalé must try to rescue those still tied below deck from the sinking slave ship. Whatever he does, whatever players achieve, only a few can be rescued. When the protagonist escapes from the sinking ship at the end and emerges, he is surrounded by the corpses of those he was unable to save. Here, despite a successful game action, the players are confronted with the failure of their actions on the narrative level, an element that exists in such a way only in the interaction of gameplay and a narrative level separate from it. In this case, the action is not without narrative consequences either, for in the concluding dialogue scene on a nearby island, where Adéwalé's crew buries the dead, the main character recapitulates what has happened to Josèphe and Dieufort. At that moment, however, it is not the protagonist who shows emotion and humanity in the face of the governor's contempt for humanity and the untimely deaths of hundreds of young Africans, but Bastienne Josèphe. She responds to Adéwalé's demand for revenge with a question: "And the death of these souls? Some barely knew life" (*Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*). Although a rare moment, what emerges here is the sense that the people degraded to commodities by the colonizers are individuals who, unlike their oppressors, have retained their humanity.

What also makes the scene with the sinking slave ship remarkable is the fact that only at this point in the game are (visual) insights into the transport of African slaves to the New World given. While the game depicts neither the oppressive confinement in the crowded steerage nor explicit acts of violence that might be familiar from other popular media, in films such as *Amistad* (1997), it takes pains to at least hint at them via the visualization of wooden plank beds and the people chained to them. The entertainment product does not contain any overly gruesome scenes; moreover, with a few exceptions, it stages only male disenfranchised people, thus excluding the broad field of gender segregation and hierarchization and the accompanying sexual violence against enslaved women, although sources and even popular literature provide numerous models for this (Ueckmann 2020, pp. 145–56).

As a result, it can be said that in this game of a highly popular series, People of Color are portrayed as multilayered actors within a colonial society. This is even more remarkable since *Black Flag* itself mentions slavery only briefly and since, up until then, digital games had hardly ever touched upon the topic, especially in contrast to recent popular movies (Murray 2017, pp. 83–84). After all, although diversity was discussed even then especially in an Anglo-American context, the debate about it was still far less prominent at the time of the game's development in the early- to mid-2010s than it is nowadays (Florin et al. 2018, pp. 12–18). The game attempts to offer multiple perspectives, juxtaposing the perspectives of the colonial masters with those of the oppressed people through comments by People of Color in various situations. It offers complex characters on the side of the People of Color and shows their assessments of how members of the same group can and should act in favor of those still enslaved. Thus, as early as 2013, a digital game presented 'slaves' as objects within a colonial economic system based on slave labor, devoid of options to regain freedom, yet not as a helpless and passive mass but as individuals and autonomous individuals who could pursue their own agenda and thus leave the role of the victim far behind. The fact that in the actual historical situation their options were still limited, and that the abolition of slavery was not yet possible, does not change the fact that the game represented ethnic and racial diversity in a more complex fashion than many other popular entertainment media did in the 2010s.

That being said, the game can only begin to address all of these issues or integrate them in short narrative chains of events, such as those presented in the cutscenes. Most of the time, it does so independently from its gameplay. This dissonance results from the fact that it is a game from the *Assassin's Creed* series, in which much of the gameplay involves running, climbing, fighting, and killing (Schwarz 2011, pp. 82–84). In *Freedom Cry*, these gameplay options revolve around liberation actions on plantations, slave auctions in the cities, or even privateering at sea, but the historical context informing the storyline remains rather vague. Little can be learned about the origins of slavery in the New World, its extent in terms of the number of people abducted, its duration, and its temporal and geographic framework. Nor does the game tell us anything about the broader contexts of the phenomenon, such as the lucrative transatlantic triangular trade or European colonial rule in the Western Hemisphere, which also shaped the 19th and 20th centuries (Osterhammel 2020, pp. 229–35). Even on far less complex matters, such as the situation on the plantations or the views of those who were forced to live, work, and spend their lives there, the game offers little, if anything. In effect, any adequate representation, at least in rudimentary form, of the context of the historical topic with intersectional interactions of gender, social status, political and economic influence, skin tone and color, and power is lacking (Ueckmann 2020, p. 138).

However, we must take into account that we are dealing with an example of popular entertainment and with a title in a series. On the one hand, the restrictions mentioned correspond to what players of the *Assassin's Creed* series expect, especially regarding the gameplay: mastering challenges, leveling up the protagonist and his equipment, and achieving successes. On the other hand, the story in the game must remain comprehensible to all kinds of users so that the product can sell well in an international market. The adoption of highly complex historical facts, as well as the integration of a discourse still being resolved in academic circles, would complicate these expectations.

These economic limitations may also account for the fact that *Freedom Cry* is not a title in the main series, but a spin-off. This allowed Ubisoft to minimize the potential financial risk of a game that takes on the historically 'difficult' theme of Caribbean slavery through the eyes of a Black protagonist (Hammar 2019, p. 75). The same applies to *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), which offered with Aveline de Grandpré a woman of French and African descent and thus an "intersectional figure" (Murray 2017, p. 53) as a new protagonist to the franchise. The game was initially released in 2012 just for the Vita-system, Sony's handheld console, which sold only moderately, and only two years later for PC and other consoles. For these reasons, both games, which address diversity directly

and consistently, still have a niche existence in the wider context of the entire *Assassin's Creed*-franchise (Murray 2017, pp. 48–50, 86; Mukherjee 2017, pp. 63–64).

Nevertheless, the 2013 expansion *Freedom Cry* stands out in its treatment of ethnic and racial diversity in a popular medium. It gave the topic a surprisingly large amount of space at a comparatively early point in time, included different perspectives, though greatly simplified, and depicted those forced into slavery not only as victims or objects but popularized them as subjects and agents in the historical process. Crucial for this early example and the comparison of the case studies discussed here is the fact that *Freedom Cry* actually presented diversity as a given, even of past worlds, without transferring the modern perspective too much into the historical setting. It did this even before the topic received the enormous attention it does today, and it did so as part of a very popular and globally sold triple-A series. For all the limitations of what is presented, it can be considered an example of popular culture making traditionally marginalized groups visible, successfully avoiding imposing current socio-political debates on the historical setting and ignoring the historical background of the fictitious story.

As to the motives for doing so, the two narrative designers of the game, Jill Murray and Hugo Giard, emphasized in a public statement that the setting and the perspective on the staged time was a conscious decision of the development team at Ubisoft Quebec. They criticized the lack of awareness as to diversity in society prevalent in the video game industry and declared this as one of the reasons for them to choose the setting of *Freedom Cry* as they did. Their goal, they said, was to evoke strong, but not necessarily positive, feelings in players and thus raise awareness of the issue (Tito 2014). Although economic reasons cannot be ruled out, the statement of the two designers may be taken as an indication that they truly wanted to visualize the historical injustice of slavery, and in so doing sought to draw more attention to the normative and high cultural dimension. This impression is reinforced by the actual scandal Ubisoft has been facing for the past two and a half years about its toxic environment for female game developers and its deliberate exclusion and marginalization of female protagonists in its games by male executives. Here, Murray appears as one strident critic of Ubisoft (Blum 2020).

## 2.2. *Civilizing the West and the Losers of Modernization in Red Dead Redemption II*

The action-adventure *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) is vaguely set in a fictionalized version of the midwest and southwest of the United States, and dated to the year 1899, on the threshold of the 20th century. Both aspects serve as markers for a particular phase in U.S. history in which contemporaries such as the historian Frederick Jackson Turner began to speak of the closing of the frontier, the regions defined as borderlands between 'wilderness' and 'civilization,' and which ushered in a widespread transfiguration of all areas of life. At the same time, both aspects refer to the drastic decimation of Indigenous groups to a historical low at the end of the century, climaxing in the so-called 'Indian wars' and the massacre at Wounded Knee (1890), as well as to the change in their living conditions brought about by the establishment of the reservation system (Osterhammel 2020, pp. 490–99).

With its setting in the not-so-Wild West in the decades after the Civil War, the game can also draw on the genre of the late Western and its themes, settings, and characters, as well as a rather pessimistic view of this era in U.S. history (Donald and Reid 2020, p. 20). Analogous to movies such as *Heaven's Gate* (1980) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Red Dead Redemption II* views this turning point in U.S. history—not only between the 19th and 20th centuries, but also between 'traditional' and 'modern' America—ambivalently (Locke and Mackay 2021, p. 177). The old and wild times are not yet over in both the late Western and the game, but they have long been undergoing a process of dissolution.

The game's plot centers on the story of a gang of gunslingers on the run from the ever-tightening grip of the law. After a failed robbery, the gang around Arthur Morgan, the protagonist of the game and avatar of the players, plans to capture enough money in a last big coup and leave the U.S., which no longer tolerates their way of life.

Morgan embodies the widely known image of the white, male, rough-around-the-edges yet morally upright *Westerner*, a figure successfully popularized by countless films of the 20th century (Mitchell 1996, pp. 3–7). Here, the game once again popularizes cinematic tropes and makes them accessible to new circles of recipients. For the most part, the individual personas of the gang members are also based on the figure of the outlaw as formulated in classic Westerns up to the early 1960s, living outside the law according to their own rules in a community rooted in the ideal of voluntarism (Kiefer and Grob 2004, p. 22). Despite these general genre borrowings, the gang, apart from Morgan himself, is clearly more diverse in *Red Dead Redemption II* than in older Westerns such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) or *The Wild Bunch* (1969), revealing an increasing shift in perspective that is getting closer to the historical model. Women make up one third of the group, and it also includes Black as well as Indigenous and Mexican people. Some of these figures have complex characters and take on important narrative and gameplay functions, for example as quest-givers.

Ultimately, the gang includes the old and the young, the frail and the strong, and people from poorer and richer backgrounds. Diversity in *Red Dead Redemption II* thus already starts with the staging and drawing of its most important characters. These characters have their own identities and follow their own plans; they drive the game's narrative forward and perform an identificatory function for the players. As such, they are not constructed as marginal characters on insignificant side missions but indeed play a central role in the game. However, this diverse and positive staging of the gang does not necessarily mean that stereotypes are absent from the character construction. While no audiovisual markers that can be clearly identified as stereotypical appear, such as strong accents or typecast clothing, it is clear that the individual characters fulfill distinct roles within the gang from which they cannot break free. For example, Charles Smith, an Afro-Indigenous character, worries about the extinction of the bison herds and, as one of the more important gameplay elements, teaches players how to hunt. Both aspects hark back to popular images about the Indigenous peoples of North America. Diversity is thus built into the narrative pivot of the game—the gang—but it must fit into the genre specifications of the popular Western and the character concepts it has developed. This is especially true for the game's main character, who is surrounded by the diverse cast of other characters but is nonetheless constructed as a white heteronormative figure himself (Hammar 2019, pp. 15, 66).

Diversity does not only appear in *Red Dead Redemption II* on the level of the gang around Arthur Morgan. Rather, the genre of the Western, and here that of the late Western, offers ample opportunity to include members of the Indigenous population and to portray them in a more differentiated way than as the stereotypically belligerent 'redskin' of many early Westerns. Thus, during their escape from law enforcement, the epitome of state control and civilization, the gang encounters members of the fictional group of the 'Wapiti,' created specifically for the game. The way the game represents them is of particular relevance to the diversity discourse.

From the very first appearance of the Wapiti, the central motif is that of their disastrous situation on the brink of extinction. They eke out an existence defined by disease and hunger on a reservation far from their original settlements, harassed and monitored by the U.S. Army, which withholds vaccines and kidnaps children. When rich oil deposits are discovered on the reservation, the Indigenous group is pressured to move further north despite existing treaties guaranteeing them the land on which they live. In their distress, members of the tribe turn to the outlaw gang for help in fighting the threat of deportation. Although Morgan initially succeeds in stealing the documents on the oil discoveries from a refinery, a planned parley between the U.S. Army and representatives of the Wapiti ends in a massacre at the instigation of the Army general in charge. As a result, violence escalates continuously from one mission to the next. It ends with a failed Wapiti raid on the oil refinery, the dissolution of the reservation, and the group's escape to Canada.

Several aspects of the narrative are particularly important for the staging and representation of ethnic and cultural diversity in *Red Dead Redemption II*. First, the storyline around the Wapiti is part of the game's main missions; the sequence is thus obligatory for players if they want to finish the game. In the spirit of an open narrative structure built on the ability to choose missions freely, they can decide for themselves when to encounter the Wapiti, but the fact that they will is predetermined. There is a total of eight missions in which members of the gang, and thus players, work with the Wapiti, eight missions emphasizing the importance that representatives of Indigenous groups have been given in the game. This makes the game strikingly different from older digital games with similar settings, the first installment of the *Red Dead Redemption* series from 2010 included (Wright 2022, p. 193).

Particularly remarkable is the fact that the game plot makes the Wapiti and the outlaws allies in the fight against a common enemy. In doing so, it does not merely propose a temporary parallelism of interests but presents both groups as equals, for both find themselves on the side of the underdogs, the losers of modernization, in the process of the continent's progressive development. Both see themselves existentially threatened, and both have only the choice between adapting to modern society or fleeing, since the narrative makes it clear from the beginning that they have no alternative.

For the Indigenous group, it is the conflicts of the two main Wapiti characters, those of Chief Rains Fall and his son Eagle Flies, that foreground these issues. While the elder, scarred and disheartened by the personal losses of the so-called 'Indian Wars' of the 1880s, seeks a peaceful settlement by treaty and recognizes the hopelessness of the situation, the younger, driven by ambition and wounded pride, is bent on a military escalation of the situation, even if this action would mean the demise of the Wapiti. In the final mission involving the Wapiti, just before some of them attack an oil refinery, Rains Fall pleads with his son not to fight, saying "Maybe a world in which they [i.e., white people] came to us is a world that we cannot endure. But endure we must" (*Red Dead Redemption II*), but Eagle Flies does not listen to him. He pays the highest price and dies in his father's tent after the failed attack before a reconciliation between the two and their views can come about. Thus, the conflict remains unsolved.

In all missions, the game directs the player's sympathy primarily to the case of Rains Fall, whose motivations and goals are fleshed out in greater detail. Morgan and other central characters in the gang engage with his actions by relating them to their plans to leave the United States. This brings a much-used topos of the late Western into the game, according to which 'wild' life in the U.S. was in the process of disintegrating by the end of the century. What is remarkable is that the game uses this concept for the white Westerners and for the Indigenous characters.

Finally, the game depicts the closely interconnected processes of the expanding capitalist market economy and the westward expansion of the U.S. state as driving forces of modernization. The contemporary image of the ruthless capitalist as robber baron takes shape in the figure of the industrial tycoon Leviticus Cornwall, who wants to open up the land of the Wapiti economically on behalf of the U.S. government and for his own enrichment. He can thus be identified as the person responsible for the threatened deportation of the Wapiti. He is also the greatest antagonist of the outlaws, whom he hunts with the Pinkerton Agency (Bilansky 2018, p. 69). The army general in charge of the Wapiti, who is also white, expresses himself in an openly racist manner, considering Rains Fall's Indigenous name as "silly" (*Red Dead Redemption II*) and calling him and his people "criminals" (*Red Dead Redemption II*) who occupy land that belongs to the U.S. At the same time, the general is an opponent of Morgan's gang, so that both losers of this civilization, the Wapiti and the outlaws, once again find themselves on the same side and in conflict with the powerful proponents of national and economic expansion.

In its depiction of the Wapiti, then, the game perpetuates the popular topos of the vanishing Indian by presenting the situation of the Indigenous group as inevitable. In essence, according to this topos, the drastic decimation of Indigenous groups and ultimately their disappearance is a lamentable but necessary and natural concomitant of a progressing

(white) civilization (Dippie 1982, pp. 13–15; Fort 2013, pp. 308–21). Through the aforementioned shifts in perspective, however, the game does not simply instrumentalize this topos to justify the disappearance of Indigenous peoples in favor of modern civilization but rather mobilizes it in order to highlight the dark sides of this very process.

Through the close narrative fusion between the game's protagonist and his gang, as well as the Wapiti, *Red Dead Redemption II* generates sympathy and an attachment to the concerns of the Wapiti, who appear and act as representatives of the Indigenous peoples of North America. In this way, the game depicts key aspects and processes of late-19th-century U.S. history from a perspective attributed to an Indigenous group. It vividly presents land theft, expulsion, the so-called 'unequal treaties,' as well as the grievous existence in the reservations without sufficient access to food and medical care, but also the ultimately hopeless rebellion against the modern, state- and capitalist-organized world. The game even shows both groups, the Wapiti and the outlaws, as sharing a common destiny and thus clearly sets itself apart from classic Westerns and other digital games, in which Indigenous people mainly appeared as opponents or exoticized strangers and thus were misrepresented (Beer 2020). Rather, it treads the path taken by more recent Western films such as *The Hateful Eight* (2016), which deal critically with the Progressive Era and the racism prevalent at the time the story is set (Locke and Mackay 2021, p. 178).

The close narrative fusion between the protagonist and the Wapiti is also integrated into the game mechanics, making the bond between the two groups even more visible. Since *Red Dead Redemption II* is a game with an open world, it is possible for players to visit and explore the Wapiti reservation outside of the storyline. In these instances, however, the otherwise available options for action are massively limited. The avatar Morgan can only walk, run, look around, and have short conversations with individuals on the reservation, but he can no longer ride quickly, fight, or kill. These restrictions make the already leisurely gameplay of *Red Dead Redemption II* even slower and thus more focused, transforming the players from actors to passive observers of the scenery, which presents the reservation as a place of Indigenous survival (Zimmermann 2022, pp. 52–53, 59–63). At the same time, they condition that, almost throughout the entire game, players cannot physically attack or kill an Indigenous person. This circumstance is especially significant against the backdrop of the maximum gameplay freedom that *Red Dead Redemption II* otherwise offers its users, as they can ride into a sleepy village armed to the teeth and shoot every inhabitant at will. The fact that all of these violent actions are prevented only in relation to the Wapiti emphasizes the special character of the Indigenous people, who seem almost untouchable in this perspective. Accordingly, the mechanics of the game underscore the narrative that Indigenous cultures of North America were most severely wronged in the late 19th century by preventing contemporary players from participating in genocidal action.

As much as *Red Dead Redemption II* attempts to counter mainstream narratives of the historical period in which the game is set by adding an Indigenous perspective, much of the way the Wapiti are designed audiovisually is stereotypical and clichéd. The freely invented tribe can be understood as a "generic conglomerate of Native U.S. cultures" (Miner 2020, p. 129), primarily of the Sioux and other Great Plains groups. Images of feathered headdresses, teepees with smoke pouring from them, bare torsos, long black hair, tobacco pipes or face paint, sounds of war cries, and even the names of the two central Wapiti characters activate popular notions of 'Indians' reminiscent of, for example, the classic Hollywood Western from the first half of the 20th century, the German Karl May's *Winnetou* novels and films, or more recent films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990). In doing so, they further encourage the reduction of hundreds of different cultures of the Indigenous population of North America to a few broadly familiar traits. As late as 2018, digital games such as *Red Dead Redemption II* continue to reaffirm and thus also further popularize already popular stereotypes. The function of these stereotypes lies in their immediate recognizability; a few visual and auditory clues, integrated into a new overall design, enable those who play the game to quickly read certain characters as 'Indian.' In this part of *Red Dead Redemption II*, the desire to tell a version of history that can be easily

identified and appeals to a sense of familiarity in order to attract buyers prevails over the attempt to represent historical diversity appropriately.

To illustrate this point, we may look at the mission in which Rains Fall gathers herbs for Morgan's hitherto untreated tuberculosis, bringing the two men together to talk about Morgan's past. The situation recalls the back-and-forth between a psychotherapist and his or her patient, with the Chief acting as a wise counselor. Rains Fall appears entirely in the tradition of the noble savage as it has evolved since the 18th century, first in literature and later in other media as well. According to this tradition, the Indigenous groups of North America live in harmony with nature, appear untouched by the temptations of civilization, and are therefore pristine and in possession of a profound understanding of life (Rowland 2004, p. 7).

At the same time, the game attempts to break up the stereotypical image of the Wapiti, at least in some respects. For example, some Wapiti figures, most notably Rains Fall, are depicted in thoroughly Western clothing, i.e., with coat, hat, and boots, while others, such as Eagle Flies, also appear with a naked torso and painted face. Through this visible distinction between the two main figures, the division of the Wapiti into those who propose warlike defense of their traditions and those who embrace assimilation into the majority society is presented narratively and taken up visually. The group no longer appears as a homogeneous mass but as an association of individuals, each with their own views, plans, and backgrounds.

*Red Dead Redemption II* thus adopts current debates about the increasing representation, visibility, and audibility of previously marginalized ethno-cultural groups in all three aspects of its historical staging: narration, audiovisual design, and gameplay. It is true that the game visually perpetuates stereotypical images of the Indigenous peoples of North America, (re)producing images that have been successfully popularized in various media for over a century and are therefore readily recognizable. At the same time, the game places the Wapiti at the center of an important part of its narrative. In connection with the restrictive game mechanics, which prohibit acting against the group, the narrative generates not only sympathy for the concerns of Indigenous groups, but history is decidedly told from a perspective attributed to these groups. Finally, the central characters of the Wapiti each have their own voice and come across as characters with whom players can identify. Thus, they transform the strongly schematized exemplariness of many Indigenous characters in Western narratives into a more differentiated, individualized portrayal, even though *Red Dead Redemption II* certainly leaves out central aspects of the Indigenous experience, such as religion, everyday life, or social interaction below the leadership level. At the same time, the game avoids granting Indigenous people greater agency than the historical setting would allow. Similar to *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, a rebellion against racist oppression and disenfranchisement in the system of colonization of the West of the U.S. is possible for the actors within narrow limits, but a reversal of the process is ultimately impossible. *Red Dead Redemption II*, as a triple-A title, follows a path—although only with one foot—that other, less popular digital games, some of which are produced by, about, and for Indigenous people,<sup>4</sup> have been treading for a number of years: breaking down stereotypes about Indigenous people that are still widely discussed in mainstream media and thus making the videogame industry more inclusive in terms of Indigenous narratives, stories, and representation (Land 2020, p. 92; Beer 2020).

Dan Houser, the game's executive producer, indicated in two interviews that this is not a coincidence. In one of these interviews, he acknowledged that *Red Dead Redemption II* refers to and reflects the present in some parts of its historical framework (Goldberg 2018). In the other interview, he noted that his team was constantly caught in the balancing act between history and fiction, faced with the task of finding a middle ground between what he described as an "oppressive" (White 2018) historical background and the ambition of their own narrative. This was especially true of contemporary racism and gender inequalities. Nonetheless, he hoped that he had found a reasonable way to address these issues (White 2018). Current criticism of racism towards People of Color, which constitutes

a relevant and much-noticed factor of public opinion, especially in the U.S., thus seems to have impacted the representation of the Wapiti, which is ultimately intended to consciously counteract such tendencies (Cramer 2020, p. 154). Similar to Ubisoft, the Rockstar team of *Red Dead Redemption II* was also determined to incorporate the diversity aspect into the game's historical setting, again in favor of a normative and high culture view of diversity.

### 2.3. Streamlining the Culturally Diverse Medieval Times in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*

What unites the historical backgrounds of the digital games discussed above is their temporal location on the threshold of modernity or in the midst of this epoch, which, depending on the definition, either continues into the present or is at least close to the present. Furthermore, the characteristics of social, economic, and political diversification, social permeability, and a belief in progress are associated with this era (Dipper 2018). However, what happens when a digital game is set in Antiquity or during the Middle Ages, which, according to popular understanding, are characterized precisely not by these aspects, but by rigid hierarchies, demarcations, and a tendency to persist (Oexle 2013, pp. 1–2)? Can a diversity discourse be integrated if already popular images of this epoch do not recognize diversity?

Questions such as these are crucial for the action-adventure game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), which is set in the late Middle Ages. This game is doubly suited for contrasting it with the representation of ethno-cultural diversity in the other two games: First, even before its release, the development studio Warhorse advertised the game as 'realistic,' 'authentic,' and 'historically accurate' (Huss 2018), insofar as it attributed to it the ability to reconstruct rather than stage the historical reality of the early 15th century. Second, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* also drew heavy criticism even before its release, from the gaming community as well as from other circles. The head of the development studio and leading developer of the game, Daniel Vávra, especially due to his statements in the context of the so-called 'Gamergate' conflict, which were considered sexist, was accused of adhering to right-wing political conspiracy theories and the ideology of White Supremacy, and of propagating a modern racist and sexist worldview in medieval guise (Sigl 2018). In the game, neither women nor People of Color were said to appear in central or in any way positive roles (Huss 2018; Brandenburg 2021, pp. 6–7). In German-speaking countries, national newspapers picked up on the accusations so that the discussion reached a broader public (Sigl 2018; Von Au 2018). Moreover, critics claimed that the game deliberately depicts the Middle Ages as an era of pure white masculinity and that it does so against the current trend of making diversity more visible across all kinds of media.

*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* roughly sketches the late medieval world of Bohemia at the beginning of the 15th century. The locations are the still extant town of Rataje (German: Rattay), situated about sixty kilometers southeast of Prague, the monastery of Sázava (German: Sasau), and the surrounding castles, villages, and hamlets. The background of the plot is the dynastic conflict between King Wenceslas IV and his half-brother Sigismund over the Bohemian and imperial crown in succession to Charles IV. The players take on the role of the fictional blacksmith's son Henry from the small village of Skalitz, who sides with Wenceslas and most of the Bohemian nobility during the conflict, while Sigismund acts as the antagonist.

Supporting his allies from the Bohemian nobility, Henry (and with him the players) embarks on a hero's journey through the freely accessible game world, in the course of which he hires himself out as a squire, uncovers a coin forgery ring, joins the Benedictine order in Sázava, and finally foils the conspiracy of a Hungarian nobleman in Sigismund's service. At the end of his journey, Henry finally learns that he is not a simple blacksmith's son but the illegitimate son of his liege lord and thus belongs to the Bohemian nobility.

The audiovisual design of the game closely follows the already familiar images from history that have been taken up many times in the media, whether it is the medieval architecture and town facades, the clothing of the people populating the towns and villages, or the possible social interactions between the players and the inhabitants. When, for example,

a Rataje citizen in linen clothing walks cursing over the unpaved streets of the city and complains about the hardships of his life, or when Benedictine monks in brown cowls and tonsures mutter Latin aphorisms, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* transports already successfully popularized images about the Middle Ages in a kind of further canonization loop of the popular. The production creates a cohesive historical setting that can be perceived as authentic by those playing the game because it activates existing popular knowledge about this period of European history and, due to its decades-long popularization, testifies to its recognizability, whether it is the pre-modern simplicity or the religious pervasiveness of everyday life, to name just two examples (Pinsker and Weber 2022, pp. 147–48; Schwarz 2020, p. 27).

An essential part of this “Kulissenauthentizität” (Heinze 2012, p. 182) are the characters, who either animate the world as extras or advance the narrative as agents. However, insofar as characters belong to the second group and are thus integral elements of the gaming experience, they share the same social, cultural, ethnic, and religious characterization, with a few (exclusively female) exceptions, such as Christian Catholics and white males who consider themselves ‘Bohemian.’ For this period, centuries before classical nationalism emerged, ‘Bohemian’ is mainly defined ex negativo by distinguishing it from ‘Germans’ and ‘Hungarians,’ who serve as antagonists in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. For example, at the very beginning of the main storyline, a ‘German’ and the other citizens of Skalitz argue about the present situation, in which the ‘German’ doubts the rightful rule of Wenceslas IV, whereupon players can decide whether Henry will throw dung at his house. Alongside this, the primary opponent of the game, Sigismund, is repeatedly reduced to being a ruler over Hungarian territories. By means of these assumed antagonisms, the game projects back into the Middle Ages nationalizing views that have shaped debates and conflicts since the 19th century, but they do not reflect the historical experience of people in the Holy Roman Empire in late medieval times (Groebner 2008, pp. 56–57).

Other existing ethnic, religious, or cultural minorities of medieval Bohemia, such as members of the Roma group or Jews, are neither visualized nor integrated into the narrative of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Engel et al. 2022, p. 182). Although there is an entry on ‘Jewish People’ in the in-game codex, which has the same length as other entries and describes their settlement, exclusion, and persecution in Bohemia, no such mention of the Roma appears in the game. This reveals an astonishing omission, since various Jewish settlements in Bohemia, for example a Jewish community in Prague since the late 11th century, are historically attested and since the Roma are also mentioned in medieval sources, for example also for the late 14th century, i.e., for the decades preceding the time of the game’s plot (Hoensch 2000, pp. 199–201; Strielkowski 2012, pp. 33–35).

Insofar as characters who assume important functions do not correspond to the consistently positive scheme described above, they are exclusively members of the Cumans. Historically, the Cumans originated from the Eurasian steppe regions and migrated to Eastern Europe, especially Hungary, due to Mongol pressure at the beginning of the 13th century. They hired themselves out as mercenaries in many European conflicts and, for the most part, adopted Christianity (Bártfai 2018). In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, they serve as soldiers in Sigismund’s army and thus as central antagonists. It is a Cuman army that raids Skalitz at the beginning of the plot, snatching Henry away from his village and his idyllic everyday life. Already, in this first scene, the Cumans appear as the ethnic-cultural Other: as dishonorable, brutal, savage, uncivilized. After their initial action in the narrative and the open world, they appear again and again as a type of enemy to be dealt with just as brutally. In a side mission, players can even collect the ears of killed Cumans as trophies and exchange them for rewards.

In the words of Henry and his allies, the Cumans are alternately defamed as ‘barbarians,’ ‘bastards,’ ‘heathens,’ or ‘devils’ (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*), which sets the groups apart from one another linguistically and not through references to skin color. Although the in-game codex is reticent about clear, pejorative attributions, a book titled ‘The Cumans,’ which players can acquire during the game, states that “many of them were of a savage

sort and cruel nature" (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*). The text adds that, although many of the Cumans were baptized, "they still maintain some of their barbaric ways until today" (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*), for example killing a dog and burying it to seal an agreement. The Cumans thus appear above all religiously and culturally different, alien, and hostile. Only the Cuman knowledge of horsemanship and war craft finds a certain recognition. In the game, the Cumans ultimately speak Hungarian, which is not translated but reproduced in the original wording. This once again separates them from the main characters as well as from the players.

The Cumans are visualized exclusively as male warriors in full, mostly colorful armor. Unlike the other figures, they wear pointed helmets and upturned beaked shoes. Their faces are mostly covered by metal masks, which once again makes them appear alien and difficult to fathom. Their clothing and weapons use and arguably further popularize familiar stereotypes that existed in the West in the 19th and 20th centuries of people from neighboring Eastern European and West Asian countries under Ottoman rule, graphically depicted and disseminated, for example, by Karl May in his *Orientzyklus* (1881–1888).

Thus, in the entire game, the Cumans represent the only group that does not follow the ideal of 'civilized' Christianity but rather practices to undermine it, which is supposed to morally justify fighting them to defend Bohemian nobility as the core of its society. It is a pejorative view of the Cumans coming from the 'East,' characterized by the narrative as a savage and brutal warrior horde and by their weapons and armor as alien and faceless. With only one exception of a side mission that primarily highlights the supposed traits of deviousness and cunning, no Cuman individuals appear, so that only their actions and not their motives and goals are visible. Similar to Western colonialist thought of the 19th and 20th centuries, which constructed the 'East' as a space of inequality, domination, and exoticism, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* shows the Cumans as a roughly sketched, characterless mass and as a threat to 'civilized' life (Murray 2017, pp. 62–67).

In this way, the game as a popular cultural product confirms Eurocentric and colonialist ideas about non-European societies. Some of these ideas are two hundred years old, and they have been criticized and considered problematic in research at least since Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (Said 1978) some forty-five years ago. Nor is there any reflection on debates about Europe's colonial heritage, which have occupied academic research for years and have, more recently, also reached the broader public, the discussion about the return of the Benin bronzes by Germany to Nigeria after decades of wrangling being a case in point (Dörries 2022).

However, it is not any reference to the skin color of the groups in the game that would serve as the dividing line between the 'us' of Henry, Bohemian nobility—and the players—and the 'them' of the Cumans. Rather, a cultural determination expressed through language, dress, and religious affiliation sets the sympathetic figures apart from their opponents. Although the underlying conflict between Wenceslas IV and Sigismund is one of power politics, the prominent position of the Cumans as the backbone of the enemy army gives the conflict a different emphasis, especially since players are rarely confronted with the person of Sigismund, while the Cumans are almost omnipresent as opponents, not only in the plot but especially in the game mechanics of exploring the game world by foot or horse and through combat. Thus, while the political conflicts serve as background patter to the game, the violent clash of different cultures is very prominent. Moreover, the borders between the cultures are not permeable, and crossing from one into the other is not possible.

In this case, too, the game presents ideas about the ethnic and cultural Other that have long been revised and criticized in academic research and even by the public at large. The popular game continues to present them as 'authentic' and historically correct European views of non-European societies. According to these views, people can be assigned to this or that culture by means of clearly and objectively determinable parameters, whereby diversity expresses the potential for conflict. The game therefore tends to reflect the widely received theses of the U.S.-American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, who attributes

a fundamental role to cultural rifts in order to explain how international conflicts of the 21st century have emerged (Beer 2013, pp. 54–55; Salzborn and Stich 2013, pp. 171–73).

This is all the more remarkable since some of the game designers responded to criticism of the game's historical oversimplifications and distortions by pointing to the expertise on which they had drawn in creating the game. They had worked extensively with twenty experts from universities and various disciplines, among others, during the production process, so they said (Inderst 2020, p. 21). Furthermore, in an interview, studio head Vávra referred to the historical sources used to construct medieval Bohemia for the game. He said that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is not limited to one ethnic group, as other ethnic groups, especially the Cumans, appear in the game, just as historical sources describe it (GameStar Redaktion 2018). Thus, in response to criticism of the game, the Warhorse team used references to scientific expertise and specific sources as an authentication strategy of their own construction, without addressing the selectivity of their choices.

By adopting these ideas about culture and history, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* projects the image of two culturally homogeneous, closed, and complementary collectives back into the medieval era, reflecting nationalist, geopolitical, and Eurocentric discourses rather than the debate about diversity. Coupled with the nationalizing antagonisms and the omissions of religious and ethnic minorities, the game paints a streamlined picture of the late Middle Ages with religious and ethnic uniformity and cultural devaluation of the Other. In other words, the time knew nothing or little of diversity.

Is there a connection between this return to traditional stereotypes, the streamlined images, and the choice of a medieval setting? Do clichés still dominate popular conceptions of the Middle Ages to such an extent that they can be easily (re-)activated and without consequences, i.e., without rejection and boycott of a media product? This seems to be exactly the case with *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. The nonchalance with which it ignores members of religious and ethnic minorities and People of Color as well as their perspectives, while still claiming historical accuracy, is striking. It reproduces images and ideas about cultural and ethnic diversity in the Middle Ages that have been handed down for two hundred years, thereby popularizing what has already been popular for centuries. That this need not become clear when we consider the strategy game *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* (2019). This game demonstrates that the culture of the Cumans of the Middle Ages can be represented in a much more differentiated way, at least in a game's plot.

### 3. Conclusions

Debates about diversity in Western pluralistic societies, diversity at all levels, diversity as a discourse that, on the one hand, should attract attention and, on the other, evidently does attract attention, in that sense experiences a double popularization: How does this trickle down into the digital game? How does this change the images of history that popular games with historical settings transport and make accessible to millions of people?

First of all, although whiteness is still the norm in most digital games with and without historical settings (Hammar 2019, p. 15), it is blatantly obvious that the representation of ethnically, racially, and culturally heterogeneous groups in games with historical settings has been receiving greater space for some years now, i.e., that it has quite fundamentally attracted more attention. In this respect, the medium participates in the visualization of a diversity that for a long time had to take a back seat, especially in popular representations, in favor of 'whitewashing' or, if members of different groups appeared, of stereotypes and exaggerations.

This visualization, however, by no means necessarily represents a situation as differentiated as would befit the historical facts. The three action-adventure games we have analyzed in this article go some way to prove this point, not only staging different contexts, eras, and ethnic, racial, or cultural groups but also reflecting arguments and demands of current debates about diversity to varying degrees.

*Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* and *Red Dead Redemption II* vividly demonstrate how far debates may be incorporated into and negotiated in highly popular games. With the

Caribbean pirate setting and the gunslinger West, both games evoke familiar and popular topoi prone to embellishment through stereotypical representations. Yet, both titles place other themes, elements, and, above all, modes of representation at the center. Within the (especially economic) limits of a popular entertainment product, they offer a new perspective on the respective historical situations. For example, the expansion *Freedom Cry* uses the picturesque and idyllic landscape of the main game *Black Flag* to tell a story of Afro-Caribbean resistance against the European colonial system through the eyes of the Black protagonist. *Red Dead Redemption II* puts the struggle of Indigenous groups against the modern U.S. on the same level as that of white U.S.-Americans, so that entirely new communities become visible in the midst of a narrative otherwise closely aligned with the Western genre.

Diversity can be found in both titles in that the players either slip directly into the skin of members of a marginalized group or that their interests, fears, and actions are directly related to those of the avatars. People of Color no longer function as exoticized strangers, enemies, or only roughly sketched supporting characters in either title but rather take on important roles in the plot with even detailed personas in some cases. Nor are they victims or impotent diehards bulldozed by history, but individuals endowed with a certain agency who try to assert themselves in situations of historical upheaval. In keeping with the historical process, both titles avoid placing too strong a focus on the individual actors' powers to overcome acts of injustice or even the socio-economic system it supports. Neither can they abolish the Caribbean slaveholding society nor prevent the displacement and resettlement of Indigenous groups. Nonetheless, and this is the medium's big step toward current demands for a more appropriate representation of diversity, they stage diversity with a depth and differentiation long absent from popular digital games. They do this for the historical contexts—again, measured against older examples of digital games as well as other popular media—in a representation of historical conditions that largely manages to avoid transferring present-day attitudes unfiltered to past life.

Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that both games work with stereotypical attributions and clichés in their visual and auditory design. Such images have become too influential and attractive through decades of repetition in popular culture. For example, the depiction of the Wapiti in *Red Dead Redemption II* follows the familiar images of Indigenous groups in North America including feather adornment and war cries; *Freedom Cry* orients itself on simplistic models from the medium of film, which have had a lasting influence on the ideas of the Caribbean island world of the 17th and early 18th centuries with plantations, slavery, and pirate adventures. The function of these images lies in their recognition value across cultural and national boundaries (Schwarz 2023, pp. 28–29, 93–105). After all, players worldwide can clearly and quickly identify Rains Fall and Eagle Flies as 'Indians' due to their design and locate the characters and their position in the virtual world. For its part, the permanently visible presence of Black slaves in the streets of Port-au-Prince serves as a marker of recognition. This is where the limits of the medium can be found with regard to a differentiated representation of history. First and foremost, digital games are entertainment media and commodities that must be accessible to large audiences and potentially marketable worldwide. Both aspects encourage a simplistic representation of history without, as shown, already comprehensively characterizing the digital game and its possibilities.

The staging of history in both games thus incorporates two strands that simultaneously contrast and complement each other: These are, firstly, images of history and historical actors that have been handed down for centuries, incorporated into numerous media formats, popularized and thus reduced to recognizable markers. There is, secondly, a contemporary, normatively charged discourse that is far from a consensus, which impinges upon popular notions of the past and thereby transforms and diversifies these very images without completely dissolving them.

In contrast, the third case study demonstrates that digital games can still keep well away from current debates and demands for diversity. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is

neither about filling previous gaps, as evidenced by the lack of consideration of Jews or members of the Roma living at the time, nor about an at least rudimentary multi-perspective representation of other ethnic-cultural groups of late medieval society, such as the Cumans. Rather, the game narrows down the historical reality of this time and space, which was characterized by a coexistence of different religious, ethnic, and cultural groups, to a near exclusive white, Christian world. Anyone who did not fit this prerequisite must be, the message goes, an implacable and brutal enemy.

Game designers, then, can specifically opt for one or the other variant. For some, it may be a serious concern that they are consciously working to obtain more and more attention, for others, an economic decision to more efficiently address wishes or expectations on the part of the players. For yet another group, it may be a resolute and self-confident rejection of trends in modern society and recent academic research. However, when studios decide to incorporate diversity into their games, we can observe various reasons underlying this decision: the fulfillment of a normative, high cultural claim and the low-based incorporation of diversity due to economic considerations (Srauy 2019, pp. 493–94).

Although current opinion polls show that the majority of players, as a reflection of broad sections of society, also demand more diversity in games, the popular medium nevertheless opens up the option for such a commitment as well as the conscious renunciation of it. Considering the fact that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was the product of an independent, comparatively small game design studio, its popularity is all the more remarkable. The sales success of a title that deliberately refuses to adopt diversity shows that there is a market for this kind of history production and players who buy and use the game either despite or precisely because of its omissions.

How much the choice of a historical period plays into the decision to create a more diverse environment or to deliberately exclude still remains uncertain. The sample we have used for our analysis is too small to produce widely applicable insights. Whether we can confirm that a medieval setting gives more room to classic stereotypes than a modern one, for example, because it is still perceived as more stereotyped and template-like, will have to be ascertained in future studies based on not only more action-adventures but also on games of other genres, from construction simulations to first-person shooters. There is undoubtedly a great diversity in the wide range of digital games that is still waiting to be discovered.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although several studies have already been conducted on the question of how ethnic and racial diversity in digital games with historical settings is received (e.g., Hammar 2019, pp. 17–20; Aguirre Quiroga 2018), there is still a great need for research. For this reason, at present a large-scale reception study is taking place in a sub-project of the Collaborative Research Center 1472 “Transformations of the Popular” at the University of Siegen, supervised by Angela Schwarz. Initial data from this interview study conducted with German-speaking players suggest that the more prominently the respective game highlights diversity, the more clearly it is received by players; i.e., it takes larger space in the narrative interviews and is mentioned more often. In addition, the interview data provide initial evidence that individuals who classify themselves as belonging to a particular social, ethno-cultural, racialized, gendered, or sexual orientation-based group are more sensitive to the staging

of these same groups in digital games and give them greater space in their playing experience. For example, female players criticized stereotypical and sexist portrayals of female characters in games more often and intensely than male players did. Given the early stage of the project, however, this must still be considered a first tentative assessment. Further information can be found here: [https://www.uni-siegen.de/phil/geschichte/neueregeschichte/forschung/forschungsfelder/forschungsfeld\\_1\\_geschichtspopularisierung.html?lang=de#12](https://www.uni-siegen.de/phil/geschichte/neueregeschichte/forschung/forschungsfelder/forschungsfeld_1_geschichtspopularisierung.html?lang=de#12) (12 January 2023).

- 2 It goes without saying that sales figures and other data issued by software publishers and taken up in other media such as game magazines have to be viewed with caution and need contextualization. Publishing sales and usage figures always serve an economic, usually promotional, purpose, as they are goods in themselves. They exhibit popularity to generate more of it (see, among others, Power 2004; Beer 2016). On the other hand, they are also a mark of popularity that indicates at least some degree of intensity with which certain games are being noticed. As such, they offer a basis for our remarks in this article (see also Werber et al., Arts 12: x).
- 3 The DLC was also sold as a stand-alone game. Apart from the Discovery Tours (since 2018), this was the only instance in which a DLC to an Assassin's Creed game was released separately.
- 4 One example is *Thunderbird Strike* (2017) by Elizabeth LaPensée, who has written and/or produced more than a dozen digital and analog games about Indigenous self-determination since 2007 (Beer 2020; Land 2020, pp. 96–99).

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