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Virtually Historical: Performing Dark Tourism Through Alternate History Games

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History, for many a tourist, is settled. Dark tourism, similar to its lighter shade of commercial travel, attempts to recreate that history to help tourists understand it by visiting its locales. But where history remains rooted in canonized past, and dark tourism wrecked in the remains of its physical geographies, a different kind of virtual dark tourism allows "tourists" to go where the world cannot take them—even where the world itself never went. Virtual dark tourism opens the possibility that alternate histories can be important complements to actual history. Video games may participate in that virtual exploration by not only creating rich alternate histories but featuring their users as agents within those timelines. Games operate on not just narrative, but what game studies scholarship calls "ludicity." Ludic "from Latin *ludus*: game or play,"[1] game studies scholar Astrid Ensslin explains, refers to texts that incorporate "semiotic multimodality, rule-drivenness, playability, relative agency, and interactive variability."[2] In other words, games can be played, and when

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their narratives are therefore playable, we participate in what game developer and critic Clint Hocking calls the "ludonarrative."[3] Combining game studies and dark tourism research demonstrates how dark tourism can be ludonarrative, and how games as virtual dark tourism can be performative.[4] An analysis of alternate history games that highlights their performances of dark tourism offers game studies a distinct practice for theorizing what game studies scholar Alexander Galloway calls games' "social realism,"[5] and offers dark tourism an avenue through which to gauge its historical function via representations of what "could have been" historical.

Alternate history games often present disturbing divergent timelines that "tourists" can play. Ken Levine's *Bioshock* and *Bioshock Infinite*, for example, take place in the violent ruins of science fictional cities, each set in past technological moments that could not plausibly support the dark advances their games depict. The unfeasible horrors of these alternate versions of 1960 and 1912, respectively, offer players imagined evidence of the havoc that uglier hypercapitalist, racist, and oppressive values of early twentieth-century America would wreak unchallenged. On the opposite side of the historical timeline, the *Fallout* franchise, especially once revived by Bethesda Game Studios, fathoms a twenty-third century of nuclear apocalypse. Beginning in a deviated timeline from our recorded past, *Fallout* imagines an America stagnating culturally in the mid-century modern values and aesthetics of the 1950s, exploring unprecedented scientific advancement in "atompunk" technologies, and eventually destroying itself in nuclear war with China. Its alternate historical future thus creates for players a dystopian world full of the ashes of utopian promises.

The worlds imagined by these titles are virtually historical, in both senses of the word "virtual": they are imagined via immersive digital media, and they are virtually imaginable, drawing on the term's other meaning of "nearly" or "almost." These games present almost-histories. Therefore, dark tourism can be a gaming opportunity that creates spaces in which we can explore the violent trajectories that our almost-histories may have taken. Furthermore, we can discover through games where those histories brush the negative borders that canonical history approached too closely. By contrasting the *Bioshock* series' foray into our

fictionalized past against the *Fallout* series' foray into our fictionalized future, we can explore where these gaming franchises find roots in the facts between. Performing dark tourism through alternate history games involves the player in another side of the historical: the virtually historical.

From Virtual to "Virtual"

Virtual dark tourism does not have to stop at the digital representation of what has already happened. What has already happened is anyway a blur at best, according to Walter Benjamin. He argues, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again .... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."[6] If these "images of the past" are not preserved in the present, then tourism's historical exploration ends up with nothing to tour. Lutz Kaelber explains what the virtual offers dark tourism. "Traumascapes"—what Kaelber defines as "sites of atrocity"—often are "difficult to reach, have been substantially altered, or no longer exist."[7] The virtual, where the actual has been erased, offers a solution: "For visiting a physically obliterated traumascape that is difficult or even impossible to access physically, pilgrims and tourists can engage in alternative, technologically mediated appropriations of darkest tourism sites."[8] Virtual dark tourism helps those interested to reach infamous locations beyond physical reach because, according to tourist studies scholars Michael Bowman and Phaedra Pezzulo, tourists have always been drawn to sites where death has occurred.[9]

Dark tourism locations draw crowds through their traumatic intimation that "something happened here," so tourists come to see what remains of the terrible happening. Yet when all that is left are memories, virtual dark tourism puts people in touch with what they cannot reach. Users "tour" virtual sites and still find ways to witness the histories these sites offer so that the stories become part of a collective memory. In fact, virtual avenues into dark tourism more effectively allow users to be part of what they witness, a desire increasing alongside the rise of memory "as

the word most commonly paired with history."[10] Speaking to this desire, Kerwin Lee Klein posits, "Memory appeals to us partly because it projects an immediacy we feel has been lost from history."[11] Virtual dark tourism makes history more immediate than ever, when memory becomes a process we actively participate in, especially through gaming spaces. Yet when games like *BioShock* and *Fallout 3* present bleak alternate histories, Klein's claim that "memories shaped by trauma are the most likely to subvert totalizing varieties of historicism"[12] finds creative subversion. Trauma theory scholar Susannah Radstone elucidates what trauma means for memory: "The subject of trauma theory is characterized by that which it does not know/remember."[13] The trauma of alternate history is that it presents a historical memory no one remembers. Gaming alternate timelines affords players the power to trace that memory-without-remembrance to its historical tensions, to better understand our own historical memory from its points of divergence.

Virtual dark tourism, therefore, can venture into the darker possibilities of what may have been or will be. The *BioShock* and *Fallout* series both take up these potentialities, which contribute to their alternate histories as gaming spaces for players to explore. In these games, history provides the backdrop to their violently different settings where its counterfactuals are transmogrified into worst-case scenarios. These counterfactuals map onto historical memory through trauma where players get to experience what cannot be remembered, for "testimony (to trauma) demands a witness."[14] Playing these games means witnessing their traumas, for both alternate histories feature the darkest science fictional horrors that only virtual dark tourism could survey: not just what cannot be remembered, but what no one should have to remember. Sarah Clift states that "memory has thus been given the task of creating a better future by virtue of past events that *must* remain passed—that is, located safely in the past."[15] *BioShock* and *Fallout* differ in that the former's events never happened and the latter's have not yet occurred—but their shared "future" is our present, where we should be contemplating how these what-ifs reflect our what-happened. Fredric Jameson suggests that "to read the present as history," we must adopt "a Science-Fictional perspective of some kind,"[16] which matches well the fantastical plots of these

thematically resonant games. To read the present as history means to explore through virtual dark tourism how our timeline scrapes the borders of these alternate horrors.

Immersive realistic gameplay helps extend dark tourism into a virtual consideration of what "almost" occurred, calling on the other definition of "virtual." These games virtually depict, meaning simulate through software, the virtually historical, what almost "could have happened." That "almost" highlights an important distinction regarding the "real" in gaming. Alexander Galloway distinguishes "realistic-ness" from "realism," claiming the terms are "most certainly not the same thing."[17] He writes, "If they were the same, realism in gaming would just be a process of counting the polygons and tracing the correspondences .... Realistic-ness is important, to be sure, but the more realistic-ness takes hold in gaming the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, relegated instead to simulation or modelling."[18] Galloway's point suggests that when virtual dark tourism involves gaming alternate timelines, "simulation or modelling" becomes inadequate. Games should, Galloway argues, strive for realism, which "often arrives in the guise of social critique."[19] But realism, for Galloway, is not the "social critique" of alternate history on a thematic dimension—it is social critique built into action. "Realism in gaming is a process of revisiting the material substrate of the medium and establishing correspondences with specific activities existent in the social reality of the gamer," in Galloway's estimation.[20] In other words, the actions of thumbs, the pressing of buttons, et cetera that comprise gaming experiences must similarly feature and matter within the games themselves.

BioShock and *Fallout* provide action-oriented, high-intensity gaming experiences, featuring science fictional horrors, so realism on both narrative and gameplay components sounds suspect at first. But reflecting upon her own play-through of *Fallout 3*, Sara Mosberg Iversen explains that interfacing with the game's *Pip-Boy 3000* device to keep track of her character's health, equipment, game maps, notes, and more feels like her real job: "Just as I do when carrying out my actual work, a great deal of time in F3's world is spent tabbing between various menus in order to access information which ... may all be seen as residing securely with the diegesis presented by the game."[21] *BioShock* likewise features character

management menu elements through its own plasmid upgrade system. By stretching Galloway's requirements for realism into domains of dark tourism, we see further how each game similarly works the experience of touring historical locales into its gameworld, an activity (even subverted) that many would recognize from their own experiences.

For what makes games unique as exercises of virtual dark tourism is their interactive and agential qualities. These facets especially factor in critically considering these games' virtual tours of alternate timelines. Jerremie Clyde, Howard Hopkins, and Glenn Wilkinson's research proposing a gamic mode of history supports this argument's stretch of Galloway's requirements for realism. Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson claim, "games also create a sense of realism for the player based on the player's actions rendering expected results, a type of realism that stems from the players' control over the game, as opposed to the presentation of historical evidence in the game or narrative; a sort of unavoidable rhetorical device."[22] Game studies scholar Ian Bogost dubs this rhetorical device "procedural rhetoric," what he considers "a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes."[23] Similar to J. John Lennon and Malcom Foley's original conception of dark tourism residing outside the virtual,[24] Bogost begins his argument outside games: "*Procedural representation itself* requires inscription in a medium that actually enacts processes rather than merely describe them. Human behavior is one mode of procedural inscription. Human actors can enact processes; we do so all the time."[25] In visits to physical dark tourism locales, human actors enact the processes of finding the traumatic sites and learning their histories through exploring them. Characters in the *BioShock* and *Fallout* games enact similar processes in virtual arenas. But their centrality to their own exploration makes the gamic mode of virtual dark tourism distinct, for, "[i]n games, as soon as the player has agency to make meaningful choices and they are playing with the past, every action is a counterfactual."[26] Performing dark tourism through alternate history games means becoming part of those histories. And when "tourists" not only tour but enact alternate history through virtual dark tourism, they learn through active gameplay how actual history is comprised of concrete actions that kept the canonical record from veering onto darker paths.

Science Fictional Settings as Alternate Traumascapes

Ken Levine's *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite* depict hauntingly rich alternate histories that players get to discover through gameplay. Created by many of the same developers, Levine included, that worked on the futuristic *System Shock* series, *BioShock* takes the future into the past. *BioShock*'s fictional world is influenced by both fictional and nonfictional references, ranging from the literature and philosophy of Ayn Rand to the business magnate John D. Rockefeller. Given these intensely capitalist influences, its timeline can be critically elucidated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of history as "desiring-production." Deleuze and Guattari define desiring-production as an active laboring force which explains the function of humans as desiring-machines.[27] Put simply, humans work to get what they want: this summary explains how we are desiring-machines and how we labor in societal conditions of desiring-production. Indeed, these conditions comprise the flows of history itself, in Deleuze and Guattari's estimation: "Hence everything is production: production of productions, of actions and of passions; productions of recording processes, of distributions and of co-ordinates that serve as points of reference."[28] Those points of reference are where Levine's games veer desiring-production from the historical into the counterfactual.

BioShock takes place in a history that allowed desiring-production to want too much. The game is set in 1960, within the science fictional setting of Rapture, an underwater utopia constructed by ultra-capitalist entrepreneur Andrew Ryan in 1946. More accurately, it is set in the ruins of what Rapture was, for the utopia has already become a dystopia by the time protagonist Jack's plane crashes in the ocean near the above-ground terminus that leads to the city below. Before we arrive through Jack's avatar, Rapture's objectivist paradise has been destroyed by civil war after the discovery of the genetic material ADAM has driven people mad. ADAM is a substance harvested from a fictional species of sea slug that forms potent stem cells able to produce new tissue in the human body and thus generates unprecedented cosmetics and abilities. Rapture's market ran on the commodification of ADAM through injectable "upgrades" called

Plasmids; its collapse into chaos was fueled by the societal lack of any regulation on Plasmids whatsoever. Since the ADAM in Plasmids incites superhuman powers in its users (including Jack), the over-users have mutated into the game's frequent antagonists, "splicers"—inhuman revenants intent on killing the player. This horror scenario hyperbolizes not only Ayn Rand's belief that selfishness should be the highest virtue, but furthermore what happens when desiring-production is not put "under determinate conditions" by social regulation.[29] *BioShock*'s alternate history gameworld becomes the new media extension of Deleuze and Guatarri's idea that, "Art often takes advantage of [the properties] of desiring-machines by creating veritable group fantasies in which desiring-production is used to short-circuit social production … by introducing an element of dysfunction."[30] While Jack fights to survive his way through Rapture, we learn of many other characters in the city's history, including Ryan's major competitor Frank Fontaine and Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum, the scientist who experimented on the ADAM-altered, drone-like girls called Little Sisters. In Jessica Aldred's and Brian Greenspan's words on *BioShock*, "To play the game is to learn the story of the city's demise."[31] We play *BioShock* to tour Rapture as a "traumascape."

Similarly, *BioShock Infinite* features gameplay built around discovering more about its darkly science fictional setting. Set in 1912 before the events of *BioShock*, this game is influenced by Erik Larson's nonfiction book *The Devil in the White City* as well as events around the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.[32] Taking American exceptionalism to a literal extreme, the game's cityscape this time floats above water into the sky as the flying city of Columbia. Its Chicago World's Fair homage is worked directly into its alternate history: Columbia was first a spectacle which began its journey skyward at that very exposition. However, this almost-history violently diverges when Columbia reveals its battle station capabilities and brutally abbreviates the Boxer Rebellion by bombing Peking to the ground. Refusing to return to the United States to answer for this act, the city secedes from the Union, becomes a theocratic police state ruled by self-appointed prophet Zachary Comstock, and worships American historical figures within a pseudo-Christianity. Though this time the game's action begins while Columbia's culture remains in order, soon a civil war—between the white, elite-class "Founders" and the "Vox Populi," underclass

servants of color—disrupts daily life. Closer to the source of the conflict this time, we not only tour the aftermath but witness what causes it when desire for a different order begets destruction. According to Deleuze and Guatarri, desire is "explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors."[33] In the wake of these explosive desires, once again, the player's avatar Booker DeWitt learns a city by fighting his way through it. Through characters Jack and Booker, we experience these settings via immersive adventure.

These gameworlds can be dark tourism sites if we consider their cities as aesthetic theatres. Bowman and Pezzulo suggest we take the darkness out of dark tourism by reckoning it a performative act, on both the tourists' and tour sites' sides. They recognize that "When tourists travel … what they witness isn't merely like a performance, it is a performance insofar as the site is often composed of live bodies engaged in acts that are put on display for tourists."[34] The fact that games essentialize action makes them a performative medium, and every performance needs a stage. Both Rapture and Columbia offer stages that logically and aesthetically support players' performances through their alternate historical locations. Aldred and Greenspan consider Rapture's "art deco … steampunk pastiche" gameworld to represent

> what has been called a "critical dystopia," a historical inventory of utopian styles, plans, and technologies that self-consciously critiques the notion of utopia itself. Rapture's ironic-nostalgic pastiche of failed artistic and technological utopias prompts the player to reconstruct the city's tragic tale, an objective that, however, holds out the utopian promise of a renewed historiographic consciousness.[35]

Therefore, Rapture's setting encourages players to consider its almost-history an opportune location for virtual dark tourism. Even Columbia's brighter, more open World's Fair nightmare—which eschews Rapture's literally dark design—subverts the counterfactuals of canonical history in creepy ways. With respect to Bowman and Pezzulo, approaching these traumascapes performatively does not make them any less dark. Emma Willis speaks to this darkness in performance by citing in both dark tourism and theatrical performance certain spaces "haunted by absence"

which "each in their own manner, traffic in substitutes that attempt to make such absence present, to make it *felt*."[36] The absence in these cities is palpable; they appear largely devoid of life, remains of cultures-that-once-were before tragedy struck. In these absences of society, the substitutes of Rapture are ostensibly the splicers which constantly attack Jack, and even worse in Columbia, its own citizens who, though apparently of sound mind, still hunt Booker. These encounters highlight what Matthew Jason Weise means by calling *BioShock*, "A world full of madness and death … in which all people behave as expected: violently or not at all."[37] In the virtual dark tourism enacted through the cities of *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*, the tours are dangerously interactive, and the player must avoid ending up a casualty of the atrocities being witnessed.

Unlike these titles, *Fallout 3* realizes the alternate history spanning its franchise through a dark location familiar to the American nation: its capital city, Washington, D.C. For a little history of this almost-history, *Fallout 3* is the revival of this series of games, after Interplay Entertainment released the original *Fallout* in 1997 and *Fallout 2* in 1998. Ten years later, the series proper came back to prominence when Bethesda Game Studios took it over and released its third installment. Despite the years of changing hands, *Fallout* has always boasted an ironic, retro-nostalgic, culturally and technologically 1950s aesthetic, its alternate future full of past. Set in a timeline divergent from ours following World War II, its past imagines that American technology continued to advance but American social progress stagnated and ceased. Now America's future is ravaged by nuclear apocalypse after the Sino-American War of 2077, leaving humanity forced to survive in Vaults which resemble "in-game museums … of the 1950s," according to Martin Pichlmair's discussion of the franchise.[38] *Fallout 3* is set 200 years after the original nuclear war cited in the first game, and its world outside the Vault maps out across the familiarly uncanny locations of Washington, D.C., as a traumascape of a future hopefully not our own. Discussing *Fallout 3* in his research on post-apocalyptic fiction, Robert Yeates suggests in light of this dark tourism location, "Setting the game within a semi-recognizable environment has … the potential to create an uncanny space for the player to explore, one that is all the more defamiliarizing for its being familiar."[39] His invocation of the word

"uncanny" signals Sigmund Freud's famous definition of the term: "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."[40] Freud explains the concept by sharing his own unsettling experience of walking and getting turned around on the deserted streets of a small town in Italy unknown to him.[41] The streets of *Fallout 3*'s Washington, D.C. feel more uncanny because we feel we have been there before, but a "there" safe from the nuclear future this game has in store for a possible almost-history. Within the gameworld, players tour what is called instead the Capital Wasteland, where possible sights include the remains of the White House, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, and the Washington Monument. This "virtual" dark tourism invokes both definitions of the term by situating its traumascape at not just a recognizable location, but a nationally essential location.

Fallout 3's alternate future allows players to virtually tour the America we know as a thing of the past. In its Capital Wasteland, where we recognize one of America's most thriving political and cultural cities, there is only a small number of survivor settlements, where survivors live underground in the Vaults. What remains of an American government we may recognize, called the Enclave, is an antagonist. What is gone—nearly everything—recalls Willis's "absence" and what is left are only those "substitutes" that have turned the familiar not just uncanny, but hostile. Against these odds, players create a character to feature in a plot that involves finding their character's father and endeavoring to complete Project Purity, which would purify the Tidal Basin and then the entire Potomac River. Each main character of each *Fallout* entry is always a Vault dweller, identifying with the players outside the game as strangers to this alternate apocalyptic setting.

The America we know is a "post-nuclear wasteland"[42] that highlights virtual dark tourism's interactive invitation to feel the pain of a ravaged traumascape. Feeling that pain means risking injury and death, for the Capital Wasteland now houses radioactive mutant creatures intent on killing the player. Pichlmair explains this hostile uncanny by saying, "The universe the player character dwells in is unpredictable, just like the shattered environment around her. In other words: many things that would be weird in our world feel entirely normal in a post-nuclear setting."[43]

The weird becomes normal when players not only tour these sites of traumascapes but become part of them. Players become part of them, however, as outsiders, for these tourists are, in Willis's language, "spectator[s] as audience to the unspeakable."[44] So Pichlmair's point that "[h]umanity [in *Fallout 3*] tries hard to remember former greatness"[45] is better phrased that only the outsider traveling into the virtual (both digital representational and "almost") can remember it. Performing virtual dark tourism through alternate history games makes players outsiders on the inside, significantly both part of the deviated timeline through their avatars within the gameworld and separate as external operators of that gameworld. The tour is only a visit for us, but we are allowed considerable power in it during our stay.

Dead Media Archaeology

Players in both *BioShock* and *Fallout* become explorers of dark tourism sites through the accumulation of material memories. Klein deems this trope the attempt "to identify memory as a collection of practices or material artifacts" to comprise "the new structural memory."[46] Across the two franchises, these games aestheticize structural memory through obsolescent media formats—even their separate ad campaigns buzz to the tune of scratchy radio and/or skipping film stock. *BioShock*, for example, according to Aldred and Greenspan's argument, is inundated with "the echoes of Rapture's dead or zombified inhabitants … all preserved on reel-to-reel dictaphones, Super-8 footage, and other dead media strewn about the city."[47] Weise quips, "Rapture is not only littered with dead people, but dead people who were kind enough to record their own demise."[48] This cast of characters Jack almost never meets takes the part of Willis's "absent others … inhabit[ing] a kind of 'audible silence,'"[49] the dead whose presence is only communicated through dead media, now made media *of* death. Their contributions to the game's narrative enacts the virtual dark tourism experience and makes it important to the overall narrative. Aldred and Greenspan state, "After all, the goal of gameplay within *BioShock* is to discover the mystery of Rapture—how it came to be and how it came to fail so perfectly—by collecting these assorted media objects."[50] The media objects convey deeply unsettling alternate historical subjects.

The dark backstories distributed across these artifacts could be extensions of Benjamin's famous statement that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[51] For there is plenty of barbarism to go around both *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*. The point of the games is not only collecting these documents of barbarism, but also collecting them as documents of their civilizations.[52] *BioShock Infinite* features similar strategies of structural memory collection; therefore, *BioShock* and *Infinite* are not just alternate histories in context, but in ludonarrative procedure: "The act of gathering and playing these recordings becomes an integral part of the game story and experience, being thereby transformed from a non-diegetic into a diegetic act."[53] Even on the non-diegetic level, nevertheless, if players can collect every single media document throughout each game, their avatars earn the rank of city Historian.[54]

The rigor of this narrative and ludic achievement is absent from the *Fallout* series, however. *Fallout 3*'s virtual dark tourism is more incidental, an exploration off the beaten path of advancing the plot. Trevor Owens remarks of his own play-through of *Fallout 3*, "I was enthralled with playing the game as a kind of future archaeologist, excavating our present through traces left on these terminals and strewn about the physical landscape."[55] But the material "strewn about the physical landscape" has more space throughout which to spread than the city settings of the *BioShock* games, so discovering these traces of the past ends up feeling more sublime. Sarah Grey explains this notion of the sublime in her philosophical examination of *Fallout 3* via Theodor Adorno. Regarding these disparate logs, documents, et cetera, she points out, "They do not add anything specific to the plot, nor do they change gameplay …. However, if the player explores the area, she will find powerful, if loosely told stories of loss and helplessness."[56] Unlike the diegetic media archaeology at play in *Bioshock*'s virtual dark tourism, according to Grey's argument, in *Fallout 3* these material encounters with traumatic memories "jolt … one from

immersive, flowing gameplay … to provide an opportunity for reflection."[57] She concludes, "Paying attention to dissonant moments and to unsettling micronarratives embedded into otherwise seamless gameplay is one way to reject thoughtless immersion and mimicry,"[58] demonstrating again how the gamic mode of virtual dark tourism is not just "simulation or modeling."

Where *BioShock* draws the player in through narratively motivated dark tourism, *Fallout* takes the player back into the real world where the effects of virtual traumascapes register. Yet both strategies uniquely become ludic practices of Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault notes:

> [Archaeology] does not try to repeat what has been said by reaching it in its very identity …. It is nothing more than a rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object.[59]

In other words, piecing together the dead media documents of either game franchise's entries is not a representation of what those formats contain. It is instead a "rewriting," the story of piecing them together. This experience is unique to the virtual variant distinct from actual dark tourism. Unlike the prepared and prewritten experience most expect of some tours, these games present interactive tours in which the "tourists" locate and accumulate what they want to witness. Spectatorship becomes an active rewriting when we perform the role of media archaeologist in these almost-histories.

Players, Tourists, and Performers

BioShock and *Fallout 3* invite players to perform not just the role of spectators to what happens, but actors determining what *will* happen. Their gameworlds foster virtual spaces that involve players as tourists. According to Bowman and Pezzulo, tourists are already performers: "The emphasis on the instrumentality of tourists' social performances … conjures images of the tourist as … the prototype … of (post)modern, alienated individuals who go on tour to escape the artificiality of everyday life, only to find themselves failing, falling ever deeper into the abyss of the simulated, the staged, the 'fake.'"[60] At first provocative glance, these games allow players to succeed, not fail, in the simulated staging of their alternate timelines. For example, in *BioShock* the central ludonarrative mechanic of choosing whether to "harvest" (kill) or save the Little Sisters for more or less ADAM has ethical complications, gamic concomitants, and narrative consequences that all contribute to a "contemplative approach to history."[61] Ryan Lizardi suggests that in *BioShock* "[p]layers are … given the ludic gameplay option to follow Ryan's self-interest thinking or not through the decision to 'harvest' the Little Sister characters or save them."[62] In this context, players can decide if they want to participate in the tour by playing a citizen of Rapture or an outsider to its atrocity. Whichever amount of ADAM the player receives for her or his decisions, using the genetic material through Plasmids on oneself creates an in-game power-up which opens startling, new fantastical abilities. The game functions on a first-person-shooter engine, however, so we don't quite see Jack's mutated body. We therefore more fully inhabit this avatar, making the game's dark tourism as virtual as possible. That tour we find ourselves part of eventually takes two distinctly forking paths depending on how we treated the Little Sisters. To harvest them guarantees an even more dystopian ending, and we end up not just witnessing Rapture as a site of atrocity but making it more atrocious ourselves. To save them, on the other hand, brings a happy ending which rewards the player for acting ethically in a post-ethical ruin. Taking up a similar ethical tangle, Willis argues regarding the tourist's gaze that, "The ethical problem of such a gaze or attention is clear … to turn the pain, suffering, and death of the other into a drama for one's own gratification suggests a total disavowal of any moral responsibility for that other."[63] *BioShock* offers a chance to intervene on behalf of the other and bring light out of the dark tourism site of Rapture.

Fallout 3 features a similar mechanic of gamifying ethical behavior in dark tourism exploration. Like the main series entries before it, this game continues *Fallout*'s Karma system, unique from other popular games with

stricter, binary mechanics gauging morality for its ability to allow characters to be good, bad, neutral, or varying moralities in between. In its performance of virtual dark tourism, *Fallout 3* lets players decide for themselves how to act in a post-ethical world which imposes no morality, enabling individual "responses to death [to be] culturally bound and historically variable"[64] each unique play-through. Marcus Schulzke argues that *Fallout 3* enhances this mechanic because "it is set in an open world that grants the player freedom of action—including the freedom to be moral or immoral."[65] Unlike the mostly faceless main character of *BioShock*, players get to design their own avatars in *Fallout 3*, thus drawing players closer to their own choices, since it is their very own character through which they make those choices. Their avatar into this gameworld spotlights that it is both them and not them. Similarly, the tourist to traumascapes is part of that history through witnessing it, yet always an outsider, only witnessing.

Nowhere is this outsider status clearer than in the most cinematic and narratively constrained of these titles, *BioShock Infinite*. While Booker looks after the superhumanly talented "damsel in distress" Elizabeth, we discover her ability to tear holes in the fabric of space-time, presenting the player with "alternate" timelines that look just like our own. When our history threatens the alternate world within the game, we are prompted to realize how little control we have to resolve this divergent timeline at risk. Lizardi agrees: "*Infinite*'s narrative is specifically highlighting the counterfactual and indeterminate future of its protagonists, in a game that gives players the least amount of ludic influence on outcomes in the series." Indeed, *Infinite*'s gameplay is the least subversive of these forays into virtual dark tourism. Nonetheless, its story features several illusive appeals to ludic intervention, giving the player pivotal choices at various intense moments within the traumatic ludonarrative. But all these actions are revealed for their falsity of importance in *Infinite*'s dreamlike concluding "puzzle." The player controlling Booker walks toward a lighthouse in the distance, and the wood comprising the docks constructs right in front of his feet wherever he may go. This visually clever feature first appears empowering, for the player feels that he or she can go anywhere—the player quite literally makes his or her own path. That path, however, merely builds toward the same

destination no matter where Booker goes. Players realize they are being played once the camera pans out to reveal the same lighthouse repeated dozens of times throughout the shores of this dreamscape. This visual metaphor is a gamic way of confronting *Infinite*'s narrative endpoint as a poetic rumination on alternate history itself. Booker learns that no matter what different choices he makes to rescue Elizabeth from Comstock each time—for he likewise learns this game doesn't depict his first attempt—the same thing roughly always happens.

These virtually historical games wrestle with the futility of the "virtual." With *Infinite*, Levine creates a story that metanarratively critiques the very idea of players' narrative control over a game. He did something similar in *BioShock*, where players learn Jack's "tour guide" Atlas has been making him do everything we have played so far with the triggering phrase "would you kindly?" Hocking considers this reveal to be an instance of what he terms ludonarrative dissonance: "when it is revealed that the rationale for why the player helps Atlas is not a ludic constraint that we graciously accept in order to enjoy the game, but rather is a narrative one that is dictated to us, what was once disturbing becomes insulting. The game openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it."[66] Nevertheless, instead of "mocking" the player, *BioShock* and *Infinite* more accurately involve the player in a deconstruction of alternate history at odds with the history we are stuck with outside these games. *Fallout 3* also intentionally "fails" in this regard when the same ending occurs whether we decide to sacrifice ourselves to complete Project Purity or send in our teammate to do it. In the end, Bowman and Pezzulo are right, and the "simulated, the staged, the 'fake'" of these explorations into virtual dark tourism reveal themselves. The virtually historical remains just that, only virtual. Our own history is too actual to virtually ignore.

Conclusion

Rather than conclude that performing dark tourism through alternate history games is a futile endeavor, this practice makes history matter more. To play the past-that-never-was is to negotiate the trauma in the

traces of what did occur. Benjamin said, tragically in light of his fate, that "[o]ne reason why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical."[67] Not long after these words, the Holocaust became possible and now its historical traumascapes are locations of dark*est* tourism.[68] These alternate timelines then should make us contemplate what was "'still' possible" in our history to be mined for material in these violent explorations of dark tourism through the virtually historical.

Each of these alternate history games present almost-histories that highlight how disturbing the "almost" is. *BioShock*'s real world referents include the Objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand and the disturbing scientific experimentation by German concentration camp doctors during the Holocaust. *Infinite* draws upon "scientifically" backed racism "proving" why non-white races are biologically inferior as exhibited on prominent display during the Chicago World's Fair.[69] *Fallout 3* takes literally the real Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation woven into the American suburban aesthetic to propose an alternate bombed-out future. We cannot tour these ideas, but we have the virtual opportunity to explore where they could have taken us. Confronting through virtual means the death and destruction that could have taken place under different circumstances should make us reflect on the darker seeds of life within our actual histories. The virtually historical, in this case, what could have happened, as depicted by digital representational games, makes dark tourism a memorializing ritual of the atrocity possible but not actual to our canonized history. Caught between alternate timelines and actual traumatic potentials, history—the dark tourist realizes—now remains unsettled.

Notes

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