

# Playing Sites of Memory: Framing the Representation of Cultural Memory in Digital Games

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## Abstract

Basing on an understanding of digital games as cultural objectivations, this article suggests interpreting them as sites of memory, or in other words as 'carrier' of cultural memory. By merging game studies, literary studies, and memory studies, we aim at providing a theoretical framework useful to frame different kinds of representation within (and beyond) digital games towards cultural memory. The framework is inspired by Paul Ricoeur and his threefold model of textual mimesis and favours an approach to digital games that takes into account how they represent and re-configure pre-existent cultural forms, and therefore get refigured into novel ones during, after, and beyond the game experience.

**Keywords** *memory studies, sites of memory, cultural memory, game studies, literary studies.*

## 1. Introduction to Digital Games as Sites of Memory

By drawing upon recent approaches that frame digital games towards cultural memory studies and vice versa, this article aims to provide a framework addressing digital games as cultural objectivations. The subfield of historical games, among others, is increasingly inspired, or directly borrowed, from memory studies and scholars (see Hammar 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Cooke, & Hubbell 2015; Pötzsch, & Šisler 2016; Šisler 2016), which heightens the importance of bridging the knowledge of memory, literary, and game studies. Hence, we suggest understanding digital games as 'sites of memory', a concept that relies on two fundamental assumptions: first, that digital games can convey cultural memory and take part in a broader, transmedia memory framework; second, that this conveyance can be fruitfully addressed and understood by approaching digital games as texts.

Before we proceed, it is therefore necessary to take a step back and define what a 'site of memory' is, or can be, and how we find this idea useful to tackle the relationship between games and cultural memory. The concept 'sites of memory' draws upon the work of Pierre Nora and is "certainly the most prominent and internationally most frequently practiced approach to cultural remembrance" (Erl, 2011, p.27). In what follows, we will frame digital games towards this concept for operational purposes only. Additionally, and according to the meaning of the term introduced by Nora, we will use 'site of memory' without any reference to spatiality as a privileged field for the emergence of remembrance or memory: here, 'site' is used not to point out an environment or a space but rather "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature" (Nora, 1996, p.xvii). According to Nora, a site of memory is a cultural objectivation in the broadest sense of the term, including not only material

objects such as texts but even present or past events, such as rituals or commemorations. By considering the concept of 'cultural objectivation' as broad as those of 'texts', 'artefacts', and 'media', we shall understand all of them interchangeably to include both texts like books, paintings, tales, songs and ballads, sculptures, monuments, signboards, movies, photographs, recordings, architectures, and buildings, and even performances, rituals, and so on and so forth. It may be evident that, according to this understanding, even digital games can be intended, analysed, and experienced as cultural objectivations. Nonetheless, it is worth considering that not all cultural objectivations are, according to Nora, sites of memory.

To be a site of memory, a cultural objectivation must fulfil a certain memorial function in society and must evoke memories as part of this function. Nora gives primary importance to this dimension of sites of memory: "[t]o begin with, there must be a will to remember. If we were to abandon this criterion, we would quickly drift into admitting virtually everything as worthy of remembrance" (Nora, 1989, p.19). Other memory scholars, and especially those interested in media memory, speak in terms of 'mnemonic functionalisation' on that purpose. Inspired by Stuart Hall (Hall, 1973), Erll distinguishes for example between two sides of mnemonic functionalisation, namely: (1) production-side functionalisation, which refers to cultural objectivations that intentionally encode "messages for posterity" (Erll, 2011, p.124), such as monuments or memorials, and all the cultural objectivations that are made to "elicit processes of remembering in the future" (idem, p.125); and (2) reception-side functionalisation, which refers to the very fact that a site of memory "exists when people think it does. As soon as a medium is perceived and used as such, it turns into a medium of memory – even if it was never intended to be one" (ibid.). Reception-side functionalisation, therefore, mostly refers to retrospective functionalisation, that deals with cultural objectivations that were not intended to be used as sites of memory in a first place – or rather, regardless of the intentions of their creators, designers, or performers (assuming that there are such: even things from the natural world can be intended as sites of memory). Therefore, a site of memory is not a given but rather "comes into being through a complex interplay of various material and social factors" (Erll, 2011, p.125). Additionally, "every lieu de mémoire is symbolic by definition" (Nora, 1992, p.x), i.e., it must have a symbolic meaning for the community it functions towards (Nora, 1989, p.9). We are uninterested here in deepening the concept of symbol or symbolisation: we may limit ourselves to use 'symbol' to describe something that stands for something else, in a way that is analogue to representation. What is worth noting is that mnemonic symbols can be 'imposed' and 'constructed': in other words, just like functionalisation, the "symbolic and memorial intention [can be] inscribed in the object itself" (imposed) or they can be constructed by "unforeseen mechanisms, combinations of circumstances, the passage of time, human effort, and history itself" (Nora, 1992, p.x).

By considering digital games as sites of memory, we then choose to align with two different perspectives: that of production-side functionalisation and imposed symbolic dimension, and that of reception-side functionalisation and constructed symbolic dimension. In other words, the distinction introduced by Nora and subsequent memory scholars will allow us to analyse how digital games favour remembrance of a collective past from both the perspective of their designers and their users.

It is worth specifying that, despite reflecting on the production-side of sites of memory can provide fruitful insights for designers interested in dealing with the past through digital games, it is on the reception-side that meanings are produced, events are remembered, symbols recognised, and mnemonic functions implied. It is therefore worth emphasizing that the two sides cannot be entirely separated, if not operationally and for analytic purposes.

Before proceeding, it is also worth noting that the very ideas of cultural memory and of sites of memory are bound to representation, to the point that the concept of cultural memory tends to be associated with representation and represented content (see Huysen, 1995; Erll, 2011). A comprehensive definition of representation would take us far from the matter in hand here. Inspired by Kendall Walton, we operationally define representation as a synonym of 'fiction' in the broadest sense of the term: representations are props for make-believe games (Walton, 1990, pp.59-60) that associates certain meanings or roles to certain objects. To use an example provided by Walton himself, suffice it to think of two children that plays according to a rule that associates bears to stumps. When the two children find a stump, they react as it is a bear. Within their game, therefore, the stump is a representation of a bear (idem, pp.37-40).

Regardless of the emphasis some memory scholars put on collective rituals and collective procedural memory as an un-representational form of cultural memory, most of the analysis focused on cultural memory still focus on content, representation, metaphor, and symbols. We may therefore dedicate particular attention to representation in analysing memory-making and digital games. This does not mean that digital games are limited to representation: in digital games, represented cultural memory can be manipulated, transformed, affected by players (see Hammar, 2017, 2019a, 2019b). The framework we will provide is nonetheless aimed at suspending judgement on digital games intended as simulations, and therefore on the use of procedural rhetoric (see Bogost, 2007) or the metaphorical use of certain game mechanics to convey meaning (see Möring, 2013), and therefore at providing an overview of different kinds of memory-making in games.

The following paragraphs will be dedicated to the building of our framework, inspired by literary studies and memory studies.<sup>1</sup> The framework will tackle different kinds of mimesis in digital games, and it can be useful for both game designers and users.

## **2. Digital Games as Memory-making Texts**

Just like other texts, digital games can be understood as a medium of cultural memory, i.e., as sites of memory. In other words, just like other texts, digital games can “fulfil a multitude of mnemonic functions, such as the imaginative creation of past life-worlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about processes and problems of cultural memory” (Erll, 2011, p.144). We may use the tripartite model of mimesis introduced by Paul Ricoeur to analyse how texts intended as media of memory afford memory-making. Despite the model is aimed at describing literary texts, we find it productive to use it towards texts in general, and digital games in particular.

Ricoeur (1984) introduces the model of the 'circle of mimesis' tracing the significance of mimesis, i.e., representation, back to Aristotle. He identifies three different levels of representation in literature: the prefiguration of the text; the textual configuration; and the refiguration by the readers. We may summarise them in the attempt of transforming such model into an operational framework for our present purposes.

'Prefiguration' stands for the 'preunderstanding' of reality. Every experience of reality is, according to Ricoeur, symbolically, semantically, and temporally preformed: "[...] there is no human experience that is not already mediated by symbolic systems and, among them, by narratives" (idem, p.74) [1]. In other words, no experience of reality is experienced without a previous identification of its structural features (idem, p.54). It is worth specifying 'reality' here is not to be intended as the reality of an alleged objective world 'as it is' but rather the reality of the memory culture, or network, a text is produced within and towards. Erll suggests approaching mnemonic prefiguration by focusing attention on the areas of pre-understanding that concern cultural memory (Erll, 2011, p.153). Accordingly, we use Wolfgang Iser's term 'textual repertoire' to point out "all the familiar territory within the text [being it] in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (Iser, 1978, p.69). To speak of mnemonic prefiguration means observing how a text refers to the repertoire of different dimensions of memory culture, and how, and therefore focusing on, among other aspects, how certain mnemonic communities mediate, in different media forms, their shared past.

By 'configuration', Ricoeur means the process that mediates between prefiguration and refiguration (1984, pp.64-70). Once prefigured elements become part of the text, they get arranged in certain orders, or 'emplotted' (ibid.), and therefore become fictional: configuration "opens the kingdom of the as if" (idem, p.64). Configuration cannot but lead to deviate from previously established textual traditions:

*"There is always a place for innovation inasmuch as what is produced [...] is always, in the last analysis, a singular work, this work. This is why the paradigms only constitute the grammar that governs the composition of new works-new before becoming typical. In the same way as the grammar of a language governs the production of well formed sentences, whose number and content are unforeseeable, a work of art – a poem, play, novel – is an original production, a new existence in the linguistic kingdom" (idem, p.69).*

At the same time, even highly deviated narratives or texts rely at a certain degree on cultural framework of tradition that precedes and encapsulates them: even "[t]he labor of imagination is not born from nothing. It is bound in one way or another to the tradition's paradigms. But the range of solutions is vast" (ibid.). A text re-configures, constructs, and re-arrange prefigured elements of a memory culture. Erll claims on this purpose that "[a text is not simply] a representation of reality; in fact, configuration is an active, constructive process, a creation of reality" (Erll, 2011, p.154). To speak of mnemonic configuration means analysing how prefigured elements from different dimensions of a memory culture are arranged in a text, and how they create fictional worlds (and fictional memories) from pre-existing elements extrapolated by the actual world.

'Refiguration' refers to the reception and interpretation of a given text by the readers. It is in the act of reading, according to Ricoeur, that fiction is reconnected with (and reconfigured by) the world of action: "it is only in reading that the dynamism of configuration completes its course. And it is beyond reading, in effective action, instructed by the works handed down, that the configuration of the text is transformed into refiguration" (Ricoeur, 1988, p.159). The interpretation of a text is not only something individual (despite of course framed towards a community of interpreters and upon a repertoire and tradition of previous interpretations): it also becomes something collective, as individual interpretations influence cultural practices ('actions') and therefore produce novel prefigured elements. One of the broadest effects of textual refiguration that Ricoeur mentions is temporal orientation, intended as the influence that narrative structures have in our understanding of the passing of time, of the meanings of certain events, and of our acknowledging the passing of time and the relationship between past and present. In addition to this influence, that derives from the formal structure of texts, more evidently texts influence and affect culture through their content. This is one of the major interests of cultural memory scholars. Inspired by Ricoeur, Erll claims that:

*"Representations of historical events (such as wars and revolutions) and characters (such as kings and explorers), of myths and imagined memories can have an impact on readers and can re-enter [...] the world of action, shaping, for example, perception, knowledge and everyday communication, leading to political action – or prefiguring further representation (and this is how the circle of mnemonic mimesis continues to revolve)"* (Erll, 2011, p.155).

In other words, it is through the constant transformation of prefiguration in configuration (emplotment), configuration in refiguration (reading and interpretation), and refiguration in prefiguration (the impact interpretation has on readers and their behaviours and beliefs) that certain 'interpretive communities' (communities that share a same way of reading and interpreting, i.e., that collectively refigure certain representations – see Fish, 1980) raise. By paraphrasing Ricoeur's "[w]e are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time" (Ricoeur, 1984, p.54), we may observe that texts configure prefigured elements and meanings, that then become refigured by their reading and interpretation, therefore mediating between a pre-existing and surrounding memory culture and its 'potential restructuring' (Erll, 2011, p.156). We may summarise this threefold model for textual representation and cultural memory, inspired by Erll, as follows (Figure 1).

Throughout the rest of the article, we will use this framework to analyse and discuss digital games. More specifically, we will provide a framework to analyse prefigured cultural elements and textual representations within digital games, as well as and different dimension of cultural refiguration (mental, social, material) that derive, or are affected by, certain interpretations of digital games.

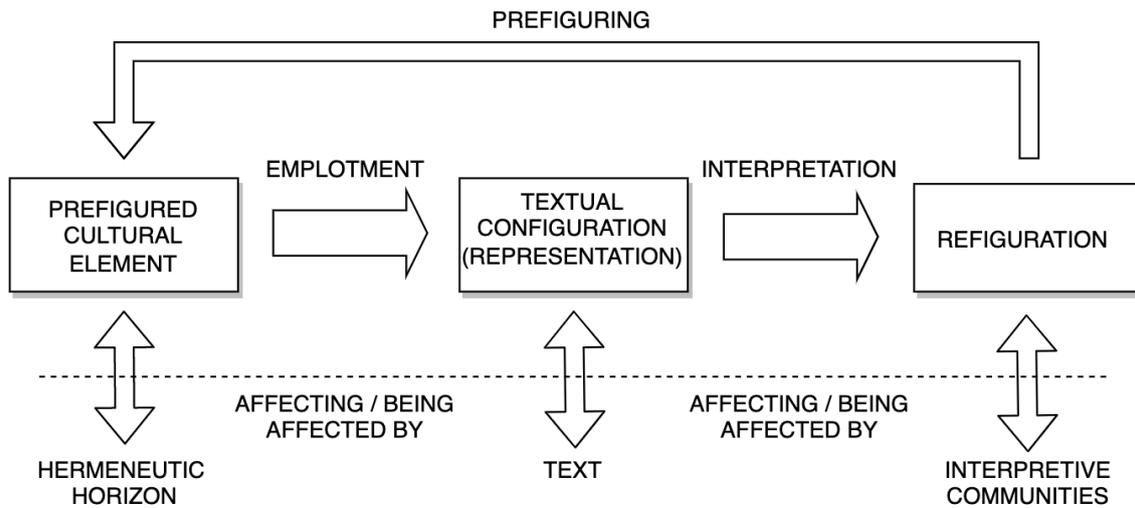


Figure 1. Framework for textual representation and cultural memory, drawing upon Ricoeur and Erll.

### 3. Mnemonic Prefiguration and Digital Games

In the first kind of representation, we focus on is mnemonic prefiguration. Here, and from this paragraph on, 'representation' is used as a synonym of 'mimesis' in Ricoeur to include even nonliteral representations but also metaphors, fictionalisations, references, or iconisation.

Mnemonic prefiguration refers to elements that belong to, and are mediated by, the cultural horizon (see also 'hermeneutic horizon' in Gadamer, 1977; or 'repertoire' in Iser, 1978) that pre-exists and surrounds the production of a digital game. By focusing on mnemonic prefiguration, we may enquire which elements are being prefigured by a digital game, which cultural dimension do these elements originally have, and how they have been transformed and mediated by the cultural framework towards which the digital game in question is designed. In other words, enquiring mnemonic prefiguration in digital games means to focus on remediation, premediation and their dynamics towards digital games. To enquire about mnemonic prefiguration means, in a first place, asking what is being represented within a game. More precisely, enquiring what is being represented implies also understanding what dimension of memory culture is being represented, and therefore how what is being represented is framed towards a broader sociocultural framework. We define a mnemonic prefigured element as an element that is remembered by a mnemonic community, and therefore as a mediated memory collectively shared and individually actualized across the members of such community. It is therefore worth inspecting how such element is borrowed by the broader sociocultural framework of textual representations before it is transformed and framed towards the fictional world in question. Therefore, acknowledging how such elements are influenced by ideologically or hegemonically biased frameworks is also pivotal here.

Another thing we find it worth specifying before proceeding is that the prefigured elements we will deal with are not to be intended as actual events, characters, or elements. We can understand as prefigured elements both the Second World War, an actual historical event, and the Division of Arnor, which took place during the Second Age in the fictional world of the Middle-earth (1954 *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien); both Otto von Bismark's uniform and Ezio Auditore's (Ubisoft Montreal 2009 - *Assassin's Creed II*) hidden blades. Erll speaks of 'memory of literature' to designate the return, in literary texts, of elements from earlier works of art in terms of intertextuality, intermediality, processes of canon formation and literary historiography (Erll, 2011, p.68). Similarly, we would like to emphasize once more that prefigured elements have to be interpreted as the 'memory of fiction' that texts inherit from previous mediated forms of cultural expression, regardless of their truth value.

Basing on the previous paragraphs, we may then provide a framework to address mnemonic prefiguration in digital games. Such framework will be twofold, as it addresses both the production-side and the reception-side of digital games, and is therefore to be intended as directed both to designers of digital games and their users (being them game scholars, memory scholars, historians). The part of the framework provided here must be intended as a tool that may prove useful for avoiding misunderstandings and misconceptions from the production side, and for studying and inspecting representational cultural memory in digital games from the reception side – it is therefore not to be intended as something strict but rather fluid, dynamic, and mainly for operational purposes.

Considering a prefigured element *X* that a game designer is willingly to represent in its digital game, it is profitable to:

- Identify implied mnemonic communities.

To begin with, game designers that are interested in functionalising their worlds as sites of memory may identify the mnemonic communities they are referring to. Who are the implied users of the digital game in question? In other words, which are the implied mnemonic communities that the game is directed to, and that will be able to functionalise the game in question as a site of memory? Other questions that may rise that are similar to this one are: is any of the mnemonic communities of users the designer is implying for the digital game in question sharing a whole different vision of *X*? Are the different visions of the implied mnemonic communities going to clash? Why do these visions clash, and is the representation of *X* the designer would like to have within the game inclined towards any of them?

Such set of question is a precondition for those that follows, as it can direct the effort of the designer towards a specific hermeneutic horizon that he/she is aware of. None of the subsequent questions is in other words thinkable without reference to specific mnemonic communities.

- Acknowledge *X* as a prefigured.

Once acknowledged both the implied mnemonic communities that the designers would like to construct, it is worth tracing back a mnemohistory of *X*. The depth and precision of such mnemohistory of course depends on the intention of the designer. To trace back a mnemohistory of *X* means to focus on its cultural memory dimension (material, social, or mental – see Erll, 2011) as well as on its previous remediations (see Bolter, & Grusin, 1999).

- Functionalise *X* as a site of memory – represent *X*.

Basing on the previous questions and observation, designers may choose how *X* is going to be represented within the digital game in question, and how is it going to be recognized, interpreted, and understood.

By using this framework, game designers may put the representation they would like to implement in their game in relation with a broader cultural memory framework – therefore not only avoiding possible misunderstanding and misreadings (i.e., possible mismatches between the production-side and the reception-side functionalisation of the site of memory) and favouring the construction of certain implied designers but, most importantly, acknowledging the complexity of the memory framework they are borrowing elements from, and therefore reflecting on hegemonically biased representational traditions, on ideologically-influenced clichés, and so on and so forth (see Hammar, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Hammar, & Woodcock, 2020; Mukherjee, 2016, 2017; Sterczewski, 2019). Without such a close consideration of the surrounding memory framework the risk of being exposed to unwanted hegemonic biases cannot but increase. At the same time, it may happen that a designer does not intentionally represent something within a digital game, and that nonetheless users recognize the game as a site of memory. In that case, the designer may find useful to approach the game from the perspective of the users, therefore acknowledging if something is being unintentionally represented (or if something is unintentionally resonating with some mnemonic community of users). In this case, the reception-side of the framework provided above may be as follows.

Considering a representational element *Y* within a digital game, or the game itself intended as a representation of the past (once the simulation is over) on the other hand, it is profitable to:

- Functionalise *Y* as a site of memory – as a representation of *X*.

Reception-side functionalisation, as already noticed, prescind entirely from the intentions of the designer. In other words, users/interpreters may ask themselves what *Y* is representing and acknowledge that *X* is something that deals with their past, therefore taking part in a broader framework of representations of the past.

- Acknowledge *X* as prefigured.

Once acknowledged that *Y* is representing *X*, and that *X* is something that deals with the past, it is worth for the receivers to trace back a mnemohistory of *X*. The depth and precision of such mnemohistory of course depends on the intention of the user, or scholar, and of course can be interpreted as: acknowledging the cultural memory dimension of *X*; and acknowledging previous remediations of *X*.

- Identify implied mnemonic communities.

Another concern that must be accounted in dealing with mnemonic prefiguration within digital games is the hermeneutic horizon towards which such prefiguration can be recognized, and therefore functionalised. No analysis of digital games intended as sites of memory can prescind from referring to specific mnemonic communities, since there are no meanings, interpretations, or memories that prescind from hermeneutic and cultural horizons.

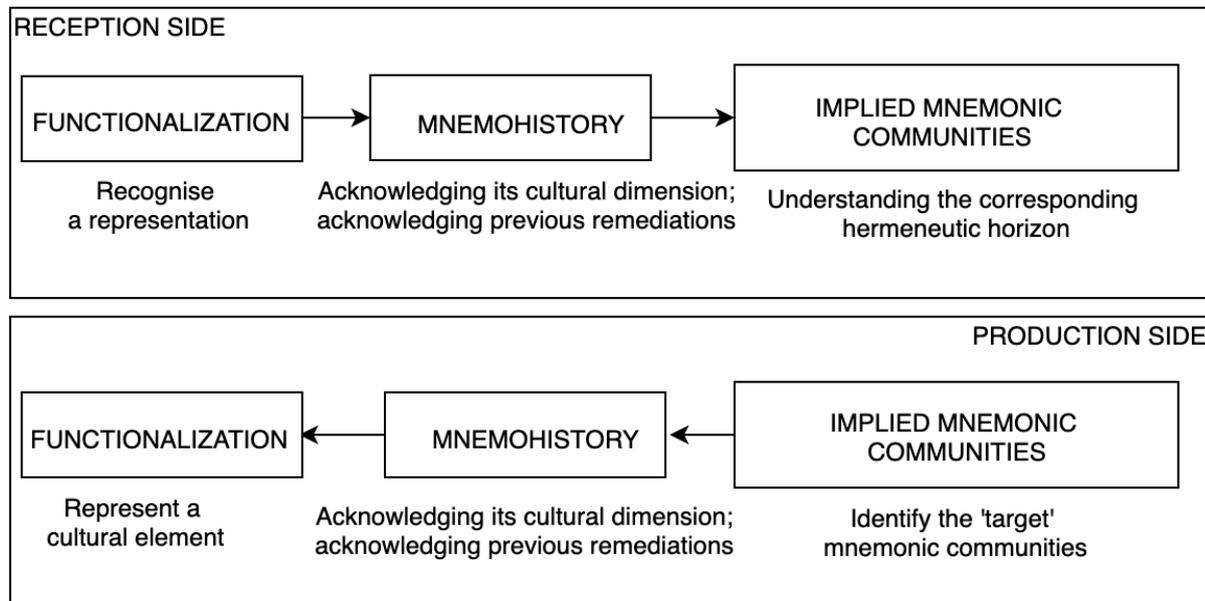


Figure 2. Prefiguration and functionalization.

By using this approach and framework, users of games may recognize and interpret what they experience within a digital game towards a broader cultural memory framework – regardless both the intentions they imply the designers have and those actual designers have had during the design.

#### 4. Textual configuration in digital games

To merge the lexicon of Ricoeur and that of Walton, we may claim that once prefigured elements become part of a story (in a literary text), become represented, or become elements of a make-believe game, their ontological status changes (Erll, 2011, p.154) – i.e., they become fictional. Textual configuration refers to the arrangement of prefigured elements, and the construction of networks of meaning (ibid.) that are internal to fictional worlds. This of course regardless of the truth-value of what happens in the fictional world in question: even historical fictions that have a certain degree of accuracy are nonetheless to be intended 'fictions', as we have seen throughout the previous paragraphs. Mnemonic icons, symbols, and representations of elements that belong to the cultural memory of certain communities, get re-arranged and transformed once they become part of a fictional world.

To enquiry textual configuration of mnemonic prefigured elements means, in a first place, asking how such elements are being represented within a digital game, and how they get in relation with

others as parts of a fictional world. We define textual configuration as the creation of a set of relations, concepts, and narratives that lay at the basis of a fictional world: the arrangement of buildings and natural elements in space, the appearance of façades, written texts, and characters, the relationship between two virtual entities, the morphology of a virtual continent, a specific set of actions and behaviours, and so on and so forth – textual configuration includes all “the internal laws of a [text]” (Ricoeur, 1984, p.53), or (with reference to Roy Sommer) the ‘narrative potential of fictional texts’, i.e., “an assumption substantiated by the text regarding the possible effects of the narrative strategies which structure and organize its content and are thus essential for its meaning” (Sommer, 2000, p.328, as cited in Erll, 2011, p.157).

Basing on the previous paragraphs, we may provide a framework to address textual configuration in digital games. Such theoretical framework is to be intended as directed both to game designers and users (being them game scholars, memory scholars, historians), and therefore will not distinguish, as the previous one, between reception-side and production-side functionalisation.

Being a textual feature, textual configuration is better considered from the perspective of textual analysis. We shall then construct our framework basing on a narratological model, and especially that introduced by Seymour Chatman (Chatman, 1978, p.26). That provided by Chatman is one of the most successfully reused classifications in narratology, and it is thought to be used to address narratives in both literary texts and films. We therefore use his model to identify various ‘building blocks’ of a digital game intended as a text: of course, we are not implying here that digital games have to tell stories to be interpreted as texts. As will be clearer as follows, the framework we will provide is suitable both for digital games that provide users with interactive narratives and for games that, on the other hand, are devoid of narrativity and are, for example, only composed by digital environments that users are free to explore.

Considering a prefigured element *X*, in order to represent it and re-arrange it, together with others, one may choose to:

- Represent *X* as content.

According to narratology and structuralist readings of narrative texts, ‘content’ refers to the story, or the fabula. To put it simply, we term ‘content’ what is being told within a text, or rather all the elements and events that are part of the fictional world that can be experienced from a text. It is worth noting that every kind of content is influenced by, among other things, the genre and kind of the digital game in question, and therefore by all the clichés and genre conventions that pre-exist it as a text (see ‘tradition’ or ‘repertoire’). We distinguish, according to Chatman, two different ways to represent *X*:

- Representing *X* as an existent.

Existents occur in a fictional space (Chatman, 1978, p.96) and are the fundamental constituents of a fictional world as well of its narrative. In other words, every virtual object is to be taken as an existent in narratological terms: characters, buildings, landscapes,

trees, transportations, weapons, clothes, furniture, clouds, creatures, and so on and so forth. By representing *X* as an existent, designers may choose to iconise it and attach it on the back of a feather, or rather to transform it into a character, monster, or whatever, depending of course on the very original nature of *X*. Moreover, each virtual object has its own agency and affordances just like each cinematic object has its own role within the narrative of a movie. If *X* is a character, it may perform certain actions, it may have certain behavioural patterns, a certain voice, a background, and so on and so forth. On the other hand, *X* can also be a written logo on a sign. It is up to the designer to construct a representation of *X* that fits all the others that are within the same game.

- Representing *X* as an event.

Events occur in a fictional time, and they involve actions of fictional existents (Chatman, 1978, p.96). This means that, at least in a minimal sense, every event or chain of events could construct a story. In digital games, it is worth specifying that there is a difference between represented events and events that users can affect or create, i.e., simulated events. By representing *X* as an event, we point out processes that get merely represented and towards which users have no influence or agency of any sort. Such events, pre-scripted by design, are analogue to those one may find in television or literature – they are received, ‘read’, and interpreted by users (Aylett, 1999). Represented events could be cutscenes, pre-scripted dialogues, animated sequences, or written texts that introduce, intersperse, or close the gameplay sections.

- Represent *X* as discourse.

Discourse is usually intended as ‘the expression plane’ of fiction (Chatman, 1978, p.146). Fictional memory and processes of remembering have always been a dominant topic in fiction: “[n]umerous texts portray how individuals and groups remember their past and how they construct identities on the basis of the recollected memories” (Neumann, 2008, p.333), or more broadly “are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, [...] re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and [...] illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfil for the constitution of identity” (ibid.). This is observable for what concerns both the individual and the collective levels of memory, and texts can explicitly reflect on the nexus of memory and identity or can represent such nexus ‘implicitly’ (see also Neumann, 2008, p.333). Fictional memory, differently from more or less intentional referential memory traces, icons, or elements (*Y* that represents *X*), is what Neumann terms ‘the mimesis of memory’, i.e., “the ensemble of narrative forms and aesthetic techniques [through which texts] stage and reflect the workings of memory” (Neumann, 2008, p.334), and devoid of any sort of reference to culturally prefigured elements. ‘Mimesis’ here is used as Ricoeur’s ‘mimesis3’ to point out ‘configuration’, i.e., to indicate the productive quality of fictions instead of their mimetic qualities (ibid.).

Instead of furtherly deepen this kind of representation, we may group under it all those discursive and rhetorical devices that allow designers to present the content of their games,

and therefore to construct fictional memory: pre-scripted cinematic sequences may for example feature, on the plane of expression, camera angles, video editing, soundtracks; virtual texts may have their own narrators, as well as their rhetorical textual devices, expressions, tone, et cetera. Other than that, digital games may provide users with narrators that accompany them through their exploration or progression – the adventure digital game *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017), for example, features several comments of a narrator as the user explores the game. In such cases, narrational discourse is explicitly present within the game in question and can be designed as in other kinds of text (see Chatman, 1978, pp.146-261), using, e.g., retrospection or analepsis (Genette, 1972, p.40).

Representing memories through discourse in a digital game means also, for example, to remediate forms of expressions, or formal structures, rather than contents, such as previous non-virtual technologies and aesthetics (McCrea, 2009); modes of representation or styles; et cetera. The implementation of narrative voices, as well as focalizations, chronotopoi, or other narrational devices are of course other strategies to create fictional memories.

This part of the framework may help framing different mnemonic icons, or mnemonic elements, towards a broader narratological network of textual analysis. Both designers and users may find profitable to observe textual configurations and prefigured mnemonic elements within text using it. Additionally, this framework may be used to address memory-making in unhistorical representations of digital games. By speaking of textual configuration, one may observe how even a fictional world's depiction of an alien race of pale-skin hairless humanoids such as the Helghan in *Killzone* produced by Guerrilla Games 2004 is contributing to our memory of Nazi Germany, favouring collective memory-making around our cultural understanding and re-interpretation of the Third Reich. On the other hand, by using this framework one may acknowledge how certain elements of the past are configured and re-imagined differently, selectively, or reductively (see Caselli, & Toniolo, 2021).

## 5. Refiguration of digital games

Digital games can be refigured in many ways across memory cultures. Just like other texts, digital games can, and do,

*“[mould] memory culture [...] through its structure and forms, but of course, and more obviously so, also through its contents: representations of historical events (such as wars and revolutions) and characters (such as kings and explorers), of myths and imagined memories can have an impact on readers and can re-enter [...] the world of action, shaping, for example, perception, knowledge and everyday communication, leading to political action - or prefiguring further representation (and this is how the circle of mnemonic mimesis continues to revolve)”* (Erl, 2011, p.155).

Some games get iconized and become memes, or symbols, used within the political debate, such as 2019 *Untitled Goose Game* developed by House House; others aim at persuading, informing, or mobilise users, such as *September 12th: A Toy World by Frasca* in 2010 or *Darfur is Dying* by Ruiz, in 2006, or more broadly at commenting the actual world; still others can move users to explore, traverse, and know the actual world (see augmented reality games such as *Pokémon Go* by Niantic, Inc. in 2016, or games designed to promote actual museums, sites, or places such as *Prisme7* by

Game in Society & Bright in 2020, designed to represent and simulate the heritage of the Centre Pompidou.

A proper framework to deal with refigured digital games may address all the elements in a memory culture that derive from a game, i.e., that are remediations of something that appears in a game. Despite it is hard to provide an extensive list of how digital games can be refigured in a memory culture, the subsequent framework is aimed at providing a taxonomy of how digital games can circulate and affect other media forms, therefore moulding the memory culture that receives them, and within which they get activated and negotiated. Being that refiguration is something that can be observed and carried out by the members of a mnemonic community and is not something that can be designed by game designers, the subsequent framework will only refer to receivers, being those users, scholars, journalists, or whoever may be interested in the influence that digital games may have in the surrounding memory culture.

Considering an element *Z* of a memory culture and a representational element *Y* within a digital game (regardless how it is configured within the game in question), or the game itself intended as a text, and specified that every *Z* function toward a specific set of mnemonic communities, we may distinguish between:

- Material refiguration of *Y*: *Y* can be re-mediated by the material dimension of a memory culture.

Here, *Z* is to be intended as an artifact, a medium, a technology, or a text. The goose from *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019) represented in billboards and posters during anti-Brexit rallies in October 2019 is a clear example of such refiguration. Concepts such as that of de- and resemiotization (Lachmann, 1993), mnemonic iconisation (Erl, 2011), and remediation (Bolter, & Grusin, 1999) are all pivotal in inspecting and discussing material refiguration. Virtual characters, spaces, objects, symbols can (and do) be painted on walls, become subjects of movies or multimedia franchise, take part in the public debate, or become, even despite themselves, ideologically charged symbols. Intertextual references and processes of canonization are all to be intended as examples of material refiguration but also fanfictions and other forms of participatory fandom entailed in the contemporary popular culture (see Barton, 2014).

- Mental refiguration of *Y*: here, *Z* has to be intended as a schema, a concept, a code, or a mental disposition enabled through symbolic mediation (Erl, 2011, pp.103-104).

The representations of the past that are shared within mnemonic communities contribute determining the very hermeneutic horizon of their members. In other words, users of digital games tend to be influenced by how these games depict the past even in their mental dispositions, or in the very way they understand and interpret their present. This is particularly observable in how contemporary relationships of power determine how we recollect our own past, influencing popular media and therefore digital games (Hammar, 2019). In this sense, games are to be intended as nothing but a technology, or medium, that contributes

constructing (Hammar speaks in terms of 'manufacturing') dominant cultural memory among others, for example marginalizing groups or counter-hegemonic ideologies, dehumanizing or underrepresenting antagonists and subalterns (ibid.; see also Beverley, 2001, p.54; Calafell, 2016; Hall, 1997; Pandey, 1995; Said, 1979; Spivak, 2010). Every representation of the past, both explicit or metaphoric, affect our very way to understand and recollect it even when we enquiry, receive or understand novel representations of it. In other words, mental refiguration refers to all those concepts and mental dispositions that derive from digital games.

- Social refiguration of Y: here, Z has to be intended as a practice, a ritual, or a commemoration that 'carries' cultural memory.

Cosplaying can be a good example of such practices: in cosplaying, fans produce their costumes inspired by fictional characters and appropriate of existing stories or imaginaries through performativity (Lamerichs, 2011; see also Butler, 2004), therefore momentarily escaping from their actual identities and entering in an imaginative world through role/identity-transformation (Rahman et al, 2012). Cosplaying can be inspired by, among several popular media, digital games, and can therefore imply the transformation of a fan in a virtual character – therefore offering a clear example of social refiguration of a digital game.

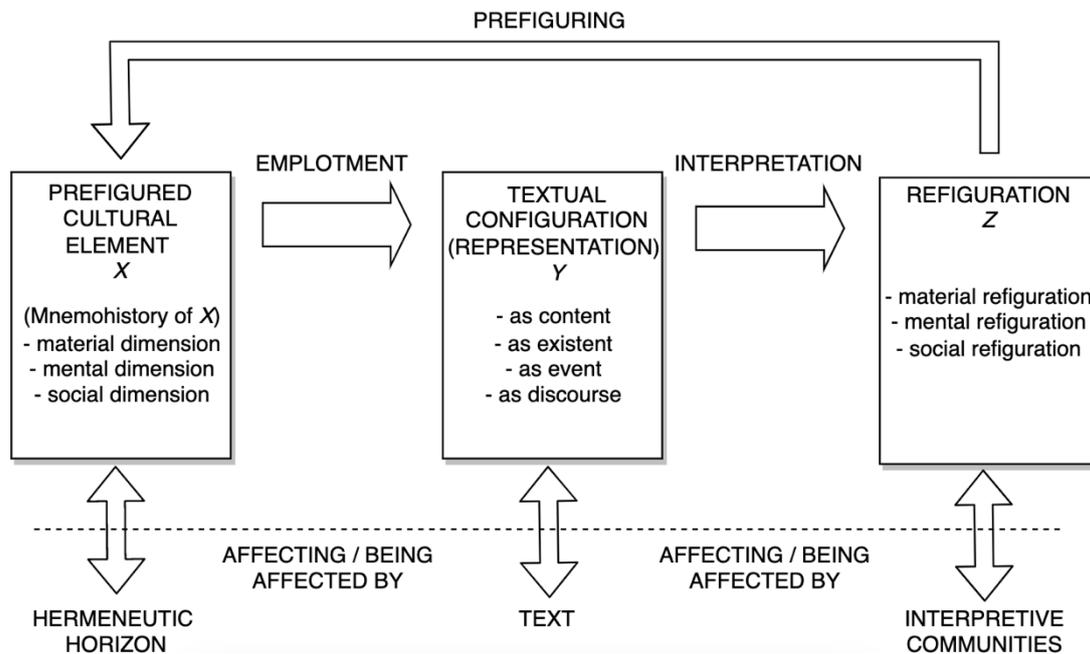
As a matter of fact, closely interconnected with social and mental refiguration of representational aspects of digital games as sites of memory are all those practices, performances, behaviours, knowledges, schemata, and concepts that themselves happen, get performed, or actualized, within digital games.

Many are the examples of funerals and commemorations held within digital games, such as that of *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* by Square Enix 2013, to mourn the death of users (Elliott, 2020) or celebrities (users paid tribute with spontaneous memorials or ceremonies, e.g., for the death of the mangaka Kentaro Miura of May, the 19th 2021). Other times, virtual worlds such as *Second Life* by Linden Lab in 2003 have become sites for museums, memorials, and monuments dedicated to collective traumas or events (such as 9/11 or the digitization of other traumatic memories: see Trezise, 2011). Such practices are not pre-designed or represented but instead actively invented and performed by users as de-facto participatory cultural expressions.

## 6. Conclusions

The framework provided so far, inspired by Ricoeur and contemporary memory studies, aims at merging hermeneutics and literary studies to approach digital games intended as sites of cultural memory. Such methodological approach is useful to address how certain elements of digital games are framed towards a broader memory framework; get re-arranged and transformed within gameworlds; and can therefore produce cultural effects outside of them (figure 3).

By using this framework, different kinds of mimesis can be recognised, analysed, and interpreted according to the need of game designers, users, or scholars, in a more systematic and thorough way.



**Figure 3. Framework for textual representation and cultural memory.**

Further avenues of this research may include:

- applying the framework to specific case studies, namely: digital games that get functionalised as sites of memory from both production and reception sides (first attempts of this can be found in Caselli, 2021; Caselli, & Toniolo, 2021);
- intertwining representational aspects, outlined, and analysed so far, and simulative aspects of digital games. An understanding of how players can actively re-configure and affect, other than understand, recognise, and interpret all the representational aspects presented, is pivotal: this framework is a first attempt of merging literary studies, memory studies, and game studies but it needs to be complemented by a close observation of the dynamics of simulation to grasp the complexity and mnemonic potential of digital games intended as sites of memory. In this sense, all its sections may be enriched by insights from digital hermeneutics, game aesthetics, and game design.

## Endnotes

[1] Since our theoretical framework draws upon narratology and hermeneutics, we may focus on the concepts of representation and narrative, broadly intended, without dealing with game studies topics such as interactive storytelling or narrative architecture (Jenkins, 2003).

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