Unorthodox Professors: World War One in Videogames and on YouTube

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse the videogames *Battlefield 1* and *Victoria II* and the YouTube channels *Crash Course World History* and *The Great War* in order to show how these forms of media represent the First World War. Given the centennial of the First World War in 2014 and the end of the centennial occurring in 2018, there has been increased attention brought to the First World War, and therefore more representations of the war have been occurring in these media. Specifically, these representations affect how younger audiences view the war and will impact their knowledge of it. Although there has been scholarship in game studies, historians should engage more often with videogames and YouTube in order to ensure the wider public is receiving adequate historical representations from these media.

Keywords: First World War; videogames; YouTube; historical representation; Robert Rosenstone

In his seminal work on film and history, Robert Rosenstone struggled with the question of the representation of history in feature films. Famously, he concluded that

> To accept film-makers as historians. . . is to accept a new sort of history. The medium and its practices for constructing the past—all ensure that the historical world on film will be different from that on the page. In terms of informational content, intellectual density, or theoretical insight, film will always be less complex than written history. Yet its moving images and sound scapes will create experiential and emotional complexities of a sort unknown upon the printed page. . . the historical film can convey much about the past to us and thereby provide some sort of knowledge and understanding—even if we cannot specify exactly what the contours of such understanding are. (2012, p.181)

Here, Rosenstone argues that the medium of film should be understood as a legitimate form of history and that our criteria for analysing film need to change (2012, pp. 171, 185). For example, as our world changes, so too does technology. While film is now commonly discussed in academic circles, there are other forms of media that are primarily based on moving images and grip us the same way as film, such as videogames and YouTube. Videogames are electronic games that are played on a TV or a computer and have an object or character that is controlled by a player. YouTube is a platform where users create and share videos for viewing from the public. In 2005, media using moving images experienced a major change, with the seventh generation of videogames beginning (which is characterised by the mass market of videogames with cinematic graphics and a massive increase in popularity). YouTube, coincidentally, was also founded this year and contributed to the changes in media. Today, these media create experiences that cannot be had in a static text because they introduce sound and images in order to engage and entertain, much like film. They are also becoming increasingly popular, especially with younger people, yet film has ostensibly been studied

more than these new forms of media, although there is more scholarship becoming available, for example, Chris Kempshall's 2015 book, *First World War in Computer Games* and Adam Chapman's 2016 article, "It's Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames."

Overall, I argue that videogames and YouTube are becoming increasingly popular and as a result are teaching young audiences about history. While some channels on YouTube do try to take a documentary-style approach to history, videogames should be evaluated on how well they convey historical information. Furthermore, I argue that, for the time being, videogames such as *Victoria II* and YouTube channels such as *Crash Course World History* convey or represent historical information about First World War adequately in terms of three criteria: trench warfare, the reasons for the war, and the political alliance system, but that historians need to begin to advise on future projects being developed by videogame developers and YouTube creators in order to allow for this education to continue.

Before continuing, it is worth arguing how the elements of trench warfare, the reasons for the war, and the political system of alliances are important aspects to the First World War. In *The Great War and the Making of the Modern World* (2011), Jeremy Black reflects on the impact of the trenches: "stalemate and trench warfare reflected the nature of modern industrial warfare once both sides had committed large numbers of troops and lacked the ability to accomplish a breakthrough" (pp. 57-58). Here, Black is explaining that stalemates and trench warfare were hallmarks of the First World War. Essentially, trench warfare occurred when the two sides dug opposing trenches from each other, with a "no-man's land" in between. The two sides would shell and bombard the opponents in the hopes of lowering morale, which was followed by an assault through no-man's land. Typically, this did not result in any real gains, but it did contribute to a significant loss of life and fueled the pessimism of the soldiers and the general public about the war. This highlights how the trenches were an element of the First World War, which contributed to making it a conflict that was different from any other previous one.

The reasons for the war and the political alliance system are complex. It is difficult to determine how the First World War began, but it is clear the assassination of the Archduke of Austria, Franz Ferdinand, on 28 June 1914, ignited the tensions that had existed in Europe (Clark, 2012, p. 367). These tensions existed due to a militant Germany, a humiliated France, an ambivalent United Kingdom, and the competing Eastern powers of Austria-Hungary and Russia (Clark, 2012, p. 123). Here, one can observe how many factors could have contributed to the First World War, but one factor in particular can be analysed specifically because it helped to create the circumstances for the First World War to become reality: the political alliance system (Clark, 2012, p. 122). The alliance systems that existed during this period were the Triple Alliance between Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary and, opposing the Triple Alliance, the Triple Entente (Clark, 2012, p. 122). The Entente was a grouping of Russia, the United Kingdom (UK) and France, who were bound together through mutual treaties of defence, such as the Anglo-Russian Convention (an agreement between the UK and Russia), the Franco-Russian Alliance (between France and Russia) and the Entente Cordiale (between the UK and France) (Clark, 2012, p. 122). In the end, the elements of trench warfare, the reasons for the war, and the political alliance system are the key aspects that made the First World War unique and therefore crucial to include in historical representations of the war. This is why these three elements are used to evaluate the historical representation of videogames and YouTube.

Videogames

Beginning from humble origins such as the small-scale videogames of Pong in the 1970s, videogames have become an increasingly influential force in the entertainment industry. According

to the Pew Research Centre, 77% of men and 57% of women between the ages of 18 and 29 have had some experience in playing videogames (Duggan, 2015, p. 2). Of course, this statistic considers all videogames and genres, but the popularity of the historical videogame should not be overlooked. For example, the popular videogame series *Call of Duty* had its beginnings with a game about the Second World War in 2003. So far, the series has 13 titles and has been produced since the mid-2000s. More recently, *Battlefield 1* is an example of a historical videogame that has seen commercial success. In fact, *Battlefield 1* contributed heavily to the success of Electronic Arts (EA), the publisher of the game. During the third quarter of 2016, EA reported a 7% increase in revenues to just over $2,000,000,000 on an adjusted basis, which was helped by the strong sales of *Battlefield 1* and other games such as *FIFA 17* (Tharakan, 2017, para. 8). The game's success suggests that many young people are playing *Battlefield 1* and learning history from it, which provides the impetus for my analysis. After all, if moving images can teach us about the past in distinct ways (as Rosenstone concedes), one must ask whether videogames can reasonably contribute to a discussion of historical events. While there are many games that can be analysed, this paper focuses on *Battlefield 1* and *Victoria II.*

Battlefield 1 is a first-person shooter (FPS) videogame that immerses players in the combat of the First World War. As pointed out above, it was also one of the most commercially successful games for EA in 2016. *Battlefield 1* follows the model as set out in typical FPS games: fast-paced action, unlimited respawns (that is, resurrections of players), and a point-of-view representing a single protagonist. What makes *Battlefield 1* unusual in the genre of FPSs is that the game has a campaign that is told through six distinct war stories where the player assumes various roles as soldiers on the side of the Allies (Version 1.09; Electronic Arts, 2016). While all these stories are varied and make for interesting gameplay, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game is the prologue mission named "Storm of Steel." In a jarring departure from the conventions of the FPS genre, the death of the player's character is final in the mission with no opportunities to respawn, with the game even displaying their year of death. In a way, it personalises the war and puts faces to the events.

Whereas *Battlefield 1* places the player in the midst of combat on the ground, much like a thematic sequence similar to the opening scenes of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, *Victoria II* is more akin to the experience of playing the board game Risk. The game takes place between 1836 and 1936 (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). The player directs one of the countries that existed in 1836 and makes diplomatic, economic, and military decisions in response to circumstances generated by the program's algorithms. The game reproduces the basic technological and geopolitical realities of the Victorian and First World War eras, but between the decision-making of players and the computer-generated events, events may unfold in ways that depart radically from actual history.

For the purposes of this paper, *Battlefield 1* and *Victoria II* will be analysed with regard to their depiction of trench warfare, their explanations of the war's causes, and the dynamics of the First World War's alliance system. While these games are not perfect representations of the First World War, they bring the audience closer to the realities of the war through their representations of the three criteria.

Battlefield 1 simulates for its players a Europe decimated by war seemingly without the horror of the trenches. As gamers play throughout the single-player campaign, the earth is scorched and mortars leave deep craters in the ground, but strangely absent from these war-torn areas are the trenches. They make a brief appearance in the prologue mission of the game, "Storm of Steel," but most of the game is played through ruined cities or relatively open landscapes scattered with occasional buildings (Version 1.09; Electronic Arts, 2016). In this way, the player is spared the tedium of successive days of inaction in the trenches. Planes soar in the air and gas is a constant danger, but artillery is almost absent and cover can be found anywhere; no-man's-land does not

exist. By doing so, *Battlefield 1* appears to fail the audience in its representations of the past. Of course, the game needed to earn money, so the combat was sped up. This is a problem with historical representation.

Victoria II is also not a good representation of trench warfare, as battles are conducted as if the player was the leader of a nation and leaders were rarely in the trenches. This means that battles are fought using dice rolls, leadership ability, technology advantages, and the number of men involved in combat (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). While these are certainly important aspects to any battle (dice rolls could be seen as a random chance factor that is outside of the player's control), certain elements are missing, such as the trench warfare experience of the common soldier. Soldiers and battles turn into nothing but flashing red numbers (which let you know how many men are lost per turn), and a single, impersonal, three-dimensional figure represents the entire army. Yet *Victoria II*, while clearly not providing an experience that demonstrates the reality of trench warfare, comes closer to the experience of decision makers and generals behind the lines, for whom the war unfolded on maps and in memoranda.

In terms of the criteria to convey the reasons for the war, *Battlefield 1* hardly examines the key factors. The closest the game gets to discussing the reasons for the war comes during the prologue mission, which is designed for the player to understand how needless and violent the First World War turned out to be (Version 1.09; Electronic Arts, 2016). In this way, *Battlefield 1* clearly showcases the general belief of soldiers and the public in 1917-1918, in that the war was seen as unnecessary and drained Europe of its sons (Brose, 2010, p. 150). It is understandable this was a strong belief in the European population, as 31% or 21,000,000 European men who joined the army received wounds. This does not include the figures for the dead (Brose, 2010, p. 151). Portraying the idea that the war was a waste of lives is an admirable pursuit for a videogame and a valid historical representation of the past as the game clearly emphasizes the horrors of war. However, the reason for the war is not explicitly discussed in the game.

Victoria II better explains the reasons countries went to war. It is important to note though that the First World War is not actually an inevitable event in all play-throughs of the game. Instead, *Victoria II* forces the player to make alliances, manage a national economy, monitor class relations domestically, and keep their country ahead in technology (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). These systems are complex, and the game can be difficult to master as a result, but this is also *Victoria II*'s strength. By showing how complex managing a country can be and by identifying all of the factors that contribute to an industrialised war machine, the game gives players a detailed grasp of the situations that existed in the decades leading up to the First World War. While it does not explain the beginnings of the First World War, *Victoria II* certainly allows for the player to understand some of the calculations of the Great Powers and the forces that acted upon the leaders of those nations in deciding to go to war, as the player must analyse how warfare will be harmful or beneficial to their nation.

Both games have differing analyses for the reasons for the war, but they also have different ideas on how to approach the systems of alliances that existed in Europe in 1914. *Battlefield 1* does not mention these alliance systems. In the game, the player is only given the goal of eliminating their enemies (Version 1.09; Electronic Arts, 2016). The enemy happens to be whoever is attempting to kill the player during the game, whether German or American. The game basically decides for the player who the enemies and allies are, and the possibility of the player altering or influencing those alliances is effectively foreclosed. While this might be an accurate reflection of the experience of the average soldier, it does not engage critically with the idea of the alliance systems prior to the outbreak of war. In fact, in single-player mode, users are only able to play as a combatant representing a few of the warring powers: the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Italy, Australia, and Arab nationalists. Russia and France can be added through downloadable content

(DLC). It is the fact that the player is unable to take on the role of Germans or Austro-Hungarians in this mode that is the most egregious weakness of *Battlefield 1*. Not allowing players to experience the war through the eyes of a German or Austro-Hungarian soldier is problematic because it evokes a sense of British and American righteousness and paints the German-speaking powers, much like they were seen in the Second World War, as the undemocratic and militaristic enemies of the free English-speaking world. Yet, history proves this interpretation is incorrect. While Germany and Austria-Hungary deserve some blame for the First World War, the Entente powers of France, Russia, and the United Kingdom were also responsible for the First World War (Clark, 2012, p. 123). As Christopher Clark points out, "without the two blocs, the war could not have broken out the way that it did. The bipolar system structured the environment in which the crucial decisions were made" (2012, p. 123). Here, Clark does not blame a particular nation for the war, but rather blames the bipolar alliance system. Therefore, it is not only German and Austro-Hungarian leaders who were responsible for the war, but the alliance system that had divided the continent into opposing blocks. Furthermore, this interpretation also shows how there were no villainous nations or great nations. All nations were responsible (Clark, 2012, p. 123). Unfortunately, *Battlefield 1* does not delve into this nuance and instead leaves the player with the impression that the Germans are warmongering and militant.

Victoria II's interpretation of the systems of alliances is more nuanced than *Battlefield 1*'s. Playing as the leader of a great power in 1836, a gamer may decide to establish an alliance or rivalry with any country that existed in the world (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). This allows for a range of counterfactual events. However, it is still possible for something similar to the First World War to occur. Indeed, the game's baseline starting point does place certain countries within predetermined spheres of influence and virtually guarantees that conflict will occur often over particular issues. For example, the artificial intelligence (AI: when software mimics the cognitive functions of a human player by problem solving and learning from the player) of France in the game often attempts to incorporate Alsace-Lorraine into its sphere of influence, and as Prussia, Alsace-Lorraine is crucial in order to form Germany due to pre-determined win objectives set by the game (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). This sets up a conflict between France and Prussia and will lead to tensions between France and the newly created Germany, similar to what occurred in history (Clark, 2012, p. 124). Of course, *Victoria II* is a counterfactual game, and as a result, France may not necessarily attempt to incorporate Alsace-Lorraine in its sphere of influence. Instead, it could focus its attention somewhere different, or it may even decide to have an alliance with Prussia. The opportunity to make history is one of the strengths of *Victoria II*, as it implicitly argues for the notion that historical events are not inevitable but rather the result of extremely complicated factors. However, even with this implicit argument, *Victoria II* does set preferences for the AI, and the personalities of certain nations create the likelihood of certain outcomes occurring, including a large conflict like the First World War (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). Moreover, given the counterfactual nature of the game, the First World War may not necessarily break out over the area of Bosnia, but the probability of a global crisis occurring is still extremely high. This is due to the international crisis system.

The international crisis system is a game mechanism that enables smaller, minor powers to appeal to the eight Great Powers of the world in order to solve a dispute (Version 3.03; Paradox Entertainment, 2010). For the smaller nation, a "backer" is required in the form of one of the eight Great Powers. After this occurs, an international crisis is triggered. During an international crisis, the Great Powers are encouraged to take a side in the conflict. In fact, if they decide to remain neutral, there is a penalty to the nations. Unfortunately, the negative consequence of joining a side is that afterwards the player becomes committed to that side of the conflict, and with each Great Power joining in the crisis, it deepens and becomes more difficult to resolve. The process can

take many months in-game to end, and with each day the game has a greater chance of creating a World War between the Great Powers. To make a simple analogy to the First World War, Serbia would be considered the smaller nation claiming lands in Austria-Hungary, and the Russian Empire would be the backer of Serbia, precipitating the crisis after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. Eventually, Germany would decide to choose the side of Austria, and France would choose the side of Russia and Serbia. Italy would be a neutral third power and the United Kingdom would be a supporter of France and Russia. Between the beginning of the crisis (the assassination of the Archduke) and the war, the crisis was further deepened as negotiations failed between the Great Powers and eventually war was declared. In this way, *Victoria II*'s model can produce an accurate simulation of the beginning of the war and is able to implicitly explain the beginning of the First World War and the alliance system that existed in Europe at the time of the war. By doing this, the game is a valid example of historical representation.

In summary, *Battlefield 1* and *Victoria II* are two videogames that attempt to give players a depiction of the past and have different strengths and weaknesses in how they attempt to achieve this goal. On the one hand, *Battlefield 1* excels when it is depicting the human element of war and for giving an overall sense of what could have happened during the First World War, but it fails with the elements chosen to be analysed in this paper; namely, *Battlefield 1* does not cover trench warfare in depth, nor does it discuss the reasons for the war or explain the political alliance system. It does, however, give a good representation of the unnecessary nature of the war. On the other hand, *Victoria II* sacrifices the personal for other elements. Trench warfare is not shown or examined in detail, but the game covers the reasons for the war and the political alliance system. While it may not always be accurate, *Victoria II* does certainly provide an example of how to represent the past in videogaming. Overall, videogames may not be accurate, at least the ones in this analysis, but this is a fairly simplistic argument to make. Similar to Rosenstone's analysis of film, the evaluation of videogames must also be on how well they represent history. In this way, *Victoria II* clearly gives a sense of what occurred in the past and brings it closer to modern audiences, whereas *Battlefield 1* fails almost every measure of the accuracy of historical representation, except for its depiction of the emotional and human impact of the First World war.

YouTube

Modern audiences are not only using videogames to receive historical information. YouTube is another platform that seeks to bring the past closer to the public. Similar to videogames, it also informs a younger audience, but crucially, watching YouTube and playing a videogame are different in terms of receiving information. While videogames require the active participation of the player, YouTube offers more a passive way to engage with history and is an easy medium to access via modern electronic devices. This could be why, according to YouTube's most recent statistics, the site boasts over a billion users and reaches more 18 to 49 year olds than any cable network in the United States (YouTube, 2017, para. 1). This means YouTube is becoming increasingly popular and is often looked to for entertainment, which occasionally includes content about history. YouTube is a platform, so this paper will analyse two YouTube channels instead of the platform itself. These channels are *Crash Course World History* and *The Great War* and they will be analysed in relation to the same elements used to assess videogames: trench warfare, the reasons for the war, and the First World War alliance system. This paper argues that these channels aim to teach their viewers about the past and give an accurate representation of history.

Crash Course World History is a video series created by the Green Brothers, Hank and John ("Crash Course," n.d.). It is essentially a survey course for those who are curious about the past. The First World War makes an appearance in four episodes: "How World War I Started: Crash Course

World History 209," "Who Started World War I: Crash Course World History 210," "Archdukes, Cynicism, and World War I: Crash Course World History #36," and "America in World War I: Crash Course US History #30." In this series, John Green explains complex historical problems as well as the generally accepted history of the war. According to the creators, the purpose of *Crash Course* is to "create free, high-quality educational videos used by teachers and learners of all kinds" ("Crash Course," n.d.). The series is thus explicitly pedagogical in intent.

Another video series on YouTube with content on the First World War is *The Great War*. This series follows the First World War week-by-week with a very in-depth narrative account of the war in order to mark the centennial of the conflict ("Indy Neidell," n.d.). The channel even includes some special episodes about certain countries, people, and groups ("Indy Neidell," n.d.). The team behind *The Great War* describe themselves as a "dedicated group of around five Berlin-based people most of whom work full time for this project as employees of Mediakraft Networks, a German multi channel network" ("Indy Neidell," n.d., para. 2). While the channel does not go into a vast amount of detail about the war, it does discuss the significant points.

Whereas the two videogames analyzed do not often display trench warfare, the YouTube channels both examine the trenches in some capacity. *Crash Course World History* discusses the trenches during "Archdukes, Cynicism, and World War I," as host John Green says: "The lines of trenches on the Western Front covered only about 400 miles as the crow flies, but because of the endless zigzagging, the trenches themselves may have run as much as 25,000 miles" ("Archdukes," 2012, 3:14–3:40). Here, there are specific details about the trenches that the video discusses and they use the trenches in order to transition into another of their topics. For example, after Green delivers the line about trenches, he immediately states that trench warfare did not exist in every theatre of war, and in fact, he uses this as an opportunity to briefly introduce the more forgotten Eastern Front and the Ottoman theatre of war ("Archdukes," 2012, 3:14–3:40). This creates a video that is constantly engaging and allows Green to mention multiple areas of interest to the audience, without sacrificing accuracy.

The Great War also covers trench warfare, but does this with specific videos about trench warfare. For example, their video "Trench Warfare in World War 1" identifies the trenches as a worthwhile topic in itself because, as host Indy Neidell explains, "When people think of the First World War, one of the very first images that comes to mind is of soldiers in the filthy muddy trenches, fighting, smoking, or just being miserable" ("Trench Warfare," 2014, 0:00–0:15). While Neidell appears to betray his channel's objectives for covering the trenches (it is a popular topic and therefore the video will generate more views, which will generate more revenue), the video itself covers much about the trenches. The history of trenches, how they came about, how they were supplied and what their conditions were, are all covered by Neidell ("Trench Warfare," 2014, 0:15–12:02). Indeed, the detail with which Neidell covers the trenches seems to resonate with viewers, judging by the view count of the episode, which has one of the highest number of views on the channel, at 483,566 as of April 4, 2017 ("Trench Warfare," n.d.). Furthermore, *The Great War* makes sure to cite their materials in the description of their video. Their sources are often recent (the oldest work cited is from 2000) and include both German and English works by respected academics such as Peter Hart and John Keegan ("Trench Warfare," n.d.).

While YouTube channels may be factually correct in their discussions on trench warfare, the reasons for the outbreak of the First World War are also an important barometer of how YouTube channels portray the past. *Crash Course* addresses the reasons for the war explicitly in a video series titled "How World War I Started" and "Who Started World War I." In "How World War I Started," Green explains how difficult it can be to describe how a historical event occurred:

> The question we're looking at today is how. And that's a much more modest question
> because we can simply discuss a series of events but it's still a complicated one because

> when you're talking about how, you're always picking from an uncountable number of things that happened. ("How World War I Started," 2014, 1:39–1:50)

Here, Green explains an important aspect about historical understanding; namely, he is examining not only how the war occurred, but also how the audience must be careful in analysing the past and how cause and effect impact our understanding of what occurred. This is a surprising account of history, as Green moves away from a simple narrative account of the war but also moves into the significance of historical study itself. Of course, Green does examine how the war occurred, but he also does this in-depth and critically. For example, in "Who Started World War I," Green discusses how previous historians have argued that it was German militarism that began the war. He examines this argument through speaking to his "Me from the Past" persona who typically supplies Green the most commonly agreed-upon response in public discourse. Essentially, "Me from the Past" is John Green, but before he became educated about the subject matter. For the public, this is an effective device for showing how consciousness can be transformed through historical investigation. The following is a conversation on the reasons for the beginning of the First World War:

> Me from the Past (MP): "Mr. Green, Mr. Green! That's easy, the Germans started the war."
>
> Green: "Well, Me from the Past, as it happens many historians and British politicians would agree with you. I mean, you have an opinion that can be defended..."
>
> MP: "...Maybe they...really liked war? I'm not really in the defending positions business..."
>
> Green: "...there's more to life than that." ("Who Started World War I," 2014, 0:19–0:43)

This quote exemplifies Green's engaging with commonly understood public discourse and prompts Green's excursion into who started the war because, as he notes, history is more complicated than the Germans simply wanting war. He discusses how this argument began in the 1960s when Fritz Fischer identified Germany as the chief cause of the war, but he also explains this idea likely began in public opinion due to Germany's guilt being written into the Treaty of Versailles in Article 231 ("Who Started World War I," 2014, 1:09–1:29). He also explains how it could be understandable that the European public would believe in German aggression being the main reason for the war given how the Second World War began due to the German invasion of Poland, and given the proximity of the Second World War to readers of the 1960s ("Who Started World War I," 2014, 1:29–1:45). Having stated these points, Green goes on to refute the idea of Germany being solely responsible for the war. He accomplishes this by pointing out the irony of him living in the United States, a country that spends more on national defence than any other nation on Earth:

> Attributing characteristics like militarism or authoritarianism to entire national populations is a little problematic. Also, one nation's militarism is another nation's strong national defence, and when you live in the country, as I do, that spends more on defence than any other nation, it's probably not that good of an idea to call people militaristic. ("Who Started World War I," 2014, 1:58–2:20)

Here, Green makes history relevant to the present and begins to encourage the audience to question their own views and how similar they could be to the people of the past.

The Great War takes a slightly different approach to the reasons for the war, as it operates under a constrained structure: namely, a week-by-week narration of the main events of the war. The channel does not provide a forum to analyse the arguments for the war and largely stays on the narrative and event-focused path. In the episode "The Outbreak of WWI—How Europe Spiraled

into the Great War," Neidell emphasizes the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary and the blank cheque given to Austria by Germany. Similar to *Crash Course*, *The Great War* attempts to dispel the idea that Germany was solely responsible for the war. As Neidell notes, "as an aside here—[the idea to go to war] was the opinion of the generals and some government leaders but it was not the opinion of the German people at large" ("The Outbreak," 2014, 3:30–3:38). Here, Neidell argues against the contemporary popular opinion that Germany started the war and also continues the idea of teaching the audience about what really happened. Neidell even points out that on July 6, 1914, the Kaiser took a three-week vacation to Norway ("The Outbreak," 2014, 4:12). As Neidell says, "[this] is kind of not what you'd do if you were basically the most powerful man in the world [and about to go to war]" ("The Outbreak," 2014, 4:12). In this quote, Neidell does not offer any significant discussions about history, but he does suggest that commonly agreed upon opinions in the public (and some academic circles) do not always constitute the truth of history. While it would have been better for *The Great War* to look at the wider academic discourse, because this would make it more legitimate in the eyes of historians, the channel offers a solid narrative account of the war and attempts to make its own argument for the reasons for the First World War. The channel does this by discussing how Austria-Hungary was the main culprit in the war. As Neidell states, "Everybody except Austria thought [that the Serbian response to the Austrian ultimatum] was just fine, but Austria was determined to go to war" ("The Outbreak," 2014, 6:02–6:08). Here, *The Great War* is able to position itself in wider debates on the reasons for the First World War and also is able to later convey the complexity of placing blame on a country for the First World War, as multiple powers were involved.

The final point of examination in this paper is to assess if the YouTube content creators are able to get it right in regards to how the channels represent the political alliance system that existed in the First World War. *Crash Course World History* begins this discussion with the video "How World War I Started." The main focus of this episode is to examine the events of July and August 1914 and how an assassination turned into a pan-European conflict. Green uses an animation, "Thought Bubble," to explain what occurred and how the alliances led to war. Instead of the audience watching Green sitting in his chair, this device continues to hold the audience's attention while moving images (cartoon figures) show the complexities of a topic. Green provides a voice-over for the animations as he continues to examine the occurrences leading up to an event. Green informs the viewer that, while he usually does not make a point of addressing dates specifically in the show, he will make an exception for the origins of the First World War because of the sequence of events and their importance to the history of the war ("How World War I Started," 2014, 5:52–5:58). Green then goes on to mention that Russia had begun pre-mobilization efforts on July 25, 1914 and was the first nation to mobilize on July 30, 1914 ("How World War I Started," 2014, 5:58–7:04). Austria had declared war on July 28, 1914, but as Green explains, this war was isolated between Serbia and Austria, with Russia not being threatened directly ("How World War I Started," 2014, 5:58–7:04). Germany warned Russia to stand down, but mobilized on August 1, 1914 and declared war on Russia (2014, 5:58–7:04). France also mobilized on August 1 in support of Russia, and Germany formally declared war on France on August 3, 1914 (2014, 5:58–7:04). Here, Green sorts through the minutiae of explaining both how the war began and how the alliances precipitated these declarations of war, ultimately tying the significance of the war to lessons for the contemporary audience. Green states,

> Please remember that we are always in the middle of a "how." Those living in June and July of 1914 could never have imagined how significant that month would be for human history...we also can't imagine what our decisions today will mean in 100 years. ("How World War I Started," 2014, 8:19–8:35)

Here, Green once again makes sure to insert gravity into the value of present actions and how history

is constantly being made.

The Great War may not dwell on the broader historical implications, but still presents an accurate account of the alliance system. The video "Europe Prior to World War I: Alliances and Enemies" not only explicitly examines Europe's web of alliances, but also mentions why the alliances existed. Neidell looks at the historical rivalry between Germany and France, Russia's fears for the Dardanelles, and even the shaky alliance between the United Kingdom and France (they still had plans to invade each other in the early 20th century) as background to why the alliances existed in the way they did in 1914 ("Europe Prior to World War I," 2014, 5:58–6:45). Neidell specifically delves into why the British may have sought protection from their historical rival France by explaining the Anglo-German naval race and explores how Germany provoked Britain to seek further protection by challenging Britain's major defence: their navy ("Europe Prior to World War I," 2014, 7:06–8:52). While Neidell and the Great War team may not challenge commonly agreed-upon ideas about the beginning of the war, they give a better sense of the motivations of the European powers by explaining how the situation in June 1914 came to be. For example, in Russia's case, Neidell speaks of Russia's previous humiliations by Japan in 1905 and Russia's inability to prevent Bosnian annexation in 1908, a factor that contributed to the Tsar's later readiness to aggressively defend Russian interests in the Balkans ("Tinderbox Europe," 2014, 6:55–7:00). In this way, *The Great War* alludes to a key principle in historical studies; namely, that history does not fit into a clean timeframe. For instance, the reasons for the First World War cannot be determined by looking at the year 1914 alone: One must go back to 1905 and (much more often) go back even further to understand events in history. Indeed, one may even examine the Mughal Empire to understand Russian aggressiveness, as an example. The point is that *The Great War* teaches the audience about the complex and causal relationship of history, and how, to understand one event, historians must look back even further.

In the end, YouTube may not be a conventional medium to understand the past, yet these channels demonstrate a conscious striving for accuracy in the pursuit of historical truth and to represent how history actually was. The channels *Crash Course World History* and *The Great War* all address trench warfare, the reasons for the war and the First World War alliance system in their own ways, but fundamentally share this same core principle. These channels also seek to educate their audiences, and with many young people turning to YouTube increasingly for entertainment and learning, this may not be a negative development in the way history is disseminated to the public.

Conclusion

On one hand, *Battlefield 1* and *Victoria II* have different strengths and weaknesses when looking through the lens of how the games represent the First World War through trench warfare, the reasons for the war, and the systems of alliances that existed before the war. *Battlefield 1* gives the audience a good sense of how the war was perceived and the human toll of the war, but is guilty of oversimplifying the war to make it more appealing to audiences. *Victoria II* is about diplomacy, and as a result, showcases the difficulty of negotiations between the world powers and how difficult it must have been to stop a political crisis from devolving into war. On the other hand, the two YouTube channels *Crash Course World History* and *The Great War* attempt to depict the past as it actually was and adhere more closely to a documentary style approach, where truth is the first objective. As one can appreciate from these channels, the ideas of this truth of the war can vary, due to the different interpretations of what was important to the ideas of trench warfare, the reasons for the war and the systems of alliances. Much like a debate between academics, individuals with different biases decide that some elements are more important. In fact, John Green alludes to

this when he says,

> Looking at the diplomatic causes of the war also reveals something to us about the
> pitfalls of writing history. . . historians have to sift through all of these sources and make
> choices about which ones to emphasize. . . we had to make choices that many of you will
> disagree with. Either because you don't think we gave enough evidence or because you
> don't like the things that we emphasized, and that's great. It's these constructive and
> critical conversations that lead us to dig deeper, to consult more primary sources, to
> read more broadly, and that in turn leads to a richer understanding of the world and a
> more engaged life. ("Who Started World War I," 2014, 9:25–10:11)

Here, Green acknowledges the biases of the show and acknowledges that its interpretation of the war
is not necessarily the only one that can be made, making *Crash Course* good educational material,
not only about the First World War, but also about history itself.

Young audiences are engaging with videogames and YouTube and are learning about history
through these media by playing games such as *Victoria II* and for watching channels such as *Crash
Course*. Due to the centennial of the conflict in the 2010s, the First World War has captured the
public's imagination and as a result is increasingly represented through these media. These forms
of media also appear to be here to stay, and will only continue to capture more of the public's
imagination in the future. Therefore, we, as historians, need to engage with these media regularly in
order to ensure the past is represented adequately. Some specific recommendations on how to engage
with these media include setting up a public history course, reaching out to software developers (and
vice versa), starting a YouTube channel, writing articles and reviews, or even mentioning videogames
and YouTube to classes by bringing them up in discussions or by showing short clips. By using
some of these recommendations, historians will be able to engage more critically with these media.

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