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**Virtual Residues: Historical Uncertainty and John F. Kennedy's Assassination in
Videogames**

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Videogames**

by

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Report

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DEDICATION

To Herman Melville.

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I began this project with a few goals in mind. I hoped to challenge myself by pursuing an object of study that I'd never considered in a scholarly fashion. I wanted to mull over a research topic for a longer period of time than a traditional seminar paper would allow. And I wanted to inject some voice and life in my writing; to avoid “the dead hand of prose” that so often befalls academic work. While I hesitate to say that I've achieved any of them—who among us can ever say that their scholarly work is truly finished?—I'm nonetheless grateful to have had the opportunity to try.

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Abstract

Virtual Residues: Historical Uncertainty in John F. Kennedy's Assassination in Videogames

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This study explores how representations of John F. Kennedy's assassination in videogames inform our present and future. I argue that videogames have the potential to sway a player's sense of politics and history through image, sound, and interactive capabilities: these games leave what we might call "residue" in a player's mind, even if he or she is not conscious of those effects. I hope that my analysis, drawing upon player experiences and close readings of two games, will uncover how this residue might reconfigure a player's sense of Kennedy's assassination as well as his or her political ideologies and anxieties.

I focus on two games released in the past ten years: the low-selling but controversial *JFK: Reloaded*, released in 2004, and the wildly popular *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, released in 2010. These games present the narrative in starkly different ways. The former invites players to reenact repeatedly the assassination from the vantage point of Oswald in the Book Depository while the latter presents an alternative history that

ultimately positions a fictional character as Kennedy's assassin. These games, however, invite players to arrive to similar conclusions about the ways that people engage with historical narratives when playing historically-inspired games. In different ways, both *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* divorce the player's engagement with the assassination on a political level, framing Kennedy's death as a simple act of violence. Players, then, might understand history as driven more by discrete acts of violence than by complex political practices.

The two games diverge in how they treat the player's relationship to official accounts of history as well. *Reloaded* enables deviation from the prescribed story of Kennedy's assassination offered by the Warren Commission while *Black Ops* presents an alternative historical account that highlights the flimsiness of memory when memories are tainted by traumatic experience. Both suggest that the official narrative is faulty. Yet these games at once open a space for a new historical narrative and fail to provide a plausible alternative history. The games ultimately render history itself an uncertain enterprise, fraught with flawed memories and official reconfigurations of how events actually transpired.

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INTRODUCTION: CONNECTING WITH HISTORY

On a mild January morning, I left Austin's city limits to travel to Dallas. I had only ever experienced the city through a series of layovers at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport—some painless, some decidedly unpleasant—and I hoped the reality beyond the borders of the transportation hub would be enlightening. My ultimate destination was the Sixth Floor Museum, once the Texas State Book Depository, a cube-like brick building that purportedly housed Lee Harvey Oswald when he fired the fatal shots that would kill President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Since 1989, the building has showcased exhibits exploring Kennedy's presidency, death, and legacy.¹ To someone such as myself, a 25-year-old from Chicago who is removed both in time and space from 1960s Texas, his assassination always felt remote, a moment in a textbook rather than the lived, traumatic experience that film reels evoked. This journey, then, was a pilgrimage driven by a hunger for the reality of the recent past, to make the moment feel as real as it could to someone who was never there.

Upon my arrival at the Book Depository, I wandered through the exhibit guided by an audio tour that offered narration describing the museum's ephemera as well as first-hand oral accounts from witnesses and public officials. I soon found myself standing near the window believed to have been Oswald's vantage point. Although glass blocks the actual window and thus prevents visitors from approaching too close, seeing the storied pane was nonetheless unnerving.

The second half of the museum explores the aftermath of the assassination through a collection of photographs, film stills, and film footage. The cumulative toll of the tragedy expressed through this diverse collection of media was starkly clear: the assassination was, after all, a fundamentally mediated event. Like any event in 1960s America, authorities found no quicker way to spread the word nationally about the assassination than through news programs and over the wire. And spectators in the crowd were busily snapping photographs and taking film footage to document the President's trip to Dallas, signifying that they had been present alongside Kennedy. In 1963, they watched the President through lenses; today, we watch him through screens.

The central irony of the museum was that I was not permitted to take photographs or record video footage within the indoor confines. A moment in history that remains vivid in public consciousness due to media representations halts further documentation. Leaving the museum thus left me with anxious incompleteness and disconnectedness: I had not documented my presence at this fraught place beyond barely legible scrawls in my notebook. I wanted to photograph as a means of remembering the details of the exhibition and of signifying that I had been to the actual place; that I had physically connected to the place and the story by visiting. Yet I felt thwarted by the museum's policy.

I left the building to a sunlit plaza and spent some time photographing—documenting—the Depository's exterior, trying to produce something more concrete about the experience. The emotional valence the building still held, along with its strange familiarity, struck me. I had seen all of this before in Abraham Zapruder's film footage of

the assassination, in Oliver Stone's epic film *JFK*, in countless photographs, and in televised news programs. Yet in spite of that familiarity, a pall was cast over my experience outdoors when I noticed something odd in the street. At no point did I feel a stronger sense of sadness than when I first saw two white Xs painted on the street bordering Dealey Plaza, coldly signifying, "Kennedy was shot here and here," for tourists.



Figure 1. The Texas State Book Depository. One white X is visible on the street below (photo by author). Those Xs gave the assassination literal grounding. It happened in this space, on this concrete, not in the virtuality of media representations. The significance wasn't lost on the tourists who visited the area, too. Several grinning visitors asked to have their picture taken posing with the X, ostensibly to signify presence: "I was at this place. This is where

it happened.” That impulse initially troubled me. Who would want a personalized memento of visiting the spot of a deeply tragic moment?

But considering my similar impulse within the museum, and my motivations to travel to Dallas in the first place, I understand the desire to document a deeply traumatic moment, one that remains deceptively accessible thanks to its perpetual mediation. Placing themselves in an image with those Xs could be an effort to connect with the assassination (and with Kennedy himself) through concretizing their physical presence.²

Yet I wonder how else we might endeavor to connect to Kennedy’s assassination, the perennial unsolved mystery of American postwar life. Given the hypermediated nature of his death, do we have any hope of unlocking historical truth that might gesture towards what really happened in November 1963? How might we connect to Kennedy’s assassination now? How could experiencing the moment of Kennedy’s death through lenses and screens change our relationship with the historical narrative?

Connecting Through Mediation

Kennedy’s assassination still occupies a prominent space in the American collective consciousness thanks in part to the continual mystique of his political persona. That mythic image partially explains why his death is continually represented across media forms, from parodies of the Zapruder film on *Seinfeld* to pop songs like “Seconds,” by English New Wave band Human League.³ But even before Kennedy was elected president, he earned the admiration of cultural critics like Norman Mailer. Writing in *Esquire*’s November 1960 issue on Kennedy’s hip political glow, Mailer describes how

the politician blended banal politics and the “untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence” that comprised the American myth.⁴ According to Mailer, Kennedy’s nomination as the Democratic candidate for president meant the reemergence of that American myth, transforming politics into a spectacular, if inauthentic, public event. For Mailer, Kennedy’s persona moved beyond his person, even before his election to the presidency. He was an image made for media representation. At no point was this quality more obvious than in the infamous televised presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon. Kennedy’s quick and savvy grasp of the new medium along with his ready-for-television image positioned him as the frontrunner in a new politic that privileged style, perhaps at the expense of substance. Engaging with the assassination is not only contingent upon media technology that enables the replay of his image, but also upon Kennedy himself.

Kennedy’s prolific spread into media representation also stems from the fact that that his death remains couched in mystery to many Americans. Contemporary inquiries into the assassination tend to take a predictable path. Endeavoring to understand what happened in November 1963, we might comb through legal testimonies, interviews, scientific reports on ballistics, anatomy, and acoustics, photographs, films, official government reports, and any number of other documents that have accrued around the assassination. Yet history buffs are not the only ones who undertake these efforts. They are also the preferred craft of conspiracy theorists who reject the single-shooter account from the government and hope to uncover the smoking gun, so to speak, that actually killed Kennedy.

But we can also read the assassination's meaning by turning towards popular culture, by considering the myriad representations of Kennedy's death across media forms and genres. Inquiries into how the assassination has manifested in popular culture can shed light on how we continue to remember the moment. This framework is particularly useful in considering a collective memory cultivated in individuals who, like me, did not bear immediate witness to the original event. As American Studies scholar George Lipsitz describes in his groundbreaking text *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, "Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media... can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection."⁵ These representations function recursively. They express our memories of the assassination and, in turn, create and perpetuate representations that we reabsorb into our consciousnesses. Or, as Lipsitz puts it, "cultural forms create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future."⁶

My study will consider Kennedy's presence in one representational form—videogames—to uncover the conditions of possibility that inform our present and future. I argue that videogames have the potential to sway a player's sense of history and politics through image, sound, and, most importantly, interactive capabilities. These games leave what we might call "residue" in a player's mind, even if he or she is not conscious of those effects. I hope that my analysis, drawing upon player experiences and close readings of two games, will uncover how this residue might reconfigure a player's sense

of Kennedy's assassination as well as his or her political ideologies and anxieties. I thus approach this analysis as both a scholarly analyst and as a player.

My study will focus on two games released in the past ten years. The first is the low-selling but controversial *JFK: Reloaded*, released in 2004 by now-defunct Scottish videogame company Traffic Games. The second is the wildly popular *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, developed by Treyarch, an American videogame developer company, and released in 2010 by Activision, which reached sales of over 25 million units in less than one year.⁷ These seem to be the only two videogames that represent Kennedy's assassination, which is surprising, given his ubiquity in other popular culture forms. Nonetheless, these games present the narrative in starkly different ways. The former invites players to reenact repeatedly the assassination from the vantage point of Oswald in the Book Depository while the latter presents an alternative history that ultimately positions a fictional character as Kennedy's true assassin. Their game play, however, invites players to arrive to similar conclusions about the ways that people engage with historical narratives when playing historically-inspired games. In different ways, both *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* divorce the player's engagement with the assassination on a political level, framing Kennedy's death as a simple act of violence. Players, then, might understand history as driven more by discrete acts of violence than by complex diplomatic political practices and networks of power.

The two games diverge in how they treat the player's relationship to official accounts of history as well. *Reloaded* offers opportunities to deviate from the prescribed story of Kennedy's assassination offered by the Warren Commission while *Black Ops*

presents an alternative historical account that highlights the flimsiness of memory when those memories are tainted by traumatic experience. Both ultimately suggest, however, that the official narrative is faulty. Yet these games at once open a space for a new historical narrative and fail to provide a plausible alternative history. The games ultimately render history itself an uncertain enterprise, fraught with flawed memories and official reconfigurations of how events actually transpired.

Artistic Representations of Postwar History

Before considering specifically how videogames can rework historical memory in players, I first turn to two key schools of thought that illustrate how twentieth-century scholars have historically understood the political roles and functions of culture. The neo-Marxist Frankfurt School emerged in the first half of the century, boasting critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. These theorists contended that culture was a tool cultivated by elites to placate the masses beneath them to crystallize the social hierarchy. Their definition of culture was fundamentally couched in economic terms. As critical theorist Douglas Kellner describes, “the culture industries had the specific function... of providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into its way of life.”⁸ Less pessimistic about the agency of the masses was the Birmingham School, housed initially in Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies beginning in 1964. This school of thought rejected the notion that the masses passively absorbed the messages of the hegemonic culture industry, instead articulating the possibility that

culture could act as a space for contesting power. As Stuart Hall describes, popular culture generates “transformations,” or “active work on existing traditions and activities, their active reworking so that they come out a different way.”⁹ Lipsitz notes that these transformations enable “the expression of collective popular memory and the reworking of tradition,” offering opportunities to reconfigure the past, present, and future in productive ways.¹⁰

Although both frame popular culture as ideologically fraught and politically relevant, my analysis draws more on the latter school of thought than the former. These cultural theorists focused more on film, music, and television in their work—Adorno, of course, did not comment on capitalist ideologies that inhere in videogames—but their understanding of popular culture as ideological is strikingly instructive in this analysis. Where the Frankfurt School might imagine videogames as a kind of socioeconomic anesthesia for the masses, the Birmingham School allows for videogames to be interpreted and used in a way that affords those masses agency as they reconfigure their historical memories to intervene productively in their present and future. Cultural forms, be they films or videogames, can do political work of a productive, democratic sort.

Game studies, though, is a relatively new area of academic work. Scholarship on how videogames represent historical events—and what historical and cultural residual accounts might be left in players—is in a nascent stage, despite the cultural juggernaut of the gaming industry. We can nonetheless consider a rich supply of scholarship on historical memory and other media forms to shed light on the cultural work these games are doing. Before diving into the depths of how videogames can leave residual accounts

that may shape our historical and political thought, then, I consider a portion of the myriad representations of Kennedy's assassination in other media forms, primarily in historical film and literature. The assassination can be found in often unexpected cultural places: we can see its resonances in television shows like *Family Guy* and *Strangers With Candy*, fictional films like *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Watchmen*, and *Zoolander*, and even in songs like Postal Service's "Sleeping In." The continual cultural bleeding of the assassination into a diverse collection of media forms is indicative of the event's relentless trauma. The wound of Kennedy's death is still so fresh that the specter of his memory even haunts a Jim Carrey film.

This analysis will focus on a few key examples that illuminate the ways cultural representations may affect audiences' ideologies and beliefs about political reality. Attention to the relationship between artistic representation and the fact-fiction divide in recent years is unsurprising, given the explosion of documentary film and reality television in the last twenty years. Several scholars have also noted a pervasive search for truth and authenticity, what David Shields calls "reality hunger."¹¹ Considering the residual effects of these games might shed some light on what drives our hunger for truth—and, in this case, historical truth. Some of these representations dwell less on scrutinizing the supposed facts of the assassination, reported from the Warren Commission and subsequent government committees, and more on alternate accounts of history. These representations deviate from that official history in two key ways. First, the "what if?" scenario often questions how history might have played out had Kennedy—or Oswald—survived. Second, the conspiracy-based scenario displaces

Oswald as the lone gunman, often embedding him in a broader plot to kill the president. Even if these representations meander from the official narrative of the assassination and thus incorporate more fiction into their stories, they nonetheless can shape our understanding of truth.

These historical fantasies can be even more revealing than a representation that clings more closely to the Warren Report's official version. They hint at a desire for a new narrative that many cannot find in official assessments, one that answers the questions that the Commission and subsequent investigative teams failed to resolve. Writing about the appeal of films that represent historical trauma, media scholar Marita Sturken explains that such films respond "to the inability of the image to provide answers by 'filling in' what the image could not tell, and attempting to complete the fragmented images of memory."¹² Whatever fantasies fill in the gaps of our memories reflect what we desire of history. We long for "the fantasy of looking into the psyches of dead men, the fantasy of seeing the scenes-behind-the-scenes of our government, in which officials conspire to produce the lies they will tell the public, the fantasy of witnessing, the fantasy that we were there."¹³ If videogames can represent history as films do, we might expect an interactive fantasy to similarly fill these gaps. Moreover, videogames could connect these fragments of memory even more than films by inviting individuals not only to bear visual witness to historical moments but also to participate virtually through gameplay. These representations, while fulfilling our fantasy to know and connect with historical truth, nonetheless may evoke complex and cumulative historical memories, particularly as audiences absorb and negotiate multiple sources of representation: films, television

shows, songs, and videogames. Let me next describe some of the representational landscape in which videogames are relative newcomers.

Crusts and Residues: Stephen King's 11/22/63

Fiction author Stephen King draws on the theme of cumulative cultural meaning in his 2011 historical novel *11/22/63*. The work both subtly engages with other cultural representations of Kennedy's assassination (the protagonist recalls the Zapruder film, for example) and comments directly upon the complications of venturing into the past. The story centers on Jake Epping, whose friend, Al Templeton, has discovered that his restaurant contains a portal to the past. Each descent down the staircase of a storage facility leads an individual not to a storage cellar, but to a summer's day in 1958. Thanks to Templeton's terminal illness, Epping is charged with the task of retreating to 1958 to halt Kennedy's assassination. After five years of preparations in rural Texas, he succeeds in saving the president's life but returns to the contemporary moment to find that all hell, so to speak, has broken loose: rampant deadly earthquakes, nuclear terrorism, hate, mistrust, and geopolitical disorder disturb this apocalyptic world. Epping realizes that the past should not be tampered with so he returns briefly to 1958 to, essentially, reset history: he undoes his efforts to save Kennedy and undoes the damage done to the present.

King's foray into historical fiction necessarily explores fantastic effects of time travel on reality. Though Epping worries about the butterfly effect—the notion that any minute alteration (like a butterfly flapping its wings) in the past would have weighty

ripple effects on the future—he imagines that saving Kennedy would have positive effects for the world, the most significant being staving off the Vietnam War. But a meeting with a mystical figure who endeavors to protect the past from alteration, the Green Card Man, reveals that changing history is dangerous even with altruistic motivations. Each trip to the past, the Man explains, “creates its own string” of reality, “and when you have enough strings, they always get snarled.”¹⁴ Trips back in time do not reset the clock entirely; they leave residue that bleeds into other strings of reality.¹⁵ The Man warns that residue “gums up the machine. Eventually a point will come where the machine simply . . . stops.”¹⁶ In other words, the slow leak of residues from multiple realities created by repeated journeys into the past threatens the existence of reality itself.

The story not only explores a common “What if?” scenario—what if Kennedy had survived?—it also provides a useful framework through which we can consider how, as Lipsitz reminds us, narratives of history can leak into political attitudes and paradigms not only in King’s story but in any historical representation, something I will explore in greater depth shortly. Although residue in *11/22/63* refers to literal journeys into the past, the concept is also instructive in considering figurative journeys back in time. King’s account of residual history is reminiscent of literary critic Pierre Macherey’s metaphorical incrustations, as described by sociologist and historian Tony Bennett: any analysis of a text requires “not just studying the text but perhaps also . . . everything which has been written *about* it, everything which has been collected on it, become attached to it – like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation.”¹⁷ Though Macherey speaks specifically of a critical method in literary theory, his framework

imagines meaning as a cumulative process, one that examines the accrual of discourses and representations surrounding a central text.

Just as each of Macherey's incrustations affect discourses and representations extending from the central text, historical analysis results in a trickle-down effect, particularly in the case of Kennedy's assassination. For those who continue to mourn Kennedy's death and those who are unsettled by the Warren Commission's narrative, the trauma of the moment urges our continued reflection and examination to make sense of it. Residual knowledge accrues as we encounter historical accounts again and again, whether through popular media or through continual scholarly analysis, and that accrual of knowledge directs subsequent interpretations and paradigms. Our memories become collages of reality and representation: as Sturken describes, even participants in and survivors of traumatic historical events "cannot distinguish personal memory from the memories of others or from those derived from popular culture."¹⁸

Though I will deviate from Macherey's and Bennett's paths by focusing on only a few of the layers of meaning that have coagulated on Kennedy's assassination, I do also consider the meaning to be cumulative and contingent. The key question here, then, considers what constitutes the residue left by *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* and, most importantly, what that residue could do to other threads of reality – the beliefs and political ideologies that inhabit the player's consciousness. Though repeated historical inquiries are not likely to cause earthquakes and widespread nuclear warfare as we see in *11/22/63*, we might read the Green Card Man's warning metaphorically. Perhaps continual searches for the truth of the Kennedy trauma will yield a messy gnarl of facts

and theories that encumbers the detangling necessary to find *the* singular thread of reality. The danger is that the snarl—those residues—might have real-world effects that extend beyond the specific historical inquiry of trauma. We might also be unwilling to trust *any* account that claims to be truthful. Or we might cling tightly to threads that question and subvert official narratives of history, even challenging also those who circulate those narratives. This was one perceived danger of one representation of Kennedy's assassination that emerged in 1991, nearly thirty years after Kennedy's death: Oliver Stone's blockbuster hit *JFK* was as controversial as it was commercially successful for presenting an historical narrative at odds with the official story promoted by the Warren Commission.

JFK: Oliver Stone's Cinematic Thread

Though many historical films reference Kennedy's assassination, none is more notorious and widely seen than Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991). The film explores New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's research into the assassination. He quickly becomes suspicious of the FBI's report of how the incident transpired, and his investigation leads him to the conclusion that rogue elements in the government ordered Kennedy's murder to install Vice President Lyndon Johnson in the presidency so he could escalate the war in Vietnam. Though the film was deeply controversial for its supposed embellishment of historical truth, it garnered eight Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and grossed over \$200 million at the box office worldwide.¹⁹

Because of the vast amount of discourse surrounding the film and the high viewership numbers, we must consider *JFK*'s treatment of history and truth in depth. As communications scholars William L. Benoit and Dawn M. Nill describe, "Stone's film injected more life into [the controversy of Kennedy's death] than any of the previous books or movies on this topic."²⁰ Even the developers of *JFK: Reloaded* were not left unscathed; Traffic Games Managing Director Kirk Ewing describes the company's motivation behind the videogame:

JFK Reloaded came about from our desire to disprove the conspiracy theories surrounding JFK's assassination. It struck us that 70% of people still believed in a conspiracy, mostly, I'm sure, because of Oliver Stone's movie 'JFK,' and we felt we had the technology to take people back in time and put them at the scene in Dealey Plaza to witness it for themselves.²¹

Ewing's motive in creating *Reloaded* was not to dispel myths about the assassination that stem from hours of research into the Warren Commission's documents and frame-by-frame scrutiny over the Zapruder film; rather, he seeks to correct what he believes are harmful effects of a fictional cinematic representation. He envisions the power of cultural forms – like *JFK*, like *Reloaded* – to reconfigure individuals' senses of political truth by leaving residues.

JFK's box office and critical success invite us to ask why the film was at once acclaimed and controversial. Film scholar Richard Rosenstone describes how *JFK*'s appeal lies in its "closed, completed, and, ultimately, simple" narrative structure.²² Because the actual narrative of the assassination has countless tendrils of potential extending from its core, a narrative that distills the story into a digestible, uncomplicated account is attractive.²³ Rosenstone adds that the allure of *JFK* can also be found in its

viscerally-evocative presentation, noting that “historical issues are personalized, emotionalized, and dramatized—for film appeals to our feelings as a way of adding to our knowledge or affecting our beliefs.”²⁴ By reaching audiences both rationally and emotionally, *JFK* positions the assassination as at once a deeply traumatic moment and one ripe for in-depth scholarly analysis. The historical event becomes immediate on both levels, in spite of its having occurred thirty years in the past. And, as a result, the film might reconfigure audiences’ understandings of how the assassination actually happened. Perhaps, though, the hyper-personalized and dramatized nature of increasingly realistic videogames, like *Reloaded* and *Black Ops*, will stoke even stronger emotional responses that add to our knowledge of the past.

Residual Effects

We should not take the relationship between representations and historical memory for granted, though. It might seem intuitive that artistic representations of history might bleed into real world ideology and behavior, even in the case of a fictionalized account. Skeptics, from film critics to political pundits, are rightfully concerned with a through line that might not run directly from art into individual ideology. Perhaps, they argue, fantasies and narratives about Kennedy’s assassination do not leak into audiences’ real world ideologies and behaviors. Perhaps audiences understand fact and fiction as discrete entities, so that fictionalized accounts have no bearing on their sense of truth. And perhaps Kennedy’s assassination, however it is represented, is considered simply as a moment in the past that has no bearing on the present. In other words, maybe a film or a

book or a videogame does not leave meaningful residue in audiences because those media are safely categorized as entertainment, not as true history. Considering empirical and theoretical evidence alongside these critical accounts reveals, however, that some residues are left by even fictionalized representations of history that affect consumer paradigms and behaviors in the real world.

When *JFK* was released conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote in *The Washington Post* that the film was hardly truthful history and that, “In the end, Oliver Stone—like David Duke and Louis Farrakhan and the rest of America’s dealers in paranoia—is just another entertainment, another day at the movies.”²⁵ Krauthammer forestalls the possibility of the film’s fantastic narrative having any measurable (and, to him, harmful) effects on the contemporary political environment. For him, *JFK* is a mere diversion. Although such critiques are not surprising, and even appealing—who, after all, would want to believe that a Kevin Costner film would shape his or her political beliefs and anxieties?—we can locate evidence that artistic representations of Kennedy’s assassination *do* leave meaningful residue, altering historical memory and shaping political behaviors.

A study by psychologists Lisa Butler, Cheryl Koopman, and Philip Zimbardo, for example, explored the psychological, political, and behavioral impact of watching *JFK* by taking surveys of movie-goers in 1991. The researchers found that audiences gave more credence to conspiracy theories about Kennedy’s assassination following viewing Stone’s film, but that general beliefs about conspiracy and politics in the contemporary environment were not significantly affected. The study did, however, correlate seeing the

film with being less likely to donate to a political campaign in the future. Though we cannot make direct causal claims about the relationship between the film and political behavior, we might speculate that the behavioral change results from cynicism about private citizens' ability to effect change. Reasons behind the behavioral shift aside, however, this study illustrates how a fictionalized representation of Kennedy's assassination could leave residues that manifest in general behavioral and attitudinal change.²⁶

Critical responses to *JFK* after its release also reveal a popular concern that watching the film might leave harmful residues in audiences that could then seep into the collective memory of Kennedy's assassination as Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo found. Conservative columnist George Will is not charitable in his review of the film, calling Stone "an intellectual sociopath," ignorant of history and idealistic about the possibility to change a narrative he finds distasteful.²⁷ Such a visceral response to the film suggests that he fears that the film might stoke paranoia and distrust. Columnist Ellen Goodman sees *JFK* as a sinister, concerted effort to take over the Kennedy assassination narrative, blaming the mixture of documentary film and scripted footage for enabling "Oliver Stone's own attempted coup of American history."²⁸

Such critiques, though polemical, are not entirely unfounded. Following the release of *JFK*, Stone facilitated a hearing before the House Government Operations Subcommittee on Legislation and National Affairs in April of 1992 that considered the early release of the federal government's documentation of Kennedy's assassination under House Joint Resolution 454.²⁹ Before Stone's testimony, Representative John

Conyers suggests, “You’re probably the reason we’re all here today, and you’ve moved the country and your Congress to immediate activity with reference to the subject matter that brings us here today.”³⁰ Stone unsurprisingly agrees:

I am proud to be here, Mr. Chairman, because I think it is reasonable to suggest that my most recent work—the motion picture *JFK*—may, in its reception by the American people, have played some role in creating the state of public opinion from which House Joint Resolution 454 has emerged.³¹

By renewing public interest in the continued mystery of the assassination, the film’s popularity ultimately aided the passage of the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, releasing an enormous amount of government documentation on the assassination for public consumption and scrutiny.³²

Videogames and Representing History

Thus far, I have considered how scholars and popular critics alike have argued that representations of historical moments may affect both an individual’s sense of that historical moment as well as more general political and historical ideologies and behaviors. But how might videogames similarly represent history in a meaningful way, and, in turn, affect players? What follows is a quick sample of literature that explores videogames and the political and historical ideologies they express, as well as empirical analyses of how videogames can shape players’ thoughts and behaviors. The latter line of inquiry interrogates a nascent thread of the growing gaming studies field, so while there is currently a limited amount of literature exploring empirical effects of videogames on attitudes, we can likely look forward to more scholarly engagement in this area in the future.

I first turn to textual analyses of videogames. Narratives that glorify war and violence in videogames do not depart substantially from portrayals of the same themes in cinema or television but the added element of interactivity reconstitutes the narrative of war. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard, English scholar James Campbell explores games that represent World War II to determine how simulations constitute a form of mythmaking. He argues that World War II is reconfigured as a non-total war (that is, a war that does not penetrate both civilian and military life completely) by imposing rules upon the battlefield: players do not have unlimited power. They thus engage in a nostalgic imagining of war as controlled and predictable. Ultimately, these games connect the action of playing with wrangling the complex beast of war through nostalgic, simple narratives.³³

In some cases, the residues left by videogames may be intentional and strategically motivated. Ethnic studies scholars C. Richard King and David J. Leonard describe how the ideologies expressed in war games like *America's Army* (a game created by the US military to “provide civilians with insights on Soldiering from the barracks to the battlefields”) are strengthened by the relationship between the military and the videogame industry.³⁴ Through *America's Army*, the military uses a simplified virtual space to train soldiers. The training process in these games is not strictly skills-based; it also reshapes a player's understanding of enemy territory. The games present the Middle East as “devoid of civilians and infrastructure in need of saving and U.S. intervention,” eliminating the consequences of military action abroad and rendering warfare less grave.³⁵ The hope is that players might support military action—and, in

some cases, carry out those objectives themselves—thanks to these simplified narratives perpetuated by the military.

Though scholars have begun to consider the capability of videogames to express political ideologies, scholarship that empirically tests media effects on players is difficult to find. Joel Penney, a communications scholar, conducts interviews with players to determine how the glorification of a military warrior in two World War II-based videogames might justify military action. He ultimately finds that player opinions tend to coincide with the “strong defense” ideology promoted by the games: military action is to be lauded as political tool. Other players, however, see that the war presented in these games stands against the morally ambiguous contemporary conflicts that America is involved in.³⁶ Communications scholar Nina Huntemann similarly explores the reception of war games, focusing on everyday experience in the context of the Global War on Terror. Focus groups and participant observation sessions reveal three findings that illuminate how game-playing affects players’ ideologies. War games are read as more realistic (and thus appealing) than war films due to their interactive qualities. That desire for realism stems from anxiety about real world warfare: performing well in the realistic *Call of Duty* series offers opportunities for players to exercise control over chaotic conditions of war. Finally, though we might initially read war games as tools of indoctrination, she finds, like Penney, that players critically interpret the ideologies offered by these games rather than simply accepting them.³⁷

These studies reveal three key attributes of playing politically-oriented videogames that will be useful in the forthcoming analysis of *Reloaded* and *Black Ops*.

First, in both cases, some players read game play in conjunction with their social context and especially with the contemporary political climate. Second, while some players internalized and expressed political beliefs that endorse pro-military policy, other players expressed beliefs that directly critiqued those policies and ideologies. Third, players note that war games empower them to exercise simulated control over the chaotic conditions of real life war. Given the common themes of the videogames in question—*Reloaded* and *Black Ops* both position the player as a shooter, the latter in a complex and lengthy military campaign—we might infer that players of these games would similarly draw connections between the games and the political context of the moment, and would similarly have the potential to read these games with the grain or against it.

JFK: RELOADED AND HISTORICAL DEVIATION

JFK: Reloaded, released in 2004 by Traffic Games, requires players to reenact Kennedy's assassination. The task is simple: we must replicate the same three shots that Lee Harvey Oswald took from the sixth floor of the Texas State Book Depository in Dallas, according to the Warren Report. Those shots must resemble Oswald's in time (they must be fired at the same moment), space (they must strike the victims, Kennedy and Governor John B. Connally Jr., at the precise angles that enable the same ricochets and trajectories), and sequence (one cannot kill Kennedy with the first shot, for example). The game's straight-forward objective, then, belies the many variables that make exact replication of Oswald's shots difficult. The more deviations from these variables, the lower the score. Following the portion of the game that invites us to shoot at Kennedy, players can examine their shots from a variety of camera angles at varying speeds of playback: first, we kill; second, we engage with video footage of the assassination to see how we did.

Most of the existing scholarship on *Reloaded* explores the notion of the documentary game and to what extent these games can gesture towards historical truth.³⁸ In this analysis, though, I am less concerned with where we can situate games in the documentary mediascape and more concerned with what kinds of historical narratives *Reloaded* actually offers players. In this section, I draw on a close reading of the game as well as players' accounts of the game on online forums to argue that *Reloaded* opens up opportunities to both doubt and deviate from the Warren Commission's official narrative of the Kennedy assassination. First, for reasons that I will elucidate below, replicating

Oswald's shots is *exceedingly* difficult, if not impossible, so the game's designers' intentions to simulate the assassination and put to rest conspiracy theories ultimately backfired. Second, the limited gaming space created by the brevity of each trial and the character's lack of physical mobility means players can assassinate the president from the same spot repeatedly over a short period of time. But since trying to adhere to the Warren Report over and over again quickly becomes tedious and frustrating, deviating from that narrative and testing out alternative consequences of gunfire through shooting at different times, spaces, or characters becomes a more preferred mode of play for many. These deviations mean that the official narrative that the game hoped to validate seems even flimsier. Nonetheless, for some players who remain afflicted by the trauma of Kennedy's death, opportunities to repeat the trial may provide a virtual salve on the wound of Kennedy's assassination.

The Perfect Game

Considering these several factors that comprise a successful shot in concert is perhaps difficult in the abstract, so we might consider what would transpire in the *Reloaded* universe if someone played a perfect game. The player watches the Kennedy motorcade come around the corner onto Houston Street, a single car flanked by police cars, secret service agents, and motorcycles. As the car approaches, the five passengers become visible: a secret service agent behind the wheel, with Texas Governor Connally, his wife Nellie Connally, Jackie Kennedy, and, of course, President Kennedy.



Figure 2. Screenshot from *JFK: Reloaded*.

The car turns from Houston Street onto Elm Street, where the Book Depository is located, the motorcade driving past the building. As the cars move past the Depository, the player fires three shots. The first misses. The second hits Kennedy in the upper back, exits his neck, and strikes the right side of Connally's back before penetrating Connally's wrist and leg. The third shot strikes the back of Kennedy's head, killing him. These three shots must be precisely timed according to the Warren Report. None of the shots can hit Jackie Kennedy or Mrs. Connally, nor may Connally be killed. If the player completes the mission with total accuracy, he or she receives 1000 out of 1000 points.

These shots are especially difficult to reenact not only because of the precision required to score well—a mere fraction of a second off of Oswald's shots will lower the player's score; firing at too steep or too shallow of an angle will lower the score—but because the game seeks to approximate both the Warren Commission's account and the

real world of Dallas in 1963 as much as possible. This means, for one, that it draws on real-world physics and ballistics in order to keep the simulation as accurate as possible. The FAQ section of the game's website describes how "the bullets travel through the air at the correct speed – they don't instantly reach their target."³⁹ As a result, the player must aim ahead of the targets to ensure that the bullet will meet the target at the right moment. The bullets also "travel in a curved path" thanks to gravity, so a far target means a player must aim higher to account for the slight loss of height over time. As the bullets strike an object, be it a car or a person, their reaction is contingent upon the material hit: the objects they pass through determines the extent of their path and energy afterwards. Even the way the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle fires is imbued with real-world accuracy: because firing each shot requires removing the empty shell case and reloading the gun, the player's view through the scope shakes, and he or she must wait before firing again.

The game's computer modeling not only accounts for the laws of physics, it also simulates human behavior. Objects in the game, like individuals and vehicles, are given realistic weights and collision properties. If the motorcade strikes a tree, for example, characters in the car are tossed about as they would be in real life, like ragdolls. Furthermore, characters react to whatever happens around them. If Kennedy is shot, Jackie looks on with an expression of horror and shock, and the car speeds off as the rest of the characters take cover. Alternatively, shooting a secret service agent walking beside the car causes a panic that sends the motorcade speeding down Elm and away from the Book Depository to safety.

As sophisticated a simulation as *JFK: Reloaded* purports to be, of course, the game makers acknowledge that the game does deviate in some ways from the Warren Report. First, the game leaves out “non-essential items that were present on the day but were immaterial to the assassination,” like crowds and some buildings.⁴⁰ More substantially, though, the Warren Commission did not ultimately conclude that the first shot missed, even though players must miss their first shot to receive points. Their justification lies in their “reading of the evidence presented to the Commission,” along with the fact that the game’s design required some consistency in scoring.⁴¹ Because the first shot’s path was inconclusive according to the Warren Commission, there was no other way of awarding points to a player: how would players receive points for replicating a shot whose path was ultimately unknown?

Furthermore, the Warren Commission found that a bullet might have ricocheted to hit an individual in the crowd named James Tague. Why not incorporate that injury into the simulation, then? The game’s designers note that “this was a ‘random’ occurrence – clearly Oswald wasn’t intending to injure Tague. To expect the player to reproduce this chance occurrence would be unfair, to say the least.”⁴² Of course, one might ask the same of the bullet that shot Connally: was Oswald also intending to injure the governor through firing a single shot at Kennedy? Was that injury a chance occurrence; if so, why require players to reenact it with such accuracy? Perhaps a better answer than the game’s designers provide lies in the inconclusive nature of the evidence: the Commission did not conclude definitively that the bullet that hit Tague was Oswald’s, nor could they determine which shot of the three ricocheted to hit him.

Finally, the game's site describes how the FBI found that Oswald's rifle had a faulty scope that would make firing at a faraway target more difficult. The game, however, does not incorporate this glitch because "any shooter who knew of the defect could have compensated for it."⁴³ Even if the experience of playing and shooting as Oswald is not totally reenacted, the simulated shots remain guided by the laws of physics and ballistics to best approximate real world behavior. Moreover, none of these deviations are likely to have affected Oswald's ability to shoot Kennedy and, by extension, our ability to reenact the shots.

Motivations in Creating the Game

In light of this commitment to historical and physical accuracy through coding, the motivations behind creating *JFK: Reloaded* in the first place are unsurprising. One imperative was educational. The managing director of Traffic Games, Kirk Ewing, argued that the game would "bring history to life" and stimulate interest in the assassination among younger players who would not have been cognizant of the event.⁴⁴ He sees this game as an interactive history, allowing participatory learning that might illuminate the assassination from a new perspective. Media Studies scholar Dayna Galloway notes that one of the gaps that *Reloaded* fills in our memory of the assassination lies in the ability to view the moment from several angles because the multiplicity of perspectives "provides an experience unattainable through other media forms."⁴⁵

The key motivation underlying *Reloaded*, however, was to validate the findings of the Warren Commission and undermine conspiracy theories that argue against the Warren Report. Ewing contends that “if we get enough people participating, we’ll be able to disprove, once and for all, any notion that someone else was involved in the assassination of President Kennedy.”⁴⁶ Their hope was that the simulation would illustrate that Oswald’s shots were possible and, by extension, that the Warren Commission account was not faulty. Game studies scholar Cindy Poremba, while acknowledging the ethical issues of reenacting a grisly murder, lauds how the game “succeeds as an engagement with forensic documents” like the Warren Report and the Zapruder film as players endeavor to improve scores with supplementary research, like a short form documentary.⁴⁷ Rather than playing *as* Oswald, Poremba argues, “the game places the player in a role similar to that of a forensic investigator.”⁴⁸ She positions the game’s preferred play as an interrogation of documents that will comment on historical evidence to prove the Commission right.

Of course, these motivations are lofty. To create a game that offers enough new evidence to invalidate decades of conspiracy theories is an ambitious project. Given such weighty task, we can see why the game’s creators established a contest that would award a cash prize to the player who most accurately reenacted Oswald’s shots. Aside from the commercial imperative of drumming up publicity and game-play (and, by extension, sales) through offering \$100,000 to the player behind the most accurate game, perhaps the designers believed so wholeheartedly in their mission to deny conspiracy theories that they were willing to incentivize heavily that denial.

Validating History?

In light of the *Reloaded*'s very clear and specific goals, we might ask whether the game not only achieved these goals but also whether the game's construction of Kennedy's assassination provided additional answers. "What can we understand about these historical recreations through their simulation?" asks game studies scholar Tracy Fullerton, "Can we understand the reasons behind an assassination? The emotions of the assassin? The nuances of the political content? Or only its basic forensic data?"⁴⁹ In the absence of experimental conditions, we cannot determine with absolute certainty the political effects of playing the game. Certainly players would have opportunities to interrogate history in new ways through an interactive medium; whether or not their understanding of the assassination was actually fleshed out or reconfigured is less clear. I will, however, argue for a probable reading of the game and its effects on players, based on analysis emerging from my experiences playing the game and a number of *Reloaded* players' accounts on online forums. Ultimately, this evidence suggests that the difficulty of the game-play and the limited temporal and physical scopes of the simulation point actually destabilize the Warren Report's conclusions, rather than validating them.

Difficult Game-Play

As I describe earlier, doing well in *Reloaded* is difficult in large part because the game incorporates the laws of physics and ballistics on top of the very specific requirements laid out by the Warren Commission and represented by the game's coding. I must not only kill Kennedy to do well; I must do it *right*. Even Ewing acknowledges the

difficulty of Oswald's task: "We've created the game with the belief that Oswald was the only person that fired the shots on that day, although this recreation proves how immensely difficult his task was."⁵⁰ The results of the contest confirm the difficulty: the high score was only 782/1000 by a French player with the username of Major_Koenig on Monday, February 21, 2005.⁵¹ No player over the course of the contest could reenact Oswald's shots with complete accuracy. Rather than validating the Warren Report, then, the contest's outcome called it into question.

Attempting to score well within such exacting parameters also reveals how Oswald's shots were oddly directed, if the Warren Report is true. Rather than firing a head-on shot at the Kennedy motorcade as they drive down Houston—an easy kill to make in *Reloaded*, and, by extension, real life—I must wait until the cars turn the corner and drive away from the Depository to fire the shot as Oswald did. This is a much harder shot to make, since I must follow the car's horizontal motion with my rifle to kill Kennedy at all, let alone replicate Oswald's shots. Needless to say, the difficulty of firing those shots was deeply frustrating: I became progressively more irritated with both the game and Oswald for the difficult task in front of me. Fullerton comes to similar conclusions in her experience playing the game:

I am struck by two things: first, how deeply disturbing it is to play [Oswald's] particular role, and second, how convinced I've become after fifteen or twenty attempts that Lee Harvey Oswald could *not* have made those shots – at least not if this simulation is in any way accurate.⁵²

The official narrative begins to make less sense as players like Fullerton can fully experience the difficulty of Oswald's supposed shots.

Some player accounts similarly link the game's difficulty and the unfeasibility of the official assassination tale. Unfortunately, the official website was taken down shortly after the game's release in 2004; one can access it now through archived snapshots of the page, but the forum section of the site where players would discuss their strategies and experiences is completely defunct. Noting this dearth of source material, media studies scholar Steve Anderson looks instead to "machinima video recordings of playthroughs of the game," many of which can be found on YouTube.⁵³ The few videos that highlight respectable scores (none, of course, reach 1000/1000) include some debates about the veracity of the Warren Report's conclusions. One user writes, "[The game] may be sick, but the game just shows how impossible it must have been for Oswald to do this on his own."⁵⁴ Another user connects directly the game's difficulty and an alternate historical explanation:

It is impossible to win. Because JFK was shot by three different people. From three different angles. It is also impossible to shoot a bolt action rifle [sic] accurately at a moving target three times in under 6 seconds. JFK was not killed by Lee Harvey Oswald. He was killed by Operation 40, the same group that committed the Watergate Scandal.⁵⁵

While some users describe the game as proving to them the Warren Commission was right—one user explains, "JFK reloaded definitely proves to me that it was HIGHLY probable Oswald fired all three shoots [sic] and assassinated the president on his own," while another notes, "this game convinced me that Kennedy really was shot from the top floor of a book depository" —the game nonetheless did not mitigate the uncertain historical narrative for many players.⁵⁶

Limited Scope

The game's limited temporal and physical scopes also question the Warren Report. Playing the game is a strikingly quick experience, an anomaly among the canon of videogames with epic, lengthy narratives: from the moment Kennedy's motorcade becomes visible to the moment a player fires the shots, only about forty-five seconds pass. As a result, a player can easily repeat the assassination over and over. The potential of repetition partially compensates for the game's difficulty—a player can quickly try again—but it also opens up alternative narratives. Returning to Fullerton's account, we can see the ramifications of this accrual of outcomes: "...in all of the alternate endings of the event conceived by my play of the game, only once was the president seriously injured. Every other time, the motorcade made it out of range before history could be fulfilled."⁵⁷ The issue of alternate paths and endings in videogames that draw on actual history is of central concern to scholars debating the documentary qualities of these games. Thanks to their interactivity, games challenge the notion of indexicality as a determinant of historical truth because games rarely directly represent actual historical moments. There seems to be a scholarly consensus that videogames present history and truth as contingent and open to reinterpretation.⁵⁸ Furthermore, contrary to what we might first imagine, games do not deviate far from traditional forms of documentary in presenting subjective truth. Any media representation of history is plagued with omissions and specific interpretations; videogames are no different.

Aside from the unintended alternative narratives that arise from the game's difficulty, the potential for repetition might also encourage intentional deviations. A

diverse variety of outcomes is within greater reach because each trial takes such a short amount of time; these outcomes may thus depart from the ways players are meant to play the game. Players can fire shots from different angles, at different moments, and even at different characters. A player may thus discover easier methods of killing Kennedy: he or she would not score well this way, but the job would be completed nonetheless. Of course, any game, by virtue of its interactivity, offers players the chance to deviate from the prescribed narrative and rules thanks to “the second order design”—the “design of the conditions of experience, rather than the direct design of experience itself.”⁵⁹ Though the game requires players to adhere to a strict procedure to score well, there are nonetheless opportunities to subvert the preferred mode of game-play in large part due to the brevity of each trial. In this case, that subversion enables further questioning of the way Oswald was supposed to have assassinated the president.

We can find some empirical examples of players subverting the game’s intent, too. Referring to online videos of gamers’ play, Anderson notes that “even a cursory survey of these videos reveals a remarkable array of the divergent trajectories of digital historiography.”⁶⁰ Players who post these videos do not, for the most part, highlight the historical accuracy of their trials. Rather, most fire at other members of the motorcade to see what might happen: they might shoot Kennedy’s driver or secret service agents on motorcycles in hopes of causing a car crash.⁶¹ While there are some exceptions, these videos reveal playing experiences that do not attempt to cling to the Warren Report and reenact official history. These players do not only play the game, they play *with* the game.

Forum posts from players that can still be found also shed some light on subversive modes of play. Though the focus of any forum thread about *Reloaded* tends to emphasize the ethical question of virtually assassinating Kennedy, a few player experiences dovetail with accounts glimpsed through videos. A series of posts on the game can be found in the “Conspiracy Theories” section of the James Randi Educational Foundation Forum, a space for discussing “skepticism, critical thinking, the paranormal and science.”⁶² That conspiracy theorist enthusiasts discussed *Reloaded* in their online forums suggests unto itself that players sense the political relevance of the game. Nonetheless, these players discuss not how to replicate history or explicitly question the official assassination narrative, but how to kill as many characters as possible. One player advises, “You get the highest body count if you aim for the driver just after he makes the turn. My ‘best’ was the driver, the other agent in the front seat, all 4 passengers, 2 motorcycle cops and a few bystanders.”⁶³ A second account describes in detail when and at whom to fire the gun in order to create “a horrific pile-up that leaves a trail of corpses across the plaza.”⁶⁴

Finally, other players started conversations on Fun-motion.com, a site dedicated to physics in games. Most of these discussions center on the “ragdoll” physics of *Reloaded*, alluding to the qualities that characters and vehicles have when they collide with other objects. Bodies realistically flop around like puppets as they die, imitating the loss of physical control one would experience upon death in real life. One player bluntly notes, “I don’t usually try to recreate the actual events of the day. I just shoot random drivers to make some funny ragdoll scenes.”⁶⁵ Another mentions,

This is pretty fun. I played for a while, and although I bet many politicians would try to arrest me, I had a blast. It was cool messing with the AI and the physics, like killing the driver and watching the car spin out. I always laugh when the driver dies, and the car stops and I can just pelt the passengers of all the cars with bullets. I killed 14 people in one go, heh.⁶⁶

For these players, players work around the designers' intentions for this game to create as much havoc in Dealey Plaza as possible. Recreating Oswald's shots is no part of their gaming experience, perhaps because the intended mode of play involves critical engagement with history, rather than entertainment. Their boredom encourages playing with the construct of the game itself.

Reloaded does also limit players' experiences in the game through disabling physical movement from Oswald's perch on the sixth floor of the Book Depository. At first glance, such a limitation would, in turn, hamper questioning the Warren narrative: if we cannot shoot from any other place, how can we present alternatives? But although I may not be able to move from this spot, I can partially compensate for my immobility by examining the shots I fire after the fact from multiple camera angles. For Galloway, those camera angles offer a mode of analyzing Kennedy's assassination not afforded by media forms like film or historical novels, making games like *Reloaded* a richer means of representing history. This visual mobility, however, also offers opportunities to deviate from that history. As media scholars Gareth Schott and Bevin Yeatman describe, the ability to watch the shots we fire after the trial from a variety of camera angles opens up "alternative spaces that can be explored."⁶⁷ The expansion of my sense of the physical space of the assassination is cultivated not by the location of the shooter, but by the multiplicity of available views. Imagining the game's space as a more open frontier

gestures towards imagining the Warren Report's narrative of the assassination as open-ended, too: not only does the simulated Dealey Plaza "offer more than what it might initially suggest," so does the Warren Report, a document that we are implicitly encouraged to view from a variety of angles through playing *Reloaded*.⁶⁸

These accounts reveal that players tend to fall into two camps in terms of how they engage with the game. Some players do follow the game designers' intended mode of play by attempting to reenact Oswald's shots with historical accuracy and, based on their in-game experience, might either conclude that the official narrative is viable or that Oswald could not have possibly assassinated Kennedy in the manner that the Warren Commission described. Other players eschew the traditional mode of play completely by ignoring the designers' intent and playing with the realistic physics and ballistics coded in the game, attempting to kill the motorcade's passengers in darkly entertaining ways. Both kinds of players might open a space for questioning the official story of the Kennedy assassination through two different angles, either directly through displaying the difficulty of Oswald's supposed shots, or indirectly through ignoring this attempt to simulate a contested moment in history.

The Compulsion to Reload

Given the lack of entertainment value in the game, why are players compelled to continually enact this tragedy? My personal impulse to shoot at Kennedy in the first place is bizarre, as so many players challenging the ethics of the game point out. The game is also at once boring and difficult, thanks to its limited scope and strict scoring algorithms.

None of these qualities invite playing for an extended period of time. So why am I compelled to keep trying? Part of the compulsion is the desire to win the game; scoring well is so difficult that I naturally want to improve after each trial, which requires continual playing. For those players who subvert the designers' intentions, part of the impulse stems from a desire to play with history and physics; to test out alternative paths that might have arisen if other characters in Dealey Plaza were shot rather than—or in addition to—Kennedy and Connally. We must not ignore the entertainment value for players who enjoy seeing characters and cars tossed about the landscape, of course: causing massive car crashes from afar is fun for many.

For players who do want to replicate history and engage critically with the assassination, another part of the compulsion to keep playing may lie in the relationship between repetition and trauma. Exploring clinical cases of trauma disorders, psychiatrist Dr. James A. Chu cites Freud's controversial "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in which he suggests traumatized individuals "are obliged to repeat" painful experiences "rather than simply remembering them."⁶⁹ Contemporary clinical evidence supports the notion that past trauma impinges upon current experience and consciousness, and patients experience the compulsion to repeat that trauma with "an almost biologic urgency."⁷⁰ As Chu notes, however, the act of repetition is not simply a memory; the "previously dissociated trauma is experienced as a contemporary event."⁷¹ The vivid language of English scholar Marc Redfield describes how the traumatized "are not spectators: possessed by an event, they endure preternaturally literal repetitions of it as hallucinatory flashbacks, nightmares, and daydreams."⁷² Freud, more recent scholars, and clinicians

alike remind us that trauma is coercive in compelling continual reenactment of painful moments. Perhaps, for some players, repeatedly playing *Reloaded* is a technologically-mediated manifestation of Freud's repetition compulsion, evidence of the pain Kennedy's death continues to inflict upon us.

Of course, trauma theory has traditionally focused on those who experience a trauma firsthand: someone who personally bears witness to a tragic moment, for example, would experience the effects that Freud, Chu, and Redfield describe. I consider trauma here in a broader sense. Few of the players who have engaged with *Reloaded* are likely to have been cognizant in 1963, much less eyewitnesses to Kennedy's assassination in Dallas. But I argue that the proliferation of representations of Kennedy's death even years later has created what historian Alison Landsberg describes as "prosthetic memory," visions of the past that are facilitated by technology's ability to represent historical moments. Prosthetic memory arises from a process in which "the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics."⁷³ Though Landsberg emphasizes how prosthetic memories can "be acquired by anyone" and are thus "transportable and therefore challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, 'heritage,' and ownership," more useful here is her assertion that prosthetic memories "derive from a person's mass-mediated experience of a traumatic event of the past."⁷⁴

The trauma here that invites repetition is twofold. Not only are players potentially traumatized by Kennedy's assassination as experienced through media representations, they may also experience trauma due to the uncertain historical narrative that those representations evoke. Media studies scholar Allen Meek offers a scholarly intervention in trauma theory that comes to similar conclusions, understanding "historical trauma not only in terms of bearing witness to specific events and experiences, but also as an ongoing struggle over representations of the past."⁷⁵ Historical narratives that resist closure offer opportunities for constructing meaning, but they also might evoke anxious uncertainty about the possibility of historical truth. Trauma at once stems from Kennedy's death and the murkiness of the story that claims to explain it: our repetition might at once be a compulsive effort to stave the pain that arises from both sources.

Repetition thus does not simply imprison the traumatized within their painful pasts: it may also offer the possibility of a cure. Though Freud's assessment led him to claim that the compulsion to relive trauma was an essential part of humanity's death drive, repetition might also offer benefits for the afflicted as a means to change and control the outcome that invites an unpleasant traumatic response. As literature scholar Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan asserts, "what makes repetition in transference therapeutic, though not directly pleasurable, is the crucial difference between the original unconscious experience and its bringing to consciousness in the analytic session."⁷⁶ By transferring trauma into the simulated space of *Reloaded*, players may have opportunities to engage with that trauma at a critical distance, defusing its anxious valence and opening up

possibilities of closure. Even as some players might yearn for closure through *Reloaded*, others, like those who do not bother to recreate Oswald's activities, may not.

But Rimmon-Kenan's discussion of the therapy of repeating trauma, though compelling, does not adequately address the traumatic effects of open-ended, mediated histories. Shooting Kennedy from Oswald's perspective might offer those traumatized by his death more emotional distance from a painful event, but as I describe earlier, repeated trials render the Warren Report less and less believable. Here, Allen Meek's words are once again instructive. He notes that contemporary understandings of trauma diverge from Freud's perception, arguing that "trauma often appears to serve as our only remaining guarantee of the reality of the past in a new era of technologically mediated memory."⁷⁷ Perhaps, then, playing *Reloaded* enables players to continually open the wound of Kennedy's death, and ironically connects them with the emotional reality of Kennedy's assassination to enable coping with the fraught, uncertain nature of historical truth. Perhaps, for some, experiencing the pain of his memory is the most realistic connection with the past that we can manage.

Reading the game-play of *Reloaded* reveals how, in spite of the designers' attempts to craft a simulation that validates the Warren Report, players might come to question both the official narrative and the ethics of the game itself. Not only does the difficulty of the game hamper players' abilities to validate the Warren Report, players' actual modes of play as indicated by videos and forum posts subvert the designers' intentions and unsettle official notions of historical truth. For those players who do seek to confirm the Warren Commission's account, the game's design and the residual trauma

of Kennedy's assassination may encourage compulsive repetition as they try to both win the game and, by extension, put to rest a contested history, even in the face of the aforementioned obstacles.

Opening up history to speculation that extends beyond official narratives not only unseats notions of historical truth itself, it also invites narratives that directly challenge those official stories. For those who are unsatisfied with the Warren Report's conclusion, a plethora of conspiracy theories exist that attempt to fill in the gaps left by the Commission: there was a second shooter on the grassy knoll, the Mafia was behind Kennedy's death, rogue government operatives engaged in nefarious conduct to install Lyndon Johnson's ascent to the presidency. These paranoid theories are psychologically satisfying in part because they offer, as historian Richard Hofstadter argues, the comfort of factual evidence and access to political power at a time when the paranoid "are shut out of the political process."⁷⁸ *Reloaded*, rather than closing the story as the game's designers hoped, opens it to these alternative interpretations that both provide answers and offer individuals some control over history that they would otherwise lack.

I believe that *Reloaded* ultimately opens a space for players to not only conclude that the Warren Report was inadequate in some way, but to cultivate theories of their own that challenge historical narrative. This is one reason why some players modify the game's coding to their liking. While some players modify code for entertainment value—one video of gameplay modifies the opening text to read "Winfield, OHIO. 172:30 pm. September 32nd, 1363. The Winfield Schoolbook Depository, 164th floor. The weather is slightly gay, but managable [sic]. You have a several rifles [sic] and hundreds of rounds

of ammo”—others reposition the shooter to fire not from the Sixth Floor, but from the grassy knoll near Dealey Plaza in accordance with many of the most prominent conspiracy theories.⁷⁹ Hacking the game in this way requires some knowledge of the alternate historical accounts that surround the assassination narrative, even if this hack does not mean with absolute certainty that a player intends to validate this conspiracy theory. Nonetheless, comments on one of these hacked videos reveal that some players do discuss the validity of this narrative as the game represents: one player refers to one moment of the video where we see “a perfect alignment for a frontal headshot from the fence. this would also be consistent with wounds described by the doctors who treated him.”⁸⁰ Others, however, reject the possibility of this particular simulation as carrying truth value; says one player, “This video perfectly shows why the grassy knoll would've been a dumb place to shoot from (and also why no one shot from there).”⁸¹ Even where *Reloaded* offers opportunities to validate conspiracy theories (and thus repair the trauma of both Kennedy’s death and the fraught nature of the narrative), such theories remain deeply contested, positioning the total historical narrative of Kennedy’s assassination as open to dispute and alternative accounts.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS AND THE FRAILTY OF MEMORY

Treyarch's *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, released in 2010, blends elements of fiction and nonfiction and does not claim to be a "docu-game," as *Reloaded* does.⁸² The *Black Ops* story is predominantly a fictional narrative peppered with actual historical figures, including Cuban President Fidel Castro, Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara, and, of course, President John F. Kennedy, represented through both archival footage and virtual reconstructions of characters. As a result, *Black Ops* hovers in the murky fog between fact and fiction, the blurriness amplified by the complex, engrossing cinematic narrative of the game.

In this section, I argue that notions of official history are destabilized through the imperfection of the main character's traumatized memory as well as continual leaps across time and place. Furthermore, the player's inability to skip narrative cut scenes⁸³ or engage in non-violent activity erases his or her agency to connect with the historical narrative in any other way. These qualities converge at the end point of the campaign, when Kennedy is assassinated: not only do we not know the details surrounding the president's assassination for a number of reasons, we lack the agency to determine the truth.

The *Black Ops* Narrative

While many players engage in *Black Ops* through the game's sophisticated multiplayer game, where players engage in melees and battles with each other via internet connection, the *Black Ops* single-player campaign offers a Cold War-era story. Our

introduction to the campaign is through an unplayable narrative cut scene, where we first meet the main character, operative Alex Mason, in a decrepit interrogation room in 1968. He is strapped to a chair against his will, surrounded by television screens playing old newscasts – Kennedy makes an appearance, of course – and, strangely, flashes of numbers.



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. Mason is currently being interrogated by unknown individuals, his face visible on the TV screens in front of him.

A low, gravelly voice from an unseen source prods Mason to remember and discuss specifics of CIA missions in his past, the vocals technologically manipulated as not to identify the interrogator. We piece together the *Black Ops* narrative through a series of unplayable narrative cut scenes interspersed with playable flashbacks that cause Mason to cry out as he descends into the past.

Playing through a failed covert mission in Cuba leaves Mason in the hands of Soviet General Nikita Dragovich and held for two years in prison, where he meets Viktor Reznov, a former Soviet soldier. During another unplayable cut scene, Reznov reveals

information about Mason's captors and torturers who range from Soviet officials like Dragovich to a Nazi scientist who has created a deadly nerve gas. We play through a rebellion that the two incite in the Soviet prison, and Mason escapes back into the American operatives' hands. Another unplayable cut scene that features a meeting with President Kennedy results in a new mission for Mason: assassinate Dragovich. We play from the point of view of several characters and operatives, Mason included, through a series of missions designed both to nab the nerve agent and to kill Dragovich. After combat in Kazakhstan, Vietnam, and Laos, we are shown in a cut scene that Soviet sleeper agents have been planted in America to release the nerve gas and kill President Kennedy upon receiving a transmission of a specific series of numbers. Mason's flashbacks become more sinister: the Soviets implanted the numbers that he later sees on screens as he tries to remember the past. He has been brainwashed.

Meanwhile, we play as Mason on a mission to kill the Nazi scientist, accompanied by Reznov. After completing the mission, we return to an unplayable interrogation scene, where Mason claims that Reznov killed the scientist, but the interrogators reveal that Mason was behind the murder. This cut scene throws Mason's memories and the game's narrative into disarray: we learn that his interrogators are actually his fellow operatives, hoping to learn from Mason's brainwashing. We learn that Reznov died long before the Nazi's murder, and whatever Mason imagines Reznov doing at present is a psychological manifestation of his brainwashing. Moreover, before Reznov died, he manipulated Mason's brainwashing to trigger the assassinations of Dragovich and the Nazi rather than to kill President Kennedy. The numbers the interrogators play

for Mason, then, stoke painful memories of Dragovich's final hiding place: a ship off the coast of Cuba.

The final playable mission takes us to this ship, which holds both Dragovich and the central numbers broadcast station that will cause widespread release of the nerve gas via sleeper agents. The Navy destroys the ship, but Mason angrily kills Dragovich himself, yelling, "You're trying to fuck with my mind! You tried to make me kill my own president!" Dragovich grins and replies, "Tried?" This is enough chit chat for Mason: we choke Dragovich to death with some rapid button pushing, our final playable act in the campaign. Upon their escape from the ship, Mason's fellow operative expresses relief that both the ship and Dragovich are history: "It's over. We won." Mason isn't so sure, merely replying, "For now."

Of course, it should come as no surprise that the story is not over. A woman reads a series of numbers into a microphone, and then we watch archival footage featuring Kennedy as he descends from an airplane. We watch as Kennedy climbs into a car next to his wife, Jackie. We watch as they drive into Dallas. The film rewinds, fast forwards, rewinds, and slows to a pause before zooming into to a man in the crowd at the airport: Alex Mason. The not-so-subtle implication, of course, is that Dragovich was successful in brainwashing Mason to assassinate President Kennedy. Oswald, in the *Black Ops* universe, is no part of the Kennedy assassination story. Kennedy's murderer was a rogue covert operative.

Call of Duty and Historical Narrative

Black Ops is the only game in the *Call of Duty* series that centers on the Cold War era, but analyses of other games in the series reveal how this franchise tends to represent historical narrative. The work of media studies scholar Harrison Gish is particularly apt here: he argues that representations of World War II in this series challenge “grand narratives of past events” through different layers of historical narrative in different levels and cut scenes.⁸⁴ Even so, the games tend to portray the War as a “single, definable event,” one that is closed off and self-contained. War does not extend beyond these immediate missions: history, then, is composed of discrete violent battles.⁸⁵ Evidence of the simplification of war lies in the games’ valorization of American military heroes and a progressive structure that inheres in most videogames: players physically move to propel the narrative forward but are limited in the spaces that they can reach.⁸⁶ The same line of critique imbues cinematic portrayals of war as battles and storylines tend to be simplified and compressed to satisfy generic conventions. Though Gish’s reading of *Call of Duty* might be valid in considering portrayals of World War II, my reading of *Black Ops* departs significantly from his assessment. Rather than erasing historical complexity through a grand but uncomplicated linear narrative, *Black Ops* amplifies it by offering a gaming experience that renders historical truth unknowable. We can find several narrative and aesthetic elements that contribute to a deeply complicated history of, ultimately, Kennedy’s assassination.

Black Ops is a remarkable game in part for its temporally fragmented narrative: we lurch back and forth from the present to the past as Mason remembers mission after

mission. Josh Olin, Treyarch's community manager, describes how *Black Ops*'s complex storyline was meant to keep players interested:

We walk that fine line between complex and confusing, we don't want to make a confusing game as we never want a player to not know what's going on. We firmly come down on the complex side of it; players that do want a good story, that don't just want a simple 'good guy, bad guy, kill him' story, they will be satisfied.⁸⁷

But in spite of playing *Black Ops* frequently over the past several months, I nonetheless found myself continually perplexed by the leaps forward and backward in time. Though *Black Ops* cues those journeys into the past with violent rapid-fire imagery and sound, it was nonetheless mentally taxing to try to synthesize the piecemeal memories that emerged from Mason's interrogation, in my experience. Was the attack on Vietnam before or after Reznov's defection? Was my meeting with Kennedy after my fellow operatives' journeys to find Nazi sympathizers? Granted, the game did aid my construction of a timeline through listing the date of each played mission before it began, but it was nonetheless challenging to place these moments in the context of the broader narrative thanks to the violent jumps in time. Perhaps more importantly, though, the construction of the narrative as comprising both past and present complicates the notion of what history is in the first place. Moments of the present are deeply contingent upon moments in our past. This history is not ultimately confined to the past: the past leaves residue in the present.

Posts on the official *Call of Duty: Black Ops* message board reveal that the game's timeline confused several others. One player writes of the campaign,

I thought it was really confusing. The plot was really unclear, the whole Reznof [sic] thing was weird (was he the guy at the end when Mason swamp up to the

water onto the boat just before the credits?) and the ending was terrible. . . . I was just confused half of the time. If someone would be kind enough to dumb everything down for me and explain everything, I would really appreciate it.⁸⁸

Another player, while lauding the campaign's dynamic combat styles and sophisticated enemy responses, complains that, "The only problems in my opinion is that the last mission does drag on a bit and that at times the narrative can get quite confusing; but that's just me."⁸⁹

Also lending complexity to the *Black Ops* narrative is Mason's memory, which we glimpse through torture-induced flashbacks. Film scholar Maureen Turim describes how the flashback trope in cinema mends fissures between the personal and the social, and in doing so, they establish historical memory as subjective:

If flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in films often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered experience.⁹⁰

We experience almost the entire story through Mason's flashbacks so we are ultimately beholden to his subjective memory. Though he is the key to unlocking the location of the numbers broadcast station and Dragovich, his memories are contaminated by Dragovich's hand and by the trauma of Mason's brainwashing experience. If Mason's memory of Reznov is completely fabricated by his mental trauma, how can we trust any of his flashbacks as indicative of historical truth? His descents into the past are colored by an intense trauma whose bounds are unknown, even as the game ends. Where many games and films offer closure as the narrative ends, *Black Ops* has us wondering whether Mason's memories comprise any form of truth.

The uncertain nature of truth that characterizes *Black Ops* also dominates the game's preview video trailer, released before the game was available to stoke player interest through showing dramatic clips of gameplay. Throughout the trailer, we hear a voiceover from who we later learn is Mason: "A lie is a lie. Just because they write it down and call it history doesn't make it the truth. We live in a world where seeing is not believing, where only a few know what really happened. We live in a world where everything you know is wrong."⁹¹ Enormous amounts of viewers have seen and engaged with this video: at present, it boasts over thirteen million views and over forty-one thousand user comments. This key marketing tool centers on the inaccessibility of historical truth as well as the fact that we cannot trust established historical narratives. For those who saw this trailer before playing the game, historical narratives are already framed as unreliable and even nefariously constructed by those in power.

Thus far, I have focused on narrative elements of *Black Ops* that contribute to the notion of history as hazy and unknowable. Considering that this is a videogame, however, we ought to explore specifically how the interactive elements of the game contribute to this presentation of history. The *Black Ops* narrative shows us various Cold War-era physical spaces, from a chair in an interrogation room to the jungles of Vietnam to the Department of Defense. Those spaces, however, are not equally playable or navigable. While I can trudge through the jungle and fire indiscriminately at Vietcong soldiers with a powerful automatic weapon, I can merely look around the room of the interrogation chamber.⁹² While I can choke Dragovich to death—a truly grisly use of the controller—I

can only watch as Defense Secretary Robert MacNamara escorts Mason to meet with President Kennedy.



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Black Ops*. Mason meets Robert MacNamara in the Pentagon. Players can only look around in this cut-scene; no other action (e.g. walking on a different path, drawing a weapon, etc.) is available.



Figure 5. Screenshot from *Black Ops*. Mason meets President Kennedy in the Pentagon.

The collage of playable missions with non-playable cinematic cut scenes, what Gish describes as layers, suggests both a limited ability to construct historical meaning and an ironically passive relationship with history. In many of the game's most crucial narrative moments—strategizing with Reznov, meeting with Kennedy, standing by in Dallas as Jack and Jackie arrive—we can look, but we cannot touch.

This blend of layers within the game raises a key question: which aspects of the narrative are interactive? In general, the player rarely has control over his or her character when the narrative drifts away from action-packed missions and towards non-violent activity, like conversations among characters and political strategizing. Brief deviations from this pattern, like when the player leads Reznov sans gun through a snowy valley, are less interesting alongside violent, gun-driven narrative segments. When I play this game, these scenes leaves me overwhelmed with boredom that quickly becomes frustration as I cannot make the scene move faster with the limited control that I have. Cut-scenes offer a similar experience, as we watch a moment crucial to the narrative without participating in it: Mason's meeting with Kennedy, Mason's conversation with Reznov in the Soviet prison. Moreover, while many videogames offer the option to skip these non-interactive moments, *Black Ops* requires that we watch these cut scenes upon repeated plays of the game, solidifying our passivity. We learn the back story that makes the myriad exchanges of gunfire possible, but the lack of interactivity detaches us from those moments.

Player accounts on the official forums and other websites reveal similarly frustrated responses to the narrative cut-scenes and occasional forays into interactive non-violent aspects of missions. While one player notes, "I truly enjoyed the cut-scenes as

well (felt like a top rated movie) as the gameplay,” the predominant response to the cut scenes is boredom and annoyance.⁹³ Another account laments that “in a random part of the level it takes you back to being in the chair and all the awkward numbers come up. It’s time-consuming, and a [sic] gets a little annoying.”⁹⁴ A different player critiques, “Too much scripted things. Scripting is ok but not when it interrupts the game every few minutes.”⁹⁵ Other players found the campaign’s narrative appealing but were ultimately frustrated by the frequent interjections, as was the case for this player: “I don’t like the too-long ‘stories’ in between the action. WAY too long. But the story is pretty good.”⁹⁶ Another had a similar experience, noting that the game’s requirement to watch those scenes more than once was particularly problematic: “Oh don’t get me wrong, I loved [the cut scenes], but it was kind of annoying when you had to restart the mission because you forgot an intel or an achievement or something and you just want to get [the cut scene] out of the way.”⁹⁷ These frustrated players might take a cue from this last respondent, who found a solution to the unplayable interruptions: “I kind of checked my Facebook while that was going on.”⁹⁸ Thus while the game designers consciously paced the game to avoid boring players—Olin describes, “[*Black Ops* is] not just white-knuckle edge-of-your-seat action the entire way through; you’d feel exhausted and it would get monotonous”—many players would have rather been barraged with intense action sequences.⁹⁹

As these player accounts suggest, we only truly participate in the narrative’s moments of extreme violence, as our playable characters must execute a mission with only guns and grenades. By extension, the narrative only progresses when we drive

forward with violence, spraying bullets at enemies and taking over land. As Gish rightly describes, the game thus presents these violent acts “as the sole catalyst of military victory and the impetus for historical progression.”¹⁰⁰ In *Black Ops*, history does not move forward because of diplomacy and institutional change. It moves forward through violence. I will return to the notion of violence and politics in the following section; for now, I will explore Kennedy’s assassination in *Black Ops* in greater depth.

The Assassination

Having discussed the qualities of *Black Ops* that evoke a complex historical narrative mediated by trauma and offering players few opportunities for participation, we can now turn closely to those qualities present in Kennedy’s assassination. First of all, Kennedy’s arrival in Dallas to Mason’s presence is presented as an unplayable cut scene. We control nothing in the scene; we merely watch. The historical moment of Kennedy’s death, rather than something we can directly influence, is cordoned off from interaction. We are powerless to change that story. Try as I might even to move past the cut scene by mashing buttons on my controller, I am forced to watch Kennedy’s journey to his death in Dallas.

The construction of the narrative through a hodgepodge of moments of Mason’s traumatic present and flashback also denies the player’s ability to construct history. Given the extent of Mason’s mental trauma, how are we to know which elements of the *Black Ops* Kennedy assassination story are true or false? Is Mason *actually* in the crowd at Love Field Airport? Is this simply another figment of his imagination assembled

through the trauma of his brainwashing? Mason's damaged memories fabricated an intricate tale of the Cold War era and Kennedy's assassination, but we are never certain which cut scenes and missions are untainted.

These questions unsurprisingly plagued several players who posted discussion threads on the *Black Ops* forums and elsewhere that question whether or not Mason actually killed Kennedy. Their questions are similar to those that we would expect from those challenging the Warren Report and weighing the truth possibilities of conspiracy theories, as they draw upon in-game factual evidence to support their claims. This behavior, of course, makes sense: the game hints at the United States government's involvement in the assassination, both through the direct hand of Mason and through the subsequent cover-up that erases Mason from the official narrative. In response to the assertion that Mason did not, one player contends, "Judging from the comments and flashback at the end of the game it is safe to assume that he did... On the other hand I myself agree with you.. I do not think that he did..."¹⁰¹ Another agrees, claiming, "I don't think he did. The image flashed into his head because he was programmed at Vorkuta to kill Kennedy. However, Reznov interfered and reprogrammed Mason to kill Dragovich, [Nazi scientist] Steiner, and [Dragovich's second-in-command] Kravchenko instead."¹⁰² Others argue that Mason did kill Kennedy, like this player:

I agree with part of this, but I do believe Mason killed JFK. There is a part toward the end when he confronts the bad guy, and says 'you tried to make me kill the president!' and [Dragovich] replies incredulously: 'what? you have no idea what we've done to you', which I take to mean that he was programmed to kill the president, but at a later date, not in the pentagon [sic] during the storyline.¹⁰³

Another player agrees: “I believe he killed the president after the events in the storyline had already happened. So at the time he cracked the code, he had not killed JFK yet. But in my eyes, it seemed that the real subliminal messages were to shoot him in Dallas, sometime in the future.”¹⁰⁴ The debate about the *Black Ops* narrative in these comments reveals that *Black Ops* stoked uncertainty in players regarding the story’s final outcome, which encouraged close reading of the game text in hopes of discovering the truth. That uncertainty was frustrating for some players; as one individual complained, “dammit they should have just told instead of leaving us with a big question mark.”¹⁰⁵

This fog of uncertainty that clouds the *Black Ops* narrative implicitly invites us to consider the validity of our own historical memories out of the gaming space.¹⁰⁶ As one player describes, the uncertain *Black Ops* story dovetails with our fraught historical narrative, as Kennedy’s assassination is “still full of rumors and myths.”¹⁰⁷ Another element to the assassination also lies in the fragility of human memory: might our recollections of the assassination be tainted? Certainly the trauma of Kennedy’s assassination differs substantially with the torture Mason received by the hands of the Soviets and other CIA agents, but players and non-players alike might nonetheless also be unknowingly misremembering history in some way as some protective mechanism from whatever trauma it might otherwise provoke.

In the real world, we rely on media representations of historical moments to validate memories. The Zapruder film, for example, cues and confirms the images of Kennedy’s death we have absorbed in the years following the assassination. In the midst of so many conspiracy theories about how his death actually transpired, the film’s status

as the gold standard of truth is unsurprising. No other media source, be it an eyewitness account or a series of photographs, carries as much evidentiary authority as this film, thanks to its status as indexical documentary footage that claims coherence between representation and reality and as a source of amateur citizen media untainted by the hegemonic media industry. Playing on the trope of archival footage as an indicator of historical truth is thus also unsurprising. *Black Ops* calls our attention to the authenticity of the historical moment through framing the scene as part of a film. We hear the click of the filmstrip as the footage plays and filmstrip material borders the images.



Figure 6. Screenshot from *Black Ops*. John and Jackie arrive in Dallas.

And because no other cut scene is framed in this way, we are led to believe that this moment actually transpired in Mason's world. But even if Mason did actually go on to kill Kennedy within the game's narrative, the manipulation of purported archival footage

invites skepticism about the assassination in the real world as doctored photographs similarly do.

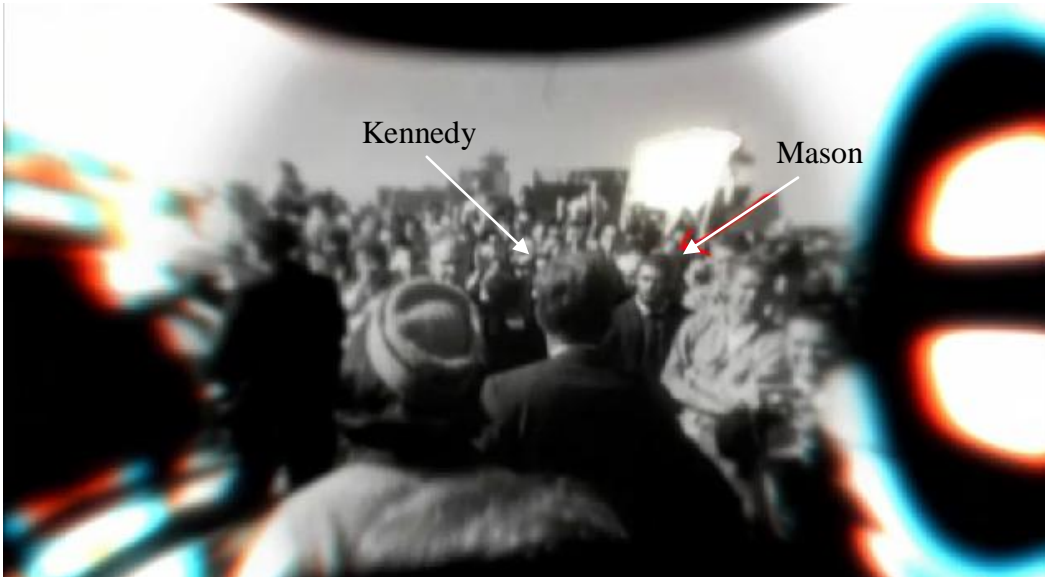


Figure 7. Screenshot from *Black Ops*. Mason appears in the crowd in Dallas as the camera zooms in on his face alongside Kennedy's; John and Jackie Kennedy stand in front of him, facing away from the camera.

I know Mason is a fictional character, but seeing his face in the crowd embedded in this archival footage evoked a brief flash of uncertainty about the actual Kennedy assassination narrative: was Mason in Dallas in 1963? Was a lookalike? What familiar elements of the films and photographs of the assassination have been tampered with in this fashion? One player's comment on an online video featuring this footage asks a similar question, wondering if actual footage and photographs connect with what he or she saw in the game: "waoh [sic] wait. if I look up that pic [of Kennedy in Dallas]. will there be a guy that looks like mason [sic]."¹⁰⁸ Another similarly expresses confusion about the veracity of this archival footage, asking, "wait wat [sic] the hell.O.O!....how the heck did mason get inna [sic] real video of JFK?..."¹⁰⁹ We cannot rely upon media representations of the assassination to validate our prosthetic memories, the game

implies, and the residues of the supposedly fictional story *Black Ops* tells can also taint whatever valid memories we think we have, particularly those prosthetic memories that arise from media representations rather than firsthand experience.

This footage leaves some players asking questions about the Kennedy assassination narrative in real life. This player's detailed assessment of the game's ending on the *Black Ops* forum reveals the bleeding between the game's supposed fictional narrative and supposed historical truth, typical of other accounts on the forum and in online video comments:

Okay guys I think I agree with some theories and some I don't but here focus on this. At the very last mission right at the end when he tries to kill dragovich [sic] it goes like this: Mason says: "You tried to make me kill my own president!" and then dragovich [sic] comes in and he says: "Tried?" with a grin of satisfaction. I think just from that he did plus he even says at the ending cutscene the gun, something like a 29 milimeter? [sic] I can't remember and I don't feel like checking it anyways yeah. I'm guessing it was him. *PLUS, I think Alex Mason was a REAL person in REAL life.. And that some of Black Ops its-self referes [sic] to his life. But I'm not sure who actually killed JFK* (emphasis added).¹¹⁰

Other accounts reveal real and specific uncertainty about the narrative of Kennedy's assassination, too, suggesting further that players are engaging with the game's politics within and out of the game space. One player's understanding of the assassination was clearly tainted by the game's story, as he or she argues, "Guys the person in real life who killed JFK is called alex mason [sic]."¹¹¹ Most user accounts, though, draw on a classic conspiracy theory that contends that two shooters conspired to kill Kennedy. One frustrated commenter notes,

...Look guys. There were 2 killers. One in a library window, and another was by a bush across the street. Lee Harvy [sic] Oswald was the one in the library. He was caught because he assaulte [sic] an officer, was spotted in the window, an [sic] snuck into a movie. His associate was never found.¹¹²

Another commenter comes to similar conclusions, arguing, “Yes, there were two snipers. 1: JFK jerks back, then forth, meaning shot from two angles.”¹¹³ Yet another account argues, “no no He [sic] died by free masons.”¹¹⁴ Relatively few accounts on online videos and on the *Black Ops* forum assert that Oswald acted alone—one notes, “Mason did not kill JFK it was lee [sic] Harvey Oswald get it through ur [sic] mind guys”—but the predominant belief indicated in these comments is that the Warren Report’s single shooter theory was not historically accurate.¹¹⁵ Some of these beliefs, moreover, were inspired by the game’s uncertain narrative: some players actually believe that Mason was a real player in Kennedy’s assassination, whether he pulled the trigger or not.

Of note is the fact that, by positioning Kennedy’s assassination as the final capstone to this protracted, complex narrative, many players who play the campaign might not intend to engage with this alternate history. His death and Mason’s involvement in the assassination are framed as a twist ending, a stark departure from *Reloaded*’s positioning the assassination front and center. Ironically, then, this conspiratorial narrative, rather than empowering us against the Warren Report, further shrinks any agency we have to construct a new account. Players do not choose to engage with this story; it is foisted upon them without warning. Nonetheless, the questions players ask after completing the campaign about the truth (or lack thereof) of the historical narrative presented in *Black Ops* suggests they question both the validity of the narrative within the game as well as the Warren Report’s narrative outside of the game.

Player intent aside, *Black Ops* imagines Kennedy’s assassination as a deeply complex narrative mediated by trauma. The official story of the assassination as told by

the Warren Commission has no place in this world: it was an inside job, and Oswald is never even mentioned. Ironically, even though the game is an inherently interactive medium, we lack opportunities to engage with history beyond executing rote violent acts. More importantly, we cannot exercise much agency in creating historical meaning where the assassination is concerned. Not only can we not engage in that moment through controlling any action, we are impotent to challenge its validity through the game's unwavering attention to the invalidity of traumatized human memory and media representations of history. Mason may have killed Kennedy in the world of *Black Ops*, thereby positioning this conspiracy theory as valid and true, but the game ironically only intensifies the uncertainty we feel about this story in the real world, as player accounts reveal. With the very act of remembering constructed as a physically and mentally painful experience, the ways that we might engage with history to mitigate that uncertainty are narrow and incomplete.

CONCLUSION: VIOLENCE AND REENACTMENT

Reloaded and *Black Ops* reveal double layers of trauma that initially arise from Kennedy's assassination. We either continually enact Kennedy's assassination as Oswald in *Reloaded* in hopes of wresting truth from a moment that resists pinning down or jettison the game's truth-telling potential completely by pursuing alternate modes of play in *Black Ops*. Playing *Black Ops* offers a more vivid, immersive experience that simultaneously challenges the official assassination narrative and renders players impotent to act in the construction of history. Such inaccessibility points to the slippery nature of historical truth. We engage in a continual act of questioning in playing the game as reality is never cleanly indicated. Timothy Melley explores the work of fellow literature scholar Cathy Caruth in his investigation of the psychology of historical uncertainty. Melley suggests that Caruth draws analogies "between the traumatized individual and the historian who can never access the past in all its fullness" because "the traumatic experience implants itself in the psyche without mediation and yet is never fully available to consciousness."¹¹⁶ Not only does a key event evoke a traumatic memory, our inability to interrogate the past adequately evokes a different trauma that resists closure.

Our anxious relationship with this trauma arises because we not only confront again Kennedy's death and the mystery surrounding it, as Melley and Caruth suggest, we also become more conscious of our lack of agency to construct or challenge historical narratives. Historical truth is inaccessible, and *there is nothing we can do about it*. In *Reloaded*, we are continually reminded that we cannot move from Oswald's sixth floor

station, we cannot engage with any of the historical context surrounding this ultimately brief moment in history, we cannot win the game unless we comply with the Warren Commission's official record. But the difficulty of that compliance ultimately means we are stuck in an anxious space between prescribed truth and alternative histories: try as we might to adhere to their version of the truth, we do not. The frustrating but addicting repetition of the assassination in *Reloaded* is a continual reminder of how historical truth is out of reach, even when encountered through media that require intimate interaction.

Black Ops, however, throws the notion of historical truth into disarray through continual jumps across time and space and consciousness. Embedded in this unstable narrative structure is a story of government conspiracy and secrecy: even if our memories of moments past were flawless and untainted, we are still ultimately beholden to official histories that obscure what really happened. And, ultimately, the most climactic historical moment in the game—Kennedy's assassination—is off limits. We watch as history passes us by. No matter how many times we play the game, we must watch Kennedy's final moments, reminded of the fissures among official narrative, actual historical events, and personal memories.

The Danger of Violence

Yet if history is so inaccessible to intervention, we only have limited opportunities to exercise agency in creating meaning and in ultimately seeking truth. The American public similarly has limited opportunities to effect political change; the words of fiction writer Tom McCarthy are instructive here:

Each time a gun is fired the whole history of engineering comes into play. Of politics, too: war, assassination, revolution, terror. Guns aren't just history's props and agents: they're history itself, spinning alternate futures in their chamber, hurling the present from their barrel, casting aside the empty shells of past.¹¹⁷

Both *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* present the same singular option. Violence is history, and enacting violence is our only opportunity to maintain our grip on agency.

The limited scope of the gaming universe in *Reloaded* extends not only to the brief time frame but to actions available to players. I can perform a very narrow set of tasks as Oswald: I can look around Dealey Plaza with my naked eye, I can look through the sight of my rifle, and I can shoot my gun. I cannot, however, move even a single step away from the sixth floor window. My only opportunity to exercise agency as a player, and as Oswald, is to fire my weapon. Furthermore, the game limits the scope to the immediate moments of the assassination. Kennedy's presidential directives are absent from the gaming space, and he is divorced from the context that might explain Oswald's motives and why he was assassinated in the first place. As a result, this history is constructed as the culmination of a singular violent act. Political change is not effected through politicking; change stems from violence. Thus our agency as citizens lies in violence.

We might say the same of *Black Ops*, though for different reasons. As a first-person shooter game, *Black Ops* naturally invites players to act violently in order to advance the narrative, whether we spray bullets indiscriminately at enemy drones or pick off unknowing subjects with sniper rifles or knives. Gish finds the same is true of *Call of Duty's* World War II games, which “foreground singular acts of violence as the sole catalyst of military victory and the impetus for historical progression.”¹¹⁸ Although those

moments of extreme violence are interspersed with unplayable narrative cut scenes, which fill out Mason's and Dragovich's stories, I can only rarely play aspects of the game that do not solely require me to shoot and kill. The process I engage in when I play *Black Ops* is one of indiscriminate violence, not a fleshed out narrative meaning-making process that might be evoked were I able to interact with characters beyond killing them. As Gish describes, the multiple layers of the *Call of Duty* series are meant to create connective tissues between the unplayable narrative that fills out the story and the playable missions, but *Black Ops* does not integrate those layers if we consider the fissure between the kinds of actions we can play and those we cannot.

What is particularly troubling about this fissure is that the non-violent political gestures that underlie and propel missions forward are coercive. Unlike other games that enable skipping unplayable narrative scenes, I cannot move past these cut scenes; I must simply wait, watching just as Mason does as he is strapped in a chair during his interrogation. That waiting is an unfortunately boring and obnoxious process: try as I might to engage with the narrative in these scenes by learning Mason's story, all I hoped to do was move past them quickly to return to the moments that I could exercise my agency as a player. I wanted to get back to the shooting. Violence takes precedence over nonviolence in *Black Ops* because it is the only opportunity to exercise any kind of agency to effect change. What we end up with is an official history that is challenged not only through the narrative that installs Mason as Kennedy's killer, rather than Oswald, but a narrative structure that negates any possibility of being able to know historical truth.

Violence is thus constructed as our only hope to intervene in this uncertain history to affect the past and the present, just as Oswald might have felt in assassinating Kennedy.

Considering the role of violence in this assassination, I might also take a cue from author Don DeLillo's discussion of Robert Branch's work in *Libra*. Branch is a researcher who endeavors to uncover the truth about Kennedy's assassination by compiling all possible data and materials, including Oswald's hairs and eviscerated goat heads that were used to reenact and assess the ballistics of Oswald's gun. DeLillo points us away from understanding the assassination as a fraught and complicated political moment, the death of the American myth and innocence, and towards acknowledging the sheer ugly violence of murder:

'Look, touch, this is the true nature of the event. Not your beautiful ambiguities, your lives of the major players, your compassions and sadnesses. Not your roomful of theories, your museum of contradictory facts. There are no contradictions here. Your history is simple. See, the man on the slab. The open eye staring. The goat head oozing rudimentary matter.'¹¹⁹

He reminds us that the hazy aura surrounding Kennedy's death obscures the truth of violence. Perhaps that stark reality of guns and blood is where we can find a kernel of certainty.

Researchers have continually sought to determine whether violent videogames affect players negatively, yielding mixed results. The media effects question is nonetheless a tired topic, one that extends far beyond the scope of this analysis. What we ought to consider, though, is what the effects might be of videogames that limit players' opportunities for interaction to this narrow range of violent actions. *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* point to an historical narrative that is out of our control, which, as journalist Jonathan

Kay describes, is precisely what lends conspiracy theories—theories that challenge official accounts of history—their strength: “We take comfort from the idea that the randomness of human life, with all the attendant sorrows and catastrophes, is actually part of some master plan created by a (usually unseen) higher power.”¹²⁰ In the face of a network of immutable power that remains unseen to most, subscribing a conspiracy theory becomes an act of exercising power over a dominant historical narrative by challenging its validity. American Studies scholar Peter Knight similarly sees control as central to conspiracy theories but notes that those theories also gesture towards physicality as a source of certainty:

The rhetoric of conspiracy likewise expresses concern about whether we are in control of our own actions, and even whether we are in control of our own minds and bodies. Conspiracy talk involves working out not only where corporate responsibility begins and ends, but also, in times of viral confusion, where our corporeal identity has its limits.¹²¹

If we read conspiracy theories as a means of reclaiming control not only over history, but over our bodies, violence might represent a similar act of reclamation. Such a deeply embodied, physical action—killing—even when it is simulated—represents a similar move not only to pin down historical truth but to reestablish the self as an active agent in a fraught, uncertain political world.

The Danger of Reenactment: September 11

People who play *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* are unlikely to have experienced Kennedy’s assassination firsthand or even as contemporary eyewitnesses to news broadcasts that broke the news of his death. But even younger players are likely to have

been cognizant of another national trauma, another moment when pundits and politicians claimed America lost its innocence: September 11. Most of us remember September 11 as a mediated event, like Kennedy's assassination. In both cases, mediation enables our continual engagement with the historical moment. The trauma that arises from representations of September 11 reveals another contemporary iteration of anxious uncertainty. Again, we might seek to mitigate that anxiety by repeatedly delving into accounts and representations of the tragedy. The problem of an unknowable historical narrative nonetheless continues to confront us in the aftermath of tragedies when we crave certainty even more.

Like Kennedy's assassination, a few videogames represent the September 11 attacks in some way. *9-11 Survivor* was only briefly available to the public in 2003 but invited critique for turning a tragic moment into a playable game. Like *Reloaded*, the game presented a limited glimpse of the historical moment: players would begin in a burning room in the World Trade Center and would meet one of three fates: die in the fire, jump out of the tower, or climb down a set of hidden stairs to safety; players did not confront the moment of impact or the fallout of their decision.

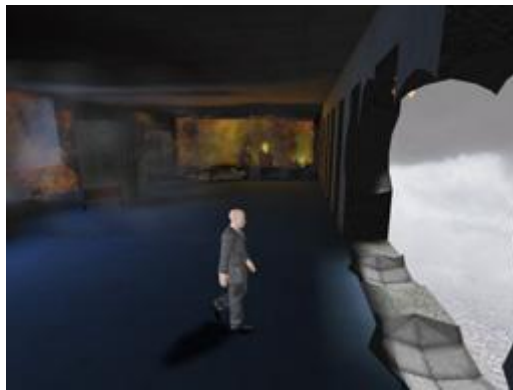


Figure 8. Screenshot from *9/11 Survivor*.

The game was originally developed as an art project by students at the University of California in San Diego, who hoped to “reinterpret a historic moment by transplanting it” to a familiar simulated medium, hoping that “an immersive, interactive vision would restore an immediacy to the day’s horrors.”¹²² Like *Reloaded*, they sought connecting to the tragedy through simulation; like *Reloaded*, the briefness of *Survivor*’s gameplay invites our continual replaying and reenactment of the moment.

But what does that reenactment do to our sense of the reality of the events that these games hope to recapture? As Marc Redfield notes, we experience the virtual trauma of terrorist phantoms over and over again thanks to mass media representations. Yet beyond the potentially traumatic nature of seeing grisly images repeatedly, those repetitive visions also entrench our uncertainty about the truth value of what is being represented. Like *Reloaded* and, to a lesser extent, *Black Ops*, representations of September 11 create “a residue of uncertainty precisely because it re-presents something singular, thereby enabling the archive as the possibility of history as fiction.”¹²³ Because footage of the planes hitting the Towers and the Towers falling to the ground captures a moment that cannot be repeated in actuality, the continual play of these images in representational media calls attention to the status of that media as unreal. Moreover, as representations extend beyond unedited footage of the attacks to more artistic, fabricated creations (like, say, a videogame), the boundaries between truth and fiction blur: where does reality end and art begin?

Our ability to reenact these tragic moments through examining representations repeatedly surely enables our closer scrutiny of those moments in efforts to find the truth

about what happened. But those representations also enable the proliferation of conspiracy theories. We would undoubtedly be more trusting of the Warren Commission's account were it not for the films and photographs that captured Kennedy's death. Those representations made serendipitously by passersby both immortalized the moment for continual scrutiny and avoid the blemish of official tampering. For most observers, because these accounts from everyday citizens, we are tempted to read them as more authentic. The same goes for footage and photographs of the World Trade Center towers. The now-infamous *Loose Change* documentary that attempts to prove that the United States government was ultimately behind the September 11 plot relies in part upon citizen media that captured some part of the attack. Truthers – those who subscribe to such conspiracy theories – are able to construct their alternative story thanks to the existence of the footage that they can repeatedly scrutinize, mentally reenacting the attacks in order to find the truth. The vast amount of evidence that has emerged from both the assassination and, to a greater extent, the terrorist attacks tempts conspiracy theorists. These “independent researchers” accrue evidence like film footage, scientific analyses, and eyewitness accounts “to master all of the specialized knowledge required to prove their theories from first principles,” an excavation process similar to the detailed online debates about the ending of *Black Ops*.¹²⁴ Considering the common threads that run between these two historical moments, we should not be surprised that, as Kay notes, “Scratch the surface of a middle-aged 9/11 Truther, and you are almost guaranteed to find a JFK conspiracist.”¹²⁵

Media representations of these tragedies that become part of alternative history documentaries such as *Loose Change* also enable the propagation of that footage through sharing with audiences. Like docu-games, these documentaries invite our repeated examination of evidence in efforts to move towards historical truth. In both cases, this evidence is not the tangible flesh of goat entrails that Branch encounters in *Libra*. This evidence is media representation and virtual reconstruction. Though we might not examine this footage with the same close scrutiny that Truthers do, we can continually engage with this footage because they embed their evidence in documentary films made for popular consumption. The multiple layers of reenactment through absorbing media representations in both cases are a potential source for anxiety. While the proliferation of footage might fossilize a particular narrative in the public memory—diplomat Philip Zelikow notes, video of Truther protests “makes their movement *real*”—media representations might rather unseat notions of historical reality.¹²⁶ We see these attacks over and over again in hopes of pinning down the truth about the tragedy, but we are not only confronted with the psychological horror of those attacks, but with Redfield’s notion of uncertainty. If we continually engage with these evidentiary materials without coming to resolution, we run the risk of wringing any hope of truth out of them.

My close readings of *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* alongside players’ assessments of the games’ narratives suggest the concerning finding that many players do not easily distinguish between simulation and documentary footage, or between simulated history and actual history. Although the blurriness between fact and fiction in artistic representation is no new issue—*JFK*, after all, took flak for blending archival footage

with dramatic reenactments—my study does suggest that critiques about fictional accounts reshaping history are not unfounded.¹²⁷ The supposed educational value of games that claim to connect players with history is hampered if players do not recognize where fact ends and fiction begins. More worrisome is the possibility that representations of history in videogames could be used for nefarious purposes. If revising historical truth is as easy as creating a new narrative and inserting manipulated archival footage into a game, the potential for abusing the medium is high. Can we imagine a state agency creating a videogame that offers a misleading historical narrative to diminish challenges to their power? Or, more insidiously, to increase their power? To some extent, we can already see this happening: the United States Army's game *America's Army*, as King and Leonard found, is intended to reshape players' understanding of what war is like in order to recruit soldiers. But how might our memory of our past change if we play and consume games that attempt to justify dark moments in American history, like the Gulf of Tonkin incident? The Bay of Pigs invasion? The Iran Contra Affair?

In my estimation, videogames like *Reloaded* and *Black Ops* offer opportunities to engage with the past to an unfortunately limited extent. Many players are easily manipulated by the stories that they play through, and even the most critical players ought to be cautious about engaging with narratives that may present biased stories. Nonetheless, videogames do still have the potential to complicate our notions of dominant historical narratives and to encourage questioning history in productive ways.

The open question is, then, how we might create a game that presents a complicated historical narrative, enables challenging that narrative, and allows for connecting with history even in the midst of uncertain truth. And, of course, is still fun to play.

¹ “History of the Texas School Book Depository,” The Sixth Floor Museum, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://www.jfk.org/go/about/history-of-the-texas-school-book-depository>.

² Selections of this introduction were originally published by the author as a blog post, “Grad Research: JFK, Reality, and Mediation at the Sixth Floor Museum,” AMS :: ATX, January 25, 2012, accessed April 10, 2012, <http://amstudies.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/grad-research-jfk-reality-and-mediation-at-the-sixth-floor-museum>.

³ Though the lyrics to “Seconds” never mention Kennedy or Lee Harvey Oswald by name, the song alludes to the fact that only a few seconds changed the course of history when Oswald pulled the trigger: the band repeats, “It took seconds of your time to take his life” for most of the song. See *Rolling Stone*’s “100 Best Albums of the Eighties” feature on “The Human League – *Dare*,” *Rolling Stone*, accessed April 9, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-best-albums-of-the-eighties-20110418/the-human-league-dare-19691231>.

⁴ Norman Mailer, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” *The Presidential Papers* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons: 1963 (1960)), 38.

⁵ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 5.

⁶ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 16.

⁷ Brett Molina, “Call of Duty: Black Ops’ Sales Hit 25 Million,” *USA Today*, August 4, 2011, accessed April 21, 2012, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/gamehunters/post/2011/08/call-of-duty-black-ops-sales-hit-25-million/1#.T5LsPrNYtcI>.

⁸ Douglas Kellner, “The Frankfurt School,” accessed April 8, 2012, <http://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/frankfurtschool.pdf>.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227, quoted in Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 13.

¹⁰ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 14.

¹¹ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

¹² Marita Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone’s Docudramas,” *History and Theory* 36 (December 1997): 73.

¹³ Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History,” 73.

¹⁴ Stephen King, *11/22/63* (New York: Scribner, 2011), 796.

¹⁵ King, *11/22/63*, 797.

¹⁶ King, *11/22/63*, 798.

¹⁷ Tony Bennett, “Text and Social Process: The Case of James Bond,” *Screen* 41 (1982), 3.

¹⁸ Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History,” 66.

¹⁹ “JFK (1991) – Box Office Mojo,” Box Office Mojo, accessed April 21, 2012, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=jfk.htm>.

²⁰ William L. Benoit and Dawn M. Nill, “Oliver Stone’s Defense of *JFK*,” *Communication Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 127-128.

²¹ “JFK Reloaded – exclusive interview!” Future Publishing Limited, accessed January 19, 2012, <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/112501/jfk-reloaded-exclusive-interview/>.

²² Robert Rosenstone, “*JFK*: Historical Fact/Historical Film,” *The American Historical Review* 97 (April 1992): 507.

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- ²³ The Warren Commission's final report alone is 888 pages and supplemented by a 26-volume set of documents. Considering in total the vast amount of scholarship, analysis, and artistic representations beyond the Warren Report would be impossible.
- ²⁴ Rosenstone, "Historical Fact/Historical Film," 507.
- ²⁵ Charles Krauthammer, "'JFK': A Lie, But Harmless," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 1992, A19.
- ²⁶ Lisa D. Butler, Cheryl Koopman, and Philip G. Zimbardo, "The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film 'JFK': Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioral Intentions," *International Society of Political Psychology* 16 (June 1995): 237-257.
- ²⁷ George Will, "'JFK': Paranoid History," *The Washington Post* A 23 26 December 1991
- ²⁸ Ellen Goodman, "Oliver Stone's Hijacking of History," *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1992, A21.
- ²⁹ Before the resolution was passed, the files were scheduled to remain closed until 2029.
- ³⁰ "Disclosure of JFK Assassination Records," C-SPAN Video, 3:17:00, from a broadcast televised by C-SPAN on May 3, 1992, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/JFKA&showFullAbstract=1>.
- ³¹ "Disclosure of JFK Assassination Records."
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- ³³ John Campbell, "Just Less Than Total War: Simulating World War II as Ludic Nostalgia," in *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Videogames*, ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 183-200.
- ³⁴ "AMERICA'S ARMY: ABOUT," *America's Army*, accessed April 15, 2012, <http://www.americasarmy.com/about/>.
- ³⁵ C. Richard King and David J. Leonard, "Wargames as a New Frontier: Securing American Empire in Virtual Space," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Videogames*, ed. Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew T. Payne (New York: Routledge, 2010), 91.
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- ³⁷ Nina B. Huntemann, "Playing with Fear: Catharsis and Resistance in Military-Themed Videogames," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Videogames*, ed. Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew T. Payne (New York: Routledge, 2010), 223-236.
- ³⁸ See, for example, See Ian Bogost and Cindy Poremba, "Can Games Get Real? A Close Look at 'Documentary' Digital Games," in *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers, War Without Tears*, ed. Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Ralf Stockmann (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 12-21; Joost Raessens, "Reality Play: Documentary Computer Games Beyond Fact and Fiction," *Popular Communication* 4 (2006), 213-224; "Documentary Games: Putting the Player in the Path of History," in *Playing the Past: Nostalgia in Videogames and Electronic Literature*, ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).
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- ⁴⁰ "JFK Reloaded | F.A.Q."
- ⁴¹ "JFK Reloaded | F.A.Q."
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- ⁵² Tracy Fullerton, "Documentary Games," 228-229.
- ⁵³ Steve F. Anderson, *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 136.
- ⁵⁴ ultimaterunescape90, comment on NinoyAquinoTV, "JFK Reloaded – 697/1000 (with replays from multiple angles)," YouTube video, 4:11, October 10, 2008, accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKV7MLnJt54>.
- ⁵⁵ fallensk8r2222, comment on NinoyAquinoTV, "JFK Reloaded – 697/1000 (with replays from multiple angles)," YouTube video, 4:11, October 10, 2008, accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKV7MLnJt54>.
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- ⁵⁸ See Ian Bogost and Cindy Poremba, "Can Games Get Real? A Close Look at 'Documentary' Digital Games;" Joost Raessens, "Reality Play: Documentary Computer Games Beyond Fact and Fiction;" or Claudio Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," *History and Theory* 47 (2009), 103-121 for discussions of how videogames (and particularly documentary videogames) present historical narratives that are variable and conditional.
- ⁵⁹ Cindy Poremba, "Frames and Simulated Documents," 7.
- ⁶⁰ Anderson, *Technologies of History*, 136.
- ⁶¹ The titles of these YouTube player videos are particularly revealing of players' desires to play against the grain. Examples include "JFK Reloaded – Crash Bang Wallop!!!!", "Physics Phun with JFK Reloaded," "JFK Reloaded lulz," "JFK Reloaded Biker Mistakes," and more.
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- ⁶³ Retrograde, comment on Big Les, "JFK: Reloaded," James Randi Educational Foundation February 26, 2007, accessed March 16, 2012. <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=75699>.
- ⁶⁴ Rich M, comment on Big Les, "JFK: Reloaded," James Randi Educational Foundation, February 26, 2007, accessed March 16, 2012, <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=75699>. Lest we imagine this player as solely bloodthirsty or amoral, he or she also mentions "you can also shoot off Jackie's hat," a somewhat more benign use of the rifle than Oswald offered.
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- ⁷⁴ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2, 3, 19.

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- ⁸⁰ coolrog7564, comment on JFKReloaded167, "JFK Reloaded- The Grassy Knoll," YouTube video, 3:32, September 14, 2009, accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUBnKrDRXvk>.
- ⁸¹ BarryDennen12, comment on JFKReloaded167, "JFK Reloaded- The Grassy Knoll," YouTube video, 3:32, September 14, 2009, accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUBnKrDRXvk>.
- ⁸² This game is available for play on a variety of platforms: PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, or Nintendo Wii. While the controls for the game vary according to platform, the storyline and levels are mostly the same. The exception here is the Wii version: of note here is that two missions were shortened in response to the limits of the game system, and two missions do not let the player control Mason, instead playing them as video clips. The elements I describe in the section that follows are constant across all four platforms.
- ⁸³ Here, I align myself with both the game studies and gaming community traditions by referring to scenes that require players to watch a vignette rather than control any action as "cut scenes."
- ⁸⁴ Harrison Gish, "Playing the Second World War: Call of Duty and the Telling of History," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4 (2010), 168.
- ⁸⁵ Harrison Gish, "Playing the Second World War," 170.
- ⁸⁶ Harrison Gish, "Playing the Second World War."
- ⁸⁷ Jack Arnott, "Call of Duty: Black Ops – Josh Olin interview," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2010, accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2010/sep/20/call-of-duty-black-ops-interview>.
- ⁸⁸ stopBULLYING, comment on "Thoughts on campaign?" Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, November 20, 2010, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/103913680>.
- ⁸⁹ Cardinal Smoke, comment on marinepauley, "campaign," Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, November 22, 2010, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/103931885>.
- ⁹⁰ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2, quoted in Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 20.
- ⁹¹ "Call of Duty: Black Ops – World Premiere Uncut Trailer," YouTube video, 1:43, posted by "Treyarch," May 18, 2010, accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtRnpC7ddv8>.
- ⁹² Players can actually escape from the bounds of the interrogation chair through a cheat code: repeatedly quickly alternating the button that moves the character left and right enables Mason to jump out of the chair and wander around the room, but this is as far as he can physically go.
- ⁹³ snoman76, comment on wavau, "Great Job on The Campaign," Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, November 19, 2010, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/103890052>.
- ⁹⁴ rana1014, comment on Starkweather, "Campaign," Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, December 18, 2010, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/104141013>.
- ⁹⁵ tpa, comment on "So I am the only one that didn't like the campaign?" Reddit, February 16, 2011, accessed January 25, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/codbo/comments/fmjc7/so_i_am_the_only_one_that_didnt_like_the_campaign.
- ⁹⁶ wheeldog, comment on CalBerks, "Just finished the Single Player campaign.." Reddit, November 19, 2010, accessed January 25, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/codbo/comments/e90p7/just_finished_the_single_player_campaign.
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- ⁹⁸ CalBerks, comment on “Just finished the Single Player campaign..” Reddit, November 19, 2010, accessed January 25, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/codbo/comments/e90p7/just_finished_the_single_player_campaign.
- ⁹⁹ Arnott, “Call of Duty: Black Ops – Josh Olin Interview.”
- ¹⁰⁰ Gish, “Playing the Second World War,” 173.
- ¹⁰¹ Boondocks_Saint, comment on sir n00b alottt, “sooo did mason kill the pres. or not?” Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, January 20, 2011, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/104445372>.
- ¹⁰² hehedin, comment on sir n00b alottt, “sooo did mason kill the pres. or not?” Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, January 20, 2011, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/104445372>.
- ¹⁰³ croesius, comment on sir n00b alottt, “sooo did mason kill the pres. or not?” Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, January 20, 2011, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/104445372>.
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- ¹⁰⁵ sir n00b alottt, comment on “sooo did mason kill the pres. or not?” Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, January 20, 2011, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/104445372>.
- ¹⁰⁶ The nonexistence of objective truth that postmodernity brought was also of deep concern to some scholars beginning in the 1980s, who decried the trend that negated the possibility of reaching concrete conclusions about reality. Robert Rosenstone quotes Pauline Marie Rosenau to illustrate how postmodern history challenged “(1) the idea that there is a real, knowable past, a record of evolutionary progress of human ideas, institutions or actions, (2) the view that historians should be objective, (3) that reason enables historians to explain the past, and (4) that the role of history is to interpret and transmit human cultural and intellectual tradition from generation to generation.” See “Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History,” in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 200.
- ¹⁰⁷ RGC Sparks, comment on Go Homer Die, “JFK and Mason. *SPOILERS*” November 20, 2010, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/103905948>.
- ¹⁰⁸ SuperFreedom900, comment on scidi, “Call of Duty Black Ops – Mason Kill Kennedy (Ending) (HD),” YouTube video, 1:33, February 24, 2011, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=MfRy-6LEGU4.
- ¹⁰⁹ MrAngel1398, comment on scidi, “Call of Duty Black Ops – Mason Kill Kennedy (Ending) (HD),” YouTube video, 1:33, February 24, 2011, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=MfRy-6LEGU4.
- ¹¹⁰ IOwnAtZombies123456, comment on sir n00b alottt, “sooo did mason kill the pres. or not?” Call of Duty: Black Ops Forum, February 15, 2012, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://community.callofduty.com/message/104445372>.
- ¹¹¹ ArmbarRProductionZ, comment on chmelster, “Kennedy and Mason theory on black ops,” YouTube video, 6:56, February 17, 2011, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=quMPtDd-dTo.
- ¹¹² infernaper303, comment on scidi, “Call of Duty Black Ops – Mason Kill Kennedy (Ending) (HD),” YouTube video, 1:33, February 24, 2011, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=MfRy-6LEGU4.
- ¹¹³ Infernaper303, comment on scidi, “Call of Duty Black Ops – Mason Kill Kennedy (Ending) (HD),” YouTube video, 1:33, February 24, 2011, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=MfRy-6LEGU4.
- ¹¹⁴ ThePc gamer999, comment on scidi, “Call of Duty Black Ops – Mason Kill Kennedy (Ending) (HD),” YouTube video, 1:33, February 24, 2011, accessed March 28, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=MfRy-6LEGU4.

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- ¹¹⁶ Timothy Melley, "Postmodern Amnesia: Trauma and Forgetting in Tim O'Brien's 'In the Lake of the Woods,'" *Contemporary Literature* 44 (2003), 109-110.
- ¹¹⁷ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Vintage), 190.
- ¹¹⁸ Harrison Gish, "Playing the Second World War," 173.
- ¹¹⁹ Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1988), 299-300.
- ¹²⁰ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America's Growing Conspiracist Underground* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 27.
- ¹²¹ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.
- ¹²² Matthew Mirapaul, "Online Games Grab Grim Reality," *New York Times*, September 17, 2003, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/17/arts/online-games-grab-grim-reality.html>.
- ¹²³ Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror*, 29.
- ¹²⁴ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers*, 190.
- ¹²⁵ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers*, 51.
- ¹²⁶ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers*, 259.
- ¹²⁷ See, for example, Janet Staiger, "Cinematic Shots: The Narration of Violence," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 39-54.

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