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A Case for Serious Play:
Virtual Pacifism in Historical Digital Games

I. Introduction

Historical digital games are played at the coming-together of two temporalities: one of gamers as they choose, plan, and play, and one of the games as they reenact the goings-on of the time they are set in – be it the seventeenth century or WWII. At the same time, these games are played at the crossing-over of two sets of narratives, what Sybille Lammes refers to as 'world histories' and 'personal stories'.[1] Given these entangled temporalities and narratives, it is imperative to begin this article's examination of the back-and-forth between pacifism and western digital strategy games with a historical overview of the peace-making traditions in the West. After all, while to choose pacifism as a strategy to follow in a digital strategy game like *Age of Empires* might seem to be an exclusive reflection of the contemporary perceptions and practices of peace-making as a pragmatic or moral gamers' choice, the very forms this strategy can take in games and the debates that adopting pacifist strategies invoke in online forums and blogs resonate closely with longer historical perceptions and practices of peace-making and the challenges that pacifists have encountered from the Middle Ages to the present.

Tackling virtual pacifism in the world of historical digital games, the first part of this article offers a historical overview of pacifism, discussing the obstacles pacifism has historically encountered. The second

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[1] Sybille Lammes, Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games as Postcolonial Cultures, in: Eludamos, Journal for Computer Game Culture 4 (2010), pp. 1–6, here p. 4.

part examines the ludic nature of war and violence in the general field of game studies and probes the scope and limits of virtual pacifism. Against this background, the third part examines pacifism as a strategy and a choice in a historically themed digital games' series such as *Age of Empires* (1997–2011).[2] The real-time strategy digital game is analyzed with regard to the choices it offers to win the game without resort to violence. The aim in this section is to shed light on the limits of pacifism as a strategy to win the game. The last section reflects on how the English-speaking player community discusses their choice of strategy and of pacifism in general. The article concludes with remarks on how digital games in general weigh in on peace and violence and the question of gamer morality.

II. Pacifism in History

Pacifism, not unlike warism, is as old as communal human life on earth, even though the two work differently in different settings and are often considered to be reactions to one another('s miscarriage or exhaustion).[3] Pacifism could be defined as an active, individual or collective choice in the face of disagreement, competition, or crisis and in opposition to violence. In this sense, pacifism – the commitment to life in harmony and to rejecting, avoiding, curbing, and resisting violence – has a history as intriguing and complex as that of warism. With roots in Latin (*paci-* (from *pax*): peace and *-ficus*: making), pacifism stands for a wide range of definitions, practices, and ideologies across the globe.[4]

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[2]   Main titles: Ensemble Studios/Microsoft, Age of Empires (Window, MacOS), 1997; Ensemble Studios/Microsoft, Age of Empires II. The Age of Kings (Windows, MacOS, Playstation2), 1999; Ensemble Studios/Microsoft, Age of Empires III (Windows/Mac OS), 2005. For further information on the series cf. Age of Empires: Play The Greatest Stories in History, https://www.ageofempires.com, 01.10.2016.

[3]   See, for instance, Anthony Adolf, Peace. A world history, Cambridge 2009, esp. ch. 1–3. See also Richard Tuck, The rights of war and peace. Political thought and the international order from Grotius to Kant, Oxford 2001.

[4]   For a thorough overview of the various forms pacifism has taken in different historical contexts, cf. Andrew Fiala, Pacifism, in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Stanford

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, warism and pacifism have been topics of contention both in the realm of ideas and as opposing practices. On the one hand, ancient Greeks believed war to be the path to glory at the same time that they sanctioned it as glorious in and of itself. Heraclitus of Ephesus had voiced a rather general consensus among pre-Socratic Greeks that war is the patron of all natural movements: "War is the father and king of all, and has produced some as gods and some as men, and has made some slaves and some free."[5] In the same breath, Homer's *Iliad* takes warism, not pacifism, as the training field of heroes and the key to eternal glory. At the dawn of the Trojan wars, Sarpedon, son of Zeus and Laodamia, tells his cousin Glaucus that war is the only way for the mortal man to be eternalized: "since the fates of death surround us, innumerable fates, which no mortal may escape or avoid – then let us go forward, until we give glory to another, or he to us (*Iliad*, 12.322–8)".[6] In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, Homer offers a reverse path to glory and heroism; there, a hero is depicted to be a survivor who endures hardships of the world and hastens the end of the war, a sort of cunning pacifist who has been disillusioned by the atrocities of war. Indeed, *Odyssey's* missive is stated to be that wars end and that "mutual goodwill of the days of old be restored […] and peace and plenty prevail (*Odyssey*, 24.485–6)." As reflected in Homer's seemingly opposing views on war and peace, and even though pacifism and warism are not mutually exclusive, it should be noted that since the time of ancient Greece, peace has been a topic of practical, contentious interest primarily when war had destroyed or exhausted too much and had led to lasting disruption of the democratic ideals of the city-states.[7]

Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Winter 2014 Edition, 2014, http://plato.stanford. edu/archives/win2014/entries/pacifism/, 10.11.2016.

[5]   George T. W. Patrick, Ingram Bywater (eds.), Heraclitus, The fragments of the work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on nature. Translated from the Greek text of Bywater, with an introduction historical and critical, Baltimore 1889, p. 95, https://archive.org/details/thefragmentsofth00herauoft, 15.08.2016.

[6]   Louis Rawlings, The Ancient Greeks at War, Manchester 2007, p. 5.

[7]   For detailed examination of pacifism as an idea and practice in western thought and the contexts in which it has been discussed, cf. Philip De Souza, John France, War and peace in ancient and medieval history, Cambridge 2008; David Cortright,

By the middle ages, pacifism as a philosophical worldview and a marginal hope had turned into a requisite practical reaction by various religious sects to what Haines has termed "the duties, diversions, and pastimes of war".[8] By this time the game historian Johan Huizinga details, chivalry and ritual duels were romanticized in poetry and prose, leaving pacifism to various religious groups to tend to.[9] As a result, monastic traditions of pacifism were developed by communities such as the Franciscan Order established in 1216, the Alleluia movement of 1233, and the Flagellant movement of 1260 (popular peace movements which spread, in the case of the latter, outside Italian cities to France and Germany),[10] the Jesuit Order of the 16th century, and the 17th-century Society of Friends (later called Quakers) had to tend to pacifism, either positively as total rejection of hostilities in all its forms or negatively as enforcement of conditional ceasefire in the interest of the parties involved.[11]

Alongside some of these movements, the publication of a number of influential works, such as Dante Alighieri's *On World-Government* (penned in the early 14th century but not published until the middle of the 16th century), Thomas Hobbes's views on peace in autocratic societies detailed in *Leviathan* (published in 1651), and Immanuel Kant's essay *To Perpetual Peace* (published in 1795), marked the establishment of secular pacifism at the dawn of the Enlightenment. Most significantly, Kant's and Hobbes's were attempts to detail the operationalization of pacifism, responding to centuries of on-going conflict and bloodshed in Europe and beyond. Kant's *Perpetual Peace*

Peace. A History of Movements and Ideas, Cambridge 2008; Adolf, Peace. A world history (cf. note 3); Duane Cady, From Warism to Pacifism: A Moral Continuum, Philadelphia 2010, esp. the introduction; Peter N. Stearns, Peace in world history, New York 2014.

[8] Keith Haines, Attitudes and Impediments to Pacifism in Medieval Europe, in: Journal of Medieval History 7 (1981), pp. 369–88, here p. 370.

[9] Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens. A study of the play-element in culture, London et al. 1980, pp. 95–96.

[10] Haines, Attitudes and Impediments (cf. note 8), pp. 371–372.

[11] For an examination of these movements see Cortright, Peace. A History of Movements and Ideas (cf. note 7); Adolf, Peace. A world history (cf. note 3).

traced the possibility for future peace among those European states that had republican and free governments. He proposed a number of 'definitive articles' as a serious, prohibitive pathway toward total inter-state peace and as a way out of hostilities both within Europe and in the so-called colonies. In Kant's view, it is significant to note, pacifism was serious work against the *status naturalis* of inter-state hostilities: "The state of peace among men living in close proximity is not a natural state (status naturalis); instead, the natural state is one of war [...]. The state of peace must therefore be established".[12] I will return to this point later.

Following this same logic, and appealing to the human desire for adventure, glory, and eternity, the war-peace binary reappeared in the twentieth century in a great number of contexts, from the pacifist WWI war-of-words – inspired by Kant – which was fought prior to the establishment of the League of Nations to various patriotic and transnational antiwar and disarmament movements across the century, and from the frenzy and activism triggered as a result of re-opting for military force during the Vietnam War to the discussions on and the demonstrations against the morality and sanity of the Gulf Wars and the so-called 'War on Terror' across the globe. To borrow from Sandi E. Cooper's book title (1991), the last century, at least in Europe, was a century marked by 'waging war on war'.[13]

However indispensable a practice and prevalent an idea, pacifism has never been easy to operationalize; before, during, and even after the culmination of the Enlightenment(s) in the west, pacifism has had a number of unrelenting rivals to stand against: to name a few, consider the so-called 'military revolution' of early modernity which various states and colonies as well as a growing private sector were actively

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[12]   Ted Humphrey (ed.), Immanuel Kant, To perpetual peace. A philosophical sketch, Indianapolis et al. 2003, p. 7.
[13]   Sandi E. Cooper, Patriotic Pacifism. Waging War on War in Europe, 1815–1914, New York 1991.

involved in.[14] In the face of such a lucrative business, where even war itself was marketed as a commodity, pacifism was in close competition with yet another rival: the remnants of the medieval notion of 'just war,' advocated by devout Church figures who had a hard time reconciling God's love and mercy with existing, earthly animosity and bloodshed (distinguished by St. Augustine in his two cities metaphor).[15] Just war contested the logic of pacifism as cowardice, even as disloyalty. Furthermore, warism has long been coveted by those who, in a revival of Greece as the cradle of western civilization during the Enlightenment, looked upon its legacy and upheld war as the path to eternal glory – a standpoint which has hardly lost its appeal ever since. Since the rise of nationalism, warism has been given even more glorious charm as defenders of armed conflicts defame pacifists as lax, apolitical, un-patriotic, and – during the height of the Cold War period – even outright communist.[16] As such, in Cortright's words, "Throughout history the cause of peace has been on trial, standing like a forlorn defendant before the court of established opinion, misunderstood and maligned on all sides."[17]

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[14]   Cf. Michael Roberts, The military revolution, Belfast 1956; Geoffrey Parker, The military revolution. Military innovation and the rise of the west, 1500–1800, Cambridge 1988; Brian M. Downing, The military revolution and political change. Origins of democracy and autocracy in early modern Europe, Princeton, NJ 1992; Clifford J. Rogers, The military revolution debate. Readings on the military transformation of early modern Europe, Boulder, CL 1995; Jeremy Black, A military revolution? Military change and European society 1550–1800, Basingstoke 1991; –, Beyond the military revolution. War in the seventeenth-century world, Houndmills, et al. 2011; David Parrott, The business of war. Military enterprise and military revolution in early modern Europe, Cambridge 2012.

[15]   Adolf, Peace. A world history (cf. note 3), pp. 103–106.

[16]   Robbie Lieberman, The strangest dream. Communism, anti-communism and the U.S. peace movement 1945–1963, New York 2000, xiv.

[17]   Cortright, Peace. A History of Movements and Ideas (cf. note 7), p. 1.

III. Pacifism in Games

A similar trend might be traced in game studies where a growing body of scholarly work examines warism and the effects of violence in digital games or the scope and implications of sponsorship of an increasing number of war-games by national as well as transnational military-industrial complexes.[18] One founding standpoint which could, at least in part, explain the prevalence of violence and the overall lack of scholarly interest in pacifism in the world of games and game studies comes from Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) who examined war and peace in one of the earliest historical studies of games and gaming, i. e., *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element of Culture*. Written in the inter-war period in Europe, and still influential in the realm of game studies, *Homo Ludens* comments on war and peace in a novel setting: play. Huizinga's main point in his timely book centers around the historically-informed argument he makes in the preface to the volume about the current stage of human civilization; to him, it is impossible to make sense of human cultures without taking the element of play into account.[19] Observing human actions beyond the optimistic post-Enlightenment lens of *Homo Sapiens* (man the thinker) and *Homo Faber* (man the maker),[20] he identifies a different mankind: *Homo Ludens* (man the player) and further examines the historical roots of play as constitu-

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[18]   For further discussion on the questions of ethics, militarism, violence, and player psychology in the world of digital games cf. Nina Huntemann, Matthew T. Payne, Joystick soldiers. The politics of play in military video games. New York, et al. 2010; José Pablo Zagal, The videogame ethics reader, San Diego, CA 2012; Christian Happ, André Melzer, Empathy and violent video games. Aggression and prosocial behavior, Basingstoke et al. 2014; Gareth Schott, Violent games. Rules, realism, and effect, New York 2016; Daniel Bos, Critical methodologies for researching military-themed videogames, in: Alison Williams, et al (eds.), The Routledge companion to military research methods, New York, NY 2016, pp. 332–344; Matthew T. Payne, Playing war. Military video games after 9/11, Berlin 2016; Pat Harrigan, Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, Zones of control. Perspectives on wargaming, Cambridge, MA 2016.

[19]   Huizinga, Homo Ludens (cf. note 9), ix–x.

[20]   Ibid., ix.

tive of old and young civilizations in contexts as allegedly wide apart as poetry and war.

Writing about this latest stage of human civilization, Huizinga does not fail to criticize the standpoint put forth by the likes of Ruskin and Schmitt that without warfare no civilization is possible.[21] Indeed, Huizinga is of the opinion that even though human civilizations would be hard to conceive without the play element – of which war is a key component – he believes that it is "[o]nly by transcending that pitiable friend-foe relationship [that] mankind enter[s] into the dignity of man's estate (209)." Echoing Kant in examining war as ludic or at least agonistic in nature, and informed by and articulated in response to the interwar discussions in Europe, Huizinga's discussion of pacifism enters the equation: while he draws a convincing sketch of the historical playfulness of war as recreational and generative, Huizinga asserts that peace is as much a part of human civilizations as is war and yet it has historically proved to be serious, laborious, and non-ludic (ibid.). It is not too hard to trace the roots of warfare's immense popularity in historical digital games in Huizinga's standpoint: the ludic essence of warism is what is believed by a great majority of game theorists, game designers, and gamers to be wanting in pacifism.

It is true that Kant, Huizinga, and the game industry both before and after the digital turn, sustain and capitalize on the ludicity of violence, thus further underscoring the non-ludic and serious nature of peace. It is equally true that pacifists have historically been stigmatized as unpatriotic, effeminate, traitorous, or plain dumb. However, the double binary "play-work – war-peace" is prone to be qualified as soon as we define peace not as mere absence of war, once we consider the difficulty of establishing absolute pacifism and begin to consider the pragmatism inherent in what Andrew Fiala has termed 'practical pacifism,' or when we examine work beyond solemn productivity and as constitutive of ludic elements.

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[21]   Ibid., 103 a. 209.

In fact, a great number of indie and mainstream action role-playing digital games such as *Fallout 3*,[22] *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*,[23] the *Mass Effect* series,[24] and *Undertale*,[25] action-adventure games such as *Mirror's Edge*[26] and *Dishonored*,[27] the stealth game *Thief*,[28] and the god game *From Dust*[29] offer pacifist scenarios or at least optional ways to abstain from combat as ludic options to play and win. These alternatives are either part of the original gameplay (albeit offered as a second-hand option only so that the game fares better in the ratings and manages to attract a wider range of players), either devised by modders who wish to avoid using the original shooting mechanics by introducing modifications to the original gameplay or by gamers who wish to pursue scenarios not foreseen by game developers, or opted for by those gamers who try to promote gamer morality (for a further discussion of this point, see section IV). These options or devised methods – generally referred to as the 'pacifist run' – range from stealth, running away, or use of non-lethal weaponry, illusion magic, and calming spells and are ways to avoid violence, or at least to avoid bloodshed, without the games' harboring boredom. While it is true that resort to practical peace is not necessarily easier or even possible under all circumstances, in the case of a great number of run-and-gun games such as the Mass Effect series, non-violence is a guarantee for an easier game experience. As 'Many a True Nerd' states, "the most surprising thing is that playing without guns completely inverts the

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[22]   Bethesda Softworks, Fallout 3 (Windows, Xbox 360, Playstation3), 2008.
[23]   Eidos Montreal, Nixxes/Square Enix, Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Windows, Playstation3), 2011.
[24]   Bioware, Demiurge/Microsoft Game Studios, Electronic Arts, Mass Effect (Xbox 360, Windows, Playstation3), 2007–8; Bioware/Electronic Arts, Mass Effect 2 (Xbox 360, Windows, Playstation 3), 2010–11; Bioware/Electronic Arts, Mass Effect 3 (Xbox 360, WiiU, Windows, Playstation 3), 2012.
[25]   Tobyfox, Undertale (Windows, OS X), 2015.
[26]   DICE/Electronic Arts, Mirror's Edge (Xbox 360, Windows, Windows Phone, Playstation3, iOS), 2008.
[27]   Arkane Studios/Bethesda Softworks, Dishonored. Die Maske des Zorns (=Dishonored) (Xbox 360, Windows, Playstation3), 2012.
[28]   Eidos Montreal, Nixxes/Square Enix, Thief (Xbox 360, Xbox One, Windows, Playstation4, Playstation3), 2014.
[29]   UbiSoft, From Dust (Xbox 360, Windows, PlayStation3, OnLive), 2011.

difficulty curve."[30] In a sense, then, these pacifist strategies could be interwoven rather densely into the gameplay – including the games' mechanics and affordances – so that they contribute to the games' ludicity, challenge, and appeal. In other words, despite Huizinga's view, they have the power to turn pacifism into play.

IV. Pacifism in Historical Digital games

In the case of historical strategy games, however, we encounter a different gameplay. One major difference between run-and-gun and strategy digital games is that in the former, enemies are mostly pre-set and the narrative elements all hint at the roots of the animosity – usually one with a backstory made available through the cut-scenes. In these games, the reasons why the enemy deserves to be annihilated are hard to miss or contest. In a wide range of historical strategy digital games such as the *Age of Empires* series, on the other hand, there are no pre-set enemies or marked historical animosities to begin with. Other than the gamers' out-of-game collective memory of historical hostilities between, say, India and the British Empire during the early modern and modern times (what was earlier referred to as 'world histories'),[31] it is either the civilization's need for resources, the gamer's desire to expand in space or strength, and the player's tolerance for proximity to an expanding neighbour that turn nearby civilizations into enemies. In other words, in *Age of Empires* and other similar titles, it is not the historical campaigns between bygone civilizations/empires (which by the way can be played, for example, in *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings*) that prompt war. Rather, what is at work here is the game series' promotion of the overall logic and frame of colonization – explore, expand, and conquer – which are woven into

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[30]   Patricia Hernandez, Mass Effect, Played Without Firing a Single Shot. Interview with Many a True Nerd by Patricia Hernandez, http://kotaku.com/mass-effect-played-without-firing-a-single-shot-1632194355, 15.10.2016.

[31]   For a postcolonial reading of historical strategy games cf. Lammes, Postcolonial Playgrounds (cf. note 1); Souvik Mukherjee, Playing Subaltern. Video Games and Postcolonialism, in: Games and Culture 2016, published online before print, DOI: 10.1177/1555412015627258, 15.10.2016.

the game narrative regardless of personal events in world history and more in favour of the gamers' personal stories.[32] The adoption of this logic in strategy games has been identified by Alan Emrich as "the essential four X's of any good strategic conquest game," the game verbs 'EXplore, EXpand, EXploit, and EXterminate'.[33]

Following this logic, other than in the 'deathmatch mode,' a player of *Age of Empires* might seem to be a pacifist at a given moment during the game when there is no outright military encounter – albeit not necessarily because they are a pacifist by choice. At the beginning of any game session, for instance, the players have to build up their civilization. This involves exploring the map, identifying their neighbours, and spotting gold, wood, and stone. Moreover, depending on their civilizational stage, they need to 'create' farmers, miners, and soldiers, and invest in science and technology in order to make better weaponry or to build a stronger castle. Therefore, even though a player plans to win the game by waging war against its accidental neighbours on the map and to move forward in time to the next historical epoch, there is a period of time at the beginning during which absence of war – what has been referred to as negative pacifism – might be mistaken for peace. It is in fact no more than a preparatory phase during which peace is required for the parties to enhance their civilization, to assess their neighbour/enemy's strengths and weak fronts, and to get ready for invading each other's territory and units. Depending on the ways the players explore the map and the directions they choose to expand out from their original town centre, they might have chance-encounters with the enemy's scouts or fruit-pickers and find themselves forced into engaging with the enemy earlier than planned. Other than this, they usually take time to get prepared before they attack the enemy or are attacked by one.

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[32]   Lammes, Postcolonial Playgrounds (cf. note 1), p. 4.
[33]   Alan Emrich, MicroProse' Strategic Space Opera is Rated XXXX! A Revealing Sneak Review, in: Computer Gaming World, Issue 110, 09/1993, pp. 92–93.

In the realm of Realpolitik, parties to war could seem to be at peace. This was especially true in early modernity, when the parties' supplies were exhausted, and arranging supply lines, ordering the army into an echelon attack formation, and putting a city under siege with few forces on horseback would take a long time. But in fact, they might be tarrying in what Kant cautions about in his essay on the conditions of perpetual peace as "a mere truce, or suspension of hostilities, and not *peace* [emphasis original]".[34] In the world of *Age of Empires* too, the preparatory phases of peace are in fact not peace based on good will. The players are in any case potentially hostile to the interests of other civilizations whom they find in potential conflict with the interests of their own. Therefore, while in these phases pacifism is part of the game narrative, it is a mere matter of time for it to break down. In fact, at this stage, pacifism is not a choice made by the players but rather an unavoidable outcome of the original gameplay which induces the players to manipulate the game architecture, including exploring the space and fortifying a city, before they can engage with other civilizations and empires. In other words, pacifism at this phase is mandatory, pragmatic, and serious work.

Following this preparatory phase of seeming peace, it is spatial and natural constraints, Kant's *status naturalis*, that turn the neighbours into enemies and that make players' choice of nonviolence become pacifistic. At this point, it is the player's choice to either opt for pacifism or to wage war in one or several fronts in order to win. The gamers can opt for a more pacifist, or at least less violent, path to victory – building a Wonder such as the Temple of Heaven or the Taq-i Kasra or collecting relics on the map and safeguarding them for a certain number of years – strategies that transform pacifism into ludicity. In this mode, rather than having to opt for a conclusive, indiscriminate head-hunt in which they have to find and kill every last civilian unit of the enemy (the so-called 'villagers') in order to win the game, the players win by being superior in their skills and

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[34]   Humphrey, Kant (cf. note 12), p. 2.

remaining untiringly watchful to the end. The *campaign modes*, on the other hand, are many and varied, from random-map to historical campaigns, and from regicide to hunting down the other monarchs and destroying them. This mode involves military encounters with other infantries as well as civilians. Of these two main choices available in order for an *Age of Empires* civilization to end victorious, it is war which is promoted as the prime option – valorous and glorious. As in all promotional material for the various titles and spin-offs in the series, the cinematic intro to *Age of Empires III*, for example, includes game-verbs such as 'explore', 'fight', 'conquer', and 'control' to introduce the game – verbs which are the simplified sum of the various stages of European and other colonial endeavours during the early modern and modern periods.[35]

V. The Gamer Community

Following similar trends as in history and the historically themed *Age of Empires* series, pacifism is rarely a glorified topic of discussion in online gaming forums. To cite an example, in a discussion thread about the *Age of Empires*-related title *Age of Mythology*[36] in the online forum *GameFAQS*, user 'Brokendwarf' asks a practical question about pacifism as a strategy. 'Brokendwarf''s disbelief in pacifism as a viable means to victory in *Age of Mythology* and his/her hard time digesting pacifism which includes avoiding all types of violence are discernible in the language and the order in which he/she poses the questions: "How do you get this? It says win without attacking enemy units. Does this mean you can't attack enemy units and buildings? And what about the enemies that guard the relics? Can I not attack those? So can I only win by temple victory?"[37]

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[35]   Cf. Age of Empires Youtube Channel, Age of Empires III Intro, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vWHfg3SQ0Y, 15.10.2016.

[36]   Ensemble Studios/Microsoft, Age of Mythology (Windos, MacOS X), 2002.

[37]   Age of Empires: Mythologies, GameFAQS, http://www.gamefaqs.com/ds/946771-age-of-empires-mythologies/answers/29897-pacifist, 15.10.2016.

Of the two answers posted in response to this inquiry, the answer from user 'Itdragon93' echoes a similar lack of trust in winning by abstaining from violence: "I haven't got this yet, I think it's a waste of time".[38] Even though 'Itdragon93' finds pacifism a boring option, however, he/she continues to give advice on what he thinks the pacifist gameplay in *Age of Mythology* means: "I'm pretty sure that you can still attack buildings, technically their [sic.] not units. You could when [sic.] by conquest, but, it would be much easier to win by temple control. My advice is play on the map Atlas' Burden and go for temple control victory."[39]

Pacifism is further discussed in other forums where it is discussed as a general topic with regard to digital games and in contradistinction to warism and violence. In a query on pacifism and violent digital games, quora.com posted the following question: "If you consider yourself a pacifist, would you be a hypocrite for playing violent video games? I understand the violence is fictional, but would the game conflict with your beliefs?"[40]

The post has so far received a total of 10 responses since it was posted in 2015. User 'Oliver Jia' (identifying himself in his user description as "Uni student, aspiring Japanese translator, atheist, cinephile [sic.], and human being"[41]) does not agree, believing that violence in digital games is about entertainment, but not only: "In the context of the game's world, doing what you can is part of the fun. Violence can be used to tell a story, and most of the time it usually does serve a purpose or greater meaning".[42] 'Oliver Jia' continues, "Shooting a bunch of pixels is completely different from shooting a real flesh and blood

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[38]   Ibid.
[39]   Ibid.
[40]   Anon., "If you consider yourself a pacifist, would you be a hypocrite for playing violent video games?" https://www.quora.com/If-you-consider-yourself-a-pacifist-would-you-be-a-hypocrite-for-playing-violent-video-games, 15.10.2016.
[41]   Ibid. The same holds for the following self-descriptions.
[42]   Ibid.

human".[43] Discussing the issue with reference to religion and politics, user 'Charlie Kilpatrick' ("I've been playing video games straight back to Orcs & Humans") agrees with 'Oliver Jia' about fictional vs. real bloodshed:

"Some of these [religious and political] forms of pacifism might extend toward violent video games. These games are widely viewed as indulgences and (mistakenly in my view) as promoting violence. A devout Hindu or Christian's particular strain of pacifism might preclude violent video games while a political pacifist feels no compunction against playing them."[44]

Further down the thread, 'Pablo Oliva' ("gaming since age 6") answers the question by mentioning his dream of a world in which fewer wars are waged and in which violence takes place only in the pixelated world of digital games. Despite his dream, however, 'Pablo Oliva' believes that violence cannot be totally ruled out from human societies because human beings are wired to be violent. However, he continues, "if I can choose between a society with ice hockey and *Call of Duty* or one with high crime rates or a permanently active army, I choose the former; because that violence is directed at virtual entities, that can take it".[45]

To cite another comment from the same thread, 'Pedro Falcão' ("Been playing since 7 yrs old, currently studying to be a developer") writes about what he believes pacifism means:

"The key about considering yourself a pacifist is that you don't agree with innocent people being hurt, so every conflict should be resolved diplomatically to avoid that. While technically you're practicing what you believe is wrong, the fact that nobody will actually get hurt in any way is the key. Instead of spreading violence and pain, you are having fun with your

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43   Ibid.
44   Ibid.
45   Ibid.

supposed enemy, and venting the stress of your daily life. Also, that video games incite violence is a myth."[46]

Fewer users such as 'David Cossu' ("Games addict. Some times [sic.] even developer"), on the other hand, show a hard time reconciling pacifism with playing violent digital games: "I personally think," writes 'David', "that yes, at times it can be a contradiction. I also think that people can understand when violence is fictional and when it's not".[47] To him, however, strategy games are different because in this genre the overall objective is agreed to be "to defeat the enemy army".[48] User 'Lian Berthold' takes an even stronger stance: "I would say yes, a pacifist shouldn't play gory videogames or watch violent movies. But," he continues, "since I'm not a 100 % pacifist, that's only my 1/50 of a dollar".[49]

A similar question is asked by 'penguin_Ix' on the *Cool Ghosts* discussion page on *ShutUpandSitDown.com* about whether pacifism is a meaningful option in the digital game culture.[50] In one of more than fifty responses, user 'Gwathdring' states that pacifism is an ideology and not a practical choice. 'Gwathdring' further writes about why the so-called 'pacifist runs' are not popular in the world of digital games: "It's because games are entertainment not ideology and people who want to avoid violence don't have to play a pacifist in a violent world – they can go all out and just not play a game with guns in it."[51] Another comment discussing pacifism as an alternative way to play the same set of violent games that he has played with the original violent gameplay, the killer-turned-pacifist gamer 'MinuteWalt' argues like this: "Normally, I just want to kill everything because the pacifist

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46   Ibid.
47   Ibid.
48   Ibid.
49   Ibid.
50   Penguin_Ix, Pacifism in Videogames as Meaningful Option, in: Cool Ghosts: All Things Video Games, August 25 (2016), https://discussions.shutupandsitdown. com/t/pacifism-in-video-games-as-a-meaningful-option/2450/2, 15.10.2016.
51   Ibid.

game is clearly much more of a pain in the ass than just playing the game that the developers obviously wanted to make, and then they threw in a pacifism option as a challenge".[52]

As the discussion takes various directions, 'penguin_Ix' clarifies in a later comment in the thread that the responses sometimes take pacifism to mean avoiding violence when possible and taking up non-lethal violence when winning the game dictates it.[53] What is absent from their views, the comment maintains, is the politically informed definition of pacifism as active avoidance and curbing of violence and resorting to conflict resolution. In fact, non-violence could count as virtual pacifism only when it follows this definition and results from the player's "imparting real-world morals on their virtual-world characters".[54] Moreover, it seems that this group of pro gamers take up pacifism as a ludic option only when they are bored with the original gameplay or in an attempt to enhance and demonstrate superior skills in surviving the run-and-gun course without resort to the originally available means, including using hand-grenades or engaging in a gunfight. At the same time, what seems to be a rather common pattern in these answers is that, on the whole, the comments hardly discuss pacifism as a worldview in and of itself. Instead, they discuss pacifism as a reaction to how often in-game violence is discussed under a negative light in media as well as research.[55] In the same vein, these responses seem to function as a means to lessen the moral ambivalence that these gamers feel toward playing violent games despite their otherwise belief in non-violence outside the virtual world – what Emrich refers to as 'EXcuses' (to one's significant others).[56]

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[52]   Ibid.
[53]   Ibid.
[54]   Conor Dougherty, Videogamers Embark on Nonkilling Spree. 'Pacifist Run' Wins Bragging Rights; Spells, Not Swords, in: The Wall Street Journal, January 31 (2012), http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203806504577181320 148513432, 15.10.2016.
[55]   Emrich, MicroProse' (cf. note 34), p. 92.
[56]   Ibid.

VI. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to shed light, first, on the limits and potential of pacifism as a strategy to win historical digital games; second, on how players discuss their choice of strategy within online platforms; and third, on how digital games in general weigh in on violence and peace. It was noted that pacifism – the commitment to life in harmony and to rejecting, avoiding, curbing, and resisting violence – has a history as intriguing as that of warism. Despite its vibrant history, however, it is hardly uncomplicated to pursue pacifism when war and confrontation can be resorted to – choices which have historically promised to lead to a more exalted end: eternal victory or ephemeral humiliation. Nonetheless, as in the case of the real-time strategy (RTS) digital game *Age of Empires*, pacifism is a choice that players can make. On the surface, no civilization/empire listed in *Age of Empires* is depicted as evil or inherently antagonistic – a fact which makes waging war or following a pacifist strategy a complex decision to make. Furthermore, as the article argues, even though pacifism has been foreseen by the developers of *Age of Empires* as a complete set of strategies to win the game, players can switch between warlike and peaceful strategies depending on the current stage of their civilization's progress, where on the map they are located, and their acceptance threshold in response to other players' patterns of expanding their territories and exploiting natural resources. As the example of *Age of Empires* suggests, digital games offer little choice other than resort to violence or establishing peace treaties or diplomatic relations as strategies to choose from. Sanctioning the binary opposition of warism and pacifism, they leave more lasting resolution of hostilities to the world of *Realpolitik*.

Furthermore, even though to pursue pacifism in and out of computer games is a moral question, probing the morality of a pragmatic approach to war and peace in *Realpolitik* merits a longer discussion which remains outside the scope of the present article. By way of conclusion, however, it should be noted that, while it is often be-

lieved that digital games do not capitalize on morality, in the end the decision of a player to opt for the seemingly less glorious, flashy, and exciting strategy of pacifism is one of morals and conscience and not one of pure pragmatism. However, as the discussion threads reflect, in their own right, the ambivalent stance that the player community holds with regard to reconciling pacifism as a virtuous worldview with killing sprees as virtual entertainment. All in all, as these examples suggest, the English-speaking player community under study here demonstrates a lacklustre interest in pacifist strategies similar to the ways history has been suspicious of pacifist movements. In fact, they follow the same historical pattern (discussed in II) where pacifism and warism are shown to have been historically considered as binary opposites, present only when the other is absent. Similarly, the views expressed in these threads resonate with how game studies scholars have been reluctant to examine the significance of pacifism as ludic counter-violence. In other words, it is as if the gamer community views violence as the topic of ludic interest, while it takes peace as the serious, boring alternative discussed only on the side.