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# “No One is Ever Ready for Something Like This.” – On the Dialectic of the Holocaust in First-Person Shooters as Exemplified by *Wolfenstein: The New Order*

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**Abstract:** For almost three decades, the depiction of the Holocaust was considered taboo in digital games. While World War II became a popular historicizing setting for digital games, the crimes of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust in particular remained conspicuously absent. In this article we show that discussions about the fundamental suitability of specific media or media forms for dealing responsibly with the memory of the Nazi regime's crimes have already taken place several times and that similar arguments can now be applied to the digital game. With this in mind, we pursue the question of whether only so-called serious games are suitable for this purpose, or whether, on the contrary, mainstream blockbuster games – here specifically the first-person shooter *Wolfenstein: The New Order* – can find ways to maintain the memory of the Holocaust without trivializing it. We approach this question by analyzing chapter 8 of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, in which protagonist William “B.J.” Blazkowicz allows himself to be deported to a Nazi concentration camp. We discuss this camp scene dialectically, on the one hand, as an encouragement to rethink the first-person shooter and, on the other hand, as a reproduction of a superficial iconography of the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** digital games, contemporary history, Holocaust studies, popular culture studies, *Wolfenstein: The New Order*

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## 1 Introduction

While World War II became a popular historicizing setting for digital games, the crimes of the Nazi regime and of the Holocaust in particular have remained conspicuously absent. Toward the end of the 1980s, copies of the anti-Semitic and inhumane ‘game’ *KZ-Manager*<sup>1</sup> made the rounds in Austrian and German schoolyards,<sup>2</sup> effectively making taboo any depiction of the Holocaust in digital games for almost three decades.<sup>3</sup> Then, seemingly out of nowhere and therefore all the more surprising, came a scene in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*,<sup>4</sup> the latest reboot of the *Wolfenstein* game series, in which the game’s protagonist is interned in a concentration camp. The first-person shooter was developed by Swedish studio Machine Games and published by Bethesda Softworks in May 2014 for PC and consoles. Despite its apparently limited economic success,<sup>5</sup> the game received mostly positive reviews.<sup>6</sup> Criticism by the press concerning the game’s use of a subject as

<sup>1</sup> *KZ-Manager* (n.n. 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See Wolfgang Benz, “KZ-Manager im Kinderzimmer. Rechtsextreme Computerspiele,” in *Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland: Voraussetzungen, Zusammenhänge, Wirkungen*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), 224–31.

<sup>3</sup> See Eugen Pfister and Martin Tschiggerl, “‘The Führer’s facial hair and name can also be reinstated in the virtual world’: Taboos, Authenticity and the Second World War in digital games,” *GAME Games as Art, Media, Entertainment* 1, no. 9 (2020): 51–70.

<sup>4</sup> *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames 2014).

<sup>5</sup> This is indicated by the player numbers on Steam, which include PC but not console players. In July 2018, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* had only around 1.8 million players on PC according to leaked player data (see Kyle Orland, “Valve leaks Steam game player counts; we have the numbers,” *ars Technica*, last modified July 6, 2018, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2018/07/steam-data-leak-reveals-precise-player-count-for-thousands-of-games/>).

<sup>6</sup> As of March 2021, the PC version of the game has achieved an average score of 81 out of 100 on Metacritic and a user rating of 8.2 out of 10 (See “*Wolfenstein: The New Order*,” Metacritic, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/wolfenstein-the-new-order>). On Steam, 89% of the 28,211 user reviews for the international version of the game have been positive (see “*Wolfenstein: The New Order*,” Steam, accessed November 3, 2020, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/201810/Wolfenstein\\_The\\_New\\_Order\\_International\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/201810/Wolfenstein_The_New_Order_International_Edition/)).

taboo as the Holocaust was rather restrained. Did the game manage to depict the Holocaust in a dignified and critical way? The Israeli journalist Jordan Hoffman summarized the question in an article for *The Times of Israel*: “Where the line of decency is drawn is somewhat dependent on whether you consider video games art, storytelling or a brain dead way to kill time, blasting pixels in increasingly gross ways while memorizing movement patterns.”<sup>7</sup>

Intense debates at the end of the twentieth century about whether the Holocaust could be represented in poetry, television, film, and graphic novels usually came out in favor of these interpretations. The question now arises as to whether games – as a medium capable deploying historical imagery – are also capable of drawing on the subject of the Holocaust in a way that is acceptable. Parallels to historical discourses can also be seen in the question of whether only ‘serious games’<sup>8</sup> are suited to showing the Holocaust or if, on the contrary, mainstream ‘blockbuster’ games could also find ways to help remember the Holocaust without trivializing it. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* is therefore a worthwhile object for a historical analysis because it allows us to gain particular insights into the historical function of digital games, in this case a first-person shooter rooted in the Nazisploitation genre.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned scene in the camp, we will address the question of whether games can responsibly depict the Holocaust. We are however not aiming to find a definitive answer, but rather to analyze the underlying historical, ethical, and memorial discourse that this question raises. After all, the game appeared at a time when the future of remembrance was – and still is, for that matter – increasingly discussed in view of a growing ignorance about the Holocaust in large parts of the population, in particular among younger generations.<sup>10</sup>

7 Jordan Hoffman, “Major new game set at a Nazi concentration camp is top seller,” *The Times of Israel*, June 17, 2014, accessed November 3, 2020, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/major-new-game-set-at-nazi-concentration-camp-is-top-seller/>.

8 Serious games are understood here as games which “are not only fun, but in addition have a specific purpose” and are therefore characterized by an “objective apart from pure entertainment.” (Stefan Göbel, “Serious Games,” in *Handbuch Gameskultur*, eds. Olaf Zimmermann and Felix Falk (Berlin: Deutscher Kulturrat, 2020), 105–09, quote on 105. Translated by the authors).

9 Recently, the *American Historical Review* published an extensive review of the game and its successor (Andrew Denning, “Deep Play? Video Games and the Historical Imaginary,” *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (2021): 180–98).

10 See Harriet Sherwood, “Nearly two-thirds of US young adults unaware 6m Jews killed in the Holocaust,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2020, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/16/holocaust-us-adults-study>.

## 2 Debates on the Representability of the Holocaust

“For those of us who were not there – and today that includes all but a dwindling few of us – representations are the way we access the Holocaust.”<sup>11</sup> In order to remain present in our collective memory, the Holocaust must be constantly remembered. This also takes place in our popular culture. Medialization of the Holocaust in popular culture is rarely unproblematic, however, because of the format-related adaptations and transformations involved. Frequently cited in this context is Theodor W. Adorno’s dictum “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric,”<sup>12</sup> which is often interpreted as a dogmatic prohibition in the tradition of a quasi-religious “ban on images.”<sup>13</sup> According to this interpretation, it would be fundamentally impossible to adequately describe the suffering of millions of people. This interpretation of Adorno’s statement, which he himself later relativized, has been challenged. Burkhardt Lindner, for example, understands the sentence rather as a critique of a culture that is inherently barbaric.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, every transposition – and in particular every aestheticization – of the Holocaust into another medium remained associated with the fear of trivialization.

In 1978, the US television series *Holocaust* (dir. Marvin J. Chomsky 1978) was criticized for trivializing the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup>

11 Daniel H. Magilow and Lisa Silverman, *Holocaust Representations in History: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–20, quote on 1.

12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I-II. 2 v* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 30. Translated by the authors.

13 See Gerald Kriehofer, “... nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch ...” Theodor W. Adorno,” *Zitatforschung*, last modified November 20, 2017, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://falschzitate.blogspot.com/2017/11/nach-auschwitz-ein-gedicht-zu-schreiben.html?m=0>; Karyn Ball, “For and against the Bilderverbot: The Rhetoric of ‘Unrepresentability’ and Remediated ‘Authenticity’ in the German Reception of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*,” in *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, eds. David Bathrick, Brad Prager, and Michael D. Richardson (Rochester: Camden House, 2008), 162–84, quote on 162–63; Habbo Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild. Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), 11; Miriam Bratu Hansen, “‘Schindler’s List’ is not ‘Shoah’: the Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 292–312, quote on 300, 306.

14 See Burkhardt Lindner, “Was heißt: Nach Auschwitz? Adornos Datum,” in *Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur und der Holocaust*, eds. Stephan Braese, Holger Gehle, Doron Kiesel, and Hanno Loewy (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1998), 283–300, quote on 286.

15 See Christoph Classen, “Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* among History, Memory, and Popular Culture,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 2 (2009): 77–102.

Elie Wiesel called the series "untrue, hurtful, cheap."<sup>16</sup> The German historian Eugen Kogon, on the other hand – who had himself survived imprisonment in the Buchenwald concentration camp – judged it more positively despite noting its "embarrassing" and "sentimental Hollywood concept[s]": Kogon found that the "inner truth of history" was "not falsified by this" and thought many Germans should watch the series.<sup>17</sup> In Western Germany alone, it was precisely this deliberately dramatized realization that helped it reach broader segments of the population: 20 million – "about 48 percent of the adult population" – watched at least one *Holocaust* episode.<sup>18</sup>

Two decades later, a similar debate surrounded Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993), where once again there were arguments about whether a "Hollywoodization" of the Holocaust should be permissible.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah* (1985) and one of the most vehement critics of Spielberg's film, saw a fundamental incompatibility here.<sup>20</sup> Critics focused primarily on Spielberg's filmography since he had made a name for himself as a "commercial" director. American film critic James Hoberman asked the polemically exaggerated question, "[i]s it possible to make a feel-good entertainment about the ultimate feel-bad experience of the 20th century?"<sup>21</sup> Another point of criticism was the narrative technique associated with feature films: the personalization, emotionalization, and the 'necessary' happy ending, which ran counter to the documentary style that had prevailed until then – in other words, the same accusations that had been directed at the *Holocaust* series 15 years earlier. The film not only became a commercial success, grossing over \$312 million in theaters alone, it also won seven Oscars. Spielberg's film seems to have succeeded in heralding a paradigm shift. Indeed, the fundamental suitability of the medium for depicting the Holocaust is no longer questioned

today, as evidenced by the success of films such as *Life is Beautiful* (dir. Roberto Benigni 1998), *The Pianist* (dir. Roman Polański 2002), and *The Counterfeiters* (dir. Stefan Ruzowitzky 2007). Parallels can also be drawn here to debates surrounding the suitability of depicting the Holocaust in comics.<sup>22</sup>

*Schindler's List* and the other films mentioned have had a lasting impact on our collective memory of the Holocaust; they have codified – through their commercial success and, above all, their reach – an iconography that today enables us to immediately recognize indices of the Holocaust even in games (and all other media) in which the Holocaust is not explicitly mentioned. In fact, this iconography can be traced back to World War II photographs and newsreel footage from the ghettos and concentration camps, especially the American "atrocity films" – an umbrella term for newsreel footage and documentaries of the liberated concentration camps: mass graves, fields of corpses, incinerators, and emaciated survivors.<sup>23</sup> Supplemented by "cattle cars, ramps, and tracks of the deportation of the Jews,"<sup>24</sup> a "lieu de mémoire"<sup>25</sup> was thus formed. These indices of the Holocaust can also be found in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. In addition to the cattle cars, tattooed prisoners, and incinerators, however, we also encounter a female SS officer dressed in leather, robot dogs, and a moon base in the game.

In *Wolfenstein: The New Order* we can identify a separate imagination of the Holocaust: the so-called Nazisploitation genre in which earlier films such as *Isa*, *She Wolf of the SS* (dir. Don Edmonds 1975) and *The Night Porter* (dir. Liliana Cavani 1974) have been joined more recently by *Iron Sky* (dir. Timo Vuorensola 2012), *Overlord* (dir. Julius Avery 2018) and have influenced mainstream blockbusters such as *Inglourious Basterds* (dir. Quentin Tarantino 2009) and *Captain America: The First*

<sup>16</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Die Trivialisierung des Holocaust: Halb Faktum und halb Fiktion," in *Im Kreuzfeuer: Der Fernsehfilm Holocaust. Eine Nation ist betroffen*, eds. Peter Märthesheimer and Ivo Frenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), 25–30, quote on 26. Translated by the authors.

<sup>17</sup> Eugen Kogon, "Über die 'innere Wahrheit' des Fernsehfilms Holocaust," in *Im Kreuzfeuer: Der Fernsehfilm Holocaust. Eine Nation ist betroffen*, eds. Peter Märthesheimer and Ivo Frenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), 66–69, quotes on 67. Translated by the authors.

<sup>18</sup> See "Chronik der ARD. Dritte Fernsehprogramme senden 'Holocaust,'" ARD, accessed November 3, 2020, [http://web.ard.de/ard-chronik/index/2204?year=1979&month=1&rubric\[\]=5](http://web.ard.de/ard-chronik/index/2204?year=1979&month=1&rubric[]=5). The ARD is the Working group of public broadcasters of the Federal Republic of Germany.

<sup>19</sup> Classen, "Balanced Truth," 78.

<sup>20</sup> See Hansen, "Schindler's List," 306.

<sup>21</sup> Hoberman quote from Hansen, "Schindler's List," 297.

<sup>22</sup> See Janek Cordes, "Den Holocaust zeichnen: Kontroversen um Bildsprachen und Darstellungsweisen," *Hypotheses' Moral Icons*, last modified August 22, 2017, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://moralicons.hypotheses.org/381>.

<sup>23</sup> See Magilow & Silverman, *Holocaust Representations*, 23–30; Jeanpaul Goergen, "'Atrocity films': Aufklärung durch Schrecken," *Filmblatt* 10, no. 28 (2005): 61–63.

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Paul, "Europabilder des 20. Jahrhunderts. Bilddiskurse – Bilderkanon – visuelle Erinnerungsorte" in *Bilder von Europa: Innen- und Außenansichten von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, eds. Benjamin Drechsel, Friedrich Jaeger, Helmut König, Anne-Katrin Lang, and Claus Leggewie (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010), 255–80, quote on 269. Translated by the authors.

<sup>25</sup> See Etienne François, "Pierre Nora und die 'Lieux de Mémoire,'" in *Erinnerungsorte Frankreichs*, ed. Pierre Nora (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005), 7–14, quote on 7.

*Avenger* (dir. Joe Johnston 2011).<sup>26</sup> Here it could be argued that it was exactly the ascription of ‘trash’ inherent to the genre which allowed this form of medicalization of Nazi crimes more leeway.

Still, for many years, the taboo of the Holocaust remained unchallenged in digital games, shored up by the short-term distribution of the illegal and clearly extreme right-wing *KZ Manager*.<sup>27</sup> Other games touching upon the topic were altered for the German market.<sup>28</sup> The increase in Holocaust representations in film, television, and comics – coinciding with debates concerning social media and Holocaust memory,<sup>29</sup> or the ‘Holocaust holograms’ which capture survivor’s stories – have changed the discussion.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, today, the absence of the Holocaust in digital games is seen as a deficiency. As remarked by Wulf Kansteiner: “Given the cultural prominence of video games in general and games with historical themes in particular it amounts to a strange case of Holocaust denial in reverse that no sophisticated game about the topic yet exists.”<sup>31</sup> The reasons for this ‘strange’ omission lie in culturally and historically grown and demonstrable fears of trivialization or denial of the Holocaust through the gaming medium. In

their 2015 essay on the representation of National Socialism in digital games, for example, Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderroth suggest that there is a specific “ludic frame” at play.<sup>32</sup> By ludic frame, they mean that the medium of digital games has its own logic of representation and narrative to which content must be adapted and which inevitably involves an “intrinsically trivializing property.”<sup>33</sup> Another motive might be the rarely expressed, but presumably nevertheless widespread, concern that developers could lose their interpretational sovereignty of the Holocaust because players can, for example, use modifications to alter their games.<sup>34</sup> But what about a first-person shooter like *Wolfenstein: The New Order*?

### 3 *Wolfenstein: The New Order* – the Camp Scene

In the alternate history of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, the Nazi regime has won World War II and dominates the game world, which is set in the 1960s. The players take the role of the (former) American soldier William “B.J.” Blazkowicz, who works in the resistance against the Nazi regime. The developers highlight futuristic Nazi technologies in the game which, according to its narrative, ensured victory for the Nazis.<sup>35</sup> In the game’s story, the Nazis only gained access to these technologies because they stole them from a Jewish secret organization called Da’at Yishud. *Wolfenstein* thus relies on the narrational mode of the “fantastical counterfactual.”<sup>36</sup> In the mission relevant to this analysis

<sup>26</sup> See Daniel H. Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture,” in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: Continuum, 2012), 1–20, quote on 5.

<sup>27</sup> The questionable and consequently cancelled modification *Sonderkommando Revolt* (Team RayCast unpublished) for *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1993) as well as the unsuccessful and also cancelled project *Imagination Is the Only Escape* (Bernard unpublished) are examples of this taboo’s prevalence. See Pieter Van den Heede, “Engaging with the Second World War through Digital Gaming” (PhD diss., Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2021), 82.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 37 for how *Wolfenstein: The New Order* was altered for the German market. Another noteworthy example is the game *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (Cyberdreams 1995), based on the short story of the same title. One of the five characters, Nimdok, an ex-Nazi physician, was removed from the game in the German version. Ironically, this made it impossible to complete the game (“I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,” Schnittberichte, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.schnittberichte.com/schnittbericht.php?ID=399275>).

<sup>29</sup> See Wulf Kansteiner, “Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies,” in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception*, eds. Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 305–43.

<sup>30</sup> See Steffi de Jong, “Von Hologrammen und sprechenden Füchsen – Holocausterinnerung 3.0,” #erinnern\_kontrover, last modified July 9, 2017, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://erinnern.hypotheses.org/files/2015/07/Von-Hologrammen-und-sprechenden-Füchsen-%C2%AD-Holocausterinnerung.pdf>; Steffi de Jong, *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 245–49.

<sup>31</sup> Kansteiner, “Transnational Holocaust Memory,” 314.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderroth, “Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games,” in *The Dark Side of Game Play. Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderroth, and Ashley M. L. Brown (London: Routledge, 2015), 137–153, quote on 138.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>34</sup> This can be seen in Paradox Interactive’s decision not to allow mods for *Hearts of Iron III* (Paradox Development Studio 2009) in which the Holocaust or other war crimes of the Nazi regime would be shown or simulated. See unmerged(9046) [Pseudonym], “No Gulags, Gas, Concentration Camps, Holocaust or Swastikas! If in doubt, ask a Mod,” Paradox Forum, last modified April 6, 2011, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/no-gulags-gas-concentration-camps-holocaust-or-swastikas-if-in-doubt-ask-a-mod.529860/>.

<sup>35</sup> Here, the game draws on a popular cultural tradition that plays on Western audiences’ fascination with the secret *Superwaffen* [super weapons] of the Nazi regime, such as in the game *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe* (Lucasfilm Games 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Steffen Bender, *Virtuelles Erinnern. Kriege des 20. Jahrhunderts in Computerspielen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 68. Translated by the authors.



(Chapter 08),<sup>37</sup> Blazkowicz allows himself to be deported to a Nazi concentration camp in order to free Set Roth, a member of the aforementioned group Da'at Yichud. His mission is to find a weakness in the Nazis' weaponry.

The camp-mission begins with a non-interactive cutscene in which the resistance group develops a plan to free Set Roth.<sup>38</sup> Shortly after, players hear Blazkowicz's somber words against a black image: "So stupid. I was arrogant. No one is ever ready for something like this." Then the gates open, light filters in, and players learn that the protagonist is in a cattle wagon with several other prisoners. Through the opening in the wagon, we see a gate with the word "Selo" – or "Belica" in the international version of the game – above it (Figure 1), which is a clear recourse "to visual codes of the Holocaust deeply anchored in collective memory."<sup>39</sup> Additionally, players are confronted with symbolically charged elements such as the chimneys and iron gate in the background, which is reminiscent of the

iconic gate of Auschwitz.<sup>40</sup> The appearance of female officer "Frau Engel" [Ms. Angel] is, however, a nod to traditions of the Nazisploitation film.

Only seconds later, players see the protagonist automatically marching in line behind prisoners while only the camera perspective can be controlled, that is, the view occurs through the eyes of Blazkowicz. In this scene, too, clear references to the Holocaust can be identified as the game draws upon an iconographic form of expression of a "power of rows"<sup>41</sup> and an "attitude of inferior bodies."<sup>42</sup> Unmistakably, a 'selection process' between 'able-bodied' and 'debilitated' new arrivals takes place in the camp (Figure 2). Blazkowicz is found fit for work in the course of this process, which in Holocaust memory became the "incarnation of the entire extermination process,"<sup>43</sup> and is pushed into an adjoining room by a soldier. The industrial mass murder that took place in the concentration camps remains implicit, but not invisible.

In the next room, for the first time in this chapter of the game, players can control both Blazkowicz's movement and point of view. But here, too, the agency of the players is considerably limited. There is no choice but to interact with the machine, which tattoos a recognition number on Blazkowicz's right arm. Again, a clear motif from concentration camp iconography.

Then, control of Blazkowicz can be taken again. In a hallway on the way to the next room, players are given the opportunity to pause and look at a stooped row of people to the right. On the left, behind a locked gate, a prisoner is being beaten by three guards and cannot be saved by the player. By breaking from the familiar shooter gameplay itself, a statement is made about the power and powerlessness of the players.

Soon after, players can explore the courtyard of Block 4. This exploration reveals a renewed recourse to an iconography of the extermination camps, more precisely: a "[s]tandardized imagination of the crime space" identified by Habbo Knoch.<sup>44</sup> Chimneys, which are also clearly visible in this sequence, exemplify the implied off-screen space of the crematoria.<sup>45</sup> Reference to this iconography can also be seen in the dilapidated barracks, which is simultaneously counteracted by the looming, flame-spitting robot (Figure 3). This concession to the exaggerated Nazisploitation genre breaks with the otherwise sober and oppressive portrayal of the camp. The unambiguously fantastic robot – called "Herr Faust" [Mr. Fist/Mr. Faustus] in the game – clearly situates

37 For our analysis, we played the version of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* that was adapted to the German market. In contrast to the game's international edition, symbols like the swastika or SS runes, which are prohibited in Germany, were removed from the game. What actually proves to be problematic is that beyond the exchange of criminally relevant symbolism, there is an even more fundamental interference in the game's narrative. The German version of the game talks about the "regime" (not the "Reich") so that no clear reference to National Socialism is made, but only an indirectly aesthetic one. Finally, the name of the camp was also changed in the German version: from Belica to Selo. There exists some research on this (self-) censorship. See Eugen Pfister, "Das Unspielbare spielen – Imaginationen des Holocaust in Digitalen Spielen," *Zeitgeschichte* 4 (2016): 250–63; Felix Zimmermann, "Wider die Selbstzensur – Das Dritte Reich, nationalsozialistische Verbrechen und der Holocaust im Digitalen Spiel," *gespielt | Blog des Arbeitskreises Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele*, last modified August 27, 2017, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://gespielt.hypothesen.org/1449>; Tobias Meßmer, "Ist Hakenkreuz gleich Hakenkreuz? Der Umgang des staatlichen Jugendschutzes mit verfassungsfeindlichen Symbolen im Digitalen Spiel 1985–1994," *gespielt | Blog des Arbeitskreises Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele*, last modified August 23, 2019, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://gespielt.hypothesen.org/3208>; Peter Färberböck, "'Mein Kanzler!' Von A wie Adolf Heiler bis Z wie Zensur," in *"Eva, auf Wiedersehen!" – Zur Geschichte, Verhandlung und Einordnung der Wolfenstein-Spielereihe*, eds. Rudolf Inderst, Pascal Wagner, and Aurelia Brandenburg (Glückstadt: vvh, 2021) [In preparation]. After another review in light of a new legal interpretation (see footnote 69), the international version of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* was released in Germany in November 2019.

38 The mission can be followed in the form of a YouTube video ("Wolfenstein: The New Order (German Edition).") YouTube video, 33:05. Posted by "Felix Zimmermann," January 23, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Jm7y7GAS7A>. While this particular video is necessarily in German, other gameplay videos available on YouTube show the international version of the camp scene.

39 Pfister, "Das Unspielbare spielen," 258. Translated by the authors.

40 Ibid.

41 Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild*, 103. Translated by the authors.

42 Ibid., 107. Translated by the authors.

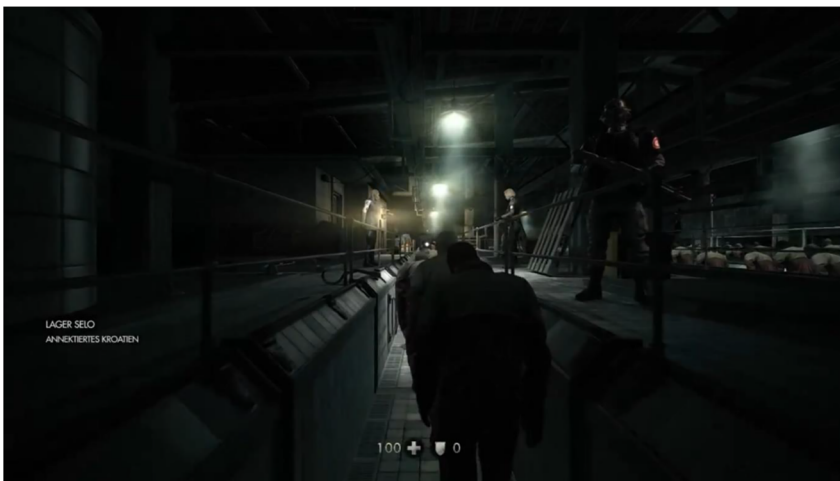
43 Ibid., 110. Translated by the authors.

44 Ibid., 107. Translated by the authors.

45 Pfister, "Das Unspielbare spielen," 258.



**Figure 1:** View from the cattle wagon at the beginning of the camp scene. (Source: Screenshot taken by the authors).



**Figure 2:** Blazkowicz marches forward automatically, only the camera perspective can be controlled. (Source: Screenshot taken by the authors).

the events in the fantastical, thereby simultaneously emphasizing and dissolving the tension of a realistic representation in a fictional game.

In the barracks, Blazkowicz encounters Set Roth, who is to be freed, and after a period of reflection, develops an escape plan from the camp. After another cutscene the player is given control again to go to the guard building and disable the security systems there. Blazkowicz reaches the basement of the building via a shaft that is obviously used to ‘dispose’ of killed prisoners. An interesting off-screen space becomes present towards the end of this short sequence: barrels of blood flow into the basement from the higher floor. Players are left at this point only to imagine the atrocities that might have been committed. The inevitable target of this sequence is a sliding door. Behind the door, a brutal warden called “Das Messer” [The Knife] is already waiting for Blazkowicz and drags him off to the torture chair that was just hinted at off-screen. In the torture sequence that now follows, once again only the avatar’s point of view can be controlled; the powerlessness of players is supposed to reflect the powerlessness of the protagonist.

Blazkowicz awakens with the knife still in his stomach. Apparently, he was presumed dead and taken to a furnace.<sup>46</sup> He escapes and is now armed with a knife. At this point, the protagonist’s previous powerlessness is reversed into Blazkowicz’s dominance over his enemies. In fact, as becomes clear in the following sequences, it is not a desperate struggle for survival in the face of systematic annihilation that develops, but an idealized fight for liberation by the superhumanly strong Blazkowicz, who “single-handedly [defeats] the entire team of guards of the Belica camp.”<sup>47</sup>

The first 13 min of the mission, characterized by the powerlessness of Blazkowicz and thus also of the players,

<sup>46</sup> The fact that the visible container is a furnace is not apparent in the German version. It is at best audible. Both the disfigured corpses that are in the furnace with him in the international version and the fire that is activated shortly after Blazkowicz’s awakening are completely absent in the German version. (“Wolfenstein – The Order: Gewaltzensur,” *Schnittberichte*, accessed April 22, 2021, <http://www.schnittberichte.com/schnittbericht.php?ID=363269&Seite=7#ge>).

<sup>47</sup> Pfister, “Das Unspielbare spielen,” 258. Translated by the authors.



**Figure 3:** Player can more or less freely roam Block 4. The barracks to the left can be entered. To the right, the flame-spitting robot is visible. (Source: Screenshot taken by the authors).

stand in stark contrast to the remaining 15 min in which Blazkowicz, armed with a knife, kills numerous guards; a contrast whose “ludonarrative dissonance” has been emphasized by scholars like Rudolph Inderst.<sup>48</sup> Here, the game falls back into familiar and learned patterns of the first-person shooter or those primarily associated with this genre.<sup>49</sup> Due to the fact that *Wolfenstein: The New Order* foregrounds the fight against the Nazis at this point, the death camp, thus, becomes only one of many settings of violent resistance against Nazism.

The concentration camp therefore acts as “one set piece of many.”<sup>50</sup> This set piece in particular allows players to re-enact a given and idealized liberation story. In just 13 min, we get a glimpse into the potential associated with examining the Holocaust through the genre of a first-person shooter game. Through this genre, players lose their agency and are left powerless at times. Players are, at other

times, also able to explore and potentially be confronted with the atrocities happening at the camp. This potential is however limited by the game-mechanical conventions of the first-person shooter, which is why the exploration process ultimately lacks “a truly critical imagination of National Socialist atrocities”<sup>51</sup> and why a visualization of the “hopelessness and desperation of the fate of a concentration camp prisoner”<sup>52</sup> does not succeed.

## 4 Thesis: Rethinking the First-Person Shooter

Based on this scene we would argue that the medium of digital games offers the potential for particularly powerful medialization of concentration camps. The game mechanics’ ability to limit players’ actions can strengthen the “environmental storytelling”<sup>53</sup> so that players pay more attention in “action-reduced situations”<sup>54</sup> like the first 13 min of the camp scene. The players themselves become

<sup>48</sup> Rudolf Inderst, “‘They’re rewriting history. But they forgot about me.’ *Wolfenstein: The Order* als spielerische Weiterführung dystopischer Erzähltraditionen,” in *Spielzeichen: Theorien, Analysen und Kontexte des zeitgenössischen Computerspiels*, eds. Martin Hennig and Hans Krah (Glückstadt: vwh, 2016), 248–65, quote on 253. Translated by the authors.

<sup>49</sup> In the context of this paper, we define “genre” as a “designation for a set of works with common content-related or stylistic characteristics” (see Jochen Koube, “Gamebegriffe,” in *Handbuch Gameskultur*, eds. Olaf Zimmermann and Felix Falk (Berlin: Deutscher Kulturrat, 2020), 34–38, quote on 37. Translated by the authors) and, as it were, as a “communication matrix between producers, distributors, and recipients” whereby genre terms “stand for certain expectations” (see Benjamin Beil, “Game Studies und Genretheorie,” in *Game Studies: Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*, eds. Klaus Sachs-Hombach and Jan-Noël Thon (Köln: Herbert von Halem, 2015), 29–69, quote on 29. Translated by the authors).

<sup>50</sup> Inderst, “They’re rewriting history,” 253. Translated by the authors.

<sup>51</sup> Pfister, “Das Unspielbare spielen,” 258. Translated by the authors.

<sup>52</sup> Inderst, “They’re rewriting history,” 253. Translated by the authors.

<sup>53</sup> See Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 118–30; Christopher W. Totten, *An Architectural Approach to Level Design* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2014); Daniel Vella, “Spatialised Memory: The Gameworld as Embedded Narrative,” (paper presented at The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Athens, Greece, April 6–9, 2011), accessed November 3, 2020, <https://gameconference2011.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/spatialised-memory-daniel-vella.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts, “From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game – A philosophical approach to a misunderstood genre,” *Press Start Journal* 5, no. 2 (2019): 29–50, quote on 37.

witnesses, a phenomenon that Tabea Widmann recently tried to encapsulate with the concept of the “prosthetic witness.”<sup>55</sup> It is also quite plausible to assume that such action-reduced, elaborately designed 3D environments can be part of a “digital-somatic phase” of memory culture. As described by Steffi de Jong: “In this phase, memory is no longer meant to be primarily cognitive: via affective and somatic strategies, the body becomes part of the memory process.”<sup>56</sup> Immersion in haunting atmospheres of the past,<sup>57</sup> such as the camp atmosphere detailed here, can be described as such a form of embodiment manifested by the controllable avatar-protagonist Blazkowicz.

Also, the possibility to more or less freely roam Block 4 of the camp differentiates this scene from other sequences in the game which force players into inaction. For example, in the first mission of the game, Blazkowicz is captured by the main Nazi antagonist Wilhelm “Totenkopf” [Deaths-head] Strasse and forced to watch him execute one of his friends. One could argue that this scene is comparable to the camp scene in how it limits player agency. However, the camp scene stands out in how it encourages exploration of a virtual space without the pressure of a time limit or hostile forces. Therefore, it bears ludic likeness to the resistance base that players can freely roam in chapter 5 (“A New Home”). As self-paced exploration of a virtual space is encouraged, the camp mission can even be compared to games that have been called ‘Walking Simulators’ or – more fittingly – “Ambience Action Games.”<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the ‘placeness’ of the camp and therefore the relationship between Holocaust remembrance and specific memorial sites is emphasized.

Precisely because *Wolfenstein: The New Order* is a first-person shooter, which otherwise stages the destructive superiority of the player as a central gameplay element in most game sequences, the camp scene is such a powerful

incision. Agency is indeed intrinsic to the genre of the first-person shooter game, as Stephan Günzel has pointed out.<sup>59</sup> The first-person shooter thus actually offers players a special power over the game’s events, which not only manifests itself in concrete game actions, but also logically results from the aesthetics of this genre. In a first-person shooter, “point of view” and “point of action” coincide.<sup>60</sup> Wherever players look in these games, they exercise power. This power, however, does not present itself in a humanized manner, but rather in a “dehumanized view”<sup>61</sup> of the weapon wielded by avatar-protagonists.

*Wolfenstein: The New Order*, which otherwise mostly adheres to the conventions of the first-person shooter game, breaks with expectations of the genre. The players lose their agency from one moment to the next. Not being able to fall back on the usual behavioral scripts of ‘identify enemy,’ ‘cover,’ ‘eliminate enemy’ leaves the players disoriented and thus conveys – even if only fragmentarily – a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness that no other medium could convey. The way *Wolfenstein: The New Order* briefly takes away a large part of the player’s agency can thus be interpreted as an attempt to draw the player’s attention to the “performatory historical challenges”<sup>62</sup> of those imprisoned in Nazi camps, i.e. to the lack of agency of historical actors in concentration camps.

Therefore, it cannot be said that it is impossible, *per se*, for first-person shooters to adequately represent the Holocaust. Building on Daniel Martin Feige’s comment that game genres “must be understood as something whose meaning evolves with every successful computer game,”<sup>63</sup> the first-person shooter should not be understood in a way that it is particularly suitable or unsuitable for addressing a particular topic simply because it has traditionalized certain game actions and a certain attitude of reception. Rather, breaking with these genre conventions is an opportunity to implement a responsible approach to the Holocaust – even in first-person shooters. This, at first

<sup>55</sup> Tabea Widmann, “Playing Memories? Digital Games as Memory Media,” *Digital Holocaust Memory*, last modified September 17, 2020, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://digitalholocaustmemory.wordpress.com/2020/09/17/playing-memories-digital-games-as-memory-media/>.

<sup>56</sup> Steffi de Jong and Thomas Tekster, “Digitale Rekonstruktionen von Konzentrationslagern am Anfang einer digital-somatischen Phase der Holocausterinnerung,” *Grimme-Forschungskolleg*, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.grimme-forschungskolleg.de/portfolio/witness-auschwitz-2020/>. Translated by the authors.

<sup>57</sup> See Felix Zimmermann, “Historical Digital Games as Experiences – How Atmospheres of the Past Satisfy Needs of Authenticity,” in *Game | World | Architectonics – Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, ed. Marc Bonner (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021), 19–34.

<sup>58</sup> Zimmermann and Huberts, “Ambience Action Game,” 38–39.

<sup>59</sup> See Stephan Günzel, “Wahrnehmung im Computerspiel. Genealogie der Zeit und Ästhetik des Raums,” in *Anthropologie der Wahrnehmung*, eds. Magnus Schlette, Thomas Fuchs, and Anna Maria Kirchner (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017), 245–68. See also Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 104.

<sup>60</sup> Britta Neitzel, *Point of View und Point of Action – Eine Perspektive auf die Perspektive in Computerspielen* (Berlin: Avinus, 2013), 15.

<sup>61</sup> Günzel, *Wahrnehmung*, 259. Translated by the authors.

<sup>62</sup> Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 183.

<sup>63</sup> Daniel Martin Feige, *Computerspiele: Eine Ästhetik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 71. Translated by the authors.



glance, may seem unsuitable, but it could serve as a means to further develop the first-person shooter genre as a whole.

There are indications that the camp scene broke new ground in World War II games, allowing other developers to follow suit. In the first-person shooter *Call of Duty: WWII*,<sup>64</sup> which was released a few years later, there is a similar sequence in the epilogue.<sup>65</sup> We are possibly witnessing a paradigm shift in digital games, away from the exclusion and blank space to a thematization of Nazi crimes in game sequences. These deliberately distinguish themselves from the rest of the games through their exploration-bound atmospheres and limited player agency – providing a new formal language in the mediation of the Holocaust. There are clear indications that this paradigm shift is indeed occurring. Over the past few years, for instance, several ambitious games have been developed in order to consciously inform players about World War II and the Holocaust. Foremost among these have been *Through the Darkest of Times*,<sup>66</sup> *Attentat 1942*,<sup>67</sup> and *My Child: Lebensborn*.<sup>68</sup> In direct connection with this, there has also been a change in German legal practice. In 2018, the Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body (USK) decided for the first time to apply the so-called “social adequacy clause” to digital games as well, i.e., to also allow games for age rating in which the depiction of anti-constitutional symbols (such as the swastika and SS runes) is linked to a clearly educational or artistic purpose.<sup>69</sup> Against the background of comparable paradigm shifts in film, we can therefore assume that more games will address the Holocaust in the future. As Kansteiner said, “[g]enocide prevention requires political courage,”<sup>70</sup> a courage that seems to be increasingly developing.

In a way, it is also high time for this shift. The omission of the Holocaust in World War II digital games may originally have been due to moral concerns and, in particular, the fear that the memory of the Holocaust would be

trivialized or even perverted. At the same time, however, the consistent omission of Nazi crimes in games about World War II led to a de-ideologization of this historical conflict. While ‘the Germans’ are mostly clearly drawn as the enemy in these games, they stand more for a diffuse and elusive general malice – which bears no relation to the actual motives and triggers of these crimes.<sup>71</sup> This depiction of an almost cartoonish schematic evil, however, cannot be in the interest of our politics of remembrance as it has no potential to enlighten whatsoever. In this respect, it is high time that digital games find an appropriate form to address the Holocaust. This cannot be the task of a few ambitious serious games alone. Especially for blockbuster games with a reach measured in millions, this should be a matter of course.

## 5 Antithesis: Superficial Iconography of the Holocaust

If a game like *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, a commercial first-person shooter, intends to thematize the Holocaust without trivializing it, it has to break with those genre conventions that are understood as a prerequisite for ‘fun.’ This is where the discursive parallels to films like *Schindler’s List* and the *Holocaust* series end. In the description of the game scene examined, it has become clear that *Wolfenstein: The New Order* did not consistently break with these conventions and therefore fails to function as a role model for a responsible portrayal. Although the Nazi aesthetic is exaggerated into the grotesque – also and especially in the camp scene – the oversized concrete buildings and the huge machine creatures always convey a sense of awe. This mise-en-scène encourages admiration towards the Nazi apparatus depicted, as it is staged as impressively and terrifyingly as possible. German game developer Jörg Friedrich rightly criticized this “tendency to reproduce fascist aesthetics in pop culture covering the era.”<sup>72</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games 2017).

<sup>65</sup> In an action-reduced sequence, a player freely wanders through a liberated prisoner-of-war camp with the protagonist, but otherwise only interacts with the environment by means of a camera. The task is to document the crimes of the Nazi regime – here quite clearly following the tradition of atrocity films.

<sup>66</sup> *Through the Darkest of Times* (Paintbucket Games 2020).

<sup>67</sup> *Attentat 1942* (Charles Games 2017).

<sup>68</sup> *My Child: Lebensborn* (Teknopilot/Sarepta Studio 2018).

<sup>69</sup> See Jörg Friedrich, “Sozialadäquanz,” in *Handbuch Gameskultur: Über die Kulturwelten von Games*, eds. Olaf Zimmermann and Felix Falk (Berlin: Deutscher Kulturrat, 2020), 116–19. This decision should not be underestimated in its consequence for the politics of remembrance in Germany.

<sup>70</sup> Kansteiner, “Transnational Holocaust Memory,” 333.

<sup>71</sup> See Eugen Pfister, “‘Man spielt nicht mit Hakenkreuzen!’ Imaginations of the Holocaust and Crimes Against Humanity During World War II in Digital Games,” in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, eds. Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland, and Pat Cullum (London: Routledge, 2019), 267–84.

<sup>72</sup> Jörg Friedrich, “You Do Have Responsibility! How Games trivialize Fascism, why this should concern us and how we could change it”, in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, eds. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), 259–75, quote on 264.

An even greater critique can be levied at the game: it appears to be content with mere hints at the Holocaust. We do find references to Jewish prisoners, but no explicit mention of the racially motivated genocide. The sequence serves only to emotionalize and dramatize the game's narrative. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* thus squanders its potential precisely because it does not help the players place their own experiences into a historical narrative. As a counterexample: in *Gone Home*<sup>73</sup> or *Bioshock Infinite*,<sup>74</sup> the players can interact with embedded narrative elements that provide context and allow for critical engagement, including, for example, letters, photographs, audio recordings, and the like. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* offers no such elements – at least not in the action-reduced part of the camp scene.<sup>75</sup> It thus leaves the potentials of environmental storytelling unused in its staging of the camp because it creates a diffuse camp atmosphere without simultaneously providing critical means for reflection. In this sense, the camp in this specific case can be described as an “evocative space,” that is, a space that uses familiar set pieces to evoke certain emotions.<sup>76</sup> These “familiar elements”<sup>77</sup> – cattle cars, chimneys, barred gates, bunk beds in barracks – run the risk of reproducing the “super-sign”<sup>78</sup> Holocaust without communicating any relevant message about these crimes. If the Holocaust becomes a “super-sign” it becomes a senseless shell that serves solely to emotionalize without connection to the historical event itself. It then no longer conveys a socio-political warning but is only meant to shock. Bare barracks filled with bunk beds and human experiments serve as a chain of associations whose only

task is to trigger discomfort in the audience.<sup>79</sup> In this sense, the game gets lost in superficial, visual codes of the camp as a *pars pro toto* for the Holocaust.<sup>80</sup>

Another problematic moment in the gameplay is the main character's sudden recovery and renewed ability to fight, even though moments before he had been helpless.<sup>81</sup> Now armed – and later with the help of a combat robot – he easily overpowers dozens of camp guards.

Surely, in digital games – as in any other medium – the suffering of concentration camp prisoners can never really be ‘relived,’ nor should it be for that matter.<sup>82</sup> Any media portrayal of the Holocaust can therefore only ever be an approximation. Through this incompleteness, however, such medializations also take the chance of leaving open a dangerous scope for reinterpretation. It is precisely here that the game runs the risk of feeding a dangerous fiction: in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, the described deprivation of agency is only temporary. It would, for instance, also have been conceivable for Blazkowicz, unable to extricate himself from the camp, to ultimately be rescued by his resistance group. Instead, Blazkowicz – basically armed only with a knife (Figure 4) – manages to break out on his own. Yes, he is seriously wounded in the course of the mission (though he recovers from this very quickly) and can only gain control of the combat robot with the help of Set Roth. Nevertheless, players could ask themselves why the other prisoners did not also try to escape long ago.

This is where the difference to Holocaust films becomes clearest. The game quotes the well-known iconography and consciously portrays crimes of the Nazi regime, but it does not pursue an educative goal in the broadest sense. Instead of making a conscious effort to include real-world history – by mentioning death camps such as Auschwitz, for example – it flees into the overly fantastical at a critical point, namely when Blazkowicz takes control of the combat robot, presumably out of fear that the game might no longer be ‘fun.’

But it is not quite as clear-cut as this, since it is also at this moment that the parallels to the Nazisploitation genre become most apparent. Exaggeration can also be a means of addressing hidden collective fears and making people aware of them. What is more, we increasingly find Jewish revenge fantasies as part of popular culture. One might therefore ask if Blazkowicz's violent escape from the camp follows this pop cultural tradition. It could and has been

<sup>73</sup> *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013).

<sup>74</sup> *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013).

<sup>75</sup> There are, however, audio recordings that can be unlocked throughout the game. “Ramonas Tagebuch” [Ramona's diary], for example, tells the story of how Anya Oliwa, ally and later partner of Blazkowicz, commits acts of resistance against the Nazi regime. They can be listened to in the main menu of the game and open up an interesting perspective on Jewish agency in the game world of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. However, as they are not integrated into the game world as embedded narrative elements, they stay somewhat hidden during the course of the game and can even be overlooked completely. Still, they hint at how the potential of the action-reduced camp scene could have been utilized more, namely by integrating such emphatic audio logs into the environment to be found by players.

<sup>76</sup> See Totten, *An Architectural Approach*, 276.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Matthias N. Lorenz, “Der Holocaust als Zitat. Tendenzen im Spielfilm nach Schindler's List,” in *Die Shoah im Bild*, ed. Sven Kramer (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2003), 267–96, quote on 274. Translated by the authors.

<sup>79</sup> See Eugen Pfister and Arno Görgen, “Die Profanisierung des Massenmordes im Computerspiel,” *GAIN Magazin* 13 (2020): 32–37.

<sup>80</sup> See Van den Heede, *Engaging with the Second World War*, 87.

<sup>81</sup> See Widmann, “Playing Memories?”

<sup>82</sup> See Chapman, *Digital games as history*, 183.



**Figure 4:** After escaping the furnace, Blazkowicz kills numerous guards with the knife that was originally intended to kill him. (Source: Screenshot taken by the authors).

argued that revenge stories like *Inglorious Basterds* can be understood as valuable, even if not mimetic examinations of Nazi crimes and Jewish agency.<sup>83</sup> Under this lens, even the second half of the camp mission could be regarded positively in relation to Holocaust memory.

## 6 Conclusion

The precise moment when a paradigmatic shift in portrayals of the Holocaust in digital games occurred cannot be determined with certainty since other games – such as *Valkyria Chronicles*<sup>84</sup> in 2008 – have also referred to concentration camps in a fantasy setting. However, since *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, Nazi crimes have been increasingly and more openly referred to in games. In its successor, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*,<sup>85</sup> the racially motivated murder of Jews is openly mentioned by name – and not only alluded to as in *The New Order* – for the first time. And in the epilogue of *Call of Duty: WWII*, players can see the image of a concentration camp prisoner with a yellow badge in the credits. The explicit reference to the Holocaust is even more evident in smaller, ambitious game projects. In 2020s *Through the Darkest of Times*, players lead a resistance group in Berlin during the Nazi regime. This game, as well as *Attentat 1942* and *My Child: Lebensborn*, enjoyed critical success, but also drew the attention of certain institutions such as the German *Stiftung Digitale*

*Spielekultur* (Foundation for Digital Games Culture).<sup>86</sup> Since the end of 2019, it has explored the potential of digital games – especially serious games – as a medium for Holocaust remembrance with funding by the *Stiftung “Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft”* (Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future).<sup>87</sup> This resulted in the publication of *Remembering with games: Ten key questions on using game-based digital formats in remembrance culture*.<sup>88</sup>

We do not have a final verdict on whether *Wolfenstein: The New Order* succeeded in presenting an appropriate representation of the Holocaust in games. From a historian’s perspective such a verdict is neither possible nor scientifically meaningful. Therefore, we are much more interested in better understanding the underlying discourse on memory politics and popular culture. A comparison with corresponding discussions on films and television series showed certain continuities with those

<sup>83</sup> Eva Thöne, “‘Darf man das? Die Frage ist zu einfach’,” *Der Spiegel*, February 4, 2019, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/holocaust-verarbeitung-darf-man-das-die-frage-ist-zu-einfach-a-1251000.html>.

<sup>84</sup> *Valkyria Chronicles* (Sega 2008).

<sup>85</sup> *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (MachineGames 2017).

<sup>86</sup> The foundation “initiate[s] and realize[s] projects in the fields of culture, education and research to carry the manifold potentials of games into society” (“What We Do,” *Stiftung Digitale Spielekultur*, accessed March 29, 2021, <https://www.stiftung-digitale-spielekultur.de/en/>).

<sup>87</sup> The Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future “testifies to the political and moral responsibility of the state, industry and society for the injustice of National Socialism” (“Central Themes,” *Stiftung “Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft,”* accessed March 29, 2021, [https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/EVZ\\_Uploads/Stiftung/About-Us/\\_en\\_Leitgedanken\\_AKTUELL\\_20.07.09.pdf](https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/EVZ_Uploads/Stiftung/About-Us/_en_Leitgedanken_AKTUELL_20.07.09.pdf)).

<sup>88</sup> Mona Brandt and Christian Huberts, *Remembering with games: Ten key questions on using game-based digital formats in remembrance culture* (Berlin: Stiftung Digitale Spielekultur, 2020), accessed November 03, 2020, [https://www.stiftung-digitale-spielekultur.de/app/uploads/2020/10/SDK\\_Erinnern-mit-Games\\_Mini-englisch-web.pdf](https://www.stiftung-digitale-spielekultur.de/app/uploads/2020/10/SDK_Erinnern-mit-Games_Mini-englisch-web.pdf). The authors of this article were involved in the development of these questions in a consultative capacity.

types of media. However, it also revealed the necessity to better identify the specific logic of digital games and their genres. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* has found – to a certain degree at least and within the confines of the medium and its genre conventions – its own language with which to contribute to Holocaust remembrance. At the same time, however, the lack of a truly thought-out remembrance strategy leads the game to waste this opportunity by quickly falling back into the well-trodden paths of a first-person shooter game.

We can assume that digital games will find a responsible ‘language’ to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. Historical debates on representations of the Holocaust in different mediums have shown us that over time, these mediums have found such a language and have consequently been met with acceptance. It must be clear to game developers, however, that the representation of the

Holocaust has its limits. It is true that the boundaries of what is viewed as acceptable have constantly shifted, so that by now even (tragic) ‘comedies’ like *Life Is Beautiful* are conceivable. Here too, however, certain unwritten rules remain. It is necessary to think of digital games in the light of this particular challenge to respect these limits and find a way to deal responsibly with our history. We seem to be witnessing a paradigm shift at the moment. So-called ‘serious games’ are more likely to dare to look for new ways to represent (traumatic) history. The previously impossible task of representing the Holocaust seems to become possible, and our example shows that even large-scale productions and games often considered as pure entertainment products can surprise us. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* was – consciously or not – a pioneer in many respects and thus stands in a media-historical tradition with other sensational shifts in boundaries.