"Hitler was a Silly"

Learning history in historical multiplayer first person shooter communities

Student name: Nils Spelt

Student number: 349503

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Thesis coaches: Prof. Dr. Kees Ribbens & Pieter van den Heede MA

Coreader: Dr. Robbert-Jan Aadriaansen

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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1: Introduction

> 'So, Hitler like decided to invade Russia... Like, that's the least strategically sound plan of action that anysupreme commander of, like, any totalitarian state might consider, amirite?
>
> It's like, lol, he, like, completely underestimated the Élan or Esprit de Corps of, like, ALL the russian vets, lol. Thinking he was like the Größter Feldherr Aller Zeiten, or something, lol. And I'm sittin' here thinking: Whoa, Adolf! Napoleon, like, made the same mistake of not having a plan B, if plan A failed, like, looong before u.
>
> It's almost like the National Socialist dogma of, like, the Slavic peoples being inferior to Aryans, sort of, like, worked against them, in the long run.
>
> U guys tell me wat U think!'[1]

This interesting piece of prose is what gamer 'Kesselring123' decides to present to other players of the game *Heroes & Generals*, a popular multi-player game set in the Second World War. At first glance, it does not look like much. He makes the well known presentist argument that Hitler's Germany was doomed to lose the war on the Eastern front, if one could even call it an argument. He makes a comparison with Napoleon's attempt to invade Russia that makes no sense, and as someone else points out: the comment seems to be 'copy-pasted from a teenage girl's history report'.[2] If it was part of a history report, the teacher would look at it, give it a bad grade, and nobody would ever see or learn from it again. Kesselring's comment, however, is placed in the historical section of this game's main social platform, the official forum. Things work differently there.

In a few days' time, twenty of Kesselring's fellow forum users flock to his topic to tell each other what they think about it. Some respondents choose to agree that 'Hitler was a silly', as the name of the topic suggests. Others point out other mistakes Hitler made, and some choose to simply leave it at a sarcastic remark. The majority, however, elects to point out which errors

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[1] Forum user Kesselring123, 'Hitler was a silly',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=63267 (11-08-2016).
[2] Moderator Africandave, 'Hitler was a silly', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=63267
(11-08-2016).

Kesselring made in his approach to this particular piece of World War 2 history. 'Phalanx1337' argues Kesselring has his facts wrong. While Hitler's offensive on the USSR broke on Stalingrad, the rest of the war in the east was relatively 'successful'.[3] 'Ice_King' writes 'hindsight is 20/20', using a popular phrase to confront Kesselring with his presentist perspective.[4] He then refers him to a university student's essay on the invasion, before sharing his own opinion on the matter. These corrections, in turn, become sources for further discussion.

Even though Kesselring123 shares a version of history that is largely incorrect, the *Heroes & Generals* community instead treats it a version of history that is *debatable*. In this respect, the way history is approached in gaming communities is fundamentally different from the way it is done in formal education, in which assessment, not discussion, is the goal. It results in a historical learning experience that is also different from the sort that formal education provides. However, how such a historical multiplayer first person shooter game community functions as a historical learning environment has never before been researched, let alone what sort of historical learning experience it can offer to its users.

In the field of Game Studies, there are some exceptions of studies that do focus on commercial World War II first person shooter (FPS) games as sources for historical knowledge.[5] However, the large majority of historical video game research has been limited to the video game as a medium or the video game as a remediation of a reality.[6] In their conclusions, these studies have presented several strong arguments about the educational and representational qualities of commercial games *an sich*. However, judging a multi-player shooter game solely by its programmed components is like judging a dance party solely by its DJ, not taking into account the atmosphere created by the visitors. Multi-player games' educational and representational qualities are expressed not exclusively through the mediators themselves, but also, and perhaps

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[3] Forum user Phalanx1337, 'Hitler was a silly', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=63267 (11-08-2016).

[4] Forum user Ice_King, 'Hitler was a silly', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=63267 (11-08-2016).

[5] For example, Joel Penney, 'No better way to experience World War II' (2009), in N. B. Huntemann and M. Thomas Payne (eds.), *Joystick soldiers: the politics of play in military video games* (Routledge 2009) 191-205, and Fisher, 'Playing with World War II' (2011).

[6] For example, Thomas Elsaesser, 'Pushing the contradictions of the digital: 'virtual reality' and 'interactive narrative' as oxymorons between narratives and gaming', *New review of film and television studies* 3 (2014) 295-311; Gonzalo Frasca, 'Simulation versus narrative: introduction to ludology', in Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (eds.), *The video game theory reader* (2003), and Eva Kingsepp, 'immersive historicity in World War II digital games', *Human IT* 2 (2006) 60-89.

to a greater extent, through the interactions they provoke. An analysis of historical multi-player games must include an analysis of the content shared between players of those games - at least up to the point that it can be deemed relevant for its function as an educational environment.

In contrast to serious games, most commercial historically themed first person shooter games are first and foremost made to entertain, not to be educational. However, within the realm of first person shooters - video games in which a player controls a virtual military figure from a first person perspective - a plethora of different kinds of games exists, varying from science-fiction (e.g. the *Halo* series (2001 - present)) to relatively realistic historical games, such as *Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad* (2011). Every one of these games has their own characteristics, merits and problems, both in how they are played and in which stories they try to tell. Since their first appearance in the late twentieth century, FPS games centered around the World War II theme have been among the most popular within the genre. While I am aware that assigning any single game to a specific genre is problematic, I would argue there are two clearly discernible sub-genres within the FPS: the single-player shooter and the multi-player shooter.[7] As the terms imply, the main difference between the two is the number of player-controlled figures that are permitted to participate in a single virtual space. By extension, this means a single-player shooter is a game played through the interaction of two entities: one player and a pre-programmed series of virtual spaces or arenas making up the game. A multi-player shooter, on the other hand, is played through the interaction of the virtual spaces provided in the game and a number of players, generally ranging from two to several dozen.

Once a person has someone else to play with or against in a game, this game becomes a *social experience*, which means that whatever is programmed to appear in the game's virtual space is no longer the main factor that influences what the player learns about the game and its subject matter. For example, gamers playing historical single-player FPS games like the formerly popular *Medal of Honor* series are faced with a thoroughly scripted and linear plot, presenting and propagating specific views and ideas about the Second World War. What a player learns

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[7] For example, some games generally considered as single-player shooters feature 'co-op modes', in which a player can team up with a limited amount of other players through an internet connection or otherwise. Problems that arise due to these dichotomized taxonomies are discussed thoroughly in Rachel Ivy Clarke, J. H. Lee, N. Clark, 'Why video game genres fail: a classificatory analysis', *Games and culture* (2015) 1-21.

through playing games such as these is a result of the interplay between these propagated views on the one hand, and the player's pre-existing views and ideas about the war on the other.[8]

Historical multi-player FPS games, in contrast, often lack an explicit narrative and refrain from actively addressing a player's views and ideas about history. These games do not build on the interaction between the game and the player, but on the interaction between players themselves, which is facilitated by the game. Through these games, players face a social environment in which a potentially huge amount of historical knowledge, insight and opinions about the war can be shared between players. Additionally, the majority, if not all popular multi-player first person shooters provide ways of communication between players, both voice- or text-based. These pre-programmed communication channels, however, are not the only ways through which players of a game can communicate with each other. Most commercial games have at least one easy-to-find website with an official forum, through which a virtually endless amount of questions can be answered, requests fulfilled, and information can be published. These communication platforms and the ways in which they are employed with respect to historical discussions are the focal points of this study.

In her study of single-player World War II FPS gamers, Stephanie Fisher argues that the single player videogames examined in her research effectively function as informal learning tools.[9] Informal learning, in turn, only relates to the context of the learning process, not to whether the tool was designed for educational purposes.[10] According to the results of her interviews with teenage gamers, it is the immersive, engaging quality of the approach to history employed by these games that stimulates historical learning and the development of skills of inquiry in gamers. Her respondents gladly spend hours on end engaging with the storylines provided by these games. Pointing to history classes being experienced as the most boring classes of all in secondary education, Fisher heralds video games as means through which historical learning can be invigorated.[11] She mentions a characteristic of World War II FPS games that make them such interesting and successful learning tools, which I would argue is especially relevant to the study of gamer communities enveloping historical FPS games as well.

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[8] Joel Penney, 'No better way to experience World War II', 192.

[9] Stephanie Fisher, 'Playing with World War II: a small-scale study of learning in video games', *Loading… the journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 8 (2011) 77, 83.

[10] Ioanna Iacovides, P. McAndrew, E. Scanlon, J. Aczel, 'The gaming involvement and informal learning framework', *Simulation & gaming* (2014) 612-613.

[11] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 71, 78-79.

Like many forms of popular representations of the Second World War, FPS games about the war stimulate 'tangential learning', a kind of learning in which the learning environment familiarizes its users with a particular body of knowledge, instead of actively trying to teach them through more conventional educational means. The theory holds that if the learning environment stimulates the user's interest in a particular subject enough, and if it facilitates an adequate introduction to it, the user will educate him- or herself further on the subject. This is exactly what Fisher found to be the case in gamers playing World War II FPS games. Her research subjects were intrigued about World War II after playing these games. They went on to use, question and scrutinize information that was offered in games in other settings such as in the history classroom.[12] In other words, these games have the ability to function as gateways to self-directed learning about the past.[13] It is this trait that I also expected to find in the engaging learning environment shaped by the social contact between players, both in interaction related to gameplay and in interaction on affiliated social media.

I also touch upon the relevance of Gordon Calleja's *Player Involvement Model*, because it conceptualizes the feelings of involvement in video games and gaming communities experienced by gamers. It discerns the two temporal phases that are inherent to the feeling of engagement when playing a game: micro-involvement and macro-involvement. The first refers to the 'moment by moment' engagement experienced during gameplay. The second, on the other hand, concerns the motivations for sustained engagement with video games and their subject matter throughout the long term, when not directly engaged in playing a game.[14] Like Fisher's research asserts, it is in this long-term engagement that the process of learning about history occurs. This notion is confirmed in Iacovides et al.'s study of gaming involvement, which similarly highlight the importance of 'learning through interaction with people on a macro-level', outside of the direct context of the game.[15]

Because there is a lack of research on the social aspect of learning about history in the macro phase of game involvement, my study is focused on filling this gap. I aim to do so by addressing the following research question: what and how do gamers learn about the Second

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[12] Ibid, 77-82.

[13] Ibid, 83.

[14] Gordon Calleja, 'Revising immersion: a conceptual model for the analysis of digital game involvement', *Situated play, proceedings of the DiGRA 2007 conference* (2007) 83-84.

[15] Iacovides e.a., 'The gaming involvement and informal learning framework', 617.

World War in WWII multiplayer FPS gaming communities? The *Heroes & Generals* gaming community is researched as a case study, since it has an active community platform and is currently one of the more popular multiplayer FPS games with a Second World War theme. According to data from Steam, the game's distributor, an average of about 4.600 players were playing it at any one time during the last three months.[16] As reported by Reto-Moto, the game's developer, july 2016 marked the eight millionth registered user.[17]

Because this research question implies both a focus on how learning works in an online social environment and on what learning history exactly comprises, this analysis is guided by two different frameworks. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework by Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson and Walter Archer serves as an analytical blueprint for the analysis of the *Heroes & Generals* community as an informal educational environment.[18] To assess the quality of historical discussions in the community, secondly, Peter Seixas' 'benchmarks of historical thinking' function as a guideline.[19]

Regarding the structure of this master's thesis, the academic discourse on what learning history comprises will be explored first in chapter 2, as well as my own views on the matter. Next, I turn to the explanation of video games' potential as social learning environments. Following this, the workings of the Community of Inquiry framework will be briefly explained. For the sake of readability and contextuality, the separate components comprising the CoI framework are clarified further at the beginnings of each related subchapter in chapter 3. This chapter is where the main analysis of the Heroes & Generals community is located. It is divided into four sections, starting with a brief analysis of learning history during play. The following three chapters are on the analysis of cognitive, social and teaching presences in the community. These 'presences' are the three components of educational experiences, as conceptualized by Garrison et al.. Seixas' 'benchmarks of historical thinking' are referred to throughout this chapter. In the following conclusion, I answer the main research question by bringing together all my findings and considerations presented in the preceding chapters.

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[16] http://steamcharts.com/app/227940#All (12-08-2016).

[17] http://www.heroesandgenerals.com/community/heroes-generals-roars-past-8-million-registered-players (12-08-2016).

[18] D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, Walter Archer, 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: computer conferencing in higher education', *The internet and higher education* 2 (1999) 87-105.

[19] Peter Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking: A framework for assessment in Canada', *Centre for the study of historical consciousness, University of British Columbia* (Vancouver 2006).

2: Academic discourse

2.1 The dualistic nature of learning history

Before I continue on what learning history comprises, it is necessary to reflect on why learning *about* history and learning *of* history are both important. The difference between learning *about* history and learning *of* history is based on a distinction between learning the content or substance of history on the one hand, and learning the discipline of history, on the other. This distinction is crucial, because alternating and seeking a balance between the teaching of these two wholly different kinds of knowledge has been a source of academic debate for a very long time.

Learning history is often thought to be something very straightforward, when compared to other fields of study. In the words of the eminent historian David Lowenthal: '[history] is a uniquely amateur and particularistic realm. […] More than any other academic profession, history is amateur in its approach, its appeal, and its apparatus. Unlike the physical and social sciences, history has not technical jargon and requires no grounding in some arcane aspect of nature or human nature. Its practitioners generally strive to be accessibly straightforward, even to the point of eschewing theory entirely'.[20] Although a student of history is bound to run into unknown concepts whenever he or she is reading about an unexplored topic, history is generally viewed as 'recognizable', or 'ordinary', and requires no descriptive or explanatory concepts in order to understand it. Instead, knowledge of 'the story', coupled with a healthy dose of common sense and life experience will suffice.[21]

Not all scholars subscribe to this perspective, however. Peter Lee explains why this is an incorrect view on the process of learning history. At the heart of Lee's argument is the often repeated fact that there is no such thing as one 'true history'. After all, most events are recounted by different voices, which can empower, dispute or downright contradict each other.[22] In turn, each one of these voices had a reason for recounting a particular event, which brings about the question of authority: which of these voices can be trusted? Learning history is not a matter of

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[20] David Lowenthal, 'Dilemmas and delights of learning history', in Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (eds*.) Knowing, teaching & learning history: national and international perspectives* (London 2000) 63.

[21] Peter Lee, 'Understanding history and understanding the past', in Peter Seixas (ed.) *Theorizing historical consciousness* (Toronto 2006) 129.

[22] Lee, 'Understanding history and understanding the past', 129.

simply reading a story and judging whether it is trustworthy or not. It is about coming to grips with a multitude of stories, but also a multitude of story tellers, varying from first-hand witnesses of past events, to authors of history textbooks, to movie directors. The interests, goals, and motives of these story tellers, as well as the nature of the historical artefacts they produce, can all tell a historically trained public to which extents these voices of the past can be considered trustworthy or 'valid'. Discerning fact from fiction, however, is very difficult when being aware of just a single story.

Additionally, while the content explored in learning history can at times be understood through use of common sense, the discipline of history cannot. Learning of history cannot be considered a straightforward affair, because it involves becoming familiar with what Lee calls 'metahistorical' ideas and ways of thinking that are perpendicular to our common-sense approach to constructing a historical narrative by using our 'substantive knowledge' of a certain topic.[23] According to him, 'second-order, "organizing ideas" give meaning and structure to our [ideas of] the discipline of history. Our ideas about the nature and status of historical accounts, evidence, understanding and explanation, time and change frames the way in which we make sense of the past'. Lee argues these ideas are to be considered as *parts of* our historical consciousness.[24] I would say they act instead as *means through* which we control the extent of our awareness of our historical consciousness. These ideas do not directly shape the nature of our historical consciousness, but they help one figure out in which kinds of sources one's historical consciousness is rooted. This, in turn, affects the nature of historical consciousness. It is this awareness that is taught in formal history education.

Being aware of the sources of one's knowledge about history enables critical thinking about these sources, and thus critical reflection on this knowledge. The continuous contemplation of historical knowledge is central to the historical endeavour, because there is no 'given' past which we can observe or scrutinize. Instead, we must work with evidence, and working with evidence requires knowledge on how to interpret and how to pass judgement on its validity.[25]

In short, knowledge of skills and substance must go together, but because historical thinking does not come natural, they must be brought together in a conscious way. While it may appear easy to obtain 'valid' substantive knowledge, Sam Wineburg's research on historical

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[23] Ibid., 131.
[24] Ibid., 131.
[25] Ibid., 134-135.

thinking, in which he presents both students and teachers of history with conflicting sources, shows it is not.[26] In this study Wineburg's most exemplary research subject, a historian named Bob Alston, is presented with several sources on Abraham Lincoln. These texts conflict heavily with what Bob had learned about Lincoln before, in that they do not present Lincoln as a champion of abolitionists, but as a complex personality with views that run both parallel *and* perpendicular to this traditional, popular view. While Lincoln appeals to 'natural rights' to claim that black and white people share a common humanity, he also laments and confirms the view that God justifies slavery. Additionally, in a speech addressed to a group of freedmen, Lincoln uttered the phrase "we need men capable of thinking as White men".[27] Bob's prior knowledge and this new information do not add up, creating a feeling of unease. Wineburg's other subjects would comfort themselves by simply locating the source of this feeling in Abraham Lincoln: from a presentist point of view, it is easy to dismiss him as a racist. However, Bob does what Wineburg thinks everyone involved in the historical discipline should do: he shows a sense of 'mature historical cognition': 'a humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience and an openness before the expanse of the history of the species. It grants people in the past the benefit of the doubt by casting doubt on our ability to know them as easily as we know ourselves'.[28] Bob locates the sense of unease in his own lack of understanding of a fundamentally different world in the past, before looking for the things he does not understand that prevent him from 'fully entering Lincoln's world'.[29] In other words, Bob's substantive knowledge of the past was inadequate for him to immediately take a historical perspective. He needed his historical skills to first come to grips with his own shortcomings, before being able to use these skills in order to decide where to look for a remedy.

As Wineburg's example shows, it is certain that people must have at least some degree of awareness of the origins of their substantive knowledge of the past, in order for them to be able to actually use and interact with that knowledge in daily matters. Fortunately, there is a need to train everybody to be a historian in order to enable them to 'do history properly', as much as there is a need to train everybody to be a fiscal expert in order to allow them to fill in their tax forms properly. Teaching people 'second-order ideas', 'mature historical cognition', or 'critical

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[26] Sam Wineburg, 'Historical thinking and other unnatural acts', *The phi delta kappan* 7 (1999) 488-499.
[27] Wineburg, 'Historical thinking', 497.
[28] Ibid., 497-498.
[29] Ibid., 497.

historical inquiry' is not an all-or-nothing affair.[30] Teaching everyone to address the past a bit more like a historian would may be useful for everyone's relationship with the past.[31]

But how does the historian address the past, precisely? Here, I will refer to Peter Seixas' comprehensive framework on what constitutes and how to assess 'historical thinking'.[32] According to this framework, historical thinking is based on the interplay between six different but related historical thinking concepts, being the following:

- Establishing historical significance: why do we care?
- Using evidence: what is a source? Who wrote it? Why was it written? In what context was it written?
- Identifying continuity and change: how are continuity and change interrelated? Are there trends of progress or decline? What is the chronology of events? Which periods can be discerned?
- Analyzing cause and consequence: how does one condition, action or event lead to another? What is the agency of historical actors in promoting, shaping, and resisting change in history?
- Taking a historical perspective: understanding the past 'as a foreign country', with its own social, cultural, intellectual, emotional and moral contexts that characterize it. Empathizing with historical actors on the basis of evidence, while avoiding presentism.
- Understanding the moral dimension of historical interpretations: how and why do we pass judgement on past actors? Which meanings do these judgements have in the present?

Of course, much more has been written on the topic of historical thinking, and complete libraries have been written on the subject of history education in general. I choose to focus this study on the exploration of the concepts above in an informal social learning environment, because this framework is particularly concise, as opposed to most descriptions of historical thinking. These are largely descriptions by analogy, more open to interpretation and thus difficult to generalize. Generalization is essential for researching the sources central in this study. They assume an

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[30] Lee, 'Understanding history and understanding the past', 139.
[31] Peter Seixas, 'Introduction', in Peter Seixas (ed.) *Theorizing historical consciousness* (Toronto 2006) 12-13.
[32] Peter Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking'.

intuitive grasp of historical thinking rather than one that can to some extent be conceptualized.[33] Seixas actually tries to disassemble that which is in fact hard to grasp, and makes historical thinking assessable. Notably, he points out that 'this formulation is neither the last word on historical thinking nor the only way to approach it'.[34] It is merely a formulation of historical thinking made to fit the needs of assessment. It is exactly for this reason why I have chosen this definition of historical thinking. The comments made on a forum for a videogame can be very different in style and shape, while showing a similar level of historical thinking. After all, while there are extensive rules of conduct on the platform, there are no such rules that deal with the style and shape of historical arguments. The definition for historical thinking, in this case, thus needs to be somewhat malleable to the context, while still offering the possibility of showing clearly in which ways it is molded, unlike less conceptualized definitions. Seixas' framework meets these criteria.

2.2 History education is not unique to the classroom

Another matter worth considering in relation to learning history is that the classroom has no monopoly on it. Teachers are not alone in having the power to shape students' grasp of history: students are exposed to conflicting interpretations of history all the time.[35] Thinking otherwise removes the possibility to help people deal with these different historical accounts. According to authors like Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg, histories in popular culture possibly have an even greater effect on people's conception of the past than formal history education does. This is demonstrated by Wineburg's study of American high school students.

At the turn of the millennium, Sam Wineburg made the observation that history educators had been disgruntled by the lack of historical knowledge in high school students for decades, if not longer. This trend of scepticism has persisted through every major round of education reform and every wave of societal transformation. In the eyes of learning authorities, students just cannot seem to get it right.[36] However, Wineburg argues the students are not at fault here. Time

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[33] See for example Sam Wineburg's description of Bob Alston's grasp of history, earlier in this chapter.

[34] Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking', 2.

[35] Seixas, 'Schweigen! die Kinder!', 25-33; Linda Levstik, 'Articulating the silences: teachers' and adolescents' conceptions of historical significance', in Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (eds.) *Knowing, teaching & learning history: national and international perspectives* (London 2000) 284-286.

[36] Sam Wineburg, 'Making historical sense', in Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (eds*.) Knowing, teaching & learning history: national and international perspectives* (London 2000) 306-307.

and time again, schools and education committees have approached the assessment of historical knowledge extremely simplistically: if someone ticks the correct box, one 'knew'. If it was not the correct box, one did not know. In other words, the tests learning authorities have devised to probe the depth of historical knowledge have mostly failed to do so.[37]

The main reason for this has already been mentioned in the previous paragraph. The problem lies in the fact that history tests only focus on the sort of knowledge that is taught in the history classroom, which is the knowledge that learning authorities want them to have. This shows there are underlying and incorrect assumptions about historical knowledge: (1) there is only one kind of 'true' or 'valid' historical knowledge, of the sort that the learning authorities have defined, and (2) students do not pick up historical knowledge outside of the classroom.[38] It is this second assumption that I will elaborate on.

During their study of the sources of historical knowledge in students and their parents, Wineburg and his associates found that stories about history learned outside of the classroom can be very influential in their subjects' understanding of the past. For example, when asked about the origin of his view that Vietnam-veterans were often viewed as 'baby killers', or his view that war is good for economic development, one of Wineburg's research subjects refers to the popular fictional movies *Forrest Gump* and *Schindler's List* as if they are historical evidence for his claims, while both are based on historical fiction.[39] This is a recurring theme in his research. 'It is the fictionalized past, not the historical event', that is the student's frame of reference.[40] According to Wineburg, the source of this problem lies in the fact that popular (fictional) histories such as these movies are omnipresent. They are always available, as opposed to a history class, a visit to a historical site, or primary sources. Additionally, what is remembered or forgotten about the past is largely influenced by the rate in which these parts of the past can be used in the present. After all, knowledge that is useable often is remembered, sometimes to the detriment of equally crucial, but less convenient related knowledge.[41] I would argue that the same goes for information about history and historical discussions in gaming communities. Games and their corresponding social platforms are but a few mouse clicks away.

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[37] Wineburg, 'Making historical sense', 307-309.

[38] Ibid., 306-310.

[39] Ibid., 316-319.

[40] Ibid., 320.

[41] Ibid., 320-321.

It is in school that students can learn how to assess the merits and peculiarities of histories encountered outside of the classroom.[42] A point argued by Peter Seixas and to a greater extent by Peter Lee, however, is that this discipline of history can *only* be learnt 'in formal education'.[43] In the face of canonized versions of histories, which work to teach the student 'the right' versions of history, it is the job of 'history education in schools' to 'give students an intellectual apparatus for handling history. No one else will'.[44]

It is here that I beg to differ. The classroom could very well act as the main mediator between popular history and what experts on history didactics think is 'proper' historical practice, but contrary to claims by didactics experts such as those referred to above, it is not just in the classroom in which advanced methods of historical thinking can be expected to be taught. A history curriculum which bases its student's scores on the amount of boxes they ticked 'correctly', a curriculum that is based on having students regurgitate 'the right story', paradoxically can lead to a history classroom that is unfit for teaching skills for historical inquiry.[45] After all, when only one version of history is correct, the classroom is not a space in which students can introduce new material for analysis, experiment, or question authoritative knowledge. Questioning or deviating from the 'school version' of history is not encouraged, and may in fact be punished through a low grade. The classroom could thus even be detrimental to the development of historical thinking.[46] An online community of inquisitive individuals who share a common hobby, playing a historically themed video game, however, can be considered a relative 'safe' space for the development of and experimentation with this skill.

Additionally, one can expect that people with a certain degree of mastery of this 'intellectual apparatus for handling history' do not only use and profess their skills in the classroom. Finding their way towards gaming communities, it is precisely through their use of and fascination with popular culture that they are challenged to apply their historical toolkit in practice, potentially teaching others some of their skills in the process.

According to Stephanie Fisher, among others, games especially are apt to trigger a process called 'tangential learning', a process in which gamers will educate themselves if the

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[42] Seixas, 'Schweigen! die Kinder!', 25.
[43] Ibid., 31.
[44] Lee, 'Understanding history and understanding the past', 155.
[45] Ibid., 129.
[46] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 81; Levstik, 'Articulating the silences', 297-300.

game introduces them to topics they might find appealing, in a context they find engaging.[47]As I will show in the next chapter, in an internationally oriented social environment such as the *Heroes & Generals* gaming community, people are presented with histories that dispute or challenge those they have been taught in school all the time. In this digital and social learning environment, other ways of engagement with history may be developed than those taught in the traditional classroom setting.

Finally, not only do students learn different versions of history outside of the classroom, they also *want* to engage in discussions about conflicting histories. According to Stephanie Fisher, history is considered to be the most boring subject in schools, because it is so unengaging.[48] Additionally, students are generally disturbed by the fact that schools do not incorporate multiple histories in history classes, while this ambiguous history is exactly the kind of history that engages them outside of the classroom.[49] At the same time, history continues to engage students and non-students alike in the form of historically themed videogames, both singleplayer and multiplayer.[50] Evidently, many are interested in history, but it does not show in the classroom. Linda Levstik's interviews with both students and teachers led her to the conclusion that a refusal to engage in meaningful discussion about these 'other' histories in the classroom results in a presentist and cynical conception of history in students, so this discrepancy cannot go unchallenged.[51]

2.3 The online video game as a social learning environment

According to Gordon Calleja, a leading author in the field of game studies, players experience a sense of involvement when interacting with a video game. This involvement has direct consequences for the learning environment that a game may provide: players are drawn to the environment out of their own volition. There is a number of factors at work, which I will explain here. First, Calleja makes the critical distinction between different phases of interacting with a game: micro-involvement and macro-involvement. The distinction is made on a temporal basis: micro-involvement refers to the 'moment by moment involvement of the game-playing

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[47] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 77-78; Iacovides, 'The gaming involvement and informal learning framework', 618.

[48] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 71-72.

[49] Levstik, 'Articulating the silences', 290-291, 296-297.

[50] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 72.

[51] Levstik, 'Articulating the silences', 300-301.

instances'. Macro-involvement is the sustained engagement throughout the longer term, when players are not directly involved in playing a game.[52] For instance, in the case of *Heroes & Generals*, macro-involvement would be to discuss tactics and strategy on the game's forum with other players, whereas micro-involvement takes place during battles in the game itself

Both the micro- and the macro phase are affiliated with different kinds of involvement. In the micro phase, players are involved in actions that deal directly with controlling the game. They need to make tactical decisions and formulate plans on the spot, regarding the momentary situation in a game. In most online first person shooters, including *Heroes & Generals*, game modes revolve around cooperating to defend and attack so-called 'checkpoints', or strategic points spread all over the virtual space. The instant need to defend a checkpoint that is under siege by the enemy faction would be a trigger for such planning and tactical decision making. By being continuously involved in the planning of tactics, players get increasingly better at this. Actualizing these tactical considerations is what Calleja calls 'performative involvement'. FPS players engage in this all the time, through controlling their avatar using the game's controls. This process of learning mainly addresses the player's ability to control the game, varying from barely being able to move around, to moving their characters using controls they have internalized, as ways of movement that feel and come as natural to them as moving through the real world.[53]

The characteristic of multi-player games that distinguishes them most from other forms of popular culture is the sense of 'shared involvement' they invoke. They place a player-controlled agent in the virtual environment, which is in turn surrounded by other player-controlled agents. According to Calleja, this is the main strength of the medium when compared to other media forms, because 'it anchors the player to the [represented] location both spatially and socially. […] Human-controlled agents allow an infinitely wider range of communication [than computer controlled agents] as well as responding in more unpredictable ways, making the shared involvement more intense' when feeling surrounded by actual humans.[54] Players are scrutinized and judged by others, and can collaborate and compete with each other as they please.[55]

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[52] Calleja, 'Revising immersion', 83-84.
[53] Ibid., 85-86.
[54] Ibid., 101.
[55] Ibid., 86-87.

In the micro phase of playing a WWII FPS game, consequently, gamers may learn about some aspects of the Second World War, but there is little room for reflection on the subject matter of the game. It is in the macro phase that gamers are invited to learn more about the game itself, and its tangential bodies of knowledge.[56] Unfortunately, Gordon Calleja's study of shared involvement on the macro scale is mostly limited to Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG's), in which dozens to thousands of player-controlled agents can interact with each other and their surroundings in one single game world. However, there are some aspects of his findings that he extends to other multi-player games, such as the FPS.

According to Calleja, 'playing in a virtual world with others is a crucial motivator for players to try out and continue to participate in such games'.[57] Considering this, one could argue that a multi-player game is more prone to stimulate a fascination of and an interest in the game's subject matter than other forms of media would. While gamers typically start playing a WWII game for its entertaining qualities, they quickly find themselves intrigued with the Second World War.[58]

Of course, not only games can have this effect on their audiences. Other forms of popular culture such as a good movie or a controversial biography can also induce a motivation for self-guided learning. However, video games, and especially online multiplayer video games, are rather unique because of the fact that they can engross gamers for long periods of time. They are notoriously engaging, largely due to the competitive and collaborative atmosphere that the social character of these games invokes.[59] This means that multiplayer WWII FPS games such as *Heroes & Generals* effectively help maintain their players' interests in the Second World War for longer periods of time than other media forms do. It is through this sustained process of interaction with other players that makes the spreading of historical thinking possible. Learning to think historically is, after all, not an easy matter performed in the short term. As the framework constructed by Peter Seixas suggests, it consists of several different but overlapping thinking processes that must all be trained over a longer time span.[60]

[56] Iacovides, 'The gaming involvement and informal learning framework', 620-621.
[57] Gordon Calleja, *In-game: from immersion to incorporation* (London 2011) 98-99.
[58] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 77-78.
[59] Fisher, 'Playing with World War II', 78; Calleja, *In-game*, 111-112.
[60] Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking', 1-2.

What is that makes these games so engaging, other than the possibility of interaction with others? In short, this comes down to what is considered to be the holy grail of game development: immersion.[61] One of the strengths of first person shooters set in World War II is that they can potentially stimulate a feeling of time travel in the gamer. Eva Kingsepp refines this characteristic of video games in her study concerning World War II single-player shooters. According to Kingsepp, historically themed video games are well suited to accomplish a specific type of immersion she calls 'immersive historicity': 'an atmosphere of being personally involved in a re-enactment of history'.[62] According to Kingsepp, video games are excellent means through which a feeling of historical immersion is possible, because they can successfully use three means required for immersion: spatial signifiers (subtle suggestions of place, like windmills to signify Holland), temporal signifiers (subtle suggestions of time, like an old tractor with bullet holes in it to signify the Second World War) and sounds (like thunderous sounds of mortar fire in the background). If these means come together convincingly in an interactive environment, it is able to give the player an experience of being in a different place and time.[63] A well-designed historically themed video game is able to convince a gamer that whatever he or she is doing in a particular virtual space really feels like having a sense of agency in a certain place in the past, of actually participating in past events.[64]

Imagine being a soldier on a battlefield during World War II, being part of a major battle such as the Battle of Stalingrad that could have resulted in another world than that which we know today, had Axis forces won it instead of the Allies. Now imagine video games being even partly able to accomplish this effect. Participating in this event in the past would without a doubt be a valuable learning experience to gamers, because it would actually transport them to the past. However, video games can only accomplish this effect up to a certain level. Even without considering the representational issues games present, games in their current form appear not quite fit to provide such an experience.[65] A gamer cannot *be* a virtual figure in a shooter, even though popular games that claim you can play as a soldier of the Red Army (or the Allies, or even the Wehrmacht) would have us believe otherwise. These figures are controlled through

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[61] Calleja, *In-game*, 25.

[62] Kingsepp, 'Immersive historicity', 60-61.

[63] Ibid., 66-80.

[64] Jay D. Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: understanding new media* (MIT 2000) 53.

[65] Branko Mitrovic, 'Opacity and transparency in historical representations', *History and theory* 2 (2014) 281.

some type of game controller and their actions are witnessed through some type of display and audio output (or any other types of hardware the industry has come up with), and it is quite obvious to gamers that this is the case.

While there is sound research on the topic of immersion, such as that of Eva Kingsepp mentioned above, in practice, it is a term that is used to refer to experiences varying from 'general engagement, perception of realism, addiction, suspension of disbelief, identification with game characters, and more'.[66] In other words, it practically covers the whole range of games' aspects that are deemed either 'positive', or at least advantageous for the growth of game involvement. According to Calleja, however, this also means that without specifying the concept as it is used in its context, it is not suitable for academic research. More specifically, Calleja argues that the term 'immersion' has been used indiscriminately, not only in colloquial use, but also in the academic literature. In so doing he contends that it has lost its meaning altogether.[67] For every instance in which 'immersion' is used, another term would arguably be more fitting and thus more appropriate. Therefore, Calleja has developed a vocabulary that is better suited for analysis of what has until then been called 'immersion'. Ultimately, game involvement is a prerequisite for 'higher-order cognitive processes' such as Kingsepp's 'immersive historicity'.[68] While I will not go into the full details of his arguments, I do feel certain forms of game involvement are helpful in explaining the phenomenon of learning in multi-player games as social learning environments. Since this study is mainly about the influence of gaming communities on the learning process, it is the shared involvement that is of most interest.

I have explained the role of 'shared involvement' in the micro phase before. It is in the macro phase, however, that the influence of fellow gamers on a player's sense of involvement shows its true colours. Calleja claims that the competitive nature of multi-player FPS games provokes collaboration, which often results in a shift from individual gameplay to teamwork as part of a collective of fellow gamers, often called 'clans'. These clans challenge their members to become increasingly better at the game, for the good of the whole. The sense of commitment and belonging this creates in players is what results in a gaming experience that is deeply involving in the longer term.[69]

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[66] Calleja, *In-game*, 25.
[67] Ibid., 25-32.
[68] Ibid., 35; Kingsepp, 'Immersive historicity', 66-80.
[69] Calleja, *In-game*, 111-112.

All in all, in his discussion of shared involvement in multi-player games, Calleja does not give FPS games the full attention they deserve. He mainly focuses on the small amount of players that play these games on a competitive or semi-competitive level, leaving 'casual players' out of his analysis.[70] These casual players, however, naturally form the greater part of any gaming community, because they do not belong to the small elite that have attained the high level of mastery necessary to be part of competitive groups. In the case of *Heroes & Generals*, for example, there is not even an option to play competitively in official or semi-official 'tournaments' that Calleja refers to.[71] In other words, Calleja's framework for involvement is not quite thorough enough to account for long-term shared involvement in most players of FPS games. It is for this reason that another approach is necessary: one that does not focus on small parts of a gaming community, but on the social dynamics of communities as a whole.

At this point, a problem arises: how can you research a gaming community as a whole? For the purpose of finding out how gamers learn about history in these social environments, it is not sufficient to interview some of them. Using a bottom-up approach, one can never understand the dynamics of the community as an entity in itself. A top-down approach is necessary. To this end, I focus on the social structures the community inhabits, and how these structures inhibit and stimulate learning history. This is, however, not very straightforward, since there is no fixed space which the community 'inhabits': as Calleja's model shows, gamers are not only involved with a game in the game itself, but also outside of the game's virtual space.

However, when researching a social structure surrounding a multiplayer game, it is not useful to speak of 'inside' and 'outside' of the game. After all, those people that communicate with each other 'inside' of the game might as well do so 'outside' of the game. The game is just one of many media through which they communicate with each other. Their contact ignores the imaginary boundary between the 'game world' and the 'real world'.

This approach to a community is not unlike Anselm Strauss' (1916-1996) *social world perspective*, when applied to these games. According to Strauss, a social world can be described as a 'universe of discourse', which is not limited to a specific spatial (virtual) dimension, but is delimited by what constitutes as 'effective communication', not by any form of territorial or

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[70] Ibid., 111.
[71] Ibid., 111-112.

formal group membership.[72] It is exactly this intangibility which often characterizes player communities, and the 'effective communication' that makes the formation of community across media boundaries possible.[73] As stated by Strauss' contemporary David Unruh, 'a social world must be seen as a unit of social organization which is diffuse and amorphous in character. [It is] an internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants'. Additionally, it typically lacks a central authority.[74] In other words, to capture the essential characteristics of a gaming community one must study its ways both inside the game space and outside of the game. The social worlds involved in playing games also extend beyond these games, to social platforms other than those that are offered by the games themselves. In the case of this study, the social worlds involve the in-game chat and the official *Heroes & Generals* forum.

So far, I have explained that playing a multiplayer (FPS) game like *Heroes & Generals* necessarily leads to participation in a social learning environment, and how this relates to the social process of learning. In my analysis of the community, I will explain where and how in these games the act of learning about history takes place, and what exactly this means for the content that is touched upon. Gordon Calleja's *player involvement model*, and more precisely, the distinction he makes between the micro phase and the macro phase, will act as a frame of reference. For the analysis of the community as a social learning environment, I will briefly zoom in on the influence of this temporal difference by comparing communication between gamers in the two phases. Communication in the micro phase is studied through analysis of in-game chat (being both text- and voice-based), using data collected by methods of screen capture during over a hundred hours of participating in matches lasting ten minutes to several hours, depending on the game mode. Notably, during these matches, players can communicate with up to seventeen teammates using in-game text chat.

However, the macro phase of involvement is the more important one. It is examined in this thesis mainly through a study of the *Heroes & Generals* official forum, which acts as the main social hub for players of the game. The medium of the forum has often been researched as a

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[72] Anselm Strauss, 'A Social World Perspective', in N. K. Denzin (ed.), *Studies in symbolic interaction* 1 (Greenwich, CT 1978) 121; David R. Unruh, 'Characteristics and types of participation in social worlds', *Studies in symbolic interaction* 2 (Greenwich, CT 1979) 115.

[73] Vili Lehdonvirta, 'Virtual worlds don't exist: questioning the dichotomous approach in MMO studies', *Game studies* 1 (2010) http://gamestudies.org/1001/articles/lehdonvirta (28-05-2016)

[74] Unruh, 'Characteristics and types of participation in social worlds', 115.

supplement for online courses, but not as a form of popular culture or as an extension of a multiplayer game. Hence, I will apply a framework that has often been used to assess critical thinking in forums for learning in a formal setting to this game's forum, in order to assess its potential for learning in an informal setting. The implications of using a framework for assessing learning in a formal setting for assessment of learning in an informal setting are taken into account and discussed extensively. The substantive knowledge and historical thinking skills that become apparent through this study of communications is compared to Peter Seixas' definition of 'historical thinking' as conceptualized in chapter 2.1.[75]

2.4 The Community of Inquiry Framework

This theoretical framework by Garrison, Anderson and Archer was originally meant as a framework which can be used to determine the efficacy of forums used for online courses. It works as an assessment of the level of critical inquiry apparent in social learning environments, by looking for indicators of a learning experience. Central to their argument is that, for a learning experience, three factors must come together. These factors are 'cognitive presence', 'social presence', and 'teaching presence'. Of the three factors, cognitive presence is the most basic to an educational experience. By cognitive presence, the authors mean 'the extent to which participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication'. According to the framework, four categories or levels of cognitive presence indicators can be discerned:

1. A triggering event or communication, which results in a 'feeling of unease'. In other words, the event or communication that starts a discussion. In the context of *Heroes & Generals* this may vary from an outpost being conquered by the enemy faction or a player playing very poorly, to a question asked on the forum.

2. Exploration of information, knowledge or alternatives in order to make sense of the triggering event. In the context of the game, this may relate to, for example, questioning the power or effectiveness of certain kinds of military equipment, or asking for information that is relevant to the discussion topic on a forum.

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[75] Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking'.

3. Integration of information and knowledge into a coherent idea or concept, and gaining insight into and understanding of the explored information, knowledge or alternatives. This level of cognitive presence can be shown by presenting a battle plan, formulating certain tactics, or showing understanding of an event or communication.

4. Resolution of the issue or problem, or the application of the integrated information and knowledge. In relation to the game, this level of cognitive presence may present itself as the application of a battle plan or strategy, or as an answer to a (historical) question.[76]

Cognitive presence relates to the content of communications. It is a vital element of critical thinking, a process that is often the main goal of successful learning experiences.[77]

Social presence functions as a support for cognitive presence. It relates to the structure of communications, social hierarchy, and sociability. 'Social presence is the ability of participants in the 'Community of Inquiry' (CoI) to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as "real people"'.[78] This process of socialization facilitates critical thinking in the learning community. On the other hand, social presence also directly influences an educational experience's efficacy, because participating in an active, enjoyable and fulfilling community helps retain learners. In an informal learning environment, in which participation is not in any way mandatory, this is particularly relevant. Three categories of social presence are presented in the Community of Inquiry framework, although these are less stratified than those of cognitive presence:

1. Expression of emotion, which can be indicated by use of emoticons, humour, self-disclosure and other forms of expressions.

2. Open communication, which is characterized by reciprocal and respectful exchanges. In the context of the *Heroes & Generals* community, this may become apparent through recognition of each other's contributions, or by simply showing awareness of the presence of other individuals.

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[76] Garrison e.a., 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment', 98-99.
[77] Ibid., 89.
[78] Ibid., 89.

3. Group cohesion, or focused collaborative communication that builds participation and empathy. This is indicated by activities or communications which build and sustain a sense of group commitment to building understanding.[79]

Teaching presence, the final element of the model, has two different functions, both of which can be performed by any participant in an educational experience. Traditionally, however, both are the responsibility of the teacher. The teaching presence supports social and cognitive presence, in order to realize educational goals. Its first function is the design of an educational experience, which includes selecting, organizing and presenting course content. Additionally, the development of learning activities and assessment is also part of this designing function. The second function of the teaching presence is the facilitation of learning, which is a responsibility that is often shared between participants and the teacher.[80] According to the authors of the framework, there are three categories which indicate teaching presence:

1. Instructional management, such as setting a curriculum, assessment, and making sure the medium is being used properly. Indicators of this category would include organization guidelines and the setting of explicit and implicit structural parameters.
2. Building understanding. This is a process that involves creating a feeling of collective effort towards the sharing of meaning, the identification of matters participants agree and disagree on, and the reaching of consensus and understanding.
3. Direct instruction, which is mainly concerned with providing 'constructive explanatory feedback'. This category is indicated by communications that facilitate reflection and discourse.

I feel this approach can also applied to my research, because both cognitive presence and social presence are clearly abundant in gamer communities. More problematic is the teaching presence. There are, after all, no formal teachers in gamer communities. I argue, however, that the role of the teacher is to some extent fulfilled by members of the community itself. The authority that constitutes 'valid knowledge' is not formally acknowledged, but instead is continuously negotiated by the community. For example, forum users who start a topic on a forum select the

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[79] Ibid., 99-101.
[80] Ibid., 90.

content of inquiry, which is presented by other forum users who join in the discussion. Making sure the discussion stays on topic is often the responsibility of forum 'administrators', and is often a duty performed by other forum users who simply want 'their' forum to remain somewhat organized. Additionally, the lack of extrinsic motivation (a teacher, a grading system, or sanctions) to participate in group discussions can be offset by the presence of 'shared involvement', as defined in chapter 2.2.

While I am aware of the functional differences between online courses and WWII video games, the differences between online forums for formal education and online platforms for WWII video gamers are not that straightforward. While learning might not be a primary function of the *Heroes & Generals* forum, as is the case in forums for online courses, this does not mean that similar cognitive, social, and teaching presences are necessarily absent. The framework is used because it is a good tool to assess and analyze learning in any social online environment, not because it is a tool to assess online courses specifically.
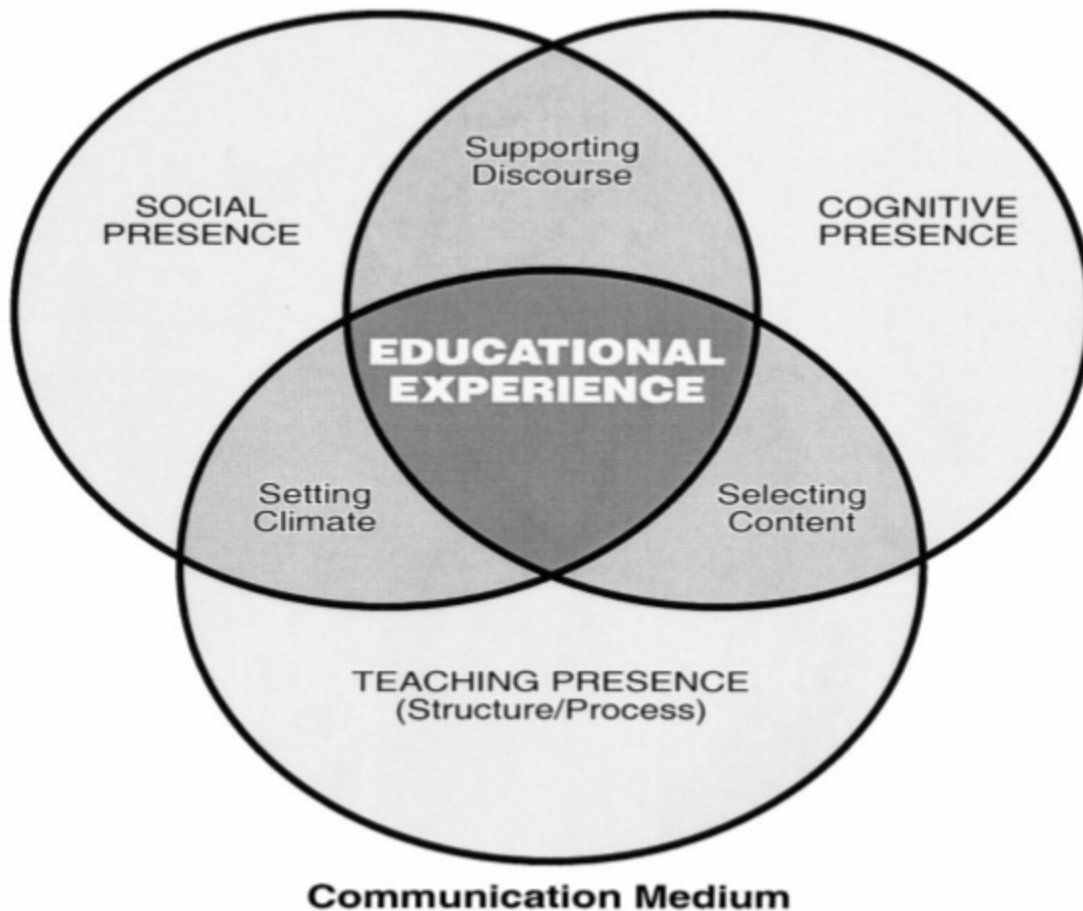
Figure 2.4.1: The community of inquiry model: elements of an educational experience.[81]

The model can be related to Seixas' framework of historical thinking on a number of topics. All six aspects of historical thinking deal with the ways in which historical content is addressed. As is displayed in figure 2.4.1, these are elements that are addressed specifically through a combination of effective cognitive presence and a teaching presence. However, without a supportive social climate and sustained discussions - matters in which a favourable social presence is paramount - establishment and maintenance of an educational experience in which historical thinking is stimulated is not possible. Since the main object of analysis is a gaming community's forum, which is a very elaborate, somewhat incoherent and thus far unexplored source, I feel the Community of Inquiry model for assessing an educational experience provides me with better leads for structural analysis, when compared to Peter Seixas' model for assessing historical thinking. Hence, the CoI model is leading for the structure of this study. Since the goal is to study how this community functions as a *historical* educational experience, however, references to Seixas' framework are made regularly.

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[81] Ibid., 88.

3: *Heroes & Generals'* gamers: a community of historical inquiry?

As mentioned before, *Heroes & Generals* is a multiplayer FPS game with a World War II theme. While studies have been performed on learning through playing single-player FPS games with that same theme, and on learning in multiplayer games in general, learning history through playing multiplayer FPS games has as of yet not been explored. As explained in the previous chapter, I approach the community of gamers of the game as a social entity that is not delimited by physical or digital boundaries. It consists of a network of many social worlds that can overlap each other, and which can be observed and studied both in-game on a micro level and on a macro level, on other social platforms.

In this chapter, I will present an analysis of this community, in which I will explain what and how gamers learn about the Second World War in WWII multiplayer FPS gaming communities. To this end, I split up the chapter into three parts in which I analyze the three essential 'presences' specified by Garrison et al., as they appear in the communications of *Heroes & Generals* players. The presence of these elements is determined by looking for comments or segments of comments which indicate that these three elements are indeed present. I employ this method because the framework is meant to prove the extent to which a community delivers an educational experience, and my goal is to explore the extent to which this community delivers a historical educational experience. Throughout the entirety of my analysis I also account for the presence of sound historical thinking, as determined using Peter Seixas' conceptualization of historical thinking.

3.1 Learning history in the micro phase

According to Gordon Calleja's *player involvement model*, the experience of a gamer in the micro phase of playing a first person shooter is dominated by a preoccupation with controlling the in-game character, navigating through the game's virtual areas and planning and executing tactics and strategies.[82] In my study of in-game communication, both text-based and voice-based, this was indeed the case. Gamers write and speak about matters that are directly relatable to the game's progress and the team's performance. Additionally, they engage in 'lulz' (a corruption of

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[82] Calleja, *In-game*, 59-71, 77-78, 155-159.

an abbreviation for 'laughing out loud', or saying something simply for fun), taunting and jeering at each other for their own and other's amusement. History is not a topic of discussion, so a degree of critical historical inquiry is absent.

Through play, players may develop knowledge on the ways in which military hardware was used during the Second World War. They might learn, for instance, that small arms could not harm tanks, that assault weapons were more useful in close-quarters combat than at long range, and that battles were not necessarily fair or 'balanced'. However, these potential subjects of discussion are not reflected in sustained in-game communication, and therefore they do not act as triggering events for meaningful discussion on the topic of history. Herein lies the weakness of in-game chat and the game in general, when seen as educational media. Chat may be useful for learning and teaching others how to play a game more effectively, but what gamers lack in the micro-phase is room and time for reflection. After over a hundred hours of play, I have never observed a single mention of historical topics. In a competitive setting like a virtual battle, thinking about and discussing history is likely considered a distraction that, just like any other distraction, impedes the gamer's chances of winning.

Next to the social platforms available to gamers, the game itself also does not help trigger meaningful discussion of the past. This is mainly due to the fact that it lacks a scripted narrative like most multiplayer shooters. There is no story about the Second World War that the games' developers want to convey to players.[83] Instead, players are offered a virtually unlimited amount of possible alternative war scenarios to take part in, or as the developers say:

> 'Fight to become a war hero or rise through the ranks to command an army. As Infantry, Tank Gunner, Fighter Pilot or General, your actions can turn the tide of a persistent online war, fought by players across the world!'[84]

This 'persistent online war' consists of scenarios that are connected not through a plotline, but through a chronological series of battles, eventually leading to the strategic victory of one of the three warring factions, being the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union. After this, a new war commences, and the cycle starts anew.

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[83] Calleja, *In-game*, 120-121.
[84] Reto-Moto, 'Home page', http://www.heroesandgenerals.com/18/? (12-08-2016).

This results in a gaming experience that is not easily relatable to the history of the Second World War. According to one gamer, 'shumpu123', he 'never got a WWII vibe from the game. […] The atmosphere doesn't feel right, it never feels like WWII'.[85] Others attest to this: 'It may as well be goldeneye 007 with a ww2 skin, just walking around the map killing people'.[86] The game is 'simply turning into a "skin" of the "usual shooter game"'.[87] In other words, players do not experience a feeling of 'immersive historicity', as defined by Kingsepp.[88] Players are aware that the game does not provide them with an experience that in any way resembles the experience of World War 2 combat as they perceive it would have been. This awareness of the gap between representation and the past, however, does lead to discussions about the War in the macro phase.

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[85] H&G forum user shumpu123, 'HnG compared to Medal of Honor allied assault (take notes!)', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=37&t=59643&p=762998 (12-08-2016).

[86] H&G forum user arsnicthegreat, 'HnG compared to Medal of Honor allied assault (take notes!)', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=37&t=59643&p=762998 (12-08-2016).

[87] H&G forum user _Zavulon_, 'New blood screen effects are fun taking', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=37&t=55025&p=688077 (12-08-2016).

[88] Kingsepp, 'Immersive historicity', 60-61.

3.2 Cognitive presence

As explained in the previous chapter, the cognitive presence in a community of inquiry is constituted by the extent to which community participants are able to construct meaning through sustained communication.[89] According to the CoI framework, four phases or levels of cognitive presence can be distinguished: (1) a trigger, (2) exploration, (3) integration, and (4) resolution. These phases can be determined by looking for indicators that imply their presence. For example, a sense of puzzlement points to a triggering event, exchange of information implies exploration of information, connecting divergent ideas and views implies integration of information, and applying new ideas points to the resolution of the issue or the problem. The success of the resolution determines the continuation of the process of inquiry: when it is deemed inadequate by a community of inquiry, the cycle of inquiry should resume.[90]

3.2.1 Cognitive presence in the macro phase

In order to learn more about the way the *Heroes & Generals* community deals with history in the macro phase, I researched the main social platform provided by the game's developers, Reto-Moto. The official *Heroes & Generals* forum acts as the most important social link between players, but also between the players and Reto-Moto. The developers of the game chose to let game development be guided by user feedback, meaning they invite players to let them know which parts of the game need changing or further development.[91] Before downloading the game for free from the software distribution platform Steam, potential players are already confronted with a message from the company, which '[encourages] the players to participate in discussions in our forum'.[92] On the forum, the result of this 'user driven development model' is noticeable: most topics, about three quarters, are related to development feedback, in which gamers make the developers aware of ongoing software bugs or present ideas for new or changed game features.

By which kinds of users this development is driven is quite unknown. Neither Reto-Moto, nor Steam, the game's distributor, have published figures on the demographics of people

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[89] Garrison e.a., 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment', 89.

[90] Ibid., 98-99.

[91] Reto-Moto, 'User driven development', http://www.heroesandgenerals.com/community/development (12-08-2016).

[92] Reto-Moto, 'Heroes & Generals, early access', http://store.steampowered.com/app/227940/ (12-08-2016).

playing this game. Forum comments and personal information disclosed in these comments suggest that not just student-aged gamers play this game. For example, in a topic related to the development of the game, forum user 'Grenadier79' mentions he is 'a WW2 historian who works in the largest WW2 museum in the Netherlands (Overloon)'.[93] Comments such as these suggesting the age category a player belongs to are quite common. Additionally, there is a community-made poll on the forum that suggests nearly half of all players, or at least nearly half of all forum users, are over twenty-five years old, and thus presumably no longer students.

Figure 3.2.1.1: *Heroes & Generals forum demographics, n=145*.[94]

Age group	Count	Proportion (%)
<15 years old	6	3.9
15-20 years old	32	22.1
21-25 years old	38	26.2
26-30 years old	27	18.6
>30 years old	42	29

Source: own calculations, data collected from a poll started by forum user baswaldo, 'Poll: age demographic and prefered faction?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=63160 (12-08-2016)

Discussions on the topic of history mainly occur in the macro phase of playing *Heroes & Generals*. The many topics that are talked about reveal a clear dichotomy. On the one hand, the community talks about military hardware that is or is not represented in the game. On the other hand, there are more sophisticated discussions about historical events, actors and battlefields. In general, the discussions about military hardware do not or rarely lead to meaningful discussions about history. These more meaningful discussions are instead generally found under those topics dealing with historical matters. There is a good reason for this, one that must be mentioned beforehand. Historical discussions are only supposed to be submitted to one specific area of the forum, being the 'Historical Chatter' forum.[95] Discussions about history also appear outside of this thread, but they are a rare find.

Notably, such organizational issues are addressed by officials appointed by the game's developer. These officials, referred to on the forum as 'moderators', 'administrators' or simply

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[93] Forum user Grenadier79, 'Feedback to make a great game even greater', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=67205&p=886862 (28-07-2016).

[94] Data is gathered from a poll started by forum user baswaldo, 'Poll: age demographic and prefered faction?',

[95] Reto-Moto, 'Historical chatter', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewforum.php?f=27 (12-08-2016).

'admins', make sure the rules set by the developer are adhered to. Taken together, these 'Rules and Guidelines', through intervention by administrators, have a large influence on all three presences, and thus on the learning experience.[96] They mention rules on social norms, but also on language policy and matters like offensive usernames. These are considered ´unacceptable´ when they contain or consist of 'names of people or organizations directly involved in crimes against humanity such as, but not limited to Waffen SS'.[97] It goes without saying that the effective policing of these rules has a positive effect on the social presence.

Similarly, the rules and guidelines have an influence on the cognitive and teaching presences, because they set limits to the content that may be presented and discussed. Remarkably, they state that 'discussing real-world politics and pursuing ideological debate' is forbidden, as well as presenting images containing 'Axis symbols such as swastikas, obscenities and any other content that goes against the standards of this community'. Behaviour that deviates from the rules and guidelines can be punished by a temporary or permanent ban from the community forum or even legal action in severe cases.[98] How exactly these rules and guidelines influence the forum as a learning environment is explored further in chapter 3.4, ´Teaching presence´.

Much like most forums, the *Heroes & Generals* forum is structured in a stratified way, meaning that it consists of several levels of information. The forum's homepage provides the broadest possible overview of the its contents, dividing it into seven categories of forums (or sub-forums). One category, for example, is called 'General Discussion', which consists of two forums, being Historical Chatter and 'Off-Topic'. These can be visited straight from the homepage. When opening the Historical Chatter forum, a list of 'topics' or 'threads' appears. These are virtual chat boxes made and labelled by forum users. These are ordered on a temporal basis: the topic which has last received a reaction is on top, and it falls further down the list the longer it has been since the last response. A notable exception is a 'pinned' topic, which is made

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[96] Community manager Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=357&sid=fd250b0b5e1b68a9b1fc44fcabb08863 (1208-2016).

[97] Community manager Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=357&sid=fd250b0b5e1b68a9b1fc44fcabb08863 (12-08-2016).

[98] Community manager Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=357&sid=fd250b0b5e1b68a9b1fc44fcabb08863 (12-08-2016).

'sticky' by administrators. These always remain at the top of the list. Topics, in turn, consist of comments, which are written reactions by forum users. These are the main carriers of content on the forum, and thus the main focus of this study. One final important fact about the forum is that, unlike communication in the micro phase, comments made are not fleeting. They do not disappear after a few seconds, but remain visible and thus can be responded to until the forum ceases existing, or the comment is removed by either an administrator or the user who wrote the comment. This aspect of communication on forums is especially relevant for its function as a historical learning environment, because it is beneficial to the cognitive presence: it gives users time to consider their argumentation or search for sources before responding to a previous comment.

Compared to other forums, 'Historical Chatter', the area dedicated to discussing historical matters, is relatively small. Currently, it consists of 290 topics, while all five 'Development' forums taken together count nearly twenty thousand.[99] The Historical Chatter forum is, however, similarly sized to other forums not directly related to the game's development, such as the 'Off Topic' forum, which counts just over four hundred topics.[100] Additionally, it is noticeable that the average amount of views and comments on each individual topic on the 'Historical Chatter' forum is comparable to those on any other forum, ranging from dozens to thousands of views and from a few to hundreds of comments. Relatively few as they may be, historical topics do not get any less attention than any other topic on the forum.

Compared to other popular World War II themed multiplayer games, *Heroes & Generals* is no exception in having an area reserved especially for historical discussions on its forum. Forums such as those of *Day of Defeat: Source*[101] or *Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad/Rising Storm*[102] do not have such an area, while the *WWII Online/Battleground Europe*[103] and *War Thunder* forums do appear to offer very similar environments for similar

[99] Reto-Moto, 'Development', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewforum.php?f=35 (12-08-2016).

[100] Reto-Moto, 'Off topic', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewforum.php?f=6 (12-08-2016).

[101] Day of Defeat: Source community-made forum, http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=56 (12-08-2016).

[102] Tripwire Interactive, 'Red Orchestra 2 / Rising Storm forum', http://forums.tripwireinteractive.com/forum/red-orchestra-2-rising-storm (12-08-2016).

[103] Playnet Incorporated, Cornered Rat Software, 'WWII military history & technology 1940-present', http://discussions.battlegroundeurope.com/forumdisplay.php?s=&f=26&page=1&pp=20&sort=lastpost&order=desc&daysprune=-1 (12-08-2016).

historical discussions.[104] This indicates that discussing history is indeed regarded by both gamers and game developers as a topic as worthy of discussion as game development itself. Additionally, while a quick search reveals that history is a topic of discussion in every forum mentioned above, those with especially delimited areas for historical discussions are of course more effective informal historical learning environments.[105] Ultimately, without a dedicated topic or forum for such discussions, they would become invisible in seas of unrelated comments.

On the *Heroes & Generals* forum, I have observed two different modes in which history is usually addressed. First, there is the utilitarian mode, in which history acts as a means, or a frame of reference, through which forum users can attain their envisioned ends, such as influencing the development of the game. Secondly, there is the inquisitive mode, in which history is addressed as something that is to be explored and discussed in collaboration with others. The utilitarian mode is generally found in the 'Development' forums, while the inquisitive mode is mostly present in the 'Historical Chatter' forum. The utilitarian mode is generally a piece of knowledge or information about the past that is combined with a grievance or remark about the ways in which this is reflected in the game. In both modes, the approach to history and the extent to which historical thinking is apparent is decisively different. For example, in a topic called 'This is not historical anymore', gamers address the following announcement by Reto.Mato, who is the lead character artist of *Heroes & Generals*:

'Seeing as how the Americans made all this interesting, experimental camouflage in the early years of WW2, we thought it would be really cool to use them in our game. Now, we know not all of these saw actual battle, but they were designed and extensively field tested so they are authentic in that respect'.[106]

Forum user 'shadesilencer' quotes this statement, and uses it to ask for other 'things "tested" and never actually used in war time', first referring to the Panzerkampfwagen VIII Maus, a German

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[104] War Thunder community, 'Historical discussion', http://forum.warthunder.com/index.php?/forum/236-historical-discussion/ (12-08-2016).

[105] Forum user Lowenbrau, 'Russian battle cry', http://forums.tripwireinteractive.com/forum/red-orchestra-2-rising-storm/ro2-rs-general/ideas-and-suggestions-ab/62506-russian-battle-cry (12-08-2016).

[106] Forum user and Reto-Moto employee Reto.Mato, 'this is not historical anymore', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=74043 (12-08-2016).

super-heavy tank prototype.[107] Not much later, other forum users join in to create a list of other experimental military hardware that they would like to see implemented in the game.

Similarly, 'Isara', who presents herself as 'a female gamer in a rather sexist gaming world', employs the same utilitarian mode. She expresses that she would like 'to see some actual depictions of female soldiers in game', because

> 'Girls played a big part in the war effort on the Russian front, in a huge way. Russian snipers
> were some of the most deadly and fear assets the Russians had against the German advances
> Just one example for those of you who would like to read some interesting facts.
> http://rarehistoricalphotos.com/smart-b ... med-kills/
> http://rarehistoricalphotos.com/775-con ... ture-1945/
> Yes they were incredibly rare, but it did happen, females served as tankers in the Russian army as
> well
> http://rarehistoricalphotos.com/aleksan ... tank-army/
> And even more so as Pilots, though they were not respected by their male comrads, some did
> raise to higher ranks. there was also the feared Night Witches'[108]

Isara then continues to list more accounts of female soldiers in action during the Second World War. Conversely, knowledge and information about history can also be used to prevent such developments of the game. For example, 'McChimp' is of the opinion that:

> 'Female tankers would need to be limited because whilst tanks and camouflage were extremely
> common on the battlefield, women were not. Despite what some people claim, this game does
> have quite a lot of historical accuracy and the majority of players do not want to see battlefields
> absolutely covered with women. They are recoiling because they'd like to keep the game's
> historically accurate side, and that is a perfectly reasonable goal.
> As has already been explained, no section of the German or US militaries used women as

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[107] Forum user shadesilencer, 'this is not historical anymore',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=74043 (12-08-2016).
[108] Forum user Isara, 'Female soldiers in game (with example of a model)',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=63495 (12-08-2016).

combatants during the second world war-they carried ammunition, they ferried aircraft around, but they did not fight.'[109]

These negotiations between forum users are thus mainly aimed towards a common goal of providing constructive feedback to the game's developers, but they also provoke conflicting parties to engage in meaningful discussion about history. Both Isara's and McChimps' comments show a level of cognitive presence that is beyond the level of integration of knowledge about the past. Isara already presents a partly configured implementation of a female soldier.[110] This act incites a triggering event in forum users like McChimp, who subsequently explore information about women in World War II, and use the information found to provide their own accounts of the past.

Unfortunately, however, the utilitarian mode of addressing history rarely leads to a resolution of the issue at hand that can be agreed upon by the whole of the community. Instead, what happens is that parallel discussions between proponents and opponents of this intended change are sustained for a long time, resulting in resolutions of issues in both separate groups that are not compatible with each other, until the administrators finally come around to concluding the matter and close the topic to further discussion. Relating this matter to Peter Seixas' conception of historical thinking, discussions in the utilitarian mode between parties such as those between Isara's and McChimps' are lacking in nearly every aspect of it. While both parties provide arguably valid evidence for their claims and wishes, establishing historical significance rarely occurs in this mode. There is of course a sense of significance that is conferred, as is obvious from Isara's account, but in the case of the proponents of changes to the game these are mostly matters of personal rather than historical significance, often citing a wish for greater 'immersion' as the main incentive.[111] Additionally, because all requests for game development deal with either military hardware, aesthetic changes or the virtual arenas in which *Heroes & Generals* is set, other indicators of historical thinking such as identifying continuity

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[109] Forum user McChimp, 'Female soldiers in game (with example of a model)', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=63495&p=828483 (12-08-2016).

[110] Forum user Isara, 'Female soldiers in game (with example of a model)', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=63495 (12-08-2016).

[111] Forum user Isara, 'Female soldiers in game (with example of a model)', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=63495 (12-08-2016).

and change, analyzing cause and consequence, taking a historical perspective, and considering the morals of history, are not present in this utilitarian mode of engaging with history.

This is not the case in the inquisitive mode, however. This mode is generally represented by historical topics that are brought up by community members for discussion outside of the context of the game or its development. In practice, and contrary to the utilitarian mode, these are mainly found in the 'Historical Chatter' area. Meaningful discussion affiliated with this mode of thought usually occur on topics with provocative names such as 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', 'Nukes on Japan', or even 'Hitler was a silly'. In these discussions, participants are certainly past the stage of integration of information and knowledge: knowledge is put to questioning. Generally, when discussing topics such as these, forum users are involved in the final stage of cognitive presence: they are trying to resolve a problem or find common ground on an issue, as is the case in the discussion of the following moral issue. Forum user 'Ruen_Frank' presents the community with the following statement:

> 'The Bombing of Dresden included 720 British Bombers and 540 American Bombers bombing the city of Dresden which has few factories supporting the war, thousands of injured troops and civilians, few actual military presence with just a few AAA guns, and thousands of civilians. The British and American Bombers were said to have been targeting the railroads and factories even though, today, most people argue that it was a major war crime as it was of little military gain. Probably the most shocking part is that it was reported that people were SUCKED INTO the flames due to high winds and the incendiary bombs. This led to massive civilian deaths as the city burned to the ground. It was also reported that Escort Fighters attempted to strafe any fleeing civilian, either this is true or not is for you to decide. I personally think it was both morally wrong and a major war crime. Hey, you might have different thoughts so vote what you think!'[112]

Being asked whether the allied bombing of Dresden was justified, 'CarthAntilles' responds as follows:

> 'From my view; It was UTTERLY Justified. They bombed Civilians far before we even began slamming German cities, they cry about it as if it was some huge act of brutality that was 'unprovoked', to which I ask; the Battle of Britain? Mass executions of Civilians barely accused of

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[112] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&view=viewpoll (12-08-2016).

any major crimes in France? Warsaw ghetto? What do your call that if not unprovoked?

Slamming them with bombs and leveling there rather misplaced pride in the 'accomplishments' of there Riech is perfectly excusable in my view. They were willing to kill civilians, and there civilians were happy to support the cause and retaliate against Allied airstrikes with there own airstrikes, we returned the favor with mutual contempt.'[113]

To which fellow respondent 'Rouce' in turn reacts:

'So basically: The X faction is doing murder/rape/mass extermination, so my Z faction is allowed to di it too. And it's totally morally justifiable. Furthermore portion 1 (soldiers, special divisions) of X faction did it, but we're going to punish portion 2 (civilians) of X faction for it.

So if the military of my country is going to do some war crimes out there and I'm not willing to throw away my life and leave my family in a heroic (and naive) resistance fight?

That's not only too idealistic for me, but also too compliant with the allied victory version of history. And the victors always get to write the history and decide what was wrong/right/needed.'[114]

What we see here is a way of dealing with differences of opinion that is typical to the inquisitive mode of thought: most users first try to properly understand what exactly the other means, before actually responding to each other's comments. There are some individuals who even testify to this:

'I always try to read a post in its entirety and understand every point. Only if a person is too insulting or repeats oneself way too much I tend to really just fly over the text.'[115]

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[113] Forum user CarthAntilles, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=120 (12-08-2016).

[114] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=120 (12-08-2016).

[115] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=140 (12-08-2016).

They point out to each other why they feel differently about the subject, as becomes clear from CarthAntilles' response:

> 'Perhaps that is the case, but my views are that way through what I've read up on, photographic and eyewitness accounts, what crimes the Axis performed upon not only there own people, but on those they enforced there rule upon, perhaps some events were exagerated to make there actions look more severe, but I feel the vast majority of cases concerning the Germans in WW2's approach to what they called 'ethnic minorities' and to there own people in some cases, justifies my outlook that the Germans in WW2 were contemptable and possessed significant support from there own people.'[116]

This results in a very meaningful discussion about history and moral judgement of the past and its actors, in which participants not only give their opinions about matters, but are also invited to explain how they came to their conclusions, and why their perspective on history is as it is. Altogether, this discussion shows aspects of Seixas' conception of historical thinking such as understanding the moral dimension of, in this case, the bombing of Dresden, both in its direct context as a morally dubious act of war and on a larger scale as simply one of the many (necessary) atrocities of the Second World War. As Rouce's final comment on this matter shows, however, there is awareness of the dangers of the subjectivity of history's moral implications:

> 'People should be very carefuly to not run into double standards - me included. I know that I'm doing it too, but I'm trying to do it in an anti-polar matter. It's hard to stay objective with all that mass media manipulating and etc'.[117]

This comment is instantly met with approval from the community. Eventually, throughout various phases of the discussion, forum users evaluate on which points they agree and disagree with each other, finding a resolution to the issue at hand. In this case, Rouce's conclusion that 'Neither the bombing of Dresden or nuking of Japan [a comparison that was quickly made] were

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[116] Forum user CarthAntilles, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=120 (12-08-2016).
[117] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=120 (12-08-2016).

necessary to win the war but had coldly calculated and strictly political goals as reasoning' is endorsed by many of his fellow respondents.[118]

Another aspect of historical thinking that is apparent in the inquisitive mode is taking a historical perspective, although it is not always performed in a constructive way. For instance, in an exchange between forum users 'emosh73' and 'Green.Silks', the second accuses the first of 'putting words in other people's mouths' and projecting his own thoughts on fictional witnesses because emosh73 claims to have met 'a woman who survived the blitz and a ex Canadian soldier POW of the Japanese', who would both supposedly 'spit on a German and Japanese to this day because of the horrific experiences they encountered'.[119] His best attempt at proving he is not making his claims up goes not much further than saying that Green.Silks has 'a lot to learn in life', before stating that his father 'even knew some vets that wouldn't even buy Japanese cars'.[120] Similarly, on the same page of the forum, Rouce claims that 'the germans didn't feel like they were the evil ones who would do something wrong if building a bomb in a factory', that 'people knew that jews and foreigners were treated like trash, but since death camps were just a rumor at most which few people spreaded and they were totally convinced of aryan superioty (just like the americans were convinced of white/caucasian supremacy over black/afro-american people. And back then there was racial segregation in schools, buses, toilets, park benches - also violence and killings and just plain extreme racism', and that 'in the end they didn't feel like starting the war, too. For them it was a continuation of WW1 and revenge for the shameful Treaty of Versailles which made Germany a Third World country'.[121]

Both emosh73 and Rouce display a sense of empathy with historical actors that is echoed throughout the forum. They claim to know quite a bit about how historical actors felt during the Second World War and what caused certain historical events. However, just as distinctive is the fact that forum users' attempts at taking a historical perspective go together with a lack of references to base their perspectives on. In general, the origins of their knowledge of the motivations of historical actors remain vague. Taking a historical perspective without basing it

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[118] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=160 (12-08-2016).

[119] Forum user emosh73, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=38 (12-08-2016).

[120] Forum user emosh73, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=48 (12-08-2016).

[121] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=65 (12-08-2016).

on empirical evidence, such as the two forum users above do, cannot be considered as proper historical practice. According to Seixas' framework, however, taking a historical perspective *is* a key aspect of historical thinking. Although the execution is flawed, by attempting to approach an issue from a historical perspective, emosh73 and Rouce are ahead of those stating that the bombing of Dresden was simply 'a war crime and morally wrong', maintaining a presentist view.[122] These are in turn confronted with correcting comments from their peers, such as forum user 'Atillius0311', who states the following:

> 'No, you can not use today's "laws and rules" as a guide for something that happened in a time
> when there were none. The War Crimes and Crimes against humanity laws came into effect after
> the war. Civilian locations were legal targets at the time because they provided a resource for a
> nations ability to conduct war. That resource is a human one'.[123]

This manner of collective behaviour results in a feedback loop in the inquisitive mode of addressing history which creates a social environment that endorses historical thinking, while dissuading forum users from maintaining presentist points of view.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider a key feature of the historical gaming community of *Heroes & Generals*. As the high intensity of activity in the 'Non-English' part of the forum suggests, the game's player base is very international.[124] Due to this fact, any historical subject that is explored and discussed by the community is done so from a variety of perspectives. This multiperspectivity may well be one of the reasons why discussions can be so prolonged: there is not 'one true story' about the past, but many different stories which are sometimes not compatible with each other, and thus need negotiating. In the topic about the bombing of Dresden, it is a difference in national perspective that leads a German forum user (Hermann6) to disagree with an American's (Ruen_Frank) claim that the destruction of Poland during the Second World War was mainly due to Germany's actions. Hermann6 claims instead this was the

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[122] Forum user Nemesis073, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359 (12-08-2016).
[123] Forum user Atillius0311, 'Nukes on Japan',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=21 (12-08-2016).
[124] Reto-Moto, 'Non-English', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewforum.php?f=72 (12-08-2016).

'fault of Ruskies', just like the destruction of 'our country [Germany]'.[125] It is also his perspective as a Polish person with a traumatic family history that lets JohanP blame both parties.[126] In the macro phase of engagement with this game, one social platform acts as the meeting place for these different perspectives, leading to a manifold of insights that would go untold in a less international setting.

Summarizing, not only is the highest category of cognitive presence apparent in the inquisitive mode. Most aspects of historical thinking are present as well. Additionally, within each topic of discussion other topics are brought up for inquiry, adding to a larger repertoire of substantial knowledge for active participants to become familiar with. The parallel discussions on these topics are often tangential in nature, such as the discussion about the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima that Rouce refers to. It is not just the original poster (or 'OP' as it is usually referred to on the forum), the initiator of the discussion, who decides which topics are debated on. If fellow respondents can explain why a discussion about another topic can be helpful for or relevant to resolving the original issue, such as by comparing two supposed 'war crimes', this secondary topic is explored as well. How this is made possible will be explained further in 'Teaching presence', chapter 3.4.

3.3 Social presence

In computer mediated communications such as in-game chat and a forum, a favourable social presence can reflect the supportive context for building understanding. This context can be provided by three categories of social stimulators for historical inquiry, being emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion.[127] According to the authors of the CoI framework, most of the adjectives commonly mentioned when asked to describe emotional bonds with others 'are secondary meanings derived from primary meanings related to physical presence', such as closeness, warmth, and attraction.[128] Social presence is comparable to what Gordon Calleja calls 'shared involvement', as both terms imply a shared experience that acts as a sort of social adhesive between the (learning) experience and those involved in it.[129] During

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[125] Forum user Hermann6, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=30 (12-08-2016).
[126] Forum user JohanP, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=32 (12-08-2016).
[127] Garrison e.a.,'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment', 101.
[128] Ibid., 99.
[129] Calleja, *In-game*, 86-87.

these shared experiences, emotions are considered to be 'inseparably linked to task motivation and persistence, and, therefore, to critical inquiry'.[130] Through text-based communications such as real-time chat and forum discussions, however, players can express emotions less easily than in face-to-face or in digital voice (VoIP) communications. Nevertheless, most digital communication platforms allow the use of emoticons (expressive combinations of punctuation marks, letters and numbers) or animated emojis to express emotions.

Humour and self-disclosure are two common examples of emotional expression. Especially humour is crucial for a functioning learning experience, because it bridges social distance and helps deal with differences within communities. Self-disclosure, on the other hand, helps people connect on a deeper level. Disclosing personal information, such as feelings, experiences and interests, does not only help build trust. It also encourages mutual support and can fuel a sense of belonging to a collective.[131]

Open communication, the second category of social presence, is defined as 'reciprocal and respectful exchanges'. Respect in these exchanges does not necessarily need to be aimed at other group members, but at each other's contributions to the learning process. In a good learning experience, there must be an evident atmosphere in which participants feel their contributions will be valued and responded to. According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, widespread employment of the 'reply' feature in forums, or directing a comment to someone or someone else's comment in particular would prove open communication is happening.[132]

Finally, group cohesion is exemplified by activities or communications that stimulate 'focused collaborative communication that builds participation and empathy'. For an effective online learning experience, it is essential that a series of comments does not simply consist of loosely related monologues, but of contextualized and personalized dialogues. Additionally, the quality of discourse and critical inquiry are facilitated when participants of such a learning experience see themselves as part of a community, rather than as individuals.[133] Since these categories of social presence are less stratified than those affiliated with cognitive presence, the presence of all three categories in both the micro phase and the macro phase of playing *Heroes & Generals* will be explored in this chapter.

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[130] Garrison e.a.,'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment', 99.
[131] Ibid., 100.
[132] Ibid., 100.
[133] Ibid., 101.

3.3.1 Social presence in the macro phase

Topics discussed in the Historical Chatter area of the *Heroes & Generals* forum can be considered quite sensitive to some forum users. One such topic is called 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden', the contents of which have been explored in the previous chapter. In this part, I want to focus on the ways in which this community of inquiry deals with emotions, the success of which is a prerequisite for the participants to be able to engage in meaningful discussion. In the case of this topic, the community shows awareness of this prerequisite. The introductory post, in which original poster 'Ruen_Frank' asks his fellow forum users to answer the topics main question by choosing one of four options, also includes a request for all willful participants. He asks them to 'not name call if people chose [the bombing of Dresden by the Allies] was Justified or Morally Wrong or a War Crime'.[134]

By noting this, Ruen_Frank shows he anticipates forum users to respond emotionally to this question, deteriorating the quality of discussion. He takes pre-emptive measures in order to forestall them. Emotional sensitivity can evidently be expected when discussing such issues on the forum. However, while the discussion that ensues is civil in general, a few of its 234 comments contain remarks that are meant to challenge or even insult others.

For example, due to the fact that the social medium is asynchronous and participants can responds whenever it suits them, discussions can become rather heated and may lead to the creation of a social environment that is detrimental to the learning experience, as is shown in the next fragment. During a later stage of the discussion on Dresden, a dialogue between two forum users on whether civilians can be valid targets in times of warfare spins out of control. Forum user Rouce, one of the more active participants in the discussion, defends his view that not all German civilians and soldiers involved in the War could be held accountable for the war crimes committed by the Nazi regime, and says arguing otherwise is 'far too simplistic and history undermining'.[135] This leads 'Emosh73' to refer to him first as a 'German sympathizer', and calling his claims 'BS', or nonsense. Later at night, however, (the discussion is held very early in the morning) emosh73 goes even further:

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[134] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&view=viewpoll (12-08-2016).
[135] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=c0cbce858eb72dc79b51840028ae2cc5&start=100 (12-08-2016).

'I am calling you out now!

Prove me wrong that the average German soldier was not indirectly or directly helping Hitler gain more power by world dominance.

I dare you to prove me wrong now. I DARE YOU!

Hitler could NEVER dominate foreign countries without the help of the average German. Naive or not naive, directly or indirectly it does not matter as the end goal was achieve the NAZIII party goals'.[136]

'Prove me wrong now NAZII sympathizer....ball in your court now little hitler!'[137]

What is intriguing is the fact that a few hours after making this remark, during the evening following that last comment made in the early hours of the day, Emosh73 apologizes for behaving in such a way:

'I was drinking lots of rum and coke last night and got more aggressive as the night went on:(

I apologize for my behavior but this topic has personal meaning for me as well.

Can we take this into private chat if you want to? If not, I understand.

You have my word that I will be SOBER, logical and civil'.[138]

Evidently, discussions can and do turn sour on the forum. This does not mean, however, that respectful discussion becomes impossible. This discussion between two forum users and the apology by Emosh73 shows that there is a shared sense of a common goal, in which 'sober, logical and civil' discourse is the norm, and hostile behaviour is undesirable.

Additionally, such sociable behaviour on the forum helps maintain conversations about sensitive topics. In an earlier phase of the same topic of discussion, forum user JohanP responds to a comment made by Green.Silks, writes that 'if you blame Germans in general for national

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[136] Forum user Emosh73, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=c0cbce858eb72dc79b51840028ae2cc5& start=100 (12-08-2016).

[137] Forum user Emosh73, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=c0cbce858eb72dc79b51840028ae2cc5& start=115 (12-08-2016).

[138] Forum user Emosh73, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=c0cbce858eb72dc79b51840028ae2cc5& start=119 (12-08-2016).

socialist atrocities, then that is ignorant. I hope we all agree on this one'.[139] JohanP does agree, but chooses to

> 'say it straight, Germans and Austrians builded the murdering factories. They were sloughtering ppl. Ppl supported them, used the pows as slaves on farms and in factories, they robbed land and buildings, not to mention the arts... You cant just say only couple of them did that, lets forget, Germans are good, you just cant... I cant, they killed 20+ members of my fammily... and why? Only cause they helped jews, or didnt want to be slaves... My grandma was sent to Auschwitz only cause she was a nurse during a Warsaw uprising... damn it... I would spit in the face any german or austrian tbh [to be honest]...'[140] 'As you can see I play German, and I play German only [Germany is one of three playable factions in Heroes & Generals]. I dont hate Germans. Actualy I do like them quite much. But I will never forget what they did to my country and to my fammily'.[141]

JohanP is obviously struggling emotionally with discussing this topic, because it had an horrific effect on his family. Regardless, he does discuss it, and in a way that can be considered 'sober, logical and civil'. He responds to forum user Rouce, who empathizes with JohanP's anger towards Germans and Austrians after reading about his personal feelings towards the subject, but points out that 'you can't exactly compare the actions of Gestapo and SS police with the regular Wehrmacht forces. They were soldiers of which many didn't even support the Nazionalsozialisten, but had to do their soldierly duty'.[142] JohanP asks what Rouce means by 'soldierly duty'. 'Murdering civilians without a reason? Because this is what they were doing in Poland in the autumn of 1939. I can compare them easly, wehrmacht crimes were not so much

[139] Forum user Green.Silks, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=8dc6f36ab3dd23f8478b0997202b1123&start=45 (12-08-2016).

[140] Forum user JohanP, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=8dc6f36ab3dd23f8478b0997202b1123&start=51 (12-08-2016).

[141] Forum user JohanP, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=8dc6f36ab3dd23f8478b0997202b1123&start=59 (12-08-2016).

[142] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=8dc6f36ab3dd23f8478b0997202b1123&start=52 (12-08-2016).

different then the Gestapo and SS'.[143] The fact that JohanP participates intensively in the discussion, while still expressing emotions about the topic, shows that the expression of emotions is possible, while maintaining the inquisitive character of the informal learning environment.

In the end, this discussion about Dresden turns out to be a very worthwhile exercise for the group, most importantly because it addresses both the moral dimensions and the historical significance of multiple issues, being two of the central aspects of historical thinking as conceptualized by Peter Seixas.[144] It is relevant that these ways of thinking become apparent even in the context of a highly emotional discussion. Most forum users appear to be rather taken aback by JohanP's emotional response, but try to respond in a meaningful and sociable way. It reveals a mutually reinforcing social presence, which is aided by JohanP's self-disclosure.

It does appear that a measure of group cohesion is the result of this sociable environment. Participants of the discussions on the forum are seriously trying to engage in a purposefully shared commitment to answer a moral question to their best efforts, and express feelings that they are part of a community that has a shared motive. In the words of Green.Silks:

> 'I don't think it's silly to debate this, at all. I think it's quite meaningful.
> To say that an entire group of people (Germans) is responsible for the crimes of a few members
> of that group is precisely the kind of thinking that we should challenge at every turn'.[145]

Even though hostile behaviour such as that of Emosh73 is not uncommon in the community, it does not appear to obstruct discussing history. In some cases, it actually seems to be a stimulant of sustained communication. While civil discussion may be a prerequisite for learning in a formal learning environment, this may not hold true for this informal learning environment. For example, in a thread discussing the 'Nukes on Japan', forum user '<<<PHOENIX>>>' rightly accuses 'shadowsouls12' of 'pure speculation' on the matter of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by making a case that probably more people would

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[143] Forum user JohanP, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&sid=8dc6f36ab3dd23f8478b0997202b1123&start=56 (12-08-2016).

[144] Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking', 2.

[145] Forum user Green.Silks, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=58 (12-08-2016).

have died from an American invasion of Japan than had died in the 1945 bombings, and thus shouldn't be considered a war crime in retrospect.[146] Additionally, Phoenix claims that growing regional influence of the Soviets and American fears of the Soviets were just 'propaganda' for dropping the bombs that was used in later years. A link to U.S. President Truman's press release the day after the bombing, in which the motivation for the nuclear attack is officially outlined, is provided as proof for the lack of this 'Soviet incentive' in 1945. A provocative discussion ensues, in which both users tell each other to 'learn your history', and to provide more objective historical evidence for their claims, until a third forum user called 'Sgt.Niels.12' joins in the discussion rather offensively:

> 'DUDE. ARE YOU F*CKING KIDDING ME? SOVIETS were going to attack JAPS. US were scared Soviets get to close to Murica so in order to scare Soviets they show new atom bomb. Second: Why not NUKE Tokyo? Do you finally understand? Nuking a capital would make a country surrender. But no USA found their testing site in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. DO YOU ALSO WANT A DRAWING OR DO YOU UNDERSTAND IT'?[147]

However, the butt of this comment, shadowsouls12, does not leave it at that. Instead of viewing this angry response as a queue to quit the discussion, he takes this message as an invitation to inquire further, and points Sgt.Niels.12 on his failed argument:

> soviets were closer to American without japan. 😄as I said show me proof not what you think happened in a time your were even a thought of.
> you do know American asked Soviets to help with japan? you do know American wanted Soviets to declare war on Japan. what did American think Soviets would do. give mean looks? you do know American agreed to what Soviets wanted to help (declare war) against Japan?
> I said show your proof not your beliefs. I showed the press release and toyko fire bombing. you should show something.

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[146] Forum user <<<PHOENIX>>>, 'Nukes on Japan', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=80 (12-08-2016).
[147] Forum user Sgt.Niels.12, 'Nukes on Japan', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=103 (12-08-2016).

why was it a war crimes 1945? don't use 2016 standard use ww2 and 1945 standards and rules and same as before show proof that it was a war first before anything else.[148]

The exchange is not a pretty sight, nor is it documented very well. It does, however, engage forum users in debate about the Second World War for four consecutive days, resulting in dozens of comments discussing the morals of warfare and WWII history. Another forum user, 'Sejmundo', summarizes the moral dimension of the discussion:

'history is to learn of the past, and to avoid catastrophies.. not to be captain hindsight and compare what we know today and say what they should have done back then'.[149]

In conclusion, while emotional expression is the norm on the forum, respectful communication is most certainly not. However, this does not seem to inhibit the continuation of meaningful discussion with other forum users. The forum as a whole does not fail to act as a learning experience at the first sign of disrespect or anger.

Another observation related to this community's social supportive function to historical inquiry is that of reciprocity. Reciprocity is an indicator of open communication, and thus a key component of social presence in computer mediated communication. From previous quotations, it will have become evident that comments are generally directed to other contributors. However, the measure of reciprocity has a particular function in the discussions. The 'quote' function of the forum allows forum users to manually select the fragment that they want to respond to. By responding to particular comments and fragments of comments, and not responding to other comments and fragments, every contributor has a say in which content is propagated or ignored during a discussion. What is interesting is that the most ludicrously misguided and unrelated comments are ignored by everyone.

For example, forum user 'schlowy' lapses into an extensive account in which he tries to prove that England was 'morally worse' during the Second World War than Germany, by discussing the potato famine in Ireland (1845-1852), the causes of the First World War, and by

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[148] Forum user shadowsouls12, 'Nukes on Japan',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=104 (12-08-2016).
[149] Forum user Sejmundo, 'Nukes on Japan',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=146 (12-08-2016).

comparing the England of today to Nazi Germany, 'because of wanting all the muslims out'.[150] Schlowy's fellow forum users evidently see no reason to engage him or her in the discussion any further, since nobody responds to his essay in a serious fashion.

Additionally, this nuanced form of reciprocity is repeated more often, in a more subtle way. For example, in a response by forum user Rouce to an earlier comment made by Emosh73, Rouce says that 'the civilian bombings weren't ordered by some soldiers who have been in extreme suffering and brought the worst out of themselves. They were ordered by people who probably even didn't saw a single cruel firefight, like the president and countless advisors or generals'. In this same post, however, he also refers to something that has nothing to do with the topic of the discussion:

> 'Also "Germany started both World Wars and lost them" is something that only people say who haven't really studied history [to be honest]. WW1 wasn't started by Germany, it was rather started by all countries of Europe. Everyone was naively looking forward to defeat the enemy with its allies. There are countless citations of english/french/russian politics/generals who wanted to crush Germany because of it getting too strong economy- and military-wise.
>
> Separating WW1 and WW2 is a myth to me as well as to many historians. They prefer to call it the great war. Because in fact WW2 was just a desperate continuation of WW1 by the Germans to exterminate the shame and inferiority they've been put into after WW1. Becoming a Third World country in the center of Europe. Only living and working hard to support the wealth of foreign folks'.[151]

A response to the second part of this rather intriguing piece of prose is nowhere to be seen, while the matter of Germany starting WWII is discussed further in later comments. While this is quite an extreme example, many pieces of misleading information, such as the suggestion that 'many historians' supposedly prefer putting both World Wars under the common denominator of the 'the great war', are published on the forum. However, what is striking is that forum users do not reproduce or refer to these in their later arguments: they are not taken to be facts.

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[150] Forum user schlowy, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=81 (12-08-2016).

[151] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=80 (12-08-2016).

Moreover, it appears the forum in itself is not taken to be a source of valid facts at all. This is arguably fortunate, because a significant amount of the substantive historical knowledge presented is questionable, to say the least. When users refer to their sources at all, most appear to use Wikipedia, other online sources, or the occasional book as reference material. Primary sources, other than stories from family members or other acquaintances, rarely appear: most certainly because it is generally considered to be too much work for an informal learning environment. It is telling that Ruen_Frank, the initiator of the topic (and thus the one with the most interest in finding valid answers) about the bombing of Dresden fails to provide valid sources for a particularly controversial claim he makes in the first post of the topic. He states that 'it was also reported that Escort Fighters attempted to strafe any fleeing civilian, either this is true or not is for you to decide'.[152] It is equally striking, however, that not much later, another respondent calls on him to 'provide evidence of this'.[153] Ruen_Frank responds a few hours later, and apologizes for responding so late. He admits to his failure of providing evidence for his claim, due to being 'lazy'.[154] Interesting is the fact that he points out that the site he refers to lacks citations, and puts the task of proving the truth of the claim at the reader's address by telling his fellow forum users to decide the trustworthiness of his source for themselves:

> 'Sorry for the late post, I had a little something called 'Life' going on.
> Anyway, sadly I have not found any official documents (mainly because I am too lazy to do that)
> but the site where I discovered this is: http://www.rense.com/general19/flame.htm
> I argue to myself sometimes if that is true or not, just because the site doesn't have any citations.
> That is why I said 'You decide'.'[155]

Summarizing, the social climate that is set in the macro-phase of playing *Heroes & Generals* supports discourse, especially when emotions are expressed. Through a combination of humour, self-disclosure, and other forms of emotional expression, an environment is created that keeps

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[152] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359 (12-08-2016).

[153] Forum user aagaard, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=50 (12-08-2016).

[154] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=54 (12-08-2016).

[155] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the Bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=54 (12-08-2016).

forum users engaged in prolonged discussions. Rouce, Emosh73, JohanP, Green.Silks and half a dozen others still discuss the topic of Dresden more than a month after Ruen_Frank asked them about their opinions on this topic. Selective use of the 'quote' feature of the forum allows users to keep discussions focused on particular topics and on comments they deem valuable and worth elaborating on, despite a significantly faulty corpus of comments about the past. These erroneous comments are generally ignored or corrected, while better informed comments are predominantly quoted, discussed or endorsed. However, setting the climate for discourse in a learning experience is not just a function of the social presence. Teaching presence has a large influence on this as well, since one of its key roles is to make sure the medium is used correctly and community members stick to discussing the designated topic.

3.4 Teaching presence

According to the Community of Inquiry model, the two main functions of the teaching presence are to help maintain a social climate that is favourable to critical inquiry, and to select content for the learning experience.[156] Additionally, it is 'essential in balancing cognitive and social issues consistent with intended educational outcomes'.[157] Of course, in the context of the informal learning environment provided by the *Heroes & Generals* official forum, no such intended educational outcomes are defined in anything resembling a curriculum. In other words, a teaching process, as in a traditional classroom setting, is not intended. At least, not one guided by a formally designated teacher, since a social hierarchy that is related to the level of knowledgeability is in any way absent on the forum. To what extent, then, can there be a functional teaching presence in the macro phase of playing a game like *Heroes & Generals*? And to what extent does it support learning about history? These are the questions that are central to the following segment.

To answer the first question, we must look to the three categories of teaching presence indicators identified by Garrison, Anderson and Archer, being instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction. If all these three categories of indicators are confirmed to be present, there is an effective teaching presence. Instructional management concerns the structure of the educational experience, such as setting a curriculum, determining a time frame and policing effective usage of the medium. In particular, instructional management revolves around planning, both before and during the experience.[158] Determining and structuring the presented content and setting discussion topics are key components of this planning function, but so are the creation of discussion groups and other organizational features.[159]

Building understanding and reaching consensus is usually the aim of any community of inquiry. In an educational context, it is concerned with the acquisition of 'productive and valid knowledge'.[160] In particular, the authors of the CoI model stress that in order to create and maintain a community of inquiry, a challenging and stimulating process is essential.

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[156] Garrison e.a., 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment', 88.
[157] Ibid., 101.
[158] Ibid., 101.
[159] Ibid., 102-103.
[160] Ibid., 101.

Additionally, there must be an 'effective group consciousness'.[161] While the influence of the social presence on this process has been explained in the previous section, the teaching presence also helps create and maintain this educational experience through engaging every participant, acknowledging individual contributions and generally facilitating an educational experience. Determining which statements are correct and supporting them, as well as maintaining focus on a topic during a discussion, are additional indicators for building understanding.[162]

The third and last category of indicators for teaching presence is direct instruction. Generally, this category includes indicators of assessment, such as assessment of the discourse and that of the progress of the learning process. Additionally, providing constructive explanatory feedback is key to this category, because critical responses to comments require appropriate explanations. In a historical learning experience, it would thus ideally be the teaching presence which would assess and give feedback on the way Seixas' aspects of historical thinking are employed by forum users.

The authors of the CoI framework give one particular reservation that is crucial to discerning computer-mediated conferencing (CMC), such as employment of a forum, from traditional classroom education: 'Although CMC is not a medium well suited for lecturing or disseminating large blocks of information, teachers do have responsibility for providing contextualized knowledge relevant to the subject domain'.[163] Of course, being able to provide contextualized knowledge, linking contributed ideas and elaborating on misconceptions, requires considerable topical knowledge and pedagogical skills - skills that a formal teacher is expected to possess.[164] The lack of such an authoritative figure in historical discussions on the *Heroes & Generals* forum must surely have an effect on the nature of these discussions. What this effect is, will be elaborated on in the section to come.

3.4.1 Teaching presence in the macro phase

In informal learning networks such the *Heroes & Generals* forum, it is not an instructor, but the community that orchestrates the learning process. It is also the community that acts as a control mechanism for the knowledge spread in these gamer networks. According to Lev Vygotsky

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[161] Ibid., 101.
[162] Ibid., 101.
[163] Ibid., 101-102.
[164] Ibid., 102.

(1896-1934), a social psychologist who remains highly influential in game studies theory, there is always a 'teacher' in a social environment, although not in the formal sense of the word. In social interaction, there is always an exchange of knowledge from the more knowledgeable peer to the less knowledgeable one.[165] Through the long-term engagement of gamers with communities enveloping World War II FPS games, players develop their historical knowledge. According to Lev Vygotsky, the influence of a social context on learning is crucial to the successful construction of knowledge.[166] As a process of negotiating meaning and concepts in social intercourse, learning can be understood as a continuously changing synthesis. At the heart of this dynamic nature of the learning process lies the fact the expertise and the corresponding authority is not centred in one individual, but is shared by members of the community. In the case of the *Heroes & Generals* forum, one forum user might know (or shows to know) more about a particular topic than another, and this goes for everybody on the forum. In one topic, one might step forward to act as a teaching figure, while on another topic, this same person might act more like a student, asking questions and exploring information.[167]

In relation to instructional management on the forum, the setting of a curriculum, determining of a time frame and the planning and organizing of an educational experience in general are not matters inherent to this social learning environment. As explained before, the creators of forums such as the official *Heroes & Generals* forum are meant as mainly social, not educational platforms, on which a community of players of one (or more) game(s) can coalesce. Additionally, this particular forum is used as the main gateway for players to provide feedback to the game's developers.[168] Its function as an educational platform is not of primary importance to these developers, but apparently of some importance nonetheless. After all, the 'Historical Chatter' section of the forum has no meaning for the game's development. Neither does it have to do with the building of a community, which means that it has another function. It is mentioned in the subscript of the section's title: 'Talk about WW2 events and equipment'.[169] Named and

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[165] Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, M. Cole, *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes* (Harvard 1978) 86.

[166] Heather Kanuka, T. Anderson, 'Online social interchange, discord, and knowledge construction', *International journal of E-learning & distance education* 1 (1998) 57-74.

[167] Dave Cormier, 'Rhizomatic education: community as curriculum', Innovate: journal of online education 5 (2008), article 2, http://nsuworks.nova.edu/innovate/vol4/iss5/2 (12-08-2016).

[168] Reto-Moto, 'User driven development', http://www.heroesandgenerals.com/community/development (12-08-2016).

[169] Reto-Moto, 'General Discussion', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewforum.php?f=36 (12-08-2016).

described by the forum's creators, the section is evidently designed to invite forum users to discuss not the game or its players, but topics related to the Second World War. Notably, it does not say 'Talk about WW2 *military* events and equipment', meaning it does not point the discussion in the direction of military matters, a fact that is reflected in the non-military topics the community discusses.

Although this close reading of the subscript of a forum section's title might seem far-fetched at first glance, it is very important. The forum is rigorously structured on different kinds of topics, such as those related to 'Community', 'Development', 'Gameplay', or 'Support', and several social entities pay close attention to the maintenance of this structure.[170] Topics that are not related to this section, but posted in it nonetheless are moved to other sections of the forum, or removed completely. Each of these entities plays a part in this process. This process also occurs on the level of single topics, because comments that are not related to a topic are often removed. These entities appear in any historical discussion on this particular forum, but they are present in all similar forums. Firstly, there are the administrators, or the 'policemen' of the forum. Secondly, there are the forum users, which I classify further into topic creators on the one hand, and the third entity, which I will refer to as 'respondents', on the other. Each of them use different means to select and structure content in the social environment of the forum.

My choice to dub the forum's administrators as 'policemen' is because it is their 'job' to uphold 'law and order' on the forum. Whether they are actually employed by the game's developer, or whether they perform this task on a voluntary basis is not clear. Reto-Moto does not disclose this information. It only mentions that it employs thirty 'fulltime developers and administrative personnel', so this might include at least some paid community managers.[171] What they do elaborate on, however, is the job description of administrators. The 'law and order' they uphold is defined by the 'Rules and Guidelines' of the forum, which is the most prominent and the most read topic on the entire platform.[172]

Most importantly, this list of rules and guidelines states that 'the forum moderators and administrators shall have full discretion to address any behavior that they feel is inappropriate.

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[170] Reto-Moto, 'Index', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/index.php (12-08-2016).

[171] Reto-Moto, 'Who is developing Heroes & Generals?', http://www.heroesandgenerals.com/community/game/faq (12-08-2016).

[172] Reto-Moto, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

Also, suspension or banishment from the game will always result in the same in regard to forum access. Your access to these forums is a "privilege," and not a "right." Reto-Moto reserves the right to suspend your access to these forums at any time for reasons that include, but are not necessarily limited to, your failure to abide by these guidelines'.[173] Additionally, 'the administration reserves the right to delete, update or modify any information which is considered inappropriate on these forums'.[174] Administrators have the power to decide both which people can attend the forum, and which comments are removed from the view of others. However, since they are few, they have relatively little say in the content that forum users do get to discuss. On the other hand, they are the only of the three entities that are given the access necessary to 'delete, update or modify' sections of or comments on the forum. Their main function and obligation is thus the structuring of content. While eleven different categories of reasons for an admin to intervene are given in this documents, two in particular are relevant for the maintenance of an educational experience.

First of all, 'Reto.Robotron3000', the official community manager of *Heroes & Generals* and employee of Reto-Moto stresses that these rules and guidelines are not only applicable to the forum, but in all social worlds enveloping the game, being 'the entire game universe, including forum, ingame chat, PMs [private messages], Wiki etc.'[175] The first category of rules works to stimulate and maintain a social climate that is favourable for effective discussion, which, as has been mentioned in the previous section, is a task shared by the social presence and the teaching presence. 'Etiquette', as Robotron refers to it, states that 'users are not allowed to abuse others, make personal attacks or behave disrespectfully. This prohibition applies to both public threads, chat and private messages (PMs)'.[176] Non-conformity to this 'etiquette' is not viewed as a social faux pas that would not result in serious repercussions, but as an offense punishable by 'a temporary or permanent account suspension (ban) for both game and forums, depending upon

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[173] Reto-Moto, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

[174] Reto-Moto, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

[175] Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

[176] Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

severity'.[177] An environment in which making defamatory remarks or using offensive slurs goes unpunished is not beneficial for the social presence in an educational experience, and administrators work to keep the community free of such behaviour.

Secondly, the administrators see to it that 'posts which drift off topic, or content-free posts will be edited or removed. Posting multiple messages with the same content across several forums is unwelcome and inappropriate, since such activities divide the targeted discussions and makes gathering feedback considerably more difficult. Such 'cross posts' will be merged, closed and redirected or removed'.[178] In other words, the administrators are tasked by the game developer to keep the flow of information on the forum as structured as they can by moving information to places where the administrators judge it belongs. They have a decisive function in controlling the progression of a discussion, because they ultimately have the exclusive power to close topics, to mark some topics as more important by 'pinning' or fixing them to the top of the list of topics, or to ban people from the forum entirely. Because of these abilities, administrators can have a decisive and positive influence on both the cognitive presence and the teaching presence in the social learning environment of the forum. Additionally, administrators are the only ones who can remove comments other than their own. To a certain extent, these powers do give them the ability to influence the informal learning process, in that they can decide what forum users get to see, and what they do not. The rule that precludes the possibility of 'discussing real-world politics and pursuing ideological debate' in particular is a case worth mentioning in this respect.[179] This rule does not appear to inhibit forum users' abilities to debate history or its moral dimensions on the forum, however. It is not policed very effectively, since 'SnowDog' and 'Lathergo' are allowed to make derogatory comments about republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, for instance.[180] Additionally, administrators allow forum user 'Red_Soldier' to share his national socialist views, even though other forum users make

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[177] Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

[178] Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and Guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=47&t=357 (12-08-2016).

[179] Reto.Robotron3000, 'Rules and guidelines', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=357 (12-08-2016).

[180] Forum user SnowDog, 'Nukes on Japan', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=44 (12-08-2016); Forum user Lethargo, 'if germany didnt betray the soviets', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=54479&start=12 (12-08-2016).

short work of what he presents as facts.[181] As the fragments in the following sections will show, this rule is likely beneficial for a supportive social context for critical discussions.

While the process of structuring the educational experience is performed through policing effective usage of the forum, this would be impossible without the feedback provided by the forum users, who first need to use the 'report' feature on a comment, before it can be dealt with by the administrators. These, in turn, act on their own sense of judgement. For instance, when a forum user asks an administrator to 'lock'[182] or close the discussion on the bombing of Dresden, because it has nothing to do with the game, administrator 'Africandave' responds as follows:

> 'It's in the Historical Chatter section of the forum so it's all good.
>
> We have lots of talks here like the nukes in japan and other controversial stuff 😄.
>
> And other nice things like family histories or memorials for certain battles eg "on this day" sort of stuff'.[183]

Additionally, because the rules and guidelines are so clear on how dysfunctional behaviour on the forum is dealt with, forum users largely solve these problems among themselves, before involving the officials. For example, to return to the topic of the bombing of Dresden, the topic creator Ruen_Frank acts as a representative of the teaching presence. He tries to keep the ongoing discussion relevant to the topic as he intended it by intervening after a discussion about the bombing of Dresden has changed into a discussion about morally judging both the Allies and the Axis for the war in general:

> 'Reminder: This topic isn't about either if the Axis or Allies won. This topic is just to see if people think that Dresden was wrong or the right thing to do'.[184]

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[181] Forum user Red_Soldier, 'if germany didnt betray the soviets', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=39&t=54479&start=11 (12-08-2016).

[182] Forum user ScienceGuy44, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=133 (12-08-2016).

[183] Forum administrator Africandave, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=136 (12-08-2016).

[184] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=84 (12-08-2016).

When two users keep steering away from the intended topic, instead of involving an administrator, the topic creator decides to try and move them away from the conversation himself. To make things easier for them, he creates a new thread called 'Were Axis and Allied decisions justified?', in which the two users can continue their argument. [185] However, as chance has it, those who strayed from the intended topic then promise they were already done discussing 'off-topic' matters, before returning to the original topic.[186] Similarly, topic creator 'Heng06' contributes to the teaching presence by pointing out repeatedly that the discussion on his topic 'what if Britain had joined the Axis when offered the chance?' should be about alternative history, rather than a discussion about whether this is a valid question or not.[187] This way, topic creators try to focus the discussion on the topics that interest them, while being confronted with respondents who often offer tangential topics that interest them in turn.

The respondents themselves also police their own behaviour in order to keep discussions organized. Apparently, forum users feel they all have a measure of responsibility when it comes to the structure of information on the social platform. For instance, after discussing very personal experiences and feelings about German war crimes in Poland during the Second World War, forum user JohanP recognizes his own ´mistake´ of getting too involved in a tangential discussion, apologizes, and decides to steer the discussion back to its original topic, being the moral question about the bombing of Dresden.

'Lets get back to Dresden bombing raid, tbh [to be honest]- we went way to deep in the off topic 🙂.[188] Btw [By the way], seems I stole the thread, so Im sorry 😎'.[189]

Forum users not just tend to mind their own behaviour, but also call each other to order. For example, after the discussion about the bombing of Dresden has changed into a discussion of other supposed war crimes, Hermann6, who is neither the topic creator or a moderator, nor

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[185] Forum user Ruen_Frank, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=93 (12-08-2016).

[186] Forum user Rouce, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=95 (12-08-2016).

[187] Forum user Heng06, 'What if Britain had joined the Axis when offered the chance?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=10338&start=30 (12-08-2016).

[188] Forum user JohanP, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=59 (12-08-2016).

[189] Forum user JohanP, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=64 (12-08-2016).

someone who was involved in discussing matters that were not related to the topic, tries 'to save this thread once more'. He complains that 'It still isn't purpose of this thread, might as well rename it to: Few guys are having Off-Topic argument and others just watch'.[190]

Of course, the boundary between what is 'on-topic' and what is 'off-topic' is not fixed. Instead, it is continuously negotiated by everyone involved, as the discussion develops. For instance, 'Anatur' claims his preoccupation with discussing the Allied bombing of Japan rather than that of Dresden is completely justified, because 'both were situations where the allies used uneccessary force to kill masses of civilians with no reasonable millitary or political objective'.[191] Tangential topics such as these are presented throughout discussions, and while the measure of tangentiality is policed to some extent by forum users, the administrators have the final say in how far a discussion can stray from its initial topic. The acceptance of a measure of tangentiality results in very valuable discussions, as is shown by the discussion about Dresden, which evolves from a rather factual discussion about how people feel about the bombing of Dresden - judging from the introductory comment by the topic creator, it was meant as simply a poll - into a more philosophical discussion on the morals of warfare and the skills involved in understanding the past.

On the other hand, sometimes bridges are made to completely unrelated topics, such as in a topic called 'What if Britain had joined the Axis when offered the chance?'.[192] In this topic, after dozens of comments trying to answer this question, the discussion devolves into one about the ethnic origins of modern Russians and the ethnic profiling of Genghis Khan, mainly due to the influence of one forum user. However, lapses such as these do get pointed out by the forum users. They just don't have the power to remove those messages themselves: that level of influence is reserved for the administrators only.

Summarizing the topic of direct instruction in the macro phase, it is not just forum users that have been officially appointed the task of policing the Rules and Guidelines that work to structure content and discussions on the forum. Administrators, topic creators and respondents work together to create a teaching presence that guides discussions to topics that are not always

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[190] Forum user Hermann6, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=191 (12-08-2016).

[191] Forum user Anatur, 'What is your opinion on the bombing of Dresden?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=49359&start=192 (12-08-2016).

[192] Forum user CYNIC, 'What if Britain had joined the Axis when offered the chance?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=10338&start=43 (12-08-2016).

intended by the topic creator, but are evidently deemed engaging and worthwhile topics on the Second World War to discuss.

Concerning the second category of indicators of teaching presence, referred to by the authors of the Community of Inquiry framework as ´building understanding´, the *Heroes & Generals* forum is more problematic. Judging by the number of comments on historical topics, the large average size of each comment and the fact that some discussions last well into the night, forum users find participating in these discussions very challenging and stimulating. However, the topic creators do not not seem to view reaching a consensus as a goal in these discussions, and thus it rarely occurs. For example, in the 'Historical Chatter' section of the forum, the section where all historical discussions on the forum are directed to, most topics are created for the sake of asking fellow players to help them find answers to simple questions such as 'did they ever use the Johnson lmg?'[193], to share interesting links they might appreciate or to ask them about their opinions on historical events and actors.[194]

Additionally, the failure to reach consensuses and to stick to a single topic I attribute largely to the fact that knowledge itself is constantly being negotiated. Discussions never really end with a consensus to be taken as true, but rather merge into different topics when forum users express enough has been said on the initial matter. However, when (and if at all) this switch of topics is appropriate is constantly under negotiation as well. In this sense, the *Heroes & Generals* community could be classified as a 'rhizomatic learning environment': rather than looking to a central verifier such as a teacher or curriculum to decide what is knowledge and what is not, forum users judge information by its usefulness to the discussion, rather than its 'truthfulness'.[195] This is expressed by the fact that most source references lead to Wikipedia articles, rather than books or academic products, and a dislike of factual statements in general, other than those with references to primary sources. For instance, 'BushElito', 'tykjen' and 'Matt6767' all express

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[193] Forum user Joewashere2003, 'British Johnson lmg', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=80159 12-08-2016).

[194] For example, the topics 'Forgotten Weapons RTD', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=80441 (12-08-2016), 'So technically hitler saved the US economy?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=73681 (12-08-2016), 'Is Russia still communist?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=76567 (12-08-2016), and 'IYO what is the most iconic tank of the second world war?', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=78927 (12-08-2016).

[195] Dave Cormier, 'Rhizomatic education: community as curriculum', *Innovate: journal of online education* 5 (2008), article 2, http://nsuworks.nova.edu/innovate/vol4/iss5/2 (12-08-2016); Kathy Sanford, Madill Merkel, 'There's no fixed course': rhizomatic learning communities in adolescent videogaming', *Loading...* 8 (2011) 50-70.

their weariness of their observation that 'every youtube channel looking for views magically becomes a first rate historian', and that there are 'a lot of people out there who watch ONE video and by magic becomes a historian'.[196]

Of course, building understanding in a learning environment in which an authority on what constitutes 'knowledge' is lacking might seem quite problematic, and it is at this point that the Community of Inquiry framework is not sufficient to explain the teaching presence that is at work on this forum. It presumes the existence of such a central verifier of knowledge, rather than knowledge that is 'constructed and negotiated in real time by the contributions of those engaged in the learning process', like the way the rhizome of a plant adjusts its direction of growth to the environmental conditions.[197]

Nonetheless, the ambiguity with which forum users approach information leaves doubts as to how effective this rhizomatic historical learning process is in practice. While mutual sharing of information in this stimulating environment happens in every historical topic, the measure in which referring to sources is policed varies from thorough to not at all. For instance, Anatur gladly gives an extensive and reference-free account in favor of the dropping of Fat Man and Little Boy on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, claiming it gave Japan 'a very convinient way to surrender while preserving their honor'.[198] In that same discussion, however, his fellow respondent 'KriegsSchwein' instead provides an entire copy of a text describing an interrogation with a 'well informed Japanese Army officer in Yokohama' during the Second World War to convey his opinions on the same matter.[199] Additionally, further on in the discussion, respondent shadowsouls12 implores another to base his or her statements on evidence, rather than nothing.[200] This disparity is likely due to the fact that an obligation to refer to sources is not included in the Rules and Guidelines, meaning administrators do not pay attention to it and forum users do not need to adhere to it. Consequently, neither topic creators nor respondents have any motivation other than their personal reasons for referring to source material. Using

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[196] Forum users BushElito, tykjen, and Matt6767, 'Attention to detail. WWI historian reviews BF won trailer', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=74158&p=951021 (12-08-2016).

[197] Cormier, 'Rhizomatic education'.

[198] Forum user Anatur, 'Nukes on Japan', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876 (12-08-2016).

[199] Forum user KriegsSchwein, 'Nukes on Japan', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876 (12-08-2016)

[200] Forum user shadowsouls12, ´Nukes on Japan´, http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=59876&start=106 (12-08-2016).

evidence, one of the six tenets of historical thinking as conceptualized by Peter Seixas, is not common practice in the community.[201]

Moreover, through active intervention, a teacher in a traditional classroom setting would ideally try to engage less active participants and acknowledge individual contributions. However, since such a central figure of authority is lacking in the context of the forum, these actions that help build understanding do not systematically occur. Whether a topic or a comment receives attention is mainly dependent on the level of interest from respondents, and to a degree on administrators, who sometimes choose to ´pin´ topics to the top of the forum's index page, when it is deemed beneficial to the structure or quality of discourse. In the ´Historical Chatter´ section of the forum, for instance, community manager and administrator Reto.Robotron3000 pinned a topic listing ´online references for the community´ which mainly contain essays on battles and details about military hardware. He notes that 'reference is especially useful if you can find it'.[202] This intervention helps it become one of the best viewed topics in this section.[203]

The third category of indicators of a teaching presence is referred to as 'direct instruction' in the CoI framework. According to Garrison et al., 'here is where the ultimate "teaching" responsibility, in the best sense of the concept, emerges in the educational process'.[204] Presenting content, questions, guiding and summarizing discussions and confirming understanding are the tenets of teaching.[205] However, 'teaching' in the traditional sense of the word, as was explained in the previous section, is not what happens in an informal rhizomatic learning environment such as the *Heroes & Generals* community. The roles of teacher and student are more fluid in these cases. Because everybody is anonymous, there are no individuals who carry authority on historical content in this community. Nobody is entitled to assess another's ways of thinking or arguing in any other way than simply offering counterarguments when one disagrees, or reinforcing someone's arguments when one agrees, without the invested authority of some larger entity like a university, company or state. Nobody is entitled to teach.

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[201] Seixas, 'Benchmarks of historical thinking', 2.

[202] Reto.Robotron3000, 'Online reference links', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=762 (12-08-2016).

[203] Forum user pacifist, ´Online reference links´, http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=762 (12-08-2016).

[204] Garrison e.a., 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment', 101.

[205] Ibid., 101-102.

Although it is certainly not always the case, the social learning environment of the *Heroes & Generals* forum, in which nobody is considered a historical expert by epithet, appears to make participants more critical of the historical information or evidence that is presented to them. This does of course make sense, since historical claims known to be made by a verified historian or a newspaper are generally considered more trustworthy than those made by a stranger on a video game's forum. In this context of the forum, however, there are no such epithets, at least none by which one could discern a degree of historical expertise. Forum users merely present themselves through their avatars. These are made up of a name and a profile picture, which can but does not have to carry meaning to the individual. Additionally, they show information about how they refer to themselves, how many comments they have posted on the whole forum, or for how long they have been active on the forum. Additionally, it may show which group or 'clan' of gamers they belong to, or whether they have a formal function as an administrator or as a troubleshooter on the game's forum. It is only in the ways forum users write, argue, and otherwise communicate with others from which the community can extrapolate whether something they say is valid or not.

While forum users are very critical of each other, this is not a guarantee for sound historical thinking to be the norm in the community. While establishing historical significance, using evidence, identifying continuity and change, analyzing cause and consequence, taking a historical perspective, and understanding of the moral dimensions of history occur often on the forum, it remains a matter of chance that a forum user who is knowledgeable enough comes by to point out these ways of addressing history. It is only in some topics that all three presences come together to create an effective learning experience, and one of the prerequisites for this is to have a prolonged discussion. This is why it is mostly (although not exclusively) in persistent discussions such as those about the bombing of Dresden or the nuclear attack on Japan that these more sophisticated historical arguments occur. It turns out, however, that even having a historian present in these discussions is not sufficient to guarantee productive historical discussions.

Through extensive use of the 'search' feature on the forum, which allows users to search the forum for words or combinations of words, I gathered quite an enlightening insight of the forum community. On the whole forum, there are only a handful of forum users who publicly identify themselves as historians, but they do not show themselves in the historical section of the forum. Instead, they introduce themselves as such on the development forum, presumably in

order to provide their comments with more authority. Generally, these comments are extensive suggestions for the game developers to make the game more historically accurate, dealing exclusively with the (mis)representations of Second World War military hardware in the game, often citing a lack of 'immersion' and 'realism'.[206] However, judging by the reactions of their respondents, this presumed authority does not add extra weight to their claims. As others, historians' contributions to discussions are met with an equal amount of criticism and judged solely by the quality of their contributions. Note the differences between reactions to two such historians on the forum.

'Gunwhistle' creates a topic to discuss what he sees as 'issues that seem to be either ignored or worsened' after the release of latest version of the game at the time of his comment.[207] In an article that would fill about four regular sized pages, the topic creator neatly and extensively outlines what these issues are, and why they should be addressed by the developers. For example, Gunwhistle thinks that the M2 assault rifle should be removed from the game, because 'hardly any were made in WWII, and certainly not with 30-round clips and scopes. [...] The M2 seems like an attempt to bring over 'shoot 'em up kids' from FPS games like Call of Duty or Halo. [...] Why were these put into the game at all? The few dozen pages I CAN find on this, historically, tell me that at no time in the war were more than a few thousand MP44's or M2's scoped, and yet in battle [in *Heroes & Generals*] I hardly ever see an M2 without a scope.[208] Only at the very end of his plea Gunswhistle mentions 'being a military historian my entire life, albeit not formally educated in that field'.[209] The comment leads to a constructive discussion in which forum users express their agreement and disagreement and in which Gunwhistle acts as the leader of the discussion, acknowledging all contributions without exception and taking the time to respond to them in turn. He provides an effective teaching

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[206] Forum user Gunwhistle, 'OP troubles',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=44979&p=531486 (12-08-2016); Forum user Grenadier79, 'Feedback to make a great game even better',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=67205&p=886862 (12-08-2016); Forum user TaikunTier, 'War Thunder experience',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=37&t=38482&p=450081 (12-08-2016); Forum user kolanti,
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=66482&start=53 (12-08-2016).

[207] Forum user Gunwhistle, 'OP troubles',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=44979&p=531486 (12-08-2016).

[208] Forum user Gunwhistle, 'OP troubles',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=44979&p=531486 (12-08-2016).

[209] Forum user Gunwhistle, 'OP troubles',
http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=44979&p=531486 (12-08-2016).

presence in this particular topic, both on the topic of the game and the use of military equipment during the Second World War.

On the other hand, forum user 'kolanti' claims that he is 'an archaeologist/historian' who claims to 'know the shirt I'm talking about'.[210] Kolanti claims authority not by contributing something worthwhile, but by simply saying he has authority on the matter at hand, even though the subject of the discussion (being, reasons why there are no swastikas displayed in the game, while the hammer and sickle of the USSR is) is not necessarily in his area of expertise. This is picked up and pointed out immediately by his fellow respondents, after which kolanti explains he is still entitled to more authority because 'I am reading a source and then I analyze with LOGIC and REASON, something that blind ideological sheep lack..Ahh and also leftists always distorted history even their own *cough communist manifesto last page cough*'.[211] By insulting his fellow forum users and participating in a pointless exchange of insults and derisive comments, referred to the intervening administrator as an 'open flame war', he actually impedes a potentially educational experience.[212]

While teaching is not a goal in the community of inquiry, learning is facilitated nonetheless. Not a formal teacher, but community members such as Gunswhistle and his respondents present the content, ask the questions and guide discussions. On the other hand, with help from administrators, watchful community members keep unconstructive comments such as those made by the 'kolantis' of the forum from dominating serious attempts at discussion. In this fashion, the community itself contributes to a more effective teaching presence. In the social context of the forum, everyone is both learner and teacher. In the words of Dave Cormier: 'most people are members of several communities—acting as core members in some, carrying more weight and engaging more extensively in the discussion, while offering more casual contributions in others, reaping knowledge from more involved members'.[213] Some members of the community, such as Gunwhistle, show to know a thing or two about the historical discipline, and prove happy to share some of their skills with their peers.

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[210] Forum user kolanti, 'Swastika not in the game, but hammer and sickle is…', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=66482&start=53 (12-08-2016).

[211] Forum user kolanti, 'Swastika not in the game, but hammer and sickle is…', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=66482&start=68 (12-08-2016).

[212] Forum administrator Reto.Circinus, 'Swastika not in the game, but hammer and sickle is…', http://forum.heroesandgenerals.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=66482&start=78 (12-08-2016).

[213] Cormier, 'Rhizomatic education'.

Naturally, by no means does this result in a historical learning experience that is comparable to a traditional classroom setting. After all, learning is only of secondary importance in the community, and so is history itself. Moreover, what cannot be overlooked is the fact that serious attempts at historical discussions, in which an inquisitive mode of addressing history is maintained, is generally confined to a relatively small portion of the forum. Nevertheless, active participation in the historical section of this social learning environment helps perpetuate knowledge on many historical issues. With the input of a few participants with knowledge about historical practice, and knowledge on how to communicate this to a critical public, it also helps create and sustain an informal educational experience in which presentist views are discouraged, and in which knowledge on how to think historically can be developed.

4: Conclusion

In this explorative study of a little understood phenomenon, I have tried to explain what and how gamers learn about the Second World War in WWII multiplayer FPS gaming communities. In order to do so, I have compared communications in the micro phase (chat) as well as in the macro phase (forum) of involvement with the game *Heroes & Generals*. Through this comparison, I have found that the structure of the medium in which history is discussed proves to be very influential in determining how well Seixas' benchmarks of historical thinking are maintained. This leaves many possibilities for making generalizations, in particular about the extent of the employment of historical thinking on community forums. Since other WWII themed video games have a similar forum, the claims I have made about the *Heroes & Generals* forum could well be extended to these other games. However, the main research question posed in this study is difficult to answer with certainty using only one case study, because each community is different, both in its demographics and its means of communication.

'Hitler was a Silly', the discussion started by Kesselring123 in the Historical Chatter section of the *Heroes & Generals* forum, is a shining example of the fact that most historical discussions on this social platform can be classified as sustained historical arguments. In these discussions about topics presented in the historical section, and in some cases outside of it as well, the inquisitive mode of historical thinking is the norm. In this mode, history is addressed as something that is to be explored and discussed in collaboration with others. It is generally represented by historical topics that are brought up for discussion by community members outside of the context of the game or its development, as opposed to the utilitarian mode, which is mostly employed in discussions about the representations of military hardware in the game. In the inquisitive mode, aspects of historical thinking are as much subjects of discussion as historical content is. Pointing out the moral dimension of history and addressing presentist perspectives in particular are trends visible in these sustained discussions. The systematic occurrence of corrections like these results in a feedback loop in the inquisitive mode of addressing history which creates a social learning environment that endorses historical thinking and discourages ways of thinking that go against its principles.

As to how this informal educational process works is explained through application of the framework developed by Garrison et al..[214] This framework suggests that an effective learning experience comprises the successful combination of a cognitive presence that enables community participants to construct meaning through sustained communication, a social presence that provides a supportive social context for sustained historical discussion, and a teaching presence that helps maintain that supportive social context and that guides discussions to remain productive. The extent to which constructing meaning of history is made possible is high, because of the highly organized nature of the forum. There is an area especially delimited and maintained for historical discussions, in which engaging topics about the Second World War are suggested for discussion. This is highly relevant when comparing forums, because the existence of such an area is what keeps discussions focused on historical topics in and of themselves. Without such an environment, as is to be seen in the utilitarian mode as it appears outside of the Historical Chatter section, any discussion about history becomes secondary to discussion of historical matters as they are represented in the game. This is particularly the case with discussions about military hardware.

Forum users and specially appointed officials called administrators work together to create a teaching presence that helps make sure that these topics are discussed in a way that they consider productive. While some forum users are prone to introduce topics to discussions that are in no way related, most appear to value discussions that remain 'on topic'. While most sustained discussions contain many turns towards tangential topics, these watchful community members express their complaints when discussions stray too far or even 'report' 'off-topic' comments to keep this tendency somewhat contained. Together with the rules of conduct that are policed by administrators, this supportive social process makes sustained discussions about historical topics possible.

Additionally, the social climate that is set in the macro-phase of playing *Heroes & Generals* supports discourse especially when emotions are expressed. Through a combination of humour, self-disclosure, and other forms of emotional expression, a climate is created that keeps forum users engaged in prolonged discussions. The quality of these historical discussions is maintained through selective and widespread use of the 'quote' feature of the forum. It allows users to keep discussions focused on particular topics and on comments they deem valuable to

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[214] Garrison e.a.,'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment'.

the discussion, despite a large number of misleading comments about history. These comments are mostly ignored when users quote and respond to each other, preventing these misleading messages from gaining much attention.

The social structure on the forum is very different from a that of a history classroom, because there are no figures with authority on the topic of history, as a formal teacher would be. This results in an environment in which all forum users are free to experiment in historical discussions, offering different perspectives without a need to conform to one ideal of what is the one 'true story'. This way, multiple views on historical topics can coexist, while more extreme ones (such as a national socialist's perspective) are treated to either disregard, disapproval or even a ban from the forum.

This social structure results in a community in which knowledge is constantly under negotiation. While community members can agree on what should be considered a good historical approach to the topics they discuss, discussions about history never really end with a consensus to be taken as true. Rather, they merge into different topics when forum users express enough has been said on the initial matter. In this sense, the *Heroes & Generals* community could be classified as a 'rhizomatic learning environment': rather than looking to a central verifier such as a teacher or curriculum to decide what is knowledge and what is not, forum users judge information by its usefulness to the discussion, rather than its 'truthfulness'.[215]

However, while the observations above apply to most sustained historical discussions on the forum, the crux of the matter is that not all historical discussions are sustained. While nearly all topics are viewed by a significant number of forum users, for unknown reasons, many topics do not gain as many comments as those discussed above. Because the topics that receive less engagement represent a large share of all topics in the historical section of the forum, the above findings cannot be generalized to the community as a whole. Additionally, historical thinking does not occur in the micro phase of playing this game. This was to expected from Calleja's theoretical standpoint, but could not be concluded beforehand. Neither Calleja nor anyone else has presented enough evidence necessary to preclude this. As historical thinking during gameplay has not yet been studied before, I could not simply assume it did not occur. However, after observing dozens of hours of play without encountering a single mention of historical matters, my study of the micro phase of gaming has confirmed that historical thinking does not

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[215] Cormier, 'Rhizomatic education'.

generally occur during this temporal phase. It is mainly in the macro phase when historical thinking is evident.

My findings are in line with other studies, in that learning about history generally occurs in the macro phase, and that it mainly works through interaction with others and by using external resources such as Wikipedia.[216] Generally speaking, however, multiplayer games have had little attention from academics focusing on this field of study, even though these games are at least as popular as their single player competitors. Of course, a shift in focus would also mean a shift in methodology. Studying a single player game´s influence on learning about history is a matter wholly different from studying this process as it occurs while engaging with multiplayer games, because of their inherently social contexts. I have found the Community of Inquiry framework to be particularly helpful in this respect, since it provided comprehensive points of attention during my analysis of the forum. Therefore, I propose the Community of Inquiry framework as a useful tool in studying learning in multiplayer games further in the future.

Finally, my findings in the *Heroes & Generals* gaming community suggest that history educators such as Peter Lee need to be more considerate of influences other than that of formal history education on students' understanding of the historical discipline than they have been. The assumption that 'no one else will' teach students the fundamental principles of historical thinking laid out by Peter Seixas is proven wrong by the analysis of the discussions I have found in communities such as this one. Gamers teach each other not just how to play a game, but also how to deal with the historical content these games refer to. Ignoring the fact that people playing historically themed multiplayer games learn about historical discipline in their respective communities is counterproductive. It hides from the view of academics a very large public domain in which thousands of gamers interact with each other on the topic of history. Under the right conditions, these communities can and do act as historical learning environments, and provide an effective learning experience.

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[216] Iacovides e.a., 'The gaming involvement and informal learning framework', 620; Fisher, 'Playing with World War II'.

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