

VICTORIAN AND AMERICAN MYTHS IN VIDEO GAMES

International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games

9-11 April 2025

Colégio Almada Negreiros, NOVA University Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities (NOVA-FCSH)

Ever since Steven Russell, Wayne Wittanen, and J. M. Graetz, three MIT employees who fantasized about bringing Edward E. Smith's (1890-1965) *Skylark* novels (1915-1966) to the big screen, developed *Spacewar!* (1961), one of the first digital games created and a clear inspiration for games that would be designed in the following decades, the game industry has grown exponentially. As Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. have stated (2024), "[i]n the historical blink of an eye, video games have colonized our minds and invaded our screens" (2). Digital games have burst into our television sets, portable computers, tablets, and smartphones, following us wherever we go, be it our homes, a friend's party, or whenever we commute to work, immersing us in worlds increasingly more complex and realistic. Often (re)discovering and (re)defining symbologies, meanings, constructs, discourses and, as Bogost (2007) points out, conveying various ideologies, perspectives, and points of view, digital games have the potential to significantly operate social changes, as well as disturb and alter attitudes and beliefs about the world (ix). Additionally, instead of breaking with previous means of communication, video games function in a permanent dialect with them, remediating them, and, simultaneously, the myths to which they can allude. In the process, the myths themselves, succinctly defined by Slotkin (1973) as "a narrative which concentrates in a single dramatized experience the whole history of a people in their land" (269; Paul 29), are refashioned, and it is precisely this type of adaptability that explains myths' longevity and endurance, as Paul (2014) stresses.

Among the myths revisited by digital games are those dominating the social, cultural, political, and religious discourses of nineteenth century England, in the period which came to be known

as the Victorian Era. These include archetypal mythifications of the self that fall within the gender ideologies of the time – such as the angel in the house and the gentleman –, as well as preconceived notions of childhood that figured prominently in most artistic works within eighteenth century Romanticism, and which came to define the idealized figure of the Romantic child that so deliciously fascinated Victorian readers and consumers. The obsessive upholding of these myths, together with the sociocultural conventions that were associated with them, made for a particularly repressive society. The myth of the gentleman, “[v]aguely attached to a sense of personal improvement but essentially conservative in its allegiance to the existing social structure” (Moran 43), found its echo in the American myth of the self-made man. As for the angel in the house, conveniently mythicized after the publication of Coventry Patmore’s (1823-1896) poem “The Angel in the House” (1854), it justified and sustained the relegation of women to a secondary and passive role in Victorian society, as a number of prominent thinkers emphasized (such as John Ruskin) or criticized and condemned (namely Stuart Mill). The Romantic child, with its promised purity and divinity, served frequently as a refuge from the chaotic and oppressive daily life and, as such, functioned as a repository for the adults’ anxieties, fears, and fantasies. Neo-Victorian fiction has since demonstrated a peculiar interest in deconstructing and subverting Victorian myths, in an effort to represent marginalized and disempowered voices, new histories of sexuality, postcolonial perspectives, and other generally “different” versions of the Victorian (Llewellyn 165), thus carrying out a critical re-evaluation of this time period.

American myths are also often remediated by a plethora of video games of different genres, which clearly reference in various ways some of America’s foundational mythic narratives, tied to the project of American nation-building and to the discursive construction of a homogenous American national identity (Paul 12). Among these narratives are the myth surrounding Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), and the supposed “discovery” of the American continent by the Europeans in 1492, the myth of the Promised Land, inaugurated by the Pilgrims and the Puritans, the myth of the American West, with agrarianism and expansionism as its two basic tenets (Paul 314), and the myth of the self-made man, indissociable from the expression “from rags-to-riches”. All of them are subsumed under the umbrella myth of the American dream, as argued by Paul (2014), besides appearing under the arc of the dominant ideological paradigm in the history and practice of the field of American studies, namely American exceptionalism, which can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1805-1859) assertion that “the position of Americans was quite exceptional” (36; Paul 16, 13-

14). Digital games, however, often establish a not so unproblematic relationship with the myths they refashion, and may celebrate them, validating the exceptionalist discourse and portraying the United States as a “predestined entity and (still) unfinished utopian project” (Paul 12), or even contest them, highlighting the voices of those excluded from the American foundational mythology (Paul 12) or debunking that same mythology entirely. Yet, in most cases, they do so simultaneously.

Hoping to address the ways video games revisit Victorian and American myths, this international conference aims to explore the intersections of game studies, literary studies, film studies, (neo-)Victorian studies, American studies, and myth criticism, among others. Taking place at **Colégio Almada Negreiros, NOVA University Lisbon**, between **April 9-11, 2025**, it invites scholars to submit proposals for **20-minute presentations** on the following (or other relevant) topics and fields of study:

- Game Studies
- Adaptation Studies
- Media Studies
- Digital Humanities
- Visual Culture
- Cultural Studies
- Victorian Studies
- American Studies
- Transnational American Studies
- Transmedia
- Neo-Victorianism
- Utopian and Dystopian Studies
- Horror Studies and the Gothic
- YA Studies and girlhood myths
- Subversion and transgression
- Steampunk, cyberpunk, and solarpunk
- Retrofuturism and anachronisms
- Apocalypticism, eschatology and posthumanism
- Procedural rhetoric
- Game-worlds and virtual landscapes
- Worldbuilding and fantasy
- Borders and frontiers
- Player characters and NPC’s (non-player characters)
- Player agency
- Video games and/as mythmaking
- Mythopoeia
- Mytholudics

- Gendered, ageist and ableist myths in video games
- Victorian and/or American myths and archetypes
- Victorian and/or American myths in contemporary discourses

The conference will feature the following Keynote Speakers:

- Heike Paul (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)
- Barbara Braid (University of Szczecin)
- Dom Ford (University of Bremen)

Proposals including 300-word abstracts (in English or Portuguese) and 150-word bio notes (besides the participant's name, affiliation/s, and contact information) should be submitted to victorian.american.myths@gmail.com until December 15, 2024. Notification of acceptance will be sent by January 12, 2025.

Find out more at the official website: <https://vam2025.fcsh.unl.pt/>

Accepted presenters will be required to register and pay the following conference fee:

Early bird (until February 28, 2025):

Wide public: Free

Student Participant: 35€

Participant: 85€

CETAPS Members: Free

Regular:

Student Participant: 50€

Participant: 100€

CETAPS Members: Free

Organization:

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The International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games will take place in the framework of the research conducted by the research strands “Culture, Science and the Media” and “American Intersections”, of the research area “Anglophone Cultures and History” at CETAPS (Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies). More here: <https://www.cetaps.com/anglophone-cultures-and-history/>.

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