



Recessionary games: Video games and the social imaginary of the Great Recession (2009–2015)

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Abstract

How do the most popular video games in recent years contribute to the construction of the social imaginary of the Great Recession? The discursive struggles over the definition of crucial aspects of the recession such as austerity, the heroic ethos to face precariousness and being anti-establishment are being played not only in the political arena and ‘serious’ news genres but also in the narrations of popular culture and video games. Thus, critical analysis of the social resonances of video games on the Great Recession is a relevant exercise not only academically but also socially. To address this question, this article proposes an analysis of bestselling video games from 2009 to 2015, based on cultural studies and game studies. The analysis is organized in three case studies: (a) post-apocalyptic video games and their potential resonances regarding austerity and precariousness; (b) video games, neo-liberalism and counter neo-liberal views; and (c) video games and the representation of anti-establishment characters and rebel communities.

Keywords

Anti-establishment, austerity, cultural studies, discourse, game studies, neo-liberalism, recession, video games

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Introduction

On 23 October 2008, after the fall of Lehman Brothers, Alan Greenspan, the former Chair of the US Federal Reserve, claimed that ‘we are in the midst of a once-in-a-century credit tsunami’. This phrase might lead one to view the financial crisis as an unpredictable misfortune, the consequence of blind natural forces with no one in particular to blame, neither political-economic actors like Greenspan himself nor abstract entities like financial capitalism.

As this example illustrates, the media’s discourses and representations of the global economic crisis and the so-called Great Recession¹ which sprang from it are important because they can influence the way we think about these issues, often without even consciously realizing it. And ultimately, the way we think about the recession influences the way we act and behave with regard to it. For this reason, critically analysing the discourses and representations of the Great Recession is an important exercise not only academically but also socially.

Beyond the political discourses and messages from the press and ‘serious’ news genres, representations from popular media and popular digital culture also play a substantial role in these issues. Indeed, in recent years, there has been a surging interest in analysing the representations of the Great Recession in fields like film, television series, reality shows and audiovisual advertising (Banet-Weiser, 2014; Boyle and Mrozowsky, 2014; Kidder, 2016; Negra and Tasker, 2013; Vanderwees, 2013). In the case of video games, this issue has only been addressed tangentially until now (Aarseth and Backe, 2013; Oliva et al., 2016); however, it merits more in-depth research.

In this article, we suggest a reading of the Great Recession through the analysis of some of the most widely consumed video games from 2009 to 2015. Most of these video games do not have explicit connections to the recession, but they do have significant resonances on key issues related to the crisis, such as austerity, precariousness, the neo-liberal ethos and the possibility of questioning it, and what it means to be anti-establishment. Thus, the question guiding our analysis is the following: How do the most popular video games in recent years contribute to the construction of the social imaginary of the Great Recession?

The aforementioned concepts are particularly relevant when addressing the social imaginary of young people, since young workers have been especially affected by what has been dubbed the ‘precarariat’ (Standing, 2013). They have also been the main catalyst behind counter neo-liberal movements such as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and Spain’s 15-M, which largely emerged from the social and political tensions of the Great Recession. Moreover, young people represent a significant user profile of the mainstream commercial video games we are analysing, so the proposed analysis might be particularly interesting as a contribution to understanding the connections between video game culture, youth culture and the social imaginary of the Great Recession.

Theoretical approach

Theoretically, this article is situated at the intersection of cultural studies and game studies. Since the 1960s, cultural studies have examined works of mass culture as a medium for diagnosing the socio-historical and political context to which they belong, through the analysis of their social discourses and representations and the identification of timely ideological anxieties and tensions lying latent in these works. Some emblematic studies in this field include *How to Read Donald Duck* (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975), Fiske’s works on TV and popular culture (Fiske, 1987, 1992)

and Ryan and Kellner's studies on Hollywood films and American society (Kellner, 1995; Ryan and Kellner, 1990; also see Storey, 2012 and Strinati, 2004).

A prolific area of game studies in recent years is closely linked to the tradition of cultural studies, particularly when video game analysis addresses representations of gender (Bryce and Rutter, 2005; Leonard, 2006; Perreault et al., 2016) and race (Brock, 2011; DeVane and Squire, 2008; Leonard, 2006) or the implicit ideological discourses in video games (Baerg, 2012; Cassar, 2013; Millington, 2009, 2014). From a sociological approach closely related to cultural studies, Kirkpatrick recently spotlighted the significance of video games in the construction of the social imaginary, in terms of both the shaping of subjectivities and the evolution of the global digital economy (Kirkpatrick, 2013).

Our analysis is specifically based on Kellner's approach (Kellner, 1995; Ryan and Kellner, 1990). Kellner proposes a critical analysis of texts from mass culture with the purpose of identifying how the text potentially influences the construction of the social imaginary. He assumes that many works from mass culture promote conservative views and tend to reinforce capitalism and social stereotypes; however, his extensive analyses of Hollywood films also show that the texts from mass culture are often not quite as ideologically monolithic as usually assumed (Ryan and Kellner, 1990).

Inspired by Fredric Jameson's essays on mass culture and ideology, Kellner posits a textual analysis which instead of seeking a single, hyper-coherent 'message' in the text focuses on exploring the latent tensions among socially conservative and progressive elements, including whether stereotypes are reinforced or violated and questioned. In times of crisis and social change, this perspective is particularly relevant given that a:

crisis can have two kinds of effects [on fiction]: it can promote a regressive reaction, whereby more familiar and secure traditional social models and cultural representations are revived, or it can lead to a progressive attempt to construct new representational codes and social attitudes. (Ryan and Kellner, 1990: 32)

In our analysis, we apply Kellner's approach as the underlying perspective, and we implement it via the textual analysis of video games (Consalvo and Dutton, 2006; Fernández-Vara, 2015; Navarro-Remesal, 2016; Pérez-Latorre et al., 2016; Planells, 2015). To do so, we examine the dimensions of narrativity and audiovisual representation in video games, along with an analysis of their ludic design. Based on the theory of 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost, 2006; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014), we address game design as an expressive medium. Thus, the rules of the game are conceived as semiotic micro-devices which establish meaningful connections between certain actions and their consequences in a video game, and we analyse the 'game mechanics' (recurring interaction sequences) and predominant strategies as prescriptive discourses which project a certain vision of how certain problems should be resolved.

The corpus of our analysis is based on narrative-oriented video games which have shown high consumption in the years since the 2008 crisis (according to ESA and AEVI² sales lists). However, the selection of these video games was based not solely on sales but also on their potential interest in examining three strands of analysis which we believe to have particularly substantial resonance regarding the Great Recession: (a) austerity and precariat, (b) neo-liberalism and counter neo-liberal discourses in the recession era and (c) the representations of anti-establishment heroes and rebel communities. Thus, our three case studies revolve around: (a) video games with post-apocalyptic narratives, which have potential resonances regarding austerity and precariousness

(*The Last of Us* [Naughty Dog, 2013], *The Walking Dead* [Telltale Games, 2012], *Fallout 4* [Bethesda, 2015], *Call of Duty: Ghosts* [Infinity Ward, 2013]); (b) games that are potentially significant in an analysis on neo-liberalism in video games and its friction with counter neo-liberal discourses (*Uncharted 3* [Naughty Dog, 2012], *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) V* [2013], *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* [Eidos, 2011]); and (c) popular video games which are relevant regarding the representation of ‘anti-establishment’ characters and rebel communities (*Assassin’s Creed 3* [Ubisoft, 2012], *Assassin’s Creed: Black Flag* [Ubisoft, 2013], *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* [Eidos, 2011]). Along with these video games, we added to our analysis examples of other cases whose similarity or difference to the main video games analysed help better illustrate certain aspects of their social discourse.

Austerity, precariat and post-apocalyptic video games

Austerity is a crucial concept in the discursive struggles around the economic crisis, and as Blyth (2014) has noted, it is a historically ‘dangerous idea’. In the neo-liberal discourse about the current recession, it has been used largely to ‘rename’ welfare state cutbacks, salary reductions and the erosion of labour rights (Blyth, 2014). Within the European Union’s (EU) crisis, austerity has also been projected as a moral issue through blame discourses that either explicitly or implicitly accuse the so-called ‘PIIGS’ (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain) of putting the EU at risk due to excessive spending policies, thus depicting these countries as subjects that deserve austerity (Ntampoudi, 2014). Other authors point out that austerity can be framed as a more positive, progressive concept: a historical opportunity to question capitalism and consumerism and to promote alternative economic cultures linked to cooperativism, recycling and environmentalism (Bramall, 2013; Conill et al., 2013).

Nowadays, austerity is commonly associated with discourses about the precariat. Coined by Standing (2013), this term refers to the precarious labour conditions that many workers around the world are facing since the emergence of globalization. Standing posits that the economic risks and increased financial competitiveness of the globalized world have been transferred to workers in a wide variety of labour and social contexts who are dealing with tensions that have become common today such as job flexibility, temporary contracts, cutbacks in salary and/or labour rights, offshoring and so on. As Standing pinpoints economic globalization as the root of the precariat, it is not a purely recessionary concept; however, he argues that the Great Recession has significantly expanded and intensified the precariat (2013: 66–96).

Negra and Tasker (2013) have examined representations of the economic crisis and the precariat in Hollywood films, with particular attention to what they call ‘recessionary corporate melodramas’, films which premiered during the Great Recession featuring men who worked in the business world with connections (either direct or indirect) to the economic crisis. Vanderwees (2013), in turn, has done a case study on the HBO series *Hung*, which depicts the personal drama of a high school coach during the recession, and several authors have observed metaphorical relationships between the post-apocalyptic narrative of the popular series *The Walking Dead* and the Great Recession (Lavin and Lowe, 2015; Rubin, 2014; Sugg, 2015).

Negra and Tasker (2013) and Vanderwees (2013) point to a ‘resurgence’ of the hero’s masculinity through his decline into precariousness. Thus, for example, for the main characters of a corporate drama like *The Company Men*, having to work in a factory as a blue-collar labourer for a while, as a consequence of the recession, is portrayed as a regenerative ritual which allows them to

redeem themselves. It is indeed associated with a re-encounter with their masculinity (strength, sexual potency), via scenes with a clearly metaphorical meaning.

On the other hand, in the article 'Hollywood, bike messengers and the new economy', Kidder (2016) compares two films featuring young urban bike messengers, *Quicksilver* and *Premium Rush*, the former pre-recession and the latter post-recession. The former shows the stint as a bike messenger as a stage in the character's life which, though romanticized, is nonetheless depicted as a phase to be overcome until he achieves upward social mobility. In contrast, in the recession-era *Premium Rush*, the main character drops out of the middle class as a result of the crisis, but he recovers his self-esteem and finds a new existential perspective that revitalizes him in his job as a bike messenger in the precariat. Thus, at the end of the film, the main character does not return to the middle class and has no wish to do so. What elements does the story ascribe to the precariat to make it so attractive to the main character? Kidder points to an implicit discourse of regaining autonomy and individuality/individualism (in contrast to job stability, which is associated with the sense of being 'yet another cog in the wheel', without a voice of one's own, not to mention the omnipresence of bosses and the alienating sense of subordination). He also points out that the capacity to navigate risk (of precarious work but also, more explicitly, of the city streets on a bike) is highlighted as something positive in the film based on a certain rhetoric of regaining an epic sense of life.

Some authors agree with Kidder's diagnosis in the sphere of post-apocalyptic fiction. Gurr (2015) and Sugg (2015), the latter focused on *The Walking Dead*, both identify the pronounced romanticism of the post-apocalyptic hero in contemporary narrative via their depiction as midnight cowboys, pioneers riding through the wilderness in austere or precarious conditions, yet at the same time towards a vast horizon brimming with individual freedom and the conquest of new territories: a kind of new American pioneer. Banet-Weiser has also drawn attention to the elements of post-apocalyptic rhetoric in post-crash TV advertising from 2008 (Banet-Weiser, 2014).

How are austerity and precariousness represented in post-apocalyptic video games from the recession years? How do the main characters deal with the austere/post-apocalyptic situation? Does their behaviour lean towards an individualistic and competitive ethos or a communitarian, cooperative approach? Can we find new forms of society in these post-apocalyptic worlds, or just a reinforcement of socially conservative views? What role do nature and the environment play in these stories?

Video games like *The Last of Us*, *Fallout 4*, *The Walking Dead* and *DayZ* harbour potentially metaphorical resonances of the hardships of the Great Recession through dystopian, post-apocalyptic worlds (cf. Rubin, 2014). In *Fallout 4*, the player's avatar experiences a constant need to find objects of all kinds and take them apart in order to harvest their basic components, with which they can create the tools they really need to build refuges and the like ('crafting' system). The game also promotes constant tactical dilemmas between preserving one's health and the need to consume radioactive food or drugs in order to survive, such that managing the risk to one's own body and health becomes an everyday logic (evoking the 'risk society' posited by Beck, 1998). Along the same lines, *DayZ* suggests a post-apocalyptic wasteland where finding edible food and medicine are real challenges in the game, and where the end of the world is depicted not as an epic but instead as harsh and tedious.

The dystopian component of these video games is combined with a component that romanticizes (post-apocalyptic) precariousness and downward mobility, in line with the analyses by Kidder (2016) and Sugg (2015) mentioned above: just like mass fiction, they are 'commodifying' the decline into precariousness and austerity via stories in which the hero finds the crisis to be an

opportunity to redeem or regenerate himself, and sometimes to recover traits of traditional masculinity (Negra and Tasker, 2013). This is often associated with a rhetoric of regaining freedom and an epic sense of life, the imaginary of the Western and the conquest of the new 'frontier'. For example, Lee in *The Walking Dead* redeems himself from a crime in his past via the post-apocalyptic story, and in *Fallout 4*, the main character of the game ends up turning into a sort of 'conqueror' of the 'new frontier' represented by the Commonwealth, the fictitious world where the game takes place.

The post-apocalyptic trope of regeneration through violence is problematized in games such as *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*, where the main characters have to combine the need to resort to violence in order to survive with their roles as 'fathers' of little girls, as well as with frequent, dramatic moral dilemmas alongside the non-linear narrative in the latter.

Sugg (2015) has explained how *The Walking Dead* TV series and comic partly turn back on the romantic depiction of the post-apocalypse to reveal a nihilist and despairing trajectory of 'impasse'. Though a substantial component of nihilism and despair can certainly be found in games such as *The Last of Us*, *Fallout 4* and *The Walking Dead*, and even though their endings have a melancholy and/or pessimistic tone, their gameplay structure, which is based on a succession of 'game levels' or 'quests', frequently provides players with a sense of progression and confers a rather positive, epic tone on the ongoing gameplay experience. 'Indie' games such as *DayZ*, *Inside* and *SOMA*, which have a dark, less epic narrativity and gameplay design, are clearer or more 'radical' cases of the nihilist, hopeless outlook on the post-apocalyptic world.

The heroism of precariousness we have identified in top-selling video games tends to come with an individualistic/familial approach. For example, *The Last of Us* ends up suggesting the micro-family of Joel and Ellie as the only possible salvation, and it depicts large communities (Tommy, Joel's brother and the Fireflies) as realms that jeopardize safety and/or individual autonomy. In *Infamous*, social groups directly play the role of the hero's main adversaries. *Fallout 4* is particularly complex (and contradictory) in this respect: on the one hand, the game design encourages players to interact with different communities (factions) in the Commonwealth, yet the story gradually reveals that deep down there is no 'good' faction (they all become overzealous to destroy one another) and therefore individualism is the closest a player can come to 'common sense'. *Fallout 4* also offers a meta-game in which the avatar/player forms a community of survivors; however, this meta-game ends up being more about human resource optimization and commercial management than genuinely forging a social community. The player has to assign the community members different jobs, such as cultivating the garden or making surveillance rounds, so they end up working as the player's 'employees'.

Regarding the variables of gender, race and class, Negra and Tasker (2013) and Lavin and Lowe (2015) have observed that middle-class White men tend to play the main roles in contemporary fiction that is directly or obliquely linked to austerity and downward mobility. This connects with the (misleading) public discourse of male workers as the main victims of the Great Recession ('Mancession'). Although there is a certain degree of social diversity in the main characters of contemporary post-apocalyptic games, they certainly always have at least one of the hegemonic traits: male, White, middle class. Thus, Joel (*The Last of Us*) and Cole (*Infamous*) are White, middle-aged men, whereas Lee (*The Walking Dead*) is a young Black man who had a good socio-economic standing (university professor) before the apocalypse. *Fallout 4*'s hero can be either a man or a woman, depending on the player's choice, but their backstory is invariably a young middle-class father/mother, living the American dream before the world collapses. Moreover, *The Walking Dead* games reproduce a social hierarchy trait which Lavin and Lowe (2015) observed in

the TV series, namely the failure of working-class characters as potential community leaders. For example, Kenny, a former fisherman, seems to have ambitions to play a more prominent role in the community of survivors, but he repeatedly fails to achieve it.

The individualistic/familial approach of the games analysed, together with the reinforcement of social hierarchies, leads us to link them with the motto ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’. As Gurr (2015) has noted, even though post-apocalyptic narratives always start with the opportunity to imagine new social models, they often project conservative discourses as or even more often:

Perhaps these stories imply that our previous hierarchies and behaviors are so easily reinstated because they are, after all, “natural”, and when the world around us is reduced to a primitive state, we too can drop our social pretensions and return to who we are meant to be. (Gurr, 2013: 2 [Kindle edition])

Nature is a significant element in terms of the romanticization of austerity/precariousness in post-apocalyptic video games. Even though they often contain ecological subtexts in which nature symbolizes hope and the promise of building a new society from scratch, nature can also be interpreted in these games as part of a regressive rhetoric which ennoble and beautifies the hero’s regeneration through violence, mistrust of others and individualism/familialism as ‘natural’ ways of dealing with the post-apocalypse.

Oftentimes, different conceptions of nature are in tension with each other in the same work. *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*, an adaptation of the post-apocalyptic *Journey to the West*, features individualistic and mistrustful Monkey, and Trip, who is desperate to return to his small, closed community. The fall of civilization reverts them back to previous forms of social organization, but they end up with the mission of defeating a machine that enslaves the people in a virtual recreation of the early 21st century. The ending offers clear positions: nature can only expand if we trim our models of production and urban planning, there is no turning back the clock on history and ‘awakening’ (which the slaves experience as a shock) requires one to create a new world that redefines our relationship with nature. This message contrasts with the stereotyped use of nature in *Call of Duty: Ghosts*. Here, the campaign begins with father and children in a clearing near a suburban house, a bourgeois view of tamed nature as property and commodity. After a foreign military attack, the main character enters hostile terrain, which is often reminiscent of the jungles in US war and action films. These two places in the collective imagination, the bourgeois home and the war-ridden jungle, perpetuate the conception of capitalist nature prior to the recession.

Finally, the figure of the zombie also shows interpretative tensions in video games and in contemporary popular narrative in general. While there is still a plethora of video games where zombies are little more than monsters to shoot at in Manichean stories, in recent years, some video games have started to question this in intriguing ways. For example, *DayZ*, a multi-user online game, is characterized by the fact that very often the most horrible enemies are not the zombies but the other players, controlling human characters (survivors) (Aarseth and Backe, 2013). *The Last of Us* also harbours a similar interpretation in terms of fictional representation, posing a group of uninfected humans as the ultimate enemies. On the other hand, a ‘casual game’ like *Plants vs. Zombies* projects a ‘sympathetic’ vision of zombies, including a mode in which the users can play on the zombies’ side. *Left 4 Dead* also offers a mode where humans and zombies clash, and users can choose to play on the side of the zombies from their vantage point.

This latter point connects with a recent cultural current of empathizing with zombies, which has been mentioned by authors like Austin (2014), Bishop (2014) and Paik (2011): the rise in zombie

comedies in the cinema (e.g. *Shaun of the Dead* and *Fido*), the motto ‘we are the walking dead’ from the comic and TV series *The Walking Dead*, and especially the phenomenon of ‘zombie walks’. But does this have anything to do with the precariat, the economic crisis and the recession, too? The aforementioned authors believe it does. Significant examples of this were the zombie walks organized by OWS activists. In these ludic demonstrations, some participants dressed up as zombified bankers and Wall Street brokers, while others performed a zombified self, with claims on their T-shirts such as ‘We are the 99%’, ‘Occupy the Living’ or ‘Tax the rich’. This entails an interesting expansion of the symbolism of zombies: while the former corresponds to a common, classical allegory of zombies as unbridled consumerists or insatiable (pseudo-)capitalist monsters, the latter suggests a re-signification of the zombie as a hyperbolic victim of contemporary austerity and the precariat. This new social resonance of the zombie might be linked to the aforementioned current of empathizing with zombies in video games and popular fiction, where zombies do not represent a monstrous ‘other’ but rather a tragic, hyperbolic ‘me’ (the 99%). Thus, once again, but with an interesting spin and new connotations, ‘the zombie body offers a space for a rejection or inversion of social values, echoing Bakhtinian notions of the grotesque and carnivalesque’ (Austin, 2014: Kindle position 3667).

Neo-liberalism and counter neo-liberal discourses in recessionary video games

The rhetoric of ‘regained freedom’ as a positive part of the fall into precariousness, alongside heroic values such as individualism and competitiveness, as discussed in the previous section, leads us to the neo-liberal discourse of the recession. Based on Foucault’s work, neo-liberalism is understood as a governmentality, a way of steering the ‘conduct of conduct’ of individuals in which cultural institutions and media discourses play a major role (Burchell, 1996; Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1998). According to neo-liberalism, collective well-being should be achieved through the sum of the actions of individuals and companies that try to maximize their own individual well-being. Neo-liberal governmentality has been accused of legitimizing inequalities since it does not take the structural causes of inequality into account given its focus on individual freedom (Oliva et al., 2016).

Even though the road that led to the Lehman Brothers crash is paved with the hegemony of neo-liberal thinking (since the Reagan–Thatcher era), analysts like Peck (Peck, 2013; Peck et al., 2012) and Blyth (2014) have drawn attention to neo-liberalism’s ability not only to survive the crisis but even to be strengthened by the situation by reformulating itself in the political-economic discourse not as the problem but as part of the solution. One article that is illustrative on these issues is ‘You say rich, I say job creator’ by Peck (2014). In this article, Peck analyses the rhetoric of the political pundits on Fox News Channel, which has promoted a post-crisis reaffirmation of the free market by situating businessmen and CEOs of large companies as the quintessential ‘heroes’. In advertising, Banet-Weiser has analysed the neo-liberal discourse in ads for Chrysler and Levi’s since the 2008 crash. According to this author, these kinds of ads frame the crisis as an inevitable obstacle in the course of capitalism which individuals are urged to overcome as a moral and national obligation. A narrative of recovery and resilience is created which calls on the US working class to deal with the crisis individually. These ads tell a congenial story about the crisis which merges patriotism, the myth of the American pioneer and the conquest of the frontier, entrepreneurship and the neo-liberal ideal that individuals have to watch out for themselves (without the need for the welfare

state). As the author concludes, to many, in the era of the Great Recession, the most important 'product' to sell is capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2013: 130).

However, several crucial aspects of the current social reality remain 'stubbornly' against the positive framing of capitalism and neo-liberalism in this recessionary time, particularly the dramatic growth in social inequalities. Unlike many other historical recessions, in the current one, salary inequalities between social classes have not decreased but dramatically increased (Standing, 2013: 76–82). In the meantime, citizens' belief in the American dream has plummeted. Between 1999 and 2011, approximately 15% fewer US Americans subscribed to the phrase 'the majority of people who want to get ahead can do it if they are willing to work hard' (Castells, 2012: 192–194). Likewise, there has also been a steep increase, 19% between 2009 and 2012, in citizens' perception of the 'class struggle' as a truly important phenomenon in the United States (Castells, 2012: 194).

In this social context, are bestselling video games portraying heroes and values aligned with capitalism and neo-liberalism or rather with critical discourses about them, perhaps including stories that metaphorically project the current unrest regarding the American dream, or game mechanics detached from consumerist/accumulative procedures?

A recently published study of the covers of the 20 top-selling video games in the United States from 2010 to 2014 has indeed concluded that according to the promotional texts of their covers, these games convey and promote neo-liberal values such as individualism, freedom linked to consumption and the accumulation of goods, customization and entrepreneurship (Oliva et al., 2016). In these games, the neo-liberal view is commonly embodied by the hero, so the neo-liberal ethos would often be idealized as part and parcel of adventure, epic fantasies or the fight against injustice. Although this study is limited to game covers, it considers mainstream video games part of a broader neo-liberal discourse. Thus, mainstream video games may facilitate the aforementioned media discourse whereby capitalism/neo-liberalism is presented as a part of the solution to overcome the economic crisis, instead of as a key causal factor and/or problem (Banet-Weiser, 2013; Peck, 2013; Peck, 2014; Peck et al., 2012).

The popular saga of *Uncharted* video games is a particularly interesting case for addressing the romanticization of neo-liberalism in contemporary action-adventure video games. *Uncharted 3* (2011) is a character study of Nathan Drake, a treasure hunter framed as a romantic hero more interested in adventure than profit. His obsessions endanger some of his loved ones, especially his mentor Victor Sullivan and his estranged wife Elena, who encourages him to live a safer life. The opposition between freedom and conformity has a complex, twofold interpretation: on the one hand, both Elena's position and the end of the story sanction the focus on safety, while the ludic-narrative construction of Drake and his adventures make his lifestyle seem desirable.

According to his creator, Amy Hennig, Drake is envisioned as a relatable regular guy with whom the average player can identify.³ While in previous games he dealt with pirates and mercenaries, in *Uncharted 3*, his antagonists belong to elegant elites with British accents. This pattern is repeated in *Uncharted 4*, where the difference in upbringing between Drake and his rival, Rafe Adler, is made explicit. Their clash is also a class struggle, a confrontation over social mobility. Drake is more professionally prestigious and, in this sense, the world of *Uncharted* is meritocratic.

Uncharted 4 poses a new solution to the intersection between adventure and safety. In this instalment, Drake has achieved safety in exchange for his autonomy and individualism (he works as a diver in a modest salvage company), which is reminiscent of Kidder's analysis (2016): the capacity to deal with risk is his greatest virtue, so without risk his life has lost its 'epic meaning'. This becomes explicit in two metatextual moments: first, Nate relives his adventures by acting them out in an attic full of relics; secondly, he plays *Crash Bandicoot*, one of the first Naughty Dog

video games, as he comments on what he would do were he in Crash's place. His yearning for adventure and the ennui of the middle class are Drake's core problems.

At the end of the game, Elena actually suggests that Drake go back to his old practices, but within the bounds of the law: he purchases the company and retools it towards international jobs that Elena documents as a journalist. Once again, we find the rhetoric of 'regained freedom'. In an epilogue, we are shown that entrepreneurship has allowed them to live the life that they want with worldwide fame. Drake and Elena are a couple who are capable of giving shape to their own life circumstances, who do not depend on social, economic or governmental forces, and who manage just as well on the fringes of the law as in start-ups. In their case, changing their lives is a question of mindset, and balancing adventure and the job market is a real possibility. Instability and risk thus become positive values.

The whiff of neo-liberalism in contemporary video games can also be found beyond narrative games, for example, in Nintendo Wii video games and the 'gamification' design trend. Regarding the former, Millington (2009, 2014) has examined the neo-liberal component of video games for Wii with the premise that 'the Wii is a device that potentially serves to "conduct the conduct" of individuals and groups' (Millington, 2009: 622). Wii games stress the individualistic ethos associated with the customization of the avatar (Mii) and suggest implicit discourses of 'caring for yourself' using mechanisms of constant self-scrutiny, especially in Wii games advertised as healthy practices, such as *Wii Fit* and *Wii Sports*. *Wii Sports Resort* specifically suggests an individualistic narrative development on the island Wuhu, a utopian, sports-focused place where there are no social issues. Following liberal ideals, *Wii Sports Resort* requires a player to be extremely competitive, highly adaptable (different sports with different rules and game mechanics for each one) and nimble (just a few seconds to react). All the modalities of all the sports follow a system of self-competition, mixed with self-scrutiny; that is, at the end of each competition, players get a score that is plotted on a graph, and then they are challenged to beat their own score in future competitions. Furthermore, the majority of play modalities offer competition with others, either intradiegetic (Miis) or extradiegetic (person-player).

Moreover, the popularization of 'gamification' has converged with the core years of the Great Recession. Gamification is a design trend whereby typical elements of video game design are incorporated into other cultural works or contexts in order to increase user participation and engagement. It has been applied extensively in recent years in fields such as social media, online marketing and educational innovation. Several authors have criticized gamification because it is usually implemented through the application of and emphasis on seemingly neo-liberal game mechanics such as scores and leader boards, which promote individualism and competitiveness; self-scrutiny technologies (e.g. 'fitbit'), which reinforce the neo-liberal postulate of everybody looking after themselves (individually); and customization mechanics, which are often based on the link between freedom, consumption and identity construction (identity as a product of consumption choices) (Shrape, 2014; Whitson, 2013). Nevertheless, other bestselling video games such as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *GTA V* place a greater emphasis on critical looks at neo-liberalism. These games evoke the aforementioned crisis of the American dream (Castells, 2012: 192–194; Standing, 2013: 76–82) through dystopian worlds and ironic narratives.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution revives the tenets of cyberpunk: extreme neo-liberalism, little to no government, technological and urban overdevelopment, the pervasiveness of networks and the loss of autonomy by individuals. However, it departs from another constant feature of its genre: its main character, Adam Jensen, is not on the fringes of society but instead works for a corporation

specializing in cybernetic implants and has been ‘augmented’ without his consent, making him a tool of the corporations.

Jensen is an ironic twist on the American dream: instead of being a self-made man, he is a cyborg manufactured by others whose body does not belong to himself. At some point, players are asked to replace one of his implants, and if they wait until later, he will be hacked during the struggle against an enemy and lose his combat skills. This rupture with the body itself, which becomes a consumer object with its own copyright and ‘firmware updates’, articulates the class struggle: not only are augments an expensive consumer good, but they also require medicine to avoid rejection, which turns their users into captive consumers.

Finally, *GTA* is a saga that is symptomatic of the declining belief in the American dream. At the end of *GTA IV* (2009), there is a contrast between the image of the Statue of Liberty and the impotence of the main character, an immigrant trying to escape the clutches of the mafia. *GTA V* (2013) also poses a (predominantly) tragic ending, in this case featuring a young African-American man from a depressed neighbourhood and two White Americans, Trevor and Michael. Michael’s story shows a unique social dynamic in the saga: instead of climbing the social ladder via the mafia and crime, or having his climb frustrated, he actually experiences downward mobility; he starts the game wealthy, but this is gradually jeopardized because of a debt.

However, *GTA* is a profoundly contradictory video game in terms of its ideology: along with its sarcasm about the American dream, the story also includes elements that romanticize individualism and unbridled competition as means of survival in a contemporary city. Likewise, the game offers the ‘easy pleasure’ of the ability to appropriate any car you want, whenever you want, thanks to the avatar’s talent at stealing. It is the lure of an easy consumerism. It is interesting to note how the creators of *GTA* have included knowing nods to these ideological contradictions within the game itself. In this sense, the final dialogue of *GTA V*, which takes place right after the main characters throw a financial speculator into the sea, is revealing:

- Trevor: . . . Now we can get back to the kind of capitalism we practice.
 Franklin: Shit, I don’t know how much more better that is than Devin’s kind.
 Michael: Hypocrisy, Franklin, civilization’s greatest virtue.
 Trevor: Jesus, your therapist has a lot to answer for.
 Michael: Yes, I still hate myself, but at least I know the words for it.

Anti-establishment characters and rebel communities

At the start of the recession, movements like OWS and the Spanish 15-M protested that citizens should not pay for the banking crisis, as was happening, and they concurred on several key points in their ideas: questioning the capitalist system and the free market (especially financial capitalism), demanding a more participative and ‘authentic’ democracy fuelled by online platforms, putting an end to the intertwined interests of politicians, the financial elite and the major media, and urgently addressing the issue of increasing social inequalities (Castells, 2012; Díaz-Cortés and Sequera, 2015; Shrivastava and Ivanova, 2015). They also advocated for an alternative economic culture associated with self-production, cooperativism and networks of exchange and solidarity (Conill et al., 2013). Regarding their organizational dynamic, these movements were characterized by a horizontal organization and advocacy of decentralized structures, neither leaders nor prominent personalities.

Although no direct or explicit representations of OWS and 15-M were found in the top-selling video games from the recessionary years, some of them contained anti-establishment characters and rebel communities opposed to the status quo. Thus, it is interesting to examine how anti-establishment and rebel attitudes are represented in these games and how they resonate with those real social movements. *Assassin's Creed* video games, in particular *Assassin's Creed 3* and *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, developed and published by Ubisoft, are especially interesting in this respect.

Assassin's Creed 3 was advertised through a TV teaser with the claim 'Rise' and dramatic images of the American Revolution, just a few years after the emergence of OWS. The main character of the game is Connor, a Mohawk Indian who is steadfastly committed to the freedom of his people and the struggle against their oppressors. In the midst of the American Revolution, Connor is not as much interested in favouring a particular side (although he sympathizes with the patriots) as in helping his tribe and other oppressed people. Thus, the game includes missions called 'liberations' of disadvantaged people in 18th-century Boston and New York, and Connor works as something like a community leader when he allies with other 'assassins' and forms a small rural community in the middle of the forest which harbours the oppressed from the cities. This could seem to connect with the rebellious and communitarist ethos of OWS. However, if we examine the game mechanics, we observe that Connor tends to exert a strong, personal leadership over his fellow assassins, and in fact the player has to deal with them like 'employees', totally subordinated to the orders of the leader. Something similar occurs in the meta-game of the rural community called Davenport Homestead: here the game essentially consists of helping the villagers increase their productivity and thus gradually building a small 'commercial empire' so that Connor can go from being an oppressed Mohawk to something like an impresario. Thus, while the game's advertisement and part of its narrative seemed to evoke a rebellious and communitarist spirit, some significant game mechanics turned out to be close to neo-liberal values.

The next instalment of the saga, *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, is set in the world of pirates, indeed one of the most significant anti-establishment figures in popular culture. From the libertarian spirit of the 17th century until the digital world, the figure of the pirate has largely been positively portrayed in film and literature (Bond, 2010; Emeljanow, 2011; Romero, 2008). Their connection with democratic structures (jury trials, the election of captains) and important values (the presence of women, the abolition of slavery and the multiracial composition of the crews) turns the pirates' struggle against the establishment into a legitimate form of political activism (Bond, 2010: 309–310).

The fictitious world of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is defined by similar premises. It is set in the Caribbean in the 18th century where the European powers are vying for maritime control over Nassau, the pirate capital. The main character, Edward Kenway, is a working-class figure who decides to make his fortune as a pirate in order to feed his family. At first, the story seems to include all the usual elements portraying pirates as self-made heroes who struggle for certain collective values against powers that are clearly superior. *Black Flag* also includes a political subplot between the secret organizations the Assassins and the Templars. Thus, Edward soon emerges as a tough, implacable pirate, yet one that is simultaneously compassionate and empathetic with suffering. However, the traditional 'anti-establishment cool' of pirates is soon tinged with clearly neo-liberal notes when we understand that the main character's problems are much more important to him than the moralist and libertarian constructs of the Pirate Republic or the Assassins. To Edward, anti-establishment does not reflect a collective need for social change (as it does for Blackbeard, Charles Vane, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, or for Ah Tabai, the leader of the

Assassins) but instead is articulated as an efficient, short-term means to earn huge personal riches. In fact, the very catalyst of the video game exemplifies this perfectly: Edward usurps the identity of a renegade Assassin with the goal of selling a powerful artefact to the Templars for a huge sum of money. This transaction breaks the balance of power between both factions as the Pirate Republic is being constructed, triggering the main conflict in the game. Nonetheless, since Edward's priority is to amass a huge fortune, the libertarian-oppressor storyline is never an end in itself but instead only the perfect way to harness 'anti-establishment-cool' as the main backdrop to the hero's strictly individual aspirations.

Published by Ubisoft as well, *Watch Dogs* shows some interesting discursive confluences with the *Assassin's Creed* games analysed above. In this case, Aiden, the (seemingly) rebellious hero, is a hacker, but he gradually distances himself from the hacker community. Obsessed with the security and privacy of his family, as the story advances, he realizes that he can trust neither the State nor the hacker collective (with the exception of Clara). Thus, Aiden becomes a fugitive, isolated hacker. Similar to the main characters of the *Assassin's Creed* games analysed, Aiden finds himself in the midst of a harsh confrontation between a pro-status quo faction and a rebellious movement (Patriots vs. Loyalists, Assassins vs. Templars, Hackers vs. State) and tries to find his way amidst (and against) them. All in all, a hacker hero such as Aiden paradoxically makes hacktivism lose a great deal of its essence: from a collective movement aimed at social change and alternative culture, it becomes an individual struggle interwoven with familiar issues and ultimately deprived of its counter-ideological meaning.

Other top-selling games from the same years confirm this negative tinge of rebel communities, or at least their detachment from the hero's path. In *Fallout 4*, the Railroad community is presented as a resistance group committed to protecting the 'synths' and fighting for their social rights (synths are oppressed cyborgs in the game's fictional world). However, as *Fallout 4*'s storyline evolves, all the communities represented (defined as 'factions') reveal themselves as rather shady, spurred by the thirst for power and an insane drive to annihilate their opponents. Another top-selling dystopian video game, *BioShock Infinite*, shows a similar pattern regarding the representation of the insurgent group Vox Populi. The Vox are initially represented as a left-wing resistance group in the dystopian world of Columbia, but they turn out to be as cruel and violent as their ultra-conservative counterpart, the Founders.⁴

Conclusions

How do the most popular video games in recent years contribute to constructing the social imaginary of the Great Recession? Beginning with the video games that offer post-apocalyptic narratives, they tend to offer an individualistic adaptive ethos as a 'way out', which tends to be associated with connotations of regaining freedom and an epic sense of life, thus connecting with the imaginary of the Western and the conquest of new frontiers. These video games are offering narrative experiences which allow the public to recodify (their) experiences of austerity and precariousness in partly positive or less negative terms by promoting a kind of cathartic or relief effect. Yet at the same time, and as a consequence, these narratives tend to romanticize austerity and precariousness, creating a story that is congenial towards them, a kind of 'austerity cool' (cf. 'austerity chic', Bramall, 2013).

Likewise, part of the heroic ethos of many of the video games analysed connect with neo-liberal elements such as individualism, extreme competitiveness, self-scrutiny for constant personal improvement and instability as a positivized value. However, our video game corpus is not ideologically monolithic. In some ways, despite their ideological contradictions, video games like

GTA V, *Deus EX: Human Revolution* and *Fallout 4* are probably some of the most popular icons of criticism of neo-liberalism and the American dream among contemporary youth.

On the other hand, in post-2008 crash politics, the discursive ‘battle’ over the definition of what being ‘anti-establishment’ means is crucial, as proven in the recent US election with Donald Trump’s anti-establishment rhetoric. Mass culture plays an indirect yet important role in this discursive dispute. In this sense, we can see that the video games analysed tend to foster a problem-free, naturalized vision of the merger between neo-liberalism and being (apparently) anti-establishment. One good example of this is *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag* with its social and rebellious camouflage of a purely individualistic position.

Moreover, we have observed that the top-selling video games analysed project rather negative images of rebel and resistant groups. In *Watch Dogs*, Aiden needs to get out of the hacker collective as he follows his own heroic path; in *The Last of Us*, Joel and Ellie find their way in the post-apocalyptic world partly by learning not to trust communities; and *Fallout 4*’s Railroad and *BioShock Infinite*’s Vox Populi end up being represented practically as terrorist groups, almost equating them to their opponents, pseudo-fascist groups such as the Brothers of Steel and the Founders, in their lust for power, cruelty and/or violence.

This dominant representation of rebel groups in mainstream video games must have not facilitated the construction of a positive public perception of social movements such as OWS and 15-M. These games tend to push rebel groups opposed to the status quo towards a radical arena where any ideologically marked collective ends up represented as violent and untrustworthy. That is, bestselling video games project a post-ideological frame, whereby ideology seems to become almost synonymous with extremism. Therefore, the heroes must leave or avoid long-term commitment to ideologically charged communities, regardless of their political leanings.

As an exception, Connor in *Assassin’s Creed 3* is strongly committed to protecting his tribe and helping oppressed people. However, as discussed above, his rebellious potential is reduced and contradicted by the design of a significant part of the game, whereby he becomes a kind of capitalist impresario. Ironically, perhaps the most consistent examples of a rebellious group with a positive representation among the top-selling, recessionary video games we have analysed are those games where users can play as part of a zombie collective (*Left 4 Dead*, *Plants vs. Zombies*). This connects with the popular phenomenon of ‘zombie walks’ and with the new symbolism of the zombie as a hyperbolic icon of austerity and the precariat in contemporary culture (Austin, 2014; Bishop, 2014).

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Notes

1. Different terms have been used to refer to the international economic crisis that followed the Lehman Brothers’ crash of 2008. ‘Great Recession’ is particularly common in the United States, while ‘global financial crisis’ and ‘economic crisis’ are more common in Europe.

2. Entertainment Software Association (ESA): <http://www.theesa.com/about-esa/esa-annual-report/>. Asociación Española de Videojuegos (AEVI): <http://www.aevi.org.es/la-industria-del-videojuego/los-videojuegos-mas-vendidos/>. These associations are from the United States and Spain, respectively, two countries with a high consumption of video games and remarkably affected by the financial crisis, which made their sales lists particularly significant to our research.
3. http://www.pcworld.com/article/172866/uncharted_2_interview_p1.html
4. The link between the Vox Populi and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in BioShock Infinite is more than purely metaphorical. According to an interview with Ken Levine, the game's creative director (The Washington Post, 25 October 2017), he was partly 'inspired' by OWS when he was creating the Vox Populi (and by the Tea Party for the Founders). As we have pointed out, the game depicts both fictional groups negatively, and actually they both end up being the main character's adversaries. Source: www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/the-tea-party-occupy-wall-street-and-bioshock-infinite-how-a-video-game-is-reflecting-life/2011/10/21/gIQAUI8fGM_story.html.

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