

THE ALTERNATE HISTORY OF THE 1918 FLU AS A CONSPIRACY IN DON'T NOD'S *VAMPYR*

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Abstract

Pandemics have always been under scrutiny as part of conspiratorial schemes to control humanity. The 1918 Flu (1918-1920), suspiciously following World War I, is a case in point that inspired the video game *Vampyr* (Don't Nod, 2018). Recounting the Great Flu and the conditions of post-WWI London in 1918 with a dose of cultism and mysticism, *Vampyr* presents us with an alternate history of the world. This paper, following an interdisciplinary approach in investigating the alternate worlds of virtual games in light of quantum physics and conspiracy theories, tries to explore the nature of alternate histories and their plausible scenarios about the way of the world, here about the cause of pandemics. *Vampyr* is thus played as an alternate history where overcoming the Flu, as in other pandemics, is an existential game of schemes, choices and consequences. Considering the open world of *Vampyr* and the range of choices the player has in developing its storyline, this analysis reveals how conspiracies by shadow governments or polities may run the world and how the mass of people are blind to them. The mystical reason behind the disaster in *Vampyr* is associated with an evil entity appearing every few centuries to unleash a new pathogen into humanity, implying conspiracies against overpopulation at certain periods throughout history. Accordingly, players in *Vampyr* can choose to make the world better or continue with darker schemes, a gaming fact that runs through the world with policy-makers as its players.

Keywords: alternative history; conspiracy theory; pandemics; 1918 Flu; *Vampyr*

Introduction

The question of ‘what if’ in worldly affairs has presented itself through different philosophical concepts, scientific theories and literary genres that conceptualize parallel or alternative worlds. An etiological investigation into such existentially possible worlds gives us challenging interpretations of the present situation of the world and its possible endings. In light of quantum physics, alternate worlds envision the forking paths that are plausible on the verge of the birth of a phenomenon and that can affect future decisions in human life. In other words, multiple worlds exist, as parallel worlds, mutually negating worlds or similar worlds with different or alternative rules of being or realities the interpretation of which can help with managing the present world better.

“Alternate history” is about “a timeline that is different from that of our own world, usually extrapolated from the change of a single event” or “the genre of fiction set in such a time” (Prucher, 2007, p. 4). Although the concept dates back to Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* (English: *History of Rome from Its Foundation*) about an alternate history of Alexander’s conquests, the term itself is a 20th-century coinage by critics and historians to describe the fiction of the kind (Turtledove, 2001, p. 4). In this sense, alternative history proposes ‘what if’ scenarios about certain historical events in the past and imagines possible outcomes that are different from historical records. In quantum terms, alternate history is a safe thought experiment – safe as it is imaginary and a thought experiment as it is abstract – that can depict different worlds, imaginary or realistic, via the quantum hatch, with origins and destinies different from that of the original world. In all cases, the course of history is altered to manifest the consequences of applying certain ideologies and priorities to the worldly states of affairs at one point in the universal time, be it *ab ovo* or *in media res*. In existential terms, the freedom of choice to create any number of worlds brings about responsibilities, as if human beings are players in video games toward a destiny controlled by their strategies and chance events, with equal possibilities of victory or failure.

Out of the ‘what ifs’ of the past and alternate histories, a great credit belongs to conspiracy scenarios that might be active in making the human world what it is now. This can include

certain schemes for the emergence of a pandemic, like the Covid 19 (Hong et al., 2021), built upon some conspiracy of genocide. A similar scenario seems to have been at work when the 1918 Flu began. The 1918 Great Influenza epidemic, also known by the misnomer the “Spanish Flu,” was one of the deadliest global influenza pandemics caused by the H1N1 influenza A virus, with 17 to 50 million reported deaths, making it the second deadliest pandemic in history after the Black Death (1346-1353) (“Spanish Flu,” 2022). It was estimated that one-third of the people worldwide (500 million at the time) were infected by the flu (Frost, 1920; Burnet & Clark, 1942). These facts led to the rise of conspiracy theories regarding the nature of the pandemic, specifically the death toll it was contributing to that of the synchronous WWI.

A video-game image of life presents humans with the possible (quantum) choices and alternate histories they can imagine for their fate. According to Kim et al. (2008), blurring the distinction between the real and the digital worlds, “alternate reality games” provide “scenarios through which players interact and collaborate to construct an eventual ending to the story” through the “constantly” updating “state of the game[s]” (p. 36). For Professor Patrick Jagoda and Associate Professor Kristen Schilt, “alternate reality games ... allow players to become active participants not just as players, but as designers.” These games are essentially useful to “educate users about climate change, marginalization and public health” and even “help reshape the real world in which we live” (How alternate reality, 2020, para. 2). The players can thus make history in the parallel world they are digitally living. For the same reasons that certain video games include role-playing, alternate history provides the background for their plots when historical events such as war and pandemics are concerned. Game developers’ concerns in this regard are to peer into the nature and possible causes, natural or conspiratorial, of those catastrophes. For example, in *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* (Westwood Studios, 1996), Einstein travelled in time in 1946 back to 1924 to prevent the upcoming WWII from happening by erasing Hitler from history, meanwhile allowing Stalin to become powerful and conquer Europe. Other alternative histories are provided by many other games that address war and pandemics, such as *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), *Crimson Skies* (2000), *Freedom Fighters* (2003), *Damnation* (2009), *World in Conflict* (2007), *War Front: Turning Point* (2007), *Battlestations: Pacific* (2008), *Turning Point: Fall of Liberty* (2008), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014), *Fallout* series (1997-2018) and *Vampyr*

(2018). Antagonistic in nature as war and pandemics are against an orderly worldly order, such games act like prescriptions that help human beings to avoid catastrophic destinies if certain conditions hold true or awaken them to the ‘what ifs’ in the past that could alter the present if actualized.

Posing what pandemic-themed games can reveal to us about epidemics, this article particularly assumes that the Great Flu, just like similar cases, could be better controlled to decrease the death toll around the world. Don't Nod's *Vampyr* is an action roleplaying game (RPG), written by Stéphane Beauverger, published by Focus Home Interactive and released for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One on 5 June 2018, and for Nintendo Switch on 29 October 2019. The plot recounts how Jonathan Reid, a doctor-turned-vampire, is torn between his loyalty to the Hippocratic Oath and his newly developed thirst for human blood. Set in London during the raid of the Great Flu, *Vampyr* has a semi-open world of four districts whose fates depend on the player's decisions and actions in the game, especially his attempts at exterminating the Flu. The game has also four optional endings, each as a consequence of the choices the players to deal with the Flu. Jonathan's course of action from the beginning of the game to its end and his discoveries about the source of the Flu throughout existentially draw attention to the fact that certain measures are ignored to control the pandemic mostly because of possible conspiracies or certain policies by countries in conflict that have prompted the cause of WWI.

In what follows, *Vampyr* is analysed via an interdisciplinary approach that builds upon the play of choices in game studies, alternate worlds in quantum physics and conspiracy theories in pandemic times. Concerning the problem at hand, that of the possible roles of different kinds of conspiracies in giving rise to pandemics, this paper accordingly argues how human beings as player-figures in a world of possibilities are able to make alternate histories, in this case pandemic-free, against conspiratorial plots that endeavour to pollute the world for exclusive reasons.

The Great Flu and Conspiracy Theories

The available historical epidemiological data make the geographic origin of the Great Flu indeterminate (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). The earliest documented case was in March

1918 in Kansas, the United States, with more cases recorded in France, Germany and the United Kingdom in April 1918. Two years later, nearly one-third of the world population, about 500 million people, were infected in four successive waves. 17 million to 50 million deaths were reported then, 100 million in rumours (“Spanish Flu,” 2022). It should be noted, Branswell (2018) argues, that the Great Flu befell humanity before the age of molecular virology – influenza viruses were initially discovered in 1930. However, in the following decades, the Flu was recognized to have been caused by an influenza A virus of the H1N1 subtype, although questions and theories suspect when and where it began to spread. An undiscovered mystery is that the outbreak was unusually deadly among young adults. Although, Barnswell claims, between 12,000 and 79,000 people die from flu in the US alone every year, the victims are normally the very young and the elderly, giving rise to a U-shaped chart on the x and y-axes of a graph in terms of death toll by age. The fatality chart for the Great Flu had a unique W shape, with the inner peak marking the deaths of young adults in their late twenties. That is why “dangerous misconceptions and conspiracy theories” about the cause of the virus soon became widespread in 1918 (Cohut, 2020, para. 8). For Gagnon et al. (2013), this high mortality rate for young adults, an age group usually immune from death by influenza, is suspicious. Reports elucidated that influenza and pneumonia death rates for 15-to-34-year-old people were more than twenty times higher in 1918 than in the previous years (Linder & Grove, 1943; Simonsen et al., 2000; Taubenberger, 2005). However, the virus triggered “a cytokine storm”, attacking the young adults’ immune system (Barry, 2004), although the viral infection was seemingly no more aggressive than the previous influenza pandemics (MacCallum, 1919; Hirsch & McKinne, 1919). Interestingly, such harsh conditions of WWI as malnourishment, overcrowded medical camps and hospitals as well as poor hygiene worsened the “bacterial superinfection,” gradually killing more people (Brundage & Shanks, 2007; Morens & Fauci, 2007). These images of infection and death as well as their reports seem to have affected contemporary people with anxiety and existential fears about their fate.

According to Lynteris (2021), “Visual images of plague have left deep traces in the societies receiving, using and interpreting them,” and the global scale of such images has given rise to the development of a “plague concept” that introduces plague as “an icon of existential threat to

humanity” (p. 1). In other words, the “plague’s imagination” has been functional ever since the initial instances of imagining plagues in religion, art and literature in warning humanity against the horrors of pandemics that could follow (p. 2). The existential threat itself, always lurking within the human psyche, turns into the fear of an external factor, namely, conspiracy. Van Prooijen (2019) proposes “an existential threat model of conspiracy theories” that posits that existential threats may trigger sense-making processes, making people more susceptible to conspiracy theories (p. 16). Humans’ existential needs, thus Landau et al. (2015) argue, stand for people’s desire to feel safe and control their environment. In case of no fulfilment in guaranteeing their safety, people may succumb to compensatory mechanisms to restore a sense of security. As Kofta et al. (2020) argue, conspiracy theories are attractive for people experiencing strong existential needs as they encourage people to blame some “other” group or groups with evil intentions, thus associating their miseries with external causes (p. 900). These theories, as Bost & Prunier (2013) maintain, also act like warning signals to people who feel that they are living in a hazardous and untrustworthy world. In other words, the world is safer if potential enemies of people are identified. Therefore, a conspiracy theory “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). The “powerful actors” here are the conspirators, who are “hostile” in intention (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 770), in case that they exist and have great power (Nera et al., 2021). This imaginary aspect of the cause of pandemics acts as an alternate history with its own range of possible consequences.

Regarding the Great Flu, some conspiracy theories are still open to discussion. Cohut (2020) holds that for the sake of “the Big Pharma conspiracy theory”, “to promote and sell pharmaceutical products, companies intentionally spread disease” (para. 11). For Cohut, during the 1918 pandemic, a myth advanced in the US and the UK was that the Flu followed the use of aspirin produced by Bayer, a German pharmaceutical company. German products were mistrusted back then in the US, as the start of the pandemic coincided with the end of WWI, a war in which the US and Germany were enemies. There was also a rumour of bioterrorism by German troops. In addition, a Brazilian newspaper at the time reported that the influenza virus spread around the world by German submarines. Similar stories claimed that German boats

coming ashore on the East Coast of the US had released the infectious agent into the atmosphere. According to an account by Kolata (1999), a woman claimed to have witnessed a toxic cloud spreading over Boston as a camouflaged German ship approached the harbour. Bioweapons make use of biological toxins or infectious agents, including bacteria, viruses, or fungi, thus contributing to war casualties. Due to the unpredictable nature of the consequences associated with the use of bioweapons, controlling them became challenging, leading to their prohibition across multiple global treaties. Bioweapons can be even more difficult to predict or control on battlefields as the risk of infection between warring troops is too high. However, if a party is interested in attacking a distant target, bioterrorism is the simplest choice. Price-Smith (2008) argues that the virus helped with the balance of power in the latter days of WWI in favour of the Allied cause. Relevant data reveal that the Great Flu hit the Central Powers and that mortality rate in Germany (0.76 percent) and Austria (1.61 percent) were noticeably higher compared to Britain (0.34 percent) and France (0.75 percent) (Murray et al., 2006). The origins of the Great Flu, whether natural or potentially linked to conspiracies that influenced WWI or events surrounding aspirin distribution, remain unsolved, as in other pandemics that have raised suspicion.

Don't Nod's *Vampyr* and its Quantum World

Many open-world video games are inherently quantum worlds as they leave the player unto him/herself to run the game as he/she wishes. Meanwhile, the logic in such games is based on wilful action and consequences, i.e., choosing and accepting one's choices whatever the results. If a player loses certain opportunities during the game for better outcomes and higher scores, it is sometimes possible to reset the episode or the game to play all over again. Most recently, many role-playing games (RPGs) and alternate reality games (ARGs) provide their players with such worlds in which the same situations can be played all over by players for desirable outcomes. However, certain exceptions to this logic include games in which the players' decisions cannot be reversed and they have to live with their choices and their consequences. Even in such cases, the quantum mechanism is at work as the players have followed one certain path, ignorant of the possible ones that could be played.

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The story in *Vampyr* begins when Doctor Jonathan Reid, a skilled military haematologist and physician, who returned to his hometown London near the end of WWI in 1918, wakes up in a mass-graveyard, surrounded by countless rotting corpses. The Great Flu has already rampaged London, turning the city into a gloomy, dark dystopia. Jonathan struggles to his feet, suffering an unfamiliar but severe thirst. Having his senses dulled, he accidentally stumbles upon Mary Reid his sister, who has been searching for him, suddenly attacking her and drinking her blood to death. It is only after Jonathan's thirst is quenched that he realizes the horrible deed he has done. Jonathan decides to commit suicide and shoots himself, only to awaken again, now sensible enough to accept the reality of his situation: he has superhuman powers and is constantly hearing the voice of his murderer in his head. Tracking a fresh trail of blood to a bar, he enters the bar and asks the bartenders about the cause of blood, just to realize that there have been countless deaths by homicide aside from those by the Flu. It turns out that no one has taken the responsibility to investigate the case in that the whole city is infected. Furthermore, no authority seems to be doing much about the Flu either, as they are probably engaged in the war. The people are suspicious of everyone and refuse to converse at all, as they seem existentially afraid of the situation.

Following up on his inquiries in the bar, Jonathan realizes that there is only one person, a professor figure, residing in the upper rooms. As Jonathan makes his way up to the room, he hears a man and a woman inside talking about vampires. Just before he enters the room, the woman vanishes, leaving behind Doctor Edgar Swansea, a member of the Brotherhood of Saint Paul. Jonathan inquires whether Swansea knows anything about the murders: "Someone, something, is molesting people ... killing them, biting them." Swansea replies that it can only be the work of a "famished and reckless vampire," like Jonathan himself, and that he is investigating them independently. Swansea further refuses to acknowledge the presence of the woman in his room and inquires, instead, why Jonathan has come to his room at all. Jonathan replies that he followed a "fresh blood trail right to this room," thinking he was tracking his aggressor. Realizing his mistake, he leaves the room and resumes his search: "I will get to the bottom of this intrigue. Of what's been done to me, to this City" (Don't Nod, 2018).

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As Jonathan follows the tracks throughout the worn-out city of London, he finds the streets devoid of people. “I feel like I’m back on the frontline again,” he reflects. This devastated scene, superimposing vampirism on war crimes, is intensified when some vampire hunters, namely “Priwan Guard,” cry out here and there in front of large bonfires hosting corpses. This fighting gang prowls the streets of London abducting, torturing and killing anyone they suspect to be infected with vampirism. Later, Jonathan is employed at the Pembroke Hospital by Swansea who is known as a famous surgeon and blood specialist, followed by a summary of the dire situation in London: “Pembroke Hospital is the last bastion between the rest of London and the epidemic. The flu has decimated the East End and the war still rages. Welcome to the front lines of a plague.” Moreover, Jonathan enthusiastically notes the irony of how “the world’s most eminent specialist in blood transfusion is a vampire!” He is disturbed by Swansea’s use of the term “vampire,” as he is a “man of science,” but Swansea explains that while “traditionally the role of science is to refuse myth” now it is a time when “myth walks among us,” alluding to any scheme behind the catastrophe. The hospital staff draw attention to this aspect of the pandemic: “We’re struggling against an invisible enemy more lethal than any bullet from a gun;” “so many deaths... And still more coming... How can we be sure we’re making a difference?” Swansea calls on Jonathan to be a soldier again, as “this is a war. This white coat still a uniform” (Don’t Nod, 2018). In the course of Jonathan’s nocturnal travels throughout different urban districts, the effects of influenza on different groups of people become even more eminent: working-class men falling sick and losing their jobs; businesses and trade falling apart; the police protection collapsing to the whims of the war.

On the other hand, there are people with radical views about the Flu, like Richard Nithercott, a radical poet who likes its purging power. When Jonathan asks him why he is out during the pandemic, he genuinely expresses his courage as such: “I see some equity in the Spanish Flu. ‘No flesh should be saved,’ say the Scriptures. Good or evil, rich or poor, all are equal in the eyes of the Flu.” He believes that “the seeker of truth has to go boldly where the weak dare not,” and that “the scourge has not been all bad for the city” as it has put an end to London as a “noisy, cacophonous” city where “quiet was nowhere to be found” (Don’t Nod, 2018). Nithercott’s radicalism is more apocalyptic than ideologically oriented, although it points to certain

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purification rites. The Flu for Nithercott is a divine scourge of purity against a human-polluted world; therefore, it would not be surprising to discover him behind the pandemic. Nithercott seems like a misanthrope who stands alone as a possible source of the disease and one responsible for conspiracy against humanity, although he essentially occupies a null possibility of the source of the infection – his concerns are mostly psychotic.

Later on, Jonathan realizes that his sister is not dead; she has turned into a vampire. When he finally makes up his mind to meet her in order to console her, Mary's response is ultimate discouragement: "You believe you are fighting a disease, but it is you who is the disease Jonathan!" Later, we discover that it was Myrddin, the Red Queen's son, who had bitten Jonathan to become a vampire against the queen and her evil intentions, now manifested as the Flu. The fight between mother and son has been running for centuries, with chosen heroes on his side in each historical period to resist her evil deeds around the globe. Initially ignorant of this fact, Jonathan insists on his role as a scientist in pursuit of a cure, to which Mary harshly reacts by trying to kill him when she considers Myrddin's vampiric strategy not so functional against the archetypal conflict. Jonathan kills Mary in self-defence, just to be haunted by a vision of Myrddin beckoning him to prepare for a great battle against the Red Queen: "The famished queen has awoken" (Don't Nod, 2018).

The more Jonathan progresses in his quest, the more he finds evidence that the Flu is directly linked to a certain disease, namely "the Skal epidemic," that is specific to vampires. People who fall victim to this infection become frenzied, their skin gradually decaying. "This is not the Spanish Flu but something [else]," Jonathan says. One of the first patients who undergoes a bizarre transformation is Harriet Jones, a "hateful and bitter woman who is infested with anger." She is initially hospitalized at the Pembroke Hospital due to the Flu but is brutally murdered there. Once Jonathan tracks her whereabouts to the sewers, where he finds a group of harmless vampires called "Skals" seeking shelter, among whom Harriet is surprisingly detected. On investigating her, he realizes that she has faked her own death to "make everyone pay for what happened to her" (Don't Nod, 2018). Her occasional outbursts of rage seem to have no apparent source, something Jonathan brushes off as part of her own bitter nature.

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As Jonathan progresses through the story, he meets Lady Ashbury – an ancient vampire under William Marshal, Myrddin’s greatest vampire-champion centuries ago – who introduces him to the Ascalon Club. It hosts powerful conspiratorial male vampires who are behind numerous events, capable of “influencing the commerce and the crown” by imposing their will on both vampires and humans. Lady Ashbury recommends Jonathan to proceed with caution, as it is “impossible to tell the long-run goals of the Ascalon Club” that has brutal ways of acquiring what it desires. Lord Redgrave, the head of the club, admits that while they “publicly support the Empire, the true nature of its members remains a secret,” and thus they have no official signature by the crown. The group has its roots deep in Arthurian legends in that the name Ascalon comes from “the lance wielded by St George, glorious patron saint of England, who slew the heart of the dragon with it.” The importance of this club for the city is bolded when Jonathan meets a mortal old man sitting among the members and recognizes him as Aloysius Dawson, the wealthiest man in England. He admits that he is there to “implant his plan for the good of London” by building a wall to isolate the afflicted from the rich or the “deserved.” “As long as the right people are on the right side of the wall,” he maintains, “that’s all that matters.” The rich for him constitute the body of the human world, while the rest shall be exterminated for the sake of the purity of the rich. Recalling Nithercott’s radical purification rite, Dawson’s method bears a political undertone associated with certain capitalist ideologies that ignore the lower classes altogether. Dawson even plans to “dispose of anyone [any rich isolated one] that is contaminated as soon as they are spotted,” believing that “the apocalypse is already knocking at the gate” and that “to save England we must make sacrifices.” At the end of the game, the player has a choice of turning Dawson immortal, allowing him to follow his plan and separate the rich and the poor or to kill him as a man “devoid of empathy and despicable” (Don’t Nod, 2018), in which case Jonathan is banned from the Ascalon Club. It seems it is better, however, to allow Dawson to die not to empower him to continue his misdeeds. In that case, Jonathan’s hope of finding a cure will be lost cause. After all, the player decides which path to follow.

During the course of his investigations, Jonathan is soon to hear about William Marshal, “the oldest of British vampires . . . the greatest knight who ever lived.” Marshal has been falsely accused of being the source of the Flu by vampire hunters. On the other hand, upon pressing

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Swansea, Jonathan discovers that Swansea performed an unethical experiment of blood transfusion at the hospital from Lady Ashbury to Harriet some months ago, without informing either in hopes of curing Harriet, using “the regenerative properties of vampire blood on a human subject.” Swansea was not aware then that Lady Ashbury was a “healthy carrier” of a disease called “blood of hate.” Because of this transfusion, Harriet has thus developed a disease with “blind hate and strong physical mutations” as its symptoms. Meanwhile, she has turned into a monster called “Disaster” whose mere wish is “to spread pestilence and disease.” In addition, Doris Fletcher, a famous actor responsible for infecting the West End parts of London with the Flu, is in fact Harriet’s daughter who visited her at the hospital just to be infected with the “blood of hate.” Having inherited Marshal’s memoirs via Myrddin, Jonathan remembers facing another monster “Disaster” in 1666, when the Great Plague swept through London, and managing to defeat it. He also remembers Marshal referring to the ingredients of an antidote for the “blood of hate” (Don’t Nod, 2018).

Knowing that he must stop Harriet from overspreading the pandemic, Jonathan resolves to make an antidote to have immunity to the disease himself by using Marshall’s recipe, which contains King Arthur’s blood and the “blood of the purest heart”, a heart that turns out to be Marshal’s himself. Jonathan becomes more determined then to continue his quest: “It may be science or some supernatural power that is responsible for all this, but I will harness either or both to end this epidemic” (Don’t Nod, 2018), believing that Harriet is the one to be exterminated to save others.

Right before confronting Harriet, Jonathan is haunted by another vision of Myrddin, who introduces himself as “Myrddin Wylt, the servant of the Red Goddess and the protector of this land.” He explains that he turned Jonathan into a vampire because only he “could provide a modern, scientific answer to this ancient mystical threat.” Myrddin describes the threat as being the “Blood of hate. Vessel of the wrath of the Goddess.” On her awakening, “a Disaster will be born into this world, for she is hunger and anger.” Myrddin expects Jonathan to use his knowledge of “disease, contagion and contamination” and “how they course through veins” to make a cure. He also reflects on the fact that “your choices have made you, only you can save this land.” Beside, Myrddin reveals that the “blood of hate” or, simply put, the pandemic, is the

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curse of the Goddess and will be “unleashed upon the world whenever she awakens.” The Red Goddess is called “Morrigan,” whom we know was worshipped as the warrior-queen goddess in Irish-Celtic mythology. Comprehending her is even beyond Myrddin’s knowledge. Jonathan’s scientific definition of the epidemic is a “disease vampires carry in their veins, waiting to be awakened,” while Myrddin clarifies that it arises whenever the “Goddess dreams of walking the earth” (Don’t Nod, 2018). To stop the pandemic from further devastation, Jonathan must simply exterminate Disaster. Nevertheless, Myrddin reveals to Jonathan that his fate lies in his own hands and the choices he has made so far during his adventures.

Later on, Jonathan finds Harriet’s transformed body in the middle of a water canal, vomiting. Injecting a dose of the antidote to himself, he engages in a battle against her. As soon as she is destroyed, an avatar of the Red Queen appears amidst an ankle-deep pool of blood, crying out: “is this anger I feel my child? ... how infinitely, how intensely, how irredeemably are you all going to suffer now!” On Jonathan defeating the Red Queen’s avatar, Myrddin appears and begins conversing with her, inviting her to “go back to sleep now.” The Red Queen agrees to leave only if her “wrath” has made humans suffer enough. For Myrddin, they have suffered “more than ever.” The Red Queen thus disappears as she takes her leave “until the next time.” Jonathan thus announces the end of the pandemic:

London has been cleansed. This catastrophe came about when an ancient malignant crossed paths with mortal imprudence. For now, we are safe. For now. My blood lust remains. Red as anger, red as hatred. Passing from one immortal to another. From predator to victim. Patiently biding its time to rise again. London has been cleansed for now. But there’s a simmering hatred, fear and old grudges. When will we succumb, mortals and immortals alike? The next disaster is only a matter of time. (Don’t Nod, 2018)

Jonathan’s fate, however, is enclosed within the cluster of choices the player makes during the game. Confronting Lady Ashbury again, she explains how Marshal had cured her initially from the blood of hate using his antidote, yet he had resolved to confine himself in a castle to stop the disease from spreading. Ashbury decapitates Marshal according to his own will but her own faith

relies on Jonathan's choices. If Jonathan spares all his victims and keeps the districts of London in a stable condition, Ashbury will follow him and seek a cure for her blood sickness in America. In another possible story line, if Jonathan kills only a few people and tries to keep the districts stable, he will confine himself, accompanied by Ashbury, to her castle and attempt to make a cure. However, if Jonathan slays too many people, Ashbury will commit suicide, leaving him to grieve in solitude. At last, if Jonathan leaves no one alive and makes a hell out of London, he will be utterly insensible to Ashbury's suicide and embark on a violent rampage, spreading the blood of hate wherever he goes.

Vampyr has four optional endings, manifesting its forking-path structure and quantum/alternate endings based on the player/Jonathan's attitude in finalizing the events. In the first ending, Jonathan can avoid killing any citizen, keeping all the districts healthy and non-hostile, thus fulfilling his duty as a physician in that he flees London with Elizabeth to find a cure. Here we see how Jonathan's existential fear turns into an existential concern for humanity by calling himself to action against what he thinks as a conspiracy. In the second ending, Jonathan kills only a few people, except the key characters, and locks himself and Elisabeth in a castle to make the cure. In the third ending, Jonathan commits more killings, including the key figures. Besides, he can choose to grant Aloysius Dawson, a despicable but rich figure in London, immortality by turning him into a vampire. Elisabeth thus feels betrayed and commits suicide, leaving Jonathan in isolation. Finally, in the fourth ending, Jonathan kills almost everyone around, thus turning himself into a cruel serial killer. He is even indifferent to Elisabeth's suicide and leaves the scene to wreak more havoc on London and contribute to the piling death toll.

***Vampyr*: Facing Pandemics in Light of Quantum Physics and Alternate Choices**

According to Myrddin Wyllt, an ancestor of vampires, in the poetic prologue to *Vampyr*, "Confronted by the eerie and unknown, mortals become desperate for answers" (Don't Nod, 2018). Being conscious of any kind of conspiracy does not necessarily mean the urgency to find the conspirators – as we have no evidence against shadow governments and what they do. Meanwhile, engaging people in a process of discovery and proper action in the face of human-made catastrophes threaten people's lives on a mass level. Investigating the cause of a pandemic

raises two questions: what caused the pandemic and what was necessary not to allow it to happen? However, since finding the origin of a pandemic in the real world is sometimes difficult, specifically when conspiracy theories seem to be at work, managing it is not impossible if only cautious measures are taken at the proper time.

It seems that certain conspiratorial schemes – the Flu, vampirism and war – are covering each other for a common cause in *Vampyr*. Jonathan’s case looks like, or alludes to, that of a WWI British military pathologist named William Rolland. As Branswell (2018) maintains, Rolland published a report in 1917, before the Great Flu began, describing cases of British soldiers in France suffering from an unusually deadly respiratory disease. What if those soldiers were quarantined for a while? What if they were not infected at all? Would there be any Great Flu as a possible consequence or not then?

In light of quantum physics, particles can be in multiple situations and places at the same moment, and we can merely “observe them in a definite state or location” if we can measure them (Stuart 2018, p. 19). In theory, “quantum events” are phenomena that happen simultaneously out of the same source of energy but in miscellaneous spatiotemporal situations (p. 20). Accordingly, “Every quantum event ... splinters the universe into multiple copies ... where all possible outcomes play out” (p. 20). In this light, reality has unlimited versions in unlimited alternative timelines. Nevertheless, it is impossible for human beings to observe all their alternate versions simultaneously. “Individual minds are not quantum mechanical systems; they are never in superpositions” (Albert and Loewer, 1988, p. 207); they cannot watch themselves from alternate positions. The observer can have and be conscious of one position at a time, ignorant of the others. When applied to human affairs, a quantum process happens when human beings consciously choose one particular course of action, among possible ones, towards its consequences.

Various choices are made available throughout *Vampyr* for the players to determine the course of the game and build a character based on their own moral compass. For example, the player can either slay others or allow them to live, building a peacemaker or violent profile of him/herself. All the choices contain consequences that will affect the citizens and the health gauge of a

district. In quantum-existential terms, David Deutsch, a British physicist at Oxford University and a fervent supporter of the “many-worlds interpretation (MWI)” of quantum mechanics, argues that “we thicken the stack of universes in which versions of us live reasonable lives” through making wise choices and doing right things. “When you succeed,” Deutsch continues, “all the copies of you who made the same decision succeed too. What you do for the better increases the portion of the multiverse where good things happen” (as cited in Jasmuheen, 2008, p. 159). The player’s decisions in *Vampyr* contribute to the character of Jonathan and thus shape the overall path that the story will take. Jonathan later meets a journalist named Clayton and asks him “why are the newspapers keeping silent about the Spanish influenza? It’s as though none of you care.” The reply is discouraging enough: “There’s a war going on. People shouldn’t be demoralized by news of deadly diseases” (Don’t Nod, 2018). His ironical speech reflects the historical fact that the media hushed the news of the Flu except in Spain, hence the misleading name of the “Spanish Flu.” The pandemic broke out near the end of WWI, when war censors stifled the news about the Flu in the countries engaged in the war. It was to maintain morale while newspapers freely reported the sudden occurrence of was in neutral Spain, creating the false impression of Spain as the birthplace of the pandemic (Mayer, 2019). Additionally, Clayton points to “frenzied mobs incensed by the fever” (Don’t Nod, 2018), reflecting their existential fears.

The open word of an interactive game presents players with existential freedom and a range of possibilities of action, each with a certain consequence. As players can choose different plot lines in finishing their games, they develop an individual walkthrough for other players and game fans. Such walkthroughs are in fact quantum possibilities, each being subject to annihilation when no player chooses them. The player here, as a human being, has a godly position or that of the omniscient observer who is able to see the results that follow each course of action in the game. According to Wendt (2015), one’s consciousness, having the power to choose what to be conscious of, can choose what course of action to follow while all the possibilities co-exist in a superimposed manner. Accordingly, there are “active” and “passive” approaches to our “social entanglements:” The “active mode” is directed towards “a desired reality,” while the “passive mode” is what we do not instantly desire but could desire (p. 269). The world of Jonathan Reid is

a world of choices where he can wisely choose to either help humanity with a cure or leave it to rot by contributing to its decay. As Cohut (2020) argues, former pandemics like the Great Flu can offer valuable lessons about the management of health crises as long as we learn from our mistakes by making efforts to rectify them. In other words, preventing a pandemic from happening may not be possible – nobody can anticipate when a pandemic strikes or when some evil/conspiratorial force aims at exterminating people – while controlling it depends on individual and communal choices. The alternative fact could then hold as such: the Great Flu could be managed in a better way to reduce the death toll. Alternate reality games thus enable players to change their living styles as they essentially make change by testing/playing their choices and their consequences in real-life but virtual situations.

Conclusion

Role-playing games set in dystopian worlds plagued with pandemics can serve as valuable media for envisioning alternate histories and exploring potential scenarios to create better worlds in reality. With the rise of media and metaverse, games involved, and their influence on the younger generations, such pandemic-themed games play a pivotal role in informing players about pandemics and the controlling measures against them in ways that are definitely costly and time-consuming if they were to be theorized and practiced in reality. The interactive nature of RPGs and ARGs presents players with a quantum field of myriad possibilities of creating alternate worlds where pandemics are better controlled or even not allowed to affect humanity at all. In such worlds, players as human beings in the real world can make different choices, each with observable consequences on resetting their games, to safeguard their individual and communal achievements. Games of this kind that revolve around conspiracies at certain historical points move even a step further to affect the efficacy of conspirators by interfering with their schemes. The player in *Vampyr* is invited to join conspiracy adherents, like the rich vampires, to observe their knowledge of the true nature of pandemics. However, the moral appeal of certain choices open for the player that reveal these conspiracies for the benefit of humanity plays with the quantum nature of our decisions in the real world in similar situations. The players are thus essentially free to will their choices for or against humanity. Although the roots of the Great Flu, the subject matter of the game, were scientifically investigated, the role of

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medical and political organizations that refrained from managing it during WWI is undeniable. Meanwhile, *Vampyr* is keen to highlight the possible health measures that could be taken to reduce the death toll around the world. Although, in general, the quantum field of alternate histories is open for conspirators to make their desired histories, the existential possibility of resisting these conspirators is always at hand. Taking the Red Queen as an arch-conspirator in ambush to wreak havoc on Earth now and then, there can always be resisting heroes like Jonathan Reid to save humanity. In this light, RPGs and ARGs serve as educational tools to equip younger generations with enough knowledge about all the possible controlling measures and managing techniques available to humanity under different catastrophes.

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