

## Post/Documentary:

### Referential Multimodality in “Animated Documentaries” and “Documentary Games”

Jan-Noël Thon, *University of Nottingham*

#### Abstract

From John Grierson’s influential early definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” through documentary studies’ reconstruction of the multitude of existing forms to philosophers’ attempts to develop comprehensive accounts of documentary as a specific kind of nonfiction film, the concept of documentary has been both fiercely contested and, through these debates, continuously expanded to refer to an ever more extensive corpus of works. By now, there is a broad consensus that documentary film as a genre cannot be reduced to supposedly “objective” recordings of the “actual world,” as both various kinds of reenactments and sometimes radical forms of subjectivity have (yet again) become well-established elements of many documentary films. However, it would seem that summarily treating “hybrid” documentary films, “animated documentaries,” and “documentary games” as nothing but the most recent chapter of the history of documentary occludes more than it illuminates. Instead, this article proposes to examine “animated documentaries” such as *Chicago 10: Say Your Peace* (Brett Morgen, 2007) or *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and “documentary games” such as *JFK Reloaded* (Traffic Games, 2004) or *The Cat and the Coup* (Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad, 2011) through the lens of post/documentary, thus emphasizing not just their semiotic but also their occasionally rather complex referential multimodality.

#### Keywords

animation, documentary, referential multimodality, semiotic multimodality, video games

From John Grierson's influential early definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Hardy 1966: 13) through documentary studies' reconstruction of the multitude of existing forms (for particularly influential accounts, see Nichols 1991, 1994, 2016) to philosophers' attempts to develop comprehensive accounts of documentary as a specific kind of nonfiction film (see, e.g., Carroll 1997; Currie 1999; Plantinga 1997), the concept of documentary has been both fiercely contested and, through these debates, continuously expanded to refer to an ever more extensive corpus of works (see, e.g., Bruzzi 2006; Ward 2005; as well as the contributions in Nash, Hight, and Summerhayes 2014). By now, there is a broad consensus that documentary film as a genre cannot be reduced to supposedly "objective" recordings of the "actual world," as both various kinds of reenactments and sometimes radical forms of subjectivity have (yet again) become well-established elements of many documentary films (see, e.g., Nichols 1994: 92–106, 2016: 34–50). However, it would seem that summarily treating "hybrid" documentary films, "animated documentaries," and "documentary games" as nothing but the most recent chapter of the history of documentary occludes more than it illuminates.

### **The Lens of Post/Documentary: From Semiotic to Referential Multimodality**

Against this background, I propose to reframe at least some of these works as post/documentaries, emphasizing both their continuities with the documentary tradition and the ways in which they go beyond some of its core tenets (see also, albeit with different emphases, Corner 2002; Hight 2008; Roesler 2004). The scope of this article prevents me from discussing

the theoretical foundation of the following comparative case studies in too much detail, but I would still like to begin by briefly sketching the underlying conceptual apparatus:

(1) On a fundamental level, I consider post/documentary as a narrative form. Prototypical narrative representations are representations of worlds situated in time and space as well as populated by characters (see, e.g., Ryan 2006: 6–12; as well as Thon 2016b: 26–30). The resulting concept of “*storyworld* applies both to fictional and nonfictional narratives” (Herman 2002: 16, original emphasis; as well as Herman 2009) in the sense that neither fictional nor nonfictional representations represent the actual world directly, as becomes apparent in cases such as a politician’s lies and a journalist’s honest mistakes, neither of which would be appropriately described as fictional, even though what they represent clearly is not the actual world. However, nonfictional narrative representations make additional claims regarding the similarity of their storyworlds to the actual world. Nevertheless, while “our ability to *understand* a narrative, or nonnarrative, is distinct from our *beliefs* as to its truth, appropriateness, plausibility, rightness, or realism” (Branigan 1992: 192, original emphases; see also Thon 2016b: 66–69), the fact remains that not only documentaries but also post/documentaries represent worlds situated in time and space and populated by characters.

(2) This conceptualization of narrative representations and the storyworlds they represent is not limited to verbal narratives, but also applies to multimodal media that combine different semiotic modes such as “image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack” (Kress 2009: 54).<sup>1</sup> Since multimodality studies conceptualizes modes as fundamentally “fluid” (Gibbons 2012: 10), the concept of semiotic multimodality makes it

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Thon 2016b: 71–74; as well as, e.g., Bateman 2008, 2014; Gibbons 2012; Kress 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001; O’Halloran 2005; van Leeuwen 2005; and the contributions in Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009; Jewitt 2009; Levine and Scollon 2004; O’Halloran 2004; Page 2010; Schneider and Stöckl 2011.

possible to go significantly beyond the somewhat trivial observation that multimodal media usually address more than one perceptual sense and/or combine more than one semiotic system. Rather, it makes visible the different narrative affordances and limitations of photographic vs. drawn pictures, spoken vs. written speech, still pictures vs. moving pictures, interactive vs. noninteractive segments, etc.

(3) Certain semiotic modes may suggest a higher degree of “representational correspondence” than others, thus making the extent to which “certain features of the representation serve to represent features of the things represented” (Currie 2010: 59; see also Thon 2016b: 60–61, 2017) more evident. However, there is no simple one-to-one relationship between the semiotic resources a given narrative work employs and the referential claims it makes. Written speech, photographic pictures, drawn pictures, live-action footage, animated sequences, and sound recordings can all be used in both fictional and nonfictional contexts. Accordingly, it seems helpful to expand previous conceptualizations of multimodality by distinguishing between semiotic multimodality, on the one hand, and referential multimodality, on the other, allowing us to address the sometimes rather complex combination of fictional and nonfictional modes of representation and comprehension that characterizes post/documentary works (see also, e.g., the influential semio-pragmatic account by Odin 2011; as well as the more recent consideration of “hybrid forms” in Mundhenke 2016).

(4) Just as one may distinguish between different modes of fictional narrative representation, one may distinguish between different modes of nonfictional narrative representation. While documentary representation usually claims a particularly high degree of “specificity” (Nichols 1991: 29), a comparatively direct form of representational correspondence that is often connected to notions of “indexicality” (see also, e.g., Currie 1999; Plantinga 1997:

59–82), “merely” nonfictional representation still makes strong claims regarding the similarity of the represented storyworld to the actual world, but allows for more indirect forms of representational correspondence (see also, e.g., Carroll 1997; Plantinga 1997: 83–119).

Documentary and nonfictional modes of narrative representation may further be distinguished from metaphorical and fictional modes of narrative representation, whose representational correspondence and resulting referential claims are even more indirect.<sup>2</sup>

(5) Finally, I am here primarily concerned with the combination of referential claims that are comparatively local as opposed to a global categorization of a given work’s “referential genre.” The vast majority of documentary films are characterized not just by semiotic but also by a certain degree of referential multimodality, combining documentary with “merely” nonfictional and quite often also metaphorical modes of representation.<sup>3</sup> Hence, while I limit myself to the examination of “animated documentaries” and “documentary games” in the following (or, rather, to the comparative analysis of two “animated documentaries” and two “documentary games”), a wide range of documentary films, docudramas, and mockumentaries may be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of post/documentary as well (without such an analysis necessarily having to result in a revision of their global categorization as a documentary film, a docudrama, or a mockumentary).

### **Animated Post/Documentary: Referential Multimodality in *Chicago 10: Speak Your Peace* and *Waltz with Bashir***

---

<sup>2</sup> Though, of course, the fact that even fictional representations relate to the actual world in various ways is well established in the theory of fiction; see, e.g., Blume 2004; Lamarque and Olson 1996; Riffaterre 1990; Ryan 1991; Schaeffer 2010; Zipfel 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See also, e.g., Nichols 1991: 34–38 on “poetic exposition,” 56–75 on “reflexive documentary,” 1994: 92–106 on “performative documentary”; Odin 2011: 65–82 on the “aesthetic mode”; Plantinga 1997: 171–90 on documentary’s “poetic voice.”

A particularly striking effect of documentary studies' tendency to continuously expand its object domain in light of cultural shifts and technological innovations has been the increased willingness of theorists and practitioners alike to acknowledge "animated documentaries" as a legitimate part of the documentary tradition (see, e.g., DelGaudio 1997; Ehrlich 2011; Hight 2008; Honess Roe 2013; Ward 2005: 82–99; Wells 1997). Films such as *Ryan* (Chris Landreth, 2004), *Chicago 10: Speak Your Peace* (Brett Morgen, 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), or *The Green Wave* (Ali Samadi Ahadi, 2011) are now commonly categorized as "animated documentaries," even though they often turn out to be only partially animated. It seems just as clear, however, that animation—with its negation of the "denotative realism that comes from the optical and acoustic properties of film and magnetic tape" (Nichols 1991: 29) or their digital analogues, and its general openness to abstraction, subjectivity, and metaphor—will only very rarely communicate a degree of specificity or representational correspondence similar to that commonly suggested by documentary live-action footage. Accordingly, it would seem particularly promising to examine "animated documentaries" through the lens of post/documentary, underscoring not only their semiotic but also their referential multimodality. Let me illustrate this with a comparative analysis of two of the above-mentioned films, *Chicago 10: Speak Your Peace* and *Waltz with Bashir*.

Brett Morgen's *Chicago 10: Speak Your Peace* skillfully combines archival live-action footage with various kinds of animated sequences to tell the story of the "Chicago Eight," a group of peace activists who were arrested and tried following the protests against the Vietnam War during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and their two lawyers. Its production company claims that it employs "a new style of documentary" (Participant Media 2017: n.pag.) and the existing research generally categorizes the film as an "animated

documentary” (see, e.g., Bartlett 2013; Formenti 2014; Honess Roe 2013: 55–61), but Morgen’s work subverts its own referential claims in a number of noteworthy ways that are connected to but also go beyond the question of to what extent animation can be used for nonfictional or even documentary purposes. Even though *Chicago 10* initially notes that it is “adapted from the court transcripts” and further reinforces its referential claims via various written intertitles and inserts that structure the “mélange of archival material” (Bartlett 2013: 206) and spatio-temporally locate the represented situations within the storyworld as a whole (see Thon 2016b: 46–47), it does not make transparent in what way(s) the various animated sequences in particular correspond to “actual events.” Even a charitable spectator will have some doubts that all of the details presented by the animated sequences are exclusively based on the “documentation” provided by the court transcripts.

While Morgen’s use of live-action archival footage of varying quality strongly suggests documentary referential claims, then, it would seem that the animated sequences are generally more appropriately described as a form of nonfictional “animated reenactments” (see also Formenti 2014). However, there is quite a bit of variation to be observed here as well. For starters, *Chicago 10* uses rather different styles of animation to represent the courtroom proceedings (see figure 1), what supposedly happened during the protests (see figure 2), Abbie Hoffman’s repeated calls to Bob Fass’s radio show (see figure 3), and Hoffman talking about the protest and the trial on various stages across the country (see figure 4). It even employs composite pictures that combine archival footage in the background and animated characters in the foreground to represent David Dellinger and others addressing a crowd of protesters in

Chicago (see figure 5).<sup>4</sup> The “data density” of the sources on which these “animated reenactments” are built clearly differs, with sources including the court transcripts as well as various audio recordings, but there is also some variation of referential claims within individual segments of animation, including metaphoric representations; for instance, when Paul Krassner comes up with the idea of calling the group “Yippies,” a lightbulb briefly appears above his head (see figure 6; and Formenti, who ascribes this scene “to the grammar and aesthetics of fiction filmmaking” and “to animation’s ‘anarchic’ rules” [2014: 112]). Other sequences rather clearly move into fictional territory, such as Jerry Rubin throwing a paper airplane at a witness without anyone in the courtroom reacting (see figure 7), or a cross-legged Allen Ginsberg levitating a foot or so above the floor (see figure 8; and, once more, Formenti 2014: 112; as well as Honess Roe 2013: 58–59).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

---

<sup>4</sup> For a more general discussion of semiotic multimodality in animation, see also, e.g., Furniss 1999; as well as Bruckner 2015; Feyersinger 2013; Reinerth 2013.



[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE]

This referential multimodality of the moving pictures, which does not directly correspond to fault lines suggested by the latter's semiotic multimodality, is further underscored by the perhaps less striking but ultimately no less pronounced referential multimodality of the soundtrack, which combines diegetic as well as nondiegetic music, documentary sound recordings as well as "manufactured" sound effects, and, most importantly, documentary voice recordings as well as various kinds of vocal "reenactments." Not unusually for a documentary filmmaker, Morgen relies extensively on spoken language to unfold his narrative, including interviews, speeches, and further statements by Abbie Hoffman and the other members of the "Chicago Eight" as well as witnesses, journalists, and other people associated with the protests or the trial in some way. Nevertheless, while some of the animated sequences are based on audio recordings of varying quality, those parts of the film that are solely "adapted from the court transcripts" had to be "reenacted" not just pictorially but also aurally, necessitating extensive voice-work by professional (voice) actors such as Hank Azaria, Dylan Baker, Nick Nolte, Mark Ruffalo, Roy Schneider, Liev Schreiber, and Jeffrey Wright—as well as, interestingly, voice-work by one of the lawyers of the "Chicago Eight," Leonard Weinglass (voicing his younger self). In contradistinction to the striking differences between archival footage and animated segments as well as the anachronistic contrast between diegetic and nondiegetic music, however, most of the

spoken language does not direct the spectator's attention toward its materiality and quite a few spectators will only realize that the courtroom statements, in particular, are just as "reenacted" as the animated sequences they accompany when the credits give the long list of (sometimes rather well-known) voice actors that have contributed to the film.

Thus, the credits once more seem to destabilize *Chicago 10*'s "documentary frame," perhaps even inviting spectators to participate in a post-hoc questioning of the status of what, at first glance (or, rather, at first listen), appear to be documentary recordings of sounds and voices throughout the film. One might certainly maintain that this destabilization of decidedly documentary or even just "merely" nonfictional referential claims has become a core part of the documentary tradition and, hence, accept a global categorization of *Chicago 10* as a documentary film (or "animated documentary"). Nevertheless, given that some sequences are quite clearly marked as "animated reenactments" (albeit nonfictional ones) that necessarily add considerably more detail than the "data density" of the sources they draw on supports and that, at least in some cases, they also employ metaphorical as well as downright fictional modes of representation, it would seem strange to insist that such sequences should somehow be able to make documentary referential claims with the same degree of specificity or representational correspondence as the various sequences of archival live-action footage that *Chicago 10* also employs. In contrast to such global categorizations, examining Morgen's work through the lens of post/documentary allows us to acknowledge not only its semiotic but also its referential multimodality, thus underscoring the ways *Chicago 10* subverts and at least partially contradicts core tenets of the documentary tradition.

Another example of a film generally considered to be an "animated documentary" (see, e.g., Atkinson and Cooper 2012; Formenti 2014; Honess Roe 2013; Landesman and Bendor

2011; Miller 2017; Peaslee 2011) is Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), which tells the story of Folman's attempts to gain access to the memories of his involvement in the Sabra and Shatila massacre of Palestinian refugees during the 1982 Lebanon War. Most of the film employs Flash-based animation with a rather distinct visual style, though Folman also briefly uses archival footage of victims of the massacre at the end of the film. On closer inspection, however, *Waltz with Bashir*'s multimodal configuration turns out to be rather different from that of *Chicago 10*. Folman uses a more complex narrative structure that emphasizes the subjectivity of memory, with the filmmaker voice-acting an extradiegetic homodiegetic narrating I who provides continuous "direct access" to the mind of Ari's experiencing I while he searches for his suppressed memories.<sup>5</sup> No less importantly, however, the film also employs various intradiegetic homodiegetic narrators who are either interviewed in the comparatively formal style of "talking heads" (see figure 9) or tell Ari's experiencing I stories about their role in and memories of the 1982 Lebanon War in various less formal settings (see figure 10).

[INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 10 HERE]

Thus, even at a first glance, the production company's claim that *Waltz with Bashir* is "based on a true story" turns out to be overly reductive. While the film certainly focuses on Ari Folman's attempts to regain access to the repressed memories of the role he played in the Sabra and Shatila

---

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the pertinent narratological terminology used to analyze what could, perhaps, be described as *narrative* multimodality, see, once more, Thon 2016b; as well as the contributions in Reinert and Thon 2017.

massacre, *Waltz with Bashir* allows for a broader chorus of voices to be heard. The various animated interviews could, at least in principle, be considered to make documentary claims in that they generally seem to have been recorded by the filmmakers, and could have been animated with a documentary-like degree of specificity, but the animated sequences representing the narrating situations in less formal settings are already marked as making considerably less specific referential claims, as they are represented as being based on Ari's memories, notes, and sketches rather than on film recordings. Moreover, much as in *Chicago 10*, the animated sequences illustrating both the resurfacing memories of Ari's experiencing I and the stories narrated by the various additional intradiegetic homodiegetic narrators<sup>6</sup> had to be reenacted not only visually but also aurally, going significantly beyond the "data density" that the respective narrators could have provided.<sup>7</sup>

[INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 12 HERE]

*Waltz with Bashir*'s referential multimodality is further complicated by the "layered" production process that Folman and his team pursued. The film's script draws not only on Folman's own memories but also on various interviews that he and his team did with Israeli veterans of the 1982 Lebanon War, leading to some of the narrators in *Waltz with Bashir* being "composites" of a number of interviewees rather than based on a single specific interview. Moreover, the process

---

<sup>6</sup> Including the narration of dreams, which are extensively illustrated by the nonnarratorial animation; see figure 11 and figure 12.

<sup>7</sup> See also, e.g., Kaufman 2008 for further details on the production of *Waltz with Bashir*'s various animated sequences.

of producing the animated sequences themselves was decidedly iterative. As Atkinson and Cooper note, “the interviews were conducted and a script written, there was then a second round of filmed interviews organized into a video, and finally there was the creation of the animation based on the video and script” (2012: n.pag.). Yet, while the interviews that are presented in a comparatively conventional “talking-head” style were videotaped before being animated, most parts of *Waltz with Bashir*’s script did not allow for this kind of specific pictorial reference, leading the film team to reenact some of the scenes themselves, thus “filling in the gaps” beyond the details that the interview material provided: “The animation may reference a set of events, often only vaguely remembered by the interview subjects, but in the act of recreating the remembered events there is the *addition* of detail that has the potential to alter the status of the event” (Atkinson and Cooper 2012: n.pag., original emphasis). If one further takes into account that the Flash-based animation that was used for most of the film allowed for extensive rearrangement and reuse of various elements, it becomes apparent that a substantial part of *Waltz with Bashir* is presented as the film team’s imagination of how things might have been rather than a more specific documentary claim of the film representing things how they actually were.

If *Chicago 10* seems primarily defined by an overarching principle of collage or “mélange of archival material” (Bartlett 2013: 206), *Waltz with Bashir* is perhaps more appropriately described as a form of palimpsest (see Genette 1997), with regard both to its semiotic and its referential multimodality. This in no way diminishes *Waltz with Bashir*’s aesthetically ambitious and rhetorically refined rendering of Ari Folman’s quest for his lost memories—but, yet again, it would seem strange to insist that animated segments that are quite explicitly marked as creative illustrations of verbal renderings of subjective memories of the 1982 Lebanon War should be taken to make documentary claims similar to, say, the archival

footage of victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre that *Waltz with Bashir* briefly presents at the end (see figure 13 and figure 14). Rather, *Waltz with Bashir*'s chorus of narrative voices and "animated reenactment" allows it to explore highly political questions of remembering and forgetting in ways that a film more committed to traditional documentary's "discourse of sobriety" (Nichols 1991: 3) perhaps could not.<sup>8</sup> Precisely because *Waltz with Bashir*'s local use not only of semiotic but also of referential multimodality allows for nuanced exploration of some of the more subjective aspects of the Israeli Defense Forces' involvement in the 1982 Lebanon War, it once again seems more productive to examine the film through the lens of post/documentary rather than uncritically accepting its global categorization as an "animated documentary."

[INSERT FIGURE 13 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 14 HERE]

### **Post/Documentary Games: Referential Multimodality in *JFK Reloaded* and *The Cat and the Coup***

If the extent to which the animated sequences in "animated documentaries" such as *Chicago 10* or *Waltz with Bashir* make referential claims that are specific enough to be described as documentary (as opposed to "merely" nonfictional) is already a matter of some debate, the question whether there is such a thing as a documentary video game turns out to be even more tricky. There is a growing number of digital artifacts such as *JFK: Reloaded* (Traffic Games,

---

<sup>8</sup> See also, e.g., Bradley 2011 or Peaslee 2011 for further critical discussion of *Waltz with Bashir*'s political implications.

2004), the *Kuma\War* series (Kuma Reality Games, 2004–), *The Cat and the Coup* (Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad, 2011), and *Fort McMoney* (David Dufresne, 2013) that are commonly labeled or label themselves “documentary games” (see, e.g., Bogost and Poremba 2008; Ehrlich 2011; Fullerton 2008; Galloway et al. 2007; Raessens 2006; Sørensen and Thorhauge 2013). Yet the specific mediality of video games leads to a number of rather fundamental problems related not only to the semiotic resources these works employ but also, and perhaps more importantly, to what, in the interest of concision, could be called their interactivity, which usually results in a characteristically high degree of intersubjective instability across playthroughs (see also Thon 2015, 2016a, 2016b: 104–20, 2017). As William Uricchio, for one, has remarked, their interactivity sets video games apart from more established documentary media such as films, photographs, or audio recordings, and “although they can integrate all of these earlier media, [video games] might seem closest to historical documentation only when emulating them, in the process suppressing games’ defining interactive relationship with the gamer” (2005: 327). Even though video games commonly integrate “documentary material” such as digitized photographs, live-action film footage, or audio recordings as part of their cut-scenes, then, it seems questionable whether their interactive gameplay can generate representations that are specific (and intersubjectively stable) enough to make referential claims that could be considered to be documentary. Hence, it may once more prove fruitful to examine “documentary games” through the lens of post/documentary, which I would yet again like to illustrate via a comparative analysis of two examples.

Traffic Games’ *JFK Reloaded* is a self-identified “historical simulation” that purportedly tasks the player with reconstructing as accurately as possible the assassination of the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America, John F. Kennedy. However, despite the fact that *JFK*

*Reloaded* is commonly discussed as a “documentary game” (see, e.g., Bogost and Poremba 2008; Fullerton 2008; Galloway 2013: 117–25; Galloway et al. 2007; Poremba 2011: 79–102; Raessens 2006), any referential claims that its initial verbal framing may make are immediately subverted by the interactive gameplay. Most obviously, the majority of any given playthrough of *JFK Reloaded* presents nothing that would traditionally be considered “documentary material.” After white text on black ground has specified the setting as the time and place where President Kennedy was shot (see figure 15), the player takes control of an avatar identified as Lee Harvey Oswald and is provided with ample opportunity to have the latter shoot at the Presidential motorcade passing the Texas School Book Depository in order to “relive the moment and disprove the conspiracy theories.” As far as the objects within the game space of the simulation are concerned, *JFK Reloaded* does indeed reconstruct at least some of the established “public facts” pertaining to the Kennedy assassination, such as the presence not only of John F. and Jackie Kennedy but also of John and Nellie Connally in the presidential limousine (see figure 16), with the latter being further accompanied by a motorcade and the secret service agent Clint Hill running behind the presidential limousine after the first shot has hit (see figure 17). Independently of how the simulation “plays out,” however, the events are represented using a comparatively simple graphic engine, resulting in an interactive simulation considerably less detailed than the actual world would have been when Kennedy was shot.

[INSERT FIGURE 15 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 16 HERE]



[INSERT FIGURE 17 HERE]

More importantly, though, *JFK Reloaded* further complicates traditional notions of representational correspondence and any referential claim that might be derived from them not only via the intersubjective instability that results from the game's interactivity but also via the improbability (or, perhaps, impossibility) of using this "machine for the production of variety of expression" (Aarseth 1997: 3) to reconstruct the events that have been codified in the report of the Warren Commission. At first glance, the gameplay mechanics of *JFK Reloaded* seem to emphasize the designers' supposed intention to produce a "historical simulation," with the player being able to make the Lee Harvey Oswald avatar change the orientation of his rifle within the limited area that is defined by the window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, look through the scope of the rifle (see figure 16 and figure 17), and pull the trigger. Indeed, after the simulated President's motorcade has passed the Texas School Book Depository, the player is not only given the option to replay the events from various angles (see figure 18) but also confronted with a detailed analysis of bullet trajectories (see figure 19) and a scoreboard that awards points depending on how closely the gameplay aligns with various key data points from the Warren Commission report (see figure 20).

[INSERT FIGURE 18 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 19 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 20 HERE]

However, it is very unlikely that many (if any) players have (yet) been able to reach the maximum score of 1000 points (see, e.g., Fullerton 2008), so that the table consistently serves as a “correction” of the previous gameplay, effectively revoking any nonfictional let alone documentary referential claim that the player may have attributed to the latter. The nonfictional status of the criteria for the maximum score is further reinforced by a documentary sound recording of a transmission from Air Force One, the main function of which indeed seems to consist in “providing an ‘authentic’ post-assassination backdrop” (Poremba 2011: 87), but the resulting referential multimodality makes *JFK Reloaded* appear primarily as a critical commentary on the way that the assassination of President Kennedy has been “documented” by the Warren Commission as well as by the legions of historians, film-makers, and conspiracy theorists that followed them (see, e.g., Butter 2014; Knight 2007; Zelizer 1992). Again, one could argue that establishing a critical perspective on documentary practices is very much part of the documentary tradition by now and thus maintain a global categorization of *JFK Reloaded* as a “documentary game.” However, looking at the game through the lens of post/documentary would seem, at the very least, once again to allow us to productively acknowledge the extent to which Traffic Games, on a more local level, has used not only semiotic but also referential multimodality in a way that ultimately subverts any documentary claims that *JFK Reloaded* may initially seem to make.<sup>9</sup>

Let me contrast this with a second example of a self-identified “documentary videogame.” *The Cat and the Coup* aims to give the player a survey of the life and death of

---

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the game’s source code suggest that the game developers never actually intended the game “to establish the most likely facts of what happened on 1963-11-22 by running the world’s first mass-participation forensic construction” (Wikipedia 2018: n.pag); see, e.g., Sample 2011.

Mohammed Mossadegh, who was Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953. Though both *JFK Reloaded* and *The Cat and the Coup* are commonly described as “documentary games” (see Brinson and ValaNejad 2012; Galloway 2013: 134–40; Poremba 2011: 19–20), they differ in interesting ways, particularly with regard to the relation between semiotic and referential multimodality. First of all, their strategies of representation differ. While the gameplay of *JFK Reloaded* generally seems to aim at the ideal of a “photorealistic” representation despite the obvious limitations of its graphic engine, *The Cat and the Coup* employs pictorial elements “based on Persian miniatures, a style of painting dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries” (Brinson and ValaNejad 2012, n.pag.; see figure 21). Moreover, it “uses symbolism, visual metaphors and politically charged illustrations to present a consistent, but arguably biased point of view” (Galloway 2013: 134), of which the initial representation of historical figures such as Harry S. Truman or Sir Winston Churchill with the heads of animals is perhaps the most striking example (see figure 22). On the other hand, however, *The Cat and the Coup* is much more conservative than *JFK Reloaded* with regard to the use of interactivity and the resulting intersubjective instability of the gameplay.

[INSERT FIGURE 21 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 22 HERE]

In *The Cat and the Coup*, the player takes control of Mossadegh’s housecat, who is used to solve a linear progression of comparatively simple puzzle rooms that represent salient “stations” of Mossadegh’s political life and death in reverse chronological order, including: (1) Mossadegh’s

death on May 5, 1967; (2) his life under house arrest from August 4, 1956 until his death; (3) the court verdict on December 20, 1953 that lead to his three-year prison term; (4) his surrender to the authorities on August 20, 1953; (5) US President Truman trying to convince Mossadegh to settle the oil dispute with the UK on October 23, 1951; and (6) the Iranian parliament's privatization of the oil industry on March 20, 1951. The puzzles that the player has to solve in order to progress through this sequence of game spaces often further underscore *The Cat and the Coup*'s "narrative" point using not-too-subtle visual metaphors. For example, the room representing Mossadegh's death involves a puzzle with a grandfather clock (see figure 23), the room representing Mossadegh's surrender "shrinks" as faceless grey figures push on the walls (see figure 24), and the room representing the privatization of the oil industry fills with oil from holes that the cat makes Mossadegh punch into the floor (see figure 25).

[INSERT FIGURE 23 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 24 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 25 HERE]

At first glance, then, the game seems to attribute a substantial amount of historical agency to the housecat, which may suggest reading the latter as yet another metaphorical if not downright fictional element (see also, once more, Brinson and ValaNejad 2012 on the supposed metaphorical meaning of the housecat). However, the puzzle rooms involving the housecat ultimately appear quite disconnected from the game's storyworld (see also Thon 2015, 2016a,

2016b: 104–20, 2017 for more on this kind of disconnect). Moreover, while *The Cat and the Coup* initially tells the story of Mossadegh’s political life and death in reverse chronological order, the game concludes with an extended noninteractive cut-scene that tells the story yet again—this time in chronological order and without any of the more obviously metaphorical or fictional elements that dominated the first part of the game. This retelling of the story, which employs text boxes with more precise historical information and incorporates “nonmetaphorical” photographs of the historical characters previously represented with animal heads (see figure 26), is quite clearly meant to reinforce the documentary claims that *The Cat and the Coup* explicitly makes. Nevertheless it seems equally clear that *The Cat and the Coup*’s initial combination of nonfictional (or even documentary) text boxes with metaphoric (or even downright fictional) gameplay elements during the first part of the game effectively works to subvert any documentary or even “merely” nonfictional claim that the noninteractive retelling of Mossadegh’s life and death during the second part purports to reinforce.

[INSERT FIGURE 26 HERE]

While *JFK Reloaded*’s and *The Cat and the Coup*’s use of semiotic and referential multimodality is quite different, then, looking at these games through the lens of post/documentary allows for a clearer view of the ways in which they make diverse and at least partially conflicting referential claims on a local level not only based on their characteristically high degree of intersubjective instability across playthroughs but also, and perhaps more importantly, by employing various other elements such as text-based contextualization and faux-quantification as well as partially scripted gameplay and documentary sound recordings in the case of *JFK Reloaded*, and text

boxes of varying historical precision, visual as well as ludic metaphors, as well as historical photographs and other historical documents in the case of *The Cat and the Coup*.

Acknowledging not just the semiotic but also the referential multimodality of these games thus once again leads to a more sophisticated account of how *JFK Reloaded* and *The Cat and the Coup* ultimately work to subvert—or, at the very least, complicate—their supposed global categorizations as “documentary games.”

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me stress yet again that examining “animated documentaries” such as *Chicago 10: Say Your Peace* or *Waltz with Bashir* and “documentary games” such as *JFK Reloaded* or *The Cat and the Coup* through the lens of post/documentary does not necessarily aim at contesting the global categorization of these works as documentary, but rather attempts to analyze their local combination of different referential claims, thus rendering more visible not just their semiotic but also their occasionally rather complex referential multimodality. While “animated documentaries” and “documentary games” may provide particularly interesting objects for this kind of analysis (and its results may, indeed, leave one wondering to what extent the commonly encountered global categorization of “animated documentaries” and “documentary games” is appropriate), its potential applicability is arguably much broader, as a wide variety of “hybrid” documentary films as different as *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), *Brinkmanns Zorn* (Harald Bergmann, 2006), or *Exit through the Gift Shop* (Banksy, 2010) likewise employ referential multimodality in interesting ways and could thus also be fruitfully examined through the lens of post/documentary.

## Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen

1997 *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Atkinson, Paul, and Simon Cooper

2012 “Untimely Animations: *Waltz with Bashir* and the Incorporation of Historical Difference,” *Screening the Past* 34: n.pag.

<http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/08/untimely-animations-waltz-with-bashir-and-the-incorporation-of-historical-difference/> (accessed April 27, 2018).

Bartlett, Mark

2013 “Socialimagestics and Cinemasymbiosis: The Materiality of A-Realism,” in *Pervasive Animation*, edited by Suzanne Buchan, 197–223 (New York: Routledge).

Bateman, John A.

2008 *Multimodality and Genre: A Foundation for the Systematic Analysis of Multimodal Documents* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

2014 *Text and Image: A Critical Introduction to the Visual/Verbal Divide* (New York: Routledge).

Blume, Peter

2004 *Fiktion und Weltwissen: Der Beitrag nichtfiktionaler Konzepte zur Sinnkonstitution fiktionaler Erzähltexte* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt).

Bogost, Ian, and Cindy Poremba

2008 “Can Games Get Real? A Closer Look at ‘Documentary’ Digital Games,” in *Computer*

*Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games without Frontiers—War without Tears*, edited by Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Ralf Stockman, 12–21 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Bradley, Arthur

2011 “Israel’s Vietnam: Framing the Lebanese War,” in *Terrorism and Narrative Practice*, edited by Thomas Austenfeld, Dimiter Daphinoff, and Jens Herlth, 219–35 (Münster: LIT).

Branigan, Edward

1992 *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge).

Bruckner, Franziska

2015 “Hybrid Image, Hybrid Montage: Film Analytical Parameters for Live Action/Animation Hybrids,” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 1: 22–41.

Brinson, Peter, and Kurosh ValaNejad

2012 “Subjective Documentary: *The Cat and the Coup*,” in *FDG '12: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*: 246–49.

Bruzzi, Stella

2006 *New Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge).

Butter, Michael

2014 *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present* (Berlin: De Gruyter).

Carroll, Noël

1997 “Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion: A Conceptual Analysis,” in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, edited by Richard Allen and Murray Smith, 173–202 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).



Corner, John

2002 "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions," *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3: 255–69.

Currie, Gregory

1999 "Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3: 285–97.

2010 *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

DelGaudio, Sybil

1997 "If Truth Be Told, Can 'Toons Tell It? Documentary and Animation," *Film History* 9: 189–99.

Ehrlich, Nea

2011 "Animated Documentaries: Aesthetics, Politics and Viewer Engagement," in *Pervasive Animation*, edited by Suzanne Buchan, 248–72 (New York: Routledge).

Feyersinger, Erwin

2013 "Von sich streckenden Strichen und hüpfenden Hühnern: Erkundungen des Kontinuums zwischen Abstraktion und Realismus," *Montage AV* 22, no. 2: 32–44.

Forceville, Charles, and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, eds.

2009 *Multimodal Metaphor* (Berlin: De Gruyter).

Formenti, Cristina

2014 "The Sincerest Form of Docudrama: Re-Framing the Animated Documentary," *Studies in Documentary Film* 8, no. 2: 103–15.

Fullerton, Tracy

2008 "Documentary Games: Putting the Player in the Path of History," in *Playing the Past:*

*History and Nostalgia in Videogames*, edited by Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, 215–38  
(Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press).

Furniss, Maureen

1999 *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (Sidney: John Libbey).

Galloway, Dana

2013 “Establishing Methodologies for the Analysis and Development of Interactive Documentary,” PhD thesis, Albertay University.

Galloway, Dana, Kenneth McAlpine, and Paul Harris

2007 “From Michael Moore to *JFK Reloaded*: Towards a Working Model of Interactive Documentary,” *Journal of Media Practice* 8, no. 3: 325–39.

Genette, Gérard

1997 *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

Gibbons, Alison

2012 *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* (New York: Routledge).

Hardy, Forsyth

1966 “Introduction,” in *Grierson on Documentary*, edited by Forsyth Hardy, 13–39. Revised edition (London: Collins).

Herman, David

2002 *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

2009 *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell).

Hight, Craig

2008 “Primetime Digital Documentary Animation: The Photographic and Graphic within

Play,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1: 9–31.

Honess Roe, Annabelle

2013 *Animated Documentary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Jewitt, Carey, ed.

2009 *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (New York: Routledge).

Kaufman, Debra

2008 “How They Did It: *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Studio Daily* December 18, 2008.

<http://www.studiodaily.com/2008/12/how-they-did-it-waltz-with-bashir/> (accessed April 27, 2018).

Knight, Peter

2007 *The Kennedy Assassination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

Kress, Gunther

2009 “What Is Mode?,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, edited by Carey Jewitt, 54–67 (London: Routledge).

2010 *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (New York: Routledge).

Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen

1996 *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (New York: Routledge).

2001 *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (London: Arnold).

Lamarque, Peter, and Stein H. Olson

1996 *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Landesman, Ohad, and Roy Bendor

2011 “Animated Recollections and Spectatorial Experience in *Waltz with Bashir*,” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 3: 353–70.

Levine, Philip, Ronald Scollon, eds.

2004 *Discourse and Technology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press).

Miller, Giulia

2017 *Studying Waltz with Bashir* (New York: Columbia University Press).

Mundhenke, Florian

2016 *Zwischen Dokumentar- und Spielfilm: Zur Repräsentation und Rezeption von Hybrid-Formen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS).

Nash, Kate, Craig Hight, and Catherine Summerhayes, eds.

2014 *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Nichols, Bill

1991 *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

1994 *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

2016 *Speaking Truth with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press).

Odin, Roger

2011 *Les espaces de communication: Introduction à la sémio-pragmatique* (Fontaine: Presses

Universitaires de Grenoble).

O'Halloran, Kay L.

2005 *Mathematical Discourse: Language, Symbolism and Visual Images* (London: Continuum).

O'Halloran, Kay L., ed.

2004 *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum).

Page, Ruth, ed.

2010 *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality* (New York: Routledge).

Participant Media

2017 "Chicago 10," *Participant Media*. <http://www.participantmedia.com/film/chicago-10> (accessed April 27, 2018).

Peaslee, Robert M.

2011 "'It's Fine as Long as You Draw, But Don't Film': *Waltz with Bashir* and the Postmodern Function of Animated Documentary," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 4: 223–35.

Plantinga, Carl

1997 *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Poremba, Cindy

2011 "Real|Unreal: Crafting Actuality in the Documentary Videogame," PhD thesis, Concordia University, Montreal.

Raessens, Joost

2006 "Reality Play: Documentary Computer Games beyond Fact and Fiction," *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3: 213–24.

Reinerth, Maike S.

2013 “Animationsfilm,” in *Filmwissenschaftliche Genreanalyse*, edited by Markus Kuhn, Irina Scheidgen, Nicola V. Weber, 319–41 (Berlin: De Gruyter).

Reinerth, Maike S., and Jan-Noël Thon, eds.

2017 *Subjectivity across Media: Interdisciplinary and Transmedial Perspectives* (New York: Routledge).

Riffaterre, Michael

1990 *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Roesler, Martha

2004 “Post-Documentary, Post-Photography,” in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*, 151–206 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Ryan, Marie-Laure

1991 *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

2006 *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

Sample, Mark

2011 “A Revisionist History of *JFK Reloaded* (Decoded),” *playthepast* June 7, 2011.

<http://www.playthepast.org/?p=1519> (accessed April 27, 2018).

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie

2010 *Why Fiction?* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

Schneider, Jan G., and Hartmut Stöckl, eds.

2011 *Medientheorien und Multimodalität: Ein TV-Werbespot – Sieben methodische Beschreibungsansätze* (Cologne: Herbert von Halem).

Sørensen, Inge E., and Anne M. Thorhauge

2013 “Documentary at Play,” in *Online Credibility and Digital Ethos*, edited by Moe Folk and Shawn Apostel, 353–67 (Hershey: IGI).

Thon, Jan-Noël

2015 “Game Studies und Narratologie,” in *Game Studies: Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*, edited by Klaus Sachs-Hombach and Jan-Noël Thon, 104–164 (Cologne: Herbert von Halem).

2016a “Narrative Comprehension and Video Game Storyworlds,” in *Video Games and the Mind: Essays on Cognition, Affect and Emotion*, edited by Bernard Perron and Felix Schröter, 15–31 (Jefferson: McFarland).

2016b *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

2017 “Transmedial Narratology Revisited: On the Intersubjective Construction of Storyworlds and the Problem of Representational Correspondence in Films, Comics, and Video Games,” *Narrative* 25, no. 3: 286–320.

Uricchio, William

2005 “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies*, edited by Jost Raessens und Jeffrey Goldstein, 327–38 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

van Leeuwen, Theo

2005 *Introducing Social Semiotics* (London: Routledge).

Ward, Paul

2005 *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (London: Wallflower Press).

Wells, Paul

1997 “The Beautiful Village and the True Village: A Consideration of Animation and the Documentary Aesthetic,” in *Art and Animation*, edited by Paul Wells, 40–45 (London: Academy Editions).

Wikipedia

2018 “*JFK Reloaded*,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JFK\\_Reloaded](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JFK_Reloaded).

Zelizer, Barbie

1992 *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Zipfel, Frank

2001 *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität: Analysen zur Fiktion in der Literatur und dem Fiktionsbegriff in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt).



Figure 1: Animation representing the courtroom proceedings in *Chicago 10*.





Figure 2: Animation representing the protests against the Vietnam War in *Chicago 10*.



Figure 3: Animation representing Abbie Hoffman calling Bob Fass's radio show.



Figure 4: Animation of Abbie Hoffman speaking on a stage in *Chicago 10*.



Figure 5: Composite picture representing David Dellinger addressing the protesters.



Figure 6: Animation metaphorically representing Paul Krassner having an idea.



Figure 7: Animation representing Jerry Rubin throwing a paper airplane in the courtroom.



Figure 8: Animation representing a cross-legged levitating Allen Ginsberg in *Chicago 10*.



Figure 9: Animated “talking heads” interview sequence in *Waltz with Bashir*.



Figure 10: Animated sequence representing more informal “interview” in *Waltz with Bashir*.



Figure 11: Animated sequence representing Boaz Rein Buskila’s dream.



Figure 12: Animated sequence representing Carmi Can’an’s dream.



Figure 13: Animated sequence representing victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre.



Figure 14: Video footage representing victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre.



Figure 15: Text insert specifying the setting of *JFK Reloaded*.



Figure 16: The presidential limousine with passengers in *JFK Reloaded*.

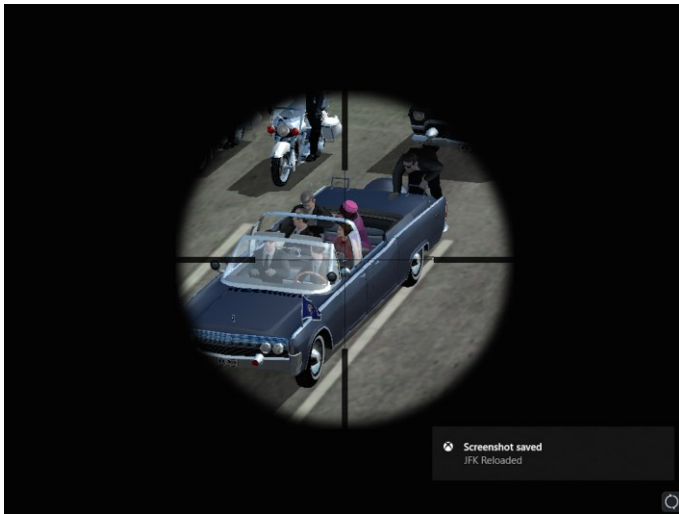


Figure 17: The presidential limousine with passengers and secret service agent Clint Hill.

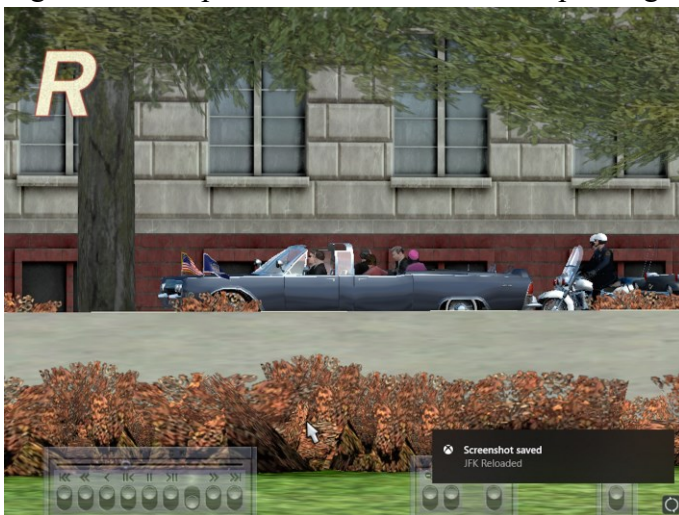


Figure 18: Replay of the recorded gameplay in *JFK Reloaded*.

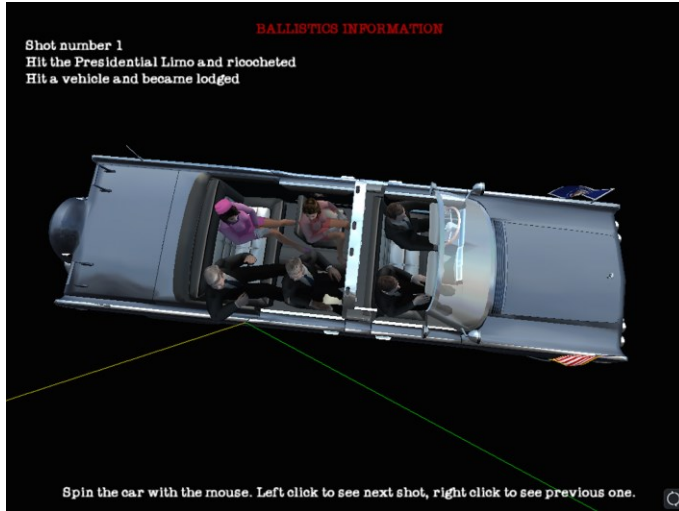


Figure 19: Reconstruction of bullet trajectories in *JFK Reloaded*.

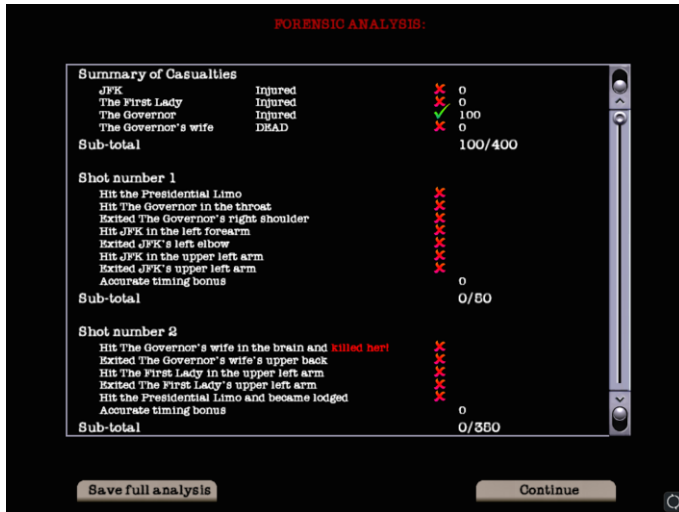


Figure 20: Scoreboard evaluating the “historical accuracy” of the gameplay in *JFK Reloaded*.



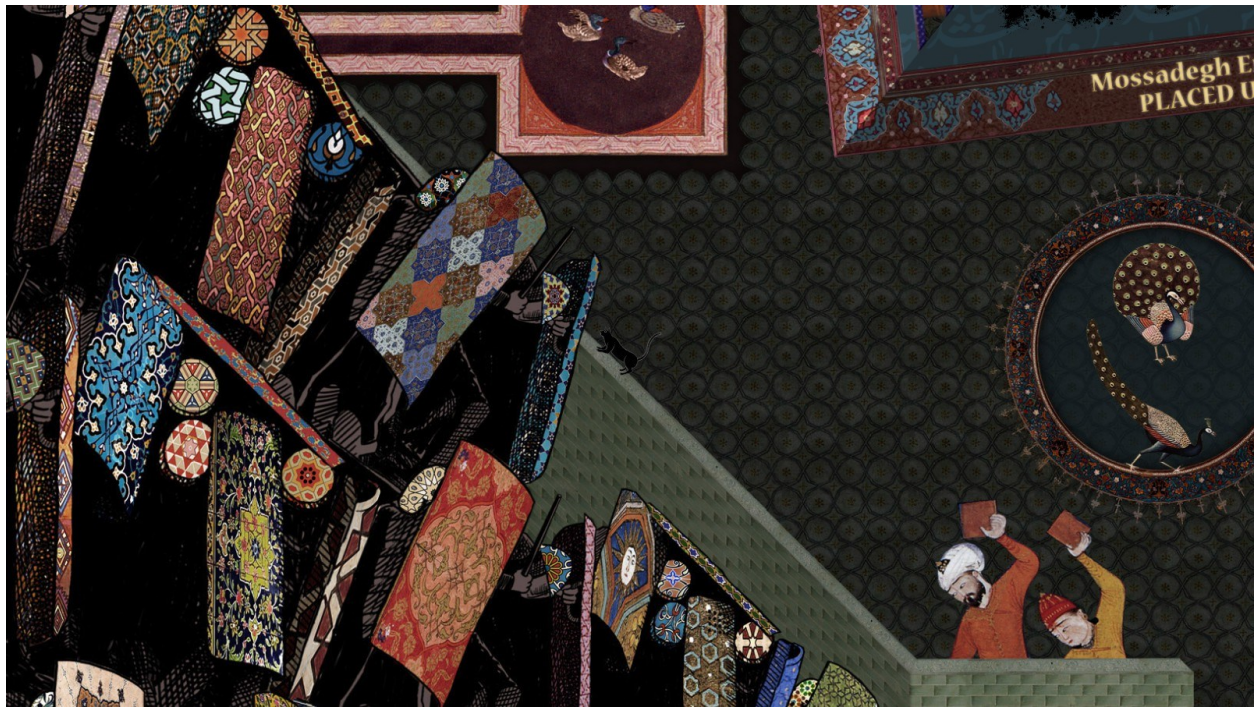


Figure 21: Pictorial representations inspired by Persian miniatures in *The Cat and the Coup*.

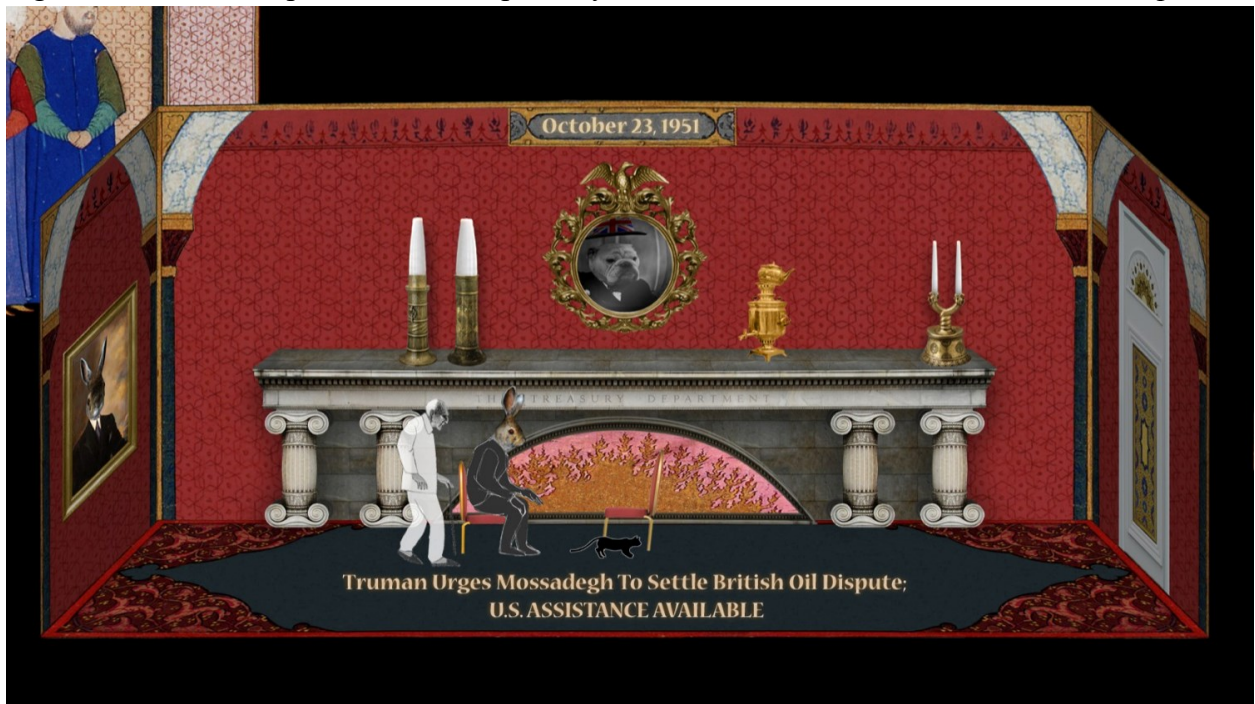


Figure 22: Representations of historical figures with animal heads in *The Cat and the Coup*.

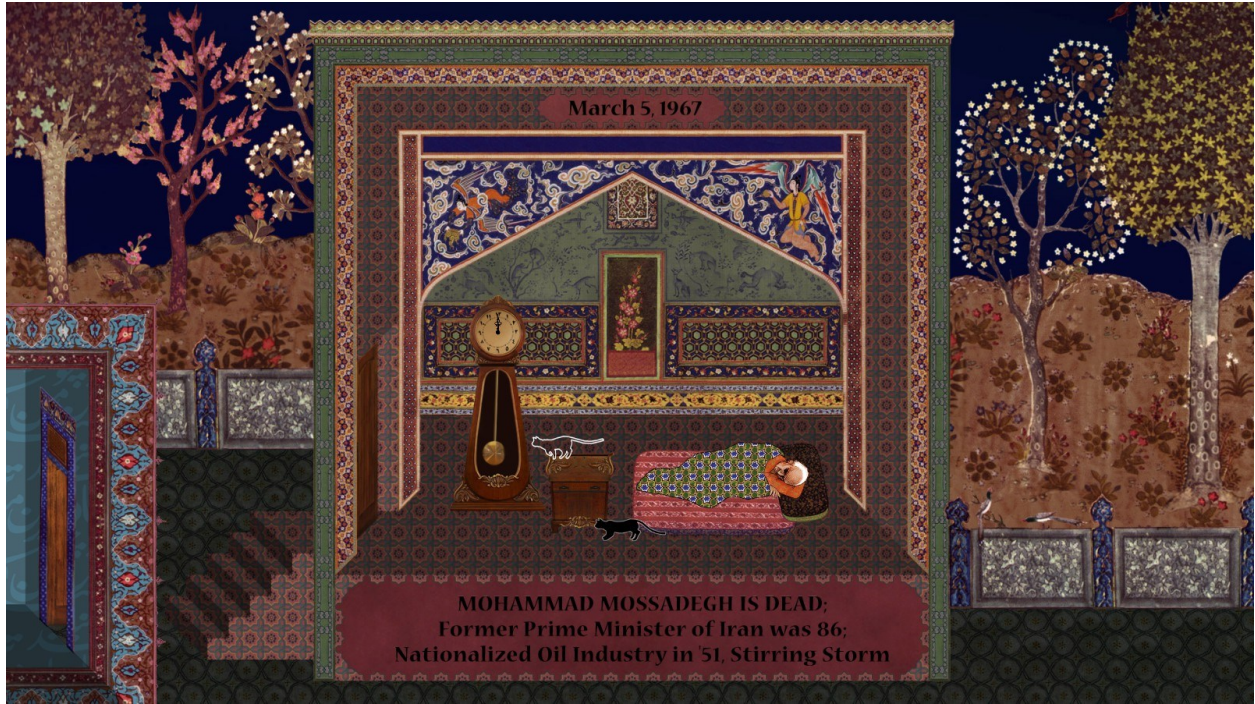


Figure 23: Puzzle room involving a grandfather clock in *The Cat and the Coup*.



Figure 24: Puzzle room that “shrinks” as faceless grey figures push on the walls.

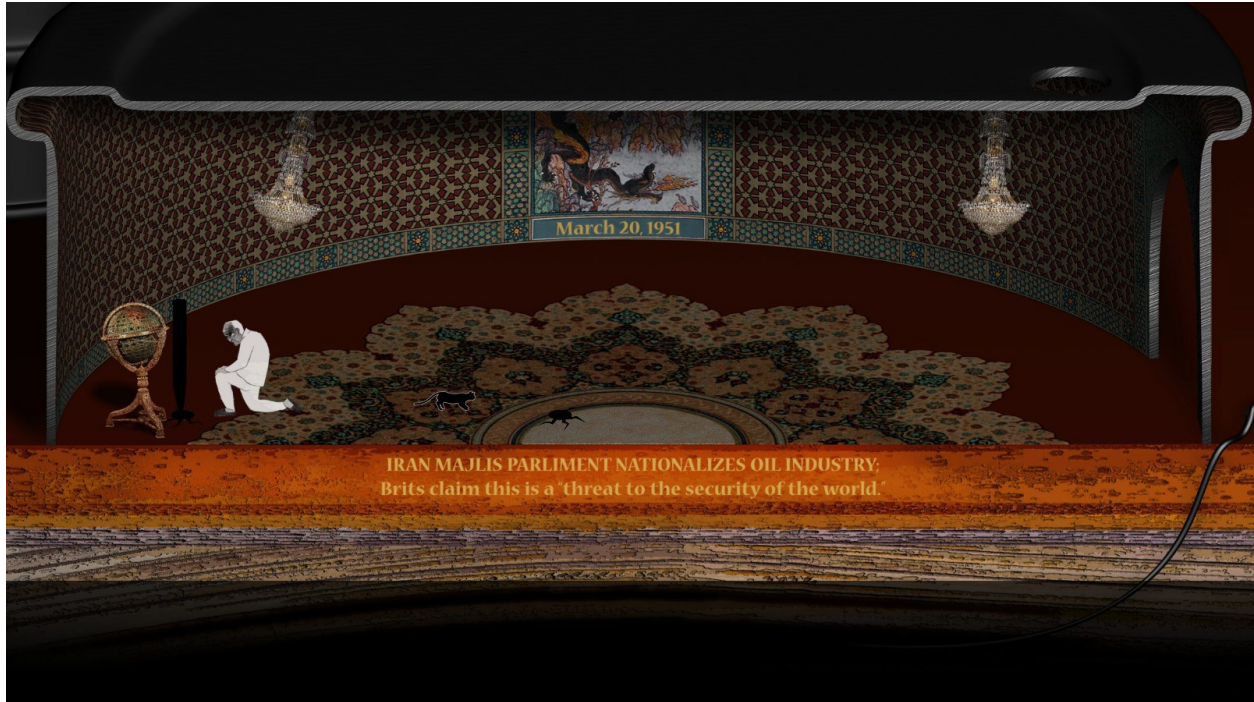


Figure 25: Puzzle room that fills with oil from holes punched into the floor by Mossadegh.



Figure 26: Representation of historical events in *The Cat and the Coup*'s final cut-scene.