Grinding for war: Authenticity and experience in WWII MMOs

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The notion of realism is central to historical games, as the genre attempts to imitate and interpret real-world events, phenomena or conditions.

The potential of digital games as vehicles for rethinking history has been widely acknowledged. This perception is based primarily on the interactive nature of the medium. Games require active participation, an engaging storyline that must be able to influence the outcomes, or even the game content itself, in a meaningful manner. In the context of historical games, the above-mentioned notion also suggests that players adopt the role of historians, who have the capacity to shape, or at least influence, the course of history.

The term does not just stand for audiovisual sensorium constructed of formal game elements, but can also include a host of non-sensory cues, such as historicality of the subject matter, teleology (the objective and purpose of gaming), or equivalently goals (the potential to achieve those goals).

In recent years, major game developers and publishers have mostly shunned the topic. The more popular wargame genres, such as those of strategy games and first-person shooters, introducing a host of specific gaming conventions. As a result, their approaches in presenting history are not uniform. Compared to many other wargame genres, MMOs enable large scale battles, where thousands of players simultaneously partake on the same, persistent theatre of war. The multiplayer mode also adds a layer of complexity that, for instance, challenges construction of established metanarratives. These factors pose interesting questions to historicity. Gridding is one of the definitive mechanisms of historical authenticity in digital games. The concept of game realism – an intrinsic constituent of historical games – is elaborately explicated. Furthermore, implicit and explicit restrictions set cultural sensibilities and national legislation, which influence historical representations, are discussed.

AUTHENTICITY/EXPERIENCE

The potential of digital games as vehicles for rethinking history has been widely acknowledged. This perception is based primarily on the interactive nature of the medium. Games require active participation, an engaging storyline that must be able to influence the outcomes, or even the game content itself, in a meaningful manner. In the context of historical games, the above-mentioned notion also suggests that players adopt the role of historians, who have the capacity to shape, or at least influence, the course of history. Regardless of the user-centric, post-structuralist prospect, this potential has been only partially realized. Instead of counternarratives or alternate histories, historical games have often relayed dominant metanarratives in a new form.

In some instances, historical wargames have been dubbed as a virtual form of reenactment. This definition is not perhaps the most precise characterisation, as reenactments of historical battles tend to be extremely scripted events, whereas recreation of historical battles in games – depending on the genre and game mode – are more spontaneous and disorganized. Chapman divides this "digital ludic re-enactment" into exploratory and performative historical challenges. The former refers to imitation of functions and actions performed by historical agents, whereas the latter refers to the similarity of the in-game information and the information in the historical environment. Chapman notes that contemporary gaming interfaces are not capable of realistically mimicking performative challenges. Instead, representational techniques are used to remind of their existence. Digital games are experience-driven media. The aforementioned quality dictates that experience outweighs rigid historical accuracy. Games practice selective authenticity by omitting and/or adding historical details and fictive elements. Historical games are not critical analyses of the past events, but immersive gameplay experiences that aim to satisfy audience expectations.
CULTURAL AND LEGISLATIVE BARRIERS OF REPRESENTATION

One could assume that the inescapable presence of violence would be a source of controversy in games depicting one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history. However, this has been rarely the case. Nor have WWII-themed games been widely associated with the discourses of Baudrillardian nightmare, in which the players confuse reality with simulations of reality. This type of debate is reserved mainly for modern military shooters. World War II remains a convenient theme for the medium of digital games to explore. The war is not recent or ongoing, and its materialisation is well established. There is a clear division between “good” and “evil”, albeit some aspects surrounding this mythology have been debunked. The six-year conflict falls into the category of just war, without the moral ambiguity of the Cold War era or modern asymmetrical warfare.

Nevertheless, WWII games are not free of controversy. Historical games are retrospective representations of recorded real-world events, phenomena and conditions. They are also unavoidably infused with belief systems, prone to reflect the interpretations and biases of their designers and publishers. Thus, historical games should not be perceived as pure historiographic simulations, but as also their ideological approaches should be acknowledged.

Transgression of cultural sensitivities has been a typical cause of public contention. However, mere offence is not sufficient enough to generate controversy, as they are manufactured through social interaction. Arguably these cases have most likely been about cultural discrepancy than about intentional ill. Game developers relay myths, tropes and narratives familiar in their cultural sphere, which are subsequently perceived as exaggerated or false by audiences with different conceptions of history.

There are also matters of national legislation at play. Perhaps the most known example is the German criminal code, which prohibits the use and distribution of symbols of unconstitutional organisations. This definition naturally includes Nazi symbolism. The section 86a does not apply to acts and mediations that, for instance, serve educational purposes or promote art and science. However, the medium of digital games does not meet the aforementioned criteria in the eyes of German legislation. Thus, publishers censor the German versions of historical games that feature such imagery to gain access to Europe’s biggest game markets.

The narratives of heroism, patriotism and good war dominate WWII games, whereas the narratives of victimhood remain absent. One major explanatory reason for this can be traced to the cultural status of digital gaming, which was still being negotiated during the heyday of historical shooters in 2000s. These are relatively safe themes for a medium that was being accused of desensitising players to real-life violence, or even transforming some of them into mass murderers. There have been few failed endeavours to design digital games about the Holocaust, but these projects have been quickly cancelled due to public pressure from various interest groups. The overarching reasoning for their cancellation has been that the Holocaust is not a suitable subject matter for the medium of games to handle. This line of argumentation underlines the rhetoric of playfulness and frivolity, which remains integral for the normative debate about games as historical representations. Much because of this, the game developers have practised self-censorship or willingly avoided the theme. Consequently, the Holocaust has been almost exclusively treated in neo-Nazi and white supremacist propaganda games.

German single-player campaigns have been mostly absent in WWII tactical shooters, whereas the Germans have been a playable faction in multiplayer mode since the emergence of the genre in the late-1990s. Reciprocally, German campaigns is a norm in other games, such as real-time or grand strategy games, which offer more detailed perspectives into the simulated warfare. Perhaps the most evident explanation to this disparity is the absence of traditional narrative in the multiplayer mode. However, the viability of the first- and third-person perspectives is also a factor that should to be taken into consideration. Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad and Modus Front: Liberation 1944 are rare exceptions in the tactical shooter genre. These games implement a set of artistic decisions that curb insinuations to Nazi sympathising or glorification. In this context, the differentiation between the Wehrmacht soldiers and the political soldiers of the Waffen-SS is essential. The premise also has great importance, as it creates the atmosphere of the narrative. Both games are set in the later stages of WWII when the German war machine was stalling.

WAR THUNDER: HISTORICITY THROUGH SIMULATION

War Thunder[41] focuses on aviation and armoured warfare in historical locations. The naval battles are at the moment in closed beta phase. The roots of War Thunder are deeply embedded in historical vehicle simulation games. The game creates a historical model that players experience by operating various kinds of tanks and aircrafts. This cultural background creates a horizon of expectations concerning perceived game realism in terms of modelling, simulation, visual verisimilitude, and historical accuracy. The bulk of vehicles in the game’s technology tree are from the WWII period, but the last arsenal also includes tanks and planes from the previous and later eras. The five belligerent factions represent the two main alliances of WWII: the United States, the United Kingdom and the USSR of the Allied nations, and Germany and Japan of the Axis powers. The most prevalent and popular gameplay component is the random multiplayer matches, which simulate well-known historical battles to a varying degree. These battles are isolated, as there is no continuity between them. War Thunder also features cooperative missions and dynamic campaigns. Regularly changing community events and tournaments also recreate historical battles. In addition to free-to-play content, there are two premium single-player campaigns, based on the key events of the Pacific theatre. Gaijin is also developing World War Mode, which brings the battles to the global scale.

War Thunder remains true to the conventions of MMO. The main objective is to grind research points, in-game currency and experience points. These resources are received by damaging/destryong enemy vehicles, accomplishing given objectives and winning the matches. Grinding has two phases: first players grind for research points and in-game currency to unlock and purchase new vehicles. Then players need to grind research points for modifications. Researching and purchasing modifications is not mandatory, but these modules give significant performance boost, compared to stock vehicles. The accumulated experience point can be used to train crew members. The players can also buy special currency with real money, which can be used for premium accounts, premium vehicles or to speed up the research.

War Thunder has three game modes arcade, realistic and simulator battles. These modes cater both casual and hard core gaming audience. The separating factor between the modes is the scalable fidelity of simulation. The damage, flight and physics models, which are based on archive data and real world parameters, become increasingly more complex and true-to-life as the modes progress. Thus, the archive material is not only used as visual reference, but also in the underlying level of code. However, Gaijin has exercised artistic freedom, when it comes to certain attributes. The fidelity of simulation has an impact on tactics and strategy, as well on gameplay tempo. Realistic and simulator modes for instance, remove visual aids, enforce historically accurate team compositions, and limit the number of maps and available vehicles per battle. Simulator mode also restricts the player perspective to first-person viewpoint.
The second central constituent of generating historicity relates to mission and map design. The gameplay takes place in virtual environments that bear resemblance to historical battle locations. These places are made recognisable through visual cues, modelled by utilising archival material as frame of reference. The single-player campaigns convey historical information and details that contribute to the aura of authenticity, but do not affect the gameplay itself. Each mission starts with an introductory cutscene, which explain the historical background of the battle. The cutscenes mix archival footage with in-game graphics. Players control renditions of real wartime pilots, who participated to the actual battles. The missions end with cinematic cutscenes accompanied with voice-over of citations from published memoirs and reports of action, compiled by military personnel who eye witnessed the events. This adds a layer of reality as reflection to the game narrative. The mission descriptions for multiplayer battles are considerably briefer.

In the end, without extensive analyses of player statistics and vehicle parameters, the claim of Russian bias remains a speculation. However, it can be argued with certainty that some tanks and planes have been initially allocated into wrong tiers, their battle ratings are undervalued or their attributes have been boosted. The claim is plausible to a certain extent, but it can be partly explained, for instance, with the scalability of simulation. In the arcade mode, certain Soviet vehicles appear overpowered contrasted to their counterparts in the same tier, but their advantage is reduced with the introduction of more complex simulation models in the realistic and simulator modes. This reading is partially supported by the in-game leaderboards and vehicle statistics. In the end, without extensive analyses of player statistics and vehicle parameters, the claim of Russian bias remains a speculation. However, it can be argued with certainty that some tanks and planes have been initially allocated into wrong tiers, their battle ratings are undervalued or their attributes have been boosted. The intention behind these choices is unclear.

Heroes & Generals (H&G) is a combined arms game, integrating tanks, planes and infantry, which draws inspiration from the traditions of first-person shooter and strategy game genres. The game has currently three factions: the United States, Germany and the USSR. The central tenet of the game is the creation of alternate histories. H&G is not a straightforward historical game, although it is being marketed as “the ultimate WWII game”. The setting is recognisable from the history, but H&G does not have a historical starting point, nor does it recreate specific events or faithfully follow the course of history. This inherent unpredictability of the simulated conflict creates a notion of realism as equifinality. The end state of the game is not predestined. The absence of historical alliances is another example of divergence. All belligerents battle against each other for the domination of Europe. This creative choice, which enables simultaneous combat between all the factions on a single map, enriches and balances the gameplay. The American-Soviet coalition would make Germany an overwhelming undertaking in the campaign. The gameplay consists of action and strategy components, depicted from the first-person viewpoint and top down perspective, respectively. There are two game modes: staged battles and war. The staged battles are balanced matches with equal resources. These matches are isolated clashes, and do not impact the course of war. The war mode is more dynamic and consists of these types of battles: skirmish, assault and defend. Every battle has an impact on the grand campaign. The war is won when either of the two victory conditions is met: 1) the faction captures or holds 15 capital cities; or 2) other factions lose all their major cities. The order of battle and the composition of troops depend on available resources the generals are willing to commit on specific battles. This prioritisation can result in highly unbalanced battles, pitting smaller infantry units with minimal resources against larger motorised forces. Consequently, this aspect makes the experience of war seem more authentic. Although the strategic component is central to the outcome of the war, it can be considered as a browser minigame for experienced players, which revolves around simplistic mechanics of deploying, reinforcing and
H&G has primary and secondary objectives, which revolve around grinding. The principal aim is to develop a character or additional characters, from privates to generals. Experience to do this is earned by dispatching enemy troops, destroying vehicles and capturing/defending control points. Players receive in-game currency [74] by participating into the battles. The amount depends on the character rank and battle performance. The credits are used to purchase or upgrade weapons, vehicles, camouflage or new characters. There are six available careers: infantry, paratrooper, recon, tanker, fighter pilot and general. New players usually start with regular infantry, as academy trained or higher tier soldiers require considerable sums of credits or investment of real money. The strategy mode can be accessed when the characters reach the rank 12 (lieutenant) and receive command points. Characters become generals at rank 18. The second goal is to participate to the war campaigns. The war mode is reserved for rank 3 or higher characters.

H&G adopts an arcade approach to modelling and simulation. Albeit the battle locations in the strategic map are actual cities and regions, the mission maps themselves are generic representations of military, industrial, urban and rural areas. The game lacks maps of larger cities, which means that the battles for metropolitan and capital cities are fought in smaller towns or rural areas. This is for the most part a technical impasse. The sheer size of the strategic map makes it challenging to recognisably model all 23 major cities or other battlegrounds on the theatre of war. The weapons and vehicles are more accurately modelled, according to their real world references. The weapon physics are perhaps the most important aspect of simulation for a first-person shooter, as they are the main tools for player-to-player interaction. H&G incorporates elements of basic ballistics, such as bullet drop, muzzle velocity and bullet penetration, but these effects are not rigorously simulated.

CONCLUSIONS: TWO APPROACHES

Historical games incorporate several interdependent and overlapping constituents that influence their sense of historicity. The base element is the genre, which largely determines the formal elements of realism, such as visual verisimilitude or fidelity of simulation, and also introduces a set of cultural conventions, which in turn are directly linked to audience expectations. Sub-genres include their own distinctive traditions and gameplay styles, varying from game to game.

War Thunder depicts World War II as modern, technology-oriented warfare. It is an armed contest of engineering. However, history is just a backdrop in the multiplayer mode, utilised to create a setting for incessant vehicular combat. World War II is never-ending. Random battles are inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, as there is no persistent campaign to be fought. The upcoming World War Mode likely changes this. War Thunder generates historicity by simulating military vehicles and creating playable scenarios of well-known historical battles and campaigns, situating them into virtual environments that bear resemblance to actual battle sites. The game warrants the claims of realism and historicity by employing models and simulation that are based on archive material and historical data. This rigorous approach to simulation asserts the notion of digital indexicality. The aim towards realistic representation, coupled with scalable simulation, is the most prominent innovation that War Thunder provides, as the MMOs usually favour more arcade style gaming. The game also leverages challenges concerning performatory actions, as the complex flight models in simulator mode demand the use of joystick, which can be perceived as a simplified imitation of centre stick of a real aircraft.

Heroes & Generals, in turn, depicts World War II through the perspectives of frontline infantry. Other military branches (armour and aviation) have more supportive roles. The game has a postmodern approach to historical representation, as it does not imitate specific historical scenarios or relay metamorphoses, but creates a plausible experience (in terms of contemporary gaming conventions) of large scale warfare. The simulation of war is dynamic with varying outcomes. Instead of rigid historical accuracy, H&G aims to provide an entertaining arcade shooter, infused with strategic and pseudorealistic [75] elements. This framework incorporates historical details, such as weapons, vehicles and belligerent nations, but lacks others, such as political conditions or specific events that were decisive for the war. The game does not aim to construct indexical relations to real world data. H&G harnesses the potential of the MMO genre by offering a shared experience that allows simultaneous participation of thousands of players in a persistent game world. This is realised in a meaningful way. In addition to shooting, players can influence the outcome of the war by commanding assault squads, instead of being mere pawns on the
It is evident that the historical and alternate settings analyzed in these games do not surpass the common mechanics or conventions of MMOs or their respective sub-genres. War Thunder and H&G portray war as an anarchic ordeal. The rank system, implemented in H&G is meaningless, as there is no real chain of command. Rank is a mere representation of experience, not of authority. Soldiers can act as individuals or as the collective fulfillment of organizational goals or objectives. This creates a sense of autonomy and random factors affecting gameplay, which varies the experience uniquely for each player. Neither of the analyzed games are called pay-to-win games, i.e., players do not necessarily need to spend real money to be successful in them. Nevertheless, premium accounts and vehicles influence the gameplay, as they significantly limit the time spent on grinding by granting additional experience points and in-game currency.

Another common trope is the implementation of selective authenticity, which balances history and entertainment. For instance, Gaijin has added a modifier for the armour of Tiger II to smudge the deteriorating quality of German steel during the last years of the war. This is done in the name of historical accuracy. Consequently, the 1944 modification of IS-2 heavy tank can be equipped with post-WWII ammunition. This is mostly done in the name of balance.

The accusations of faction biases and overpowered-in-game items are common grievances in online gaming communities. These assertions exemplify the audience expectations of balance, as well as the highly competitive nature of online wargames. These claims are often groundless, sentimental gut reactions, but there are also more justifiable complaints, as the constant tweaking of in-game items and gameplay properties demonstrates. Unwanted or not, these perceived advantages affect the player behaviour. The unwritten logic of online multiplayer games dictates that if a faction, weapon or vehicle is perceived overpowered by the community, a large number of players will drive to exploit the unbalancing factor to gain upper hand on their opponents. This type of behaviour becomes apparent, when new items or factions are introduced to the game and their impact on gameplay is still unknown. New elements can sometimes introduce significant changes to balance. Faithfulness to historical accuracy can be not only an element of strategy, but also of morality. The unbalanced gameplay can lead to the sudden collapse of an entire faction or the victory of one faction over all others, which makes the game less enjoyable for both players and developers.

Imbalance does not necessarily lead to such problems in an educational setting with extrinsic gameplay purposes, as the serious (serious) context has divergent interests from the parasitic (playful) context. War Thunder and Heroes & Generals exhibit the challenges and opportunities in generating and maintaining historicity in online multiplayer games. The multiplayer setting retains requirements of balance, openness-endedness and narrative. These exigencies have pivotal implications on historical accuracy. The games analyzed in this article have resolved these challenges in mentioned ways, mainly by focusing on certain key aspects of WWI. They are visceral historical experiences. Their objective is not to convey a comprehensive account of the war, but to use WWI as a setting for entertainment. In this context, the concept of entertainment does not include elements of fun, but also moments of frustration and tediousness, as exemplified by grinding.

REFERENCES

post-911 politics. [Takaisin]

3. Buildhead Interactive and Devolver Arts have crowdfunded their upcoming WWI shooter projects, Battalion 1944 and Days of War, respectively. These games will be one of the first WWI games to feature real-world historical battlefields. New World Interactive developed Days of War (2016), a game based on Infrasysy (2014) modification, in cooperation with the modding community. [Takaisin]

4. Focke-Wulf (FW) 190 (Franz (Franz Spandau 1940) was based on the prototypes of aGrünau submarine commander Günther Plen. His submarine was sunk a year after the game's release. The airframe design Fighter Luftfahrtgeschäft (Rudi Gröbel 1941) was marketed as an educational game, designed by a Luftwaffe officer. [Takaisin]

5. Stuka Gefechten An (Böcker Spiele 1940) was a variation of chess and Fließgeschirrspiel (Haupe-Druck 1940) was a reversioned version of Flying Hats. [Takaisin]

6. WW 1917. [Takaisin]

7. The Belgian resistance distributed V-Game (1944), in which the objective was to shoot V1 rockets into German cities and on high ranking Nazi officials (Antique Trade Gazette, 28.8.2007). [Takaisin]

8. D-Day (Aviation Hill 1961) was the first historical wargame situated to WWII. The cover's blur reads "New you change World War II history in this realistic invasion game." [Takaisin]

9. Taktisch: Computer Game of Amored Combat on the Eastern Front (Clawfish 1978), North Atlantic Convoy Runner (Aviation Hill 1980). Computer Antebu (SIII 1985) and Eastern Point 1941 (Altair 1983) are the historical computer games with WWII setting. Tactics was quite an interesting exhibit, as it was a hybrid of computer and board wargame. The computer handled the calculations and the player moved the counters on the game board. [Takaisin]

10. WW 1918. [Takaisin]

11. Grand strategy games are either turn-based or real-time, depicted from top-down or isometric perspectives. The game is a direct descendant of tabletop wargames. Players command nations or large armies, employing a scenario or pursuit of strategic goals. Furthermore, the adherence to the law of land warfare helps to adhere to the law of the land. For instance, on problem solving, resource management, scientific development and politics. The game includes historical events such as Storm Across Europe (SISI 1989), Asia & Allies (Heinn 1998), the Irons of Honor series (Paradox Interactive 2003-2020). The war becomes personal in WW 2010. The Bonfire IT Company 2010-2014. The company is more concerned about the realism of the game and the player's perspective. The vehicle simulation games were the first historical games depicted from the first-person perspective. They focus heavily on the fidelity of simulation. The game includes historical events such as Hellcat Ate (Ratinara Azi 1999), the War Birds games (MicroProse 1995-1996), Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe (Lucasfilm 1991), Combat Flight Simulator: WW2 Europe Series (Microsoft 1999), Steel Fury: Kharkov 1942 (Gavilam 2008) and Steel Armor: Blaze of War (Gavilam 2013). [Takaisin]

12. Vehicle simulation games were the first historical games depicted from the first-person perspective. The campaigns feature an illusion of control in relation to unfolding of historical events. The narratives align with the player's actions, for instance, when the player is able to change the course of history, for instance, by situating the players' roles that do not allocate to the outcome of the overall battle. This is done to maintain historical accuracy while removing the winning conditions. The narrative structure becomes obvious based on emerging, from the interaction between the game system and the player. [Takaisin]

13. Soviet tanks are up-scaled, modernized, and show off the lethal aspects of warfare, such as politics and suffering of civilians. There are no equivalents to titles such as This War Of Mine (11 bit studios 2014) in the historical wargame genre. The game is a rare exception, as it depicts warfare from civilian perspective. This War Of Mine was inspired by the Siege of Sarajevo. [E. G. Rejadas 2007; de Groot 2016.]


15. Ribbens & Mailhot 2010. [Takaisin]

16. According to James F. Dunnigan (1992, 1) "to be a wargame, in our sense of the word, the game must be realistic. And in some cases, they are extremely realistic, realistic to the point where some game wargamers are actually used for the training of the military, but also business and teaching." [Takaisin]

17. Heavy Metal 2010. [Takaisin]

18. The difference between the two is that the former is used as a tool to train soldiers, while the latter is used for entertainment. [Takaisin]

19. According to Baron (2010, 304), the architectural effect is an "experience that [...] certain elements of the war system are depicted from the perspective of their use in actual combat, but the buildings of the structures present are not necessarily realistic." [Takaisin]

20. According to Baerg (2008), the game is a variation of checkers and "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream." [Takaisin]

21. The Wehrmacht was acquitted as being a criminal organisation at the Nuremberg trials by the International Military Tribunal (IMT), although some of its elements perpetrated war crimes. [Stegbauer (2007)].

22. In reality, the depiction stereotypical representation of the Soviet war effort in Company of Heroes 2 (Sega 2014) was a variation of checkers and "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream." [Takaisin]

23. Nowadays, the term "strategy" is used to refer to "a difference between what we read as the original intended purpose of the footage and its later actual use." [Salvati & Bullinger 2013, 157-161].

24. For actual wording, aims, and more comprehensive account, see Smith (2010). [Takaisin]
Battle rating is a value that is used to determine the matchmaking and balance the game. The better and more effective the vehicle is, the higher the battle rating. Wehrmacht can invade the Great Britain or thwart the collapse of the Eastern Front. The USSR can keep advancing towards west after the fall of Berlin. The United States can fail in its landing to Normandy and be forced to defend London from the impending invasion.

The ongoing, real-time war on a persistent server is not a novel innovation for the FPS MMOs. The concept was already introduced in the early-2000s by World War II Online. However, this feature has been seldomly utilised since.

H&G has three currencies: credits, warfunds and gold. Credits are the basic in-game currency. Warfunds are used to purchase, deploy and supply assault teams. Gold is bought through microtransactions. Gold can be used to buy, for instance, veteran membership, camouflages and bonus ribbon progression. The players earn free gold by completing the first match of the day.

In this context, the term "pseudorealism" refers to both the synthesis of dramatic/playful and authentic/realistic elements to meet the audience expectations, as well to the exaggerated/imprecise simulation. Exaggerated bullet drop of submachine guns is an example of this tendency. It gives a hint of realism to operating a weapon, but the actual simulation is notably inaccurate.

The term "tactical realism" refers to gaming, which imitates real military organisations from chain of command to tactics.