



Playing with the past: history and video games (and why it might matter)

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HISTORYING, PUBLIC HISTORY AND HISTORICAL VIDEO GAMES

While traditional history, as a discipline, is important, that should not obscure the fact that doing history, sometimes called “historying,” is something everyone does. For history is fundamentally just the communication of the past through a medium (Denning, 2006; Chapman, 2016). That is certainly the case when the most traditional forms of history are crafted by academic historians: books and textbooks. The dominance of text and speech in history classes should not mislead us: they are not the only media for

communicating the past and certainly not the only legitimate media (McCall, 2012b). There are many more, and once we leave the realm of academic historians, it’s easy to find pretty much everyone doing history in some form. They do this when they tell a story about their day, draw a picture about their vacation, or debate something that happened in their peer group. Film, painting, theater, sculpture, toys, music, even social media can and often do communicate aspects of the past and, when they do, they are history.¹ So, historical video games certainly qualify as a medium that can do history, that can communicate aspects of the



Figure 1. Historying. Collage of several images; sources: *Revolution* (cravengames.com); Delacroix’s *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (Wikimedia Commons); Metropolitan Museum of Art (screen capture from their website: metmuseum.org); East India Company (screen capture from their website: theeastindiacompany.com); *Clan Fabius*, book cover (amazon.com); Cincinnatus Statue (S Kaya: flickr.com); Cincinnatus Pig Statue (waymarking.com); *Hamilton* (broadway.org); *Assassin’s Creed Origins* (screen capture from the game, Ubisoft); Playmobil History set (toptoyusa.com); *Evil Empire*, album cover (Rage Against the Machine); *Dirt*, album cover (Alice in Chains).

¹ History and accurate/authentic history are not the same, and a work that qualifies as history can still be a very flawed communication of the past, whether a monograph, a lecture, a visual artwork, a film, a game, etc.

past. To use a more formal term, historical video games are a form of public history. Because the term's meaning varies widely, for purposes of this article, let's define public history as any communication of the past crafted outside traditional academia with little or no involvement of academic historians. This includes games whose designers read published histories and even games where an academic historian was on board as a consultant but did not make the driving decisions in the design process (McCall, 2018).

So, what makes a video game count as historical? This is another area of debate, but a useful broad definition runs like this: a historical game "has to begin at a clear point in real world history, and that history has to have a manifest effect on the nature of the game experience" (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2007). This definition works for most commercial games set in the past: the big budget titles *Call of Duty: World War II*, *Total War: Rome 2*, and *Battlefield One*; *Sid Meier's Civilization* series (now for almost

three decades with *III*, *IV*, and *V* still sold and *VI* released in late 2016); *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Odyssey* (and many earlier entries in the series); the favorite games of last decade like *Stronghold*, *Sid Meier's Pirates*, and even *Age of Empires*; and hosts of recent games by independent developers such as *Field of Glory II*, *Egypt: Old Kingdom*, *Bomber Crew*, *Nantucket*, and *The Curious Expedition*.

Some games that connect to the past, however, are more difficult to categorize. *Wolfenstein: New Order*, for example, imagines a counterfactual history where Nazi Germany conquers the United States in 1948. The game begins in 1960. Not a historically documented world of 1960, but a counterfactual United States ruled by Nazis. Though *Wolfenstein* deals with important historical topics like the Holocaust, it does not neatly fit the definition of a historical game noted above (McCall & Chapman, 2017, 2018).

Games in *Assassin's Creed* series, on the



Figure 2. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, screen capture from the game (Bethesda Softworks, 2014).

other hand, do begin at a clear point in real world history but focus on player characters that did not exist (Altair, Ezio, Bayek, Kassandra) occupying roles (Assassins and Templars in cabals) that did not exist his-

torically – at least not according to the best evidence and analysis. It's best to remember that, ultimately, categories like "historical games" are useful not for their rigid application but only insofar as they help

us focus on what is essential. Accordingly, this article is concerned primarily – but not exclusively – with exploring those games that fit the narrower definition of historical games most neatly: large-budget games like *Civilization*, *Total War*, *Crusader Kings*, *Europa Universalis*, *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and countless independent games like *Field of*

Glory and Bomber Crew. Despite their many differences, these games have real-world historical settings and have player agents that – generally speaking – either existed historically or take on roles that existed historically (McCall, 2019).



Figure 3. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, screen capture from the game (Ubisoft, 2018).

HISTORICAL VIDEO GAMES: WHAT KIND OF HISTORY?

There are a great many kinds of these historical games: shooters, strategy games, adventure games, city builders, management sims, and so on. These games take two main approaches to representing the past: realist and conceptual (Chapman, 2016). Three-dimensional first- and third-person shooter games like *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield One*, and the *Assassin's Creed* series take the realist approach to representing the past. Their designers present a visually verisimilar environment, the past as it arguably appeared and as a world the player can navigate through the game's protagonist. Much like historical novels, these games center on fictitious characters who act in historically documented setting but do not alter conventionally accepted larger historical narratives. So, for example, the *Assassin's Creed* protagonists in the *Assassin's Creed* series do not alter the outcome of the French Revolu-

tions in *AC Unity* or negate Cleopatra's alliance with Julius Caesar in *AC Origins* as they have their adventures. Protagonist Red Daniels' actions in *Call of Duty: World War II* do not spawn an alternate history without the Allied Push through western France. Rather, the player character develops their own fictitious narrative within the backdrop of the more-or-less documented historical setting. Players decide some of the in-game protagonist's actions but do not change the larger historical narrative.

The other main approach to historical games is the conceptual simulation approach. Games like those in the *Civilization* series, *Total War* series, and Paradox's grand strategy games like *Europa Universalis IV*, *Crusader Kings II*, and *Hearts of Iron IV* focus not on showing how the past looked but telling how the systems and processes of the past functioned. They do this, not through immersive visually realistic environments, but through underlying rule sets



Figure 4. *Call of Duty: WWII*, screen capture from the game (Activision, 2017).

and systems, communicated to the player through stylized and sometimes abstract symbols and graphics (Chapman, 2016). So, *Civilization*, for example, does not show what ancient civilizations looked like so much as tell, among other things, how geography shapes the development of civilizations. *Crusader Kings II* does not show how medieval barons lived but tells about the political fragmentation of medieval Europe. In these games, players can make choices that have a grand impact on historical outcomes: managing ancient Egypt to

become the dominant world power by the time of the Renaissance, preventing Rome from falling, fending off the Crusaders, etc. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, however, and many games have elements of both, such as the *Total War* games that combine the conceptual-style large-scale grand strategy of campaign maps and city-management screens with the more realist verisimilitudinous representations of individual soldiers and battlefields rendered in 3D.



Figure 5. *Europa Universalis IV*, screen capture from the game (Paradox Interactive, 2013).

What kind of histories are these historical video games? The vast majority whether their approaches to the past are realist, conceptual, or some combination, present that past as one or more historical problem spaces (McCall, 2012a, 2012b, 2016a, 2018). That is, they present the past in terms of:

- A primary agent, the player character of the game, with one or more roles and goals, operating within
- a physical space, a virtual world with an environment and geography that includes

- any number of elements, including other agents modeled by the AI as non-player characters, that can afford and assist player actions, constrain player actions, or both depending on the situation; and so, the player crafts

- strategies and makes decisions to take advantage of available affordances, work within or around constraints, and achieve their goal.

This certainly can be a problematic way to approach the past: It can over-emphasize

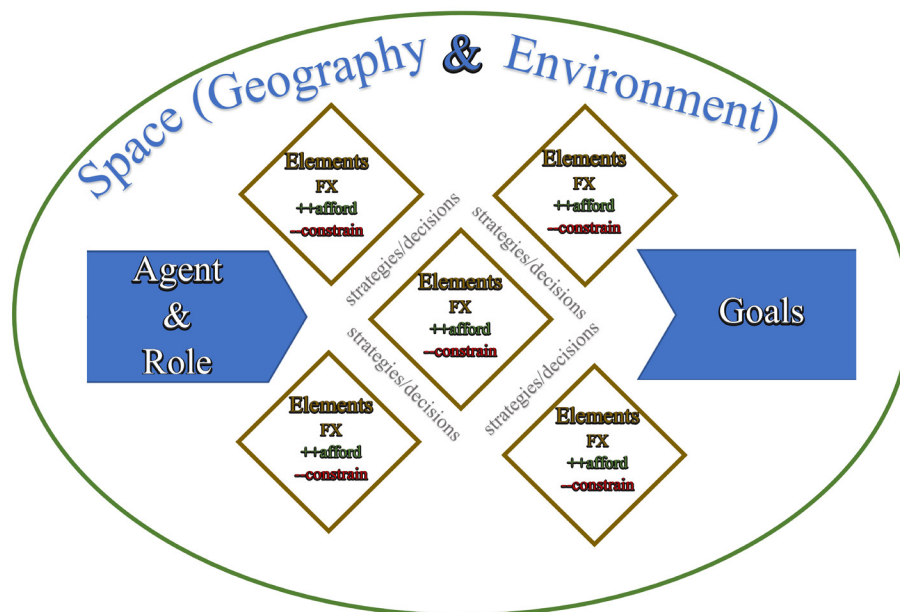


Figure 6. Diagram of a Historical Problem Space.

agents' conscious goal-oriented behavior and cause humans other than the primary agent to be cast as instruments (McCall, 2012b: 16–19). When applied specifically to the study of agents making decisions in systems like politics, trade, management, construction, battle and so on, however, the historical problem space approach of video games works reasonably well. For in these and other spheres, there was a great deal of conscious goal-oriented behavior, taking place in a physical geography containing elements and agents that could afford and constrain actions – terrain, weather, the physical condition of agents, their morale, and so on. Merchants and revolutionaries, soldiers and farmers, all formed strategies and made choices to reach their short- and long-term goals within their environment, their space.

Historical games model historical problem spaces in significantly different ways from narrative historical texts (McCall, 2012b: 13–21, 2016a: 8–10). The basic distinction is that games are interactive where text-narrative histories are fixed. Texts are fixed by the author and though, of course they can be interpreted in many ways by readers, the reality of the actual letters on the actual pages is objective and fixed and the narrative outcome of the text is fixed. For example, every reader that reads the book as designed will experience the same words in the same order. To that extent, the narrative outcomes of the text are fixed. Videogames (and boardgames for that matter) are interactive. The player is faced with meaningful choices and a variety of possible narrative outcomes based on those choices. Different players playing the game as designed will

experience different scenes and episodes in different orders, a different narrative overall. In practice, this means historical games will necessarily include counterfactual history, events and outcomes that did not hap-

pen, but might have.

Crusader Kings II, for example, allows a player to start their games at various times in the 9th to 15th centuries CE. At any giv-

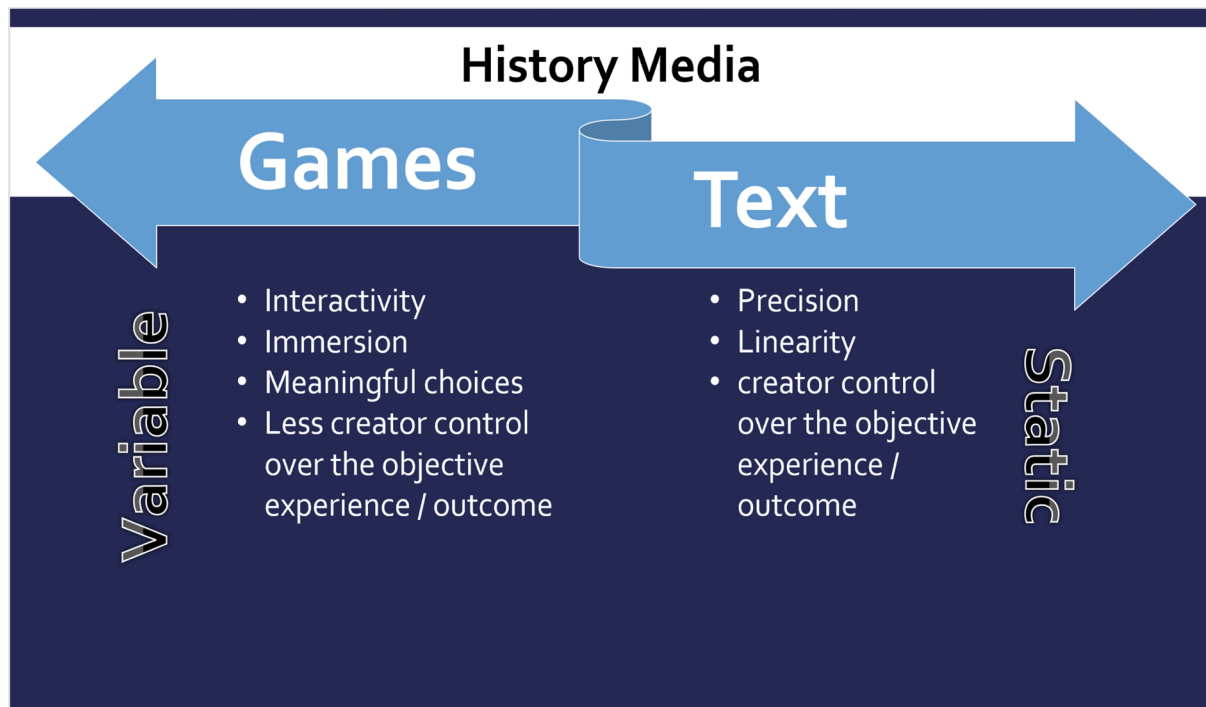


Figure 7. History media.

en date, the world map is divided into territories under the control of historical local rulers according to the historical evidence the game developers have been able to find. So, to use the European Middle Ages as an example, starting the game in late 1066, the player finds William of Normandy as the new king of England. The game designers did not stop with historical monarchs; lesser nobles generally correspond to historically documentable agents when that information is known, and the political boundaries of the world map change to match the history of the time and place. Thus, to a certain extent, *Crusader Kings II* accurately simulates the political geography of the time period in its various starting points. Once the player selects a dynasty to control and starts to play, however, the game simulates the actions of all the lords great and small in the game that the player does not control. Each lord operates according to the rules and priorities established in the game code. The player's freedom of choice and the fact that artificial intelligence (AI) agents' choic-

es are coded as probabilities, not certainties, means that the narrative of gameplay will bear similarities to the broader historical context of the period and place but almost certainly not match the specific historical chronology. So, one can centralize eleventh-century England under King Harold instead of William the Conqueror, lead a Mongol king to conquer all of Eurasia, and so on (McCall, 2012b: 12-16, 2016a: 8-10, 2018: 408-409).

This key feature of historical games, interactivity and, as a result, counterfactual outcomes, makes games potentially a very powerful medium for exploring the past. Historical games, in short, can do a very good job presenting the past in terms of systems and interactions, the causal connections that made past societies and people act the way they did. They can also represent the past, to a certain extent, as it seemed to agents at the time, as a contextualized world of possibilities where agents make choices in the hopes of achieving or avoiding certain outcomes, without any



Figure 8. A counterfactual history: Norwegian control of England in *Crusader Kings II* (screen capture from the game; Paradox Interactive, 2012).

certainly how everything will come out in the end. Indeed, this is how life is experienced for most of us, past and present. Interestingly, however, as Coplestone (2017) noted, the standard form of representing the past, textual history, tends to present the past as anything but open-ended, as simply a linear set of events destined to turn out the way they did. Games offer a sense of exploration, of control, of possibility, possibly a sense of sober consideration, not just passive determinism. As such they can helpfully move history education beyond the archetypal monotony of “one damned thing after another.”

Historical games generally make two kinds of claims to being historical, to conforming with evidence and scholarship

about the past: implicit and explicit. Essentially, all historical games make implicit claims to having at least some accurate historical detail. Consider this: When designers craft a historical game, they can choose to make it about a historical topic and world – *Civilization* or *Call of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed* – or not – *Scrabble*, *Super Mario Odyssey*, and so on. By opting to connect the game to a historical world with historical names, visuals, symbols, and rules, the designers implicitly suggest the game is historical to some extent and has some level of accurate portrayal of the past – though of course that level can vary widely within and between games.

Many historical game publishers go beyond these implicit claims to claim explicit-



Figure 9. Implicit claims to historical accuracy: *Scrabble* and *Super Mario Odyssey* vs *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed*. Sources: *Scrabble* (boardgamegeek.com); *Super Mario Odyssey* (screen capture from the game; Nintendo, 2017); *Call of Duty: WWII* (screen capture from the game; Activision, 2017); *Assassin's Creed Origins* (screen capture from the game; Ubisoft, 2017).

ly that their games are historically accurate. “Historical accuracy” is a problematic term in-and-of itself and means different things to different people. Coppleson (2017) found in her research that many video game designers understood “accuracy” in terms of verisimilitude, correctly portraying architecture and material culture. Many players, on the other hand, considered accuracy to be judged in the degree to which a game matched something they had read (Coppleson, 2017). Gilbert (2019), however, found some players judged games to be more accurate than history texts to the extent that the games seem to espouse more diverse points of view than standard historical textbooks or teachings. Those investigating the connections between video games and history have their different definitions too and some advocate distinguishing between accuracy, defined as exact capturing of historical factual details, and authenticity, a more systems-based general feel that may err on details but gets an overall valid impression (Chapman, 2016; McCall & Chapman, 2017, 2018). Still, many would recognize historically accurate or even historically authentic representations of the past must conform to some debatable extent to sound historical evidence. In other words, they are consistent with at least some of the evidence. And this is what some game developers explicit-

ly claim. The manual for *Civilization IV*, for example, boldly proclaims:

“*Civilization IV* is the latest iteration of *Sid Meier’s Civilization*, first released in the early 1990’s. From its inception the *Civilization* series has been acknowledged as the first and best world history simulation, lauded for its incredible depth of play and its extraordinary addictive nature.” – (2K Games, 2005)

And Paradox Interactive claims its game, *Europa Universalis IV* allows one to “Rule [their] nation through the centuries, with unparalleled freedom, depth and historical accuracy” (in store.steampowered.com; accessed on 04/Apr/2019). Activision, publishers of the 2017 World War II shooter, *Call of Duty: WWII*, crowed, “our teams at Sledgehammer and Raven (...) captured the epic scale and authentic atmosphere of the most brutal war ever fought” (Jones, 2017). Creative Assembly, makers of the historical *Total War* series, played with definitions some, but still claimed their historical games conform to historical evidence when a spokesperson noted, “Authenticity is probably a better word than accuracy, and that’s what we aim for” (Brown, 2013).

Historical games not only promise to connect players to a real past, however; they promise all the traditional appeals of video games, elements that shape the type of history these games deliver. Beyond the



Figure 10. *Total War: Rome 2*, screen capture from the game (Sega, 2013).

tendency to cast players as goal-oriented agents within a problem space, video games often seek to indulge power fantasies where players have not just choices, but interesting and important choices that determine the fate of the game world. And because games try to satisfy this desire to make important decisions, they tend to be made about topics that seem more readily cast in heroic terms. This is at least part of the reason why there are very few peasant agriculture history games or games about herding flocks – despite the importance of these activities in human history – but there are myriad games about battles and politics.

Several other common biases of the medium are worth noting. Beyond presenting agents as empowered goal-seekers who face interesting choices, historical games also tend to simplify and streamline the topics they cover to make them more readily graspable, and, as a result, more appealing to consumers. Converting the health of soldiers into hit-points, calculating the ex-

perience of a player agent in terms of levels, treating all the nutritional requirements of humans as a simple all-purpose food commodity, expressing diplomatic relationships as positive or negative numbers. These are all examples of simplification and abstraction (McCall, 2012b).

On top of designers' goals to craft engaging gameplay, and the historical problem space framework, game histories – like indeed all historical media – are also shaped by their designers' understandings of the past. At a basic level, when a designer attempts to model the past, the elements in a game function according to that designer's understanding of the past. To give some recent examples, the *Civilization* series continues to emphasize the designers' understandings that advantageous geography and the development of Western arcs of technology are primary determinants in a civilization's success, a quantifiable success often expressed in militaristic terms. The Roman city-builder game from last decade,



Figure 11. *CivCity: Rome*, screen capture from the game (2K Games, 2006).

CivCity: Rome, has a happiness level that is essentially a material comfort level, and this measures the success of the player. In other words, the game promotes the “bread and circuses” approach to government – give the people material gifts and entertainment, and they will be happy. The popular *Total War* series suggests that morale is a critical part of battles, because soldiers fight not until they die, not always anyway, but until their morale dips too low and they flee in fear. None of these understandings are necessarily in conflict with historical evidence. They simply illustrate that designer’s understandings of the past shape their games (McCall, 2010; McCall, 2014).

GAMING THE PAST: VIDEO GAMES AND HISTORICAL THINKING INSIDE AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Designers do a considerable amount of history when crafting their historical games, and this alone suffices to make them an interesting manifestation of public history for historians to explore. These games also have great potential to inspire and enhance all sorts of historical inquiries in and outside of the classroom. Since 2005, I have advocated that historical games’ ability to:

- immerse and engage through choice and multi-modal channels,
- provide systems-based interpretations that emphasize causal connections,
- and
- offer historical problem space approaches to understanding the past,

makes them useful tools for formal history education. Treating games as historical interpretations to critique, not as factual accounts, is critical to this approach. In other words, teachers and students should approach historical video games critically, study historical evidence, discuss ways the games simulate the past effectively and ways that they misrepresent it. This ap-

proach integrates reading historical sources, having discussions, direct instruction segments, and gameplay in class, and engaging in activities ranging from discussion to critical analytical writing, all designed to get students thinking about the historical claims of game models, and thereby, hopefully, developing a greater understanding of the past by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the game versions. At the same time, I have explored the flip side of the coin, students crafting historical simulations as a way to practice the craft of historians, think carefully about cause and effect, and explore the choices of historical agents in the past. Most recently that has manifested itself in research and work on *Twine*, the choice-based interactive text tool, that allows students to research and craft interactive historical texts, allows them, in short, to do interactive digital history (McCall, 2016b, 2016c). The powerful potential of historical video games as pedagogical tools for history education is just starting to be realized.²

Even when not used in class as part of well-crafted learning environments, however, historical video games are an important medium of participatory public history. Players do history just by playing, for they interact with the game and engage in play that leads to historical narratives. Theorists about public history talk about the idea of shared authority, that non-academic historians, the public, can share authority for reconstructing and interpreting the past with academic historians. Game players and designers also share authority for reconstructing the past in video games. The game does nothing without a player, and so the act of playing is, in a very real sense, a dialogue between player and designer about what the past was like and how it functioned (McCall, 2018).

There is some research in this area, trying to understand what players think about as they play and reflect upon a historical game, though more is needed (Gilbert, 2019). Internet game forum discussions

²For my work in the field, see McCall, 2011: *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (Routledge) and visit my work page on Gaming the Past (<https://gamingthepast.net/theory-practice/my-work/>).

offer an important and largely untapped resource for investigating the historical reasoning and journeys of game players. True, most game players likely never post on game forums. So, one can rightly question how representative forum posts are of game-players' thoughts in general. Still, they are an important resource for understanding some of the possibilities for players' historical thinking: since the forums allow essentially any gamer to participate in them, they publicize players' ideas ranging from support to analysis and criticism of their games. Forum threads, therefore, illustrate some of the types of experiences and understandings players *can have* interacting with these games. This is a critical point: the forums show a range of possible interactions with games available to anyone who wants to share their thoughts, and these interactions are no less possible for those who choose never to post. In short, the forums tell us what kind of reasoning can happen, a critical data point for those investigating historical games as media for learning history (McCall, 2018).

Forum posts suggest that some players engage in considerable amounts of historical reasoning as they reflect upon and discuss their gameplay. Discussion topics include:

- the difference between a fixed representation of the past and a simulation;
- the tensions that often exist between historical accuracy and engaging gameplay;
- the role of counterfactual history in games;
- how accurately games simulate elements of world history ranging from a historical state's political and military power, to the role of women in the politics of a period, a religion's characteristics, and to institutions of slavery.

Sometimes posters just assume the truth of their historical claims. Other times they provide reasonable historical statements ("facts") to back their assertions. Occasionally, they refer to a historian's work or text to back up their claims. In these ways, posters clearly engage in significant historical thinking on varied important topics and

also think about the accuracy of the games (McCall, 2018)

In short, historical video games have an impact on how players approach and understand the past (McCall, 2018; Gilbert, 2019). Indeed, they can serve as foils for important arguments about past and present. It's time to consider this final point in our exploration of historical video games as means of encountering, learning, and thinking about the past.

WHEN GAMES ABOUT THE PAST TROUBLE THE PRESENT

Far from desiccated topics of debate only of interest to antiquarians, video games histories inspire intense, sometimes inflammatory debates about past, how it is portrayed, whether those portrayals are historically accurate, and how those portrayals affect the present. This final section will examine a few cases where contemporary controversies have arisen about how accurately certain video games represent the past.³

Some video games have proven to be politically charged in how they represent military and political powers in the past, causing some to challenge their historical accuracy. *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014), for example, places the player in control of a fictional Assassin based in Paris during the French Revolution. The game, developed by French company Ubisoft, sparked criticism from some French politicians, most notably former presidential candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon. He challenged the seemingly bourgeois depictions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette as honorable victims of revolution, the radical Maximilien Robespierre, author of the Terror, as a vicious despot, and the Parisian working class as a bloodthirsty mob. Debates about these and other actors in the Revolution have existed since the time of the Revolution itself and continue to take place, now around video games (Chibber, 2014).

Company of Heroes 2, a real-time strategy game about the Eastern Front in World War

³I gave a talk on this at Cincinnati Country Day School in October 2018, available on the school's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/CincinnatiCountryDaySchool/videos/280069235998930/).



Figure 12. *Assassin's Creed Unity*, screen capture from the game (Ubisoft, 2014).

II, was released in 2013, causing an uproar among some in Eastern Europe and Russia. Some of those upset signed a digital petition, hoping to block the sale of the game in the Russian Commonwealth. Critics "review-bombed" the game, flooding a videogame review site, in this case Metacritic, with negative reviews to lower dramatically its overall review scores. At issue was the depiction of the Soviet Army and war effort in the Second World War. At different times

in the game, the Soviet army is depicted as sending soldiers into battle without rifles, ordering officers to shoot any soldiers who retreated, and fielding battalions of convicted criminals. Critics suggested that these elements caricature Eastern Europeans as violent and obedient to the point of self-destruction and the Soviet state as evil. Relic defended its history and noted that there is enough evidence to suggest that two totalitarian states were brutal in their clashes on



Figure 13. *Company of Heroes 2*, screen capture from the game (Sega, 2013).

the Eastern Front and soldiers there were often caught between a rock and a hard place, between their enemies on the battlefield and their own states (Campbell, 2013).

The *Civilization* series, created by Sid Meier back in 1991 and now in its sixth iteration, has received significant criticism not only for its questionably accurate portrayals of the past but also the problematic messages those portrayals send to players. In this extremely popular strategy game franchise, players take on the role of leader of a “civilization.” These are ostensibly historical national leaders, but functionally deities, the guiding intelligence for their civilizations. Starting with the foundation of their first city in about 4000 BCE on a world map of earth-like or random geographic features, players navigate geography, and compete, collaborate, and fight with rival civilizations in a race to create the best civilization. Some have objected to the game’s caricature of historical figures and cultures. Other have criticized that the surest path to victory, to having the “best” civilization, is following the historical imperialist trajectory of technological and military development found in Western Civilization (Poblocki, 2002). Still others have pointed to the game’s problematic presentation of techno-

logical and industrial growth. In most play-throughs, a civilization can truly expand to all the corners of the world, exploiting ever more land and resources, without any problematic effects on the environment. Interestingly enough, anthropogenic global warming and its effect on sea levels were built into the earliest games of the series, *Civilization I* (1991) and *Civilization II* (1996), and not seen as particularly controversial. The phenomenon disappeared from *Civilizations III* through *V* (Tharoor, 2016). Most recently the developers of *Civilization VI* (2016) have released an expansion, *Gathering Storm* (2019), that adds, among other human made crises, anthropogenic climate change.

Still others have questioned how *Civilization* portrays certain historical leaders and cultures. Recently the Cree Nation criticized *Civilization VI* for including the Cree, without their consultation, as a historical civilization along with their historical chief Poundmaker. Said Cree Head Milton Tootoosis, “It perpetuates this myth that First Nations had similar values that the colonial culture has, and that is one of conquering other peoples and accessing their land” (Chalk, 2018). Tootoosis further opined, “That is totally not in concert with



Figure 14. A 10-year (real world years!) game of *Civilization II*, screen capture from the game (MicroProse, 1996). Image extracted from Biessener (2012).

our traditional ways and world view (...) It's a little dangerous for a company to perpetuate that ideology that is at odds with what we know. [Chief Poundmaker] was certainly not in the same frame of mind as the colonial powers" (Chalk, 2018).

This concern about historical accuracy takes a grim turn when some argue, even

against the historical evidence, that a game obscures the reality of the past in order to be "politically correct" and inclusive of diversity. *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017), for example, since its unveiling, has sparked debate and a considerable amount of racist rant and memes on Steam forums and elsewhere about the skin tones of ancient Egyptians, ancient Mediterranean peoples, and



Figure 15. Chief Poundmaker, from *Civilization VI*, screen capture from the game (2K Games, 2005).

so on. Much of this discussion focused on whether Ubisoft was historically accurate in its racial portrayals of ancient Egyptians. Though not always, much of this discussion reeked of blatant efforts to promote racist ideology in the present by attempting to apply it to the past (as a search in the Steam forums under *Assassin's Creed Origins* will illustrate) (Tamburro, 2017).

Similar debates about including women as protagonists in historical video games have surfaced in recent years. Creative Assembly's *Total War: Rome 2*, a strategy game in which players command an ancient state and its armies, received an update in March of 2018 that increased slightly the chances of certain states to receive female generals as potential recruits. These adjustments corresponded with Creative Assembly's release of the Desert Kingdoms Culture Pack that added Kush and Nabataea, among oth-



Figure 16. *Assassin's Creed Origins* screenshots (top; Ubisoft, 2017), compared to some Roman Period Fayum mummy portraits (bottom; Wikimedia Commons).



Figure 17: *Total War: Rome 2*, Desert Kingdoms Culture Pack, screen capture from the game (Sega, 2013).

er new playable states (Grayson, 2018; Lukomski, 2018; Scott-Jones, 2018).

Ultimately, the changes assigned some ancient states in the game a 10–15% chance to receive female generals as potential recruits. A few received greater chances. The ancient Nubian state of Kush, for example, received a 50% chance to reflect the greater frequency of women in political and military roles there. The most historically patriarchal societies – Rome, Greece, and Carthage – had no chance of recruitable female generals ap-

pearing.

Several months later, in September 2018, Creative Assembly released a tweet to respond to forum posters⁴ who did not condone the inclusion of women. The developers spoke in terms that demonstrated their interest in history and in representing the past in fairly viable, broad strokes. They stood by the changes.

Almost immediately after the tweet, negative reviewers review-bombed *Total War:*

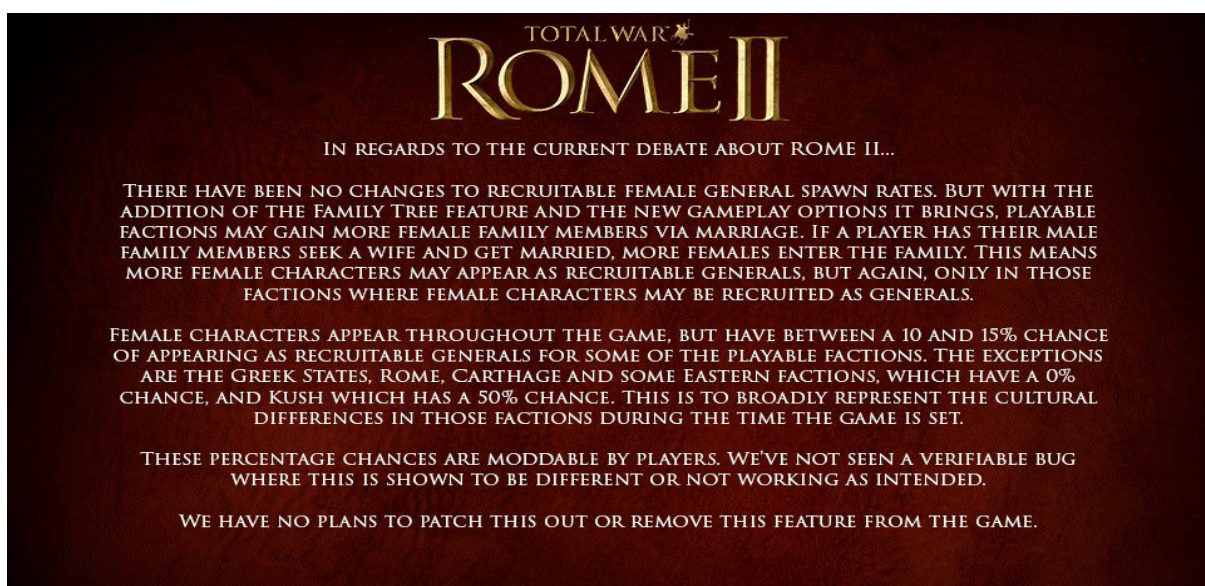


Figure 18. Creative Assembly's tweet from 25/Sep/2018.

⁴ To read reviews, go to: [https://store.steampowered.com/app/792520/Total War ROME II Desert Kingdoms Culture Pack/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/792520/Total_War_ROME_II_Desert_Kingdoms_Culture_Pack/)

Rome 2 in the Steam reviews section for the game.⁵ Many of the protests claimed that the game was historically inaccurate in its inclusion of women in the game. Much of the criticism also suggested that Creative Assembly was pandering to the so-called “SJWs”, or Social Justice Warriors, a label of derision often applied in forums to designate those who are too interested in sup-

porting diversity and inclusion (Grayson, 2018; Lukomski, 2018; Scott-Jones, 2018).

Battlefield V, a popular first-person shooter game focused on World War 2, became the topic for a similar debate. A trailer⁶ launched for the game in May 2018 included a female sniper with a prosthetic arm engaged in a pitched skirmish. Critics, often



Figure 19. Steam customer-review graph for *Total War: Rome 2*.

in volatile misogynistic terms, protested the game’s inclusion of playable women characters as historically inaccurate (Plunkett, 2018).

The striking feature of the *Total War: Rome 2* and *Battlefield 5* controversies is not so much that the critics of these aspects of the game – the inclusion of more women characters in political and militaristic historical contexts – often use inflammatory language calling out “the politically correct” and “Social Justice Warriors,” as interesting as that is. What is truly striking is that these critics levy the at-first-glance-more-objective claim that Creative Assembly and EA DICE are in the wrong because these features make their games “historically inaccurate.” In reality, however, there are any number of basic features of these games and indeed the larger *Total War* and *Battlefield* series that fail the test of historical accuracy, if that means consistency with the critically researched available historical evidence. This was pointed out by Lukomski (2018) in an insightful essay titled: “Accuracy” vs

Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games. And, in fact, there is ancient evidence that, in some cultures, women indeed participated in the political and military conflicts of their states as rulers, generals, and even just combatants. The same is true for World War II where women did play combat roles, especially in the Soviet forces, legendary for lethal women snipers and an air unit, the Night Witches, composed entirely of women pilots (Arbuckle, 2016; Holland, 2017). In short, it appears a number of posters have appealed to historical accuracy to support what essentially are racist and sexist arguments to limit diversity and representation in games.

The case of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018, henceforth *KC:D*) is a particularly interesting one to end this exploration with, because of a role reversal: instead of a game developer, as in the case of Ubisoft, Creative Assembly, and EA DICE including diverse people, increasing representations of diversity, and sparking cries of historical inaccuracy, the developers of *KC:D* presented

⁵ Search for reviews from September 2018 on Steam (https://store.steampowered.com/app/214950/Total_War_ROME_II_Empire_Edition/ and https://store.steampowered.com/app/792520/Total_War_ROME_II_Desert_Kingdoms_Culture_Pack/).

⁶ You can find it on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7ZpQadiyqs>).



Figure 20. Cover art for *Battlefield 5* (EA DICE, 2018).

a largely monolithically white, patriarchal, Catholic vision of Medieval Bohemia that pushed some to question how historically accurate this un-diverse vision of the Middle Ages was. In response to a query from a reader, the blogger at People of Color in European Art History investigated the game's Kickstarter and raised questions about the game's very un-diverse portrayal of medieval folk in Bohemia.⁷ Angry Internet sparring followed, and ultimately *KC:D* lead designer, Daniel Vávra, tweeted, "would you please explain to me whats [sic] racist about telling the truth? There were no black people in medieval Bohemia. Period," a problematically binary and ill-defined statement.⁸ In response to this doubling down, considerable debate has spawned on the Internet over whether indeed there were people of color in this small section of Medieval Bohemia.

In response to the ensuing flame war, blogger Robert Guthrie noted Vávra's claims were misleadingly selective. There are many elements in *KC:D*, Guthrie (2015) notes, that are not historically accurate, but ignored in the game designers' claims to accuracy. And so, it is difficult to avoid

the conclusion captured in Guthrie's title: "When historical accuracy is used to deny agency" (Guthrie, 2015). By insisting this exclusion of people of color and women in anything other than stock subordinate roles is required of a historically accurate game, *KC:D* essentially erases these groups from history, at least from the audiences of their game.

All of this raises interesting questions for historians and history teachers who hope to leverage historical video games that are, like all historical sources, limited in their scope and representation of issues and people. Historical accuracy certainly seems to be a reasonable value for history educators, and reasonably accurate history by game designers seems to be a positive goal. But what happens if the claim of historical accuracy is used, not as the basis for civil discussion about the past and how it is represented but as a way to exclude others? There is, indeed, a critical point here. When whole groups of people are left out of historical narratives and analysis, whether in a history book, class lecture, or video game, the effect is to almost erase those people from the record. This is not a problem

⁷ You can see it on their website (<http://medievalpoc.tumblr.com/post/75252294049/hi-ive-been-looking-at-a-kickstarter-for-a>).

⁸ To see Vávra's tweet, go to: <https://twitter.com/DanielVavra/status/569686445344079872>

that is unique to historical video games, of course. Even the best historians must be selective in their treatments and topics and will have their own biases. Thoughtful and reasoned debate and discussion are critical to navigating the often-muddy waters of historical accuracy in video games.

And those thoughtful and reasoned debates can certainly take place in the classroom. When it comes to use in history classes, the learning experience enhanced by games will be successful to the extent educators and students ground their discussion and analysis in historical evidence. After all, a game that is largely historically inaccurate – however one wants to measure that – can still be useful for learning history because the flaws in the game provide grist for the mill of critique (McCall, 2010, 2011).

Historical games, accurate or loose, exclusive or inclusive, problematic or purposeful are history. They communicate their designers' understandings of the past, not only in terms of what the designers think about the past, but also in terms of what they think is important to know, engage, and remember. They offer the possibility to game the past, to immerse oneself in historical problem spaces, seek out goals, make choices, and see the impact of those choices in a causally-connected systems. Accordingly, they offer significant possibilities for learning history whether it comes to students honing their abilities to critique modern media or developing their appreciation of systems and problem spaces. Regardless of whether they are leveraged in formal history education, they communicate messages about the past that reach considerable numbers of people. They should not be ignored by anyone concerned with how the past is perceived, portrayed, and played.

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