DiGRA Italia, Roma Tre University, and LUDUS - Letture dell'Uso Digitale nell'Universo Storico
Histories in/at Play: Debates on Historical Game Studies
5-6th November 2020

The Historiographical Principles of Video Games

Andrew B.R. Elliott, University of Lincoln, UK

There has undoubtedly been something of an explosion in the popularity of Video Games over the late 20th and 21st centuries. What this explosion means for players, of course, has been the subject of countless studies. Until recently, what it means for history, was less well studied. Over the course of the past decade there has, however, been a movement underway to explore the historiographical implications of the variety and reach of historical representations, focused on a variety of critical aspects including affordances (Chapman 2016; Chapman and Linderoth 2015), players and modders (Copplestone and Dunne 2017; Cooper 2016; Apperley 2006; Apperley in Kapell and Elliott 2013), developers (Houghton 2016; Grufstedt 2016; Grufstedt and Fewster 2016), ideology (Hammar 2017a; 2017b), problem spaces (McCall 2011; 2012) and pedagogy (Shaffer 2006; Gee 2003; Brown 2008), among many others. Likewise, specific periods of history have been subjected to rigorous and insightful analysis, such as World Wars One and Two (Kempshall 2015; Salvati and Bullinger 2013), crusades (Horswell 2016; Throop 2019), the Middle Ages(Houghton n.d.; Cooper 2016; Kline 2014; Ashton and Kline 2012), classical antiquity (Beavers 2020), or early modernity (Winnerling and Kerschbaumer 2014).

What the range and quality of these various studies means is that there are at play a series of highly sophisticated and insightful ideas, which individually and cumulatively outline a number of historical analyses about what happens when an already constructed past becomes reconstructed by developers, then offered to players who are encouraged to construct, reconstruct and even deconstruct those past spaces in the entirely "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles". (Suits 2005, 55)

As such, within historical game studies we are both witnessing and (necessarily) taking part in a fascinating participatory project, which offers a means to explore historical engagement through a variety of lenses. of exploration of the ways in which historical responsibility—once devolved from the academic realms of the historians—becomes fragmented or dissolved entirely, leaving behind the open world of a potentially irresponsible ludic enterprise. Fortunately, recent years have seen a determined shift away from the tyranny of accuracy models, or fidelity analyses which seek only to enumerate deviations from the known historical record, or to laud those games which (in each individual writer's opinion) most closely ally with the interpretations currently applied to a specific moment of the past. The fidelity debate, as a forthcoming collection by Houghton and Alvestad makes abundantly clear, is far from helpful in unpacking the rich variety of historical engagements at play in the contemporary historical gaming landscape.

Simultaneously, in terms of its scholarly legitimacy, in addition to fighting off attacks from historians lamenting the absence of historical accuracy (though I acknowledge freely that this is something of a straw man argument, since most historians would reject such a simplistic view of history), games studies has itself clearly grown in confidence over the past two decades to evolve into a discipline proper. Where, as with cultural studies, television studies, media studies and their cognate disciplines, much of the late twentieth century was devoted to defending and proving their legitimacy, one of the initial responses was similar to that of the fidelity debate, namely to assert games studies' legitimacy by equating games with art. If they are artistic endeavours, they are valid, therefore games must be high art, and therefore we miss out on the ludic aspect of games, which is entirely to miss the point of why they are enjoyable.

However, rapidly moving away from the fidelity model and the games-as-serious-art model, historical games studies has followed two strands, broadly speaking, offering us new ways of exploring games through the lenses of players/developers (the industrial approach) or those of textual analysis (the hermeneutic approach). In doing so, Historical Games Studies has developed, rapidly. Thanks to the ingenuity, persistence and rigour of its chief proponents like Adam Chapman, Jeremiah McCall, Vicky Cooper and others, it has reached a point of new horizons.

DiGRA Italia, Roma Tre University, and LUDUS - Letture dell'Uso Digitale nell'Universo Storico
Histories in/at Play: Debates on Historical Game Studies
5-6th November 2020

Following the techno-euphoria of the dot-com enthusiasts of yesteryear, it is perhaps tempting to dub this brave new era Historical Games Studies 2.0. That may well be the case, but I leave it to others to discuss the terminology if they wish to do so. My point is that the new methodological freedom of a fully-fledged HGS community offers us exciting new frontiers in research. This paper, accordingly, is devoted to exploring one such frontier, and it is a paradoxical one which risks precisely the kind of scholarly impudence which I like to entertain. My point is this: First, as I argue above, I propose that we are now, in the era of problem spaces, affordances, frames and a well-developed audience/player studies methodology, able to outline some of the historiographical principles of Historical Games. It is not the case, to be clear, that these are reducible to three or four universal principles, etc: my interest is not so reductionist. Rather, my point is to suggest that HGS is at a sufficient point of maturity to be able to talk about its games as historiographical, rather than defending them from charges of inaccuracy, or being somehow 'bad' history.

My second point builds on the first, which is to follow the thinking of Emil Hammar, one of HGS's exciting contemporary voices. Hammar's work on the political economy of video games, in particular, offers a genuinely innovative new approach to thinking about historical representation in the context of HGS' maturity as a discipline. Thinking about games as constructed present space, rather than a failed past one (a genuinely historiographical turn), Hammar contends that some games "offer a historical virtual space that allows players to emancipate themselves from the usual hegemonic articulations of the past and instead to play with the past in ways that imaginations of new [ideological viewpoints] are made possible." (Hammar 2017b, 27) That ideological repositioning of the player, as an emancipation from traditional hegemonic articulations, means that the process of thinking about past spaces is no longer necessarily restricted to the past. Instead, because our understanding of the present is born from our understanding of the past conditions which led to now, (Kapell and Elliott 2013, 7ff) the historiographical principles of HGS can suddenly be widened to critical analysis of the hegemonic practices of the present.

Put alternatively, the historiographical principles of contemporary HGS have, thanks to the work, imagination, and rigour of its key thinkers, suddenly broken free of the past and now demand that we address them to present political concerns as a way of rejecting the contemporary moment as an inevitable, or contingent moment. The exciting question left to ask, then, is where do we go next? Or, rather, where will we have gone when we replay it?

Andrew B.R. Elliott is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Lincoln, where he works on the representation of history in film, television and video games. Author of *Remaking the Middle Ages* (on medieval film), and editor of *The Return of the Epic Film* and *Playing with the Past* (on the 21st-century epic and historically-themed video games, respectively), he has published on a number of aspects relating to historical film, television and video games, from the classical world to the Middle Ages. His recent research focuses on medievalism in online culture, political discourse and films from Tarkovsky to Tavernier. His most recent book is *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Boydell and Brewer, 2017).

Works cited

Apperley, Thomas H. 2006. 'Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres'. *Simulation Gaming* 37 (6): 6–23.

Ashton, Gail, and Daniel T. Kline. 2012. *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Beavers, Sian M. 2020. 'The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games'. PhD, The Open University. http://oro.open.ac.uk/69919/.

Brown, Harry J. 2008. *Videogames and Education*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

Chapman, Adam. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Chapman, Adam, and Jonas Linderoth. 2015. 'Exploring the Limits of Play : A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games'. In *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in*

DiGRA Italia, Roma Tre University, and LUDUS - Letture dell'Uso Digitale nell'Universo Storico
Histories in/at Play: Debates on Historical Game Studies
5-6th November 2020

Playful Environments, edited by Jonas Linderoth, Torill Elvira Mortensen, and Ashley M.L. Brown, 137–53. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315738680-9.

Cooper, Victoria Elizabeth. 2016. 'Fantasies of the North: Medievalism and Identity in Skyrim'. Phd, University of Leeds. http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/16875/.

Copplestone, Tara, and Daniel Dunne. 2017. 'Digital Media, Creativity, Narrative Structure and Heritage.' *Internet Archaeology*, no. 44. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.44.2.

Gee, James Paul. 2003. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grufstedt, Ylva. 2016. 'Video Games Can Help Us Understand Historical Change'. *Uutistamo.Fi*, November. https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/publications/video-games-can-help-us-understand-historical-change.

Grufstedt, Ylva, and Derek Fewster. 2016. 'Introduction: Gamevironments of the Past – A Broad Take on Games and History.' *Gamevironments* 2 (5): 1–7.

Hammar, Emil Lundedal. 2017a. 'Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry'. *Rethinking History* 21 (3): 372–95.

———. 2017b. 'The Political Economy of Historical Digital Games'. *Media Development* 64 (4): 25–28.

Horswell, Mike. 2016. 'Crusader Medievalism and Modernity in Britain'. In *Medievalism and Modernity*, edited by Karl Fugelso, Joshua Davies, and Sarah Salih, 19–28. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer.

Houghton, Robert. 2016. 'Where Did You Learn That? The Self-Perceived Educational Impact of Historical Computer Games on Undergraduates'. *Gamevironments* 5: 8–45.

———. n.d. 'Factual Accuracy and Mechanical Accuracy in Crusader Kings II'. *The Public Medievalist* (blog). Accessed 10 October 2014. http://www.publicmedievalist.com/ckii-houghton/.

Kapell, Matthew Wilhelm, and Andrew B.R. Elliott, eds. 2013. *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. New York & London: Bloomsbury.

Kempshall, Chris. 2015. *The First World War in Computer Games*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137491763.

Kline, Daniel T., ed. 2014. *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*. London & New York: Routledge.

McCall, Jeremiah. 2011. *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2012. 'Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History'. *History Teacher* 46 (1): 9–28.

Salvati, Andrew J., and Jonathan M. Bullinger. 2013. 'Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past'. In *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott, 153–67. New York & London: Bloomsbury.

Shaffer, David Williamson. 2006. *How Computer Games Help Children Learn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Suits, Bernard. 2005. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Ontario, NY and Plymouth: Broadview Press.

Throop, Susanna A. 2019. 'Engaging the Crusades in Context'. In *The Crusades in the Modern World: Engaging the Crusades, Volume Two*, edited by Mike Horswell and Akil N. Awan, 129–45. London & New York: Routledge.

Winnerling, Tobias, and Florian Kerschbaumer, eds. 2014. *Early Modernity and Video Games*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.