

Early Modernity and Video Games

Early Modernity and Video Games

Edited by

Tobias Winnerling and Florian Kerschbaumer

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

Early Modernity and Video Games,
Edited by Tobias Winnerling and Florian Kerschbaumer

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2014 by Tobias Winnerling, Florian Kerschbaumer and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5394-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5394-1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	ix
The Devil is in the Details: Why Video Game Analysis is such a Hard Task for Historians, and how we nevertheless try Florian Kerschbaumer and Tobias Winnerling	
Prelude.....	xxi
Special Difficulties, Special Opportunities Tom Chatfield	
Section One: Methodology and Theory	
Chapter One.....	2
The Game is a Medium: The Game is a Message Rolf Nohr	
Chapter Two.....	24
Do Computers Play History? Josef Köstlbauer	
Chapter Three.....	38
The History beyond the Frame: Off-Screen Space in the Historical First-Person Shooter Adam Rowan Chapman	
Chapter Four.....	52
Homo Ex Machina? – Cyber-Renaissance and Transhumanism in Deus Ex: Human Revolution René Schalleger	
Chapter Five.....	64
Does History Play the Role of Storyline? Historiographical Periodization as Theme in Video Game Series Simon Maria Hassemer	

Chapter Six.....	76
Research the Spinning Jenny, Gain +8% Wealth by Textile Industries: The Transformation of Historical Technologies into the Virtual World of Empire: Total War Lutz Schröder	
Chapter Seven.....	91
Construction as a Condition to Win: Depiction and Function of Early Modern Architecture and Urban Landscapes in Strategy and Economic Simulation Games Marc Bonner	
Chapter Eight.....	105
Pharaoh Mao Zedong and the Musketeers of Babylon: The Civilization Series between Primordialist Nationalism and Subversive Parody Stefan Donecker	
Chapter Nine.....	123
Towards an Analysis of Strategies of Authenticity Production in World War II First-Person Shooter Games Tim Raupach	
Section Two: Case Studies	
Chapter One.....	140
Narration and Narrative: (Hi-)Story Telling in Video Games Angela Schwarz	
Chapter Two.....	162
The Remediation of History in Assassin's Creed Simon Huber	
Chapter Three.....	175
Players in the Digital City: Immersion, History and City Architecture in the Assassin's Creed Series Gernot Hausar	
Chapter Four.....	189
Games within the Game: On the History of Playing in Assassin's Creed II Andreas Fischer	

Chapter Five	201
Assassin's Creed and the Fantasy of Repetition	
Martin Isaac Weis	
Bibliography	212
Monographs	212
Chapters	218
Articles.....	225
Web Sources	227
Films	231
Games	231
Contributors.....	237

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are tremendously grateful to the following individuals and organisations that made this book possible:

First of all we want to thank the association of the 'Freunde und Förderer der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf', the Philosophical Faculty of Heinrich-Heine University Düsseldorf and the Faculty of Humanities of Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt who contributed funds for the conference 'Early Modernity and Video Games' in Düsseldorf, March 2013, which was the starting point for this book. In this context we would like also to thank the Düsseldorf State and University Library for providing the necessary rooms and being such a friendly host.

A heart-felt "thank you" goes to Anja Burwitz, Jan Eikenbusch and Katharina Heitmann who contributed significantly to the editorial work. We are also indebted to Lorna Schatzmayr and Marion Koschier for their critical comments and linguistic annotations. Silvia Osada has to be credited for her invaluable support and help in all organisational matters. Without any of you neither the conference nor the book would ever have come to be finished.

We would especially like to thank Prof. Achim Landwehr and Prof. Reinhard Stauber, who supported this project from the beginning.

Finally, our thanks go to the authors – their ideas and thoughts have vastly broadened our perspectives on games and history, and without them, there simply would be no book.

Save game and retry!

INTRODUCTION

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS: WHY VIDEO GAME ANALYSIS IS SUCH A HARD TASK FOR HISTORIANS, AND HOW WE NEVERTHELESS TRY

FLORIAN KERSCHBAUMER
AND TOBIAS WINNERLING

I Terms and Conditions of Use

Before continuing to the chapters of this book, please read down to the end of this introduction and accept the terms and conditions set down therein.

As you have evidently continued reading, you seem to be more of a scientist than a gamer, or at least appear to expect more from our terms and conditions than most people who download games do from theirs. We will try our very best not to disappoint you, but for those of you already searching for the “I accept”-button in order to be able to skip this introduction and move on to the chapters, we have good news; you may do so without running the risk that we will sue you for unlicensed use or sell your private data to others across the globe. We promise. As to making a game of it; if you do not continue reading, you will never know.

Well, by now you will have become aware that this is of course a rather crude analysis of a much more complex situation and that the term “game” is probably not very appropriate in this context. Moreover it is not even clear what “game” should mean in this context at all, making the whole concept a rather poor analogy. However, in many ways, precisely this analysis turns out to be a reasonably good analogy of the situation of video game analyses in the historical sciences. Most of them seem to be

rather crude, with basic terms not well defined and simple short stories made out of complex interwoven situational contexts. So why not just quit the field, pressing “I accept” and leave to get on with some real work?

In his widely discussed bestseller *FUN INC.*, Tom Chatfield claims that video games are one of the most serious businesses in the 21st century (2012).¹ And, for many reasons, he is definitely right; every day millions of people play video games on their consoles, personal computers and mobiles. The times when gaming was something for loners in their quiet little rooms are not only long gone but gone for good. Nowadays, in the Internet Age, gamers from around the world play together in huge networks and experience exciting adventures without any national borders. In addition, the gaming industry has exploded and no longer has to fear any comparisons regarding sales figures with Hollywood or the music business, as Angela Schwarz points out in her contribution to this volume. Bestselling game titles have been sold in millions, and there are a lot of them out there that can boast such records. The *ASSASSIN’S CREED* Series, of which several dozen million units have been sold, if the publisher is to be believed, is only one of them, but one that falls well within the range of this volume and is therefore duly treated, in the second part of this volume, as an exemplary cross-sectional study.

Video games have also become an issue under public discussion where an irreconcilable battle is being waged between people who emphasize the great potential of this medium, because of the way it encourages creativity, troubleshooting and teamwork, and those who represent the exact opposite. They warn of the dangers of isolation, learning disabilities and the promotion of violence.²

Alongside this partly populist discussion, the sciences are also dealing intensively with the topic. Media Studies, Psychology, Education Science, as well as technically and economically oriented perspectives are occupied with the phenomenon of video games. The Historical Sciences however, with few outstanding exceptions, have more or less neglected this topic in recent years; a fairly incomprehensible situation because large numbers of video games deal with historical content and day by day millions of players from around the world take a walk back into a virtual past in which they are confronted with historical images. However not only should the mediation of history be interesting for Historians, but also the medium itself, due to the ways it challenges us with its concept of narration,

technical possibilities and force of attraction. Surely this provides reason enough to focus on video games from a historical perspective?

Thus we should again take the advice of Tom Chatfield, who recommends us "*to talk seriously about the world as it is: about how to get the best out of its media, where the worst really lies, and what the games we play can tell us about ourselves and our future*".³

And of course this also involves talking about what video games can tell us regarding history. But, before doing so, we still owe you the *terms of use* so that you may read or ignore them as you see fit. The two sections of this book are outlined below. They are unequal halves, but still halves in that we think reading one without the other would provide only half the insight and half the fun. Now, as these are elaborated in further detail, just a few words about the literature which is not. We collected all the literature from the contributions, to form one comprehensive bibliography that you may perhaps find helpful, organized into the different kinds of sources and resources available. So, if you are reading this book with the aim of gaining a quick overview of the field, first take a look at the bibliography, for it will take time to gain such insight from the chapters.

Bet you are already leafing through the pages anyway to thumb down there right now?

If you are not (or have already finished doing so), here's for something completely different: the contributions.

II How to handle this book: Section 1

The aim of this section was to collect glimpses of what could evolve into a methodological framework for the historian's approach to game analysis. The individual contributions each follow a clear focus and path of inquiry and may be taken as instances of the possibilities for research rather than as maxims on how matters really are. Taken together, we think they illuminate the potential avenues and opportunities for further research as well as the difficulties that can be encountered. While they of course can be consulted selectively for guidance in a single direction, taken together they encompass a broader field and open up larger perspectives that may come in very handy for properly situating your historical video game study in the relevant context.

Rolf Nohr (Brunswick) opens the section with a contribution that explicitly “*will not deal with history*” (p. 5) but with games as media. In doing so, he focuses on the discourses in, as well as, on inter-discursive connections between the specific elements of games to show that films like *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* and video games like *AGE OF EMPIRES III* do not so much try to provide a kind of window on the past, but rather to hide their specific mediality by clothing it in colourful historical garb. In this way their use of history is decidedly utilitarian and designed to authenticate themselves. This presents the researcher with the problem of overcoming the transparency such media strive for as they tend to make themselves and their workings invisible to the consumer. The scheme Nohr proposes to alleviate these difficulties, is based on a critical discourse analysis of elements of game content that to us seems highly useful for historians dealing with games no matter whether it originally deals with history or not.

In a similar vein, Josef Köstlbauer (Vienna) probes into the issue of simulation and poses the question as to whether games are akin to simulations, his example being the military simulations used at least from the 18th and 19th centuries to prepare for real war. Where are the boundaries between enactments of battle for enjoyment and for matters of life and death to be drawn? Are *SID MEIER’S GETTYSBURG* or *EUROPA UNIVERSALIS* simulations of the latter kind? As he explores the complicated history of both the term “simulation” itself and of the early modern military simulations and compares them to video games, we begin to become aware of the difficult problems underlying this seemingly simple comparison; what are the parameters that can qualify something as a dynamic tool for the modelling of real processes, whether past or present, rather than those that provide a method for fun?

Adam Chapman (Hull) then reminds us that the construction of games not only consists of what is on the screen but also and perhaps more importantly, of what is not on the screen. He deals with off-screen space as the part of a game’s visual narration that seems to be pure imagination as it comprises the spaces that the game does not show but that are presumably there. He deals with *BROTHERS IN ARMS* as a prime example of this use of space in games as it is a first person shooter where only those parts of the game your character can see at any given moment are shown, whereas those you don’t see, for example, what is behind your back or where your enemies are positioned, are of vital importance for you if you are to succeed in the game. This broadening of the perspectives on parameters of

the construction of games is also vitally important to us, as it reminds us that it is just as necessary to pay attention to what the games imply as to what they ostensibly indicate.

The situation of a given game in a broader framework of reference, with attention to details both ostensible and implied, is also attempted by René Schalleger (Klagenfurt). In a close examination of *DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION*, he first tries to show how specific in-game choices are connected to meta-choices concerned with issues of truth, responsibility and moral duty. He then proceeds to decipher the efforts to deconstruct common game patterns and tropes presented by the publishers of *HUMAN REVOLUTION*. And, as in-game choices point to larger issues, including in-game elements, which, as Schalleger maintains, in turn point to larger historical references, a meta-historical framing surrounds the game and subliminally infuses it with new layers of meaning. In this instance the games point to the Renaissance in many different ways, and via this Renaissance connection not only to Early Modernity but also to philosophical concepts such as Trans-Humanism that can be seen to be based on Renaissance ideas too.

Simon Hassemmer (Freiburg) further elaborates on questions of narrative. He suggests that the video game is not a narrative medium as commonly understood by this term, but that it broadens our perspective again by reminding us that games seldom exist alone. Games that sell, or games that excel, are likely to be continued by sequels. The series may be connected chronologically and structurally, as *AGE OF EMPIRES* or *ASSASSIN'S CREED*, or mainly structurally, as *TOTAL WAR*, but in any case encloses a master narrative within the arc of the series as a whole. He then proceeds to a methodological proposal for handling video games in research via video-graphics and runs test cases with and without recording the actual player in addition to recording the game played. This method seems to be able to overcome a lot of the difficulties of quotation and illustration that hamper so many of the existing fine game analyses and deserves every attention, especially when including players' reactions and commentaries.

After the concentration on narrative issues, Lutz Schröder (Hamburg) once more focuses on choices. He attempts the narrowing of the focus to one single game of a series – *EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR* – and further, down to one seemingly unimportant micro-element of that title. As he ponders the small influence of inventing Hargreaves's Spinning Jenny in the game and

the importance attached to it in historiography, he unravels a lot of the game's built-in master narrative and patterns of authentication and construction. Read against the preceding contributions, it is instructive that many of the questions raised may be answered for a given game by concentrating on limitations rather than possibilities. As Schröder shows how players' decisions are restricted and directed by the limited access to key fields such as politics, trade and research granted to players, we become aware that games are concerned with complexity management, and manage history's complexity differently from history books.

Marc Bonner (Cologne) turns quite literally to the depiction of historical content, as he explores architecture displayed in video games. Though the buildings are stylised – typological instances of functional categories of architecture – Bonner successfully applies not only Baudrillard's concept of *virtual architecture* but also the contrasting enlightenment concept of *architecture parlante* to those pixel signifiers of historicity. He directly relates distortions in scale, shape, or the metamorphosis undergone by buildings when changed into game graphics, to the overall patterns of game construction and game play; form indeed follows function. But this does not mean that those exteriors are meaningless; they are a vital part of the games' strategy of authentication. Bonner makes it clear that the visual construction of a virtual space convincingly perceived as a historical one, is not achieved by attention to detail but in the overall coherence of the picture and its affiliation with the functions it embodies and enacts.

From buildings, we are taken to their inhabitants by Stefan Donecker (Vienna). In analysing the CIVILIZATION series' concept of a people, he highlights the idea of immutable, preordained national characters built into these games that may carry the player's civilization from Ancient Egypt to the colonisation of space, as progressed but essentially unchanged. He situates this primordial view of nations in the scientific historical and sociological discourses of the last centuries, as well as within popular representations today, to raise the question whether CIVILIZATION has a subconsciously delivered nationalistic message for all its players. He thus draws our attention to the discussion as to whether games influence players, and if so in what ways. This being a pressing question, Donecker does not succumb to the equation of a game embodying a criticisable concept with one that manipulatively misleads its players, but stresses the satiric potential, inherent in such titles without making it sound too easy.

Closing the section, Tim Raupach (Marburg) asks how historical authenticity is produced by video games in his examination of World War II shooters. Comparing these games with related movies on the subject, he raises the question as to whether the possibilities for interaction and a seemingly realistic experience of historical war settings create a new kind of observation of the past. The high sales figures and the even higher share of World War II settings in the production of video games with historical content – nearly 50 per cent – necessitate such studies, and call for investigation of the related question concerning why other historical epochs are so dramatically less popular. In his use of media theory, especially the remediation concept, Raupach refers back to Nohr's contribution which opens the section, and further clarifies how authentication is achieved and related to immersion. He warns us that realism is ascribed to games due to a complex interplay of various factors and cannot be deduced simply from one element or pattern in a given title; a warning we should keep well in mind.

III The Historian's GameCAM

From the chapters collected in this section, we think we can provide valuable insight and methodological procedures that form a grid for analysis; a guideline not yet developed into a full-blown method that will be of help to you in tackling all these difficult questions raised, up to now. Searching for a nice-sounding neologism to properly dress this up, we decided to label it *the Historian's GameCAM*. As every good game cam should be able to, it provides us with a scheme for taking and analysing stills, as well as sequences from the games, and filtering them into separate channels of inquiry. These channels, as fields of analysis, seem to us to be **[C]onstruction, [A]uthentication, and [M]ediality**.

The Three Minefields of Inquiry

As we are fully and painfully aware, our three CAM fields are minefields of scholarly disputatiousness, none of them well-defined or clearly delineated. Laden with associations, ripe with misunderstandings, and fraught with disagreements as they all are, we could have quite easily devoted this entire volume to each of them in turn. So as not to entangle ourselves in the complex web of interlocking and mutually exclusive definitions of these terms, and maintaining room for creative thinking and manoeuvre, we will not define them either. Rolf Nohr and Tim Raupach deal intensively with [A]uthentication, and also with [M]ediality. The

scheme Nohr provides us with is a very good raster for analysing each single element in any given game, thus providing us with the still function of our cam. As he eloquently points out, a game needs to authenticate itself to its audience and one of the strategies for doing so, is to go historical. And what's more, the modes and means it can use to do so are conditioned by its specific mediality, the game being a medium in its own right. In this focus on [M]ediality, he is joined by Marc Bonner, Adam Chapman and Simon Hassemer, while Lutz Schröder, Josef Köstlbauer, Stefan Donecker and René Schalleger remind us that games are of course always a matter of [C]onstruction, and that we need to take heed of the parameters and balances built into the game as well as of its patterns of interaction and narration. Not that a game is a construction – that is trivial – but how and why it is constructed the way it is, forms a crucial issue that any study of either single elements of games or games as a whole must address. If larger parts of games or even whole games are chosen as elements of analysis, Angela Schwarz, as is pointed out below in greater detail, provides a guide of how the narration of games can be tracked as it unfolds around the player, consisting of the interplay of the various elements and factors mentioned previously, thus providing us with the sequence function of the cam.

For each video game element featuring history singled out for analysis, the *GameCAM* procedure therefore suggests that:

- 1st Step [C]: the overall construction of the game be investigated and the place and function of the element in the context of the game made clear.
- 2nd Step [A]: the game's particular strategies for authentication be identified and how and why the element contributes to it or is necessitated by it.
- 3rd Step [M]: the contribution of the element to the qualities and functions of the game as a medium be regarded and the restrictions imposed by them on the element properly addressed.

This is of course not to say that each and every chapter of this volume follows this procedure or addresses all the questions arising from these three steps. Yet it is what, as we hope, the volume in its entirety shows in its many facets that will prove to be effort well spent. But take this as warning and encouragement – one of the specific difficulties of video game research that Tom Chatfield speaks of in the Prelude, is that this procedure is not the end of analysis but only the start. It is nothing but the

preparation of the material in a way so as to make further scientific historical inquiry feasible.

IV How to handle this book: Section 2

With several million copies sold, one of the most successful game series in recent years was *ASSASSIN'S CREED*. This so called "action adventure" by the Canadian game developer UBI Soft leads the player back to the time of the Crusades, to the Renaissance and the Colonial Period. Embedded in a realistic and sometimes historically relatively accurate game world and many real-life historical figures, the game tells us a completely fictional story. This makes it an ideal candidate for testing some of the considerations discussed in the first part of this book on one concrete example.

In her chapter, Angela Schwarz (Siegen) underlines the importance of narration and (master) narrative in video games, which are key factors for the success of this medium, and in combination with history also an interesting research subject for historians. Computer Games use patterns different from those of the academic world to deal with history, e.g. as a rough framework, in combination with fictitious plots and actors or with a claim to historical truth. Based on two examples, *AGE OF EMPIRES III: THE WAR CHIEFS* and *ASSASSIN'S CREED III*, Schwarz analyses, as well as questions, the meaning of narration in video games and shows the surprising complexity of this medium.

Design plays an important role for narration in particular and for video games in general. In his chapter, Gernot Hausar (Vienna) asks which differentiating function the game design in *ASSASSIN'S CREED* has: the design of the virtual world is necessary to create something like historical "accuracy", but also central for the immersion, the interaction, the game experience and for the fun. Hauser clearly shows that elements of game design such as the architecture and artifacts (weapons, clothes, artwork et cetera) are more than only "passive historical elements" and thereby a major point of discussion for future research.

The "aura of historicity" in *ASSASSIN'S CREED* is also a central issue in Simon Huber's (Vienna) reflections about authenticity in video games. Elements like time travel and the possibility of discovering a historical city with a high degree of freedom of movement are some of the success factors in creating a "historical" game. Furthermore, Huber points out the

relevance of remediation in this game. In this context, ASSASSIN'S CREED closely relates to movie models like MATRIX, KINGDOM OF HEAVEN or BATMAN, making it essential not to lose sight of these cross-media lines of development.

One particularly exciting access strategy to video games is chosen by Andreas Fischer (Munich) in his essay. He analyses the phenomenon of "Games within in the Game" by the example of the carnival games held in the Renaissance city of Venice as depicted in ASSASSIN'S CREED II. This perspective focuses on a most remarkable topic: the history of playing in the context of video games and the experience of alteration as an aspect of historical construction. Against this background, Fischer deals with some interesting elements like rules, manipulation and cheating, by using theoretical concepts from theatre studies.

Based on ASSASSIN'S CREED: REVELATIONS, Martin Isaac Weis (Davis, California) highlights some essential considerations about certain aspects of time and their use in video games. He figures out that the ASSASSIN'S CREED series, as well as other similar games, not only works with different time lines, but also with the phenomenon of repetition and, connected thereto, the possibility of a re-playable past. Weis' reflections show clearly that this perspective may provide us with interesting insight into the video game as a medium, the role of the player as an agent of history and, relative to the narration, the circumstance that video games continually produce an alternative, and in many respects, counterfactual history.

V What is this all about now?

"Science fiction isn't about the future" wrote Ursula K. LeGuin, herself an award-winning Science Fiction writer, in the 1976 preface to "The Left Hand of Darkness", itself a prized Science Fiction novel.⁴ She claimed SF to be distinctly about the present.⁵ Let us take as proof the genre's relation to video games, which is one of total neglect. Neither Wells nor Verne dreamed up something even remotely like ASSASSIN'S CREED, not even like TETRIS or PONG. The otherwise prolific Philipp K. Dick also failed to imagine that we would spend countless hours hooked on EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR or CIVILIZATION V, or write books about what being hooked on games for countless hours means to us.

We as historians are going to finally send you off to the ensuing chapters with the same kind of bold statement now. History is not about the past. It is distinctly about the present. It is about what the memories of events we think of as past mean to us now; why we are interested, fascinated, enthralled or disappointed by them, and why we try to puzzle out a coherent picture from the scraps and leftovers of the past strewn around us. And as we are trying to do this, it is to video games that we now turn, because they are a rapidly growing part of the wide array of media that are meddling in this, our historian's, business. They form pictures of the past, and present them to their audience in a way that, judging by sales figures (cf. Schwarz's chapter, 163, 167), condemnations of loving parents and defenders of High Culture alike, as well as growing numbers of addicts, not only appeals to their audience but reaches out far wider than academic history ever can. Fittingly, as the processing of history in universities is not about the past, the processing of history in video games is not, either (cf. Nohr's chapter, 18). "*Here again, what is at stake is the interplay between historicity 1 and historicity 2, between what happened and that which is said to have happened.*" (Trouillot 2013).⁶ Video games seem to be exclusively concerned with *historicity 2* as what is said can be said again, or even better, played anew ever after. And if we, as academic historians are honest, what we deal with is nothing else. *Historicity 1* may be somewhere out there – as Truth, Justice, or God may be – but to say that we provide more than an approximation towards it, or that we know the past as it has happened, would be preposterous to the extreme. This can of course not be taken to mean that what video games and historians do with history is the same, as everyone who has ever played a game will instantly be aware of while reading this book. What we want to say is that both kinds of interaction with history are not mutually exclusive, though many would perhaps like this to be so; they are complementary.

Another aspect you will become aware of in reading this book – though perhaps not instantly – is that, in contradiction to its own title, it seems not to be exclusively about video games and early modernity. Why for instance did we incorporate those two chapters about World War II shooters by Adam Chapman and Tim Raupach? Well, one of the advantages of holding the conference, information about the proceedings of which you are holding in your hands, was that, as Rolf Nohr articulates, "*the history of AGE OF EMPIRES III, for example, is not the history of discoveries or inventions but the seamless history of modernity*" (his chapter, 23). Viewed from a *historicity 1* perspective, a game featuring

early modernity is not about early modernity. It is about what history, in this case early modernity, means to us (given that our post- or maybe post-postmodern age is still part of modernity), and about how games deal with this. The necessary prerequisite of trying to understand how the *historicity* 2 construction of early modernity in games works is the attempt to understand how any kind of history is processed in video games to narrow the focus afterwards. Thus the more methodologically arranged section 1 of this book is followed by the thematically assembled section 2 focusing on the particular and heavily early modern *themed* (cf. Hassemer's chapter, 59) ASSASSIN'S CREED series from different angles of investigation. Common to all the chapters is one overarching aim: We have to try to figure out how video games interact with history, use history, construct historicity, and what our role as professional guardians of the past can be towards them.

"We all need histories that no history book can tell, but they are not in the classroom – not the history classrooms, anyway. They are in the lessons we learn at home, in poetry and childhood games, in what is left of history when we close the history books with their verifiable facts".⁷

What exactly is contained in those lessons we learn from video games is not in this history book, alas. To research this will be up to each and every one of you, upon completion of reading.

Notes

¹ Tom Chatfield: Fun Inc. Why games are the twenty-first century's most serious business, London: Virgin Books 2011.

² See for instance: Jane McGonigal: Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world, New York: Penguin Press 2011.

³ Chatfield, Fun Inc (2011), xiii.

⁴ Ursula Kroeber Le Guin: The Left Hand of Darkness. A new and never-before-published introductory essay by the author commissioned especially for this edition, 13th print, New York: Ace Books 1985, [v].

⁵ Ibid, [iii].

⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot: An Unthinkable History. The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event. Excerpts, in: Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (ed.), Haitian History. New Perspectives, New York/London: Routledge 2013, pp. 33 – 54, here p. 50.

⁷ Ibid., 34.

PRELUDE

SPECIAL DIFFICULTIES, SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES

TOM CHATFIELD

The idea of difficulty is built into video games, and in a different sense than for any other medium.

A film may be difficult, conceptually or in terms of its subject matter; it may be extremely difficult to understand, or to enjoy. Yet all you have to do if you wish to view the entirety of its material is to sit there watching and listening until it is finished.

Written words can be still more difficult: for these, you may need a formidable mastery of a language, concepts and context; you must construct the meaning of the text itself as you go along. Still, the raw materials are all there for you to work with. You do not have to pass a tricky test in order to access materials beyond the first chapter, or find yourself sent back to the start of the book again and again if you fail this test. You do not have to practice the act of turning pages at precise moments in order to be granted access to the author's conclusion.

Yet this is precisely what the difficulty of many video games embodies: a journey that the majority of players will not complete, filled with trials, tribulations and inexorable repetitions.

There's no one agreed-upon definition of a video game, or indeed a game, but Bernard Suits's phrase "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" captures a good deal of what's significant within them. A player contends with obstacles according to a set of limiting rules – and does so, in the case of a video game, by entering a virtual realm that itself embodies those rules. A "good" game is one that is rewarding to play; where the journey of challenge and discovery and incremental

mastery is balanced between excessive frustration and simplicity. There may be many incidental delights, but without some measure of difficulty and repetition there is no heart to the game: no “mechanic” inviting iterative exploration or breeding the complex satisfactions of play.

Video games are not only difficult to play, of course. They are also difficult to write about and to study, and for related reasons. For a start, they embrace aspects of many other media and disciplines: static images, video, sound, music, text and speech, architecture and design, animation and modelling, interface and interaction design, community design and artificial intelligence. This brings a bewildering – and rich – load of baggage to a field that has only existed for around half a century, and whose canons and critical discourse are still being fabricated on the fly. Like players themselves, the would-be investigator of video games is often running in order to stay still – and will discover that time is of the essence when it comes to understanding video games’ particular difficulties.

Even the most difficult works of literature or philosophy tend to take at most tens of hours to read through once. Yet far simpler games can demand a hundred hours or more of play if they are to be exhaustively explored. Some online games – Massively Multiplayer Online games like *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*, or the far more demanding *EVE ONLINE* – not only need hundreds of hours of play if they are to be appreciated at an expert level, but consist of a steadily updated game world and evolving social context.

What does it mean to maintain a high level understanding of such a virtual world? What, moreover, does it mean to aspire towards any system of critical editions or reference, such as is found throughout the academic study of the arts, when it comes to games? In many MMO studies, authors are more like anthropologists reporting from the boundaries of a brave new world than critics dissecting a work of fiction. Their data is fieldwork, their analysis mixed with reportage, while the digital ground under their feet is constantly shifting.

Speaking to academics studying and teaching game design and studies across Europe, I’m always struck by the huge difficulty of keeping up with even a small number of releases in a field so diverse, time-consuming, hardware-dependent and costly. Specialisation within genres is a vital skill for survival and academic integrity – yet it’s also a challenge in itself, given the pace of technological change. Are aging games to be studied in emulated form, or on original systems? What is worth preserving, and how

should this best be done? What does it mean to play a game outside its original community and context, or to link the experience of play to research in other arts and other discourses?

This last question touches on the central fact of interactivity, and what it means to communicate interaction. Discussing any game in depth with another person demands that they “get” it, which means that they’ve either played this game or something like it at sufficiently high level. Gaming itself is the art of experience as much as it is the experience of art – something, that is, that needs to be done (and done well) in order to be grasped, and that can be understood only by those who have given themselves sufficiently to it.

Within all these difficulties, there’s a central irony. Play precedes civilisation. Indeed, play precedes language and even humanity on an evolutionary scale – and while games are a highly developed kind of play, even the most challenging aspire to a satisfaction whose measure trumps language and logic. Like humour, the fun of a game is something to which we either assent, or not (albeit, sometimes, at the end of much laborious practice and mastery: the game is not always worth the candle).

Indeed, the best video games can touch us sufficiently deeply to be labelled an addictive hazard by some – and to suggest an special species of reverse-engineering in their design, in which systems expressly designed to challenge, delight, enthrall and engage us become an extraordinarily concentrated chunk of experience. In video games, we immerse ourselves not only as an audience, but as actors and adventurers – and in doing so we potentially reveal a great deal about human preference and behaviour, not to mention the increasingly important field of researching humans’ interactions with (and within) automated systems.

Difficulty and opportunity, as ever, are closely entwined – as this book and its essays ably explore. One last danger, though, remains: that we study everything about a game, *except* that which makes it a game. We may talk about its art, its politics, its script, its music, its sounds, its making, its impact, its legacy, its appropriation of techniques and elements from other arts, its sociological significance. But we must not forget the fundamental contract every game seeks to forge with its players: accept this world and these obstacles in the name of experience, and make of them what you will. The play’s the thing.

SECTION ONE:
METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

CHAPTER ONE

THE GAME IS A MEDIUM: THE GAME IS A MESSAGE

ROLF F. NOHR

The title of this chapter specifies a couple of unambiguous designations. First, I will discuss questions of mediality; second, I will deal with the question of meaning; and third: I will not deal with history. At least, not in terms of approaching the paradigmatically and epistemically organized discipline 'science of history' from the perspective of media studies. Neither can I nor do I want to reflect on the operational dimension of the representation or the presentability of history within media. And the following thoughts are neither going to discuss the methods of science of history. This chapter will (rather plainly) try to reflect on the positions that the 'discursive object history' can take in relation to media (especially video games). More precisely, it will give some thought to the question how to deal with the '(re)presentation of history' in terms of mediality research and critical discourse analysis from the perspective of media studies.

Media studies are, at least in my understanding, no discipline of interpretation or hermeneutic analysis of media content, of searching for arcane or obvious messages. Media studies rather deal with the definition of mediality. Reasoning about the function of history in regard to mediality leads us not to ASSASSINS CREED in the first instance.

The concept of media

Thus, in my reflexion on how video games and history affect one another, I would like to choose a different access point to the subject. I will briefly give some thought to the question in how far the opening sequence of Steven Spielberg's SAVING PRIVATE RYAN can be seen as a 'medium of history'. Spielberg's 1998 movie begins with a sequence of

about 20 minutes that shows the Normandy landings. The sequence of the landings at Omaha Beach is mainly filmed with a hand-held camera by Janusz Kamiński and is characterized by a narrow and dynamic cinematography, fast cuts, many pyrotechnical effects, explicit violence and a very expressive sound design. In short: the opening sequence of this movie strives towards a 'realistic', 'authentic' (re)presentation. This fact would not be worth talking about, if the contemporary film critics would not have emphasized the naturalism and the 'realness' of this sequence explicitly and emphatically so many times.¹ Now, my simple initial question is, whether this film 'shows history', 'is history' or in which way the opening sequence of *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* can be approached in terms of history and mediality.



Figure 1: Still from *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* (Steven Spielberg, USA 1998)

From the perspective of a historian one could probably ask if *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* can be seen as a 'source' or as an 'authority' – and if so, for what? Does the movie as a historical source tell something about an incident in the past? Can the discussion of a distinct historic event like the Normandy landings profit under the premise of scientific historiography when Spielberg's film is being consulted as an additional authority? Hardly anyone would be keen enough to argue that the *Diaries of the Supreme Command* or the files of the *Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander* would only be interpretable reasonably – or even to be 'written anew' – by the additional reference to a Hollywood movie. The movie becomes more interesting by the recourse to the technique of the 'historical charge' of the movie as it is being practiced by Spielberg himself. The impression of authenticity that the movie strives for (and that it also partly accomplishes by this special technique), is guaranteed by the

paratextual connection of the movie with eye witnesses.² In the second step, I will address the fact that we can also conceptualize such a 'paratextual connection' as a discourse connection or as an inter-discourse in a productive way. In terms of being a 'source' SAVING PRIVATE RYAN might rather be in line with a project of the (subjective) historiography via *oral history* and eye witnesses due to the perspective of the contemporary witness. So, SAVING PRIVATE RYAN becomes a project that does not only count on the subjectively biased memory of an individual, but that also tries to accomplish a subjective-objective writing of history by the accumulation of statements and the visualization of 'remembrance'. The idea of connecting the movie with contemporary witnesses, of "auratizing" it so to say resp. 'realizing' it by adding an authorized source (the eye witness) to a fictional visual narration is a technique that is typical for various film projects (not least by Spielberg): It can be found anywhere from SCHINDLER'S LIST (USA 1993) to BAND OF BROTHERS (HBO 2001), for example.³

Though, a different approach to the conceptualization of the movie as a source is to describe it not as an *authority on history* but as an *authority on reflecting history*. Seen in this way, the movie SAVING PRIVATE RYAN does not refer to the history of WWII but to the history of the 20th century and our contemporary understanding of dealing with WWII at a certain point in time and in a certain cultural and social constellation. In these terms the movie is a source for mediality research and for approaches based on discourse theory that try to reconstruct the discourses of history and the perception of history by analyzing fragments of statements. A third way of conceptualizing SAVING PRIVATE RYAN as a source is to just see it as a *source for the history of film* itself. That means, to understand it as a source for certain articulations of film industry in terms of production, narration and formal aspects.

But when we address the movie from the heart of mediality research, the question about the 'source' SAVING PRIVATE RYAN is no longer relevant at all. From this perspective, SAVING PRIVATE RYAN was just an exposed example for the fact that cinema is a *cultural technique*. Cultural techniques are integrated into discursive fields and they can be reconstructed in terms of genealogy and archeology. In reference to Paul Virilio or Friedrich Kittler, it would be quite easy to conceptualize SAVING PRIVATE RYAN as a military technology. Especially the opening sequence seems to strive for being seen this way due to its visual aggressiveness, its will to total visibility or the machismo fantasy of overwhelming. If, as

Friedrich Kittler pointed out, “Rock music is the misuse of army equipment” [“Rockmusik ist der Missbrauch von Heeresgerät”] (1991) then SAVING PRIVATE RYAN might be the misuse of amphibious landing operations.

In order to avoid being suspected of technical determinism, I would like to qualify the last sentence immediately. In fact, I do assume that media technologies are cultural techniques, but I do not assume that the development and the cultural meaning of any medium can be traced back to a military technology. Though, it seems important to spend some thought on the idea that media (as cultural techniques) gain their specific meaning rather due to their discursive and technical constitution than due to their – however qualified – content. And it seems also important to me to understand media not only as neutral carriers of content, but also and especially as specific and material actors within the process of communication. Media tend to invisibilise this specific quality and the specific meaning of media technology itself is rarely visible: but in our example SAVING PRIVATE RYAN it is, indeed. In figure 1 we see that drops of water and blood have been spattered on the camera lens. On the one hand, this constitutes a breach of the conventions of fictional narration as the recording technology becomes present due to this ‘mistake’. On the other hand, this constitutes an operation on the level of the meaning of mediality: the streaks and blood spatters on the camera lens are symbolic marks that are supposed to suggest the movie’s relation to history to be a pseudo-documentary one.

But what is the reason for this introduction, for such recourse on film theory? It seems obvious to me that the problem of the concept of the historical source can be made clear much easier by using film as an example than by using video games, at the moment. AGE OF EMPIRES III seems to be a good example for elaborating on the question of the constitution of video games’ dimension of meaning in terms of history. It is obvious that scarcely anybody or even anyone at all would raise the question of sound representation of history in respect to the narration of this game. AGE OF EMPIRES III rather appears to be related to *alternate history*, science fiction, conspiracy theory, Karl May novels or similar, rather ‘lurid’ formats that take avail of historic fragments. Though, the game is – although in a strange, ‘comic-like’ way – ‘imprinted by history’. History is a kind of ‘background noise’ upon which the actual narration and the mediality of the matter are established. At the same time, it has to

be seen as a state of the art of a specific game concept (the strategic construction and management simulation).

Hence, we can ask in analogy to the film example, whether AGE OF EMPIRES is a source. The answer seems to be nearby: not really. From a reasonable perspective, AGE OF EMPIRES can only be used as an object of the history of (playing) video games itself. But the game is not like a 'written record' for historic events in the past at all: the historic constellations (from the colonization of Northern America to the War of Independence) only serve as blurry basic parameters of the in-game narration. No explicit symbolic operations can be identified that evoke an authenticated or pseudo-documentary representation of history.⁴ AGE OF EMPIRES could rather be seen as a source for a cultural history of the contemporary reflection on history – but even in this case, the concept of source would have to be problematized. The video game is per se incompatible to a rigid concept of source, due to its specific medial dynamics. A video game is not least constituted by the interaction between the acting player and the written code with defined decision trees and determined options and sequences. A video game is not a fixed, static and unchangeable text. In terms of the representation of history, this specific medial quality becomes a problem: history unfolds in linear ways – actions in gameplay tend to unfold in 'non-linear' ways that are tailored to the position of an acting subject: the player (see also Schwarz 2012). In this case, history does not serve as the meaningful dimension of the video game, but as a narrative attachment or framing. Yet history seems to be constitutive for the game. The whole 'genre' of construction simulations is characterized by a frequent reference to, and variation of historic themes: especially the AGE OF EMPIRES series, but also the ANNO or CIVILIZATION series, for example, are not imaginable without the integration of the game mechanics into a vaguely historic setting – at least their enormous success seems to be dependent on these historic references in a diffuse way. The specific character of the representation of history in video games as a cultural technique – that is my thesis – unfolds exactly within this very ambivalence. History is being attached to the video game as a 'pseudo-authenticating momentum'. Within construction simulations, the equivalent to the blood spatters on the camera lens in SAVING PRIVATE RYAN is history itself.