

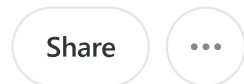
Research Note (3): Perspectives on Historiographical Video Game Design

Minding the Gap



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The convergence of history and game design presents innovative opportunities for both public engagement and education, yet significant gaps remain in understanding how video games function as historiographical tools. The historical profession has yet to fully document the processes of game design and production that enable historical video games to serve as vessels of historiographical discourse, partly due to the proprietary secrecy surrounding the commercial gaming industry. One goal of the Past meets Pixel Project is to open that discussion and challenge *many of the assumptions historians and game designers hold about each other's expertise.*

Conceptual Foundations

- **Historiographical Operations in Game Design:** Bazile (2021) analyzes the integration of historical sources into video games, focusing on *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and *Freedom Cry*. Bazile introduces the concept of "ludoformation," **which underscores** how historical research **integrates with** gameplay mechanics to shape **engaging and historically resonant** narratives. The tension between **achieving** historical accuracy and ensuring player engagement **remains** central. Bazile emphasizes that **the efficacy of game design lies in its capacity to balance these elements**, transforming video games into a medium for historiographical representation.
- **Mediation of Historical Thought:** Bazile (2022) extends his exploration of the dual mediation of history and gameplay in historiographical video games (HVGs). This **dual mediation requires balancing accurate historical details** with crafting a **narrative capable of sustaining player engagement**. Through this balance, games **can present** historical arguments in ways that resonate with

players on an interactive level, **enhancing their comprehension of complex historical contexts.**

- **Pedagogical Approaches and Serious Games:** Fernández-Sánchez et al. (2023) **outline** various pedagogical models for serious games, **observing** the absence of a standardized framework while recognizing the **untapped** potential for these games to serve as educational tools. They **argue that** integrating pedagogical principles into the design of historiographical games can significantly enhance their educational impact, allowing players to engage **more profoundly** with historical content than traditional media typically allows.
- **Adaptive Storytelling in Games:** Bietti, Tilston, and Bangerter (2018) **investigate** adaptive storytelling in games as a method for collective sensemaking. Their research **demonstrates** how games, by adapting narratives to player decisions, **enhance memory retention** and contribute to **the transmission of cultural knowledge**. This process is **particularly relevant** to historiographical games, as adaptive storytelling allows players to **engage with** historical narratives in a way that reflects historical reasoning, **social dynamics**, and **the complexities of decision-making in historical contexts.**

Practical Applications and Case Studies

- **Public History and Game Development:** Reid (2024) **examines** the development of *Ab Uno Sanguine*, a video game designed for public history engagement. He **highlights** the practical challenges of game design, including **resource limitations and the difficulties of maintaining historical accuracy**. Reid's work **demonstrates** the potential for video games to serve as tools for public history, **stressing** the need for collaboration between historians and designers to ensure **the fidelity of historical narratives in digital media.**
- **Teaching Historical Empathy through Augmented Reality:** Çakıroğlu et al. (2023) **investigate** the use of augmented reality (AR) to foster historical empathy in students. By allowing students to interact with historical events and figures, AR enhances their **historical understanding** through **immersive, interactive** learning experiences. This engagement promotes **deeper reflection on historical contexts** and **heightens** empathy.
- **Educational Video Games for Cultural Heritage:** Dankov (2023) presents a case study on the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak, illustrating the potential of educational video games to preserve cultural heritage. Dankov emphasizes that

video games can serve as effective tools for cultural education, allowing players to engage with historical and cultural content in innovative and memorable ways.

- **Game Design for Historical Accuracy:** Clulow (2023) analyzes *Ghost of Tsushima* as a case study in achieving historical accuracy in video game design. By evaluating the game's successes and challenges in portraying Japanese history, Clulow offers insights into how historical fidelity can be maintained without detracting from gameplay—a critical balance for historians and game designers alike.

Methodological Insights

- **Conceptual Frameworks for Historiographical Video Games:** The development of historiographical video games (HVGs) requires a robust conceptual framework that connects game mechanics with the core tenets of historical scholarship. Bazile's conceptualization of HVGs as tools for advancing historical arguments underscores the importance of designing games that move beyond mere depictions of historical settings or events. Instead, these games must be structured to engage players in historical reasoning, critical analysis, and narrative construction. HVGs challenge players to grapple with historical complexities, dilemmas, and contingencies, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of history as an interpretive act.
- **Balancing Ludic and Historical Mediation:** One of the central challenges in crafting HVGs lies in balancing the need for engaging gameplay (ludic mediation) with the imperative to convey accurate historical arguments and narratives (historical mediation). For games to sustain player interest, they must be engaging while also upholding historical fidelity and presenting complex historiographical ideas in a manner that is accessible. Bazile (2022) argues that successful HVG design requires harmonizing these two forms of mediation, creating an experience that is both educational and immersive.
- **Authorship and Interaction in HVGs:** The issue of authorship in historiographical video games is particularly challenging, as it involves a dynamic interaction between the game's designers and the players. In traditional historical narratives, authorship rests solely with the historian, who constructs the narrative through their research and interpretation. In HVGs, however, authorship becomes shared between the historian-designers and the players,

creating a **unique form of interactive historiography**. Bazile argues that HVGs should allow players to explore historical narratives **actively**, while still maintaining the integrity of the historian's argument.

- **Evidence Display, Immersion, and Design Visibility:** One of the major methodological challenges in HVG design is balancing the display of historical evidence with **preserving** player immersion. **In traditional scholarship, evidence is presented through footnotes, references, and bibliographies.** However, **in video games**, these elements **risk disrupting** the player's immersion in the game world, **reminding them** of the constructed nature of the narrative. Bazile suggests potential solutions to this challenge, such as incorporating clickable references or **separate, non-intrusive** sections where players can access historical sources **without interrupting** gameplay.

Design Principles and Pedagogical Models

Pedagogical models are increasingly being **integrated** into the design of HVGs to **enhance** their educational value. Fernández-Sánchez et al. (2023) **underscore** the need for a unified pedagogical framework for serious games, emphasizing the importance of **embedding educational principles** into game design. The integration of these models **ensures** that HVGs are not only engaging but also effective tools for teaching history.

One key pedagogical principle in HVG design is the use of **scaffolding**, where players are gradually **introduced** to complex historical concepts and arguments through gameplay. By starting with **simpler** tasks and **incrementally increasing** the difficulty, players **can deepen their understanding** of historical processes without feeling overwhelmed. This approach is **particularly effective** in games that aim to teach historical reasoning and critical thinking, as it allows players to build their knowledge **progressively** while still enjoying the interactive aspects of the game.

Another pedagogical model that can be applied to HVG design is **experiential learning**, where players learn through direct engagement with historical scenarios. **In this model, players assume the role of historical agents, making decisions and navigating the consequences in ways that reflect the complexities of historical events.** This approach not only teaches players about history but also helps them develop key skills such as **problem-solving, critical analysis, and empathy.**

Challenges and Future Directions

Historiographical video game design, while promising, **faces significant challenges** that demand critical attention. These challenges range from **ethical dilemmas and the complexities of balancing entertainment with historical accuracy** to issues related to **replicability, transparency, and the integration of emerging technologies**. Addressing these challenges **will be critical in shaping the future** of historiographical video games, pushing the boundaries of what these games can achieve in education, research, and public history.

Ethical and Practical Challenges in Historiographical Game Design

One of the primary challenges in historiographical video game design is **navigating ethical issues** related to the representation of historical events and narratives. Belyaev and Belyaeva (2022) **highlight** the risks of **distortion, mythologization, and oversimplification** in the creation of historical games. These issues are particularly pronounced when games **engage with** sensitive or contested historical topics, such as **colonialism, war, genocide, or slavery**. The design choices made by game developers can unintentionally **reinforce harmful stereotypes**, distort historical facts, or perpetuate dominant narratives that **marginalize certain groups** or perspectives.

The ethical responsibility of game designers is twofold: **to create games that are both engaging and reflective of historical complexities** while ensuring **responsible representation**. **Balancing these priorities** requires creating gameplay that captivates players without **trivializing** serious historical events. Games that focus too heavily on entertainment risk **glossing over the intricacies** of historical experiences, reducing them to mere **backdrops for action**. Conversely, games that **prioritize accuracy** at the expense of engagement may struggle to **retain players** and thus **limit their educational impact**.

Replication and Transparency in Game Research

Another significant challenge in **developing** historiographical video games is the issue of **replicability** and transparency in game research. As Pretty et al. (2023) **note**, the lack of published datasets and transparent methodologies in game studies **impedes researchers' ability to replicate findings** and validate results. This lack of transparency is particularly problematic in a field that is still emerging, **hindering the establishment** of a solid foundation of knowledge and best practices for historiographical game design.

Replicability and transparency are **cornerstones** of scholarly research, allowing others to **verify conclusions**, build upon previous work, and ensure the integrity of the research process. In game design, however, this is **particularly challenging** due to the proprietary nature of game development. Many game studios **hesitate to share** data or design processes, fearing the loss of their competitive edge. This culture of secrecy **stands in contrast** to the norms of academic research, which prioritize **openness and collaboration**.

Addressing this challenge requires greater efforts toward creating open-access datasets and publishing detailed methodologies that can be shared and scrutinized by the academic community. Some initiatives have already begun to **bridge this gap**, including academic collaborations with game developers to produce games that are not only educational but also designed with research in mind. These collaborations **promote** a culture of transparency in game design, **fostering openness** and allowing findings to be replicated and **expanded upon** by other researchers.

Innovations in Game Design for Education and Research

The integration of Industry 4.0 technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and big data—**opens new possibilities** for historiographical game design. Resch et al. (2018) **explore** how these technologies can be used to create more immersive, interactive, and educational gaming experiences. **These advancements have the potential to transform how history is taught and experienced**, both in educational settings and public history.

AI, for instance, **can enable** the creation of more dynamic and responsive non-playable characters (NPCs) that react to player decisions in historically grounded ways. This **facilitates** a more nuanced exploration of historical agency, allowing players to see the consequences of their choices **unfold** in ways that reflect the **complexities of historical events**. AI can also be used to **personalize gameplay**, adapting the narrative to the player's actions and decisions, thus reinforcing the idea that history is not a fixed narrative but a series of contingent outcomes.

AR and VR offer unique opportunities for creating immersive historical environments where players can "**step into**" history. These technologies allow players to explore historical settings and interact with historical figures in ways that traditional media cannot replicate. For example, a VR game set during the American Revolution could **enable** players to walk the streets of colonial Boston, participate in

key events like the Boston Tea Party, and interact with figures such as George Washington or Paul Revere. This level of immersion can foster a deeper understanding of historical events and **promote** historical empathy, as players experience the **pressures and dilemmas of the past**.

However, with these technological innovations come new challenges. The immersive nature of AR and VR can **blur the boundaries between historical fact and creative fiction**, making it difficult for players to distinguish between what is historically accurate and what has been altered for gameplay purposes. This raises important questions about **the designer's role** in shaping players' perceptions of history. **Designers must be transparent** about the liberties taken in constructing the game world and provide players with tools to critically engage with the content.

Furthermore, the use of AI and big data in game design **introduces concerns** about privacy and data security. Games that collect data on player behavior and decision-making **must ensure** this data is handled responsibly and ethically. This includes **clear communication** about what data is being collected, how it is used, and who has access to it.

The Role of Games in Public History and Cultural Heritage

One of the most **promising** future directions for historiographical video games lies in their potential to contribute to public history and the preservation of cultural heritage. As studies like Dankov (2023) have shown, video games can serve as powerful tools for **preserving and promoting cultural heritage**, allowing players to explore historical sites and artifacts in virtual environments. These games make history more accessible, particularly to younger audiences who might not engage with traditional forms of historical scholarship.

Games focused on cultural heritage **can educate** players about the importance of preservation and conservation. For instance, a game centered on the preservation of ancient monuments **could teach** players about the site's history, the challenges of conservation, and the impact of modern development on historical landmarks. By engaging with these issues in a virtual environment, players can **develop a deeper appreciation for the necessity** of protecting cultural heritage.

Moreover, video games can **stimulate historical tourism** by sparking interest in real-world historical sites. Games like *Assassin's Creed* have been credited with increasing

tourism to historical locations depicted in the game, such as Renaissance Italy or ancient Egypt. By making history more engaging and accessible, these games **encourage** players to explore the locations that inspired the game, thereby contributing to both education and economic development.

Future Directions

As the field of historiographical video game design continues to develop rapidly, and several key areas warrant further exploration and development:

- **Collaborative Development Between Historians and Game Designers:** As historiographical video games become more sophisticated, collaboration between historians and game designers **will be crucial**. These collaborations ensure that historical accuracy is **maintained** while allowing for innovative gameplay mechanics that engage players in meaningful ways. Historians should be actively involved in all stages of game development, from the initial concept to the final product, ensuring that the historical narrative is both accurate and compelling.
- **Standardization of Methodologies and Best Practices:** To advance the field, standardized methodologies for designing and researching historiographical video games **must be established**. This includes creating frameworks for evaluating the educational impact of these games, establishing best practices for balancing historical accuracy with gameplay, and **promoting transparency** in the design and research process.
- **Ethical Guidelines for Historical Representation:** As historiographical video games continue to address sensitive historical topics, the development of ethical guidelines for historical representation in games **will become increasingly important**. These guidelines should address issues such as cultural sensitivity, the representation of marginalized groups, and the potential for games to reinforce harmful stereotypes or distort historical facts.
- **Incorporation of Advanced Technologies:** The continued integration of advanced technologies, such as AI, AR, and VR, **will open new possibilities** for historiographical video games. However, these technologies must be used responsibly, focusing on enhancing the educational and immersive aspects of the game while ensuring that historical accuracy is not compromised.

- **Public History and Cultural Heritage Preservation:** The role of historiographical video games in public history and cultural heritage preservation offers exciting opportunities for the future. These games can make history more accessible to the public, **encourage historical tourism**, and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. Future research should explore how these games can be used to support public history initiatives and protect historical sites and artifacts.

Concluding Thoughts

Historiographical video games occupy a distinctive space where historical scholarship converges with interactive media. By embedding historiographical principles into their design, these games create new avenues for public engagement and education, altering the ways in which historical narratives are presented and interpreted. As the discipline advances, historiographical video games have the potential to become integral tools for enhancing historical literacy, fostering critical engagement with the past, and interrogating dominant narratives through immersive interaction.

The field's challenges, however, remain significant. Balancing historical fidelity with player engagement, addressing the ethical complexities of representing sensitive historical subjects, and contending with the proprietary constraints of the commercial gaming industry all present substantial obstacles. Effective historiographical game design necessitates ongoing collaboration between historians and game developers to establish practices that maintain historical rigor without diminishing the interactive experience.

Advancements in artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and related technologies will further enhance the capabilities of historiographical games, enabling more complex and immersive engagements with the past. Yet these developments also impose greater responsibility on both historians and designers to manage the tension between technological innovation and historiographical integrity. The need for transparency and careful attention to issues of representation must be foregrounded to ensure that these games function as effective tools for both education and historiographical inquiry.

Historiographical video games will play a critical role in shaping the future of public history and historical education. Through careful attention to their design and

application, these games can offer novel means of exploring historical complexities, contributing to a more nuanced and critical understanding of the past while reinforcing the connection between academic history and public discourse.

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