

Exploring the Potential and Challenges of Historical Video Games



CHRISTOPHER GERTEIS

APR 14, 2024



1



1

Share

Historical video games represent a unique convergence of digital entertainment and educational media, blending immersive experiences with history education. These games have achieved considerable commercial success and captivated millions globally by offering richly detailed and historically accurate environments. However, the extent to which they enhance players' understanding of history is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. This article examines the potential of video games to illuminate and obscure knowledge about the past. It explores the broader potential benefits, and drawbacks, of using video games as tools for history education (Kapell & Elliott, 2013; Squire, 2002; UK Government, 2023).

Video games offer a range of genres that cater to various interests and play styles. Action games, including First-Person Shooters (FPS) and Third-Person Shooters, immerse players in intense combat scenarios set in historical contexts. Titles like *Call of Duty: World War II* and *Medal of Honor* provide players with a visceral experience of historical battles, while games like *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* merge platformer elements with historical narratives (Ubisoft, 2007). Adventure and role-playing games (RPGs) such as *The Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (and the *Assassin's Creed* series) offer narrative-driven experiences, allowing players to explore vast historical worlds and engage with complex storylines through meticulously recreated periods like the Renaissance or settings inspired by historical events (Chapman, 2016; Kapell & Elliott, 2013).

Simulation and strategy games such as *Civilization* and *Age of Empires* emphasize resource management, tactical decision-making, and realistic recreations of historical

scenarios. These games provide a strategic depth that encourages players to think critically about historical progress and the factors that influence it (Squire & Jenl 2003). The diversity in game genres, from the narrative depth of RPGs to the structural complexities of simulation games, highlights the unique ways historical video games contribute to understanding and appreciating history (Champion, 2016).

This article seeks to bridge the divide between entertainment and education, critically evaluating how video games contribute to and complicate the public's understanding of historical narratives. In doing so, it endeavors to elucidate the nuanced challenges and opportunities presented by historical video games in shaping historical consciousness, supported by the growing interest in the potential of historical video game design.

The Role of Historical Authenticity in Gaming

The concept of historical authenticity in video games is often heralded as a significant achievement, yet its actual impact on understanding history is debatable. Developers of games like the Assassin's Creed series emphasize meticulous recreation of historical settings and events, claiming it enhances educational value (Ubisoft, 2007). The extent to which this fidelity translates into genuine historical understanding is questionable. After all, these games are commercial products designed for entertainment, and their primary goal is to engage players rather than educate them comprehensively about the past. While visually stunning and immersive, the representation of history in these games often simplifies complex historical realities, potentially leading to a superficial understanding of the eras they depict (Chapman, Foka, & Westin, 2017).

While these games include accurate representations of historical figures and events, their narratives are frequently driven by fictional elements designed to enhance gameplay rather than historical accuracy. For instance, the Assassin's Creed series integrates significant historical events and figures into its storylines within a framework of fictional conflicts and conspiracies. This blending of fact and fiction blurs the lines between historical reality and entertainment, raising questions about the educational value of such games. Players may come away with a skewed understanding

of history, influenced more by engaging gameplay demands than rigorous historical scholarship (Chapman, 2016).

The educational potential of historical video games is a topic of growing interest it is crucial to critically assess how these games engage players with historical content. Games like *Civilization* and *Millennia* are praised for simulating various aspects of historical development, yet the accuracy and depth of these simulations are limited by the need to create a balanced and enjoyable game. The strategic decisions players make in these games often involve oversimplified representations of historical processes, which can lead to misunderstandings about the complexities of historical events. While these games encourage players to think critically, they also risk fostering a surface-level engagement with history that prioritizes gameplay over educational rigor (Kapell & Elliott, 2013).

One of the strengths of historical video games is their ability to simulate complex historical processes, yet this strength is also a limitation. In *Civilization*, players develop their civilizations through different epochs, but the game's mechanics necessarily simplify and abstract historical realities. The focus on strategic gameplay can overshadow historical change's nuanced and multifaceted nature. Players might develop a sense of historical progression that is linear and deterministic, which does not accurately reflect the contingent and often chaotic nature of real historical events. This simplification can undermine the educational value of these games, making them more about strategic mastery than historical insight (Kapell & Elliott, 2013).

The interdisciplinary nature of historical game studies is often highlighted as a positive development, connecting game studies with history, education, and cultural studies. The actual impact of this interdisciplinary approach on players' understanding of history remains uncertain. Games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Ghost of Tsushima* have been analyzed for their cultural and ideological underpinnings. However, these analyses are more relevant to academic discourse than the average player's experience. The portrayal of historical events in these games can indeed influence public perception, but the extent to which this influence promotes a deeper understanding of history is still debated.

debatable. The primary appeal of these games lies in their entertainment value, and their educational merit (Lundblade, 2020).

Player communities play a significant role in shaping the historical narratives presented in games. Through modding, online discussions, and community-driven content creation, players engage with history collaboratively, often challenging and expanding the narratives presented by the games themselves. This participatory culture enhances the richness of historical games but also introduces the risk of propagating inaccuracies and biased interpretations. The collaborative nature of communities fosters a sense of ownership and engagement. However, it also means that historical content is subject to the whims of popular trends and personal bias. This dynamic can lead to a fragmented and sometimes misleading portrayal of history, reflecting the interests and perspectives of a particular community rather than a balanced and comprehensive view (Apperley, 2013).

The educational value of historical video games extends beyond gameplay to the process of game creation, yet this potential is not always realized. While creating history-based digital games can be an effective pedagogical tool, it requires careful guidance and critical oversight. Lawler and Smith's curriculum encourages students to design their historical games, which is innovative, but it assumes a level of historical knowledge and critical thinking that students may not possess. Without proper context and instruction, students might reproduce historical inaccuracies and oversimplifications, reinforcing rather than challenging their misconceptions about history (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

The use of digital games as educational tools aligns with broader trends in digital humanities, but it also raises concerns about the commercialization of education. Historical games offer a bridge between traditional historical methods and modern digital tools, yet this bridge can sometimes lead to commodifying historical knowledge. These games' immersive and interactive nature makes history more accessible, but it also risks reducing complex historical realities to marketable entertainment products. This tension between educational value and commercial

interests is a fundamental challenge in the use of historical games as teaching tools (Champion, 2016).

The field of historical game studies has provided valuable methodological and theoretical contributions. Early scholarship laid important groundwork, but the field is still grappling with fundamental questions about the role of games in historical understanding. The success of games like Sid Meier's Civilization has driven scholarly interest, yet the impact of these games on historical consciousness is mixed. Scholars have developed new methodologies and critical discourses, but the practical application of these insights to enhance players' historical understanding is limited by the games' inherent focus on entertainment (Kapell & Elliott, 2013).

Future Directions in Historical Game Studies

The future of historical game studies promises a dynamic and expanding field that requires continuous engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship. As Lundbladh's historiographic review (2020) suggests, the field must incorporate insights from various disciplines, including game studies, history, education, and cultural studies. By integrating these diverse perspectives, scholars can enrich their understanding of how video games portray historical events and narratives. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for developing a comprehensive framework that acknowledges the complexities of historical representation in games.

One critical area for future research is the exploration of race, class, and gender in historical games. Historically, video games have often perpetuated narrow and stereotypical representations of these social categories. By focusing on how games depict race, class, and gender, scholars can challenge these portrayals and advocate for more inclusive and nuanced representations. For instance, games like Assassin's Creed: Liberation and Battlefield V have started to include more diverse characters and storylines, reflecting a broader range of historical experiences. Analyzing these representations can reveal how games contribute to or challenge prevailing historical narratives and societal attitudes.

Developing new analytical tools and theoretical frameworks will be essential in advancing historical game studies. These tools can help scholars dissect the complex

ways in which games interact with historical narratives. For example, procedural rhetoric—how game mechanics convey ideas and arguments—provides a lens through which to examine how games like *Civilization* simulate historical processes. By refining and expanding such methodologies, researchers can better understand the implicit messages conveyed through gameplay and how these shape players' perceptions of history.

As digital games grow in popularity, their potential to shape public understanding of history becomes increasingly significant. Historical game studies will play a crucial role in analyzing and guiding this impact. Scholars can investigate how games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Ghost of Tsushima* are used in educational settings and popular history projects. These games often serve as entry points for players to engage with historical periods and events, making it vital to assess their educational value and accuracy. Research in this area can help educators leverage the immersive and interactive nature of games to foster a deeper understanding of history among students.

Historical games also offer unique opportunities to address contemporary social issues. Games can be powerful tools for exploring and critiquing modern societal challenges through historical analogies. For example, games that address colonialism such as *Anno 1800* or *Colonization*, can provoke discussions about contemporary issues of imperialism and cultural dominance. By examining how these games frame historical and modern-day issues, scholars can contribute to a broader dialogue on the role of games in social critique and education.

Another important direction for historical game studies is critically assessing how games influence historical consciousness. This involves investigating how games shape players' perceptions of historical events and figures, and how these perceptions translate into broader cultural narratives about the past. For instance, how does playing a game like *Total War* affect a player's understanding of military history and strategy? Do games like *Call of Duty* reinforce or challenge conventional narratives about World War II? Understanding these dynamics can help scholars and educators

design games and curricula that promote a more accurate and critical engagement with history.

Historical game studies must also consider the commercial aspects of game development and how they influence historical representation. The need to create commercially successful games can sometimes lead to the simplification or distortion of historical narratives. Researchers should explore how market pressures shape the development of historical games and the implications for historical accuracy and depth. This analysis can inform discussions about balancing commercial success with educational and historiographic integrity.

Another vital area of study is the role of player communities in shaping historical narratives within games. Modding, fan fiction, and online discussions allow players to engage actively with historical content, often expanding or challenging the narratives presented by the original games. These participatory cultures can democratize historical knowledge and introduce diverse perspectives into historical discourse. Studying these communities can provide insights into how collaborative and decentralized forms of historical engagement contribute to public history.

The future of historical game studies lies in its ability to integrate interdisciplinary scholarship, address critical social issues, develop new analytical tools, and critically assess the impact of games on historical consciousness. By pursuing these directions, scholars can enhance our understanding of how games represent history and influence public perceptions of the past. This field offers valuable opportunities to bridge academic research with public history, education, and cultural critique, ensuring that historical games contribute meaningfully to our collective understanding of history.

Successful Franchises

Civilization Series (1991)

The Civilization series, created by Sid Meier, represents a long-standing franchise within the strategy genre. Players control a civilization from ancient to modern times, making strategic decisions on resource management, diplomacy, and military conquest. The series is renowned for its depth, replayability, and educational value.

offering insights into historical development and cultural evolution. Each install of the Civilization series incorporates complex systems that simulate aspects of historical development, including technological advancement, cultural exchange, and geopolitical dynamics. This simulation encourages players to critically analyze the factors influencing historical progress and the interplay of various societal elements (Kapell & Elliott, 2013). Early scholarship on Civilization, such as the works of DeLorenz (2002), Poblocki (2003), and Lammes (2003), established critical discourses and analytical frameworks within the field of historical game studies. These studies revealed how the game's mechanics and narrative structures reflect broader historiographical debates, such as the portrayal of Western imperialism and deterministic views of history. Understanding the procedural rhetoric of games like Civilization translates historical narratives into interactive experiences, fostering a deeper appreciation of the complexities of historical development (Lundblade, 2010).

Millennia (2024)

Paradox Interactive's "Millennia" is a modern iteration of the classic civilization building genre. Similar to Sid Meier's Civilization, Millennia allows players to guide a civilization from its inception through various historical periods. The game emphasizes strategic decision-making and historical accuracy, providing players with a complex and engaging simulation of historical development. Millennia distinguishes itself with its focus on the detailed simulation of political and social structures, allowing players to experiment with different governance models and social policies. This deep engagement with historical variables offers a robust educational experience, highlighting the complexities and nuances of historical progress (Paradox Interactive, 2023). The educational potential of historical games is highlighted in the curriculum developed by Jeffrey Lawler and Sean Smith (2021), which encourages students to create history-based games. Their approach aligns with observations on the educational value of historical games, emphasizing how game creation can be an effective pedagogical tool. Using tools like Twine, students creatively engage in the historical process, constructing narratives that reflect their understanding of historical contexts. This approach enhances students' engagement with history and helps them develop critical skills transferable to other disciplines (Squire & Jenkins, 2003).

Nobunaga's Ambition (1983)

Koei's "Nobunaga's Ambition" is a strategy game series focusing on the Sengoku period of Japanese history. This period, known as the Warring States period, spans from the mid-15th to the early 17th century and was characterized by social upheaval, political intrigue, and near-constant military conflict among competing feudal lords. Players assume the role of a daimyo, striving to unify Japan through diplomacy, economic management, and military conquest. The series is acclaimed for its historical accuracy and detailed simulation of feudal Japan. Each installment offers an intricate portrayal of Japanese feudal society, emphasizing the importance of strategic alliances, economic stability, and military prowess. Players are required to manage resources, negotiate alliances, and plan military campaigns, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies of the Sengoku period (Koei, 2023). Scholars have debated the extent to which games can accurately depict historical events and figures, given the constraints of the medium. Some argue that these games offer valuable insights into historical processes, while others contend that the algorithmic nature of games reduces their historical value (Galloway, 2006). Historical game studies have developed tools to critically assess these representations, helping scholars understand how games create meaningful connections between players and historical narratives (Chapman, 2016).

Assassin's Creed (2007)

The Assassin's Creed series, developed by Ubisoft, is celebrated for its detailed historical settings and narrative-driven gameplay. The series features a fictional struggle between the Assassins and the Templars, spanning various historical periods such as the Third Crusade, the Italian Renaissance, and the American Revolution. The games are praised for their historical authenticity, engaging narratives, and innovative gameplay mechanics that blend action, stealth, and exploration. The series' commitment to historical accuracy is evident in its meticulous recreation of historical settings, complete with accurate architectural designs, cultural practices, and historical figures. This attention to detail provides players with an immersive historical experience that is both educational and entertaining (Ubisoft, 2007). The

interdisciplinary nature of historical game studies connects game studies with research in history, education, heritage studies, and other disciplines. This cross-pollination of ideas has led to the development of new theoretical frameworks and methodologies that enrich both game studies and historical scholarship. Research can explore how these games reflect and challenge historical discourses by examining the cultural and ideological underpinnings of games like *Assassin's Creed* (Chapman, 2013). This interdisciplinary approach helps scholars understand the broader cultural impact of historical games and their role in shaping public perceptions of history.

Ghost of Tsushima (2020)

Developed by Sucker Punch Productions, *Ghost of Tsushima* is set during the first Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274. Players control Jin Sakai, a samurai who must choose between following the warrior code or using guerrilla tactics to repel the invaders. The game is celebrated for its authentic depiction of samurai culture, stunning visuals, and engaging combat system. It also features a multiplayer mode titled "Ghost of Tsushima: Legends" that incorporates elements of Japanese mythology. The game's detailed portrayal of 13th-century Japan, including its landscapes, cultural practices, and combat techniques, provides players with a rich historical context and a deeper appreciation for the samurai ethos (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020). The game's portrayal of female samurai challenges traditional assumptions about gender roles in medieval Japan, opening new pathways for historical inquiry and discussion in the classroom (Clulow, 2023). This example demonstrates how games can serve as starting points for deeper exploration of historical contexts and issues. The study of player communities is another crucial aspect of historical game studies. The interactions and practices of players, such as modding, online discussions, and community-driven content creation, significantly contribute to the historical discourse surrounding games. These practices allow players to engage with history in a collaborative and participatory manner, often challenging and expanding the narratives presented by the games themselves (Apperley, 2013).

Historical Games and Player Communities

The study of player communities is another crucial aspect of historical game studies. These communities form around shared interests in specific games and often engage deeply with the historical content presented within them. The interactions and practices of players, such as modding, online discussions, and community-driven content creation, significantly contribute to the historical discourse surrounding games. Modding, in particular, allows players to modify and enhance games by adding new content, altering existing elements, or even creating entirely new scenarios and narratives. This enriches the gaming experience and transforms players into active participants in historical interpretation. Through these practices, players engage with history in a collaborative and participatory manner, often challenging and expanding the narratives presented by the games themselves (Apperley, 2013).

Examining these player communities provides valuable insights into how historical games function as platforms for public history. With their active modding communities, games like *Europa Universalis* and *Total War* illustrate how players reinterpret and reimagine historical scenarios, contributing to a dynamic and evolving understanding of the past. These communities frequently create extensive modifications that add historical accuracy, new campaigns, and alternative historical outcomes. Such efforts showcase the players' commitment to historical detail and their desire to explore "what if" scenarios that traditional history might overlook. The modding communities often serve as informal spaces for historical debate and education, where players share knowledge, discuss historical events, and engage in collective historical reconstruction. These interactions can lead to a more nuanced understanding of history as players collaboratively construct and deconstruct historical narratives (Crabtree, 2013).

The role of fan cultures in historical game studies highlights the importance of considering the broader cultural impact of games. Player communities consume and produce historical content, creating mods and narratives that reflect diverse perspectives and interpretations. This participatory culture challenges traditional top-down approaches to historical scholarship and opens up new avenues for collaborative and inclusive historical inquiry. By democratizing the creation and interpretation of historical narratives, these communities allow for a multiplicity of voices and

viewpoints, which can lead to a richer and more diverse understanding of history. A bottom-up approach to historical scholarship contrasts with the more traditional authoritative narratives often found in academic and educational settings, and it underscores the potential for games to foster a more inclusive historical discourse (Champion, 2016).

The collaborative nature of these communities fosters a sense of ownership and engagement among players. However, it also means that historical content is subject to the whims of popular trends and personal biases. This dynamic can lead to a fragmented and sometimes misleading portrayal of history, reflecting the interests and perspectives of a particular community rather than a balanced and comprehensive view. For instance, certain mods might emphasize specific historical events or figures while neglecting others, thus skewing the historical narrative. Despite these challenges, the communal creation and discussion of historical content can also encourage critical thinking and debate, as players confront different interpretations and perspectives on historical events. This participatory engagement with history thus serves as both an educational tool and a means of fostering a deeper connection to the past (Webber, 2016).

The influence of player communities extends beyond the games themselves to broader cultural and social contexts. The discussions and content created within these communities often spill over into other media, such as forums, social media, and YouTube channels, where players continue to debate, share, and expand upon their game experiences. This cross-platform interaction helps to solidify the role of historical games as influential tools for public history, as players bring their in-game learning and discussions into real-world conversations. The proliferation of fan-created content, such as Let's Play videos, tutorials, and historical analyses, further amplifies the reach and impact of these communities, demonstrating the potential for games to engage a wide audience in historical discourse (Crabtree, 2013).

The study of player communities reveals the significant role that these groups play in shaping and expanding the historical narratives presented in games. By engaging with history through modding, discussions, and content creation, players become active

participants in historical scholarship, challenging traditional narratives and contributing to a more dynamic and participatory understanding of the past. The collaborative and often critical nature of these communities highlights the potential for historical games to serve as powerful tools for public history, fostering a deep engagement with historical content and encouraging a more inclusive and diverse exploration of historical narratives. As such, the intersection of player communities and historical games represents a vital area of study within historical game studies, offering valuable insights into the ways in which digital media can influence and enhance our understanding of history (Champion, 2016).

Digital Games, Historical Skills, and Learning

Digital games present a unique opportunity to bridge traditional historical methods with modern digital humanities. Lawler and Smith (2021) argue that digital games serve as primary sources to explore the history of the second half of the 20th century, thus facilitating historical research. Their curriculum, which integrates the creation of history-based digital games, enables students to learn historical content, historiography, and research methods through a highly engaging and interactive medium. This approach not only renders history more accessible but also enhances students' understanding of historical causation, agency, and narrative construction. By developing their own historical games, students test their interpretations and engage in the work of historians, gaining a deeper and more practical understanding of the past (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

The incorporation of digital games into the study of history signifies a significant shift in pedagogical strategies. Unlike traditional methods that often rely on passive learning through lectures and reading, digital games demand active participation, requiring students to make decisions, solve problems, and create narratives. This active engagement fosters a more profound connection to the material, as students are not merely recipients of information but active constructors of historical narratives. Through this process, students gain a better grasp of historical context, the complexity of historical events, and the interconnectedness of social, political, and economic factors that shape historical developments (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

Enhancing Learning Through Perceived Realism and Sense of Place

The study by Nicholas David Bowman et al. (2024) explores the intricate relationships between perceived realism, sense of place, and the effectiveness of historical video games in enhancing both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Cognitive learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual skills, such as comprehension, application, and analysis, while affective learning involves the development of attitudes, emotions, and values. Historical video games like *Assassin's Creed* excel in creating immersive environments that can significantly impact both dimensions of learning. These games' ability to present historically rich and visually detailed settings allows players to experience history in a manner that traditional textbooks or lectures may struggle to replicate (Bowman et al., 2024).

One of the key aspects highlighted in the research is the concept of perceived realism. In *Assassin's Creed*, the developers invest substantial effort into accurately recreating historical settings, events, and figures, which enhances the game's authenticity. Perceived realism is crucial because it helps players suspend disbelief and fully engage with the historical content presented. When players perceive the game world as realistic, they are more likely to immerse themselves in the narrative and explore historical context with genuine interest. This immersion is not merely about visual accuracy but also involves the inclusion of period-appropriate behaviors, dialogues, and societal norms, which collectively contribute to a holistic historical experience (Bowman et al., 2024).

The sense of place in historical video games further amplifies their educational potential. Sense of place refers to the emotional and cognitive connections that players develop with the game environment. In *Assassin's Creed*, the meticulously crafted landscapes and cities allow players to virtually step into the past, exploring landmarks and experiencing the daily life of historical periods firsthand. This sense of place evokes strong emotional responses, such as awe, curiosity, and empathy, which are essential for affective learning. By fostering a personal connection to the historical setting, players are more likely to develop a lasting interest in the historical period.

retain the knowledge gained through their gameplay experiences (Bowman et al. 2024).

Emotional Engagement and Experiential Learning

Emotional engagement plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of historical video games as educational tools. Traditional methods of teaching history often rely on passive absorption of information, which can be less engaging for students. Conversely, the interactive nature of video games encourages active participation and emotional investment. As players navigate the challenges and narratives within a game, they experience a range of emotions that can deepen their understanding of historical events and figures. For instance, witnessing the struggles and triumphs of historical characters in games such as *Assassin's Creed* can elicit empathy and a nuanced appreciation of the complexities of history, fostering a deeper emotional connection to the material.

Recent studies support this perspective. Beavers (2020) elucidates how digital games offer an informal yet impactful avenue for historical learning, emphasizing that player interactions with historical narratives can deepen historical awareness through active participation and emotional investment. In her dissertation, Beavers presents empirical studies exploring player perceptions of historical games as a medium for informal learning. A significant finding is that players often engage in supplementary activities like seeking information, modding, and participating in forums, which further enhance their historical understanding and emotional engagement.

Similarly, Boom, Ariese, van den Hout, Mol, and Politopoulos (2020) demonstrate that video games provide a platform for experiential learning that can rival traditional educational methods. Their research identifies three main genres of historical games—strategy, action-adventure, and first-person action—all of which incorporate elements of violence as central mechanics. Despite this, these games facilitate a high level of personal and historical learning through their immersive and interactive nature. The authors emphasize the need for critical engagement with the content, warning that without mediation, players might accept the historical narratives at face value, potentially leading to presentism. Their case studies illustrate how video games

can be used effectively in formal education to teach complex historical concepts and encourage critical thinking.

Furthermore, the design of emotional agents in educational games can significantly enhance emotional engagement and learning outcomes. Emotional agents, such as animated characters, are designed to respond to the cognitive and emotional states of learners, making the learning experience more engaging and personalized. These studies involved students interacting with an educational game called *Heroes of Island*, which featured an emotional agent designed to enhance engagement. The findings indicated that such agents could make learning more enjoyable and emotionally engaging, thereby improving educational outcomes. The presence of emotional agents can help to maintain student interest, provide immediate feedback, and create a more supportive learning environment.

Emotionally Sensitive Histories

Bräuer (2019) adds another dimension by discussing the importance of an emotionally sensitive approach to learning history. She argues that emotions and their expressions are culturally and temporally specific, meaning it is impossible to fully relive the emotions felt by historical agents. Instead, learning history should involve experiencing and understanding the temporal, cultural, and geographical context. Bräuer advocates for an educational process that allows for open emotional and intellectual engagement with history, rather than the rigid emotional choreographies often seen in contemporary historical narratives.

The immersive environments in historical video games facilitate experiential learning wherein players learn through direct experience and reflection. This form of learning is particularly effective in promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As players engage with historical scenarios, they must make decisions, solve puzzles, and interact with historical figures, all of which require them to apply their knowledge and think critically about the historical context. This experiential learning process helps to solidify cognitive understanding and encourages players to view history as a dynamic and interconnected series of events rather than isolated facts to be memorized. E

engaging emotionally with the content, players are more likely to develop a lasting interest in history and a deeper understanding of its complexities and nuances.

Recent empirical studies, such as those by Beavers (2020) and Boom et al. (2020), highlight the potential for video games to serve as powerful educational tools. These studies suggest that when designed and used effectively, video games can offer an emotionally engaging, and intellectually stimulating way to learn about history. This approach not only enhances cognitive understanding but also fosters a deeper emotional connection to historical events and figures, making history education impactful and memorable.

Moreover, research on the concepts of flow and immersion in video games provides further insight into the effectiveness of these tools. Michailidis, Balaguer-Ballest and He (2018) in their mini-review discuss the overlapping concepts of flow and immersion, emphasizing that both are integral to the gaming experience. They highlight that immersive experiences are characterized by concentration, loss of self-awareness, a balance between the player's skills and the game's demands, and a sense of flow, all of which are essential to achieving a deep engagement with historical content. The review underscores that flow and immersion might not substantially differ in current studies, suggesting that these states might actually be the same. This conceptual understanding reinforces the idea that the immersive nature of video games can significantly enhance historical learning through deep emotional and cognitive engagement.

Tools and Collaboration in Historical Game Development

Tools like Twine, a narrative-based interactive game creation platform, exemplify how digital game creation can immerse students in the historical process. Twine's simplicity and flexibility allow students to create detailed historical narratives without requiring extensive coding skills. This process encourages students to evaluate sources critically, make informed decisions about historical representation, and understand the complexities of historical events and figures. The engagement and creativity involved in game development make it an effective pedagogical tool for teaching

history, as it combines technical skills with historical inquiry, resulting in a more comprehensive and immersive learning experience (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

The use of platforms like Twine also underscores the importance of narrative construction in historical understanding. Students must consider how to frame historical events, which elements to highlight, and how to portray different perspectives. This task requires deep engagement with primary and secondary sources, promoting a critical examination of the evidence and its interpretation. By constructing their own narratives, students learn to appreciate the subjectivity involved in historical storytelling and the importance of a well-supported argument (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

Integrating game development into historical education fosters student collaboration and critical thinking. Working on a game project often requires teamwork, as students must divide tasks such as research, writing, design, and programming. This collaborative approach mirrors the interdisciplinary nature of historical research, where scholars from different fields must work together to piece together historical narratives. Additionally, the iterative nature of game development—where students must continuously test and refine their games—parallels the process of historical revision and interpretation. By engaging in this hands-on, iterative process, students not only learn historical content but also develop essential skills in project management, problem-solving, and peer collaboration. These skills are invaluable for both academic and professional success in the field of history and beyond (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

Long-term Impact and Transferable Skills

The benefits of incorporating digital games into historical education extend beyond the classroom. Students who have developed games as part of their curriculum often report higher levels of engagement and a stronger connection to the subject matter. This heightened interest can lead to further independent study and a lifelong interest in history. Additionally, the skills acquired through game development—such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and technical proficiency—are transferable to many other areas of study and work.

to various fields, making students well-rounded and adaptable learners (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

Digital games offer a powerful tool for enhancing historical education. By integrating game creation into the curriculum, educators can provide students with a dynamic interactive way to engage with history. This approach not only enhances understanding and retention of historical knowledge but also develops critical skills essential for academic and professional success. The use of platforms like Twine exemplifies the potential of digital humanities to transform historical education, making it more engaging, collaborative, and reflective of the complexities of the past. As digital games continue to evolve, their role in education will likely expand, offering new opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning (Lawler & Smith, 2021).

The Use of Game Engines in Video Game Design

Game engines serve as comprehensive middleware software solutions that significantly streamline the game development process by providing developers with an extensive suite of tools and frameworks. These engines allow developers to concentrate on the creative aspects of game design, such as storytelling, character development, and gameplay mechanics, by automating and handling the more technical and repetitive tasks such as rendering graphics, performing physics calculations, and managing input handling. The advent of game engines has revolutionized the video game industry, making game development accessible to a broader range of developers and significantly reducing development time and cost.

Primary Advantages of Game Engines

One of the foremost advantages of using game engines is their ability to offer a standardized set of tools and functionalities that can be utilized across various projects. Prominent engines like Unity and Unreal Engine come equipped with extensive libraries of pre-built assets, such as 3D models, animations, sounds, and textures, as well as ready-made functionalities including physics engines, collision detection, and AI behaviors. This modularity allows developers to quickly prototype and iterate on their game ideas, enabling rapid testing and refinement of gameplay mechanics and design concepts. The iterative process facilitated by these engines

supports a dynamic development environment where ideas can be tested, evaluated, and improved efficiently.

Furthermore, game engines support a wide range of platforms, including PCs, consoles, mobile devices, and virtual reality headsets. This cross-platform capability means that games developed in engines like Unity or Unreal can be easily ported from one system to another with minimal adjustments, thereby broadening the potential audience and market reach. This feature is particularly advantageous in the current gaming landscape, where players expect access to their favorite games across multiple devices.

Another significant advantage of game engines is their capacity to facilitate collaboration among diverse team members. Modern game engines often come integrated with sophisticated development environments (IDEs) that support version control, asset management, and real-time collaboration. These features are especially beneficial for large development teams where multiple developers, artists, and designers need to work simultaneously on different aspects of the game. By providing a unified workspace, game engines ensure that all team members are aligned, reducing the risk of miscommunication and enhancing the efficiency of the development process. Tools like GitHub integration within these IDEs allow for seamless version control, ensuring that changes are tracked and merged correctly, which is crucial for maintaining project coherence.

Challenges and Limitations of Game Engines

Despite their numerous advantages, relying heavily on game engines also presents several challenges and limitations. One of the main drawbacks is the potential for performance issues. While game engines are designed to be versatile and handle a broad spectrum of tasks, they may not always be optimized for specific types of games or hardware configurations. This can lead to suboptimal performance, particularly in resource-intensive games that require fine-tuned optimization. Developers may find themselves constrained by the limitations of the engine, which can impact the overall quality, responsiveness, and visual fidelity of the final product.

Another significant disadvantage is the potential for a lack of originality. Given that many developers use the same popular game engines, there is a risk that games may begin to feel homogenized, sharing similar aesthetics, mechanics, and even user interfaces. This homogenization can make it challenging for developers to create unique and innovative experiences that stand out in a crowded market. Moreover, reliance on pre-built assets and functionalities can sometimes lead to a superficial understanding of the underlying technologies, limiting the developers' ability to push the boundaries of what is possible in game design. This reliance can stifle creativity and innovation, as developers may default to using available assets and features rather than creating bespoke elements that could set their games apart.

Game engines also often come with a steep learning curve, particularly for those new to game development. Although engines like Unity and Unreal Engine offer extensive documentation, tutorials, and community support, mastering their full range of capabilities can require a considerable amount of time and effort. This learning curve can be a significant barrier for small indie developers or those with limited resources as they may struggle to fully utilize the engine's features without substantial investment in learning and experimentation. Furthermore, the complexity of the engines means that even experienced developers must continuously stay updated on the latest features and best practices, which can be time-consuming.

The Broader Implications of Game Engines

Beyond the immediate technical and creative aspects, the use of game engines in game design has broader implications for the industry. The democratization of game development tools has empowered a new generation of indie developers, allowing them to create and distribute games without the need for extensive resources or teams. This democratization has led to a flourishing of creativity and diversity in the gaming landscape, with indie games often exploring unique themes, innovative gameplay mechanics, and diverse narratives that might not be feasible in big-budget productions.

However, this accessibility also means that the market is increasingly saturated with a vast number of games, making it more challenging for individual titles to gain

visibility and success. The reliance on game engines can contribute to this saturation as the ease of development lowers the barriers to entry, resulting in a highly competitive environment. Developers must therefore find ways to differentiate their games not only through technical and aesthetic innovations but also through effective marketing and community engagement.

Game engines play a pivotal role in the modern video game industry by providing robust tools that streamline the development process and enhance collaboration among team members. While they offer significant advantages in terms of efficiency, cross-platform support, and accessibility, they also present challenges related to performance optimization, originality, and the learning curve. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developers aiming to leverage game engines effectively, balancing the benefits of standardized tools with the need for innovation and creativity in game design. As the industry continues to evolve, the role of game engines will undoubtedly expand, shaping the future of how games are created and experienced.

A History of Historical Game Studies

The field of historical game studies has seen significant development over the past decades, with Sid Meier's *Civilization* playing a central role in its growth. Historical game studies have developed metalanguage, critical discourses, and taxonomic structures facilitating cross-pollination across various scholarly domains. This interdisciplinary field connects game scholars with research in history, education, heritage studies, and more, offering valuable methodological and theoretical contributions that provide tools to analyze digital games as historical forms and their historiographic validity.

As the field has matured, the practical implications of these academic advances have become increasingly significant. Scholars like Uricchio (2005) and Galloway (2006) initially laid the groundwork by analyzing games' historiographic potential and limitations, focusing on understanding how games like *Civilization* could be used to simulate historical processes and what this simulation could teach us about historical thinking and understanding. Their foundational work has paved the way for more

sophisticated analyses, leading to a deeper engagement with how video games function as interactive texts, capable of engaging players in historical narratives ways that traditional media cannot.

As historical game studies continued to evolve, scholars began to develop more formalized theoretical frameworks aimed at moving beyond simple analyses of individual games to a broader understanding of the cultural and educational impact of historical games. For instance, Kapell and Elliott's (2013) edited volume "Playing with the Past" brought together a range of essays that examined different aspects: how games simulate history, highlighting the diverse ways in which games can represent historical events, from the procedural rhetoric of game mechanics to the narrative structures that guide player experience.

These methodological advancements have not only enhanced our understanding of how games can function as historical texts but also fostered a richer comprehension of how they can both reflect and shape historical understanding. For example, the concept of "procedural rhetoric" helps articulate how game mechanics convey historical arguments, while "algorithmic historiography" examines how the rule systems of a game can shape our understanding of historical processes. This deeper insight allows scholars to critically examine the cultural and ideological underpinnings of historical games, revealing how games set during periods like World War II often reinforce certain nationalistic narratives, presenting a simplified and often glorified version of historical events.

The interdisciplinary nature of historical game studies has been one of its greatest strengths, connecting research in game studies with fields like history, education, and cultural studies. This cross-pollination has led to new theoretical frameworks and methodologies that enrich both game studies and historical scholarship. For instance, the use of games in educational settings has been a major area of interest, illustrating how games can teach historical thinking skills such as understanding cause and effect, evaluating sources, and considering multiple perspectives. By using games as teaching tools, educators can engage students in active, experiential learning that complements traditional methods.

In addition to education, historical game studies have also connected with heritage studies and public history. Games like *Assassin's Creed*, with their detailed recreation of historical settings, have been used in museum exhibits and public history projects to engage wider audiences with history. These applications highlight the potential of games to serve as bridges between academic history and popular culture, making historical knowledge accessible to a broader public. This also raises questions about the accuracy and authenticity of the historical representations in these games and the responsibilities of game developers and historians in creating and presenting these narratives.

Historical game studies must continue to engage with interdisciplinary scholars and address contemporary social issues, developing new analytical tools and theoretical frameworks that enable scholars to explore the diverse ways games represent and interact with historical narratives. As digital games continue to grow in popularity, historical game studies will play an essential role in shaping how we understand and engage with the past through interactive media. This involves critically assessing the impact of games on historical consciousness, examining how games shape players' perceptions of historical events and figures, and influencing broader cultural narratives about the past. By engaging with these questions, scholars can better understand the role of games in shaping historical knowledge and media in the digital age, ensuring that they contribute meaningfully to public and academic historical discourse and serve as powerful tools in shaping historical consciousness.

References

Amirkhanyan, Maria. "Emotional Engagement in Video Games: Measuring Emotions." Blog. *Game Developer* (blog), October 14, 2023. [Link](#)

Apperley, T. H. (2013). Modding the historian's code: Historical verisimilitude and counterfactual imagination. In M. W. Kapell & A. B. R. Elliott (Eds.), *Playing with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history* (pp. 185–198). Bloomsbury Academic. [Link](#)

Beavers, Sian M. (2020). The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games. Final Year Project. Open University (United Kingdom). [Link](#)

Boom, Krijn H.J., Csilla E. Ariese, Bram van den Hout, Angus A.A. Mol, and A Politopoulos. “Teaching through Play: Using Video Games as a Platform to Teach about the Past.” In *Communicating the Past in the Digital Age*, edited by Sebastian Hageneuer, 27–44. Proceedings of the International Conference on Digital Methods in Teaching and Learning in Archaeology (12th-13th October 2018). Ubiquity Press. [Link](#)

Bowman, N. D., Vandewalle, A., Daneels, R., Lee, Y., & Chen, S. (2024). Animating a Plausible Past: Perceived Realism and Sense of Place Influence Entertainment and Tourism Intentions From Historical Video Games. *Games and Culture*, 19(3), 286–308. [Link](#)

Bräuer, J. (2019). Gefühlte Geschichte?: Emotionen, Geschichte und historisches Lernen. [Link](#)

Champion, E. (2016). *Critical Gaming: Interactive history and virtual heritage*. Routledge. [Link](#)

Chapman, A. (2013). Is Sid Meier’s Civilization History? *Rethinking History*, 17(3), 315–332. [Link](#)

Chapman, A. (2016). *Digital games as history: How videogames represent the past and access to historical practice*. Routledge. [Link](#)

Chapman, A., Foka, A., & Westin, J. (2017). Introduction: What are historical game studies? *Rethinking History*, 21(3), 358–371. [Link](#)

Clulow, A. (2023). From Shōgun to Ghost of Tsushima: Using and challenging historical narratives in video games. *Journal of Japanese Studies*. [Link](#)

Crabtree, G. (2013). Modding as historical reenactment: A case study of the Battle of Tewkesbury series. In M. W. Kapell & A. B. R. Elliott (Eds.), *Playing with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history* (pp. 199–214). Bloomsbury Academic. [Link](#)

Douglas, C. (2002). “You have unleashed a horde of barbarians!”: Fighting Indian video games, forming disciplines. *Postmodern Culture*, 13(1). [Link](#)

- Galloway, A. R. (2006).** *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. University of Minnesota Press. [Link](#)
- Gutica, Mirela, and Stephen Petrina.** “Emotional Agents in Educational Game Design: Heroes of Math Island.” *International Journal of Game-Based Learning (IJG)* 11, no. 4 (2021): 1–18. [Link](#)
- Kapell, M. W., & Elliott, A. B. R. (2013).** *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA. [Link](#)
- Koei. (1983).** Nobunaga’s Ambition. Retrieved from Fandom. [Link](#)
- Lawler, J., & Smith, S. (2021).** Creating a playable history: Digital games, historic skills, and learning. *IDEAH*. [Link](#)
- Lundblade, K. (2020).** Civilizing Civilization (and beyond): A history of historical studies. International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '20 September 15-18, 2020, Bugibba, Malta. [Link](#)
- McCall, J. (2016).** Teaching history with digital historical games: An introduction to the field and best practices. *Simulation & Gaming*, 47(4), 517–542. [Link](#)
- Michailidis, Lazaros, Emili Balaguer-Ballester, and Xun He.** “Flow and Immersion in Video Games: The Aftermath of a Conceptual Challenge.” *Frontiers in Psychology* (September 5, 2018). [Link](#)
- Mukherjee, S. (2017).** *Videogames and postcolonialism: Empire plays back*. Springer.
- Paradox Interactive. (2023).** *Millennia*. Retrieved from Paradox Interactive. [Link](#)
- Poblocki, K. (2003).** Becoming-state: The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier’s Civilization. *Focaal - European Journal of Anthropology*, pp. 39, 163–177. [Link](#)
- Ramsay, D. (2015).** Brutal games: Call of Duty and the cultural narrative of World War II. *Cinema Journal*, 54(2), 94–113. [Link](#)
- Squire, K. (2002).** Cultural framing of computer/video games. *Game Studies*, 2(1). [Link](#)

Squire, K., & Jenkins, H. (2003). Harnessing the power of games in education. *In* 3(1), 5–33. [Link](#)

Sucker Punch Productions. (2020). Ghost of Tsushima. Retrieved from Sucker Punch Productions. [Link](#)

Ubisoft. (2007). Assassin’s Creed. Retrieved from Ubisoft. [Link](#)

UK Government. (2023). Video Games Research Framework. [Link](#)

Webber, N. (2016). Public history, game communities, and historical knowledge. Proceedings of Playing with History 2016. [Link](#)

Thanks for reading! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work



1 Like · 1 Restack

[← Previous](#)

[Next](#)

Discussion about this post

Comments

Restacks



Write a comment...

© 2025 Christopher Gerteis · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great culture