

From Archives to Avatars

My Journey into the World of Historiographical Video Game Design



CHRISTOPHER GERTEIS

JUL 07, 2024



Share

As a historian specializing in the study of Japan, my journey into the realm of historiographical video game design has been both unexpected and transformative. My academic work primarily revolves around the exploration of modern and contemporary Japanese history, with a particular interest in the daily lives and political consciousness of working people.

My professional and intellectual path took a significant turn when I began engaging with the media and, later, with the fascinating world of virtual reality and interactive video games. This post chronicles that journey, highlighting pivotal moments and insights that led me to embrace video games as a powerful tool for historical research and education.

Early Media Engagements

When I first arrived at SOAS in 2009, I found myself increasingly called upon to answer press and media inquiries. My expertise in Japanese history was sought after for various projects, ranging from news reports to documentaries to popular media productions. These engagements not only broadened my professional horizons but also seemed to offer the opportunity to share my knowledge with a wider audience.

One of the earliest and most memorable of these engagements was as a historical advisor to a major studio film production. This project, centered on early modern Japan, marked the beginning of my foray into the world of film and screen media. In 2011, I received an intriguing request from the producers of a Hollywood film be

made at the **Shepperton Studios** near London. The job was to help them maintain historical accuracy of a fiction-fantasy film set in early modern Japan.

Working with the then-first Assistant Director was fun and rewarding. It was a n exchange of knowledge; he shared anecdotes about his experiences in film produ and I did my best to tutor him on the culture and society of early modern Japan. ' synergy made navigating the complexities of translating historical narratives into cinematic storytelling possible and fun.

Learning from the Film Industry

Despite the promising start, the project soon encountered several challenges. Cu miscommunications and misunderstandings between the Japanese cast and the j Anglo-American production team led to significant tensions. These issues were compounded by the first ADs departure from the project, which shifted my role t advisor to troubleshooter to paid observer.

The original script, written by **Hossein Amini** in consultation with historian **Step Turnbull**, was an impressive work. Turnbull, an encyclopedia of knowledge about modern warrior society in Japan, provided invaluable insights. Amini delivered a persuasive story that did a terrific job adapting the complex narrative of the **Chūshingura (忠臣蔵, *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*)** into a Hollywood film.

However, as pre-production progressed to production, the director decided to cu restructure the script, resulting in a comic book storyboard that fell far short of i potential. The final version of the film was an epic disappointment, failing to cap the depth and richness of the historical narrative set out in the original script an outright insulting to anyone who knows the original story of the **Ako Vendetta**.

Although disappointing, the experience was far from unrewarding. It gave me ur insights into filmmaking and the challenges of representing history as a commer production. It was evident that while the film had the potential to reach a wide audience, the compromises made for the sake of commercial entertainment too c undermined the integrity of the historical narrative.

Subsequent projects for the History Channel and Nintendo further reinforced the realization. Though seemingly promising, each engagement left me feeling that the impact as a historian was minimal. The industry's commercial priorities clashed with my professional goal to convey a meaningful representation of the past.

Discovering Interactive Storytelling

I took a long break from media consulting and began to explore other avenues for sharing historical knowledge. My interest in interactive media and video games, which had always been a peripheral hobby, started taking center stage.

In 2020, I purchased an Oculus 2 virtual reality (VR) headset. This pivotal moment sparked an excitement about the possibilities of using VR technology to investigate and communicate about the past. The immersive nature of VR and the interactive video games presented a unique opportunity to engage with history in ways that traditional media could not. The potential of VR to create detailed, immersive environments where players could explore historical settings firsthand was increasingly appealing. It offered a way to bring history to life, allowing users to experience the past in a deeply personal and interactive manner.

HashimaXR

This energy fed the creation of the [HashimaXR Project](#), my first foray into historiographical video game design. A collaboration with architect [Kyoichi Nakamura](#), historian [Bill Mihalopoulos](#), and XR designer [Jakob MacDonald](#), the project aims to preserve the industrial heritage and coal mining culture of Hashima Island, a UNESCO World Heritage site off the coast of Nagasaki, Japan.

By recreating the island in virtual reality, we have worked to provide an immersive experience about the island's history and its broader socio-economic context. The [HashimaXR Project](#) is as a proof-of-concept for how extended reality (XR) technology, in a wider definition for the landscape of interactive experience, can preserve industrial heritage and communicate complex historical concepts, further demonstrating the potential of interactive media in historical research and education. We will release [‘The Hashima Chronicles: Return to Hashima’](#) in autumn 2024.

Past Meets Pixel

Inspired by the experience, Bill Mihalopoulos and I embarked on the development of an expanded exploration of historiographical video games. The 'Past Meets Pixel Project,' of which this newsletter is a part, is aimed at leveraging the power of video games to help people better understand the complexities of the past. Still in its early stages, the project assembles an expanded team of scholars and game designers focused on creating interactive historical experiences that are both engaging and historiographical.

A collaboration with [Lucas Bietti](#), [Bill Mihalopoulos](#), [Birgit Englert](#), [Mar Chichay Merayo](#), and [Mario Alaguero Rodriguez](#), 'Past Meets Pixel' explores the complex relationship between memory and history. The project builds on four innovative research areas: mapping the landscape where memory supersedes history, creating interactive XR environments for multi-perspective exploration of historical events, developing methods for measuring the impact of gaming interventions on player comprehension and evaluating the effectiveness of XR platforms in fostering a nuanced understanding of history.

The project seeks to challenge and transform how the past is experienced, promote dialogue, understanding, and historical reconciliation by creating four immersive games focused on crises in Africa, Europe, South America, and East Asia. The interdisciplinary collaboration combines expertise in digital humanities, game design, history, psychology, and education to enhance historical scholarship and public engagement, ultimately offering new pathways to historical reconciliation and fostering an ethics of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance.

Closing Thoughts

Reflecting on my experiences in the film and television industry, I encountered significant limitations and frustrations in effectively conveying the complexities of the past. These challenges highlighted the need for more innovative approaches. I believe that video game design offers historians a unique opportunity to create immersive interactive experiences that bring history to life in ways that commercial media

cannot. By making complex history more accessible and engaging, historiograph video games have the potential to foster a deeper understanding of historical eve

Subscribe to **Past Meets Pixel @ Substack** for insightful analyses and updates on the intersection of history and video games. In the spirit of open access, PMP is always free for everyone everywhere. Join our community of scholars, gamers, and history enthusiasts today and stay informed with our latest articles, project updates, and exclusive content. Don't miss out as we explore history in a whole new way.

[← 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