PLAYING WITH *HISTORY*

From simulations of Cold War catastrophe to seemingly realistic evocations of life in the Wild West, many videogames have explored episodes and characters from across history. **John Wills** explores key titles that reveal how digital worlds have represented our global past

ILLUSTRATION BY **MICHAEL KIRKHAM**

Point and shoot
In recent first-person shooter *Call of Duty: WWII*, players make their way through the war-torn Europe of 1944. It features several real-life military campaigns

Alternative Egypt
Cleopatra, as depicted in the 2017 action-adventure game *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. Set near the end of the Ptolemaic era, the title offers a fictionalised account of real events

SOPHISTICATED 3D GAMES TRANSPORT PLAYERS TO THE BEACHES OF D-DAY AND THE REALMS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

In April 2018, *Grand Theft Auto V*, a mature-rated videogame depicting criminal life in Los Santos – a fictionalised version of Los Angeles – became the most successful entertainment product ever released. Having moved more than 95 million units and amassed over US$6 billion in sales, it surpassed even the biggest Hollywood movies in terms of revenue. Once dismissed as novelty items that led kids astray, videogames now represent an established and highly successful entertainment medium. In the UK alone, an estimated 32.4 million people play videogames. Globally, the figure exceeds two billion.

The cultural impact of videogames continues to grow. A number of movies inspired by videogames have been produced over the years – from *Tron* (1982) and *WarGames* (1983) to this year's *Ready Player One* – as well as film versions of titles such as *Tomb Raider* (1996). Games have been used as recruitment tools for the United States military, as apps to entertain voters during recent US elections, and as 'brain-training' mental-health tools for seniors. The front line of digital culture, videogames have trained us to interact and communicate online and to embrace virtual reality.

Over the years videogames have tackled all manner of subjects, from delivering newspapers in *Paperboy* (1985) to saving Earth from alien attack in titles such as *Space Invaders* (1978). Games have also explored world history. In the 1970s and 1980s, titles set in the past took players on the most basic of journeys, depicting events in a rudimentary, pixellated fashion. Interaction was limited to simple action sequences or textual commands. More recently, sophisticated three-dimensional games have transported players to the beaches of the Second World War D-Day landings in *Call of Duty: World War II*, and to the realms of ancient Egypt in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* even sports a combat-free 'discovery' mode, transforming the game into a virtual museum of historical artefacts. Videogame companies such as Ubisoft and Rockstar Games conduct significant historical research for their titles, visiting archives and speaking to experts.

Given the increasing sway of videogames over popular culture, it is natural to assume they now exercise some level of influence over how we negotiate the world. For decades, popular literature, film, radio and television have had a powerful impact on mass understandings of history. From Shakespearean plays to Vietnam War movies, fiction has framed the past. As Adam Chapman, a leading scholar in digital history, argues: "for most of us imagery and understandings drawn from popular media probably construct the past as much, if not more, than the books of professional historians". Videogames help shape the historical imagination.

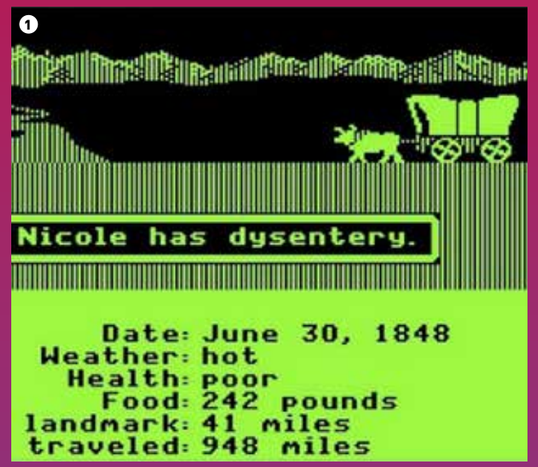
Digital pioneers

In 1903, American film projectionist Edwin S Porter produced *The Great Train Robbery*, a 12-minute black-and-white silent movie. Constructed as a series of action-packed set pieces, Porter's film helped establish the Western genre. In the final scene of the movie, an outlaw played by Justus D Barnes looks directly at the camera, lifts his revolver and fires. Immersed in the moment, feeling helpless and dumbfounded, audiences reeled in shock.

Yet videogames go one step further. Unlike in Porter's movie, they actively involve players in the unfolding storyline – they get to shoot back. In historical games, players contribute to the unfolding narrative: they 'play' history. Gameworlds therefore intimately involve players in all kinds of recreations of historical moments. They, in turn, have the ability to 'reshape' those moments, raising all kinds of dilemmas over counterfactual history and authenticity.

In autumn 1971, three trainee teachers huddled in a janitor's closet at a Minnesota college to work on a prototype educational computer game. Don Rawitsch, Bill Heinemann, and Paul Dillenberger were creating *The Oregon Trail* (1971), a text-based adventure designed to teach students the history of westward migration in the United States. The game asked students to budget for a journey by wagon to Oregon in the 1840s. Along the route they would need to negotiate rivers, hunt wild animals, barter with Native Americans and sometimes catch diseases such as dysentery. Pupils loved it, and the Minnesota Education Computing Consortium soon rolled out the game across the state.

By the late 1970s, *The Oregon Trail* was being played across the US. This education title portrayed the American frontier as an exercise in linear progress, with players guiding their wagons on a simple, set route toward success. The computer game reflected a traditional historical interpretation of frontier progress, and celebrated the journey of the white settler, but lacked an understanding of multiple borders and the true complexities of migration. However, it excelled at capturing



VIRTUAL LANDMARKS

1 *The Oregon Trail*, created by trainee teachers at Carleton College, Minnesota. Players of the pioneering educational game, reworked in various formats since its first release in 1971, experience life on the 19th-century migration route, facing afflictions such as measles and dysentery

2 The idea for Atari's *Missile Command* came from a magazine story about satellites and radars. The game proved a phenomenal arcade hit, and a 1981 conversion for the Atari VCS console sold 2.5 million copies

3 In strategy game *Civilization*, players build an empire, choosing from a range of cultures including the Germans, Aztecs and Mongols. A sixth version was released in 2016, and series sales have passed 40 million

4 Computer-based military simulations offer new ways to explore military conflict. The 1992 title *History Line: 1914-1918* is significant in its attempt to represent the First World War as realistically as possible

5 Players of British-made 'historical simulation' *JFK Reloaded* take Lee Harvey Oswald's role in the shooting of John F Kennedy. On its release in 2004 it proved highly controversial; its publisher defended the game, claiming that its aim was to "bring history to life"

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CIVILIZATION TAPPED INTO A DESIRE TO PLAY GOD – AND ALSO GLORIFIED WESTERN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

the feel of the trail – the personal hardships, the dangers, the daily grind. The game highlighted the potential of the entire medium to educate and inform – to teach history. Games became part of the teacher's toolbox in the United States and around the world, introducing pupils to both new technology and new historical ideas.

War games

As with all media, videogames reflect the historic moments of their production. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and Margaret Thatcher assumed power in the United Kingdom; the following year, former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan was elected US president. With a new vitriol to superpower sparring, Cold War tensions escalated.

Media culture of that era reflected the sudden rise in public anxiety about the possibility of nuclear exchange – and this included videogames. In 1980, Atari released the arcade machine *Missile Command*. This cast the player in the role of a defence co-ordinator tasked with protecting six cities from nuclear attack by shooting down incoming missiles. The game proved a phenomenal success. It also presaged Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, dubbed 'Star Wars' by the popular press), a proposed programme that would use satellites, lasers and missiles to defend the US against attack. However, in contrast to Reagan's promise of a nation protected from fallout, Atari's title painted only a bleak picture of conflict. The cities in *Missile Command* could never be saved – their destruction was merely delayed. The game, and with it nuclear war, proved practically unwinnable. *Missile Command* captured the historical moment and gamified nuclear fear.

As videogame technology advanced in the late 1980s, the potential for games to present more complex simulations increased. In 1991, MicroProse released *Civilization*, an advanced strategy title designed by Canadian-American Sid Meier. The game required the player to create an empire and manage its development across time.

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Meier's title was ingenious. It offered a technology tree to master, and competing empires to negotiate with or conquer. Meier tapped into a desire to play god with history. The game actively indulged the egos of its players: those who performed admirably were lauded by a digital populace who raised palaces in their honour. While offering the player a multitude of options, Meier's *Civilisation* nonetheless sanctified very particular notions about progress. The game glorified western science and technology, while indigenous groups in the game were forced to 'become civilised' or face extinction. Five subsequent sequels, and numerous 'expansion packs', have modified which civilisations players can control, while maintaining the same underlying gameplay mechanics.

Titles such as *Civilization* pandered to grand concepts of history and empire, but other videogames tackled specific events and incidents. For example, the strategy game *History Line: 1914-1918*, released by German company Blue Byte in 1992, recreated military campaigns of the First World War with distinct educational overtures. The turn-based wargame began with a realistic depiction of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand before launching the player into a series of challenging tactical scenarios, requiring them to move military units across a hexagon-based map. Intriguingly, *History Line* didn't allow players to deviate too much from the historical record. It also forged a sense of atmosphere by regularly feeding the player contemporary newspaper stories and facts about wartime conditions.

Occasionally, games provoked controversy with their colourful takes on history. In 2004, Scottish-based Traffic Software released the 'historical simulation' title *JFK Reloaded*. Exploring the assassination of President John F Kennedy on 22 November 1963, the game puts the player in the position of Lee Harvey Oswald, replaying his actions on that fateful day in Dallas, Texas by shooting at the presidential motorcade. The aim was to test the official report of the Warren Commission (and the broader historical record); in a sense the game encouraged the player to solve a lingering historical conspiracy.

Unsurprisingly, the choice of topic offended many. Despite numerous freely accessible documentaries on the shooting of the president, as well as the footage captured by amateur cameraman Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the Kennedy's motorcade as it drove through Dallas, 'playing' through the event itself appeared quantifiably more offensive. It was an example of a game pushing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

Living in the past

One of the most consistent aims in videogame design over the past four decades has been the emulation of real life. Throughout the 2010s, the quest for realism has edged closer and closer to perfection. With the advent of photorealistic graphics and virtual-reality headsets, the gap between the real and the imagined has reduced significantly. These heightened

Simulacrum city
The virtual cityscape of 2013's *Grand Theft Auto V*, based on LA and other places in California. This game is the fastest-selling entertainment product in history

A brief history of videogames

Key moments in half a century of digital gaming

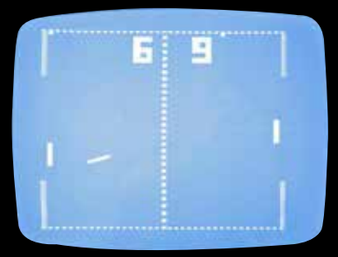
The first videogames were developed in the United States in places where computers were available to workers, often in military installations and on university campuses. In 1962, Massachusetts Institute of Technology students Steve Russell, Martin Graetz and Wayne Wiitanen programmed *Spacewar!* Inspired by the Cold War, the combat game reimagined the space race between Russia and the US as a battle between two tiny spaceships. Wiitanen departed the project before completion, being called up for military service in Berlin.

Ten years later, electronics engineer Nolan Bushnell released *Pong*, a basic simulation of table tennis. It was a huge commercial hit, and traditional amusement companies soon jumped on the videogame bandwagon. Chicago-based Midway released a range of arcade titles including *Gun Fight* (1975), an action game based on the historical US frontier, in which two cowboys face off on screen.

Still one of the most instantly recognisable titles in videogame history, 1978's *Space Invaders* pits players against wave after wave of pixellated alien attackers. An arcade sensation, it made a profit of some $450m.

While many arcade titles navigated similar themes of interstellar conflict, 1980's *Pac-Man* strayed into very different territory, creating a new genre. Its risk-and-reward format – evade the ghosts, chomp the pellets – proved hugely compelling, and even today Pac-Man remains one of the most recognisable symbols of western 1980s culture.

Another game that remains instantly identifiable thanks to its bizarre set-up, *Donkey Kong* (1981) sees Mario, the lead character, jumping across platforms in a bid to save a damsel in distress from the clutches of an angry, barrel-hurling gorilla. By far the most successful of Japanese company Nintendo's early attempts to tap into the US market, by June 1982 it had made around $180m.



Pixel progression
A 1977 iteration of Pong, a very basic simulation of table tennis. The initial version, released in 1972, was one of the earliest arcade games

While Nintendo was influencing the west from Japan, 1984's *Tetris* was the first piece of entertainment software to head from the Soviet Union to the US. Programmed by Russian game designer Alexey Pajitnov, it requires players to tessellate a never-ending onslaught of brightly coloured geometric shapes. A handheld version released for Nintendo's Game Boy console five years later secured its lasting global popularity.

Not all videogames rely solely on reflexes. Will Wright's *SimCity* (1989) is rather more considered, tasking players with transforming a barren plot of land into a bustling metropolis. Providing options to manage everything from road networks to waste disposal, its open-ended, world-building structure launched an entire genre of games.

Though many games had experimented with three dimensions, *Doom* (1993) was the first really successful effort. Its demons-in-space plot may be disposable (and sparked tabloid ire thanks to its mix of violence and satanic imagery), but the influence of its 3D gameworld can be traced through scores of titles released in subsequent decades.

From cowboys and archaeologists to the criminal fraternity of 2013's *Grand Theft Auto V*, videogames now offer an increasingly diverse range of settings, characters and player experiences.

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New frontiers
Western-themed action adventure *Red Dead Redemption*, set on the US-Mexico border in 1911, has sold more than 15 million copies since its release in 2010

LIKE A HOLLYWOOD-STYLE GUNSLINGER, PLAYERS ARE ABLE TO CONSISTENTLY SHOOT THEIR WAY OUT OF TROUBLE

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levels of realism, immersion and complexity also apply to videogames exploring historical topics.

In 2010, Rockstar Games released *Red Dead Redemption*, an open-world adventure set in the American West of the early 20th century. Demonstrating the leap forward from the simple pixellated cowboys seen in early games such as the hugely popular 1975 arcade shooter *Gun Fight* – the first videogame to depict two humans fighting – the game brims with frontier atmosphere. Assuming the role of retired outlaw John Marston, the player tackles a diverse variety of challenges, from taming wild stallions to stealing a supply train from the Mexican army.

The attention to historical detail was striking and, indeed, Rockstar promoted its title as an authentic historical product. Players live and breathe Rockstar's Wild West. The game offers an unrivalled sense of immersion, along with the opportunity to revisit a rare historical moment: the demise of the Wild West at the dawn of a new century.

Yet *Red Dead Redemption* clearly takes its inspiration from the Hollywood Western, itself a fictional, largely mythic and decidedly visual interpretation of events. It enforces common misunderstandings about history by presenting the gun, rather than the plough or the dollar, as maker of the frontier. Much like a Hollywood-style gunslinger, Marston consistently shoots his way out of trouble.

Popular gaming has thus reproduced some of the errors and omissions of popular history. Indeed, though many modern videogames may have perfected the look of history, programmers and players alike have more work to do before games truly offer balanced, rounded accounts of global historical realities.

John Wills is reader in American history and culture at the University of Kent. His recent project 'Playing Cowboys and Criminals: Videogame Depictions of the Frontier and Urban West' was exhibited at the British Academy Summer Showcase. For more details, see *britac.ac.uk/events/summershowcase/2018*