

Examining Perspective in Historical Games

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Abstract

“Perspective” is a commonly used term in video game discourse, however its application to historical games encompasses multiple different interpretations – namely technical, historical and authorial – each with their own subtle influences upon how history may be explored and interpreted within the video game medium. In particular, the effects of contrasting authorial perspectives upon attendant technical or historical perspectives and issues of historical interpretation within video games has been underacknowledged, to the potential detriment of understanding historical video games within the wider context of the gaming medium. This thesis will explore perspective in historical video games within a wide-reaching discussion of historical representation within gaming, exploring issues of historical iconography, simplified narrative interpretations of historical actors as “heroes” or “villains”, the emphasis of historical conflict scenarios to suit gameplay interactions, incidents of political controversy surrounding the representation of marginalised demographic communities within historical contexts, and interactions between video games and the popular concept of “historical accuracy”.

By examining these interactions between contrasting technical, historical and authorial perspectives, this thesis aims to illustrate fundamental limitations of the video game medium as a historical format, to facilitate greater understanding of the relationships between video games and historical subjects and identify opportunities for utilising video games as a means of historical interaction. Consequently, the capacity of video games to engage with historical phenomena should be reinterpreted to accommodate these inherent limitations of games as an historical medium. An alternative authorial perspective of historical games offered by this thesis is a comparison between historical games and historical re-enactment, illustrated by practical comparisons between the experiences of engaging with history via these two media. By drawing these comparisons, more nuanced examination of historical games can be undertaken within a wider context of participatory historical media, alongside existing comparisons to entertainment media such as film and television.

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Introduction: Examining Matters of Perspective in Historical Video Games

The importance of video games and the video game industry has never been greater than it is today. Since 2018, video games have been the highest valued entertainment industry in the world, greater than the film and music industries combined,¹ and an increasing number of companies, including film and television streaming services such as Amazon and Netflix, are exploring video games as a source of revenue and a means to ‘stay relevant’ in the cultural space.² Video games can leave instant and long-lasting impacts in popular culture that subsequently influence societal behaviours as a whole; a famous but popularly ridiculed moment from *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014), which requested PC players to “Press F to pay respects” to a fallen comrade at a funeral has become engrained as a meme in modern social lexicon, and internet communities now readily draw upon this reference in day-to-day discourse,³ while gaming phrases such as “speedrun” and “side-quest” have been included amongst recent additions to the Cambridge Dictionary.⁴

Moreover, the significance of video games as a means of historical engagement cannot be understated. Video games continue to increasingly become a primary means of introducing younger or less specialist audiences to historical subjects, often in greater and more immersive detail than that achievable by traditional heritage formats.⁵ As such, games play a critically important role in defining the cultural memory of historical subjects. The perspectives offered by historical video games play paramount roles in guiding the discourse of historical subjects within popular culture, yet are often considered in a simplified or

¹ “Gaming worth more than video and music combined”, *BBC News*, 3 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-46746593>.

² Steffan Powell, “Netflix: Streamer’s expansion into gaming is ‘natural extension’”, *BBC News*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-66639477>.

³ Matt McKeown, “The Origins of The Press F to Pay Respects Meme”, *TheGamer*, 13 April 2023, <https://www.thegamer.com/press-f-to-pay-respects-call-of-duty-meme-origin/>.

⁴ Lucy Clarke-Billings, “The ‘ick’ and ‘boop’ newest additions to dictionary”, *BBC News*, 26 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c19k2rdzxyko>.

⁵ See for example, Peter Higgins, “Unlocking the glass case”, in Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Dirk von Lehn & Stephen Cook (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 331-332.

selective manner depending on each individual scholar's interpretation of the term ***perspective***.

Perspective is a term frequently employed by historians, yet it is one which the average consumer of historical writing or media is rarely given the opportunity to understand. Despite this, its importance in the construction, framing and in the understanding of History as a subject is of paramount importance.⁶ As the *Dictionary of Concepts in History* says, 'the historian inevitably views the past from his own "angle of vision" or "frame of reference"'.⁷ This consequently shapes our understanding of the history related by a given historical text, influencing which narratives we believe or reject and the broader role history plays in our modern popular culture, as related by entertainment media such as video games.

When one looks to entertainment media such as film, television or video games, the audience is commonly presented with the personal perspective of one or more of the story's main protagonist(s); this offers an intimate, but often singular view of events which subsequently justifies their narrative by forming emotional connections between the protagonist and the audience. Some media may offer brief glimpses into the narrative perspective of secondary characters or the antagonist(s) by means of short scenes interspersing those of the protagonist, however their inclusion is often intended to further contextualise or justify the actions of the protagonist(s) or otherwise heighten the sense of drama for the audience. Yet these scenes can dramatically alter the audience's understanding of events and, in some instances, can sometimes validate the antagonist(s) rationale or force the audience to reinterpret the justification of the protagonist(s). Moreover, as artistic sources, one must also account for the perspectives of a film or game's creators, the purpose and messaging which created their art, and how their work was interpreted by their audience.⁸ Perspective, therefore, describes not only the mechanisms by which a person, be they scholar or gamer, views historical events but also about the understanding of those events which these mechanisms of viewing have imparted.

⁶ John Tosh (ed.), *Historians on History* (2nd ed.; London: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009), p. 8.

⁷ Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Inc., 1986), p. 246.

⁸ Peter Claus and John Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2012), p. 275.

The value of this simple, yet vital, concept of perspective within entertainment media is adeptly demonstrated in the Ridley Scott historical film, *The Last Duel* (2021), which depicts the events leading up to and during the last legally-sanctioned judicial duel in medieval France.⁹ The film is divided into three sections, each told from the point of view, or *perspective*, of one of the three key figures in the legal case, before the eponymous duel at the film's climax: first comes the testimony of Jean de Carrouges (played by Matt Damon), who accuses Jacques le Gris (played by Adam Driver) of raping de Carrouges' wife, Lady Marguerite (played by Jodie Comer), and challenges le Gris to a fight to the death in order to defend his "honour"; de Carrouges' testimony is followed by that of le Gris, presenting his version of events, and is in turn followed by Lady Marguerite's point of view, whose section of the film is introduced with the bold title of "The Truth".¹⁰

Across the three testimonies, several incidents are repeated on multiple occasions, each with their own subtle cinematic or narrative nuances to distinguish each of the protagonists' role in events and how each remembers or frames the incident in question; at other times, events are omitted entirely, either because the "narrating" protagonist was not present or to suit the narrative that the relevant character is presenting. Some of the repeated incidents, such as the 1370 Siege of Limoges, appear in significantly different contexts depending on the protagonist "recounting" the event: in de Carrouges's testimony, he leads a bold charge against English forces, yet the city falls *despite* his heroic efforts;¹¹ according to le Gris, de Carrouges impetuously charges English forces in contravention of his orders, thereby *directly causing* the loss of the city, and le Gris and his fellow knights are obliged to follow de Carrouges to save his life.¹² This subtle distinction shows how important it is to consider through whose eyes (or whose perspective) we are "seeing" a historical event, as we cannot necessarily trust that their presentation of events is an accurate or objective account. Although commonly understood by academic scholars, this phenomenon is frequently taken for granted by creators and consumers of modern historical media, who

⁹ *The Last Duel*, directed by Ridley Scott (2021, Twentieth Century Studios). Available on Disney+ video streaming.

¹⁰ *The Last Duel* [1:25:25-1:25:35].

¹¹ *The Last Duel* [00:05:10-00:07:20].

¹² *The Last Duel* [00:42:37-00:43:50].

regularly smooth out the nuances of their depictions of history to simplify interpretation of the experience for the audience.¹³

Moreover, when one applies these broad concepts of perspective within history to the medium of video games, there are added complications. Perspective is a term used within the gaming medium itself, referring both to the demographic – including factors such as ethnicity, gender or sexuality – and cultural background of a given character, as well as the technical or mechanical means by which the audience views and engages with gameplay; Carolyn Handler Miller devotes part of her discussion of character within *Interactive Storytelling* to discuss the manner in which different visual perspectives impacts the player's interactions with characters and the emotional resonance of actions within interactive media such as video games.¹⁴ Perspective can help to define game genres, such as the "First-Person Shooter" genre, where players look directly into the action through the technical and metaphorical eyes of the game protagonist.¹⁵ This interactive perspective – the technological mechanisms by which a gamer views and engages with in-game content – combines with that of historical narrative to inform the history portrayed by a particular game and the interactions the player subsequently has with that history as a result.

Additionally, one must also consider the perspectives of a game's creators, and any influence which their artistic decisions or socio-political views impart upon the content of a piece of entertainment media such as a video game, which may in turn influence the perspectives of consumers as they interact with that media. In this regard, video games can be interpreted alongside any other form of historical source, which, as demonstrated in the examples cited above, are all influenced to some extent by their authors.

To demonstrate the complexity of perspective within the video game medium and the need to distinguish between its different contexts and interpretations, let us take an illustrative example. In the strategy game *Napoleon: Total War* (2010), for instance, players can "step into the shoes" of the titular emperor, or those of one of his many adversaries, and guide their armies across early nineteenth century Europe before descending to the

¹³ See for example, Claus and Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment* (Second edition; Burlington, Mass.: Focal Press, 2008), pp. 92-95.

¹⁵ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Second edition; London: Routledge, 2016), p. 153.

battlefield to emulate one of the great battles of Napoleon's career;¹⁶ the player sees and interacts with the former by accessing a strategic overview in a style which homages tokens laid out across a physical map table, while the latter, tactical view takes place on the battleground itself, where terrain and weather can shape events as much as any leader.¹⁷ Yet the player is also interacting with in-game events as themselves as much as their chosen historical avatar, and their priorities, ideas, and morality can guide the course of events in a vastly different direction to the one which history says happened. Lastly, the player's ability to interact with events has been prescribed and limited to certain types of actions by the game's developers.

Whose perspective of history is *Napoleon: Total War* presenting: that of Napoleon or his contemporaries, upon whose world and career the game is theoretically based? That of the developers, who created the game, designed the game's depiction of Napoleon's world and established the parameters of the player's ability to interact with events? Or that of the player, whose input and decisions have helped to cause in-game events to unfold in the manner which they have experienced?

Mark Stephen Meadows, in his introduction to *Pause and Effect*, his examination of narrative and its structures within interactive media, presciently observes that:

... authors all have one thing in common. They have a perspective to convey. Playwrights, journalists, historians, fiction writers, and biographers all have a story to tell. Their story is their perspective.¹⁸

Meadows' inclusion of playwrights and fiction writers alongside journalists and historians is especially significant to acknowledge, as *all* forms of media – factual and fictional, studious and entertaining – are inherently imbued with the views of their creators and subsequently interpreted by their consumers, who will have their own personal perspectives of the author's account. So far, however, no one has undertaken a detailed exploration of how complex this seemingly simple term can be in the specific context of historical video games, examined its variety of possible interpretations or applications, nor

¹⁶ Creative Assembly, *Napoleon: Total War* (2010), PC. Published by SEGA.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The art of interactive narrative* (Indianapolis, Ind.: David Dwyer, 2003), p. 2.

of its wider implications for studying history within the video game medium. Throughout this thesis, I shall undertake this exploration, to shed light upon many of the potential interpretations of perspective within discussion of historical video games and examine the complexity of the consequences which competing perspectives have on the presentation and interpretation of history within the gaming medium. This process will allow for the identification of key issues within the interpretation of historical video games that may be further explored by scholarly analysis, thereby highlighting potential strengths or weaknesses of games as a historical medium, and also identifying potential interpretations and uses for video games within the context of historical engagement.

Defining Perspective

The significance of the impact which perspective can have on the construction of a piece of media's content is readily acknowledged within the academic community. Carolyn Handler Miller has, as previously mentioned, included discussion of visual perspective alongside the impacts of narrative upon interactive media,¹⁹ and Jacob Gaboury has examined the evolution of various in-game technical perspectives and their application as a means of engagement with gameplay in the video game medium.²⁰ Meanwhile, Orna Kupferman and Gal Vardi conducted a research study in 2019 in which the players of a video game were only able to view and access content tied directly to their specific in-game perspective, in order to examine the effect which this restricted perspective had upon players' overall strategy for attempting to win the game.²¹

Alongside these discussions, authors in the field of historical game studies – notably Adam Chapman – have acknowledged the distinction between the various contexts of perspective in the gaming space, but have devoted little exploration into the impact of these different perspectives beyond acknowledging them as potential fields of inquiry.²²

¹⁹ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 92-95.

²⁰ Jacob Gaboury, "Perspective", in Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins (eds.), *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2016), pp. 359-367.

²¹ Orna Kupferman and Gal Vardi, "Perspective Games", *34th Annual ACM/IEEE Symposium on Logic in Computer Science (LICS)* (2019).

²² See for examples, Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), pp. 13-17; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 152-159.

Therefore, in order to fully understand the forms of perspective which impact the construction and interpretation of history within video games, we must begin by defining each type of perspective and how it relates to the depiction of history within gaming.

Perspective, as it is broadly understood within the vocabulary of video gaming, principally refers to the manner in which the player views and interacts with the game on their screen. While the principal identifier of these varying perspectives is the manner and camera angles from which the player “sees” the in-game world and gameplay events, these different perspectives can also influence how the player interacts with objects and individuals within the game world. As such, these forms of perspective shall be referred to henceforth as **Technical Perspectives**, in order to accommodate these wider interactive considerations alongside those of visual framing.

Within the gaming medium, the most commonly cited technical perspectives are “First-Person” and “Third-Person”. The former of these is perhaps the most immediately recognisable, as the First-Person technical perspective frames ‘the screen as the viewpoint’,²³ making the player’s ability to view events identical to that of their character. As Jerome de Groot puts it:

The player is put in the position of performing a character whilst simultaneously seduced by point of view to identify bodily and wholly with this character. This can be disorientating in its scope – modern versions of these games enable the player to have both a direction of movement control and a direction of vision.²⁴

Given that the screen serves as the player’s field of vision in these games, the player character’s body is rarely, if ever, visible on screen in First-Person perspective; often, the only physical indicator of the character’s presence is an arm or, more frequently, a weapon pointing towards the centre of the screen.²⁵ However, the lack of a visible character can make the gameplay experience more intimate and emotionally impactful, as the events on screen are happening, as it were, directly to the player and not just a digital persona.²⁶ In terms of video game historiography, this technical perspective is principally represented by the First-Person Shooter (FPS) gameplay genre, within which the *Medal of Honor* (1999-

²³ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 153.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, p. 93.

²⁶ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 153; Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, p. 93.

2020), *Call of Duty* (2003-present) and *Battlefield* (2002-present) franchises offer the most prominent corpus of historical experiences, although other notable examples such as the medieval Role-Playing Game (RPG) *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) and “military simulator” (“mil-sim”) FPS *Hell Let Loose* (2021) have been released over the years utilising this First-Person technical perspective.²⁷

By comparison, Third-Person games form a broader and more varied technical category. Video games most commonly described as offering a Third-Person perspective typically focus player actions upon a single *visible* character avatar. In this technical perspective, the player’s viewpoint may be positioned from various possible angles, although a fixed or moveable “over the shoulder” camera view is perhaps the most common example of this technical format. This technical perspective offers the player a wider and more flexible field of vision, enabling more complicated, challenging or cinematic actions to be undertaken by the player with greater ease; the *Assassin’s Creed* series (2007-present) makes good use of this facility within its gameplay formulae, enabling players to stealthily infiltrate guarded locales or to single-handedly combat multiple enemies with relative ease by granting the player a greater field of vision from which to perceive threats or opportunities for interaction with the game environment.²⁸

In technical terms, however, the Third-Person definition is slightly misleading and open to interpretation. Strategy games such as the *Total War* series (2000-present) or *Steel Division: Normandy ‘44* (2017), in which the player interacts with in-game events from a high, overlooking viewpoint and is completely divorced from any particular character, could be said to automatically fall into the Third-Person technical category purely by virtue of the fact that in-game actions are not conducted in the First-Person. An alternative interpretation is offered by Meadows, who differentiates the “off-set yet character focused” view of a game like *Assassin’s Creed* from the omnipotent, detached overhead view – what Gaboury

²⁷ Dreamworks Interactive, Respawn Software, Electronic Arts *et al.*, *Medal of Honor* (1999-2020), Gameboy Advance, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Game Cube and Wii, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts; Infinity Ward, Treyarch, Sledgehammer Games, Raven Software *et al.*, *Call of Duty* (2003-present), Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, and PC. Published by Activision; EA DICE *et al.*, *Battlefield* (2002-2021), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts; Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2024. Published by Deep Silver; Black Matter, Cover 6 Studios, and Expression Games, *Hell Let Loose* (2021), PC. Later released on Xbox and PlayStation. Published by Team17 Digital Ltd.

²⁸ Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Quebec *et al.*, *Assassin’s Creed* (2007-present), Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, PC, and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

describes as a ‘disembodied isometric projection’ – of games like the *Total War* series by defining the former technical perspective as “Second-Person” and the latter as “Third-Person”.²⁹ Miller also notes the possibility of differentiating between Second-Person and Third-Person viewpoints, but observes that the distinction is a debatable one and only utilised within professional discourse.³⁰

Naturally, none of these broad categories of technical perspective cover every single game. Side-scrolling, text-based, and mobile games form their own distinct technical or gameplay genres, which rarely fit neatly into one or other of the established categories of “First-” or “Third-Person” visual or technical perspective. Similarly, overlooking isometric technical perspectives have also featured in focused, character-driven games, such as the *Expeditions* role-playing game series (2013-2020) or turn-based strategy games such as *Empire of Sin* (2020) and *War Mongrels* (2021), yet this technical perspective falls outside the common interpretations for either First-, Second- or Third-Person perspectives.³¹ However, these First-, Second- and Third-Person viewpoints do form the most common types of technical perspective employed by historical games, especially those released in the modern era of gaming where cinematic tropes and high-definition graphics are becoming increasingly widespread.³²

In some instances, players are provided with the option of selecting their preferred technical perspective, allowing them to personalise their interactions with the game experience by altering the manner in which they view in-game events, thereby potentially increasing the subjective emotional resonance of gameplay or altering their interpretation of events; *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) is one such game where this selection may be performed, as while the game presents a Second-Person technical perspective – to use Meadows’ definition – by default, thereby easing the transition between active gameplay and non-interactive cutscenes which intersperse gameplay sections and give the game narrative a greater cinematic quality, the player is provided with the option to adjust the

²⁹ Gaboury, “Perspective”, p. 364; Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, pp. 75-76.

³⁰ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 93-94.

³¹ Logic Artists, *Expeditions* (2013-2020), PC. Published by Bit Composer, Logic Artists and THQ Nordic; Romero Games, *Empire of Sin* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Nintendo Switch. Published by Paradox Interactive; Destructive Creations, *War Mongrels* (2021), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC.

³² Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 252-254.

game's viewpoint and experience certain elements of gameplay from a First-Person technical perspective if they so choose.³³

While primarily a means of distinguishing perspectives by which the player views in-game events, technical perspectives also encompass means of interacting with historical phenomena through the medium of gameplay genre and other in-game mechanical systems. An FPS game, such as *Call of Duty*, and a First-Person RPG, such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, feature subtly different technical perspectives due to the interactive systems permitted by their differing gameplay genres, which enable them to present separate technical perspectives of historical subjects although their visual formats share many similarities. These technical influences of gameplay can have a significant influence on the forms of historical phenomena presented by a video game, as a game must accommodate historical content within the mechanical formats and conventions of a particular gameplay genre, which may consequently influence its ability to engage or present certain historical subjects.

Historians, meanwhile, commonly use the term perspective to refer to the contributions to the historical narrative offered by a given historical source, along with the influences and experiences that shaped its creation. Medieval and classical historians frequently include sections in their works devoted to discussing the provenance of the various sources to which they refer, thereby illustrating the background of the author of a particular source and their linkage to the history which their text recounts;³⁴ often, the historian draws attention to any direct interactions between the sources and their subject to account for any particular insights, sympathies or antagonism demonstrated towards certain individuals or events. Some historians have regarded this subjectivity within historical texts as a criticism, a lack of critical objectivity, however others have regarded this variation of perspective as 'a "positive opportunity to observe things that are obscure" from various

³³ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on PC and Google Stadia in 2019.

³⁴ For examples, see Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War: Athens and Sparta in Savage Conflict 431-404 BC* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), pp. xxiii-xxiv; Sophie Thérèse Ambler, *The Song of Simon de Montfort: England's First Revolutionary and the Death of Chivalry* (London: Picador, 2019), pp. 9-10 & p. 296; Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land* (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd., 2012), p. 581; Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress. Queen. Warrior.* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 3-7; Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), pp. 356-362.

points of view'.³⁵ Yet is this means of guiding and constructing the audience's understanding of events any different to the creation of supposedly less-authoritative sources such as video games?

Moreover, this interpretation of perspective also incorporates analysis of the language with which historical texts frame their discussion of events and individuals, thereby defining how we, a source's audience, are supposed to view and understand their narrative of events. In *Reading Primary Sources*, Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann refer to using the language of a primary source in order to 'analyse not only how meanings have changed over time (called a diachronic perspective), but also the different and often competing connotations a term can carry at any given historical moment (synchronic perspective)'.³⁶ E.H. Carr, in his seminal *What is History?*, says that 'our answer [to his title question] consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live',³⁷ while John Tosh remarked that 'perspective, rather than prophecy, is the contribution historians can make to the rational understanding of the contemporary world'.³⁸ In this manner, analysis of history can not only impart an understanding of events and attitudes of the past, but also offer commentary on events and attitudes in the present through an examination of their interpretation in historical contexts.

These interpretations of perspective are valuable to examine in order to establish the experience of specific historical events, as the narratives and experiences of individual sources can be compared or contrasted with other accounts of the same events to build a more complete picture of the historical reality and how events are interpreted by both their contemporaries and by later generations; it is this narrative form of perspective that is so adeptly demonstrated by the cinematography within Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel*. In historical video games, this form of perspective is largely applied to the demographic(s) of the player's character avatar and which faction they play as for a given historical event, as well as the demographic(s) and faction(s) of the player character's allies and opponents. This form of perspective is also reflective of the understandings of historical phenomena

³⁵ Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History*, p. 246.

³⁶ Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 6.

³⁷ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Reprinted ed.; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 2.

³⁸ Tosh, *Historians on History*, p. 8.

conveyed by a historical game and through its subsequent analysis. Therefore, as this form of perspective is more intimately connected with the specific historical content of a given historical game and the manner of a historical subject's representation and interpretation within the gaming medium, this type of perspective shall henceforth be referred to within this thesis as ***Historical Perspective***.

By distinguishing between these technical and historical perspectives, historical video games can subsequently be explored in a wealth of potential forms. For instance, by combining or contrasting video games set within the same historical event, but with different technical perspectives, historians can gain an appreciation for how understandings of a single event can vary according to the manner through which they are engaged.³⁹

If one looks at the Battle of Normandy during the Second World War (WWII), for instance, the fighting takes on considerably different aspects when viewed through the lens of games which have utilised this setting in different technical perspectives: in FPS games like *Call of Duty 3* (2006) or *Hell Let Loose*, the player experiences the visceral shock of the “boots on the ground” fighting;⁴⁰ in Real-Time Strategy games, like *Steel Division: Normandy '44*, they experience the tactical challenges faced by operational commanders in the heat of battle, but remain physically separated from events despite their ability to observe them;⁴¹ and in Grand Strategy games like *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016), they can experience the view of the participating heads of state, guiding national policy and staring at tokens on maps, far from the frontlines and with no direct practical influence upon frontline combat.⁴²

Subsequently, playing these differing technical perspectives may facilitate better interpretation of some of the decisions and opinions reflected by these viewpoints in the original historical record, thereby possibly improving our understanding of historical events and potentially allowing us to better learn the lessons of the past; for instance, a commentator for the gaming news outlet *Polygon* expressed shock upon realising that their actions within the First World War (WWI) strategy game *The Great War: Western Front*

³⁹ See for example, Jeremiah McCall, “Agents, Goals, and Action-Choices: Analyzing the Game Histories of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Hegemony Gold: Wars of Ancient Greece* with the Historical Problem Space Framework”, *thersites*, vol. 18 (2024), pp. 69-115.

⁴⁰ Treyarch, *Call of Duty 3* (2006), Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Wii. Published by Activision; *Hell Let Loose*.

⁴¹ Eugen Systems, *Steel Division: Normandy '44* (2017), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

⁴² Paradox Development Studio, *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

(2023) – which frames in-game events from an isometric, Third Person technical perspective – had unwittingly conformed to the antagonistic presentation of senior officers from that conflict, encapsulated by the “lions led by donkeys” narrative – a post-war narrative perspective of WWI which interpreted the high death toll of British soldiers as the direct consequence of strategic and tactical failures by British commanders – propagated by texts such as Alan Clarke’s *The Donkeys* and in post-war media such as the situation-comedy series *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989) and the award-winning film *1917* (2020).⁴³

However, technical and historical perspectives are not the only forms which shall be discussed within this text. There is an additional branch of perspective which this thesis shall directly address, one that is vital to understanding video games in the modern age. As with every artistic medium, there exists a symbiotic and often conflicting relationship between the creators and consumers of entertainment media, whereby creative decisions are heavily influenced by demands from any executive management or financial stakeholders, the consumer-base, and by critical reception of the latest releases.⁴⁴ To take a historic example, there is strong evidence to suggest that the plays of William Shakespeare were influenced by contemporary political views, which he acknowledged and exploited within his works; his inclusion of witches as the driving force of villainy in *Macbeth*, for instance, played to a popular contemporary fear of witchcraft shared and encouraged by the then recently-crowned King James I of England, whose paranoia of witchcraft is well-documented.⁴⁵

The growth of social media has greatly facilitated this creative discourse, transforming it into a genuine dialogue between creators and consumers which can occur almost instantaneously. In the medium of video games, this relationship has grown into a

⁴³ Petroglyph Games, *The Great War: Western Front* (2023), PC. Published by Frontier Foundry; Alice Newcombe-Beill, “A WWI strategy game turned me into Benedict Cumberbatch”, *Polygon*, 10 April 2023, <https://www.polygon.com/platform/amp/23670056/the-great-war-western-front-ww1-rts-benedict-cumberbatch>; Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), pp. 89-94; Alan Clarke, *The Donkeys* (London: Pimlico, 1961); *Blackadder Goes Forth*, written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton (broadcast 28 September 1989 – 2 November 1989 on BBC1) [DVD]; *1917*, directed by Sam Mendes (2020, Universal Pictures) [DVD].

⁴⁴ Claus and Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice*, p. 275.

⁴⁵ K.M. Briggs, *Pale Hecate’s Team: An Examination of Beliefs on Witchcraft and Magic among Shakespeare’s Contemporaries and His Immediate Successors* (London: Routledge, 1962), pp. 77-78; Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts* (Cambridge: Polity Press Ltd, 2004), pp. 123-124 & p. 126.

critical aspect of the industry, as online gaming platforms like Twitch, Steam and Discord, and the proliferation of fan-made modifications to existing games – colloquially known as “mods” – have helped to blur the lines between content-creators and content-consumers in the gaming sphere. While many “mods” are often purely aesthetic, some can fundamentally alter the internal mechanical experience of a game or add new gameplay content, and can thus be considered genuine authorship of a new or alternate gameplay experience different from that offered by the original market version;⁴⁶ for example, Chris Kempshall, in his *The First World War in Computer Games*, examines a player-created “mod” for *Napoleon: Total War* which transforms the nineteenth century-set game into a WWI experience by altering visual aesthetics and some structural gameplay mechanics.⁴⁷ As such, video games offer a platform for consumers of a historical experience to author their own perspective of events within that original product, allowing them to present their own authorial perspective of history within or in contrast to the perspective offered by the developers.

Meanwhile, technological improvements and evolving business practices by game developers and publishers have opened the way for companies to use games as “live-service” platforms, whereby games can be constantly updated, primarily as a means of offering new content after a game’s release and increasing financial returns over the life cycle of a given game, but also enabling developers to add, alter or repair game features in response to player feedback.⁴⁸ At the same time, this relationship enables the player-base to influence what content the developers may choose to include within gameplay or by offering greater opportunity for the player to exercise choice and agency over their game experience.⁴⁹ The significance of this creator-consumer relationship to modern gaming cannot be understated as it alters the potential perspectives offered by video games from static, momentary reflections of social and cultural thought into dynamic interactions with shifting ideas over a far greater potential timespan. As such, discussion of this creator-

⁴⁶ See for example, Nathaniel Poor, “Computer game modders’ motivations and sense of community: a mixed-methods approach”, *New Media & Society*, vol. 16: 8 (2014), pp. 1249-1267.

⁴⁷ Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), pp. 23-26.

⁴⁸ John Uke, “What Are Live Service Games?”, *GameTree*, 1 December 2024, <https://gametree.me/gaming-terms/live-service-games/>; Tim Brookes, “What Are Live Service Games (And Why Are They So Polarizing)?”, *How-To Geek*, 16 March 2024, <https://www.howtogeek.com/what-are-live-service-games-and-why-are-they-so-polarizing/>.

⁴⁹ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 56-57.

consumer relationship cannot be excluded from any discourse about modern video games, regardless of topic.⁵⁰

Another significance of this creator-consumer relationship, and one of particular significance to the content of this thesis, is that publishers, developers, and players all have their own different perspectives on what video games should provide or represent: in broad, generalised terms, players want an enjoyable gaming experience, publishers want to ensure profitable returns on their financial investments, and developers want to make games that reflect their passion for the medium. Moreover, these perspectives all interconnect and, occasionally, conflict with one another, in particular highlighting contrasting commercial priorities between developers and publishers or general ignorance of the development process by players;⁵¹ a notable and widespread indicator of popular understandings of video game creation can be perceived in the attribution of certain video games to particular auteurs, senior or noteworthy figures within development teams whose influence is equated to authorship of a book, but whose influence potentially overshadows the influence of wider collaborative processes within game development teams.⁵² All of these perspectives combine to influence and shape the games that are ultimately created, and the form they take within subsequent cultural discourse; as such, these influences upon a historical game as an artistic, commercial and cultural product shall be referred to from herein as **Authorial Perspectives**, both in regard to their initial creation and to their subsequent interpretation.

This latter strand of authorship, that of subsequently interpreting and discussing in-game events, is also significant to consider alongside the primary development of a game, as the interactive nature of the gaming medium raises the question of whether a player's input

⁵⁰ See also Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch (eds.), *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

⁵¹ See for example, Austin Wood, "'It's Just Impossible': Devs explain why big online games always seem to break at launch", *GamesRadar+*, 22 February 2019, <https://www.gamesradar.com/its-just-impossible-devs-explain-why-big-online-games-always-seem-to-break-at-launch/>; Austin Wood, "'We cough up a chunk of our soul': 32 game devs, from Doom's John Romero to Helldivers 2 and Palworld leads, explain what people get wrong about games", *GamesRadar+*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/game-devs-explain-what-people-get-wrong-about-games/>. See also, Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, "Introduction: Why Game Production Matters?" and David B. Nieborg, "How To Study Game Publishers: Activision Blizzard's Corporate History", in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch (eds.), *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 7-26 and pp. 179-196.

⁵² Vítor M. Costa, "Auteur Theory and Video Games", *Medium*, 28 January 2022, <https://medium.com/super-jump/auteur-theory-and-video-games-5716dac5625e>; "Film 101: What Is an Auteur? Learn About Auteur Theory", *Masterclass*, 1 September 2022, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/film-101-what-is-an-auteur>.

within gameplay or their thematic analysis of a game's narratives can be considered "authorship" of their subjective personal experience of that particular title.⁵³ While the extent to which player actions within a game or reviews, commentary and discussion of video games can be considered "authorial" is debatable, developers and publishers are nonetheless conscious of player engagement with their games and frequently reactive to player feedback, both positive and negative, either issuing their own statements to clarify "their" perspective of a game or altering the content of their titles in response to player discourse. Consequently, player perspectives surrounding a video game, or aspects thereof, can play a significant, sometimes critical, role in shaping the development or longevity of a particular game, and as such we can consider the *effect* of player perspectives to be indirectly authorial, even if they do not necessarily have direct input into the authorship of a game's content.⁵⁴

Claus and Herriot's comments on the interrogation of artistic sources also accounts for a need to examine the purpose underlying the creation of an artistic historical source.⁵⁵ This is particularly important to acknowledge in the context of historical video games, as the financial, commercial and artistic decision-making involved within video games' development naturally impacts the creation of games as a commercial product;⁵⁶ the more expensive a video game is to create, often the fewer creative risks with regards to gameplay design or content a game's publisher is willing to take in order to ensure a "safe" return on their financial investments.⁵⁷ This can have significant repercussions for the content of a given historical game, as these authorial decisions may ultimately dilute the historical perspective offered by a certain video game, as developers and publishers introduce or partition game content through the use of monetisation systems in order to maximise the

⁵³ Melanie Swalwell, Helen Stuckley and Angela Ndalians (eds.), *Fans and Videogames: Histories, Fandom, Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵⁴ Wood, "We cough up a chunk of our soul': 32 game devs, from Doom's John Romero to Helldivers 2 and Palworld leads, explain what people get wrong about games". See also, Olli Sotomaa, "Game Developers Playing Games: Instrumental Play, Game Talk, and Preserving the Joy of Play" and Mia Consalvo and Andrew Phelps, "Game Development Live on Twitch: Observations of Practice and Educational Synergies", in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 103-122.

⁵⁵ Claus and Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice*, p. 275.

⁵⁶ Sotomaa and Švelch, "Introduction: Why Game Production Matters?", pp. 7-26.

⁵⁷ Nieborg, "How To Study Game Publishers", pp. 179-196; WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blatLhvdh0w>; GameSpot, *Game Developers Aren't Taking Enough Risks | Spot On*, online video recording, YouTube, 7 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOrSzdZbCIE>.

game's commercial viability at the potential cost of historical fidelity, or introduce ahistorical content designed to appeal to a wider gaming audience.

For historical games, this melting pot of interlinked authorial perspectives can have significant impacts upon the depiction of history within a given title, and of its subsequent discussion within the wider gaming community. Because of their content, historical games have commonly been examined in relative isolation by gaming scholars to assess the specific interactions of individual titles with historical subjects or vice versa, with certain notable exceptions such as Esther Wright's examination of Rockstar Games' interactions with history as a gaming publisher and developer.⁵⁸ However, the nature of the video game medium is such that historical games do not exist in a creative vacuum, distinct from other types or genres of games or entertainment media, and are instead dynamically interlinked with the gaming medium at large by commercial and cultural developments and by commonalities in technological presentation or gameplay genre.⁵⁹ As such, the interactions between historical content and gameplay must also be considered within this wider authorial perspective of the video game medium itself: how do "gaming" and "video games" as wider phenomena shape the presentation of history within a particular historical game?

Developers have to balance representing the historical evidence that has survived to us today with audience understandings and expectations of the period within the mechanical systems of the game, alongside publisher expectations for the commercial profitability of their end product, while players have to accept that, no matter how detailed and well-researched, historical games only ever serve as representations of a given period and must exercise critical awareness of the creative and commercial influences that manipulate and interpret the historical sources. Often, we can observe a tension or conflict between these competing perspectives of historical games – most commonly between creators and consumers – and therefore identifying the influence of these authorial interactions upon any subsequent technical or historical perspectives offered by historical games must be considered as factors regarding how a game presents a historical subject.

⁵⁸ Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022).

⁵⁹ See also Sotomaa and Švelch (eds.), *Game Production Studies*.

Only when these three strands of perspective – **technical**, **historical**, and **authorial** – are all identified and considered can scholars truly begin to gain full understanding for how history is represented and utilised within the video game medium, and the ways that games can be employed to explore both the scholarship of history and our modern understandings of historical subjects. Given its relative under-representation, this thesis will particularly highlight the influences of authorial perspective in determining the historical and technical perspectives which historical video games provide, and the impact that these authorial perspectives have on the presentation and discussion of history within the video game medium at large. As this thesis shall repeatedly emphasise, video games are frequently designed to engage with mass audiences, notably for commercial reasons. As such, the additional insight which can be gained by viewing historical games within this broader context of the video game industry as a larger entity will illustrate particular issues within popular audience discussions of historical games and the impact which these have upon game creators, thereby offering critical insight into key questions of history’s presentation within gaming and how audiences engage with historical subjects through video games.

Methodology

Within this thesis, the concept and application of perspective within the context of historical video games will be explored and examined to identify the impact that divergent perspectives can offer towards the study of history within the video game medium. While a variety of historical games shall be discussed and examined throughout this text, many of the detailed or central case studies which shall be explored are titles which fall within the category of “triple-A” games (alternatively rendered as AAA). This informal designation, commonly used within the gaming industry and player communities, refers to those premier games and franchises produced with the greatest budgets and development tools, or by the largest game developers and publishers;⁶⁰ many of the most well-known video game franchises, such as the *Call of Duty*, *Assassin’s Creed*, and *Red Dead* series (2004-2018), are

⁶⁰ Kaaya Karthikeyan, “AAA Games: A Comprehensive Guide”, *Gameopedia*, 15 December 2021, <https://www.gameopedia.com/comprehensive-guide-to-aaa-games/>.

significant representatives of this gaming category and shall feature prominently throughout this thesis.

Although repeatedly focusing on a small handful of games may appear to restrict the arguments which shall be presented herein, there are good reasons for emphasising the depiction of history within triple-A historical game experiences when making the broad commentaries contained within this thesis. Many of the games explored within this thesis, including a significant proportion of triple-A historical games, serve as representatives of what Chapman describes as the ‘realist-simulation style’, games whose digital and historical representations endeavour to present historical experiences with “realistic” or “immersive” detail to engage with the past ‘as it appeared to historical agents at the time’. The proliferation of graphically advanced games – particularly by triple-A studios but also by indie developers, thanks to the public distribution of graphically advanced game engine technology such as Unreal Engine⁶¹ – also furthers the prominence of ‘realist simulation style’ experiences, as Chapman notes that ‘a high degree of visual specificity’ and ‘heavy and detailed visual data loads’, which depict detailed historical environments filled with context-appropriate artefacts, are defining characteristics of this manner of historical game experience.⁶²

The ‘realist-simulation style’ of historical representation entails significant consequences for popular understanding of history within gaming, as the ‘realist simulation’ mode eases interpretation by the player audience through high visual detail and identifiable audio-visual cues (even if these cues are drawn from or reference previous depictions of a historical era within entertainment media), remain narratively and interactively tied to individuals or small groups of historical characters to aid player agency within a game’s digital landscape and facilitate interactions with historical subjects, and carry implicit claims relating to notions of historical authenticity through representations of ‘*the true narrative*’ of historical events [original italics].⁶³

An additional style of historical game which shall feature notably within this thesis is what Chapman defines as the ‘constructionalist simulation style’. This style of historical

⁶¹ WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*.

⁶² Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 61-66.

⁶³ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 61-69.

game – exemplified within this thesis by titles such as the *Sid Meier's Civilisation* series (1991-present), *Crusader Kings III* (2020) and *Manor Lords* (2024) – present more abstracted representations of historical periods, guiding player interactions through period appropriate audio-visual aesthetics but engaging more tangibly with historical systems and processes to present a concentrated “macro-scale” representation of a historical period.⁶⁴ Much of the ‘constructionalist simulation style’ engages with procedural rhetoric, a process defined by Ian Bogost by which a game can present a reconstruction of a process within gameplay and use them as representations of larger processes through the ‘authorship of rules of behaviour’.⁶⁵ Therefore, while games of the ‘constructionalist simulation style’ diverge from established historical narratives or representations of characters or events, they remain conceptually “historical” by engaging with attitudes and processes by which the historical worlds they represent functioned.

As this thesis shall demonstrate, particular technical perspectives of video games – notably with regards to gameplay genre – favour either the realist or constructionalist simulation style. However, of these technical perspectives, it is notable that the technical and authorial perspectives favoured amongst triple-A historical games favour the realist simulation style, and therefore many phenomena within this thesis shall reflect more directly upon this manner of digital historical representation.

Additionally, a key reason for emphasising the discussion of perspectives of history in relation to triple-A titles is that, with their greater marketing resources and cultural currency, they are often central to popular discourse surrounding history in the gaming space due to their influence on the public audience and mass media. This logic mirrors that of Grant Tracy who, in compiling his *Filmography of American History*, stated that he ‘wanted films that were, for the most part, popular since it is through popular culture that we best understand and create ourselves’.⁶⁶ Likewise, only by understanding the perspectives provided by widely known triple-A games can we begin to fully interpret the perspectives found within smaller budget “double-A” or “indie” titles – games created by independent studios or developers, principally without overt publisher backing – which try to produce or

⁶⁴ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 69-75.

⁶⁵ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 71-72.

⁶⁶ Grant Tracy, *Filmography of American History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. xi.

highlight gameplay experiences rarely found in the larger titles explicitly produced for the largest mass audience possible;⁶⁷ notable examples of these latter categories of game which shall feature within this text include *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Manor Lords* and *Hell Let Loose*.⁶⁸ The association and contrasting of popular historical games to similar gaming experiences can be seen in comments surrounding *Manor Lords*, whose Real-Time combat mechanics were heavily compared to those of the *Total War* series, to the extent that *Manor Lords*' developer felt compelled to issue a statement clarifying that the two game experiences were not intended to compete with one another despite their similar technical perspectives.⁶⁹ This wider authorial perspective of viewing games in the context of comparable gameplay experiences, regardless of thematic or narrative nuances or historical relevance, is a notable aspect of popular discourse within gaming communities.

This wider perspective may also incorporate elements of comparison or contrast to other pop-culture media, notably cinematic media such as film and television, to which this thesis will illustrate that video games make frequent connections to, both overtly and subtly. Various scholars across multiple disciplines and specialities – including the likes of Jerome de Groot, Robert Houghton, Debra Ramsey, Philip Sabin, John Wills and Esther Wright amongst others – have noted connections, influences and parallels between video game histories and their contemporaries in other gamic and pop-culture media.⁷⁰ As such these discussions of historical games within a wider perspective of gaming and popular culture can help to identify key issues within the gaming medium which impact upon the presentation and understanding of historical subjects, and may consequently inform engagement with these phenomena. However, the emphasis of this thesis shall remain upon exploring the

⁶⁷ WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*.

⁶⁸ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; *Hell Let Loose*; Slavic Magic, *Manor Lords* (2023), PC. Published by Hooded Horse.

⁶⁹ Manor Lords, "A few words from the dev before the launch into Early Access", *Manor Lords – Steam*, 17 April 2024, <https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/1363080/view/5850813762792298449>; Victoria Kennedy, "Manor Lords is not a Total War competitor, developer insists", *Eurogamer*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/manor-lords-is-not-a-total-war-competitor-developer-insists>.

⁷⁰ For examples, see de Groot, *Consuming History*; Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Robert Houghton, "Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games", *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 9: 2 (2023), pp. 1-29; Debra Ramsey, "Brutal Games: *Call of Duty* and the Cultural Narrative of World War II", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54: 2 (2015), pp. 94-113; Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); John Wills and Esther Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023).

perspectives offered within commercially available historical video games, and as such detailed comparisons to other elements of historical popular culture (barring one notable exception, which forms the basis of Chapter 4) shall fall beyond the intended scope of this thesis.

Over the course of this text, three over-arching phenomena prevalent amongst historical games shall be examined to identify and assess the conflicts of perspective which they reflect within the presentation and interpretation of history within the gaming medium. By exploring direct interactions between historical games and these phenomena, this study will particularly emphasise the influence of authorial perspectives – both with regards to the discourse between game creators and consumers, and to historical games’ context within the wider video game medium – upon the presentation, discussion and interpretation of history within video games.

The context of historical games both within the wider gaming medium and as artefacts of modern media is arguably more significant than ever before, yet has not always been acknowledged within academic analysis. E.H. Carr said that ‘History is a process, and you cannot isolate a bit of process and study it on its own... everything is completely interconnected’.⁷¹ There is significant evidence to support this assertion with regards to historical video games, where depictions of history are interacting not only with developing academic knowledge, but also numerous, and potentially conflicting, cultural and political narratives of history as well as competing functions of video games as a commercial, entertainment and artistic medium. As such, many of the issues discussed within this thesis ultimately inter-connect and reflect upon one another, and connections between case-studies or phenomena shall be highlighted where relevant. Many of these issues have been examined in relative isolation by previous scholars, thereby enabling deeper analysis of these individual issues, however by examining these contrasting perspectives and the issues which they highlight in connection with each other as parts of a wider examination of historical games on a larger scale, this thesis shall illustrate the centrality of certain phenomena to the interpretation of historical games more broadly, especially by non-academic audiences.

⁷¹ Carr, *What is History?*, p. xli.

In the first instance, issues relating to the concept of narrative, one of the cornerstones of historical study and a frequent element of entertainment media as a principle framing device for historical perspectives, shall be subjected to analysis; this section shall explore issues such as how video games have removed narrative to create authorial perspectives of history as an aesthetic or as a “sandbox” experience.⁷² In this context, engagement with history emphasises player agency as the principal form of interaction with historical phenomena, and is conducted through game mechanics and technical perspectives led by popular historical iconography instead of through narrative or historiographical context. This section shall also discuss issues of video games generating “alternate history” within strategy titles such as the *Total War* series and offering perspectives via “user-generated narrative”, whereby the player’s actions create their own meta-narrative within a game, and the impact these phenomena can have upon the discussion of historical perspective within gaming.⁷³ The thematic idea of narrative will also entail the examination of certain historical perspectives that have become popular tropes within narratives in video games, such as the prominence of warfare and conflict as game mechanics and narrative devices in historical games, as well as discussing how video games have engaged with narrative framings of “heroes and villains” within history and the consequences for the historical perspectives offered by video games through the representation of these concepts.

Following on from this discussion of narrative and iconography within historical games, this text shall then examine perspectives surrounding the role and representation of modern political controversies within historical gaming, with particular regard for the consequences these have for the historical and authorial perspectives offered by video games. Given their commercial imperative to resonate with modern audiences, historical

⁷² “Sandbox” is a metaphorical term within video game lexicon, indicating a highly creative, player-driven experience which facilitates free exploration and experimentation with gameplay mechanics and environments, with minimal predetermined narrative or objective guidance. For further discussion of “sandbox” game formats, see Steve Breslin, “The History and Theory of Sandbox Gameplay”, *Game Developer*, 16 July 2009, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/the-history-and-theory-of-sandbox-gameplay>; Kris Graft, “EVE Online and the meaning of ‘sandbox’”, *Game Developer*, 29 October 2012, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/-i-eve-online-i-and-the-meaning-of-sandbox->.

⁷³ McCall, “Agents, Goals, and Action-Choices”, pp. 69-115; Tom Apperley, “Modding the Historians’ Code: Historical Versimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination”, in Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2013), pp. 185-198.

games frequently reference or comment upon modern socio-political discussions in order to engage audiences, which can be used to positively highlight the existence of historical precedents for modern social phenomena. More often, however, this causes controversy as gaming communities respond to games which do not correspond with their subjective viewpoints and interpretations of history, with potentially significant consequences for either the game in question or its creators. In particular, this thesis shall highlight the impact of interactions between these controversies and efforts of video games to improve historical representation for women, non-White ethnicities and LGBTQ+ communities, with the *Assassin's Creed* series highlighted at the forefront of these conversations.⁷⁴ In tandem with greater acknowledgement and representation of these same demographics in wider society, games which have incorporated these groups into historical contexts via playable or narratively significant characters have been particularly targeted by hostile elements of gaming communities, often (but not exclusively) led by conservative White Male audiences who believe themselves to be suffering exclusion as a result of gaming's efforts to be more inclusive.⁷⁵

In the context of historical games, this politicised discourse is particularly difficult for game developers to navigate, as socio-political attitudes and beliefs of the past are frequently considered antithetical to modern values, and game developers are reluctant to be viewed as associating players with or legitimising historical perspectives which are deemed unacceptable in the context of modern society.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See for examples, Joe Parlock, "New report claims Assassin's Creed developers were pressured into minimising female protagonists", *PC Gamer*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/amp/new-report-claims-assassins-creed-developers-were-pressured-into-minimising-female-protagonists/>; Conor Murray, "Upcoming 'Assassin's Creed' Game Attacked as 'Woke' Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It's Based On A Real Black Warrior", *Forbes*, 24 May 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2024/05/24/upcoming-assassins-creed-game-attacked-as-woke-over-black-samurai-protagonist-but-its-based-on-a-real-black-warrior/>; Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed boss discusses 'devastating' impact of Shadows' diversity and inclusivity backlash", *Eurogamer*, 2 November 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-boss-discusses-devastating-impact-of-shadows-diversity-and-inclusivity-backlash>.

⁷⁵ Tom Phillips, "Working in the Shadows: how an Assassin's Creed researcher braved the backlash", *Eurogamer*, 2 May 2025, <https://www.eurogamer.net/working-in-the-shadows-how-an-assassins-creed-researcher-braved-the-backlash>.

⁷⁶ Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games" in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 140.

Likewise, efforts to improve demographic representation in historical contexts within games must be handled with care, as games can be subjected to politicised accusations of “historical inaccuracies” or “rewriting history” if representation is perceived to have been implemented or excluded in a historical context which appears to contradict the historical record as it is understood in the popular consciousness.⁷⁷ Within a game itself, this interaction between modern socio-political controversies and historical scenarios can result in anachronisms, disproportionate emphasis, or misinterpretation of historical material in order to address corresponding modern understandings or opinions, which can potentially create a misleading depiction of the past, with greater basis and currency within historical popular culture than clear precedent from contemporary historical materials. This issue, in particular, demonstrates that history often becomes a subjective phenomenon within the medium of video games, highlighted through conflict between competing authorial and historical perspectives of a game’s interactions with history, which can make the interpretation of history within games particularly challenging.

It is important to note at this point that the discussion of these subjects carries some significant risks, as discourse surrounding socio-political controversies, and particularly of demographic representation, is inherently politicised; espousing *any* comment upon these debates can be potentially construed by popular discourse as “taking sides”.⁷⁸ However, the significance of these controversies to historical video games as pieces of modern media and within modern popular discourse of history, as well as the influence that they can have upon the artistic decisions of a game’s creators, is such that to omit their discussion would be to overlook a critical facet of history’s construction and interpretation in the current gaming medium, and therefore must be undertaken despite the incumbent risks.

In the third chapter, this thesis shall examine perspectives of how historical and authorial perspectives in video games interact with the discussion and perception of ideas of

⁷⁷ See for example, Murray, “Upcoming ‘Assassin’s Creed’ Game Attacked as ‘Woke’ Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It’s Based On A Real Black Warrior”; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield I* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021), pp. 4-5; Helen Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*” in Alvestad and Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture*, pp. 29-30.

⁷⁸ See for example, Phillips, “Working in the Shadows: how an Assassin’s Creed researcher braved the backlash”.

“historical accuracy” and “authenticity”.⁷⁹ These concepts are among the most heavily discussed topics in historical game studies, engaging with the very essence of how history is portrayed within digital games, and illustrate one of the greatest distinctions between popular, developer and academic perspectives of historical games. However, these terms are also nebulously defined – particularly in popular discourse – applied in parallel with a variety of synonymous terms, and as such their interpretation is sometimes challenging as different applications and understandings of these terms intersect.⁸⁰

In this section, discussion shall highlight the challenges inherent to the popular concept of “historical accuracy” and its synonyms in the video game medium, as well as the compromises that both players and developers require historical games to make when designing a recreation of the past for a modern audience. By highlighting and exploring two examples of games – *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* – both praised within popular discourse for their “historical accuracy”, but in different gamic contexts, this section will deconstruct and analyse the problematic nature of “historical accuracy” and the terminology which surrounds this nebulous concept as a measure for assessing the value of historical games and the legitimacy of their depictions of historical worlds.⁸¹ Ultimately, this discourse will highlight that the concept of “historical accuracy” is a fundamentally subjective idea in the popular consciousness, which stands at odds with its popular interpretation as an objective factual measure of history’s depiction within the gaming medium, and should therefore be de-emphasised from academic exploration of historical games in favour of alternate avenues of inquiry.

The ultimate goal of analysing these core conflicts created by tensions between different historical and authorial perspectives within historical games – between historical narrative and player agency within gaming, between opposing political views and their

⁷⁹ “Historical accuracy” or “authenticity” are both terms used to discuss a historical text or media’s perceived truthfulness in relation to historical source material. However, although frequently used synonymously in popular discourse, their exact definitions are subtly different: “historical accuracy” relates to the consistency of a historical text or media’s depiction of the past in relation to available historical evidence, whereas “historical authenticity” refers to a subjective impression of a historical depiction which believably represents the past. For further discussion of these definitions, see Laura Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 24 (2020), pp. 127-144.

⁸⁰ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 18-20; Eugen Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypothesen.org/2719#more-2719>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

interactions with historical phenomena within games, and between concepts of “historical accuracy” and games as an entertainment medium – shall be to demonstrate that the depiction and exploration of history within the gaming medium is fundamentally compromised by the nature of the video game format, regardless of intent or effort by its creators or consumers. The requirements of the video game medium demand a significant degree of individual player agency and creative freedom by developers, both of which supersede the demands of historical narrative and strict factual accuracy. Moreover, as pieces of modern media designed to engage with, and be interpreted by, modern audiences, the depictions of historical figures and events which games present are inherently reflective of modern discourse, both within the gaming medium and broader society.⁸² This not only demonstrates the complexity of games’ interactions with historical phenomena, it also draws comparisons with and raises questions about the wider construction of history as a discipline.

Historical sources, both scholarly and entertaining, have long been influenced by and are reflective of the circumstances and values of the authors and societies which produced them, with subsequent authors and generations offering their own perspectives on both history and their predecessors’ works;⁸³ as previously stated, ‘the historian inevitably views the past from his own “angle of vision” or “frame of reference”’.⁸⁴ Video games are no exception to this pattern. These factors must be acknowledged and understood in order to fully interpret the perspectives of history offered by video games, which should instead be considered in the form of subjective contemporary interactions with historical subjects as opposed to empirical digital representations of historical events or phenomena.

As a result, academic understanding of how history is presented and explored within the gaming medium should be broadened in order to accommodate an understanding of these contemporary influences in order to maximise the opportunities for historical engagement within the gaming medium. To that end, an alternative perspective of historical games that shall be proposed within this thesis shall be to reconsider historical games as a form of “digital reenactment”, as historical reenactment shares many comparable characteristics and

⁸² Claus and Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice*, p. 275.

⁸³ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 2; Dobson and Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources*, p. 6; Claus and Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice*, p. 275.

⁸⁴ Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History*, p. 246.

historiographical challenges to the video game medium within its construction of an historical experience. This perspective draws upon previous comparisons and connections between games and reenactment identified by scholars including Chapman and Pieter Van den Heede,⁸⁵ as well as this author's own personal experiences of each medium, to offer an alternative interpretation of historical games which can facilitate engagement with historical content alongside engagement with the technical and authorial requirements of their medium. Therefore, the final chapter of this thesis shall be devoted to exploring the contrasts and similarities between these two forms of historical depiction in the modern world, thereby enabling an analysis of historical gaming from the authorial perspective of historical reenactment.

Scholarship on Historical Games

John Tosh has said that 'historians do not... inhabit a self-contained professional niche',⁸⁶ and the study of historical games is no exception to this interdisciplinary potential. Among the advantages, and challenges, of historical game studies as a field is its possible breadth. While one of the principle focuses of the field is, naturally, examining the contributions made to historical inquiry by video games, the ways in which historians and other scholars can examine these materials can vary infinitely. Scholars can focus on a single period of history and the games associated with it;⁸⁷ they can focus upon a single game or franchise and examine how it has engaged with historical subjects;⁸⁸ and they can explore

⁸⁵ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 180-188 & 198-230; Pieter Van den Heede, "Gaming", in Vanessa Agnew, Johnathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 84-88.

⁸⁶ Tosh, *Historians on History*, p. 1.

⁸⁷ For examples, see Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*; Christian Rollinger (ed.), *Classical Antiquity in Video Games: Playing with the Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Robert Houghton (ed.), *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games: Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact* (Boston: de Gruyter, 2024); John Wills, "Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines: Videogames of the American West", *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 77: 2 (2008), pp. 273-303; Paul Christesen and Dominic Machado, "Video Games and Classical Antiquity", *The Classical World*, vol. 104: 1 (2010), pp. 107-110; César San Nicolás Romera, Migel Ángel Nicolás Ojeda and Josefa Ros Velasco, "Video Games set in the Middle Ages: Time Spans, Plots and Genres", *Games and Culture*, vol. 13:5 (2016), pp. 521-542.

⁸⁸ For examples, see Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39; Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*; Ramsey, "Brutal Games", pp. 94-113; Richard Cole, "Mashing Up History And Heritage in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*", *Games and Culture*, vol. 17:6 (2022), pp. 915-928.

how communities have interacted with history within games across delineations of time, space, culture or demographic.⁸⁹ There are myriad possibilities.⁹⁰

Of course, such protean malleability does have its drawbacks. While the field of historical game studies is still in its relative infancy, more traditional fields of historical inquiry have continued to produce a plethora of new scholarship, which the historical game studies researcher will have to sort through to find relevant pieces for background context or analysis of the games in their work. This can entail, and in many respects demands, an equal level of care towards the “conventional” historical sources as to those materials relating to games, albeit with the caveat that a games studies scholar may potentially be less familiar with the nuances of the available historical source material than a specialist for a given period.

For the purposes of this text, it shall be necessary to impose certain restrictions and limits on the games which shall be assessed, if only for simple practicality. Firstly, discussion shall be confined exclusively to commercially available video games – i.e. games produced for domestic public consumption – as it is through these titles that the majority of players

⁸⁹ For examples, see Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*; Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Video Games* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2018); John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Jane Draycott (ed.) *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games* (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022); Deitmar Meinel (ed.), *Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022); Janina Schupp, “Wargaming the Middle East: The Evolution of Simulated Battlefields from Chequerboards to Virtual Worlds and Instrumented Artificial Cities”, in Alena Strohmaier and Anglea Krewani (eds.), *Media and Mapping Practices in the Middle East and North Africa: Producing Space* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 95-116; Na Li, “Playing the Past: Historical video games as participatory public history in China”, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 27: 3 (2021), pp. 746-767.

⁹⁰ As a developing field, new games studies scholarship has been published during the course of writing this thesis which could not be accessed for inclusion in this work. Examples of these texts include: Marc-André Éthier and David Lefrançois (eds.) with Judith Weisz Woodsworth (trans.), *Bringing History To Life: Teaching Fact & Fiction* (University of Ottawa Press, 2025); Robert Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism* (Boydell & Brewer, 2024); Maurice W. Suckling, *Paper Time Machines: Critical Game Design and Historical Board Games* (Routledge, 2025); Yowei Kang, Kenneth C. C. Yang, Michał Mochocki, Jakub Majewski and Paweł Schreiber (eds.), *Asian Histories and Heritages in Video Games* (Routledge, 2024); Riccardo Masini, *Historical Simulation and Wargames: By Hexagon and Sword* (Routledge, 2025); Rhett Loban, *Embedding Culture into Video Games and Video Game Design: The Palm, the Dogai, and the Tombstone* (CRC Press, 2024); Vinicius Marino Carvalho, “Towards a Reconciliation Between Simulational, Ludic, and Historiographical Practices in Research”, *Simulation & Gaming*, vol. 55: 4 (2024); Lukáš Kolek, Ivan Ropovik, Vít Šisler, Herre van Oostendorp, and Cyril Brom, “Video games and attitude change: a meta-analysis”, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 75 (2023); Lukáš Kolek, Patrícia Martinková, Michaela Vařejková, Vít Šisler, Cyril Brom, “Is video games' effect on attitudes universal? Results from an empirical study comparing video games' impact on the attitude change of players with different backgrounds”, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 40: 2 (2024), pp. 667-684.

engage with historical subjects. While this is not to suggest that dedicated educational games do not have any value – the highly influential frontier exploration game *Oregon Trail* (1971) was originally designed for use as an educational tool,⁹¹ and the subject of games as educational systems shall feature in later discussion, notably in Chapter 4 – the comparative rarity and specifically-curated nature of “educational games” throws up additional challenges which will move beyond the intended purview of this text.

Secondly, video games have been released across a variety of different formats and software platforms since their inception – from arcade machines to personal computers, home and portable consoles, mobile devices, and Virtual Reality (VR) headsets – and trying to cover all possible platforms within this thesis would be both financially and managerially impractical. For the purposes of this thesis, discussion of historical games herein will focus primarily upon games available upon three main gaming platforms: PC, and the PlayStation and Xbox home consoles. Despite the seemingly restricted pool of games from which this may enable discussion, these three platforms represent the vast majority of commercially available video games on sale today. Most modern game releases are designed to be playable on one or more (or even all three) of these platforms, and many historical games available on other systems – such as the Nintendo Switch or DS and the PlayStation Vita – are often “ported” versions of titles originally released on PC, Xbox or PlayStation home console systems, while some historical games originally released on hand-held or portable game consoles have been subsequently released on home console or PC systems.

Furthermore, PC and Xbox consoles have enjoyed notable success through enabling players to access and support older games on modern hardware; this type of “backwards compatibility” is particularly valuable for gaming historians as a means of preserving older titles that would otherwise become inaccessible once support for their relevant platforms was terminated.⁹² Beyond simple practicality, focusing the detailed analysis within this

⁹¹ Wes Fenlon, “For three years, the only copy of the Oregon Trail source code was printed on a stack of paper”, *PC Gamer*, 8 March 2017, <https://www.pcgamer.com/for-three-years-the-only-copy-of-the-oregon-trail-source-code-was-printed-on-a-stack-of-paper/>; Jed Lipinski, “The Legend of The Oregon Trail”, *mentalfloss*, 29 July 2013 [Accessed on Internet Archive:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130731090300/http://mentalfloss.com/article/51930/legend-oregon-trail>].

⁹² Grant Taylor-Hill, “Study Reveals 87% of Classic Games are ‘Completely Unavailable’”, *Insider Gaming*, 10 July 2023, <https://insider-gaming.com/study-classic-games-unavailable/>; Levi Winslow, “An Alarming 87 Percent of Retro Games Are Being Lost to Time”, *Kotaku*, 23 July 2023, <https://kotaku.com/classic-games-history-foundation-preservation-yakuza-1850623857>.

thesis on those games which have remained accessible on current gaming systems, or retroactively been updated to become so, will allow the illustration of the evolving presentation of historical content within the gaming medium and an examination of the broader perception of games within society, as many of the issues which shall be discussed in this text will explore the cultural discourse surrounding the public understanding and perception of history within video games and the gaming medium's responses to these same discussions.

As with any field of study, there are important pieces of scholarship within the field of historical game studies which should be taken into consideration. Across these scholarly texts, several notable trends can be observed. Firstly, the influence of technical perspectives upon the construction and interpretation of historical subjects within video games is readily recognised within the academic community; between the likes of Miller and Gaboury's examinations of technical perspectives within gameplay, Adam Chapman's discussions of differing 'simulation styles' upon the construction of historical worlds, and Robert Houghton's extensive portfolio of works exploring the depiction of the medieval period within video games and examining games for teaching medieval history, technical perspectives of historical games have been identified and explored within previous explorations of historical games. In combination with other analyses of technical and gameplay interactions with video game historiography, such as Yannick Rochat's quantitative survey of the time periods, gameplay genres and interactive platforms reflected across historical games or Jeremiah McCall's examination of the influence of game genre upon historical games as 'Historical Problem Spaces', we can classify this sphere of scholarship as that of interactions between digital gameplay and history.⁹³

A particularly significant text within this strand of scholarship is Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History*, a landmark text first published in 2016 that assesses the ways and forms that study of video games can be applied to historical research.⁹⁴ While essential reading for any historical game studies researcher, Chapman's explorations of the effect of particular constructional approaches to historical games upon their representation of

⁹³ Yannick Rochat, "A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)", in Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 3-19; McCall, "Agents, Goals, and Action-Choices", pp. 69-115.

⁹⁴ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

historical subjects is particularly notable for, as shall be highlighted repeatedly throughout this thesis, popular discussions of historical games frequently assumed varying levels of “historical accuracy” – a term to which this thesis shall return shortly – or overall factual legitimacy on the basis of the genre or style of gameplay which a historical game adopts.⁹⁵

As Chapman’s text focuses largely on theoretical understanding of how historical video games can be analysed, his conclusions largely remain applicable to this day; one concept which he raises that will be explored in subsequent chapters is that of “ludo-narrative dissonance”, a phrase coined by video game developer Clint Hocking, that refers to player actions within a game’s environment which conflict with the narrative that the game is attempting to portray.⁹⁶ However, this same value of Chapman’s work – its theoretical basis and application – is also potentially a weakness, as his discussion does not always tie itself clearly or frequently enough to any particular case study to demonstrate the principles he is exploring and how they relate to the historical games he highlights. Similarly, although Chapman does acknowledge a distinction between the various potential interpretations of perspective in relation to the examination of historical games,⁹⁷ his analysis does not overtly engage with this concept. As such, this thesis aims to build upon Chapman’s foundational analysis by illustrating phenomena discussed herein and within *Digital Games as History* in relation to practical examples from historical games, in particular highlighting the consequences of conflicting perspectives upon the interpretation of historical games and their impact upon the utilisation of history within gaming.

A second strand of scholarship of particular importance to this study is texts exploring the effects of identity politics debates upon gaming and historical interactions. As a widely discussed and frequently contested issue in modern society, debates within the sphere of identity politics – including both the dominance of White, heterosexual male perspectives throughout society and the media, and the representation of marginalised groups such as women, People of Colour and LGBTQ+ communities – are a significant topic of discussion within academia as well as society as a whole, and this significance has been

⁹⁵ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 61-79.

⁹⁶ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 161-162; Frédéric Seraphine, “Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?”, *Researchgate.net* (2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307569310_Ludonarrative_Dissonance_Is_Storytelling_About_Reaching_Harmony.

⁹⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 13-17.

reflected within academic scholarship of historical games. Scholars including Lara Keilbart, Vit Šisler, Jane Draycott, and Stephan Aguirre Quiroga have all explored the representation of marginalised communities within the video game medium, the forms which these representations take and their subsequent effects for interpreting the histories of these communities, and the challenges representations of these groups face from dominant White, heterosexual male communities resistant to more inclusive representation within gaming.⁹⁸

Of particular note in this field for this thesis is Quiroga's text *White Mythic Space* (2022), which provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting the resistance to inclusive histories which can be widely observed across instances of challenge to inclusive depictions by conservative, culturally dominant groups. While Quiroga's text primarily operates within discourse surrounding ethnic representation – focusing upon resistance to depictions of People of Colour within historical games and defining his “White mythic space” concept as a ‘setting that has been re-imagined as a racially homogenous space’⁹⁹ – the theoretical fundamentals of his “White mythic space” concept, in that this demographically exclusive interpretation of a cultural or historical setting is perceived as the accepted original even in spite of contemporary sources which conflict with this view, can be observed in similar discussions of opposition to inclusive female and LGBTQ+ representation. Likewise, Esther Wright's observations on the *Red Dead* series of video game Westerns of female narrative agency within video games amounting to the masculinisation of feminine characters also bears wider acknowledgement, for the narrative formulae identified by Wright within the *Red Dead* games can be observed elsewhere in historical video games, as narrative and gameplay formulae which favour either male-oriented narratives or gender customisation mechanics implicitly require female characters to operate within male-dominant roles to attain narrative and gameplay agency.

A third, substantial strand of scholarship, which connects significantly into the areas of scholarship discussed above, is that of “authenticity”. The concept of “historical

⁹⁸ Lara Keilbart, “Queer Authenticity in the History of Games: Experiences of Knowing, Negotiating and Portraying Queerness in Games throughout the Last Four Decades”, in Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 179-198; Vit Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 11:2 (2008), pp. 203-220;

⁹⁹ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 4.

authenticity” within historical games has received particularly strong exploration from the academic community, as the factual legitimacy of a given historical game naturally plays a significant role in determining the validity attributed to its interactions with the past, and thereby the value of a given game’s contributions to historical discourse within both the gaming and academic communities.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, as various authors, including Laura Saxton and Eugen Pfister, have noted – and as shall be explored within this text – the concept of “historical authenticity”, or linguistic variations thereof, is heavily contested, malleably applied and often heavily politicised.¹⁰¹

Yet some scholars have taken alternate approaches to this issue, instead exploring the reasons for the popularity of this phenomenon within discussions of historical games; examples of this latter corpus of scholarship may be seen in the works of Eugen Pfister, whose works have examined engagement with the concept of “historical authenticity”, including its effects as a commercial draw for video games engaging with historical subjects.¹⁰² Texts such as Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman’s *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (2020) and Robert Houghton and Karl Alvestadt’s *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (2021) offer significant scope to explore the complexity of this phenomenon by highlighting multiple aspects and contexts for the use of “historical authenticity” and its effect upon the interpretation of the past within popular culture such as video games.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ For examples, see Andrew J. Salvati and Johnathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past”, and Josef Köstelbauer, “The Strange Attraction of Simulation”, in Kapell and Elliot (eds.), *Playing with the Past*, pp. 153-183; Claire Manning, “Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games”, in Draycott (ed.) *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games*, pp. 57-71; Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, in Von Lünen, Lewis, Litherland and Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens*, pp. 243-254; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; John Glancy, “Creative License vs Historical Authority”, *Historical Games Network*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.historicalgames.net/creative-licence-vs-historical-authority/>.

¹⁰¹ For example, see Laura Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 24 (2020), pp. 127-144; Eugen Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/2719#more-2719>; Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 18-20.

¹⁰² See for examples Eugen Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/2719#more-2719>; Eugen Pfister, “Why History in Digital Games matters: Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths” in Lorber and Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, pp. 47-72.

¹⁰³ Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020).

Meanwhile, Esther Wright has explored the use of “authenticity” as a marketing device by gaming companies – using the developer-publisher Rockstar Games as a case study – wherein the concept of “historical authenticity” is employed to promote visually detailed but creatively curated historical experiences under the guise of historical realism, and the effect this marketing tag on the interpretation of history for a particular epoch.¹⁰⁴ Helen Young explores similar territory in the context of the medieval Role-Playing Game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and its developer Warhorse Studios, albeit with a specific emphasis upon the effect of arguments of “authenticity” upon racial representation.¹⁰⁵ The use of arguments of “historical accuracy” or “authenticity” within the context of identity politics is a frequent and controversial phenomenon within gaming, and Keilbart, Quiroga and Young, amongst other scholars, provide examples of the effects of these discourses of “authenticity” upon the representation of marginalised communities within video games.¹⁰⁶ This division between two key applications of the concept of “historical authenticity” is a significant feature of popular discourse of this phenomenon within popular discussions of historical games, and thus, although scholarly examination has investigated the impacts of both formats individually, these two ideas must be explored in connection with one another as part of the overall discussion of how video games approach the representation of historical subjects.

Finally, the role of historical games within heritage studies and cultural discourse has undergone significant assessment in recent years. While cultural scholars such as Jerome de Groot have examined historical games within the context of historical consumer culture – viewing video games alongside gamic media such as tabletop war- and roleplaying games, audio-visual media like historical film and television, and participatory media such as reenactments and pseudo-historical pageants and faires – other scholars have explored the use of interactive virtual environments such as those provided by video games as learning aids or interactive heritage experiences.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*.

¹⁰⁵ Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39.

¹⁰⁶ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*; Keilbart, “Queer Authenticity in the History of Games”, in Lorber and Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, pp. 179-198; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39.

¹⁰⁷ For examples, see Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Peter Higgins, “Unlocking the glass case”, in Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Dirk von Lehn & Stephen Cook (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives*,

Within this discourse, comparisons between historical video games and historical reenactments frequently appear, and have been noted by gaming scholars such as Chapman, Robert Houghton and Pieter Van den Heede amongst others.¹⁰⁸ In some cases, as with Van den Heede, Martin Bostal and Annette Vowinckle, these comparisons engage with games as reenactments on a conceptual level, exploring “reenactments” in a more figurative sense of recreating or simulating historical events so that they may be interacted with by modern audiences.¹⁰⁹ However, this thesis shall argue that this comparison can be extended further, and that historical games can be potentially explored as a mode of historical reenactment within a digital format. Chapman partly explores this idea within his *Digital Games as History*, however he approaches the concept from an inherently games-led viewpoint, exploring “games as reenactment” through a lens of utilising games as digital platforms within which to carry out reenactment-style engagements with history.¹¹⁰ In Chapter 4, this thesis shall expand the comparison between historical video games and reenactments on a practical level by drawing upon the personal experiences of the author as a participant from within historical reenactment to illustrate how the processes of engaging with a historical game compare to those of participation within a historical reenactment.

Historical games studies is inherently interdisciplinary, and as such can draw upon texts from a number of potential fields to support its discourse. For instance, Ian Bogost’s

Museums and Heritage Sites (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 326-334; Andrew McMichael, “PC Games and the Teaching of History”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 40: 2 (2007), pp. 203-218; Leslie D. Hall and James Mountain Chief Sanderville, “United Sugpaiq Alutiiq (USA) Video Game: Preserving Traditional Knowledge, Culture and Language”, *Educational Technology*, vol. 49: 6 (2009), pp. 20-24; William B. Robinson, “Stimulation, Not Simulation: An Alternate Approach to History Teaching Games”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 46:4 (2013), pp. 577-588; A. Martin Wainwright, “Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 47: 4 (2014), pp. 579-612; Lina Eklund, Björn Sjöblom and Patrick Prax, “Lost in Translation: Video Games Becoming Cultural Heritage”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 13: 4 (2019), pp. 444-460; Richard Cole, “Mashing Up History and Heritage in Assassin’s Creed Odyssey”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 17: 6 (2022), pp. 915-928; Robert Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 9: 2 (2023), pp. 1-29.

¹⁰⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 180-188 & 198-23.

¹⁰⁹ Van den Heede, “Gaming”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 84-88; Martin Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at Kingdom Come: Deliverance and its historical claim”, in Fernández Sirvent, Rafael y Gutiérrez Lloret, Rosa Ana (eds.), *Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea, Universidad de Alicante 20-22 de septiembre de 2018* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2019), pp. 380-394; Annette Vowinkel, “Past Futures: From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games”, *Historical Social Research*, vol. 34: 2 (2009), pp. 322-332.

¹¹⁰ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 180-188 & 198-23; Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, pp. 1-29; Pieter Van den Heede, “Gaming”, in Vanessa Agnew, Johnathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 84-88.

Persuasive Games, which engages with how video games present and interact with political and psychological messaging to assess how games can shape interactions with these discussions and commercialise them, can be utilised to interpret how modern media shape our understanding of a historical subject while also being shaped by modern companies exploiting that understanding for business reasons.¹¹¹ Similarly, Carolyn Handler Miller's *Digital Storytelling* (reprinted as multiple editions) offers an instructional breakdown for prospective media creators of the role and place of narrative storytelling within modern digital media such as video games, covering aspects including (but not limited to) interactive narrative structures and game genre types,¹¹² which can then be extrapolated to interpret the manner in which video games interact with and frame historical narratives and experiences. Likewise, texts produced for media or game studies more broadly may prove to offer relevant theoretical approaches and insights to historical game studies.

Other academic materials, such as those produced for studying film and television,¹¹³ can also be useful as modern cinematic presentation within video games owes much to the work of the film and television industries; in certain titles, as shall be discussed at several points in this text, there are very overt links and parallels between historical cinema and historical games, particularly in light of the ever-growing popularity of "cinematic" presentation styles within games.¹¹⁴ Moreover, given the overt historiographical influences upon video games by film and television, texts which have examined the messaging offered by historical cinema can allow a games researcher to identify any perpetuation of themes and narratives regarding historical subjects presented by video games, as well as any conflicts which these themes and narratives create when subjected to requirements for interactivity and player agency within the gaming medium, such as in cases enabling the player to engage with WWII games from the historical perspective of Nazi Germany.¹¹⁵ The

¹¹¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007).

¹¹² Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 113-128 & pp. 244-249.

¹¹³ See for examples, John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies* (New York: Arnold Publishers and Oxford University Press, 2000); James Monaco, *How To Read A Film: Movies, Media and Beyond* (Fourth edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jeffrey Richards, "Film and Television: the moving image", in Sarah Barber and Corinna Peniston-Bird (eds.), *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 72-88.

¹¹⁴ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 252-254.

¹¹⁵ See for examples, Tracy, *Filmography of American History*; Sabine Hake, *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History and Democracy* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); Chapman and Linderth, "Exploring the

same can be said for comparisons to table-top gaming, wherein similarities of technical perspective through gameplay mechanisms illustrate parallels with the historical perspectives reflected by video games; Philip Sabin, for example, has examined both video games and table-top games in parallel within examinations of means to study and simulate warfare, while quantitative and thematic perspectives of recreational table-top wargaming within the edited edition *EuroWarGames* highlight significant issues, such as the historic quantitative dominance of White, Male Western historical and authorial perspectives – particularly in relation to Anglo-American engagement with the medium – which bear notable similarity to historical and authorial perspectives of video games.¹¹⁶

Outside of the academic sphere, video game scholars can also look to a vast corpus of media outlets to track developments in the gaming medium, which are invaluable to understanding the modern video game industry and particularly the reciprocal dialogue between players and developers and their respective perspectives which shape the development of modern online “live service” games.¹¹⁷

News outlets and broadcasters, such as the *Times*, the *Guardian*, and the BBC, maintain a certain degree of interest in news stories relating to the gaming industry, which continues to grow as the gaming medium becomes increasingly accepted by the mainstream public. However, gaming news forms only a relatively tiny subset of these traditional publications’ output, partly because their focus lies elsewhere in more conventional news stories; as a result, those gaming news stories that do feature in these news media often focus more on the social and business aspects of video games, which proves invaluable for examining the industry’s decision-making and the wider cultural context of gaming, but limits the utility of these media for assessing specific games. The comparative brevity of articles within these publications also limits the amount of information which they are capable of conveying, emphasising the role of the editing process in the articles that

Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games”, pp. 137-153; Andrew J Salvati, “Fantasies of Control: Modding for Ethnic Violence and Nazi Fetishism in Historical Strategy Games”, in Von Lünen, Lewis, Litherland and Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens*, pp. 155-169.

¹¹⁶ Sabin, *Simulating War*; Philip Sabin, *Lost Battles: Reconstructing the Great Clashes of the Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009); Jan Heinemann, Riccardo Masini, and Frédéric Serval (eds.), *Euro War Games* (Bénodet, Fr.: Nuts! Publishing, 2024).

¹¹⁷ Melanie Swalwell, Helen Stuckley and Angela Ndalianis (eds.), *Fans and Videogames: Histories, Fandom, Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017).

ultimately make it to print and restricting the scope of the perspectives of historical games which these articles are capable of conveying.

Meanwhile, the exponential growth of the internet since the turn of the millennium has enabled a proliferation of websites and online communities with a greater interest in the gaming medium than traditional news outlets and has therein enabled the generation of dedicated gaming news sites, enabling information and perspectives relating to historical games to disseminate much faster and more widely than physical media such as magazines. These outlets, including *PC Gamer*, *Eurogamer*, *IGN*, and *WhatCulture*, to name but a few, are principally staffed by gamers with a passion for the medium rather than professionally trained journalists, meaning that their articles and think-pieces are rarely as well-written or objective as academic scholars or game developers would like.¹¹⁸ However, simply because these commentators have not undergone formal academic or professional training does not mean that these sources are valueless. A number of gaming commentators operate as dedicated employees to games journalism sites, and, over the course of their careers, can accrue as much insight into the gaming industry as academics can into traditional fields of study.

One of the more prominent of these gaming commentators is Jason Schreier, a former news editor for *Kotaku* and currently employed by *Bloomberg*, who has written articles for traditional news outlets like the *New York Times* and has published multiple books on working within the video game industry; while his case-studies in these books typically involve non-historical games, such as Microsoft's franchise sci-fi shooter, *Halo* (2001-present), they provide valuable insight into the process of games development, which can then be compared to reporting from the development of historical games.¹¹⁹ Late in the development of this thesis, Schreier released a new book, *Play Nice* (2024), detailing the changing fortunes of the game developer and publishing studio Blizzard Entertainment via interviews and first-hand testimonials with current and former Blizzard employees, such as the effect of executive decisions upon game production following the studio's merger with

¹¹⁸ See for example, Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | Gameumentary, online video recording, YouTube, 24 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE2goNeshY> [51:38-53:17].

¹¹⁹ Jason Schreier, *Blood, Sweat And Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2017); Jason Schreier, *Press Reset: Ruin And Recovery In The Video Game Industry* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2021).

Call of Duty publisher, Activision. These testimonials may enable an in-depth analysis of the potential impact which the divergent authorial perspectives of developers and publishers can have upon the production and content of a video game.¹²⁰

The level of investment in the gaming medium displayed by gaming journalists like Schreier offers these sources a unique insight into the operation of the industry, and in some cases provides tangible contacts with access to information which would be unavailable to other outlets; Schreier, in particular, has gained a substantial reputation within the gaming industry for the reliability of his information thanks to the network of professional contacts he has cultivated amongst developers and publishers, allowing him access to major stories and developments within the industry, such as those reported within *Play Nice*, which would otherwise remain unreported.¹²¹ Games development, especially in the triple-A sphere, is a highly insular environment, and the communication of information about internal, creator perspectives of games and their development is highly controlled;¹²² thus, these gaming journalists and their contacts within games companies permit a degree of additional transparency into the games development process beyond any official communications, though the precaution of offering anonymity to their sources naturally restricts the degree to which their reports can be independently analysed and verified.¹²³

Elsewhere, various social media platforms – including Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, Discord, Reddit and Steam Community forums – have come to form a principal means of communication between developers and players, and in some instances also serve as extensions of news outlets reporting on the video game industry.¹²⁴ These outlets, in combination with the works of gaming journalists, are particularly vital for

¹²⁰ Jason Schreier, *Play Nice: The Rise, Fall, and Future of Blizzard Entertainment* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2024).

¹²¹ See for examples, Rebekah Valentine, “The uncertain, unflinching future of games media”, *GamesIndustry.biz*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/the-uncertain-unflinching-future-of-games-media>; Gene Park, “Jason Schreier is leaving Kotaku, citing G/O Media as reason”, *The Washington Post*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/04/16/jason-schreier-is-leaving-kotaku-citing-go-media-reason/>.

¹²² For examples, see Schreier, *Blood, Sweat And Pixels*, p. xxi; Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 9-10; Casey O’Donnell, *The Developer’s Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014); Harold Goldberg, “How the West was Digitised: The making of Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, *Vulture*, 14 October 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/10/the-making-of-rockstar-games-red-dead-redemption-2.html>. See also, Wood, “‘We cough up a chunk of our soul’: 32 game devs, from Doom’s John Romero to Helldivers 2 and Palworld leads, explain what people get wrong about games”.

¹²³ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat And Pixels*, p. xxi.

¹²⁴ Consalvo and Phelps, “Game Development Live on Twitch”, pp. 123-140.

exploring player perspectives of the gaming industry, as analysing the discussions on these sites allowed scholars to identify key or recurring issues within popular engagement or interpretation of historical games; as an example, Quiroga's experience as a moderator for the online forum *AskHistorians* provided opportunity to identify the recurring questioning of non-White characters within historical media as the foundation for his exploration of opposition to non-White representation within historical games set during the First World War.¹²⁵

While a large proportion of the output from these social media sites may be of limited value to academic scholars outside of very specific lines of inquiry, these sites do also serve as gateways to significant and valuable pieces of information which can be used to assess both the development of games and the authorial perspectives which interact with historical games.

"Patch Notes", for instance, are a common feature of modern digital gaming, and serve as a public record of alterations made to a game's content by the developers after release; these alterations can be tiny details, whereby software glitches that were impacting gameplay performance are recorded and addressed, or they can be massive updates which introduce a wealth of new and updated content which was not included in the game at launch. As these patch notes are designed to serve as a public notice of changes made with each software update, they are usually published in conjunction with the associated software update, and therefore serve as a written record of the evolution and growth of a given video game in the wake of its release; this facet is of increasing importance in the modern gaming landscape, as an ever-growing number of video games continue to develop and introduce new content following their release for sale. This process prolongs the lifespan of a particular game and encourages increased player engagement, but also potentially introducing changes that radically alter a game experience and any attendant historical perspectives from those presented by the product initially available upon release.

"Developer Blogs", meanwhile, offer a game's creators the opportunity to discuss the creative process in greater detail than typical social media posts, while also allowing the developers a chance to showcase upcoming or past gameplay features, drawing immediate

¹²⁵ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-2.

comparison with conventional one-to-one interviews featured in more conventional journalistic sources. Because of the more intimate focus of these posts, they are generally reserved for the game or developer's dedicated website or more exclusive social media forums like Reddit or Discord. Consequently, these blogs offer a more detailed insight into the developers' authorial perspective and, potentially, how this impacts upon the historical perspective offered by a video game; for example, "Developer Diaries" produced by developers at Paradox Interactive for *Crusader Kings III* allow players the opportunity to observe new or altered game content being developed for forthcoming updates, such as the creation of new historical "starting characters" as part of the *Roads To Power* expansion (2024).¹²⁶

Developer-led media such as Patch Notes and Developer Blogs are significant to observe given the noted reluctance for game developers, particularly those at larger triple-A studios like Rockstar Games, to interact directly with academic researchers.¹²⁷ Video game development is a notoriously secretive business, with many employees, external testers, and even informal visitors of major studios bound by Non-Disclosure Agreements forbidding discussion of games' internal development;¹²⁸ as an example, voice and motion-capture performers involved in the development of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* (2025) reported being bound by Non-Disclosure Agreements forbidding any discussion of the upcoming game, even with immediate family members, for three years prior to the game's announcement in 2024.¹²⁹ Developer Blogs and journalist interviews serve as more overtly crafted facets of a game's media output, innately promoting a particular image of the game or developer in question, thereby potentially compromising their objectivity towards the subject matter. Some academics have specifically focused their analysis of games upon these publicly accessible materials, such as promotional materials and user-created peripheral content, often broadly referred to as "para-texts" to explore the discourse they

¹²⁶ Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III* (2020), PC. Released on Xbox and PlayStation in 2022. Published by Paradox Interactive; Cordelion, "Dev Diary #150 – New Start Date, Message Settings, and More", *Paradox Forum*, 24 June 2024, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/dev-diary-150-new-start-date-message-settings-and-more.1691073/>.

¹²⁷ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat And Pixels*, p. xxi; Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 9-10; Goldberg, "How the West was Digitised: The making of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2*".

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Tom Richardson, "Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic", *BBC News*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgxp0jl15lo>.

create between developer and player, and in particular the developer's role as the 'developer-historian' in creating and curating an historical experience; as an example, Esther Wright has specifically examined the use of these "para-texts" by gaming publisher Rockstar in association with their historical games *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and *L.A. Noire* (2011).¹³⁰

Alongside this focused discourse, academia has also slowly become more accepting of social media as a forum for professional scholarship, partly as a consequence of real-world influences; as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, various academic conferences, including the 'Middle Ages in Modern Games' conference, were forced to host events on social media because social distancing measures prevented in-person activity.¹³¹ Alternatively, professional scholars have collaborated with gaming news platforms in order to produce content analysing the factual representation of history within video games; notable examples of this collaboration may be seen in *GameSpot's* "Experts React" and "Loadout" video series, in which historical scholars – including the UK Royal Armouries' Jonathan Ferguson – assess and discuss the depiction of historical phenomena (such as historic firearms) within video games.¹³² While the varying formats of social media offer their own individual challenges to utilising them as historical sources, their growing ubiquity across the video game medium makes it necessary for academics to acknowledge and engage with this source base in some form.

Once all these various materials, and any others which the games historian may choose to investigate, are all added together, the potential source base becomes impossible to explore in its entirety. Moreover, as a developing field, new publications in the field of

¹³⁰ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*. See also, Regina Seiwald and Edwin Vollans (eds.), *(Not) In the Game: History, Paratexts, and Games* (Boston: de Gruyter, 2023).

¹³¹ Robert Houghton (ed.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Games: Conference Proceedings: Vol. 1* (Winchester: University of Winchester, 2020) [Accessed digitally at: https://issuu.com/theuniversityofwinchester/docs/mamg20_proceedings?fr=sYzE0MTQyNDQ0Mzk]; Robert Houghton (ed.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Games: Conference Proceedings: Vol. 2* (Winchester: University of Winchester, 2021) [Accessed digitally at: https://issuu.com/theuniversityofwinchester/docs/mamg_2021_proceedings?fr=sNzQ3ZTQyNDQ0Mzk].

¹³² GameSpot, *Experts React*, online video recordings, YouTube, 21 November 2020 – 31 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpg6WLS8kxGMgYb13XjPgOKbm5O-CDq7R>; GameSpot, *Loadout*, online video recordings, YouTube, 14 December 2019 – 18 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpg6WLS8kxGMzlemU1gyyLmg5VlKl2UvC>. These series have been continued since February 2025 as independent productions on Patreon and YouTube by EXP: see for example EXP, *Expert Reacts*, online video recordings, 22 February 2025 – Present, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlIgRZLt5P4W4oTxNjb2JQ4ErY5_17M04.

games studies continue to appear regularly. No matter how careful and rigorous the research, there will always be materials that will have been missed or excluded. Alongside these gaps, there are also phenomena within the gaming medium which have no definitive source, instead occurring as ephemeral sensations that have become generally accepted elements of the medium, widespread shared observations based on similar individual experiences, or gradual accumulations of smaller incremental phenomena over time. In this way, there can be commonly identifiable elements of the gaming medium – such as games’ role as power fantasy experiences – which are understood and referenced by gaming contributors and commentators without providing clear sources, introducing a further challenge to examining the gaming medium within an academic context as those *within* the gaming community understand and identify particular phenomena without direct or explicit referencing.

While significant portions of the discourse herein will, naturally, focus on the perspectives of history within particular games, to understand the broader perspectives of how history is understood and utilised within the gaming medium, historical games must be examined within the wider authorial context of the gaming industry to which they belong, particularly with regards to how players, developers and publishers view and interact with historical games in comparison to other games. By factoring in an understanding of how “historical games” exist as a thematic sub-genre within video games as a whole, it will be possible to identify authorial influences upon the design and creation of historical games which subsequently impact the manner in which history is presented in these experiences. This wider assessment carries with it inherent difficulties, in particular that much of the discourse surrounding video games as a whole is highly subjective and is frequently conducted on social media forums which facilitate and emphasise this subjectivity. Consequently, the discussion surrounding games can provide multiple, often contradictory perspectives, but a significant proportion of available games media only constitutes one side of the dialogue between games’ creators and consumers, presenting the perspectives of games consumers – be they players, journalists or academics – responding to and interpreting historical games and their technical or historical perspectives, with any authorial perspectives offered by developers or publishers providing only a small minority of available sources.

As an ever-expanding and highly varied medium, video games offer significant potential as a historical medium, and this thesis does not seek to devalue or undermine this potential by highlighting challenging aspects of games' depiction of history. As Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton noted over a decade ago, 'we should stop judging other historical practices by the standards of academic history, and instead acknowledge that each form of historical representation has its own methodology, its own codes and conventions, and its own cultural value'.¹³³ This thesis intends to build upon this statement by isolating and illustrating particular characteristics of the video game medium and the manner in which different authorial perspectives interact with historical games which can create tensions within historical understanding that must be addressed by academic analysis of historical games. Detailed understanding of these tensions and the contrasting perspectives which create them, and their impact upon the presentation of historical content within games will subsequently enable more nuanced exploration of the medium, identify new avenues for future academic inquiry, and suggest alternative approaches to interpreting historical content within the medium of video games. Therefore, our first task should be to establish *how* video games present history, particular trends in the historical perspectives offered by games, and the effect this can have upon the narrative of history as relayed through historical games.

¹³³ Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton, *Doing History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), quoted in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 24.

Chapter 1: History as a Narrative Playground - Exploring Narrative, Gameplay and Historical Perspective

From its earliest incarnations, History has always been a narrative subject, full of rich and colourful characters and elaborate stories which, even when supported by contemporary records, can stretch the bounds of credibility. It is also a discipline where what is *known* about events and people constantly mingles with what is *believed* to have happened. As the *Dictionary of Concepts in History* says:

history differs from “mere chronicle” on the grounds that *chronicle* [original italics] is a simple, sequential ordering of facts, whereas genuine *history* [original italics] requires the “structuring of facts into a cohesive narrative and an interpretation of those facts with respect to the causes and significance of past events”.¹

In this manner, just as important to the reported facts of history are the structures and interpretations applied to its narrative through subsequent retellings, as these structures and interpretations enable the audience to identify which elements from the historical narrative are considered pertinent to their understanding of historical events. ‘Narratives can paint details about abstract, distant issues and help them relate with everyday lives’,² which, in the context of historical events occurring decades or even centuries beyond living memory, forms an invaluable means of interpretation for modern audiences and enables history to remain relevant in the eyes of modern society.

The manner and form of this narrative interpretation which the *Dictionary* identifies as “defining” history as a discipline has changed and evolved over time. Despite this, a narrative aspect has remained a central tenet of historical writing.³

¹ Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Inc., 1986), p. 243.

² Kelly Bergstrand and James M. Jasper, “Villains, Victims and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory”, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 81: 3 (2018), p. 229.

³ For discussion of narrative’s role within the interpretation of history, see for examples A. R. Louch, “History as Narrative”, *History and Theory*, vol. 8: 1 (1969), pp. 54-70; J. Hillis Miller, “Narrative and History”, *ELH*, vol. 41: 3 (1974), pp. 455-473; Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in Hayden White (ed.), *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 81-99; Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory”, *History and Theory*, vol. 23: 1 (1984), pp. 1-33; Jörn Rüsen, “Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason”, *History and Theory*, vol. 26: 4 (1987), pp. 87-97; Noël Carroll, “Interpretation, History and Narrative”, *The Monist*, vol. 37: 2 (1990), pp. 134-166;

The intermingling of historical events with narratives from folklore and mythology is particularly prevalent in historical sources from older eras, most notably those from antiquity or the medieval age: Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the so-called “Father of History”, was a storyteller by profession, and the early passages of his famous *Histories* imply that a number of incidents from Greek mythology – the abductions of Io and Europa, Medea’s departure from Colchis with the Argonauts, and even Paris’ kidnap of Helen and the Siege of Troy – took place as real events and offers them as contributors to the enmity and conflict between Greeks and Persians in his own time.⁴

Likewise, Thucydides of Athens, writing his *History of the Peloponnesian War* a generation later – arguably the defining historical source of that conflict – begins his account by describing in detail how the world he lived in came to be, from the settlement of modern Greece and the reigns of Minos and Agamemnon to the Persian Wars, even though he ‘found it impossible, because of its remoteness in time, to acquire a really precise knowledge of the ancient past or even the history preceding [his] own period’.⁵ In the medieval period, scholars such as Snorri Sturluson, the twelfth century Icelandic poet and chronicler, interwove historical incidents corroborated by other contemporary texts with events from cultural legend (in Snorri’s case, the Norse sagas).⁶ Even today, simplified or curated historical narratives interwoven with myth and folklore continue to be perpetuated outside of academia, most notably by political groups in order to support specific agendas and policies by subordinating history to justify their political narratives.⁷

David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986); Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (London: Springer Nature Limited, 2007); Inke Arns, “Narrative” in Vanessa Agnew, Johnathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 151-155; Charlotte Gauthier, “In defence of narrative history”, *The Critic*, 7 March 2023, <https://thecritic.co.uk/in-defence-of-narrative-history/>.

⁴ Herodotus (trans. Robin Waterfield), *The Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-3.

⁵ Thucydides (trans. Rex Warner), *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 35-47.

⁶ For example, see Birgit Sawyer and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 189-190.

⁷ John Tosh (ed.), *Historians on History* (2nd ed.; London: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009), p. 6. Arguably the clearest and most expansive example of manipulating historical narratives to meet political objectives may be observed in Russian narratives justifying the invasion of Ukraine launched in 2022 on the basis of the two nations’ “shared history”: see for examples “Contextualising Putin’s ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’”, *Harvard University Ukrainian Research Institute*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.huri.harvard.edu/news/putin-historical-unity>; Nick Mayhew, “Vladimir Putin’s history war where truth is the first casualty”, *The Conversation*, 15 February 2024, <https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putins-history-war-where-truth-is-the-first-casualty-223365>.

Away from these prose “histories”, various traditions of oral storytelling, often recounted as poetry, preserved tales of note until they gradually coalesced into written form, often generations after the events they purported to describe.⁸ Greco-Roman epics, Norse sagas, medieval French *chansons de geste*: all offer stirring tales of ancient deeds thought worthy of remembrance, even if their details became warped and embellished over the centuries and frequently straddle an often blurred line between history and myth. This latter strand of “historical narrative”, that of the oral story-telling tradition, is particularly important to consider, as these forms of epic literature often existed as popular entertainment in their respective historical eras. Nor is this a phenomenon restricted to periods where alternate evidence is comparatively limited; Shakespeare’s plays and the books of Sir Walter Scott, both forms of popular entertainment at their respective times of creation, have left similarly impactful legacies on the narrative of history.⁹

The importance of narrative as a central tenet of history is paralleled by its significance within video games.¹⁰ Many video games, regardless of thematic or technical genre, feature narrative-oriented content, either as a principal gameplay mechanism or as a “single-player” option within games oriented towards competitive multi-player experiences, with prominent examples of notable game narratives including *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), *Bioshock* (2007), *The Last of Us* (2013), the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007-2012), *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) as well as historical games such

⁸ Corinna Peniston-Bird, “Oral History: The sound of memory”, in Sarah Barber and Corinna Peniston-Bird (eds.), *History Beyond the Text: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 105-121; Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 3-32; Patricia Leavy, *Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-5. See also, Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ For examples, see Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1996); David Brown, *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1979).

¹⁰ For additional reading on narrative within video games, see Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative” in Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker & Justin Sully (eds.), *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory* (Hoboken, New Jers.: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017), pp. 517-530; Kwan Min Lee, Namkee Park & Seung-A Jin, “Narrative & Interactivity in Computer Games” and Michael A. Shapiro, Jorge Peña-Herborn & Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Realism, Imagination and Narrative Video Games” in Peter Vorderer & Jennings Bryant (eds.), *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 304-341; Barry Ip, “Narrative Structures in Computer and Video Games: Part 1: Context, Definitions, and Initial Findings”, *Games & Culture*, vol. 6: 2 (2011), pp. 103-134; Sebastian Domsch, *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013); Nicholas B. Zeman, *Storytelling for Interactive Digital Media and Video Games* (New York: CRC Press, 2017); Amy M. Green, *Storytelling in Video Games: The Art of the Digital Narrative* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018); Chris Stone, “The evolution of video games as a storytelling medium, and the role of narrative in modern games”, *Game Developer*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/the-evolution-of-video-games-as-a-storytelling-medium-and-the-role-of-narrative-in-modern-games>.

as the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, and *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and its 2018 sequel.

These examples represent only a small handful of video games incorporating narratives within the gaming medium as a whole, as the variety of gameplay and thematic genres available within the video game medium enables a wealth of narrative creativity, with the interactive nature of the medium enabling story-telling opportunities inaccessible to other, less interactive media formats. Some commentators have even noted examples of narratives which only function successfully *because of* the technical perspective offered by the interactive nature of the gaming medium, with direct input and participation by the player critical to developing the narrative or determining the outcome of individual characters or the game's story as a whole.¹¹ Within this landscape of gaming narratives, historical games are frequently evident, with certain examples such as *Red Dead Redemption* cited amongst the highest subjectively and critically-regarded game narratives.¹²

Thus, those voices who might claim that video games have no value to modern historical scholarship as they are pieces of entertainment media, telling fictional or dramatized versions of history rather than rigidly "factual" sources, ignore a long-established precedent for using entertainment to recount and interpret history for the masses; that history and entertainment have a long established and intricate historiographical relationship which continues to play out through modern media. Moreover, as Mark Meadows notes, all of these disparate authors, regardless of their origins or vocation, utilise ideas of narrative to convey a story and, more significantly, a perspective on a subject within that story: 'this is why narrative exists. To convey perspective.'¹³

In this chapter, the construction of narrative within historical games will be explored, analysing the technical perspectives which differing forms of narrative convey within historical games and notable tensions between narrative and gameplay which these competing technical and historical perspectives can produce. Additionally, this chapter will

¹¹ WhatCulture Gaming, *8 Best Stories Which ONLY Work As Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sly-WBfypY0>.

¹² For example, see WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Best Video Game Stories Ever*, online video recording, YouTube, 5 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNaHtgX5vzI> [4:58-6:02].

¹³ Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The art of interactive narrative* (Indianapolis, Ind.: David Dwyer, 2003), p. 2.

highlight significant historical perspectives emphasised by the authorial and technical perspectives of historical games – notably the simplified interpretation of particular historical agents according to the narrative formulae of “heroes” and “villains”, and the prominence of perspectives of conflict or warfare to suit gameplay technical genres – and examine their influence upon the historical narratives presented by historical games.

Within historical game studies, Adam Chapman’s *Digital Games as History* provides many of the key elements for assessing the concepts and variations of narrative in the context of historical games. Across multiple chapters, he discusses the types of narrative that can be found in games,¹⁴ their relationship with ‘historical ludo-narrative’ (the history which is interpreted by a particular game), and how historical narrative can enter conflict with the mechanics of gameplay to generate ‘ludo-narrative dissonance’;¹⁵ this term, coined by video game designer Clint Hocking, encompasses ‘a powerful dissonance between what [a game] is about as a game, and what it is about as a story’, wherein ‘the message contained within the narrative is somehow contradicted by actions undertaken in game play’. Ludo-narrative dissonance highlights a significant point, that an individual’s interpretation of a historical game can differ and conflict when viewed from the contrasting technical and authorial perspectives of gameplay and narrative, and is an issue that shall be repeatedly encountered through this thesis.¹⁶ Chapman even goes on to explore how games can be used to explore and create counterfactual histories, allowing the player to examine “what if” scenarios in history or other historical phenomena outside of their established narrative context.¹⁷ “Alternate history” is another widespread aspect of video game engagement with history, providing either fictional narrative universes employing historical or pseudo-historical iconography as part of their design, or as a symptom of the facilitation

¹⁴ Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), pp. 117-133.

¹⁵ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 136-165.

¹⁶ Clint Hocking, “Ludo-Narrative Dissonance in Bioshock”, *Click Nothing Blog* (2007), quoted in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 161; Soraya Murray, “Upending Militarised Masculinity in *Spec Ops: The Line*”, in Patrick Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (eds.), *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2016), p. 325; Frédéric Seraphine, “Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?”, *Researchgate.net* (2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307569310_Ludonarrative_Dissonance_Is_Storytelling_About_Reaching_Harmony.

¹⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 231-257.

of player interactions within gameplay of particular video game technical genres conflicting with recorded historical narratives.

The concept of “alternate history” and mechanical interactions with narrative such as ‘ludo-narrative dissonance’ are all significant identifiers of an underlying principle which is fundamental to video games as an interactive medium: player agency. Chapman classifies player agency as both ‘the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the [game] world whose effects relate to the players intention’ as well as ‘a term to refer to the opportunities for the player to take these actions, as structured by game rules and hardware’;¹⁸ both interpretations are important to identify, as this chapter shall show, as players frequently expect both the ability to influence gameplay and narrative through opportunities for personal agency as well as voicing criticism of instances where their subjective “feeling” of agency within gameplay has been infringed by necessary technical limitations of the gaming medium. Therefore, the influence of player agency as both an authorial and technical perspective in historical games must be accommodated for its impact upon the construction of and engagement with history in video games.

In the specific context of historical games, the influence of player agency can be highly significant, as across the gaming medium, a variety of games and franchises exist where historical characters, objects or phenomena are separated from their narrative or historical context to varying extents for the purposes of gameplay, within which player agency is paramount to dictating the narrative progression of the game experience. Consequently, in order to preserve a game’s “historical” identity, games are forced to emphasise iconography – both visual and auditory – which players identify as aesthetic and narrative signatures of a particular historical setting.

From the *Sid Meier’s Civilisation* strategy game series, in which players must progress their chosen nation through successive historical epochs to achieve the ultimate goal of becoming a space-faring civilisation,¹⁹ to competitive multiplayer games like *World of Tanks* (2010) and *For Honor* (2017), in which players controlling historic vehicles or avatars with

¹⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 30.

¹⁹ MicroProse, Activision, and Firaxis Games, *Sid Meier’s Civilisation* (1991-present). Published by MicroProse, Activision, Hasbro Interactive, 2K Games *et al.*

historically-inspired aesthetics compete against one another within gameplay,²⁰ a number of games have popularised an authorial perspective of history as a series of visual aesthetics defined by iconography and applied to agency-driven gameplay mechanisms rather than as a narrative subject. Furthermore, in many of these instances where history is employed as an aesthetic, even in some games where a historically-inspired narrative is present, the game is marketed and discussed as a form of “historical gameplay sandbox”, an intriguing authorial perspective which frames history, or a particular digital historical world, explicitly as a playground for gamers’ individual agency, furnishing them with certain tools within that historical world that they may then use to shape their own entertainment.²¹

This authorial perspective of historical games is important to identify, as it is fundamental to shaping and challenging what a “historical” game means in the context of the modern gaming industry; is history in gaming determined by narrative, sequences of objective “historical” events, characters and subjects with which the player may interact through “historical” or fictional means and stories? Or is it defined by aesthetics and iconography, a selection of historical images and artefacts which the player may manipulate to create their subjective personal interpretation of a “historical” period or event? These questions are important to identify early, as they implicitly inform questions which shall be explored in subsequent chapters of this thesis regarding the representation of marginalised communities and demographics as well as the larger concept of “historical accuracy” as a whole.

The dislocation of historical imagery and characters from their narrative context for the purposes of historical popular culture, particularly for interactive media such as video games where personal agency is emphasised and lauded, gives precedence to the authorial perspective of historical games as an aesthetic phenomenon to which narrative is subsequently applied, creating ample space for the propagation of historical folklore and “alternate history” through these popular narratives within games. Similarly, the

²⁰ Ubisoft Montreal, *For Honor* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft; Wargaming, *World of Tanks* (2010-present), PC. Released on Xbox in 2014 and PlayStation in 2016.

²¹ See for examples, Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 15: 2 (2020), p. 148; Steve Breslin, “The History and Theory of Sandbox Gameplay”, *Game Developer*, 16 July 2009, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/the-history-and-theory-of-sandbox-gameplay>; Kris Graft, “EVE Online and the meaning of ‘sandbox’”, *Game Developer*, 29 October 2012, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/i-eve-online-i-and-the-meaning-of-sandbox->.

constraining factors of video game genre and gameplay mechanics promotes and emphasises particular historical narratives which facilitate, and can be enabled by, popular gameplay mechanics and design formulae;²² most notable in this regard is the tendency of games to focus on historical narratives of conflict and warfare in order to suit the conflict-centric genres of “action” and “strategy” which have quantitatively dominated historical game design.²³

Together, these ideas of player agency, iconography, and gameplay genre demonstrate that, within the video game medium, technical and authorial perspectives of historical games as forms of interactive entertainment are dominant considerations from the viewpoints of both players and creators, to which considerations of historical perspectives offered by narrative, iconography, or other forms of historical content are ultimately subservient. This is particularly noticeable within the facility of games to engineer and articulate player agency in its technical and narrative forms within a historical setting, as the interactive mechanisms of gameplay and narrative format required to facilitate player agency may operate in conflict with established historical narratives.

While the subjugation of historical narrative to technical or authorial perspectives within games can generate problematic historiographical phenomena such as anachronism or the promotion of historical myths within popular narratives, or generate “alternate history” scenarios through deviations from established historical narratives create via player input, these technical and authorial perspectives are nonetheless highly significant for identifying forms and patterns within the engagement with historical subjects by video games. By decentralising historical narrative in favour of recognisable iconography, video games endeavour to make historical subjects easier to interpret for broad, non-specialist audiences. However, the inclusion of historical narrative, in one form or another, helps to provide a degree of structure to a historical video game around which other mechanics and technical interactions with historical subjects may be organised. Therefore, our first task in assessing the influences of technical and authorial perspectives of video games upon the

²² Jeremiah McCall, “Agents, Goals, and Action-Choices: Analyzing the Game Histories of *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* and *Hegemony Gold: Wars of Ancient Greece* with the Historical Problem Space Framework”, *thersites*, vol. 18 (2024), pp. 69-115.

²³ Yannick Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, in Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 12-15.

construction of historical narrative is to examine gaming's various perspectives of narrative, and the implementation of these narrative perspectives within historical games.

Narrative Forms in Historical Games

Narratives within historical video games can come in a variety of different forms, and it is important to understand the differences and applications of each within the gaming medium. As Meadows notes, 'the way a story is told determines how it is understood'.²⁴ Within this section, individual formats of video game narrative shall be described, with practical reference examples, and the perception of their influence upon narratives presented by games discussed.

The simplest and most common form of narrative found in games are linear narratives. These take place as a chronological series of events occurring sequentially across a period of time; this can be considered the standard form of narrative storytelling, as found in historical plays, novels, films, and television.²⁵ It is therefore the narrative form with which the lay person is most familiar and has been widely employed by the video game medium, in titles from the *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor* and *Sniper Elite* (2005-present) franchises amongst innumerable others, with each gameplay level or mission forming a discreet "chapter" within that game's narrative; some games, including *Red Dead Redemption 2*, expressly divide their narrative into segments identified as "chapters", reinforcing this narrative structural association.²⁶

Furthermore, this linear form of story-telling is the simplest and easiest to create from a developer's point of view, requiring fewer resources to create as the events of the narrative are fixed, with player agency restricted exclusively to interactive gameplay between fixed non-interactive narrative waypoints.²⁷ This linearity also limits the technical requirements of the game world itself, as the linearity of the gameplay environment creates an illusion of experiencing a vast digital world, while the game itself only presents the player

²⁴ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 73.

²⁵ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 64 & p. 74; Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment* (Second edition; Burlington, Mass.: Focal Press, 2008), pp. 115-116.

²⁶ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on PC and Google Stadia in 2019.

²⁷ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 64.

with the immediate environment with which they are interacting.²⁸ In the context of a historical game, this narrative form can be perceived as reinforcing a perception of history as a predetermined sequence of narrative events – established by the fact that they have already happened – which the player advances through their interactions with gameplay or fictional game-specific stories.

A second narrative form that can appear in games are so-called “nodal narratives”. These bear many similarities to linear narratives, featuring fixed beginnings and endings, with a broadly linear story path;²⁹ indeed, Meadows’ definition of a “nodal narrative” as a ‘series of non-interactive events, interrupted by points of interactivity’ arguably applies equally to that of a linear narrative or a nodal narrative within the context of gaming.³⁰ However, the nodal narrative storytelling form also permits some limited player agency which may impact the course or sequence of the story. By including a series of “nodal points” within the narrative, known as “fractals” by some game developers,³¹ the developers may permit players a limited ability to personalise their experience, change the narrative outcome of particular characters and potentially experience events in a more loosely, individually chosen order.³² *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (2017), *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018) and *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (2020), and even *Red Dead Redemption 2* can all be argued to represent examples of this narrative format, as certain sections of each game offer multiple regional-specific “story missions” which contribute to and advance the overall central narrative for each game, but which permit a degree of freedom as to the precise order in which the player may complete them to progress.³³

Similarly, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* may also be considered an example of this narrative format, as while the game’s overall narrative follows a fixed “linear” path, individual missions within this story may feature multiple options for completion through

²⁸ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 20 December 2018 [21:36-22:08].

²⁹ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, pp. 64-65.

³⁰ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 64.

³¹ WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Hardest Video Game Genres To Make (From A Game Developer)*, online video recording, YouTube, 13 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vfwblz-zF4A> [3:24-4:52].

³² Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 65; Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 115-118.

³³ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Google Stadia in 2020. Published by Ubisoft; Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, PC, Nintendo Switch and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

gameplay, some of which may allow the player to take “shortcuts” through later missions or circumvent them entirely to reach “nodal” narrative waypoints.³⁴ For instance, in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*’s second act, the player character is narratively required to infiltrate a monastery to identify and kill a fugitive hiding amongst the monastery’s inhabitants; however, if the player has raised particular gameplay skills to a sufficiently high level, they can circumvent this narrative sequence by entering the monastery clandestinely and killing the target in “free” gameplay, thereby advancing the game’s story to a point after which the player would have left the monastery by following the primary narrative path.³⁵ This instance also highlights another potential feature of “nodal narratives” within video games, whereby certain options for progression within the narrative may be restricted to the player if a particular mechanical or narrative prerequisite has not been met, such as the acquisition of a particular gameplay item or ability or the completion of a particular in-game mission.

From a developer’s perspective, “nodal” or “fractal” narratives require greater resources to create than traditional fixed linear narratives, as games which feature “nodal” narratives must account for the additional potential interaction options available to the player and their possible impact upon the game; this means that developers must implement additional assets to facilitate the multiple interactive paths between “nodal” points, even if a player’s ability to choose means that certain created gameplay features are not experienced by an individual player.³⁶ As such, “nodal” narratives are more likely to occur within larger games, such as the aforementioned *Assassin’s Creed* game franchise, which enjoy the benefit of greater development budgets and resources which can support the work required to implement the additional assets demanded by “nodal” structures, but also as these larger games frequently experience a greater expectation to facilitate player agency and offer alternate styles of gameplay.³⁷

A third form of narrative popular amongst video games, but which is distinctly rarer or more restricted within historical games, is the so-called “branching narrative”. These are distinct from the aforementioned “nodal” narratives due their inclusion of multiple potential

³⁴ Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2024. Published by Deep Silver.

³⁵ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; “A Needle in a Haystack”, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/A_Needle_in_a_Haystack.

³⁶ WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Hardest Video Game Genres To Make (From A Game Developer)* [3:24-4:52].

³⁷ Muriel and Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, p. 148.

endings for the game's overarching narrative, depending on the player's actions upon the progression of the narrative, rather than exclusively for individual sections or "chapters" of that narrative.³⁸ These branching narratives permit – and to a certain extent require – a high degree of player agency in determining the course and outcome of narrative events and, consequently, they are frequently found within the Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre, in titles such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), *Detroit: Become Human* and *Cyberpunk 2077*.³⁹ These forms of narrative are particularly distinctive features of the gaming medium, as the requirement for player interaction to affect the narrative outcome makes them technically prohibitive for "passive" media such as film or television where audiences have little or no direct input into on-screen events.

Equally, these forms of narrative are less commonly found within the historical game sub-genre, as the historical settings of these titles typically place limitations upon the creative potential of their narratives. Major historical events featured within these games are treated as "fixed points", so may be creatively interpreted to suit the specific narrative or gameplay needs of a particular game but are often narratively presented to occur outside of the player's control and thus cannot be prevented, a manner of narrative presentation better suited to linear or nodal narrative structures. Thus, when branching narratives do appear in historical titles, such as in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Valhalla* or *Expeditions: Rome* (2022), the branching elements of these narratives – alternate dialogue options with narrative implications (Figure 1.1), variable endings, and so on – relate primarily to the fictional stories introduced for these specific games, such as fictional characters and sub-narratives, and therefore remain largely separate from the "historical" narrative elements of these games, with historical events utilised as "fixed" incidents within and around which these larger branching narratives may occur.⁴⁰

From a game developers' perspective, branching narratives are also among the most challenging to create.⁴¹ The player's ability to affect the course of the narrative can

³⁸ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 118-119.

³⁹ Bethesda Game Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), Xbox, PlayStation and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2017. Published by Bethesda Softworks; Quantic Dream, *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), PlayStation. Released on PC in 2019. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment; CD Projekt RED, *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by CD Projekt.

⁴⁰ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*; *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*; Logic Artists, *Expeditions: Rome* (2022), PC. Published by THQ Nordic.

⁴¹ WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Hardest Video Game Genres To Make (From A Game Developer)* [3:24-4:52].

potentially result in the player failing to experience large quantities of created in-game material; while beneficial for encouraging player investment and the longevity of a particular title through repeated gameplay, thereby allowing players to explore alternative narrative and gameplay options, the quantity of resources required to create the various potential narrative paths and the associated gameplay elements can be prohibitively expensive and complex to develop, multiplying incrementally depending on the number of narrative branches and points within the game narrative at which these branches may occur.⁴²



Figure 1.1: Official artwork promoting optional dialogue mechanics in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018).

The recent historical game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* is a clear example of the effect which the exponential growth resulting from branching narratives can have within game development, as the inclusion of these branching narrative elements and the dynamic effects upon in-game interactions which they cause resulted in the game reportedly requiring almost three million separate lines of dialogue to accommodate the various potential combinations resulting from branching narrative interactions; in the words of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* voice artist and motion-capture performer Tom McKay, 'you

⁴² Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 118-119; WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Hardest Video Game Genres To Make (From A Game Developer)* [3:24-4:52]; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | Gameumentary, online video recording, YouTube, 24 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE2goNeshY> [29:21-32:13].

would kind of go down one channel of a decision and then come halfway back up and go down another one and then maybe all the way back up to the beginning and back down... And that's not an acting challenge that you ever would have in TV or film, they're kind of linear'.⁴³

Given the scale and complexity which these branching narratives can potentially achieve – *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, for instance, has been suggested as possibly the longest single video game script written to date by consequence of its branching narrative elements⁴⁴ – branching narratives are frequently only possible to implement for triple-A game studios, as they are amongst the few within the gaming industry with the resources to sustain development on multiple potential narrative paths and compute the dynamic impacts of these varied possibilities within their game environments. While smaller indie games, such as *Undertale* (2015), do sometimes feature branching narratives, their development often necessitates compromises to the potential scope of such narratives or simplifications to graphical or mechanical aspects of the games in question, thereby balancing the overall investment of development resources.

The interactive nature of the video game medium also enables the telling of stories through exploration, interaction, and engaging with the virtual environment of the game itself; this phenomenon, unique to the video game medium, is commonly referred to as “environmental storytelling”. By telling stories through the environment of the game world – hence the name – developers are able to add further layers to their in-game narrative and create more immersive game worlds, either by showing the player the result of an action and forcing them to mentally engage with the game to work out the preceding events, or to tell additional stories which have no primary impact on the core narrative but which nevertheless serve to offer depth and personality to the game world.⁴⁵ In some instances,

⁴³ Tom Richardson, “Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic”, *BBC News*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgxp0jl15lo>; BBC News, *Does Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 have the longest script in video game history*, online video recording, YouTube, 10 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vts9ascxTlc> [7:34-8:35].

⁴⁴ Richardson, “Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic”.

⁴⁵ See for examples, Ekber Servet Ulaş, “Virtual environment design and storytelling in video games”, *Metaverse Creativity*, vol. 4: 1 (2014), pp. 75-91; Kath Dooley, “Exploring Environmental Storytelling Techniques in Expressive, Virtual Reality Documentary” in Kath Dooley, *Virtual Reality Narratives: Embodied Encounters in Space* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 95-125; Bart Stewart, “Environmental Storytelling”, *Game Developer*, 12 November 2015, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/environmental-storytelling>; Brandon Dolinski, “Environmental Storytelling in Video Games”, *Game Design Skills*,

such as the *Sniper Elite* series, these “environmental stories” may also serve a dedicated gameplay function, as finding documents around game maps or on enemies can serve to highlight optional objectives or alternate pathways through the in-game environment, or to provide information about Non-Player Characters (NPCs) which encourages players to think about their actions.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, “environmental storytelling” can be used to demonstrate the impact of the player’s own actions; in a historical context, this can be particularly useful for highlighting how even small decisions may subtly impact history, and how events, which may seem obvious with benefit of hindsight, could not have been predicted or prevented by those engaging with events at the time. An example of this occurs early in the narrative of *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*: while travelling in the game’s opening region, the player can discover a ruined village, where a family is being threatened with execution by the local priest; upon interaction, the priest states that the village has been consumed by a mysterious and incurable plague and that only pre-emptive destruction can prevent its spread, while the captive family plead for the player character to intervene and save them.⁴⁷ If the player intervenes to save the family, they learn later in the game that (as a result of their actions) the plague has spread throughout the region, causing countless deaths; the game also applies environmental cues, such as a grey haze and the removal of character models used to populate the game world, to visually infer the effect of the plague upon the affected region, which persists throughout the rest of that particular “playthrough” of the game.⁴⁸

However, the implementation of these “environmental stories” can vary, which thereby influences their execution or impact.⁴⁹ A widespread gameplay design template may be for “environmental stories” to feature as letters, diaries and other text formats which

<https://gamedesignskills.com/game-design/environmental-storytelling/>; Arvin Goodarzi, “Environmental Storytelling in Games 2025”, *Pixune*, 15 April 2025, <https://pixune.com/blog/environmental-storytelling-in-games/>.

⁴⁶ For examples, see Rebellion Developments, *Sniper Elite 4* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC; Rebellion Developments, *Sniper Elite 5* (2022), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC; GameSpot, *Historian & Rebellion CEO Reacts to Historical Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 26 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWVqVFIOcAc> [9:26-10:07].

⁴⁷ *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Stewart, “Environmental Storytelling”; Dolinski, “Environmental Storytelling in Video Games”; Goodarzi, “Environmental Storytelling in Games 2025”.

can be discovered and interacted with by the player; examples of this type may be seen within letters and newspapers which the player may acquire and view within *Red Dead Redemption 2*.⁵⁰ While this format makes the “environmental storytelling” easier for the player audience to interact with, it naturally restricts their creative potential to stories which take place “off-screen” while also raising issues of their suitability for the historical context of a game, depending on the period; while finding and reading letters or diaries may make sense in a modern gameplay context and can be justified for settings in more modern historical periods, such as in either of the World Wars or “the Wild West”, it is more difficult to justify contextually within a period-setting where literacy was historically less common or where multiple languages coexisted, such as in an early medieval setting.

“Environmental storytelling” inherently relies on player agency for engagement to uncover the various elements of its narratives; its antithesis is a narrative in which the narrative is presented to the player in a form by which player agency is largely or completely removed from the narrative experience. This latter style of game narrative is, in some regards, more commonplace in the gaming medium than “environmental storytelling”, as a common element of many games is to present elements of their narrative to the player through non-interactive sequences known as “cutscenes” – animated sequences often utilising framing and stylistic techniques commonly used in traditional cinematic media like film and television – which intersperse interactive gameplay segments.⁵¹

Within historical games, recent entries of the *Battlefield* franchise offer illustrations of this non-interactive, cinematic narrative mode. Both *Battlefield I* (2016) and *Battlefield V* (2018) feature shortened single-player narratives referred to as “War Stories”, set across multiple historical settings within their respective conflicts and utilising multiple player protagonists; each “War Story” comprises of a handful of distinct gameplay sections, each of which is bookended by non-interactive cutscenes which relay the critical narrative moments of each story to the player audience in a cinematic format.⁵² Moreover, this limited degree of player agency is narratively excused within this “War Story” framing, as each individual story is framed as the recollections or descriptions of the events depicted after-the-fact,

⁵⁰ *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

⁵¹ Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 64.

⁵² EA DICE, *Battlefield I* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts; EA DICE, *Battlefield V* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

which in turn enables the games to contextually accommodate the exaggerations of historical content made for gameplay value as embellishments by the story's narrator; *Battlefield I* highlights these facets directly by ending one of its stories, the aviation-focused "Friends in High Places", on an ambiguous narrative note as the story's protagonist – a maverick American volunteer in the Royal Flying Corps – recaps the events of its dramatic story with an alternate, less heroic, interpretation before verbally and visually breaking the fourth wall to address the player: 'What you heard from me is the truth. I wouldn't tell you if it wasn't... Would I?'⁵³

This cinematic mode of narrative presentation inherently positions games as a comparable medium to film and television, which likewise present narratives in a form which the audience may only passively observe rather than actively participate in through interactive input to determine the outcome. However, doing so potentially limits the degree of emotional engagement experienced by the player as the cinematic, non-interactive storytelling form automatically separates the player from the events depicted, thereby diluting the impact of any choices or incidents affecting the narrative's protagonist upon the player; while the player may still empathise with characters presented in cinematic, non-interactive forms, a popular consensus amongst gamers is that players experience stronger emotional connections with those characters and narratives into which they have specifically invested through direct player interactions.⁵⁴

While certain games, such as *Red Dead Redemption 2*, have experimented with cinematic modes of narrative presentation to include interactive elements within these sequences via mechanics dubbed "Quick-Time Events" (QTEs) – so-named as these interactive elements are often presented as timed input commands that result in an automatic (often negative) outcome if the required input is not performed correctly within a set time-limit – these are often criticised within the wider gaming community, either because of the comparatively limited agency allowed to the player by these mechanics or their disruptive impact upon the immersion or flow of narrative sections, particularly if the

⁵³ EA DICE, *Battlefield I – Friends in High Places* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

⁵⁴ See for example, Adam Muller, "Immersive engagement: Designing and testing a virtual Indian Residential School exhibition", in Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Dirk von Lehn & Stephen Cook (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 301-302.

player fails a QTE input and is forced to repeat the QTE interaction sequence (potentially multiple times until succeeding).⁵⁵

A notable exception in this regard is Quantic Dream's *Detroit: Become Human*, a cinematic, narrative-driven game exploring a dystopian society dependent on realistic servile androids from the perspectives of three different but narratively interlinked android protagonists;⁵⁶ unlike many other games which include QTEs, these mechanics form the central means of interaction with the "gameplay" of *Detroit: Become Human*, which has thus been described in some instances as more akin to an "interactive film", offering a compromise to player agency through gameplay in exchange for the game's cinematic presentation and complexity of the game narrative's writing, which forces players to consider their in-game choices carefully to determine the story's outcome for each protagonist.⁵⁷ While this instance of the integration of QTEs into a game serves to facilitate the "branching narrative" form, QTEs only occur sparingly in most other incidents of their inclusion within games, featuring within cinematic "linear narrative" sequences in parallel with more interactive mechanics and gameplay sections, which highlights the limited agency offered by QTEs by comparison. Consequently, QTEs have acquired a negative reputation within gaming communities, with a common complaint being that they restrict the player's enjoyment of the sequences within which they are used.⁵⁸

What QTE gameplay mechanics highlight is that gamers are more likely to express criticism of the illusion of narrative agency within a video game narrative than its overt absence. Nodal narrative structures sometimes present a similar problem, by offering the player multiple options from which to choose which appear to affect the direction of the in-

⁵⁵ Ben Kuchera, "Quick time events: tap 'A' if you're tired of them", *Arstechnica*, 19 September 2008, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2008/09/quick-time-events-tap-a-if-youre-tired-of-them/>; Tim Rogers, "Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment: Incorporating Quick Time Events into Gameplay", *Game Developer*, 8 February 2011, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/full-reactive-eyes-entertainment-incorporating-quick-time-events-into-gameplay>.

⁵⁶ *Detroit: Become Human*.

⁵⁷ For examples, see Sam Greer, "Detroit: Become Human review – a pretty but hollow interactive movie", *VG24/7*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.vg247.com/detroit-become-human-review>; Garethvk, "Does Detroit: Become Human Qualify More As An Interactive Movie Than A Video Game", *n4g*, 2 July 2018, <https://n4g.com/news/2184002/does-detroit-become-human-qualify-more-as-an-interactive-movie-than-a-video-game>; Lucy O'Brien, "Detroit: Become Human Review", *IGN*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/05/24/detroit-become-human-review>.

⁵⁸ Kuchera, "Quick time events: tap 'A' if you're tired of them"; Rogers, "Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment: Incorporating Quick Time Events into Gameplay".

game narrative, but which ultimately lead to the same narrative result. Both of these problems, where the application of narrative within the video game medium can create conflict with either gameplay mechanics or expectations of the player audience, serve as reflections of a phenomena we shall refer to as “false agency”, or ‘faux choice’ to use Carolyn Handler Miller’s term.⁵⁹ Miller notes that ‘faux choice’ within games is sometimes a necessity of game design, in order to restrict player agency to a degree manageable by the developers’ resources and prevent ‘runaway branching’ within the game narrative, thereby constraining player agency in order to preserve the functionality of the overall game experience.⁶⁰

However, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* attracted criticism because of this issue of “false agency” in its post-launch content expansions: in the second part of *Odyssey’s Legacy of the First Blade* expansion story, the player protagonist (either the male Alexios or female Cassandra) is presented with the opportunity to encourage an NPC side-character to depart from Greece or a romantic option encouraging them to stay; however, some players angrily noted that both options result in the relevant character staying in Greece to start a family with the player protagonist (regardless of which option the player chose), which then feeds into the narrative of the expansion’s third episode, in which the protagonist’s child is abducted.⁶¹ Although *Odyssey’s* developers at Ubisoft apologised and subsequently altered the options presented within the controversial choice scene to better reflect this overall narrative path, the changes did not affect the narrative outcome of the affected sequence because of its requirement to establish the third part of the expansion’s overall narrative arc.⁶² The controversy of this narrative incident highlights a clear example of Miller’s ‘faux

⁵⁹ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 118-119.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 118-119; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* / *Gameumentary*, [32:19-33:04].

⁶¹ Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey – Legacy of the First Blade* (2018-2019), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; Heather Alexandra, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey’s Latest DLC Has A Romantic Ending You Can’t Change”, *Kotaku*, 15 January 2019, <https://kotaku.com/assassins-creed-odysseys-latest-dlc-has-a-romantic-endi-1831784459>; Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey DLC breezes past its baby controversy and doesn’t dare to look back”, *Eurogamer*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-odyssey-dlc-breezes-past-its-baby-controversy-and-doesnt-dare-look-back>.

⁶² Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey DLC breezes past its baby controversy”; Shabana Arif, “Ubisoft Apologises to Players for Assassin’s Creed Odyssey DLC Controversy”, *IGN*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/01/18/ubisoft-apologizes-to-players-for-assassins-creed-odyssey-dlc-controversy>; Matt Wales, “Ubisoft replacing Assassin’s Creed Odyssey’s controversial DLC ending tomorrow”, *Eurogamer*, 25 February 2019 (updated 27 February 2019), <https://www.eurogamer.net/ubisoft-is-replacing-assassins-creed-odysseys-controversial-dlc-ending-tomorrow>.

choice', as the player is presented with the technical illusion of personally determining the outcome of events within the story, yet the outcome remains the same due to its requirement to establish subsequent critical narrative elements which would be disrupted by granting true agency to the player.⁶³

Despite this necessary limitation of player narrative agency from a technical and developer's authorial perspective, it is worth re-emphasising that the narrative restriction of 'faux choice' proves controversial with players, who believe that they have been unfairly deprived of their in-game agency by instances of this developer decision. In the case of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, the aforementioned instance of this narrative restriction within the *Legacy of the First Blade* story was reported as particularly controversial with LGBTQ+ players, as the attendant narrative forced *Odyssey's* player protagonist into a heterosexual relationship even if players had "role-played" their character participating exclusively in same-sex relationships throughout the rest of the game;⁶⁴ commentators noted that while the *Assassin's Creed* series had previously included protagonists having children, the greater emphasis on "role-playing" gameplay and narrative elements within *Odyssey* allowed players greater agency to define their individual versions and perspectives of the game protagonist, thereby highlighting the problematic nature of the narrative's implementation of "false agency" when it was perceived to force the player into a scenario which they may have actively attempted to avoid elsewhere within the game.⁶⁵

This incident highlights a particular challenge of video games, one to which we shall return throughout this chapter, wherein the interactive nature of the gaming medium and players' agency within the interactivity offered by particular gameplay genres are sometimes perceived to take authorial precedent over other elements of game design, particularly from the perspective of game narrative.⁶⁶ This competition of precedence between authorial perspectives can have significant consequences when applied to the historical context and subject matter of a game.

⁶³ Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 118-121.

⁶⁴ Alexandra, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Latest DLC Has A Romantic Ending You Can't Change"; Wales, "Ubisoft replacing Assassin's Creed Odyssey's controversial DLC ending tomorrow"; Phillips, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey DLC breezes past its baby controversy and doesn't dare to look back".

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 63.

A final, more varied form of narrative in video games – which occurs tangentially to ideas of historical narrative but is particularly significant for history’s presentation and usage within video games – is that of so-called “alternate history”. Based on the intellectual premise of “what if x historical event happened instead of y?”, this type of fictional narrative allows a piece of media to establish a hypothetical historical scenario and depict the consequences of that scenario either through the in-media environment or through narrative and gameplay. However, unlike other fictional media narratives, which play out in the background of or alongside interpretations of recorded historical events, “alternate history” is reflected explicitly on the macro-scale, with the effects of the “alternate history” presented at the forefront of the narrative and immediately visible throughout the game world.⁶⁷

In an academic context, this exploration of hypothetical or counter-factual historical events is sometimes described as ‘a pleasing distraction for historians’ – E.H. Carr referred to it as a ‘parlour game’ – however, as Chapman observes, ‘counterfactual history aims to understand what did happen by theorising about what did not’; Paul Cartledge, in his history of the Ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, voices similar sentiments that “alternate history” can be valuable as ‘a useful way of examining cause and effect’.⁶⁸ By identifying and reinterpreting a single event – in historical texts and video games, this is often the outcome of a particular historical battle or overarching conflict – and postulating upon probable outcomes of an alternate result, it can help audiences to identify and understand the reasons which caused history to play out in the manner it is recorded to have occurred. Annette Vowinckle identifies video games as particularly suitable to the generation and “simulation” of such “alternate histories”, however notes that ‘this does not mean that there is any meaning to them outside of the game. Rather, its thrill seems to lie in the mere possibility of influencing historical (or parahistorical) events’.⁶⁹ In other words, although video games offer ample scope for the creation and exploration of “alternate history”

⁶⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 231-257; Tom Apperley, “Modding the Historians’ Code: Historical Versimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination”, in Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2013), pp. 185-198.

⁶⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 233. See also, Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003), p. 126.

⁶⁹ Annette Vowinckel, “Past Futures: From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games”, *Historical Social Research*, vol. 34: 2 (2009), pp. 322-332.

scenarios, their appeal to players lies more in the agency which they are perceived to offer over historical narrative than in any critical analysis which they might enable.

Video games have offered a number of variations upon the concept of “alternate history” over the years. In many of the more overt instances, this is conducted through fictional narratives which explicitly and dramatically diverge from the historical record at a chosen moment. *Assassin’s Creed III* (2012), for instance, features an “alternate history” narrative within its expansion *The Tyranny of King Washington*, which takes place in an alternate timeline wherein George Washington installs himself as the oppressive monarch of the newly independent American colonies.⁷⁰ The *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* series (1996-2008) depicts a reality where Albert Einstein invented time travel and accidentally erased Hitler from existence, resulting in direct conflict between the American-led West and the Soviet Union,⁷¹ while the 2009 shooter, *Damnation*, depicts an alternate version of the USA in which the American Civil War lasted for several decades, resulting in a technologically advanced “steampunk” reality.⁷²

Perhaps the most popular example of “alternate history”, which has been heavily explored through various entertainment media, is the question “What if Nazi Germany had won WWII?”. This scenario has been explored through novels, such as *The Man in the High Castle* and *SS GB*,⁷³ and their television adaptations in 2015 and 2017 respectively,⁷⁴ showing hypothetical versions of life in Allied countries (usually the USA or Britain) under Nazi rule. These scenarios have been mirrored in video games, notably including entries in the *Wolfenstein* series (1981-2019) – for instance, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014) and its direct sequels, *Wolfenstein: New Colossus* (2017), *Wolfenstein: Youngblood* (2019) and *Wolfenstein: Cyberpilot* (2019), see the player fight against technologically enhanced and grotesquely exaggerated parodies of Nazis in a Nazi-ruled version of America during the

⁷⁰ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed III – The Tyranny of King Washington* (2012), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Nintendo Wii. Published by Ubisoft.

⁷¹ Westwood Studios, Westwood Pacific & EA Los Angeles, *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* (1996-2008), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Westwood Studios, Virgin Interactive Entertainment and Electronic Arts.

⁷² Blue Omega Entertainment and Point of View, Inc., *Damnation* (2009), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Codemasters.

⁷³ Philip K. Dick, *Man in the High Castle* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015; original print in 1962); Len Deighton, *SS-GB* (London: HarperCollins, 2017; original print in 1978).

⁷⁴ *The Man in the High Castle*, created by Frank Spotnitz (broadcast 15 January 2015 – 15 November 2019 on Amazon Prime Video); *SS-GB*, created by Len Deighton (broadcast 19 February 2017 – 19 March 2017 on BBC1).

1950s and beyond –⁷⁵ as well as in the 2024 *Götterdämmerung* expansion for the WWII Grand-Strategy game *Hearts of Iron IV*.⁷⁶



Figure 1.2: Official gameplay still-image from *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2* portraying a fictional Soviet assault on New York (Electronic Arts, 2000).

Another “alternate history” scenario that has been widely explored through video games – and one which Chapman identifies in passing in *Digital Games* – is that of ‘what if the Cold War had become open warfare?’.⁷⁷ The period of dramatic tension across the latter twentieth century as the United States and its NATO allies jostled for supremacy against the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, while both sides attempted to avoid triggering mutual nuclear Armageddon, is one of the most impactful periods of modern history, the consequences and legacies of which are still playing out in the present day; indeed, current events regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which commenced in early 2022, and the

⁷⁵ MachineGames, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Bethesda Softworks; MachineGames, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2018. Published by Bethesda Softworks; MachineGames and Arkane Lyon, *Wolfenstein: Youngblood* (2019), Xbox, PlayStation, PC, Nintendo Switch and Google Stadia. Published by Bethesda Softworks; MachineGames and Arkane Lyon, *Wolfenstein: Cyberpilot* (2019), PlayStation and PC. Published by Bethesda Softworks.

⁷⁶ Paradox Development Studio, *Hearts of Iron IV – Götterdämmerung* (2024), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

⁷⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 233.

build-up of tensions which preceded it has, arguably, inspired renewed examination of this period of recent geopolitical history.⁷⁸

While some games, such as *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* (1996) and its sequels, have presented a hypothetical conflict between America and the Soviet Union in an overtly fantastical manner which emphasises its fictional nature (Figure 1.2),⁷⁹ others have taken a more grounded and “historically authentic” approach: for instance, the Real-Time Strategy (RTS) games *Wargame: European Escalation* (2012), *WARNO* (2022), and *Regiments* (2022) all depict fictional historical scenarios in which open hostilities erupted between the conventional military forces of the NATO and Warsaw Pact coalitions in the 1980s.⁸⁰ The unique circumstances of the Cold War as an inherently nuclear conflict have also spawned a number of games highlighting the nuclear dimension of theoretical hostilities between the USA and Soviet Russia: the ATARI arcade game *Missile Command* (1986), in which players must attempt to defend their unnamed cities for as long as possible from an endless onslaught of nuclear missiles, is a famous historic example, and one that has been re-released on modern computers as *Missile Command: Recharged* (2022).⁸¹ Several more recent games, including *DEFCON* (2006) and *ICBM* (2020), have expanded on the nuclear war concept by portraying the strategic considerations of attack *and* defence with global nuclear arsenals in geopolitical narrative scenarios in which the Cold War escalated to the use of nuclear weapons.⁸²

Many of the aforementioned examples of “alternate history” fall within the strategy game genre, alongside long-running historical game franchises such as the *Sid Meier’s Civilisation*, *Total War*, *Hearts of Iron* (2002-2016), and *Crusader Kings* (2004-2020) series,⁸³

⁷⁸ For examples, see John Simpson, “Ukraine invasion: Is this a new Cold War, asks John Simpson”, *BBC News*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60515342>; Muhammad Tahir Rashid, “Russo-Ukrainian Conflict: A New Cold War”, *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 7: 2 (2022), pp. 47-56.

⁷⁹ *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* (1996-2008).

⁸⁰ Eugen Systems, *Wargame: European Escalation* (2012), PC. Published by Focus Home Interactive; Eugen Systems, *WARNO* (2022), PC; Bird’s Eye Games, *Regiments* (2022), PC. Published by MicroProse.

⁸¹ John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 87-94; Adamvision Studios & Sneakybox, *Missile Command: Recharged* (2022), PC. Published by Atari.

⁸² Introversion Software, *DEFCON* (2006), PC. Published by Encore Software and Pinnacle Entertainment Group; SoftWarWare & K-Project, *ICBM* (2020), PC. Published by Slitherine Ltd.

⁸³ *Sid Meier’s Civilisation*; Creative Assembly and Feral Interactive, *Total War* (2000-2023), PC. Published by Electronic Arts, Activision, and Sega; Paradox Development Studio, *Hearts of Iron* (2002-2016), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive *et al*; Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings* (2004-2020), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive *et al*.

as well as individual historical games such as *R.U.S.E.* (2010), *Steel Division: Normandy '44* and *The Great War: Western Front*.⁸⁴ The strategy gameplay genre in particular is a format in which the idea of “alternate history” is frequently embodied through gameplay rather than explicit narratives.⁸⁵ Instead of directly presenting the player with a sequence of events structured into a narrative loosely based upon an alternate historical scenario which the player must then perform, strategy games place their players in a historical world reflective of a chosen “start date” and encourage players to choose which historical perspective they will play as from a selection of available factions relevant to the game’s historical period and setting, each typically provided with unique mechanical modifiers to encourage varied gameplay. Players are then challenged to lead their chosen faction to achieve specified “victory conditions” – gameplay objectives such as conquering territory or establishing technological or cultural supremacy – by which the player may “win” the game; however, once the player is engaged in gameplay, they are given free agency within the technical parameters of a given game to determine events as they choose.

Furthermore, in instances within these games where the player may be presented with objectives that roughly conform to historical events, it is frequently made the player’s choice to fulfil any or all of them, thereby reinforcing the significance of player agency in the video game medium as they are enabled to actively decide to either follow the recorded course of history or take an alternate path.⁸⁶ Some games recognise that victory for a particular faction within a game’s historical context represents an “alternate history” scenario and consequently acknowledge the “what if” nature of this gameplay outcome; *The Great War: Western Front*, for instance, allows the player to win WWI as Germany, in which event the game speculates on what course history might have taken if these events had happened in reality.⁸⁷

Some strategy titles offer “campaign” modes which may allow the player to experience a more narratively structured historical scenario, such as sequentially playing

⁸⁴ Eugen Systems, *R.U.S.E.* (2010), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft; Eugen Systems, *Steel Division: Normandy '44* (2017), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive; Petroglyph Games, *The Great War: Western Front* (2023), PC. Published by Frontier Foundry.

⁸⁵ Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), p. 22; Vowinkel, “Past Futures: From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games”, pp. 322-332.

⁸⁶ Michael Whelan, “Thrones of Britannia’s Narrative: Story in a Sandbox”, *Total War*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.totalwar.com/blog/thrones-of-britannia-narrative/>.

⁸⁷ *The Great War: Western Front*.

through the battles of a particular military campaign or general's career. *Napoleon: Total War*, for example, offers multiple iterations on this concept, allowing gamers to play particular campaigns from Napoleon's career, such as his 1796 Italian campaign, or major battles that Napoleon fought which must be "unlocked" by completing them in chronological order.⁸⁸ However, in either case of the "campaign" or "historical battle" modes, the player is left free to determine their specific actions within the interactive parameters of the particular gameplay scenarios, provided that they ultimately achieve the predetermined "victory conditions" of their chosen scenario.⁸⁹

As some of the aforementioned examples of "alternate history" demonstrate, one of the popular tropes of this particular narrative format is its propensity to mix historical periods, characters, and aesthetics with fantastical or science-fiction concepts. Typically, this serves to foster gameplay or advance the narrative of a particular game, although sometimes acts as the principal basis of the game's design; certain fictional genres, such as "steampunk", overtly blend historical and science-fictional aesthetics as part of their core thematic identity. However, one consequence of this is that the history to which a particular "alternate history" game is nominally connected is largely irrelevant to many instances within the "alternate history" genre, other than to form a theoretical foundation and visual design reference for the fictional narrative created by the game's writers or generated by player interactions within gameplay; by contrast to "alternate histories" created through gameplay within strategy titles such as *Crusader Kings* where the initial "start point" is presented as an approximation of the historical reality, "alternate history" narratives within overtly fictional games such as *Wolfenstein*, *Command and Conquer: Red Alert* or *Damnation* bear little connection to the histories which they exploit for aesthetic and thematic influence. While the characters and circumstances of these "alternate histories" may be fictional, the ideas and themes that they employ and explore offer interesting avenues for how history may be understood and interpreted in the popular consciousness. Thus, the need of these games to utilise historical iconography – be it characters, architecture, or artefacts – to preserve the "historical" concept as an aesthetic foundation within their

⁸⁸ Creative Assembly, *Napoleon: Total War* (2010), PC. Published by SEGA.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

fictional narrative scenarios becomes greater than those games conveying exclusively fictional narratives and concepts.

Iconography, Aesthetics and Displacing Narrative Perspectives of History

While many historical games feature prominent narrative elements, either fictional or historical, there is an equally prominent trend amongst historical games to diverge from established narratives altogether, focusing instead on gameplay and relying on visual and auditory aesthetics to offer the illusion of a historical setting, utilising historical narrative solely in order to establish the context or setting of player actions within gameplay. These instances – which may also include games with overt narrative elements – can create historical and authorial perspectives which interpret particular historical periods, sometimes reductively, as common thematic templates of iconographic elements which players can automatically identify and interpret via their influence within historical popular culture. These game experiences, which are sometimes referred to as “gameplay sandboxes”, inherently emphasise the interactivity and player agency offered by the gaming medium to allow players to create their own personal narratives and experiences within a nominally “historical” setting by overriding the narrative confines created by historical events, thereby suborning any historical perspectives offered by these games to the subjective authorial perspectives of the attendant game’s creators and consumers.⁹⁰

These experiences may often be classified under Chapman’s definition of “constructionalist” historical simulations, employing a degree of audio-visual aesthetics to generate historical connections, but otherwise diverging from historical realism and recorded historical narrative to ‘explore ideas and create arguments about complex and large scale historical processes, systems and action’.⁹¹ As such, increased emphasis upon thematic historical content diminishes the need for detailed visual historicity, allowing scope for visually simplified historical experiences; an example of this may be seen in *Warlord: Britannia* (2022), an indie strategy game in which players command a Roman legion during

⁹⁰ Whelan, “Thrones of Britannia’s Narrative: Story in a Sandbox”.

⁹¹ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 69-75.

the conquest of Britain, but in which all characters are presented as stylised amorphous figures.⁹²

Regardless of which narrative format a video game employs, or even whether they employ an overt narrative or not, games which present historical experiences commonly endeavour to orientate the player by utilising recognisable locations, characters, or familiar aesthetic or auditory styles to evoke a particular historical period and facilitate player understanding of events and historical context without the need for overt exposition, which might prove detrimental to the flow of the game's narrative or the entertainment value of the overall experience. Similarly, in gameplay experiences devoid of overt historical narrative, such as the *Sid Meier's Civilisation* or *Crusader Kings* series, the use of aesthetics and iconography helps to frame the player's actions by establishing an implied "historical narrative", which may not necessarily link to any recorded history yet still "feels" historical from the perspective of players; examples of this may be observed in *Crusader Kings III*, such as the depiction of European "castle" settlements, which initially appear as wooden "motte and bailey" constructs, progressing to stone-built keeps and later "concentric castles" – mirroring historical developments of castle architectural design – as they are progressively upgraded by the player, with certain levels of development restricted until particular historical "innovations", which enable or expand player interactions and gameplay mechanics, are unlocked through gameplay.⁹³

This use of historical iconography as a framing device for player actions is a characteristic element of constructionalist experiences, according to Chapman's definition, for although the game does not present an overt historical narrative for the player to navigate, the mechanisms, imagery and subject matter with which the player interacts offer approximations of the corresponding historical subject, thereby allowing the processes and broader experience with which the player engages to present claims of historicity within the technical confines of gameplay. This variety of experience within historical games raises the question of what role historical narrative plays within "historical" games, and consequently how video games apply historical subject matter to their experiences.

⁹² Darkmatter Games, *Warlord: Britannia* (2022), PC.

⁹³ Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III* (2020), PC. Released on Xbox and PlayStation in 2022; Marc Morris, *Castle: A History of the Buildings that Shaped Medieval Britain* (London: Channel Four Books, 2003).

In order to create the iconography which historical games use to orientate their players, game developers invariably turn to material objects from the period in question, whether they be weapons, armour, architecture, or other famous artefacts, which collectively enable developers to create a “design language” for that historical period within a game. Games with a WWII setting are clear examples of this. Thanks to the wealth of surviving physical material and audio-visual representations, WWII is, arguably, the most immediately recognisable conflict in history, whose principal participants are instantly identifiable purely by their ephemera with little need for verbal or textual clarification; sheer frequency of depiction has made cultural interpretation of this period near-instantaneous and widespread, to the extent that wholly fictional universes, such as George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, are able to utilise elements associated with WWII participants in fictional character designs to imply narrative connotations.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, individual weapons such as the Colt 1911 pistol, M1 Garand rifle and STG-44 “*Sturmgewehr*” assault rifle have achieved pop-culture status with aid from their long legacies of inclusion and depiction in WWII media, notably FPS games such as *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*, such that they have almost become expected features of games set within the period.⁹⁵ Similar iconographic issues surround some ancient or medieval weapons, such as the Japanese *katana*, whose intimate association with the samurai in popular-culture media such as the works of Japanese film-maker Akira Kurosawa resulted in its inclusion in *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020), an open-world action-RPG set during the Mongol invasion of Japan in the twelfth century, despite the game’s historical setting pre-dating the technological development of the *katana*.⁹⁶ In this case, we can see developers of a historical game committing specific anachronisms within their game in order to satisfy the expectations and understandings of their audience which determine the aesthetic and iconographic appearance of a more loosely defined historical setting, even if this conflicts

⁹⁴ Chris Kempshall, *The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 29-30.

⁹⁵ GameSpot, *Colt 1911: Pop Culture’s Most Iconic Pistol – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 15 December 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C540_c738GI; GameSpot, *M1 Garand: A Gaming and Historical Legend – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 January 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNK1KteoWf8>; GameSpot, *STG 44: How Games Embraced The World’s First Assault Rifle – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 December 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ve98EIQX_S8.

⁹⁶ GameSpot, *Is the Katana Overrated? – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 11 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJZU_zqXXv8.

with the recorded narrative of the more specific historical period being depicted within a video game; this is an issue which this thesis shall return to at several points during subsequent chapters.

For many games, physical historical artefacts which are used to create the iconography of a historical period are modelled within the game engine as accurately as is possible for the technical resources available; many studios employ digital scanning techniques such as photogrammetry – the rendering of a detailed digital model from three-dimensional compilations of images of real objects – to generate in-game assets.⁹⁷ These may then be grouped together to suit the needs of the game in question, either to form “historical faction” groups based upon national or cultural identities, as in the *Sid Meier’s Civilisation* and *Age of Empires* (1997-2021) strategy series or Ubisoft’s *For Honor* fighting game, or to inform the game’s overall thematic design, as can be seen in games such as entries within the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which utilised period-appropriate artistic styles within the design for their game’s user interface. In competitive multiplayer games, such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* for instance, a historical setting allows games to differentiate themselves from other titles within this gameplay genre by employing identifiable period-specific firearms, which then also impose effects on gameplay balance and tactics through their more “grounded” characteristics to create variety of experience within a game.

Alongside iconic historical artefacts and locations, historical games may also prominently feature recognisable historical characters, who themselves contribute to the authorial perspective of history as iconography through their personal fame in the historical record and “name recognition” in historical popular culture, even if their visual and narrative representations vary between individual depictions. Once again, the *Sid Meier’s Civilisation* and *Assassin’s Creed* series are leading examples of this phenomenon. The former franchise’s most recently released entry (at time of writing), *Sid Meier’s Civilisation VI* (2016) features “leader” characters for the game’s various playable factions, including Cleopatra, Julius Caesar and Queen Elizabeth I, whose stylised designs draw heavy inspiration from

⁹⁷ Wilhemina Statham, “Use of Photogrammetry in Video Games”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 15: 3 (2020) [Accessed online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555412018786415>].

previous representations of these same figures in art, cinematic media and popular culture more broadly.⁹⁸

Meanwhile, the *Assassin's Creed* series regularly incorporates prominent figures from the historical setting of a particular game, often aligning famous figures with the series' "heroes" and "villains" based on their narrative depiction in the contemporary sources: celebrated cultural and intellectual figures such as Leonardo da Vinci in *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), Alexander Graham Bell in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), and Herodotus in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* – to name but a few – are narratively positioned as allies of their respective game's player protagonist,⁹⁹ while famous "villains" in the historical record are framed in opposition to the "heroic" player protagonist, such as the Borgias in *Assassin's Creed II* or Jack the Ripper in *Syndicate's* eponymous narrative-based expansion.¹⁰⁰ This simplifies interpretation of the historical narrative for the audience, allowing game designers to integrate historical figures into their game experiences without requiring extensive exploration of their individual characters and personal narratives.

The desire to condense and simplify historical narratives for the purposes of interpretation by a game's player audience can be identified within the rationale for broader iconographic approaches to game design and historical narrative throughout the gaming medium. Given the complexity of history as a narrative, where multiple events and thematic processes occur in parallel and interlink over time, the burden of interpreting these narrative strands to produce a coherent narrative experience for an audience, whether academic or not, falls upon the writer; in the case of games, this burden falls upon the developers. This interpretation of historical narrative often necessitates wholly or partially isolating particular phenomena or characters from their wider contexts or removing elements of nuance and complexity from their narratives to make these individual histories intelligible to an unfamiliar or untrained audience.

⁹⁸ Firaxis Games, *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (2016), PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2018, and Xbox and PlayStation in 2019. Published by 2K.

⁹⁹ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft; Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft; *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*.

¹⁰⁰ *Assassin's Creed II*; Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate – Jack the Ripper* (2015), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft.

As such, the utilisation of historical characters and events which may already be known to the player audience through basic education or historical pop-culture greatly facilitates this process of interpretation, allowing the developers to exploit the audience's pre-existing awareness of a particular character or event to develop their own interpretation of events or attract interested audiences by implementing these iconographic historical elements into their marketing strategies; the *Assassin's Creed* series regularly highlights particularly significant historical locations, events or characters in their marketing strategies for individual games, such as the cinematic announcement trailer for the French Revolution-set *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) which takes place during the storming of the Bastille, or the announcement trailer for *Assassin's Creed: Origins* which prominently featured the Pyramids, Cleopatra and Julius Caesar while establishing the game's setting in Egyptian antiquity.¹⁰¹ In similar fashion, the *Total War* strategy series has overtly constructed several games or expansionary campaigns around well-known historical figures, most notably the games *Total War: Napoleon* and *Total War: Attila* (2015) and the *Caesar in Gaul* (2013) and *Hannibal at the Gates* (2014) expansion campaigns for *Total War: Rome II* (2013).¹⁰²

The challenge of writing a historically informed yet accessible narrative applies equally to academic writers and creators of fictional media like games, and a common compromise to ensure this accessibility is the selective exploration of historical content. Even academic histories are required to employ selectivity in the creation of their texts to maintain a coherent narrative. As Marc Morris says in the introduction to his history of the Anglo-Saxons, 'it is impossible to write about a period that spans more than seven centuries... without being selective', but he also explains why he employs a selective, thematic approach in his text: 'my hope has been to *create a clearer story*' [author's italics].¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *Assassin's Creed UK, Assassin's Creed Unity E3 2014 World Premier Cinematic Trailer [UK]*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyTrvng2pw>; *Assassin's Creed UK, Assassin's Creed Origins: Gamescom 2017 Cinematic Trailer*, online video recording, YouTube, 20 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyTrvng2pw> [1:11-1:36].

¹⁰² *Napoleon: Total War*; Creative Assembly, *Total War: Attila* (2015), PC. Published by SEGA; Creative Assembly, *Total War: Rome II – Caesar in Gaul* (2013), PC. Published by SEGA; Creative Assembly, *Total War: Rome II – Hannibal at the Gates* (2014), PC. Published by SEGA; Creative Assembly, *Total War: Rome II* (2013), PC. Published by SEGA.

¹⁰³ Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England* (London: Hutchinson, 2021), p. 4.

This same logic can be identified in the use of famous iconography by historical video games. By primarily engaging with historical content through recognisable iconographic elements, gamers with limited historical knowledge can orientate themselves to the cultural and historical narrative context of a particular historical game before being introduced to more nuanced or intricate subject matter through gameplay or in-game narratives. This similarly applies to the emphasis on identifiable figures from the historical record and their personal narratives, even if partially or wholly fictionalised, as a means of guiding the exploration of in-game history, as the direct or indirect focus on the narratives of recognisable individuals forms a valuable means of ‘framing history in relatable, human terms’.¹⁰⁴

While this philosophy of historical game design through iconography facilitates accessibility by providing recognisable visual and narrative elements to ease player orientation, it also creates the risk of oversimplifying historical periods and cultures, devolving decades or centuries of complex cultural development into recognisable “thematic building blocks” divorced from their individual relative contexts within the chronology and established narrative of a historical period, promoting a form of “pop-culture history” which can be manipulated to suit an individual authorial perspective or narrative context.

This devolution of historical narrative into “pop-culture iconography” can result in a number of potentially problematic historiographical phenomena. By focusing on the recognisable elements of a historical period or culture divorced from their historiographical narrative context, games risk bringing together characters or objects which are historically anachronistic with one another, yet popular association with their relevant historical periods demands their inclusion from the authorial perspective of a video game. For certain historical periods, for example the World Wars, this issue is less problematic due to the relative brevity of the historical period, which reduces the historiographical separation of the items featured within a game depiction of the period, thereby making it more plausible for certain anachronistic items to coexist.

For other periods with broader or more loosely defined timespans, the issue of anachronism is far more prevalent and problematic. Games with a “medieval” setting, for

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

instance, suffer from issues of anachronism created by emphasising iconography which conforms to the popular image of medieval history but which move artefacts or phenomena out of their relative historical narrative context;¹⁰⁵ indeed, Ubisoft's multiplayer fighting game *For Honor* relies so heavily upon this phenomenon of historical iconography as part of its core identity that the interactions of its historically-themed factions – based loosely upon Late-Medieval knights, Vikings, and Samurai, with additional factions, such as a “Roman gladiator” faction, added post-release – are only justified by the game's setting within a fictional world and narrative.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, the desire to orientate players by incorporating familiar or well-known historical elements creates the potential to facilitate or promote historiographical myths, such as narratives which feature prominently in historical popular culture, but which may be factually erroneous or of uncertain veracity. For instance, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* includes and repeats the oft-told story of Alfred “the Great” and the burning of the cakes, a popular tale of English historical folklore which is alluded to in Alfred's “database” entry for the game and is later depicted in the game's “epilogue”;¹⁰⁷ while a common and popular element of folklore surrounding King Alfred, the story first appears in an anonymously-written source a century after the event supposedly took place, before later gaining popularity as an interpolation within a near-contemporary biography of Alfred.¹⁰⁸

The employment of a quote by renowned author Rudyard Kipling – ‘if history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten’ – by the Historic UK website to presage their discussion of the “Alfred and the cakes” tale is an evocative and prescient one.¹⁰⁹ A popular story, regardless of its veracity, can have a more powerful cultural impact than an evidenced one, particularly when conveyed through an entertainment medium. This attitude can be repeatedly identified in the usage of famous historical characters, narratives and iconography in gaming contexts. In a similar vein, *Troy: A Total War Saga* (2020) incorporates euhemeristic interpretations of creatures from Greek mythology within

¹⁰⁵ Robert Houghton and Karl C. Alvestad, “Accuracy and Authenticity – interactions in contemporary medievalism”, in Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1-5.

¹⁰⁶ *For Honor*.

¹⁰⁷ *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.

¹⁰⁸ Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons*, p. 215.

¹⁰⁹ Ben Johnson, “King Alfred and the Cakes”, *Historic UK*, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/King-Alfred-the-Cakes/>.

its depiction of the Trojan War (Figure 1.3), with creatures such as the Minotaur, Cyclopes and Sirens all presented in ‘historically plausible’ forms within the game’s “Truth Behind the Myth” gameplay mode, which contribute to the rationalisation of the mythology surrounding the game’s setting within gameplay and offer increased variety within the game experience for players.¹¹⁰ The evidential basis for these figures within a strictly historical perspective of this period is almost nil, and as such their exclusion is a feature of the “Historical” mode released alongside *Troy’s Mythos* expansion (2021),¹¹¹ however their *cultural* basis gives them a powerful justification for their inclusion within *Troy’s* more fantastical authorial perspectives of the Trojan War.



Figure 1.3: Official promotional image of a euhemeristic Minotaur within *TROY: A Total War Saga* (Creative Assembly, 2020).

As players of video games become ever more accustomed to seeing and interacting with iconic historical locations and objects disconnected from their historical narrative contexts, the association between them and the historical period they are used to represent naturally grows stronger. Consequently, developers face increasing pressure to ensure that

¹¹⁰ Creative Assembly, *Troy: A Total War Saga* (2020), PC. Published by SEGA; Ella McConnell, “Myths, Monsters & Meaning: The Truth Behind the Myth”, *Total War*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.totalwar.com/blog/myths-monsters-and-meaning-the-truth-behind-the-myth/>.

¹¹¹ Creative Assembly, *Troy: A Total War Saga - Mythos* (2021), PC. Published by SEGA; “TROY goes fully historical with free update alongside MYTHOS: A Total War Saga: TROY”, *Total War*, 11 August 2021, <https://www.totalwar.com/blog/troy-historical-mode>.

these elements are included in their games, forcing them to either abandon the narrative context which situates these elements in their respective histories or restricting games to historical periods which permit their inclusion. Games may also be forced to over-emphasise or include rare or prototype artefacts to suit the gameplay demands of their gameplay genre. In the case of WWII shooter games such as *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, disproportionate historiographical emphasis may be most visibly identified through weapons and vehicles included within these games, such as the aforementioned STG-44 “*Sturmgewehr*” whose technological legacy and mechanical similarity to more modern firearms, such as the AK-47, has resulted in the repeated emphasis of a historically rare weapon in its gaming depictions in order to suit the wants of players familiarised with more modern narrative scenarios and weapon gameplay.¹¹²

Similarly, when developing *Battlefield V*, the game’s developers at EA DICE admitted being drawn to the legendary Tiger tank,¹¹³ an icon of the German military in WWII despite its relative historical rarity,¹¹⁴ and the developers’ work to facilitate the tank’s inclusion within *Battlefield V* ultimately spawned the game’s *The Last Tiger* series of single-player narrative missions, which focus on a German Tiger tank and its crew.¹¹⁵ Once again, we can see developers overriding or manipulating historical narrative in order to facilitate the incorporation of iconic historical elements which both they and players associate and expect to feature within a historical game utilising a particular historical setting, especially if strict adherence to the recorded historical narrative would demand the minimisation or exclusion of these icons. In some cases, these manipulations may result in problematic historiographical phenomena, such as anachronism or the propagation of historical myths, while in others these manipulations may facilitate engagement with historical cultural concepts or create platforms for additional narratives within larger historical experiences. In each case, these interactions create larger narratives of engagement with historical phenomena, and which can be analysed to understand the effects of these interactions upon popular understanding and engagement with history.

¹¹² GameSpot, *STG 44: How Games Embraced The World’s First Assault Rifle* [8:58-12:50].

¹¹³ Dean Takahasi, “Battlefield V: How DICE walked a tightrope with the The Last Tiger”, *VentureBeat*, 5 December 2018, <https://venturebeat.com/business/battlefield-v-how-dice-walked-a-tightrope-on-the-the-last-tiger/>.

¹¹⁴ Robin Cross & David Willey, *Tanks: 100 Years of Armoured Warfare* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2016), p. 88.

¹¹⁵ Takahasi, “Battlefield V: How DICE walked a tightrope with the The Last Tiger”.

Moreover, many modern games, most notably those from larger development studios and publishers, are developed and marketed with the goal of attracting the greatest possible audience and thereby maximise the commercial viability of the video game as a product; however, this treatment of historical phenomena as ‘thematic obsessions’ sold as products by games publishers has been identified by Esther Wright as a potential obstacle to the exploration of history within the gaming medium.¹¹⁶ Within the triple-A gaming space, a notable recent trend has been the proliferation of “infinitely playable” game experiences: large, expansive game environments with simple, repetitive gameplay formats which may be played and monetised far beyond the timeframe of a more curated gameplay or narrative experience, with *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* and *Valhalla* cited by gaming commentators amongst notable examples of the “infinitely playable” design format.¹¹⁷

In an age where gaming distribution is commonly worldwide, this commercial factor of developing games for mass audiences influences the developers of historical games to create game content which does not rely on prior knowledge of the historical subject in question, in order to minimise the risk of alienating potential customers. This desire to avoid alienating customers can also lead to the inclusion of fantastical or mythological content, which may dilute the strictly factual depiction of a historical period within a game but may be contextually justified through the narrative lens of engagement with historical cultures.

Some game publishers – notably including EA and Activision – have justified the abandonment of narrative-driven game experiences by citing statistics from industry analysts which estimate that only a small proportion of players ever finish game narratives, and that consequently gameplay or content platforms revolving around more ‘connected gameplay’ experiences – such as competitive multiplayer games – are more cost effective

¹¹⁶ Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 17-18. See also Nick Webber, “Paying for the Past: Ownership and the Monetisation of History”, *Historical Games Network*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.historicalgames.net/paying-for-the-past-the-ownership-and-monetisation-of-history/>; Lies van Roessel and Jan Švelch, “Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization”, in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 197-216.

¹¹⁷ WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blatLhvdh0w>; WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting “100 Hour Games”*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyv9PX8809o>; Tom Richardson, “Too many video games, too little time – but could that be changing”, *BBC News*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czxklzlxwvyo>.

with development resources.¹¹⁸ Amongst the games affected by this authorial perspective is *Battlefield V*, which its publisher EA reportedly claimed failed to meet initial sales targets because of the prioritisation of single-player, narrative content within development over planned competitive multiplayer modes.¹¹⁹ These publisher assertions of the commercial unviability of single-player narrative content have repeatedly proven controversial with players and gaming commentators, who argue that these statements signify cynical, corporate-led initiatives to exploitatively monetise player communities and have been countered by highlighting commercial successes of single-player, narrative-driven games.¹²⁰

In the case of historical games, the commercial imperative of games to generate sales revenue likewise encourages the creation of games focusing upon popularly established historical periods – such as WWII, where the sheer quantity of associated entertainment media across books, comics and graphic novels, films and television, and video games has clearly demonstrated an established cultural appeal – as the higher cultural recognition for these periods increases the probability of attracting a large player audience.¹²¹ Similarly, depicting historical periods and events already established by their representations within other entertainment media also allows developers and publishers to draw connections to

¹¹⁸ See for examples, Mark Raby, “EA: Single-player games are ‘finished’”, *GamesRadar*, 10 December 2010, <https://www.gamesradar.com/ea-single-player-games-are-finished/>; Andrew Reiner, “Single Player is Dead, Long Live Single Player”, *Game Informer*, 8 February 2016, <https://gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2016/02/08/single-player-is-dead-long-live-single-player.aspx>; Dave Their, “Yes, AAA Single-Player Games Are Dying, And That’s Fine”, *Forbes*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2017/10/18/star-wars-visceral-yes-aaa-single-player-games-are-dying-thats-fine/>; Eddie Macuk, “Single-Player Games Are Not Dead But The Economics Are ‘Complicated’, Xbox Boss Says”, *GameSpot*, 24 October 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/single-player-games-are-not-dead-but-the-economics/1100-6454339/>; Eddie Makuch, “EA Says People Don’t Really Enjoy Linear Games As Much Today”, *GameSpot*, 29 November 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/ea-says-people-dont-really-enjoy-linear-games-as-m/1100-6455252/>; Michael McWhertor, “Treyarch explains why Black Ops 4 won’t have a single-player campaign”, *Polygon*, 18 May 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/5/18/17366980/call-of-duty-black-ops-4-no-single-player-campaign>.

¹¹⁹ Stephany Nunneley, “Battlefield V sales didn’t meet expectations during Q3, says EA”, *VG24/7*, 5 February 2019, <https://www.vg247.com/2019/02/05/battlefield-5-sales-didnt-meet-expectations/>.

¹²⁰ For examples, see Reiner, “Single Player is Dead, Long Live Single Player”; Chris Thurstan, “Singleplayer games aren’t dead, they’re just changing”, *PC Gamer*, 25 December 2017, <https://www.pcgamer.com/singleplayer-games-arent-dead-theyre-just-changing/>; Rimskeem, “Single-Player Games Are NOT Dead (And Never Will Be)”, *n4g*, 8 May 2018, <https://n4g.com/user/blogpost/rimeskeem/539802>; Erin O’Gorman, “Can We Stop Saying Single Player Games Are Dead Now?”, *TheGamer*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.thegamer.com/saying-single-player-games-dead-quality-story-stats-sales/>; Tyler Wilde, “Once again I am forced to tap the ‘singleplayer games are not dead’ sign”, *PC Gamer*, 15 February 2024, <https://www.pcgamer.com/immortals-of-aveum-aaa-shooters/>.

¹²¹ For example, see Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, p. 12; Debra Ramsey, “Brutal Games: *Call of Duty* and the Cultural Narrative of World War II”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54: 2 (2015), pp. 94-96.

pre-existing media portrayals of these periods or events, creating the illusion that gamers are “playing” events from historical pop-culture and thus enhancing their popular appeal. Some games have actively encouraged this association within historical pop-culture through their framing of in-game historical events; both *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002) and *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), for instance, overtly paralleled the famous Omaha Beach sequence from *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) in their respective recreations of the D-Day Landings.¹²²

If this assessment of video games’ capacity to blend fictionalised structures with historical fact for the purposes of entertainment seems overly cautious or critical, it is worth recognising the impact that similar combinations of historical fact and fiction have had in other entertainment media. As an example, the British situation-comedy *Dad’s Army* (1968-1977) has been highly impactful in shaping the historical memory of the Home Guard, the British civilian para-military organisation created for home defence during WWII.¹²³ Inspired by the personal experiences of the series’ writer and creator, Jimmy Perry, as a member of the Home Guard during WWII, *Dad’s Army* was widely praised by contemporary viewers for mixing real incidents from the Home Guard’s history and the experiences of its participants – including contributions from viewers of the series’ original broadcasts through letters to the BBC – with fictional and exaggerated scenarios for comic and dramatic effect.¹²⁴ As a result, the series has become synonymous with the Home Guard in the popular consciousness, to the extent that modern academic discourse of the organisation sometimes experiences difficulties in separating historical fact from the fiction created by *Dad’s Army*.¹²⁵

¹²² 2015, Inc., *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), PC. Published by Electronic Arts; Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Activision; Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Second edition; London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 153-154; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p. 21.

¹²³ *Dad’s Army*, created by Jimmy Perry and David Croft (broadcast 31 July 1968 – 6 November 1977 on BBC1) [DVD].

¹²⁴ Corinna Peniston-Bird, “‘I wondered who’d be the first to spot that’: Dad’s Army at war, in the media and in memory’, *Media History*, vol. 13: 2-3 (2007), pp. 183-202; Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women & The Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 170-197.

¹²⁵ For examples, see Dale Clarke, *Britain’s Final Defence: Arming the Home Guard, 1940-1944* (Stroud: The History Press, 2016), pp. 9-11; Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2004), pp. 76-84; Stephen Cullen, *In Search of the Real Dad’s Army: The Home Guard and the Defence of the United Kingdom, 1940-1944* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2011), pp. 201-203; S. P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard: A Military & Political History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1; Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, “Women in the Firing Line: the Home Guard

Therefore, while similar combinations of historical fact and fictional content within a video game context is not an inherently negative prospect, and indeed can be highly beneficial for increasing popular engagement with a historical subject, gamic depictions of history must be approached cautiously in any subsequent evaluation in order to identify and allow for the manipulations of historical content and narrative made for modern entertainment purposes.¹²⁶ As shall be discussed in subsequent chapters, few games market themselves as literal depictions of historical events, and thus their interpretation from that authorial and historical perspective in wider discourse can prove problematic. However, not all historical video games feature or emphasise narrative elements as part of their presentation of history, emphasising the gameplay experience over narrative, within which historical iconography becomes a form of player orientation and a thematic design template.

Historical “Gameplay Sandboxes”

Instead of, or in some cases alongside, curated historical narratives, many historical video games have presented historical content in a manner which promotes a “gameplay sandbox” experience, a descriptor which is used to refer to a creative space within a video game in which the player can utilise the materials with which they are provided – the content and mechanical systems of a video game as provided by the developers – in order to craft their own personal play-experiences, to which historical aesthetics and iconography are applied to orientate the player’s interpretation of the game.¹²⁷ In this authorial perspective of gaming, “historical sandbox” experiences can potentially create varied historical and authorial perspectives of a single game due to the degree of player agency which they

and the Defence of Gender Boundaries in Britain in the Second World War”, *Women’s History Review*, vol. 9: 2 (2000), pp. 238-244.

¹²⁶ See for examples, “How historians can leverage history in video games”, *History Associates Incorporated*, <https://www.historyassociates.com/how-historians-can-leverage-history-in-video-games/>; Esther Wright, “Playing with History in Video Games”, *University of Sheffield*, 10 April 2018, <https://historymatters.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/blog-archive/2018/playing-with-history-in-video-games>; Abbie Hartman, Rowan Tulloch, and Helen Young, “Video Games as Public History: Archives, Empathy, and Affinity”, *Game Studies*, vol. 21: 4 (2021) [Accessed online: https://gamestudies.org/2104/articles/hartman_tulloch_young]; Christopher Gerteis, “Bridging history and gameplay: Lessons from historiographical video game design”, *Game Developer*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/bridging-history-and-gameplay-lessons-from-historiographical-video-game-design>.

¹²⁷ Muriel and Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, p. 148; Breslin, “The History and Theory of Sandbox Gameplay”; Graft, “*EVE Online* and the meaning of ‘sandbox’”.

facilitate to engage with the distinct gameplay mechanisms included by the developer. This freedom of action within gameplay allows players to create their own “user-generated narratives” within a game’s historical setting, transforming random incidents from their in-game experiences created by the features and mechanics provided by the game.

“Sandbox” experiences, like Grand-Strategy game *Crusader Kings III* or city-builder *Manor Lords*, frequently result in these “user-generated narratives” becoming notable elements of a player’s experience of the game and a significant element of a game’s appeal, partly because of their spontaneity – occurring simply through player interactions with a game’s mechanics and content – but also because of the personal nature of the interactions which these events engender: no other player experienced that particular combination of gameplay systems which created the events which that player experienced. As such, these “user-generated narratives” become a significant element of players’ discussion of their experiences within the game, which they frequently share in community forums:¹²⁸ for instance, one *Crusader Kings III* player shared that their player character had four spouses murdered in the course of eight in-game years only to discover that the murderer was their character’s twin-sibling,¹²⁹ while one *Manor Lords* player went so far as to create a fake Wikipedia entry describing an in-game battle they experienced in which an army of five villagers successfully repelled a massive enemy assault.¹³⁰ These incidents are rarely historical in nature, existing exclusively within the parameters of the gameplay mechanisms of their respective games, however these random interactions help to prolong player enjoyment of a game experience, as their unpredictability helps to encourage repeated engagement with a given game.

¹²⁸ Elie Gould, “Manor Lords is at its best when ‘players craft their own stories’ and don’t rely on a dev-made tale, which ‘quickly became repetitive’”, *PC Gamer*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/city-builder/manor-lords-is-at-its-best-when-players-craft-their-own-stories-and-dont-rely-on-a-dev-made-tale-which-quickly-became-repetitive/>; Lauren Morton, “Crusader Kings 3 spymasters plotting to murder themselves and other fantastic, emergent oddities”, *Rock Paper Shotgun*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/crusader-kings-3-spymasters-plotting-to-murder-themselves-and-other-fantastic-emergent-oddities>.

¹²⁹ Charlie Hall, “All the weirdest stuff we’ve heard about in Crusader Kings 3”, *Polygon*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/9/18/21443821/crusader-kings-3-stories-witches-cannibals-serial-killers-stress-infidelity>.

¹³⁰ Elie Gould, “One Manor Lords player survived a battle so epic he decided to create a fake Wikipedia article about it”, *PC Gamer*, 29 April 2024, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/city-builder/one-manor-lords-player-survived-a-battle-so-epic-he-decided-to-create-a-fake-wikipedia-article-about-it/>.

“User-generated narratives” are naturally a-historical, manufactured by player interactions with game mechanics and provided an illusory appearance of historicity by the aesthetics of their associated game. However, history’s treatment as a “sandbox experience” does not necessarily require its divestment from historical subject material. Strategy titles, like *Total War* and *Crusader Kings*, or city-management games, such as *Manor Lords* or *CivCity: Rome* (2006), remain bound by the historical context of each particular game, which influences the type and extent of historical content incorporated within gameplay, despite allowing the player to operate largely unrestricted by recorded historical narratives within their personal interactions with these experiences. This connection to historical context without the technical limitations of existing historical narratives is particularly emphasised in games, like *Thrones of Britannia: A Total War Saga* (2018), which offer the player so-called “narrative” objectives, which conform loosely to historical events and the player is rewarded for fulfilling but is likewise free to ignore without penalty.¹³¹ In these cases, the addition of a reward for conforming to recorded historical events can encourage players to pursue these optional objectives, but the absence of a penalty for failing to complete them enables players to interact with gameplay without believing themselves pressured into particular narrative and gameplay scenarios, which could be considered an imposition of “false agency”.

Similarly, “open world” games, such as the *Assassin’s Creed* or *Red Dead Redemption* titles, feature large, expansive game environments that may be explored largely at the player’s whim; in contrast with linear gameplay environments and objectives, “open world” games encourage players to approach gameplay situations from a variety of potential interactive avenues, placing greater emphasis on individual player agency to find solutions to gameplay problems and objectives.¹³² As such, the historical subject matter of an “open world” game becomes an intrinsic element of the game’s overall environmental and aesthetic design, but firm foundations of a rigidly chronological narrative must be deconstructed to facilitate player exploration without implicit barriers or pressures.¹³³ Instead, any historical narrative within these more free-form experiences becomes a

¹³¹ Whelan, “Thrones of Britannia’s Narrative: Story in a Sandbox”.

¹³² Muriel and Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, p. 148

¹³³ “How historians can leverage history in video games”; Wright, “Playing with History in Video Games”; Gerteis, “Bridging history and gameplay: Lessons from historiographical video game design”.

framework upon which a game's fictional elements may be built; to some degree, this transforms historical narrative into a gameplay device used to guide the player throughout the game world.¹³⁴ However, because of the introduction of "user-generated narratives" by free-form gameplay mechanics within these "sandbox" experiences, history begins to acquire attributes of a subjective phenomenon, determined more by the narratives and interpretations applied by an individual player's authorial perspective of the game's historical setting.

"Historical gameplay sandboxes", while inherently subjective in the manner they are experienced, can offer a framework for a historical narrative which can help to compensate for issues inherent to a digital game format, such as passage of time within the game world, which might otherwise compromise the credibility or immersive quality of the narrative being presented. However, its implementation can be variable, even across games within a series: *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, set during the French Revolution, regularly indicates lengthy "time jumps" within its narrative by displaying the in-game date during cutscenes, thereby actively contextualising the events of the game's narrative within those of the historical record;¹³⁵ meanwhile, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, set during the Peloponnesian War of Greek antiquity, only informs the player of the year in which they assume control of the main protagonist at the start of the game, despite the events which they experience throughout the narrative spanning at least a decade in both the historical sources and in the game's novelisation.¹³⁶

One factor which may be used to explain this particular disparity may be seen in the authorial attitudes reflected within these titles towards certain gameplay formulae: while both *Unity* and *Odyssey* are both open world games from a technical perspective, *Odyssey's* game environment is considerably larger, and features a greater emphasis on individual players exploring the game environment for gameplay and narrative content. Similarly, although *Unity* and *Odyssey* both feature mechanics from the RPG gameplay genre, the explicit marketing of *Odyssey* as an RPG game makes these mechanics more prominent

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Google Stadia in 2020. Published by Ubisoft.

¹³⁶ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*; Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War: Athens and Sparta in Savage Conflict 431-404 BC* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 66-187; Gordon Doherty, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Random House and Ubisoft, 2018).

within gameplay at the expense of its central narrative;¹³⁷ by contrast, *Unity*, although featuring many similar mechanical elements to *Odyssey*, is marketed as a more focused “action-adventure” game, with a greater emphasis on its central linear narrative.¹³⁸ These subtle distinctions can have a significant effect on player understandings of how a game experience operates, and consequently affects how the player engages with historical narrative between these different experiences.

Furthermore, the authorial perspective of history as a “creative framework” for gameplay formulae naturally leads developers to particular periods or settings where the visual identity of the history in question is more distinct.¹³⁹ The World Wars offer easily defined date ranges for reference material, which may contribute to their popularity as historical settings within games,¹⁴⁰ yet even less well-defined periods show a remarkable preference for specific dates; games with a “Viking period” aesthetic, for instance, frequently gravitate towards a late-ninth century setting, with *Crusader Kings III*, *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, *Expeditions: Viking* (2017) and *Thrones of Britannia: A Total War Saga* to name but a few all offering content depicting Viking activity explicitly set within this period.¹⁴¹ Here, again, may be found a motivation for the employment of an iconographic design philosophy for historical games, as the employment of explicitly thematic iconography – be it types of clothing or armour, artistic or architectural styles, or specific well-known historical characters encountered during gameplay – allows the developers to keep these more loosely structured titles focused upon specific historical content, without the need for lengthy historical exposition by the game in question, freeing up resources to portray the unique experience of the game in question.

Although history as a discipline relies upon narrative to contextualise people and events, its treatment in video games is far more varied, often relying more heavily on

¹³⁷ For example, see *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*, Ubisoft Quebec, Steam store page, https://store.steampowered.com/app/812140/Assassins_Creed_Odyssey/.

¹³⁸ For example, see *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, Ubisoft, Steam store page, https://store.steampowered.com/app/289650/Assassins_Creed_Unity/.

¹³⁹ See for example, César San Nicolás Romera, Miguel Ángel Nicolás Ojeda, and Josefa Ros Velasco, “Video Games Set in the Middle Ages: Time Spans, Plots, and Genres”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 13: 5 (2018), pp. 521-542.

¹⁴⁰ Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, p. 12.

¹⁴¹ *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*; Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III* (2020), PC. Released on Xbox and PlayStation in 2022. Published by Paradox Interactive; Creative Assembly, *Thrones of Britannia: A Total War Saga* (2018), PC. Published by SEGA.

aesthetics and clearly identifiable visual elements than narrative. Adherence to historical narrative within games is, from the authorial perspective of game design, a restricting factor upon player agency within gameplay. While some games may depict or reference historical events within their narratives, others, by necessity of the gameplay genre which they employ, are required to remove or de-emphasise overt narratives from their depictions of history in order to facilitate the mechanical requirements of their chosen genre.¹⁴² Consequently, games must rely heavily upon recognisable historical artefacts, characters and iconography in order to structure the player experience of a game's historical period, which can result in the dislocation of these iconographic elements from their proper historical contexts.

"They'll see it as a game...": "Hero" and "Villain" Perspectives in Historical Games¹⁴³

One of the most praiseworthy aspects of the modern video game industry is its growing maturity with regards to depicting morally complex video game narratives. Older, "classic" video games often presented simple, more traditional narratives with clear "heroes" and "villains", which were constrained both by the limited technical capabilities of older gaming hardware and by games' cultural status as 'a children's medium';¹⁴⁴ however, many of the most successful and critically acclaimed gaming narratives of recent years – including *Red Dead Redemption* and its 2018 sequel, *The Last of Us*, *Undertale* (2015), and others – have been defined by morally ambiguous characters and complex, emotionally resonant narratives which have challenged traditional ideas of what gaming characters should represent or what narrative experiences games can portray.¹⁴⁵ However, this

¹⁴² McCall, "Agents, Goals, and Action-Choices", pp. 69-115.

¹⁴³ This section incorporates some discussion previously published by this author in: Alastair Binns, "'Not a Hero Story': Challenging Concepts of 'Heroes' and 'Villains' in Historical Conflicts through Video Games", *British Journal of Military History*, vol. 10: 3 (2024), pp. 91-111.

¹⁴⁴ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007), p. vii.

¹⁴⁵ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2023 and PC in 2024; Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us* (2013), PlayStation. Released on PC as *The Last of Us Part I* in 2023. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment; Toby Fox, *Undertale* (2015), PC. Released on PlayStation in 2017, Nintendo Switch in 2018, and Xbox in 2021. For further examples, see WhatCulture Gaming, *8 Best Stories Which ONLY Work As Video Games*; WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Best Video Game Stories Ever*, online video recording, YouTube, 5 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNaHtgX5vzI>; WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Best Video Game Storylines Ever*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlYxJcBYcBg>.

narrative complexity and the participatory element of gaming narratives can bring with it potential challenges depending on the historical perspective which the player interacts with the game through and the cultural interpretation of that viewpoint as either “heroic” or “villainous” within popular historical narratives.

Simplistic moral categories such as “heroes” and “villains” are significant elements of what Kelly Bergstrand and James Jasper term an ‘essential triad’ within narrative and character theory. According to Bergstrand and Jasper’s interpretation:

villains focus blame, provide a clear target for action, intensify negative emotions, and solidify group identities. A correctly cast *victim* – good, innocent, and in need of protection – can also motivate action... it can help to increase perceptions that a particular problem is worth combatting. *Heroes* form a rallying point, increase agreement among members, and boost commitment to a cause.¹⁴⁶
[Author’s italics]

However, the application of these narrative classifications is also significant. “Villains”, for instance, are cultural creations formed from the application of negative order-words, such as “evil” or “guilty”, to individuals and their actions in order to transform their socio-cultural position.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, within the context of video games, the term “villain” is employed in popular discourse of games as synonymous with a game’s narrative antagonist, the figure or group whom the player and their implicitly “heroic” protagonist must confront and overcome within the game to achieve their narrative objectives.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, in the context of historical narratives, although the narrative framing devices of “heroes” and “villains” can facilitate interpretation of a game’s narrative for the audience, the application of these narrative tags to historical groups can have significant consequences for which historical perspectives may be considered legitimate for games to engage with as protagonists, or associate players with in the context of gameplay.

Arguably, the clearest example of this “heroic” and “villainous” narrative framing in a historical context, and the consequences for challenging these historical perspectives within

¹⁴⁶ Kelly Bergstrand and James M. Jasper, “Villains, Victims and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory”, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 81: 3 (2018), p. 229.

¹⁴⁷ Cathryn van Kessel, “A Phenomenographic Study of Youth Conceptualisations of Evil”, *Canadian Society for the Study of Education*, vol. 40: 4 (2017), pp. 578-579.

¹⁴⁸ Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A creator’s guide to interactive entertainment* (Second edition; Burlington, Mass.: Focal Press, 2008), pp. 90-91.

gaming, may be seen in the case of games with a WWII setting. WWII has come to be remembered, as Debra Ramsey simply puts it, as:

a “mythical ‘just war’” in which good and evil are easily identifiable, and the latter may be destroyed without guilt – with Nazis ranking “just above robots and zombies on the list of evil things we can guiltlessly cap in the head”.¹⁴⁹

A *PC Gamer* review for 2025’s *Sniper Elite: Resistance* opens with a similar sentiment, that ‘Nazis are pretty much the definitive bad guys. They’re perfect video game fodder because you never have to feel bad about punching, shooting or exploding them’.¹⁵⁰ Chris Kempshall likewise identifies the Nazis as the “villains” of WWII, for ‘even where the player takes on roles of numerous nationalities... the context remains the same; the Nazis are the bad guys and the best thing the player can do to preserve civilisation is to oppose, defeat or destroy them’.¹⁵¹ Arguably the quintessential expression of this facility of video games to ‘oppose, defeat or destroy’ the Nazis, and the entertainment value therein, may be seen in the *Sniper Elite* series’ *Kill Hitler* or *Target Führer* expansion (2012-present), a recurring content expansion in which each game presents a scenario with the objective of assassinating Adolf Hitler (Figure 1.4), providing the player with a “sandbox” gameplay environment containing multiple potential, and often purposefully exaggerated, methods of ensuring Hitler’s demise.¹⁵²

The actions carried out by Hitler’s regime during its brief life are widely considered to be amongst the worst crimes against humanity ever committed, and a legacy of antagonistic depictions in media ranging from serious war films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Fury* (2014), action-adventure movies like *The Guns of Navarone* (1961) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), to situation-comedy series like *Dad’s Army* and *‘Allo ‘Allo* (1982-1992) has reinforced the image of Nazi Germany as the unquestionable villains of World War II.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ramsey, “Brutal Games”, p. 95.

¹⁵⁰ Jake Tucker, “Sniper Elite: Resistance review”, *PC Gamer*, 27 January 2025, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/fps/sniper-elite-resistance-review/>.

¹⁵¹ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p. 21.

¹⁵² Rebellion Developments, *Sniper Elite – Kill Hitler/Target Führer* (2012-present), PC, Xbox, and PlayStation; Rebellion, *The Evolution of Killing Hitler...*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UphGaBnXW30>; GameSpot, *Historian & Rebellion CEO Reacts to Historical Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 26 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWVqVFIOcAc> [7:37-9:07].

¹⁵³ *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (1998, Paramount Pictures). [DVD]; *Fury*, directed by David Ayer (2014, Columbia Pictures) [DVD]; *The Guns of Navarone*, directed by J. Lee Thompson (1961,

Likewise, their monstrous reputation has been repeated, magnified and parodied within video games, as the dark pantomime villainy of the Nazis' portrayal within the *Wolfenstein* and *Sniper Elite* franchises or the double-monstrosity of "Nazi zombies" within the *Call of Duty* series has further stripped the Nazis of any identity beyond that of a villain archetype, contributing to a so-called 'mythification of the war'.¹⁵⁴



Figure 1.4: Gameplay still-image from *Sniper Elite 5: Target Führer – Wolf Mountain* (Rebellion Developments, 2022).

This narrative framing has been further cemented by the attribution of characteristics and visual symbols associated with the Nazis to the villains of fictional media, such as the Daleks in *Doctor Who* (1963-present) and the Galactic Empire in the *Star Wars* franchise (1977-present).¹⁵⁵ The Nazis are framed within popular culture as the unquestionable “villains” of WWII. However, this framing brings with it inherent

Columbia Pictures) [DVD]; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (1989, Paramount Pictures) [DVD]; *‘Allo ‘Allo*, created by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft (broadcast 30 December 1982 – 14 December 1992 on BBC1) [DVD]; *Dad’s Army*. See also, Sabine Hake, *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History and Democracy* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

¹⁵⁴ Muse Software *et al.*, *Wolfenstein*, (1981-2019), PC, Xbox, and PlayStation. Published by Bethesda Softworks *et al.*; Rebellion Developments, *Sniper Elite* (2005-present), PC, Xbox, and PlayStation; Eva Kingsepp, “Experiencing and Performing Memory: Second World War videogames as a practice of remembrance”, in Patrick Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 219.

¹⁵⁵ Kempshall, *The History and Politics of Star Wars*, pp. 29-30; Tim Masters, “How did Doctor Who reflect the real world?”, *BBC News*, 22 November 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-24848815>.

consequences for the understanding of the historical perspectives reflected within this narrative of WWII.

One such consequence of the narrative perspective of the Nazis as the “villains” of WWII is the implicit framing of opponents of Nazi Germany – although most notably the USA and Great Britain – as inherently “heroic”. The pervading cultural rhetoric remembers and glorifies the actions of WWII as a “just war”, wherein the citizen soldiers of the so-called “Greatest Generation” came together from across American society to defeat Hitler’s fascist dictatorship.¹⁵⁶ As such, numerous video games – including entries of the *Call of Duty* series – have followed in the tradition established by media like *Kelly’s Heroes* (1970), *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* (2001), showing the American player protagonist interacting with events alongside an eclectic cast of fellow GIs of varied personalities and backgrounds as they battle their way across Europe.¹⁵⁷ So prevalent is this “GI Generation” narrative that *Call of Duty: WWII* adapted it into a dedicated feature of gameplay within its single-player campaign, whereby different members of the player’s squad enable unique in-game abilities and bonuses depending on which members are present during a mission.¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, although more recent media such as the aforementioned *Saving Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers*, and *Fury* have depicted American GIs performing illicit or morally questionable actions while conducting the war against Nazi Germany, they are narratively framed in order to foster dramatic tension between these eclectic GI characters while also keeping these actions contrasted against the actions of the “villainous” Nazi regime, often emphasising the implicitly “heroic” framing of these morally complex GI characters by confronting Waffen-SS troops in the dramatic climax of their stories, as in the cases of *Saving Private Ryan* and *Fury*.¹⁵⁹ Kempshall notes that this morality framing of WWII even applies to groups such as the Soviet Union, who are otherwise viewed with distrust or

¹⁵⁶ Ramsey, “Brutal Games”, pp. 94-95.

¹⁵⁷ *Saving Private Ryan*; *Kelly’s Heroes*, directed by Brian Hutton (1970, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) [DVD]; *Band of Brothers*, created by Tom Hanks and Stephen Spielberg (broadcast 9th September – 4th November 2001 on HBO) [DVD]. For game examples, see *Call of Duty: WWII*; Treyarch, *Call of Duty 3* (2006), Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Wii. Published by Activision.

¹⁵⁸ *Call of Duty: WWII*.

¹⁵⁹ *Saving Private Ryan*; *Fury*; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p. 21.

hostility in Western media narratives, but who are considered less immoral than the Nazis and are therefore considered legitimate as playable perspectives within WWII-set games.¹⁶⁰

In some regards, the predisposition for American protagonists within WWII games mirrors narrative presentation throughout gaming as a wider medium; for instance, a study of FPS games revealed that 82.3 per cent of all FPS games released prior to 2011, regardless of thematic setting, featured an American protagonist.¹⁶¹ One of the principal reasons behind this predisposition is the complex relationship video games have with other visual media, most notably cinematic media such as film and television, which similarly popularise the American perspective. For historical games, the desire to give the player a sense of what it might have been like to experience the events they depict is greatly facilitated if the same event has already been depicted in film;¹⁶² not only does the game then have a known cultural reference point for their research and presentation, but the developers can thereby also fulfil the additional fantasy of placing the player at the heart of well-known film sequences.

As such, it is unsurprising that some of the more famous sequences from historical war media have found their way into video games; the visceral and critically lauded Omaha Beach sequence from *Saving Private Ryan* has been replicated multiple times within video games – most notably in 2002's *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* and 2017's *Call of Duty: WWII* – while various early scenes from *Enemy at the Gates* (2001) were replicated almost 'shot for shot' in the original *Call of Duty* (2003).¹⁶³ Even when games adapt historical settings more loosely, pre-existing historical media are often referenced within games: for instance, the *Landing Force* expansion for *Sniper Elite 5* (2022) included a mission scenario to infiltrate a Nazi-occupied island in order to sabotage a gun battery ahead of the Allied invasion of southern France, Operation Dragoon, which the game's developers openly described as inspired by the classic war film, *The Guns of Navarone*.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p. 21.

¹⁶¹ Johannes Breuer, Ruth Festl, and Thorsten Quandt, "In the Army Now – Narrative Elements and Realism in Military First-Person Shooters", cited in Kingsepp, "Experiencing and Performing Memory: Second World War videogames as a practice of remembrance", p. 228.

¹⁶² Ramsey, "Brutal Games", pp. 99 & 102-103.

¹⁶³ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 153-154; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁴ "Sniper Elite 5 | Landing Force DLC | Update 1.21", *Sniper Elite*, 26 July 2022, <https://sniperelite.com/news/sniper-elite-5-landing-force-dlc-update-1-21>.

Critically, many of these cinematic influences revolve around narratives either centred on American characters filling the role of the protagonist, or where this role portrayed by American (or at least Western, English-speaking) actors; this issue is not exclusive to WWII-set media, as films such as *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), which places the legendary British outlaw in the context of the Third Crusade and reign of Richard the Lionheart, and *The Last Samurai* (2003), which is set during the Meiji Restoration in nineteenth century Japan, also prominently feature overtly American actors as their central protagonists (Kevin Costner and Tom Cruise respectively).¹⁶⁵ Table-top wargaming exhibits similar favouritism for presenting Anglo-American historical perspectives; a quantitative survey of table-top historical wargames by Xavier Rubillo-Campillo determined that, although recent decades have seen an increase in independent European engagement and representation in wargames as publishers explore less well-known conflicts, the representation of Anglo-American conflicts and participant engagement with the medium remains statistically dominant.¹⁶⁶ Jeremy Black, in his examination of trends in the study of military history, likewise notes the dominant influence of Eurocentrism emphasising the role and discussion of Euro-American histories and perspectives.¹⁶⁷ This is an issue which shall be raised again in the context of demographic representation in the following chapter. In the immediate instance, the emphasis of Anglo-American historical perspectives plays a significant role in the interpretation of history, especially where these perspectives are filtered through quintessential narrative roles which define these perspectives as those of protagonists and antagonists, which, as highlighted by Miller, frequently correspond with those of “heroes” and “villains” within gaming narratives.

The relationship of depicting America as the narrative “hero” in entertainment media such as video games has become so widespread within popular-culture that the artefacts that these characters employ in both films and games can be identified as cultural shorthand for “heroes” and “villains”. Western media and games frequently include firearms such as the American M16 assault rifle, or similarly recognisable Western weaponry, in the hands

¹⁶⁵ *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, directed by Kevin Reynolds (1991, Warner Brothers Pictures) [DVD]; *The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick (2003, Warner Brothers Pictures) [DVD].

¹⁶⁶ Xavier Rubillo-Campillo, “A digital humanities approach to European presence in historical wargames”, in Jan Heinemann, Riccardo Masini, and Frédéric Serval (eds.), *Euro War Games* (Bénodet, Fr.: Nuts! Publishing, 2024), pp. 71-90.

¹⁶⁷ Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 66-99.

of the hero protagonist(s) and their allies,¹⁶⁸ and the Russian AK-47 family of weapons in the hands of in-game narrative antagonists, who themselves often correspond to America's opponents through modern history, perhaps most notably in the cases of the Soviet Union and North Vietnamese/Viet Cong.¹⁶⁹

In certain cases, the association between American "heroes" and their equipment has been mandated by modern companies in order to ensure positive public reception of their products; in an interview with *Eurogamer*, a representative of the Barret Rifles weapons company said that 'we want to know explicitly how the rifle is to be used, ensuring that we are shown in a positive light... Such as the "good guys" using the rifle...' instead of seeing their products 'used by individuals, organisations, countries or companies that would be shown as enemies of the United States or its citizens'.¹⁷⁰ This outlook expressly equates Americans with being the "heroes" of films or games, and the opponents of the USA as "villains", identified through their usage of iconographic artefacts such as firearms associated with their particular narrative perspectives.

This authorial perspective of the USA as narrative heroes is further reinforced by the economic influence of the American entertainment sector, which exerts a notably powerful influence over the video game industry. Financially, the United States remains the single biggest video game market in the Western world; the video game market research website *Newzoo* ranked the USA as the most valuable individual market for video games in the world as of March 2023 (the end of the 2022 financial year), accruing estimated revenues of \$46.4 billion compared to \$44 billion for its nearest global competitor, China.¹⁷¹ By comparison, Europe's video game markets are tiny; for the 2022 financial year, the top four European gaming markets – Germany, the UK, France, and Italy, in descending order – collectively achieved a combined value of just over \$19 billion, less than half the individual

¹⁶⁸ GameSpot, *M16: Pop Culture's "Good Guy" Rifle – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 12 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsCluihpHDE> [6:08-11:25].

¹⁶⁹ GameSpot, *AK-47: Pop Culture's "Bad Guy" Gun – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l42zG5H7QPw> [6:11-9:51]; *M16: Pop Culture's "Good Guy" Rifle* [10:01-11:25].

¹⁷⁰ Simon Parkin, "Shooter: How Video Games Fund Arms Manufacturers", *Eurogamer*, November 2012 (updated 14 May 2019), <https://www.eurogamer.net/shooters-how-video-games-fund-arms-manufacturers>.

¹⁷¹ "Top countries and markets by video game revenues", *Newzoo*, <https://newzoo.com/resources/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues>. Quoted data correct as of 20 November 2023.

value of the American gaming market.¹⁷² As such, it is more financially lucrative for games companies to interact with the American gaming market, principally by creating games which appeal to American gaming audiences.

The potential scope and impact of engaging with the American gaming market can be significant, as a sizable proportion of the American population engages with video games in one form or another. According to the governing body of the American gaming industry, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), approximately 227 million Americans played video games on a regular basis as of 2021, approximately 60 per cent of the USA population.¹⁷³ Additionally, on the creative side, a substantial proportion of video game developers globally live or work in North America; as of April 2021, approximately 39 per cent of game developers worldwide worked in the USA, with another 12 per cent in neighbouring Canada.¹⁷⁴ More than 2,400 game companies – including American studios like Activision-Blizzard and EA and international companies like Japanese-run Sony Interactive, Swedish publisher Paradox Interactive and French-based Ubisoft – maintain a corporate presence across nearly 3,000 sites in the USA alone.¹⁷⁵

This scale of activity greatly enhances game developers' exposure to the technological and narrative preferences of the American video game market and the cultural outlooks of American gaming communities. Consequently, developers are naturally inclined to design their games' content so that it remains palatable to this large and valuable market demographic. As this thesis shall highlight repeatedly, triple-A video game development is as much a business enterprise as it is a creative endeavour, and so the companies involved want to maximise their financial returns by attempting to ensure that their products will not alienate swathes of potential customers from the most lucrative market.

This desire to avoid alienating customers is particularly significant for games which try to invert the historical perspective of WWII and present German characters as the

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ "2021 Essential Facts About The Video Game Industry", *Entertainment Software Association*, <https://www.theesa.com/resource/2021-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/>.

¹⁷⁴ J Clement, "Distribution of game developers worldwide as of April 2021, by region", *Statista*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453785/game-developer-region-distribution-worldwide/>.

¹⁷⁵ Dean Takahasi, "The U.S. game industry has 2,457 companies supporting 220,000 jobs", *VentureBeat*, 14 February 2017, <https://venturebeat.com/2017/02/14/the-u-s-game-industry-has-2457-companies-supporting-220000-jobs/>.

playable protagonist. Within the gaming medium, experiences of playable German protagonists in a WWII context commonly encounter *ludo-narrative dissonance*, which, as previously discussed, refers to a disjunction between the narrative depicted by the game in question and the audience's understanding of events as they interact with them.¹⁷⁶ Ludo-narrative dissonance is a particularly common issue within the video game medium, as the complexity of game design and the conflicting demands and ideological perspectives of players, developers and publishers frequently leads to the inclusion of gameplay content or enables player interactions which clash overtly with a game's narrative or thematic meta-commentary. In the case of WWII games, the widespread, popular understanding of Nazi Germany as the "villains" of WWII and the knowledge of the actions which the Nazi regime committed creates conflict amongst players familiar with that historical narrative, who are likewise conditioned to understand that the player protagonist is contextually the "hero" of a given video game narrative; therefore, this scenario generates ludo-narrative dissonance because these players subconsciously identify themselves, the "heroes" of gaming experiences, as being complicit in the "villainous" actions of the Nazi regime through engagement with WWII-era German perspectives in historical games. Therefore, in order to circumvent these issues, historical games featuring these playable German perspectives in a WWII setting are required to narratively separate player characters from the Nazi regime.

One of the commonest examples of this separation can be identified in the distinction between members of the German military and the Nazi establishment within historical discussions, inferring that the German military were either blameless or unable to act against the crimes committed by the Nazi regime; this narrative framing implicitly contributes to the historiographical myth known as the "clean Wehrmacht". Although this historiographical narrative has come under significant scrutiny and criticism in recent years, particularly in regard to the conflict on the Eastern Front between Germany and the Soviet Union,¹⁷⁷ the influence of this historiographical phenomenon can be traced throughout

¹⁷⁶ Hocking, "Ludo-Narrative Dissonance in Bioshock", quoted in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 161; Murray, "Upending Militarised Masculinity in *Spec Ops: The Line*", in Harrigan and Kirschenbaum *Zones of Control*, p. 325; Seraphine, "Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?"

¹⁷⁷ For examples, see David A. Harrisville, *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021); Bill Niven, "Generation War and Post-Didactic Memory: the Nazi past in contemporary Germany", in Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War*, pp. 30-42.

WWII's depiction in entertainment media. Traces of the "clean Wehrmacht" narrative, or other attempts at separating the German military from its Nazi leadership, can be identified within WWII media such as the 1961 film *The Guns of Navarone* – in which a captured Wehrmacht officer pleads his honourable nature to the Allied protagonists, in distinction from an SS officer who had tortured one of their injured comrades, with the line 'we are not all like Hauptmann Sessler [the SS officer]'¹⁷⁸ – and the 2014 film *Fury*, in which the American protagonists repeatedly emphasise the brutal actions of the Waffen-SS in distinction from German forces as a whole.¹⁷⁹ Comments by the developers of the video game *Battlefield V* mirror this pattern, as the developers insisted – in response to controversy surrounding player participation as a German protagonist within one of the game's narratives – that the playable protagonist of their German narrative was 'not a Nazi' despite being a German soldier.¹⁸⁰

An alternative narrative technique can be seen within the presentation of fictional German characters in WWII media, sometimes positioned to serve as representatives of real persons or groups, wherein creators of these media portray scenarios which very clearly show the German character in question as distinct from or opposed to Nazi ideology, even if this can reinforce historiographical myths such as the "clean Wehrmacht". One such clearly manufactured example of a sympathetic German protagonist may be observed in the John Sturges' film *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), based on the Jack Higgins novel of the same name.¹⁸¹

This film creates sympathy for its German protagonist, Colonel Kurt Steiner (played by Michael Caine), by having him attempt to help the escape of a young Jewish girl from SS captivity during the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto within minutes of his first appearance on screen,¹⁸² even outside of this act, Steiner's opinions of the Nazis' persecution of Jews is

¹⁷⁸ *The Guns of Navarone* [DVD: 1:26:36-1:31:13].

¹⁷⁹ *Fury*.

¹⁸⁰ Andy Chalk, "Battlefield 5's German campaign mission is 'not a hero story'", *PC Gamer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.pcgamer.com/battlefield-5s-german-campaign-mission-is-not-a-hero-story/>; Wesley Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story', insists DICE", *Eurogamer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-10-18-the-battlefield-5-campaign-lets-you-play-as-the-nazis-but-its-not-a-hero-story-insists-dice>.

¹⁸¹ *The Eagle Has Landed*, directed by John Sturges (1976, ITC Entertainment) [DVD]; Jack Higgins, *The Eagle Has Landed* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975).

¹⁸² *The Eagle Has Landed* [DVD: 15:01-20:18].

made apparent when he mocks a guard's claim of fierce Jewish resistance by asking if they fought back 'with umbrellas and crutches?', and later clarifies to an SS officer that '[he has] nothing for or against Jews personally, but [that he has] watched too many good men die for cause to watch a young girl be killed for sport'.¹⁸³ Steiner's efforts come to nothing as the escaping girl is shot dead immediately after Steiner seemingly puts her out of Nazi reach by helping her onto a departing train, but his overt defiance of the Nazis' most dreaded agenda in the face of armed opposition immediately endears him to the audience as an unwilling and honourable servant of the Nazi regime.

This early sympathy is subsequently reinforced throughout the course of the film as it is shown that the architect of Steiner's mission, Colonel Radl (played by Robert Duval), is being manipulated by the senior Nazi, Heinrich Himmler (played by Donald Pleasance); when Radl reports 'the eagle has landed', meaning that Steiner and his men have successfully begun their mission to abduct or kill Winston Churchill, Himmler destroys the letter of authorisation that he had provided to Radl in order to facilitate preparations for the operation,¹⁸⁴ and later orders Radl to be executed on charges of 'exceeding [his] orders to the point of treason to the state' after it becomes clear that Steiner's mission has failed.¹⁸⁵

This framing of dutiful, dedicated German soldiers as manipulated and expendable pawns of a Nazi regime determined to protect its own interests at any cost is an ultimately sympathetic one, even if the actions undertaken by these German characters occur in opposition to Allied agents. It is a narrative replicated within the *Battlefield V* story campaign, *The Last Tiger*, which depicts a German tank crew whose obedience to the Nazi regime is severely tested in the final days of the war. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the crew obediently fight on against advancing American troops, but several crew members (including the player protagonist of the story) begin to doubt the purpose of continued loyalty to the Nazi regime when they discover one of their crewmates after being executed as a deserter, despite obeying his orders; the disillusioned crewmembers are ultimately gunned down by a fanatical comrade when they attempt to surrender to the Allies instead of

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ *The Eagle Has Landed* [DVD: 1:18:11-1:19:17]

¹⁸⁵ *The Eagle Has Landed* [DVD: 2:15:06-2:16:30]

fighting to the death, after their only hope of escape is destroyed by the Nazis, thereby visually symbolising their abandonment.¹⁸⁶

Certain gameplay genres enable or require engagement with German perspectives within the context of WWII as key elements of their gameplay format, in which case the technical perspective of gameplay offers opportunities within which to separate players from associations with Nazi actions. Strategy games, for example, such as *R.U.S.E*, *Hearts of Iron IV* or *Steel Division: Normandy '44*, typically offer a form of “sandbox” gameplay, wherein the player’s input into gameplay overrides any associated historical narrative; narrative campaigns within these titles, wherein players “take command” of particular battles from the historical record, merely serve as stepping-stones for gameplay and bear only superficial resemblance to their real-life counterparts.¹⁸⁷

As mentioned previously, these experiences often demand the ability to choose between multiple options of playable factions in order to foster gameplay variety, which therefore often includes the ability to play as the Germans in WWII strategy games. However, as these titles frequently frame gameplay from an elevated visual perspective – as though the player is moving markers around on a map or observing from an aircraft overhead – the player is rendered isolated from the consequences of their actions. Therefore, the inability of the player to view or order crimes recorded as being historically committed by agents of the Nazi regime, such as the extrajudicial killing of prisoners-of-war by German forces,¹⁸⁸ inserts a sense of “plausible deniability” between the player and the historical record; if the player cannot see controversial actions being carried out on screen by their character or faction, they may perceive themselves as having no potential agency to sanction or condemn a controversial action, and may therefore feel diminished responsibility for any consequences. This is a significant consideration, as it provides a “moral loophole” with which to justify the depiction of potentially controversial individuals or groups within a historical game without mandating their exclusion or alienating potential players concerned by the actions associated with these figures.

¹⁸⁶ EA DICE, *Battlefield V – The Last Tiger* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

¹⁸⁷ *R.U.S.E.*; *Steel Division: Normandy '44*; Paradox Development Studio, *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

¹⁸⁸ For example, see Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 180-181 & 264-266.

Multiplayer games, including FPS titles like *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, operate in a similar fashion. Games which utilise a WWII setting for their competitive multiplayer suites universally strip away as much Nazi iconography as possible, presenting players' character models as generic soldiers with only their uniform to identify them.¹⁸⁹ In recent years, the popularity of customisation mechanics has seen cosmetic customisation expanded within these titles, but options for uniforms and equipment are almost universally restricted to military paraphernalia, often sensationalised in design or arrangement to further remove the in-game character models from the images of clean, uniform soldiers shown in Nazi propaganda.¹⁹⁰ By attempting to deny the player the facility to associate themselves with explicitly Nazi iconography, these games attempt to forcibly distance players from the regime which they are contextually fighting for within a WWII-set historical game. While there are also present-day reasons which necessitate the censorship of Nazi symbols – such as a blanket ban on the use of Nazi iconography, such as the swastika, in video games by the German government which was enforced until 2018 – developers are creatively restricted from portraying characters which associate the player with the Nazi regime, and those who attempt this are forced to defend their decisions to deflect criticism.¹⁹¹

The discourse of exploring the German experience of WWII naturally raises the thorny issue of which historical narratives are, or should be, considered appropriate for more nuanced depictions in popular entertainment media.¹⁹² Similar presentational issues as these have appeared in other heritage media contexts, particularly where German perspectives of WWII are raised, such as those noted by Ralf Raths in the formation and

¹⁸⁹ Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games" in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 145-149.

¹⁹⁰ See for examples, EA DICE, *Battlefield V* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts; *Call of Duty: WWII*.

¹⁹¹ "Germany lifts total ban on Nazi symbols in video games", *BBC News*, 10 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45142651>; Chapman and Linderorth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 145-149; Chalk, "Battlefield 5's German campaign mission is 'not a hero story'"; Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story'".

¹⁹² Eugen Pfister, "'Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hankenkreuzen!': Imaginations of the Holocaust and Crimes Against Humanity During World War II in Digital Games", in von Lünen, Lewis, Litherland and Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens*, pp. 267-284; Eugen Pfister, "'The Führer's facial hair and name can also be reinstated in the virtual world': Taboos, Authenticity and the Second World War", *The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, vol. 9: 1 (2020) [Accessed online: <https://www.gamejournal.it/the-fuhrers-facial-hair/>]; Alaiks, "Historical Responsibility: how is HOI4 doing?", *Paradox Forum*, 3 February 2021, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/historical-responsibility-how-is-hoi4-doing.1455005/>.

development of the German Tank Museum at Munster or by Jerome de Groot in the context of British reenactors portraying WWII German forces.¹⁹³ The creators of these heritage experience have attempted to isolate themselves from association with the actions of the German military within WWII, aiming to prevent the alienation of key audiences from what are presented as solely technical or entertaining experiences offered by these heritage forums, resulting in a shortage of critical interrogation of the history which they reflect.¹⁹⁴ This shortage of critical interrogation can also be identified in instances of games presenting playable German perspectives of WWII, as the need to accommodate German historical materials within the technical interactive experience offered by particular gameplay genres or mechanics encourages the isolation of more problematic or sensitive historical subjects.

A well-highlighted gaming example in this discourse has been Paradox Interactive's WWII-themed grand strategy title *Hearts of Iron IV*, which, despite allowing the player to take command of Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 40s, makes no reference to the mass persecution and executions of Jews that took place during these years in real life.¹⁹⁵ However, one of the gameplay mechanics that are included within *Hearts of Iron IV* are "Political Decisions", selectable policies that the player can use to affect their resource output and political affiliation; that the in-game German faction can use these "Decisions" to ban Communism and suppress the political freedoms of their own population, yet that these make no reference to any of Hitler's anti-Semitic policies is perhaps a glaring historiographical omission considering those policies which are included.¹⁹⁶ This

¹⁹³ Ralf Rath, "From technical showroom to fully-fledged museum: The German Tank Museum Munster", *Museum & Society*, vol. 10: 3 (2012), pp. 174-192; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116. See also, "Nazi uniforms banned at Lancashire Railway WWII event", *BBC News*, 27 May 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-13572992>; "North Yorkshire Moors Railway withdraws WW2 German soldier invitation", *BBC News*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-43655322>.

¹⁹⁴ Rath, "From technical showroom to fully-fledged museum: The German Tank Museum Munster", pp. 174-192; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116. See also, "Nazi uniforms banned at Lancashire Railway WWII event", *BBC News*, 27 May 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-13572992>; "North Yorkshire Moors Railway withdraws WW2 German soldier invitation", *BBC News*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-43655322>.

¹⁹⁵ *Hearts of Iron IV*; "Has anyone ever noticed that HoI4 never mentions the Shoah (Holocaust)?", *Reddit*, 14 March 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/hoi4/comments/tds12e/has_anyone_ever_noticed_that_hoi4_never_mentions/; "Antisemitism in HOI4", *Steam Community*, 2 January 2018, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/394360/discussions/0/1621724915820727618/>.

¹⁹⁶ *Hearts of Iron IV*.

consequently raises further questions about what forms of dictatorial oppression are deemed acceptable to incorporate within the confines of a historical video game.

Alternatively, there is the indie RTS *War Mongrels* (2021), which sees the player commanding a group of German deserters and resistance fighters behind the lines of the Eastern Front; at various points during the game, the player encounters mass executions and, during one mission, is required to infiltrate a concentration camp;¹⁹⁷ the entire game is presented in a grim, washed-colour style, which echoes other “serious” war media, like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers* and *Fury*, which intentionally depict the ‘brutal reality’ of the Second World War.¹⁹⁸ Between these two gaming examples – *Hearts of Iron IV* and *War Mongrels* – we can see the full sweep of how sensitive or controversial historical subjects can be approached by entertainment media like video games: total silence, intended to be respectful by not “gamifying” a real-world atrocity but can be perceived as acting to exorcise uncomfortable elements of the historical narrative and thereby unintentionally highlight controversial actions which are permitted, to unescapable immediacy, designed to reflect the “true” horror of these incidents but which may be interpreted as glorifying brutality.

Historical media, regardless of format, is repeatedly confronted by the conflicting demands of presenting entertaining narratives while also presenting a believable depiction of history to their modern audience. Unfortunately, because much of history is either too graphic, politically contentious, or simply impossible to translate convincingly to an entertainment format, the creators of these media regularly find themselves in a ‘constant push-pull’ scenario of balancing research to present history as close to the known record as possible and entertainment which depict events in an enjoyable if fictionalised fashion.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, the closer that the history being depicted within a piece of entertainment media is to the present, and the greater the number of still-living participants becomes, the more difficult it becomes for entertainment media such as video games to present an

¹⁹⁷ Destructive Creations, *War Mongrels* (2021), PC; Rick Lane, “Preview: War Mongrels”, *PC Gamer Magazine*, July 2021, pp. 40-41.

¹⁹⁸ Lane, “Preview: War Mongrels”, pp. 40-41.

¹⁹⁹ “The Crown: Netflix has ‘no plans’ for fiction warning,” *BBC News*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-55207871>.

interpretation of history without being challenged by those who either experienced the events being portrayed or who have their own personal perspectives of events.²⁰⁰

The perception that entertainment media makes light of, or can be disrespectfully misrepresentative of, real people's experiences and actions is mirrored within video games, particularly for those attempting to depict controversial historical conflicts within living memory, where political narratives about the conflict's events or participants remain active. As Chapman notes, 'the formal means by which we represent the past exerts pressure on this content', wherein gaming's 'intrinsic relationship to play' places limits on the ability of games to approach challenging or sensitive historical subjects expressly because of the 'perceived trivialising nature of ludification'.²⁰¹ Allowing players to participate in events as groups characterised as the "villains" of historical conflicts is a clear indicator of this process, as examples of this historical perspective within gaming have been seen as intensely disrespectful both to soldiers who participated in combating them and to civilians affected by the relevant conflict more broadly.

A prime example of this came from 2010's *Medal of Honor*, which saw EA try to bring the landmark FPS franchise into a more "modern" setting. However, the game's multiplayer mode invoked controversy when it was revealed prior to the game's release that the title's multiplayer factions had been labelled as "Americans" and "Taliban".²⁰² Given the game's setting in "modern" conflict, and more specifically depicting events set against the backdrop of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, these faction titles are understandable from a historiographical perspective.²⁰³ Yet the story that players could shoot American soldiers as the Taliban invoked outrage in the American popular press; several politicians from both

²⁰⁰ For examples, see Emily Andrews, "Palace outrage at Netflix's *The Crown* as Prince Charles' friends a blistering attack on the TV drama and accuse the producers of 'trolling on a Hollywood budget' ahead of the fourth series' launch", *The Daily Mail*, 14 November 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8949675/Prince-Charles-friends-launch-blistering-attack-Netflixs-Crown.html>; Emma Saunders, "The Crown: Ex-royal press secretary Dickie Arbiter criticises 'hatchet job'", *BBC News*, 17 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-54974674>; Dan Martin and PA Media, "Steve Coogan and companies sued over Richard III film", *BBC News*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-67003060>; Steven McIntosh, "Actor says Trump 'should be grateful' for controversial film", *BBC News*, 15 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1m9pyjmi8o>.

²⁰¹ Adam Chapman, "Playing Against the Past?: Representing the Play Element of Historical Cultures in Video Games", in Von Lünen, Lewis, Litherland and Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens*, pp. 133-154.

²⁰² GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor*, online video recording, YouTube, 23 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bj3qAlkbQw8&t=8s> [28:05-29:09].

²⁰³ GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [29:09-29:29].

America and allied nations such as the UK, veterans associations and relatives of fallen servicemen voiced protests against the game in news media, and the American military actively refused to allow *Medal of Honor* to be sold at vendors on any of its bases. As a result of the controversy, EA forced the multiplayer faction's title to be changed to the generic heading of "opposing forces", but the damage was already done.²⁰⁴

A similar situation, wherein a war game depicting recent history was impacted by negative media attention, was encountered by the developers of the indie game, *Six Days in Fallujah*. Intended as a realistic depiction of the events of the 2004 Second Battle of Fallujah, the developers worked closely with veterans of the battle to create a faithful and respectful depiction of the battle; even the idea for the game arose from prior cooperation with members of the US Marines who were deployed to Iraq, who subsequently asked for a game to be made about their experiences.²⁰⁵ *Six Days'* developers, Atomic Games, attempted to ensure that all sides of the battle were thoroughly researched during development, and so interviewed numerous returning veterans, senior military officials, Iraqi civilians and even captured insurgents to ensure that the game reflected the real events as accurately and respectfully as possible; some American Marines even agreed to lend their names and likenesses to the project, a positive sign of their support for the goals of the developers.²⁰⁶

However, before *Six Days* finished development, stories began circulating on American news outlets of vocal opposition to the game from the families of deceased veterans and anti-war activists, including the UK-based Stop The War Coalition, who attacked the game for trivialising the sacrifices of fallen servicemen and civilians. Though *Six Days'* developers defended themselves in the news media with support from soldiers who had assisted with the game's development, the public backlash irreparably tarnished the

²⁰⁴ GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [28:05-29:09]; "Liam Fox defends call for ban of Medal of Honor game", *BBC News*, 23 August 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-11056581>; Alexander Sliwinski, "Military stores won't carry Medal of Honor despite 'Taliban' change [Update]", *Joystiq*, 5 October 2010 [Accessed online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120810201321/http://www.joystiq.com/2010/10/05/military-stores-wont-carry-medal-of-honor-despite-taliban-cha/>].

²⁰⁵ GVMERS, *The Most Controversial Unreleased Game – Six Days in Fallujah*, online video recording, YouTube, 12 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqNvf2gcoys> [2:25-4:42].

²⁰⁶ Alaa Elassar, "Iraq's bloodiest battle will be a video game", *CNN*, 9 October 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/09/us/six-days-in-fallujah-iraq-video-game/index.html>.

project; the game's then-publisher, Konami, cut ties with the project at the height of the media storm and the social stigma surrounding the project prevented Atomic Games from obtaining new publisher support, thereby crippling production until Atomic Games finally went bankrupt in 2011.²⁰⁷



Figure 1.5: Promotional image for *Six Days in Fallujah* (Highwire Games, 2023).

In early 2021, the controversy was reignited when *Six Days in Fallujah* was announced to have been redeveloped as an FPS by a new studio, Highwire Games, and a new publisher, Victura, which released as an “early access” version on PC in 2023.²⁰⁸ Even before announcements that the new game would include a single-player, narrative-focused campaign presenting both American military and Iraqi civilian perspectives could be reported, gaming news outlets were highlighting *Six Days*' past controversy and interviewing Iraq War survivors who expressed their horror and disgust at a game ‘producing profit when

²⁰⁷ GVMERS, *The Most Controversial Unreleased Game – Six Days in Fallujah* [6:33-9:29]; Wesley Yin-Poole, “Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it”, *Eurogamer*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2021-02-11-six-days-in-fallujah-reemerges-11-years-after-konami-ditched-it>.

²⁰⁸ Highwire Games, *Six Days in Fallujah* (2023), PC. Published by Victura; Yin-Poole, “Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it”.

people like [them] suffered the consequences of [that] war' and which would trivialise their experiences.²⁰⁹

The language and issues surrounding *Six Days in Fallujah* are emblematic of many of the challenges facing developers attempting to depict controversial historical scenarios in a video game, regardless of period setting. On the one hand, Peter Tamte, CEO of *Six Days'* former developers Atomic Games, and founder of publisher Victura, said that 'it's hard to understand what combat is actually like through fake people doing fake things in fake places... It's time to challenge stereotypes about what games can be.'²¹⁰ This attitude reflects the wider shift into depicting more mature and complex scenarios in the medium of video games, which is often championed by games which rely on firm artistic intent and a willingness to take risks rather than pure commercial interest. Moreover, as the head of *Six Days'* former developers, Tamte had been closely invested in the project from its inception, and thus his statements closely reflect the passion that developers often have for their games, even if their creative vision does not always conform to the expectations of gaming audiences.

In opposition to this pro-developer perspective, there are the arguments that have been levelled against *Six Days in Fallujah*, which find resonance with many other controversial historical games; alongside contextual concerns that *Six Days* perpetuates Islamophobic stereotypes or acts only as an 'Arab murder simulator', one commentator – whose parents travelled to the USA as refugees from the Iraq War – said that by depicting a real event within the game, younger players would become detached from the significance of what they were experiencing: 'instead of a historical incident, they'll see it as a game.'²¹¹

This wording is key. This apparent dichotomy between history, which is viewed in the popular imagination as serious and studious, and video games, which continue to be perceived in certain quarters as frivolous diversions from reality, 'a children's medium, easily denigrated as trivial – something that will be "grown out of"',²¹² encapsulates all historical games which attempt to present events with more nuance than either the popular audience

²⁰⁹ Elassar, "Iraq's bloodiest battle will be a video game"; Yin-Poole, "Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it".

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Elassar, "Iraq's bloodiest battle will be a video game".

²¹² Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. vii.

or these game's capacity as entertainment media is willing to facilitate or permit. These same issues were similarly highlighted in the early development of the original *Medal of Honor* FPS game in 1999: early versions of the game were initially criticised by Dale Dye, the game's military and historical advisor, and Paul Bucha, president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, as being culturally insensitive and exploitative of its historical subject matter, although in *Medal of Honor's* case these critics were ultimately convinced of the developers' sincere intentions and gave their endorsement for the game.²¹³

Furthermore, the participatory element of the gaming medium is perceived as conveying a strong element of implicit endorsement for, and association with, the ideologies and actions of its protagonists via player actions conducted under their auspices, in contrast to non-interactive media such as film or television in which the audience may only passively observe on-screen events. This immediately identifies controversial historical incidents or figures as challenging subjects for video games, as the commercial imperative of not alienating players restricts developers' ability to portray these incidents from an associated narrative perspective without being viewed as legitimising controversial actions in the real world.

Similar language to that levelled against *Six Days in Fallujah* has also been employed against games with a WWII setting, particularly in relation to games where the player is given the ability to experience in-game events from the historical perspective of the Germans. In either case, the argument against portraying more nuanced versions of these historical narratives, and of preventing player engagement from the point of view of an antagonist within popular historical narratives, relies on the 'moral obligation of not upsetting those who have had horrific experiences, or at the very least, those whose identities are deeply linked with the victims of such experiences'.²¹⁴

This logic also enables an explanation of why a degree of disparity can be observed between the treatment of Nazi Germany and other near-contemporary historical groups identified as "villains" in popular history to similarly villainised figures from more distant historical periods. As in the case of depicting conflict more generally in media, the greater the separation between the events depicted within games and players in the modern day,

²¹³ GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [2:46-4:00].

²¹⁴ Chapman and Linderorth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play', p. 140.

either through time or geography, the more the game's subject becomes "safe" for a modern audience to engage with as the potential degree of offense caused by such engagement is diminished.²¹⁵ As Kempshall phrases it, 'time has removed the shock value of such ancient conflicts', whereas more recent historical events require 'a form of self-censorship' to make them suitable for consumption within an entertainment medium.²¹⁶

Over time, a slow increase in the willingness of creators and audiences to engage with the perspectives of the "villains" from more modern conflicts, like that of Germany in WWII, may be observed within the gaming medium as the separation between the history involved and living generations diminishes the impact that such exploration would have on living communities, while also permitting the exploration of nuances which have previously been closed due to societal perceptions of their historical subject. However, public resistance to depictions of controversial historical perspectives within games will affect the scope and forms of this engagement, potentially restricting the ability of commercially driven triple-A games to engage with these histories.

"You Don't Play, You Enlist": Conflict in perspective in Historical Video Games

A recurring theme within historical video games, from both the perspective of narrative and gameplay, is the centrality of conflict and warfare.²¹⁷ Many historical games have presented narratives within wars, or whose historical gameplay is similarly situated

²¹⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* (London: Profile Books, 2020), pp. 2-3.

²¹⁶ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

²¹⁷ For additional discussion of the relationships between warfare and video games, see Neil C Renic & Sebastian Kaempf, "Modern Warfare: Exploring the Relationship between Military First-Person Shooter Video Games and the 'War is Hell' Myth", *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2: 1 (2022), pp. 1-11; Michael Hitchens, "War in Video Games – Between Reality and Entertainment", *E-International Relations*, 26 November 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/11/26/war-in-video-games-between-reality-and-entertainment/>; "What can video games tell us about war and conflict?", *Imperial War Museum*, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-can-video-games-tell-us-about-war-and-conflict>; Filip Wiltgren, "The Basics of Conflict in Games", *Game Developer*, 15 July 2015, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/the-basics-of-conflict-in-games>; Steffan Powell, "War Games: The military's deep affinity with gaming", *BBC News*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-61229305>; Chris Fuller, "How playing at digital soldiers affects our perception of war", *Art Fund*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.artfund.org/explore/get-inspired/features/how-playing-at-digital-soldiers-shapes-our-perception-of-war>; Ertuğrul Süngü, "War Narrative in Digital Games: Creating the Identity of the Other", *Silk Road 2nd International Scientific Research Conference* (2023) [Accessed online: https://www.academia.edu/108918263/War_Narrative_in_Digital_Games_Creating_the_Identity_of_the_Other].

within periods of warfare or conflict. As an example, Rochat demonstrates a strong trend towards games set within the Late Modern era and, particularly, World War II with 515 games with a WWII setting released between 1981 and 2015, approximately 30 per cent of all games covered in his survey.²¹⁸ Similarly, Ramsey quotes a survey focusing on FPS games released between 1992 and 2011, in which 62 per cent of releases featured a WWII setting, marking WWII as the most populous ‘clearly identifiable setting’, with the Vietnam War as the second most popular setting with only 16 per cent of games covered by the quoted survey.²¹⁹ Even in cases where historical games have presented “passive scenarios” or narratives and experiences focusing on more mundane, everyday aspects of historical societies, conflict and warfare remain dominant influences within gaming’s depiction of history, appearing as secondary or background influences or gameplay challenges and thus continuing to contribute to a collective depiction of history dominated by warfare.

In some respects, this is hardly surprising. As shall be discussed repeatedly within this study, video games are heavily influenced by the media that have preceded them, in particular film and television. War media have formed a notable element of popular culture for decades, particularly for media targeted at young male audiences – who, as shall be discussed further in the following chapter, are an established audience for video games – with examples such as the *Commando* boys’ magazine or W.E. Johns’ Biggles stories propagating interest in fictional media set within historic conflicts,²²⁰ a pattern continued in more recent decades by historical war media such as Bernard Cornwell’s bestselling *Sharpe* novel series (1981-2025) and its television adaptation produced by UK broadcaster ITV (1993-1997), Hollywood films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, tabletop wargames such as *Bolt Action* (2012-present) and – naturally – video games like *Call of Duty*. Warfare and conflict feature prominently in many of these media, either providing the setting and backdrop for events or as the driving force which propels the narrative; conflict, whether literal or metaphorical, creates drama, which provides strong narratives and as such features regularly in entertainment media.²²¹

²¹⁸ Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, p. 12.

²¹⁹ Ramsey, “Brutal Games”, p. 95.

²²⁰ Black, *Rethinking Military History*, p. 214.

²²¹ “What can video games tell us about war and conflict?”, *Imperial War Museum*.

Even in historical media which does not depict warfare which may be termed “nation-state level” conflicts such as the World Wars or the Peloponnesian War, armed conflict is widespread in the interpretation of history; America of the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, is synonymous in popular culture with the “gangster warfare” of criminal groups profiteering from the American Prohibition, and has cemented its own thematic historiography through films including *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Bugsy Malone* (1976), *The Untouchables* (1987), and *Public Enemies* (2009),²²² and games like *Mafia* (2002), *Chicago 1930* (2003) and *Empire of Sin* (2020).²²³

Furthermore, Margaret MacMillan has argued that warfare and armed conflict is endemic to Humanity as a whole.²²⁴ She maintains that it is a mistake to separate warfare from the narrative of Human history as not only does warfare help to provide history with structure by defining events in relation to particular conflicts, but that warfare has also acted as the catalyst for many social, cultural and political movements, while its legacy can be traced in language, culture and geography;²²⁵ as MacMillan observes, even sporting competitions, such as football championships and the Olympic Games, have taken on attributes related to warfare, with gangs of organised sports fans, nationalist symbology or the championing of score tallies as a mark of superiority.²²⁶ Our relationship to war and conflict is inherently paradoxical – it is generally reviled, yet we cannot help being fascinated by it – and therefore, in her opinion, merits scholarly investigation.²²⁷

Our relationship to this universal concept of warfare is often reflected, for better or worse, in its presentation in popular culture. Western countries in particular are culturally fascinated by war, both in history and fiction, in part because of the so-called “Long Peace” since the end of the Second World War, in which only a minority of people living in Western countries have had direct contact with the experience and consequences of war; this fosters

²²² *Bonnie and Clyde*, directed by Arthur Penn (1967, Warner Brothers Pictures) [DVD]; *Bugsy Malone*, directed by Alan Parker (1976, Fox-Rank Distributors & Paramount Pictures) [DVD]; *The Untouchables*, directed by Brian de Palma (1987, Paramount Pictures) [DVD]; *Public Enemies*, directed by Michael Mann (2009, Universal Pictures) [DVD].

²²³ Illusion Softworks, *Mafia* (2002), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Gathering of Developers, Inc; Spellbound, *Chicago: 1930* (2004), PC. Published by Microids; Romero Games, *Empire of Sin* (2020), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

²²⁴ MacMillan, *War*, pp. 1-13.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ MacMillan, *War*, pp. 6-7.

²²⁷ MacMillan, *War*, pp. 1-13.

an impression that it is socially acceptable to be interested in war if it is examined at a “safe distance” of either geography or time from the individual in question.²²⁸ Yet, as demonstrated previously within this chapter, certain groups consider this engagement with real-world conflicts within gaming to be disrespectful to those communities directly affected by war, and even “safe” exploration contains unspoken restrictions on the acts and historical perspectives which are deemed culturally acceptable to depict as “playable” within the confines of a historical game.²²⁹

MacMillan’s point about the importance of warfare as a guide for the structure of history is particularly significant if we consider history’s depiction in the popular imagination. Particular conflicts, most notably World War II and the Vietnam War, have been heavily depicted in entertainment media.²³⁰ While video game portrayals of these conflict frequently reference pre-existing media depictions from film or television, they also appeal to the gaming medium on practical levels, engaging with fundamental tenets of video games as a technical and entertainment medium. This has also been identified by Vowinckle who notes military-themed “war games” as a particularly suitable medium for the “simulation” of history.²³¹

Conflict and warfare appeals to the popular media industry, such as video game developers, for its relative simplicity of structure. As Vowinckle remarks, ‘it is in the nature of things that question of victory and defeat are more suitable for games (which, after all, have to end at some point) and military history is full of such decisionist moments’.²³² Warfare and conflict inherently requires its participants to assume clearly delineated opposing sides, providing clear objectives and impactful consequences for failure, thereby simplifying interpretation of the narrative;²³³ consequently, this ease of interpretation within warfare in turn fosters the appeal of the crime or spy narrative genres – which may take place within conflict or warfare settings – through the intrigue and paranoia created by the obfuscation of this narrative identification. Many of the conflicts with the most enduring

²²⁸ MacMillan, *War*, pp. 2-3.

²²⁹ Chapman and Linderth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140.

²³⁰ Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, p. 12; Ramsey, “Brutal Games”, p. 95.

²³¹ Vowinkel, “Past Futures: From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games”, pp. 322-332.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Wiltgren, “The Basics of Conflict in Games”.

legacies in media such as games contain key elements which suit the simpler, potentially exaggerated narratives of entertainment media, notably remarkable yet relatable characters, fantastical feats, and exotic locales, all of which aid in heightening their dramatic appeal for the audience; in short, war makes for good stories.²³⁴ Even if a game does not superimpose a deeper or more complex narrative upon a video game conflict, the mechanical nature of warfare allows it to adapt with equal deftness to many gaming genres; indeed, it is arguably harder to identify popular game genres which do *not* incorporate conflict within their fundamental mechanics than to name those in which it plays a significant role.

Genre and gameplay mechanics are particularly important factors to consider in regard to the prominence of warfare and conflict in video games.²³⁵ Within the video game medium, combat and warfare are frequently a core element of the game experience. Many of the most acclaimed video games, ranging from science-fiction titles like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and BioWare's *Mass Effect* trilogy, to fantasy games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), and even games without an explicit thematic genre like the online multiplayer game *Fortnite* (2017-present), prominently feature conflict or warfare as core aspects of their respective titles, either in terms of narrative or gameplay; the same is true of historical titles, ranging from action role-playing games such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption* to strategy games like the *Total War* and *Crusader Kings* series and First-Person Shooters like *Call of Duty* and *Hell Let Loose*.

Many of the most popular gaming genres, from First-Person Shooters and Battle Royales to Real-Time Strategy and Role-Playing Games, rely on combat or warfare as central gameplay mechanics, which in of itself is significant for gaming's depiction of history, as games will therefore emphasise historical narratives and scenarios which allow combat within gameplay to occur naturally within their narrative context. In his quantitative survey of historical games, Rochat demonstrates the prominence of particular gaming genres amongst historical games, many of which prominently feature warfare or conflict as significant features of gameplay; across every historical period grouping within his survey, either action or strategy games – both of which feature a heavy mechanical reliance on

²³⁴ "What can video games tell us about war and conflict?", *Imperial War Museum*.

²³⁵ Wiltgren, "The Basics of Conflict in Games".

conflict or warfare as part of gameplay – were the most numerous genres depicting those periods.²³⁶ This emphasis on specific gameplay formats which favour narratives within historical conflicts reinforces a popular perspective of history which is dominated by conflict, diminishing or obscuring historical narratives and perspectives outside of those relating to warfare and conflict.

Within historical games, the popularity of gameplay genres where combat or warfare is more prominent – notably action and strategy genres – inevitably encourages a focus on frontline combat in one of history’s many conflicts, especially in those where the demands of gameplay can be easily married to historical content. Multiplayer games, such as *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Hell Let Loose*, further build on this imperative to foster conflict, either by requiring players to cooperate to achieve an objective or pitting competing players against each other to achieve success.²³⁷ Given this prominence of conflict as a gameplay mechanic, it is understandable that games focus on settings and narratives that permit these mechanisms to occur organically. The *Assassin’s Creed* series is, perhaps, atypical in this regard, as several games within the series have highlighted that conflict does not automatically equate to warfare against external opponents; as examples, *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, *Syndicate*, and *Mirage* (2023) all take place during periods of internal social and political conflict for their respective historical settings, and thus the combat which takes place within these games is narratively framed as conflict between opposing factions within this internal context.²³⁸

Even historical games that do not directly utilise combat as a primary gameplay mechanic, instead opting for more managerial gameplay systems as their principal game experience, often include some form of conflict or warfare as a subsidiary challenge or background influence within the context of their chosen historical period, thereby inferring that conflict and warfare remains endemic to the narratives of historical periods associated with these games. For example, the indie game *War Hospital* (2024) sees players managing a British military hospital during WWI, requiring them to balance treating as many wounded soldiers as possible with the limited resources available; while the gameplay itself does not

²³⁶ Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, pp. 12-15.

²³⁷ Wiltgren, “The Basics of Conflict in Games”.

²³⁸ *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*; *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*; Ubisoft Bordeaux, *Assassin’s Creed: Mirage* (2023), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft.

directly require the player to participate in combat, the game remains bound to the inherently militarised context of WWI, as the player deals with both the immediate consequences of battle in the form of wounded soldiers and more ephemeral consequences of conflict upon their ability to perform their tasks, such as limitations of staff and resources.²³⁹ However, a natural consequence of this emphasis of conflict and warfare within games is a diminution or ignorance of historical perspectives outside of this “frontline combat” context, particularly to civilian groups or demographics which form “minorities” within this “frontline combat” context of a historical period.²⁴⁰ Consequently, we can detect a particular interest within historical games towards historical characters which allow these marginalised groups to be represented within a “frontline conflict” historical setting, an issue which shall be explored further in the following chapter.

The inherent emphasis upon warfare or conflict as a fundamental part of gaming’s technical perspective of history is perhaps most notable in gameplay genres such as the City-Builder or Grand-Strategy genres. City-Builder games, such as *CivCity: Rome* and *Manor Lords*, principally focus on building and managing settlements, along with resource and population management. In these games, conflict is often included as a secondary challenge for the player, which they must either supply resources for “off-screen” or protect their settlements against by assembling, supplying and commanding local garrisons; *CivCity: Rome*, for instance, includes a variety of maps for the player to choose, in some of which the player’s settlement can be attacked by “barbarians”, requiring them to build and supply legionary forts to defend their towns.²⁴¹

Meanwhile, *Manor Lords* includes AI-controlled bandit camps which will appear randomly within the game map and periodically steal resources from the player’s settlements unless they are destroyed, as well as off-map enemies in the form of raiders, who will appear periodically to attack the player’s settlements unless fought, and neighbouring lords with whom the player may battle for territories within the game map;²⁴² notably, the developer of *Manor Lords* emphasised combat’s place as a secondary feature

²³⁹ Brave Lamb Studios, *War Hospital* (2024), Xbox, PlayStation and PC. Published by Nacom.

²⁴⁰ Ramsey, “Brutal Games”, pp. 107-109; Rubillo-Campillo, “A digital humanities approach to European presence in historical wargames”, pp. 71-90.

²⁴¹ FireFly Studios, *CivCity: Rome* (2006), PC. Published by 2K.

²⁴² Slavic Magic, *Manor Lords* (2023), PC. Published by Hooded Horse.

within *Manor Lords*' gameplay in order to discourage comparisons to the *Total War* RTS franchise by players.²⁴³ However, the inclusion of conflict as part of the narrative which these experiences present despite their position as secondary mechanics reinforces the idea that warfare is a significant contextual element of the historical narrative of these games' respective settings, despite these games' primary focus upon more peaceful, domestic experiences within these historical contexts.



Figure 1.6: Promotional gameplay image of combat within *Manor Lords* (Slavic Magic, 2023).

Similarly, Grand Strategy games, such as Paradox Interactive's *Hearts of Iron IV* and *Crusader Kings III*, position the player as the leader of a nation or faction; the player is then tasked with expanding their resources, influence and or territory within the game map to obtain dominance.²⁴⁴ These experiences are sometimes referred to amongst video and tabletop gaming communities as "4x" games, a colloquial abbreviation meaning "explore, expand, exploit, exterminate" in reference to key mechanical and interactive features of these experiences. While conflict is more prominent in this game genre than in more "passive scenario" games like *City-Builder*s, managerial gameplay mechanics remain at the core of the experience and the player is given very limited technical agency over the conflicts

²⁴³ Manor Lords, "A few words from the dev before the launch into Early Access", *Manor Lords – Steam*, 17 April 2024, <https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/1363080/view/5850813762792298449>; Victoria Kennedy, "Manor Lords is not a Total War competitor, developer insists", *Eurogamer*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/manor-lords-is-not-a-total-war-competitor-developer-insists>.

²⁴⁴ *Hearts of Iron IV*; *Crusader Kings III*.

which may occur. *Crusader Kings III*, for example, focuses on the player building and expanding their chosen realm during the medieval period, but frequently requires the player to either invade or defend territory with their armies.²⁴⁵ However, the limit of the player's technical agency in these encounters is directing their armies to a particular territory; once a battle has been initiated, the player's control over the selected army is removed until the battle ends or reaches a predetermined phase in which the player may order the army to disengage.²⁴⁶ This secondary influence of conflict in games focused on the mundane or managerial aspects of a historical world again pushes developers towards historical periods either dominated by conflict or where conflict is a significant element of the popular understanding of the period.

In each of these scenarios – whether the player occupies an overtly commanding role in a historical conflict or is tasked with alternate objectives in which conflict or warfare are secondary challenges – it is possible to identify underlying principle which is fundamental to video games as a participatory medium: player agency. In each of the gameplay scenarios discussed above, the player is contextually positioned as the determining power and furnished with tools to achieve their personal narrative or gameplay objectives. This subsequently places the emphasis on the abilities of the player to overcome the challenges imposed by the game to advance the narrative, with the warfare narrative framing offering clear and impactful success and failure conditions.

In the context of historical games, this emphasis upon the agency of players could be interpreted as emphasising the role of the individual in determining the course of history – an interpretation which arguably harkens back to the “great men” school of historical thought espoused by Thomas Carlyle and others²⁴⁷ – by asserting the power of the player's role in commanding events through gameplay, which then dictates the course of a game's “historical” narrative. However, this same idea of player agency and power within gameplay similarly applies to historical games depicting a “history from below” interpretation of

²⁴⁵ *Crusader Kings III*.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ For discussion of Carlyle's “Great Man Theory”, see for examples Mark Dziak, “Great Man theory”, *EBSCO*, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/great-man-theory>; Bert Alan Spector, “Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory more fully considered”, *Leadership*, vol. 12: 2 (2016), pp. 250-260; Kenny Cheah Soon Lee, “The Great Man and Trait Theory of Leadership”, in Donnie Adams (ed.), *Mastering Theories of Educational Leadership and Management* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2018), pp. 19-26.

historical events, such within as the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series which depict the player in the role of ordinary soldiers affecting the outcomes of their relevant conflicts, and within gameplay scenarios – such as in strategy games such as *Total War* or *Crusader Kings* – where historical settings are divorced from their narrative contexts, thus emphasising the player’s interactive agency in determining the course of events, which can be furthered or challenged through conflict.

Conflict and warfare within video games also features a psychological pull. Humans have long been attracted to the darker, more violent aspects of the world for entertainment.²⁴⁸ Inevitably, the facility of games to potentially indulge these violent impulses has prompted critical responses, both from gaming communities and external commentators. The complaint that violent video games are “corrupting the young” is a criticism of the gaming medium that has been employed for decades, often spuriously used by conservative outlets opposed to video games’ popularity and growth as an artistic medium.²⁴⁹ However, some incidents of real-world criminal activity have subsequently linked the perpetrators’ actions with violent video games, such as claims that the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting was facilitated or inspired by the depiction of violence in video games.²⁵⁰

These arguments against the depiction of violence within games can find meaningful resonance within the gaming industry, as certain games, such as the isometric shooter *Hatred* (2015) and school shooting simulator *Active Shooter* (2018), have provoked understandable controversy by actively enabling or encouraging players to participate in overtly graphic or controversial depictions of murder, torture, and other grievous crimes.²⁵¹ The sociological influences and effects of violent video games have caught the attention of

²⁴⁸ For example, see Mads Daugberg, “Battle”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 25-26.

²⁴⁹ For example, see Guy Porter and Vladan Starcevic, “Are Violent Video Games Harmful?”, *Australian Psychiatry*, vol. 15: 5 (2007), pp. 422-426.

²⁵⁰ Ed Pilkington, “Sandy Hook report – shooter Adam Lanza was obsessed with mass murder”, *The Guardian*, 25 November 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/25/sandy-hook-shooter-adam-lanza-report>; Parkin, “Shooter: How Video Games Fund Arms Manufacturers”.

²⁵¹ Destructive Creations, *Hatred* (2015), PC; Revived Games, *Active Shooter* (2018), PC. Published by Acid Publishing Group; David Murphy, “Trailer for Disturbing Mass Murder Game, Hatred, Stirs Controversy”, *PC Gamer*, 16 October 2014, <https://uk.pcmag.com/games/36696/trailer-for-disturbing-mass-murder-game-hatred-stirs-controversy>; “School shooting game Active Shooter pulled by Steam”, *BBC News*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44302146>.

academics and other professional interests, partly as a consequence of these titles' wider discourse, as demonstrated by studies such as those exploring the effects of and motivations behind the appeal of violent video games,²⁵² and the exploitation of conflict-scenario video games as a recruitment tool by real-world militaries, most notably in the case of the US Army-created game series *America's Army* (2002-2013).²⁵³

While games depicting conflict and warfare have been highlighted as a potential forum for controversial depictions of violence – for instance, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (2009) and its infamous “No Russian” story mission, in which players participate in a terrorist assault on a civilian airport²⁵⁴ – a significant majority of video games depict warfare or combat in historical settings which can be defined as “nation-state level” conflict, typically through historical conflicts such as WWII. As such, their digital representations are implicitly restrained by real-world conventions on the conduct of warfare and its participants.²⁵⁵ Within these depictions of conflict in video games, players are rarely presented with the ability or opportunity to conduct actions which modern morality or legal “rules of engagement” for armed forces deem criminal, which, as discussed previously in relation to the depiction of Nazi war crimes within German perspectives of WWII, permits the player to maintain a degree of “plausible deniability” regarding historical transgressions.

However, some actions which are deemed morally questionable or illicit under modern conventions of warfare are reflected in historical contexts where such actions are evidenced in the historical narratives of the period being depicted, whose inclusion is therefore contextually legitimised in these specific circumstances. For instance, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2010) features the use of flamethrowers against Japanese forces during the

²⁵² For examples, see Porter and Starcevic, “Are Violent Video Games Harmful?”, pp. 422-426; Jodi L. Whitaker, André Melzer, Georges Steffen, and Brad J. Bushman, “The Allure of the Forbidden: Breaking Taboos, Frustration, and Attraction to Violent Video Games”, *Psychological Science*, vol. 24: 4 (2013), pp. 507-513.

²⁵³ John Derby, “Violent Video Games and the Military: Recruitment, Training, and Treating Mental Health”, *Art Education*, vol. 67: 3 (2014), pp. 19-25; US Army, *America's Army* (2002-2013), Xbox, PlayStation and PC.

²⁵⁴ Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Activision; Kieth Stuart, “Should Modern Warfare 2 allow us to play at terrorism?”, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2009/oct/29/games-gameculture>; Blake Hester, “‘Remember, No Russian’: Critics and Developers Remember Call of Duty’s Most Infamous Mission”, *VG24/7*, 28 October 2019, <https://www.vg247.com/remember-no-russian-critics-and-developers-remember-call-of-dutys-most-infamous-mission>.

²⁵⁵ Ben Clarke, Christian Rouffaer and François Sénéchaud, “Beyond the Call of Duty: why shouldn’t video game players face the same dilemmas as real soldiers?”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 96: 886 (2012), pp. 711-737.

Pacific Campaign in WWII, actions which are historically evidenced and thus a valid historiographical inclusion, despite the visceral in-game presentation and moral questionability of the act in modern eyes.²⁵⁶

Likewise, the *Total War* strategy series includes a feature in many of its historical entries whereby players can decide the fate of captives taken prisoner in battle during a game's "campaign" mode, a frequently included option of which is mass execution; although execution of prisoners of war is considered a war crime by modern legal and ethical standards,²⁵⁷ the *Total War* series' frequent engagement with settings from antiquity and medieval history, where such actions are attested by surviving contemporary sources, justifies the contextual inclusion of this optional gameplay action.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, instances within games where mass executions can be ordered by the player rarely visibly depict the act being undertaken, thereby retaining a degree of separation between the player and controversial actions. These incidents reflect that while the conduct of warfare has changed throughout history, its depiction within video game representations of historic conflicts remains governed by the cultural mores of modern society, and games can invoke critical controversy if they are perceived to permit players to transgress these socio-moral boundaries.²⁵⁹

Despite this, the demands of player agency within some gameplay genres, most notably within the Role-Playing Game genre, require the inclusion of in-game mechanical or narrative facilities for varied interactions within gameplay, some of which may include means to commit transgressive or illicit actions within the game. The potential to commit these transgressive actions in-game thereby creates a contextual narrative fantasy for players that it is *their* choice, *their* agency, to commit in-game crimes, especially if the game

²⁵⁶ Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Activision; GameSpot, *How Games Get Flamethrowers Wrong – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 15 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LoZg2xaXmc> [10:59-13:42].

²⁵⁷ Michael S. Bryant, *A World History of War Crimes: From Antiquity to the Present* (Second edition; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 1-4.

²⁵⁸ See for examples, Bryant, *A World History of War Crimes*, pp. 13-106; Andy King, "'Then a great misfortune befell them': the laws of war on surrender and the killing of prisoners on the battlefield in the Hundred Years War", *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 43: 1 (2017), pp. 106-117; Michael Jones, *The Black Prince* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2017), pp. 89-90.

²⁵⁹ Chapman and Linderorth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play', p. 140.

furnishes the player with multiple options to achieve an objective, some of which may require the player to commit in-game crimes.²⁶⁰

However, even in scenarios whereby players are enabled to commit criminal acts within gameplay, games remain subject to modern moral and culture views, and as such restrict the player's ability to undertake certain crimes within gameplay even in formats where criminality is mechanically possible; while depictions of, for example, torture and sexual violence have occasionally featured as "playable" actions in video games – including a narratively-required participatory torture sequence within the recently-released *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*²⁶¹ – these actions are frequently deemed unacceptably transgressive by gaming audiences, as demonstrated by the critical responses to the depiction of sexual assault within *Custer's Revenge* (1982) and a participatory torture sequence within *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013).²⁶²

One may possibly interpret this constraint upon players' ability to commit transgressive actions as a manifestation of a lingering perception that video games are 'a children's medium',²⁶³ wherein the most extreme forms of gaming content must be censored for younger audiences. However, the production and popularity of games targeted at more mature gaming audiences which incorporate violent, sexual or otherwise explicit content challenges this idea. Instead, the restriction of particular criminal actions within gameplay is arguably more illustrative of authorial perspectives towards player agency within the gaming medium, whereby some developers actively attempt to minimise or prevent certain player actions within gameplay as they believe that some players would actively endeavour to commit extremely transgressive actions; this view is supported by developer statements such as those made towards *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, which actively excluded any

²⁶⁰ Whitaker, Melzer, Steffen, and Bushman, "The Allure of the Forbidden", pp. 507-513.

²⁶¹ Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* (2025), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Deep Silver.

²⁶² For examples, see Luke Plunkett, "Rape, Racism, & Repetition: This is Probably the Worst Game Ever Made", *Kotaku*, 7 October 2011, <https://kotaku.com/rape-racism-repetition-this-is-probably-the-worst-g-5847507>; "Decoder Ring – Custer's Revenge", online audio recording, *Slate*, 23 December 2021, <https://slate.com/podcasts/decoder-ring/2021/12/custers-revenge-racist-sexist-trolling>; Alex Hern, "Grand Theft Auto 5 under fire for graphic torture scene", *The Guardian*, 18 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/18/grand-theft-auto-5-under-fire-for-graphic-torture-scene>; Tom Bramwell, "Is the most disturbing scene in GTA 5 justified?", *Eurogamer*, 14 February 2014, <https://www.eurogamer.net/is-the-most-disturbing-scene-in-gta5-justified>.

²⁶³ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p. vii.

children from its depiction of the medieval world to preclude the potential for players to inflict harm upon them.²⁶⁴

Furthermore, many instances of “non-nation state conflicts” in historical games also incorporate gameplay mechanics which respond to the player’s actions if the player transgresses moral or legal conventions within the technical perspective offered by the mechanics of the game in question. In many cases, including *Mafia II* (2010), *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, this exists as a form of in-game judicial response, whereby players will be pursued and attacked by law enforcement or soldier NPCs, whose numbers or relative strength will often quickly overwhelm and overpower the player avatar if the player continues to transgress the game’s “laws” within gameplay.²⁶⁵ Likewise, in many entries of the *Assassin’s Creed* series (with some exceptions, such as *Odyssey*), unlawful killing of “non-combatant” NPCs will even result in a forced “game-over” screen if conducted too frequently, forcing the affected player to reload from an earlier point in their gameplay with the potential loss of progress this may entail.²⁶⁶ Thus, while video games frequently incorporate violence, conflict, and warfare, its depiction is often presented in a manner designed to restrain the player, whereby in-game systems minimise the player’s direct agency to participate in controversial actions, especially in instances where this may directly impact upon or associate players with real historical atrocities.²⁶⁷

Although this can be potentially argued as historiographical censorship and “sanitising” the narratives of violent historical events to make them palatable to gaming audiences, the concealment and enforced separation of extreme historical violence or criminal actions and the players of historical games minimises the potential for game developers to be subjected to hostile public responses voicing criticism of the depiction of

²⁶⁴ Carley Garcia, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Dev Explains Game’s Lack of Children”, *GameRant*, 15 April 2025, <https://gamerant.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-why-are-there-no-children/>; Sam Woods, “‘You Don’t Want People Throwing Another Body On Top Of A Pile Of Child Corpses’: Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Producer Finally Reveals Why The Game Doesn’t Feature Kids”, *The Gamer*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.thegamer.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-producer-finally-reveals-why-the-game-doesnt-feature-kids/>.

²⁶⁵ *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*; *Red Dead Redemption 2*; *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

²⁶⁶ Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Quebec *et al.*, *Assassin’s Creed* (2007-present), Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, PC, and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

²⁶⁷ Chapman and Linderorth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140.

these actions within the video game medium. While there are, inevitably, exceptions to this pattern, either enabling the player's participation in historical atrocities or of popular praise for the acknowledgement of incidents of illicit historical violence within a game, the popular backlash against transgressive depictions of in-game violence encourages caution amongst game developers, who consequently maintain the "plausible deniability" of players engaging with historical narratives associated with historical crimes.

These psychological elements – the attraction of warfare and a degree of freedom of action to transgress certain social norms in a "safe environment" – both contribute to and draw upon the function of video games to operate as a power fantasy and enable player agency by constructing game narratives which facilitate these aspects.²⁶⁸ By situating a historical video game or its narrative within a period of political or military conflict, video games draw upon the psychological appeal that combat and violence can provide and present it as an element of overt spectacle, under the presentational guise of "action", and of gameplay challenge for players to overcome in order to resolve the conflict. This psychological element in particular places an emphasis on the player's ability to harness the tools provided by a particular game to succeed over their in-game opponents in order to conclude the narrative.

Moreover, these factors which contribute to the appeal of conflict and the contextual narrative opportunities that it offers as a historical setting are underlined by a contrasting experience within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. In the second act of the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s fictional narrative, during the mission "A Needle in a Haystack", the player is required to infiltrate the community of a Benedictine monastery in order to identify and punish a criminal in hiding.²⁶⁹ Although *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* offers multiple potential gameplay avenues to achieve this objective, the majority of them narratively require the player to be initiated into the monastic community and thus live by a proscribed schedule of activity which reflects a simplified version of historical monastic rules in order to complete their gameplay objective. Not only does this requirement force the player to conform to a strictly enforced time schedule in order to avoid punishment – which can result in the confiscation of gameplay items required to facilitate progress towards the player's

²⁶⁸ Muriel and Crawford, "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society", pp. 138-157.

²⁶⁹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; "A Needle in a Haystack", *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*.

objective, or even result in the player's expulsion from the monastic community and thus severely increase the difficulty of their task – it also slows the narrative pace of the game dramatically as the player gradually accumulates clues whilst avoiding punishment or detection.²⁷⁰

The setting of this monastic gameplay mission also provides a marked contrast to a more adventurous, combat-focused experience, like that provided by the rest of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance's* narrative and gameplay, by restricting the player to the relatively small confines of the monastic cloister – from which they are unable to escape without particular gameplay items²⁷¹ – and forcing the player into a situation of relative passivity in their actions. Despite this, it can be argued that this section of the game offers a more historically representative experience of the medieval world in which the game is set, at least for a specific portion of the European male population, as this section of the game reflects a more mundane everyday reality by contrast with the comparatively rarer though more dramatic experience of warfare reflected by other sections of the game's narrative.

Although video game depictions of history heavily emphasise the narrative and contextual role of conflict and warfare, depictions of warfare in historical games are often imperfect from a technical perspective. Philip Sabin has noted the difficulty of using commercially available historical games – he specifically names *Rome: Total War* (2004) – to model battles from antiquity because in-game battles 'last just a few minutes but involve enormous mutual casualties rather than the one-sided losses attested by the sources.'²⁷² In a similar vein, *Call of Duty* games are often criticised for their overly cinematic action sequences and gameplay mechanics, in which the player is regularly capable of absorbing and recovering from unrealistic degrees of injury whilst gunning down scores of opponents as a "one-man army";²⁷³ Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson describe this form of representing historical conflict as an 'interactive "war movie" version of history'.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Philip Sabin, *Lost Battles: Reconstructing the Great Clashes of the Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), p. xviii; Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 22-25.

²⁷³ Sabin, *Simulating War*, p. 23.

²⁷⁴ Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson, "Shooting for Accuracy", in Alexander Von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 243-254.

It is, of course, possible to identify technical and authorial reasons for these discrepancies. War games mechanically rely on a mathematical foundation to structure combat, into which human decision-making can be applied;²⁷⁵ in video games, this mathematical basis can be found in the game's source code, within which metrics such as armour, attack, defence, morale and so on are all ascribed their own numerical values which vary between in-game units and are affected by complex, interlinking systems. However, this mathematical foundation within a game's mechanics can never fully accommodate the chance factor that exists in the real world, despite attempts to introduce it in some form, forcing researchers to rely on trends across a series of simulations,²⁷⁶ which is a flawed system of assessing "one-off" events like pitched battles within which an array of circumstantial variables can affect the outcome. Isolating historical events like battles from the narrative which produced them for the purposes of a digital recreation also emphasizes the importance of these conflicts within historical narratives to the potential detriment of broader phenomena, whose impact can be as significant as that of warfare, but which cannot be marked with as much definition in the historical records.

As with many flaws within gaming's depiction of history, technical imperfections within the depiction of historical conflict can be attributed the technical requirements of gameplay and audience interpretation. For example, the difference in timing between an in-game battle and its real-life counterpart noted by Sabin can be attributed to the need to keep players of these games engaged.²⁷⁷ Likewise, the unrealistic endurance depicted within *Call of Duty* and similar shooter representations of combat are reflective of video games' need to facilitate engagement with a wide player audience of varying skill and knowledge levels whose understanding of historical periods is heavily influenced by prior media such as film and television. Alterations to technique or physical objects can be similarly ascribed to the difficulties of recreating them in a digital format, a feat that even modern digital recreation techniques such as motion-capture, 3D scanning, and photogrammetry cannot fully overcome.²⁷⁸ Above all, the often-indefinable demands of a game or franchise's players and the desire to facilitate individual player choice while maintaining a mechanically

²⁷⁵ Sabin, *Lost Battles*, p. xvii.

²⁷⁶ Sabin, *Lost Battles*, pp. xvii-xviii. See also, Annette Vowinkel, "Past Futures: From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games", *Historical Social Research*, vol. 34: 2 (2009), pp. 322-332.

²⁷⁷ Sabin, *Simulating War*, pp. 22-24.

²⁷⁸ Traynor and Ferguson, "Shooting for Accuracy", pp. 243-254.

balanced experience is a struggle unique to the gaming format, which inherently compromises the factual fidelity of the history being depicted in order to facilitate player interactions with “historical” material.

The latter consideration, of player expectations and requirements, is particularly evident in the construction of warfare within the FPS genre, as the depiction of conflict within this scenario is fundamentally tied to gameplay mechanics. As an example, recent FPS games in the *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* franchises, such as *Battlefield I* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, have been strongly influenced by the preceding entries from their respective series, where these games had spent a decade portraying modern or science-fiction settings and armaments. Consequently, players who joined or followed these series during that time became accustomed to particular methods of gameplay facilitated by the modern firearms being represented, such as the ability to customise individual weapons to suit gameplay situations or personal preferences, a common feature of modern firearms design, which has featured in both *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* games, and a means of facilitating individual player agency within gameplay; thus, in order to avoid alienating players accustomed to these types of gameplay interactions, these interactions had to be artificially recreated within the historical settings of subsequent games of the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series, despite being unrepresentative or anachronous for the historical conflicts in question, solely to facilitate player expectations for gameplay and personal agency over their game experience.²⁷⁹

A significant counterpoint to this separation from historical narrative within the technical perspective of combat offered by *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* games can, however, be seen in more “historically accurate” game experiences, such as *Hell Let Loose* and other “military simulator” (“mil-sim”) games which strive to represent historical military scenarios as realistically as possible within a digital game context. “Mil-sim” games like *Hell Let Loose*, while following similar mechanical formulae to more “popular” shooter games like *Call of Duty*, expressly attempt to authentically replicate military scenarios in a game context, in direct contrast to more cinematically inspired gameplay experiences like *Call of Duty* and as such eschew some mechanics which render “popular” depictions of conflict “inauthentic”; in

²⁷⁹ GameSpot, *How Games Get Weapon Attachments Wrong – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 6 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiRMLtLbY5E>.

“mil-sim” titles, like *Hell Let Loose*, the player can often be “killed” within the game by a single hit, actively contrasting with the unrealistic, but accessible health mechanics seen in *Call of Duty* games amongst others.²⁸⁰ However, game experiences like *Hell Let Loose* are designed with a more select audience in mind, focusing on “hardcore” gamers or those who enjoy greater “historical accuracy” within the construction of in-game conflict scenarios, by contrast with the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* games which are designed to entertain far broader gaming audiences and so present more exaggerated scenarios with technical mechanisms which enable easier engagement with gameplay for less skilled or intellectually invested players.²⁸¹

While this does demonstrate that not all video games incorporate historical content into their experiences as loosely and with as much disconnection from historical narrative context as others, it does reinforce the point that a video game’s depiction of historical phenomena in relation to their recorded narrative context remains dependent upon the technical perspective provided by the gameplay mechanical requirements of the game into which historical narratives and artefacts are implemented. Consequently, a historical game’s genre must be considered to be as significant an element of its depiction of the past as that of narrative.²⁸²

History as a Gaming Genre

Like many genres within the video game medium, historical games come in a variety of forms, both incorporating and divorced from their historical narratives. It is notable that many of the most prominent historical games incorporate overt narrative elements, including the *Assassin’s Creed*, *Call of Duty*, and *Red Dead Redemption* series. These narrative-driven historical games utilise predominantly linear or nodal narrative structures, enabling the developers of these titles to exercise a greater degree of authorial control over the narratives which these games provide and therein the historical perspective which these

²⁸⁰ Black Matter, Cover 6 Studios, and Expression Games, *Hell Let Loose* (2021), PC. Later released on Xbox and PlayStation. Published by Team17 Digital Ltd; Sabin, *Simulating War*, pp. 22-24.

²⁸¹ Sabin, *Simulating War*, pp. 22-24; Traynor and Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, pp. 243-254

²⁸² Vit Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 11:2 (2008), pp. 203-220.

games offer. However, while some games such as the *Assassin's Creed* series or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* attempt to keep in-game events narratively linked by recorded historical events, even if these events are creatively interpreted for the purposes of a particular game, other games, such as *Sid Meier's Civilisation* or *For Honor*, eschew established historical narrative altogether and portray history as collections of iconography in order to suit the mechanical and gameplay requirements of their particular game genres.

Throughout this chapter, key facets of video games engagement with historical narrative has been explored and interrogated to illustrate the tensions between history as a narrative medium and video games as an entertainment format. Through exploration of narrative formats employed within historical games and their interactions with gameplay, such the application of binary narrative interpretations such as concepts of “heroes” and “villains” or the imperative to situate gameplay requirements such as combat within historical scenarios, we can identify patterns and commonalities within video games’ engagement with historical subjects. At the heart of these can often be identified a need or desire for agency, either to enable developers to create artistic or entertaining experiences or for players to feel that their input into the game experience is responsible for shaping the outcome of events. As a consequence of its varied employment within the video game medium, both as narratively structured experiences presenting ‘realist’ depictions of historical events and free-form “gameplay sandboxes” providing ‘constructionalist’ environments to engage with larger historical eras, history has acquired an authorial perspective of being viewed as a thematic genre, akin to science-fiction, horror, or fantasy, by gaming commentators. Moreover, just as with those more sensational genres, a common thread which “makes” a game “historical” is the construction of its aesthetic identity: its art style, music, character design, and so on, which should all be drawn from, or at least be identifiably based upon, verifiable historical source material appropriate to the period in question. Yet because of the varied forms which games employing historical iconography adopt, the popular understanding of what constitutes a “historical” game becomes blurred, encompassing both more overtly “authentic” experiences such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, conceptual experiences such as *Crusader Kings III*, and fantastical “cinematic” experiences like *Assassin's Creed*.

Part of this authorial perspective can be observed within nebulous debates of loosely defined and subjectively interpreted concepts such as “historical accuracy” within games, which shall be explored in depth in Chapter 3, and which influence the degree of factual legitimacy an individual player may assign to a given “historical” game.²⁸³ Consequently, games depicting particular historical periods frequently draw upon similar design elements drawn from legitimate historical sources and cinematic genre influences, quickly creating an easily recognisable iconography and “design language” for particular historical periods which the player can interpret at a glance, onto which developers can iterate with unique narratives and gameplay experiences.

This is especially important for video games, as the fiscal reality of gaming as a commercial industry relies on ensuring the appeal and accessibility of a game to the broadest possible audience; even dedicated historical games, such as Paradox Interactive’s historical grand strategy title *Crusader Kings III*, achieve success by attracting players from outside a core demographic of history enthusiasts and appealing to gamers with little interest in historical content but who are drawn to particular formats of gameplay.²⁸⁴ Consequently, in order to remain commercially viable, developers of history games are, to some extent, required to de-emphasise historical subject matter in order to facilitate engagement with non-specialist audiences.

Furthermore, discussions of gameplay format and audience engagement affecting historical games are reflective of parallel discussions impacting the wider gaming industry, with historical games including *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* and *Valhalla* cited amongst examples of the pursuit of “infinitely playable” game formats within triple-A games development. Although popular amongst game publishers as a means of creating an ‘indefinite financial ecosystem’ of monetizable game content, the proliferation of these

²⁸³ See for examples, Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*; Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, in Alexander Von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 243-254; Helen Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*” in Alvestad and Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture*, pp. 28-39; John Glancy, “Creative License vs Historical Authority”, *Historical Games Network*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.historicalgames.net/creative-licence-vs-historical-authority/>; Eugen Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/2719#more-2719>.

²⁸⁴ Joshua Wollens, “Crusader Kings 3 celebrates 3 years with stats showing we’re 45% more likely to do a murder than fall in love”, *PC Gamer*, 1 September 2023, <https://www.pcgamer.com/crusader-kings-3-celebrates-3-years-with-stats-showing-were-45-more-likely-to-do-a-murder-than-fall-in-love/>.

gameplay experiences in recent years has arguably oversaturated the market, creating tension with player audiences and encouraging a resurgence of smaller, more curated narratives and gameplay experiences.²⁸⁵ Game commentators have noted, for example, a contrast between the “feel” of gameplay between the sprawling, open world “sandbox” of *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* and the smaller, more contained narrative and gameplay experience of *Assassin’s Creed: Mirage*, despite similarities in gameplay mechanics and authorial attitudes to the depiction of these games’ respective historical settings.²⁸⁶ This resurgence of smaller, more curated gaming experiences offers greater opportunities for new historical experiences with focused historical narratives, often utilising linear or nodal narrative structures which operate more effectively within smaller gameplay experiences, thereby allowing developers to highlight under-represented historical perspectives even within well-known historical contexts.

It could be argued that the proliferation of historical experiences simplified to suit popular gaming formats is a natural consequence of how the video game medium operates. Games must rely on their visual, audio, and narrative identities to distinguish themselves because popular gameplay genres naturally restrict games to particular technical design formulae, which, coupled with corporate business mentalities that overtly follow statistical trends and reproduce popular gameplay systems to attract customers, lead to many titles possessing similar mechanics and “playing” in near-identical fashions. Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence scattered throughout the games industry that this similarity between games at a technical perspective is a significant element of how video games operate as a commercial entity, such as through digital game stores recommending titles from similar gameplay genres to those an individual has played previously. Consequently, games must rely on aesthetics and narrative elements to obtain an identity which allows them to “stand out” and attract customers amidst their competitors.

²⁸⁵ WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*; WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting “100 Hour Games”*; Richardson, “Too many video games, too little time – but could that be changing”.

²⁸⁶ For examples, see Christian Donlan, “Assassin’s Creed Mirage review – a fascinating new city and the embrace of a classic formula”, *Eurogamer*, 4 October 2023, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-mirage-review>; Jordan Ramée, “Assassin’s Creed Mirage review – Back To Basics”, *GameSpot*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-mirage-review-back-to-basics/1900-6418126/>; Jarret Green, “Assassin’s Creed Mirage Review”, *IGN*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/assassins-creed-mirage-review>.

However, while these commercial influences may help to explain the rationale for historical games following particular mechanical and technical design templates, such as the “infinitely playable” game template identified across recent triple-A releases,²⁸⁷ this does not fully explain the propensity for particular historical periods to develop recognisable aesthetic and iconographic identities across games of different technical genres. The dislocation of historical phenomena from its narrative context can only be partially ascribed to the operation of video games as a commercial medium. It can, however, advance an understanding of why historical games favour particular gameplay genres and narrative experiences, such as those which depict and emphasise periods of historical conflict. Game genre demands for “action”, challenge and spectacle may all be satisfied by conflict or warfare within gameplay, which encourages historical games to emphasise historical narratives – such as those of the World Wars – which facilitate these gameplay requirements and enable in-game conflict to occur in a manner organic to the narrative or experience provided by that game. Likewise, historical periods and conflicts which are easily recognisable within popular culture increase the appeal of these periods by allowing developers to draw active connections to other well-known historical media.

Gameplay expectations for “action” and spectacle may also be suborned to those of player agency by eschewing overt historical narratives altogether and instead offering “gameplay sandboxes” in which the player may determine their own actions and narratives within a landscape of historical iconography. Strategy games such as *Sid Meier’s Civilisation*, *Total War* and *Crusader Kings* are arguably the strongest representatives of this facility of games to sideline established historical narratives in favour of counterfactual gameplay,²⁸⁸ but indications of a preference for “gameplay sandboxes” in favour of curated narratives can also be identified in “open world” games such as the *Assassin’s Creed* and *Red Dead Redemption* series, as well as within player attitudes towards incidents of “false agency” or ‘faux choice’ within in-game narratives.²⁸⁹ If we return to Meadows’ observation that

²⁸⁷ WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting “100 Hour Games”*.

²⁸⁸ Apperley, “Modding the Historians’ Code: Historical Versimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination”, pp. 185-198; Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 231-257; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p. 22.

²⁸⁹ Muriel and Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, pp. 138-157; Miller, *Digital Storytelling*, pp. 118-119; Alexandra, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey’s Latest DLC Has A Romantic Ending You Can’t Change”; Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey DLC breezes past its baby controversy”.

narrative exists in order to convey perspective,²⁹⁰ the removal of curated narratives by developers of historical games in favour of “historical gameplay sandboxes” inherently promotes the concept of “user-generated narrative”, encouraging players to create their own interactive experiences of historical worlds and subjects and, therefore, their own individual subjective authorial perspectives of historical periods, which may not necessarily align with the historical perspectives offered by the contemporary sources of those same periods.

While this can potentially make any subsequent learning gained from interactions with historical subjects through video games more impactful, as the player has greater personal investment in any exploration of historical subjects which they undertake, it can also potentially expose either a historical game or its subject to problematic historiographical phenomena as historical subjects are warped or dislocated from their narrative context in order to suit the demands and expectations of modern gaming audiences. The creative freedom permitted by divesting players from recorded historical narratives can make certain narratives and historical perspectives more accessible to engage with, however they can also become controversial in certain circumstances where the depiction of these narratives conflict with politicised understandings of the history in question. While these controversies can be observed in the case of presenting historical game experiences from historical perspectives proscribed by socio-cultural taboos, as in cases of presenting playable German perspectives in WWII-set games, controversies surrounding the implementation of narrative perspectives and engagement with politicised understandings of history are arguably more significant and illuminating within the context of demographic representation, most notably within the politically charged context of depicting marginalised demographic communities within historical games.

²⁹⁰ Meadows, *Pause and Effect*, p. 2.

Chapter 2: History and Contemporary Perspectives - Exploring Modern Political Controversies in Historical Video Games

Popular culture is, and always has been, steeped in real-world politics. As an example, George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars* – which Chris Kempshall notes as ‘one of the world’s most profitable entertainment franchises’ – said that his works were always political, with ‘a very, very elaborate social, emotional, political context that it rests in’.¹ Video games are no exception to this pattern. Whether designed as intentional reflections of ongoing political debates, as in the depictions of computer hackers and the surveillance state in Ubisoft’s *Watch Dogs* series (2014-2020),² or channelling contemporary fears to depict a ‘worst-case scenario’ of current geopolitical events, as with the Cold War nuclear Armageddon-simulator *Missile Command* (1981),³ video games have long served to confront their players with real-world political discussions within the bounds of an entertainment medium.⁴

Likewise, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, political discourse surrounding historical narratives also dictates that certain perspectives and narratives within history are more challenging than others to justifiably portray within video games in a manner that is deemed appropriate for public consumption.⁵ However, as society and cultural views continue to shift and evolve, so too are video games, positioned at the forefront of modern media culture, willingly repositioned by their developers in relation to changing global

¹ Chris Kempshall, *The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 1-2.

² Ubisoft Montreal and Ubisoft Toronto, *Watch Dogs* (2014-2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC, Nintendo Wii U and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; Timothy J. Seppala, “The real life hacking behind Watch Dogs’ virtual world”, *Engadget*, 23 May 2014, <https://www.engadget.com/2014-05-23-watch-dogs-hacking-kaspersky.html>; Alex Hern, “Watch Dogs Legion’s dystopian post-Brexit London”, *The Guardian*, 26 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/jun/26/watch-dogs-legions-dystopian-post-brexit-london>.

³ John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 87-94.

⁴ See also, Joyce Neys and Jeroen Jansz, “Engagement in play, engagement in politics: Playing political video games”, in René Glas, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens and Imar de Vries (eds.), *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 36-49.

⁵ Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, “Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games” in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 140 & 145-149.

circumstances.⁶ Of particular significance in this regard are the changing forms of video game characters, as video game developers increasingly strive to include and represent all members of society, thereby moving beyond an established, predominantly White, Western Male perspective within both video games and the companies which create them.⁷

While this inclusive attitude in of itself has proven controversial with certain gaming communities, this self-same adaptation of gaming experiences to incorporate greater representation can also result in significant consequences for gaming's depiction of history, as the past, naturally, cannot adapt to changing socio-political understandings and expanding demographics in the same ways or to the same extent that modern media can. This can, unfortunately, result in conflict and controversial discourse amongst players when a game's presentation of a historical subject conflicts with preconceived understandings of how games should engage with these subjects, sometimes regardless of whether it reflects an authentic perspective of the history in question relative to an agreed factual record.

Popular, non-academic discourse surrounding video games and the modern world more generally has become heavily politicised, with social media commonly cited as facilitating the increased polarisation of debates.⁸ Within this discourse, attitudes regarding the representation of formerly marginalised groups within the gaming medium form a significant topic, one that frequently divides players and developers between those aggressively espousing progressive or conservative political perspectives. Attempting to filter through the protestations of outrage and ardent rebuttals from both sides to reach factual conclusions about this discourse is a significant challenge, paralleling challenges that historians have struggled with for decades. As far back as 1950, E.H. Carr controversially

⁶ For example, see Tom Richardson, "No one forced us to make a game with a diverse cast", *BBC News*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4nnn69l483o>.

⁷ Erica Neely, "No Player is Ideal: Why Video Game Designers Cannot Ethically Ignore Players' Real-World Identities," conference paper (2017), p. 5, quoted in Lara Keilbart, "Queer Authenticity in the History of Games: Experiences of Knowing, Negotiating and Portraying Queerness in Games throughout the Last Four Decades" in Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), p. 183.

⁸ See for examples, Rory Cellan-Jones, "Twitter and the poisoning of online debate", *BBC News*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-29642313>; "Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars – but were afraid to ask", *The Guardian*, 13 June 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/13/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-culture-wars-but-were-afraid-to-ask>.

declared that ‘objective history does not exist’,⁹ which Richard J Evans, in an introduction to a reprinted edition of Carr’s *What is History?*, explained by saying that:

Carr opted for a position “where it is possible to maintain that an objective truth exists, but that no historian by himself or school of history by itself, can hope to achieve more than a faint and partial approximation of it”.¹⁰

More recently, Mark Stephen Meadows has observed that:

we all have our perspectives and opinions. Even the “objective” news sources... hand-pick phrases that appeal to specific audiences. This means that, despite our best efforts to be objective, an opinion is implied.¹¹

This phenomena of subjective understanding and interpretation of history brings with it significant challenges and risks with regards to attempting to conduct a discussion of the impact of political controversies upon the exploration of history within video games, as such discussion is, by definition, politicised. However, the status of video gaming as one of the, if not *the*, foremost forms of modern entertainment media – both for its economic value and cultural reach¹² – is such that to exclude discussion of gaming’s interactions with political controversies and vice versa to avoid the inherent political challenges would be to omit a critical element of the gaming medium’s relationship with modern culture and the presentation of historical subjects within gaming.

It is in this context of modern socio-political debate that the distinction between historical and authorial perspectives of a given historical game are arguably illustrated most strongly, while also emphasising the importance of interpreting both forms of perspective individually to understand the presentation of the past within a modern gaming context, as well as how this historical presentation is subsequently interpreted and discussed by modern audiences. Historical writing is frequently subordinated to immediate political objectives, and as such exploring incidents in which history is employed or scrutinised by

⁹ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Reprinted ed.; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. xi & p. 1.

¹⁰ Carr, *What is History?*, p. xii.

¹¹ Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The art of interactive narrative* (Indianapolis, Ind.: David Dwyer, 2003), p. 5.

¹² “Gaming worth more than video and music combined”, *BBC News*, 3 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-46746593>; Steffan Powell, “Netflix: Streamer’s expansion into gaming is ‘natural extension’”, *BBC News*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-66639477>.

modern actors for politicised purposes, and the manner in which this occurs, can reveal much about popular understandings of history and its role within modern culture.¹³

Therefore, it is essential to examine how modern social and political controversies interact with gaming's depiction of history, despite the inherent risks that such exploration entails in order to identify and examine patterns within modern understanding of history.

This chapter shall explore the issue of contested depictions of marginalised communities in historical games, identifying pressures for change and arguments raised in opposition, and discuss the impact which these controversies have upon the depiction and interpretation of historical subjects within video games; within this discussion, the *Assassin's Creed* series will be repeatedly highlighted as a case study due to the high media profile of this triple-A franchise, which consequently enables greater visibility and wider engagement for the controversies under discussion. While this discussion shall reference issues of social and historical theory debated within academic discourse of representation within games, this chapter shall primarily focus upon practical examples of the phenomena under discussion, highlighting arguments within game exemplars and player community discussions which illustrate the issues under exploration.

In particular, this chapter will highlight that although a significant majority of arguments against increased or improved representation for marginalised groups are voiced by conservative, often Western White Male dominated, political groups, the opportunities and ability of video games to depict increased demographic representation within historical games is complicated by technical and authorial perspectives of games as an entertainment and commercial medium, which place limits on the degree of historical discrimination or oppression which games are permitted to portray, particularly towards the player character. Moreover, even in spite of efforts to enact positive change, the degree and extent of this diversification has been questioned, notably in regard to the continued dominance of White Male perspectives within both games development and on-screen representation, and the influence which these authorial perspectives have upon the representation of marginalised perspectives in historical games. Consequently, while many developers and player communities may welcome improved representation of marginalised demographics within

¹³ John Tosh (ed.), *Historians on History* (2nd ed.; London: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009), p. 6.

historical games as a means of depicting and acknowledging the histories of these communities, the scope or manner of their representation may be restricted or undermined by technical and authorial perspectives within popular gameplay genres, thereby forcing developers to commit deliberate historiographical errors in order to facilitate positive inclusions but in doing so inadvertently perpetuate controversies surrounding these groups.

The occupational requirement of examining the past naturally brings the historian into contact with societies with cultural practices and ideas whose application in the modern world is antithetical to modern social values. While academic scholarship can highlight new facets of a historical experience, which can illuminate parallels, continuity or sharp contrasts with the past, academia remains at the mercy of the historical evidence which has survived and can only impose so much supposition upon the historical source material before entering the dubious realm of speculation. Video games have fewer restrictions in this regard than academic scholars, and the artistic capacity of games to operate beyond recorded historical narratives can allow games to depict characters and perspectives which resonate with modern audiences whose narratives have been previously omitted or lost from the surviving historical record. This creativity within games opens new possibilities to explore and experience the past through the eyes of those who, until recently, were without a voice in the historical discourse and highlight facets of historical cultures concealed to suit the morals of previous generations; as John Tosh observes, 'identity-based history is a necessity not only for the nation, but for any groups or interests within it which feel disenfranchised or excluded from the mainstream'.¹⁴

However, this same capacity of creative media such as video games to explore beyond the limitations of the established or dominant historical narrative can also pose inherent dangers if mishandled or misrepresented, and discussion of marginalised demographics in games is frequently marked by controversy where these groups are depicted in fashions considered to be unflattering or misleading. Likewise, conservative elements within both the creators and consumers of creative media often voice opposition to efforts to expand and diversify representation of marginalised demographics, which they perceive as being detrimental to the interests of their own dominant demographic culture or

¹⁴ Tosh, *Historians on History*, p. 9.

actively contradicting established historical narratives, often resulting in especially voluble controversies as more radical individuals within these debates employ misleading, bigoted or even criminal behaviours and arguments to defend their claims.

Ultimately, the capacity of games to offer artistic freedom in depicting the past illuminates a deeper, perhaps more significant issue with regards to games' engagement with history, wherein a modern individual's willingness to legitimise a game's presentation of a historical period, group or culture is influenced – either overtly or subliminally – by that individual's personal and cultural preconceptions of how that subject should be represented. Given the natural variation in individual views and exposure to cultural influences, this individuality transforms history within the context of video games from an evidence-based discipline into a highly subjective cultural phenomenon, thereby perpetuating the difficulties of its depiction within video games as conflicting subjective viewpoints demand evidence from external sources to validate their contemporary interpretations of history, or else reject evidence which contradicts their subjective interpretations.¹⁵ In the tempestuous cultural environment of video games, there is perhaps a strong argument in support of E.H. Carr's provocative assertion that 'objective history does not exist',¹⁶ as each individual game is subjected to the competing interpretations of its developers and different gaming audiences and their own unique subjective perspectives.

Tensions between modern historical understandings and recorded evidence from a particular period, and the subsequent effect of these tensions upon historical writing, have been noted in popular discourse as well as within academia.¹⁷ One such manifestation of popular awareness to these issues of historical memory and interpretation can be observed through discussion of the so-called "Tiffany Problem". A term coined by fantasy author Jo Walton, the "Tiffany Problem" refers to a scenario in which a period-authentic historical

¹⁵ Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield I* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021), pp. 4-5; Helen Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*" in Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ Carr, *What is History?*, p. xi & p. 1.

¹⁷ For academic examples, see Jane Draycott, "A short introduction to women in historical and archaeological video games" and Claire Manning, "Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games", in Jane Draycott (ed.) *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games* (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 1-20 & pp. 57-71; Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*; Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-36.

phenomenon is interpreted by popular audiences as a modern anachronism within a media depiction of a historical setting; the “Tiffany Problem” originally highlighted the example of the name “Tiffany” in media with a medieval setting, which was reported as an authentic shortening of the medieval name “Theophania” but was viewed as “too modern” by audiences thanks to associations with modern media such as the Audrey Hepburn film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961).¹⁸ In certain contexts, reactions to depictions of marginalised demographic perspectives in historical games have been interpreted as an extension of this “Tiffany Problem”, wherein historically legitimate demographic representation is considered an anachronistic transposition of modern social attitudes into the past due to the prominence of representation debates in modern socio-political discourse.¹⁹

While the emphatic debating of these competing viewpoints can acquire a strong aspect of “culture wars” – to use the term popularised by John Davison Hunter in the 1990s²⁰ – the significance of this subjective popular understanding of history to interpreting historical experiences provided by video games cannot be ignored, as it gives precedence to the authorial perspectives of those creating and consuming a historical game in subsequent discourse over the historical perspectives which a game presents and depicts. As a result, this subjectivity raises the question of whether historical games provide a means of engaging with the past, or rather of engaging with our *ideas* about what the past should be.

Politics of Demographic Representation in Historical Games

Discussions about diversity, inclusivity and demographic representation are a significant and frequently controversial topic across the modern world. While many champion the modern efforts to expand our understanding of cultural, ethnic and social groups who have previously been marginalised by society, certain vocal commentators – in

¹⁸ Samantha Franco, “The Tiffany Problem: When History Doesn’t Seem to Make Sense”, *The Vintage News*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2022/04/08/tiffany-problem/>; Boker22s, “The Tiffany Problem”, *WordPress.Com*, 5 August 2020, <https://dmnes.wordpress.com/2020/08/05/the-tiffany-problem/>; “Historical Accuracy in Films and the Tiffany Problem”, *Just History Posts*, 28 March 2019, <https://justhistoryposts.com/2019/03/28/historical-accuracy-in-films-and-the-tiffany-problem/>.

¹⁹ Boker22s, “The Tiffany Problem”; “Historical Accuracy in Films and the Tiffany Problem”.

²⁰ Bobby Duffy *et al.*, “‘Culture Wars’ in the UK”, *The Policy Institute – King’s College London*, June 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk.pdf>; “Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars – but were afraid to ask”.

Western countries, these are frequently White, Male-dominated, or politically-conservative groups – have railed against what they perceive as rampant “political correctness” and a “woke agenda” through the representation of “minorities”. The term “political correctness” itself became imbued with inherently negative connotations during the 1980s and 1990s after it was widely employed by liberal politicians to critique extreme rhetoric in political debates and by conservative politicians to oppose liberal socio-political shifts, such as workplace equality for women.²¹ Meanwhile, “wokeness” – originally established as a Black activism slogan, but subsequently assimilated as ‘a single-word summation of all leftist political ideology, centred on social justice politics and critical race theory’ – has similarly acquired bipartisan connotations, conferring support by progressive actors and applied in denigratory fashions by conservative commentators.²²

As part of this socio-cultural shift towards embracing diverse demographics, history, and society’s interactions with history especially, has come under intense scrutiny in recent years, as attitudes towards cultural heritage and commemoration of individuals with legacies deemed questionable in the light of changing modern socio-political attitudes have been revised and reconsidered. Eurocentrism – the favouring and emphasis of American and European perspectives – has also been noted by numerous scholars as an issue within academic studies as well as in popular media; for example, Jeremy Black has noted that Eurocentrism is widespread in the context of military history scholarship, influencing not only the selection of historical conflicts examined by academic discourse but also the language used therein, which inherently favours terminology utilised by Western scholars.²³

Postcolonial scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Souvik Mukherjee have readily identified the power of Western, Colonialist perspectives upon the formulation of history and its transmission through popular media, including within the perspectives

²¹ Cynthia Roper, “Political Correctness”, *Britannica*, 1 March 2024 (updated), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness>; Moira Weigel, “Political Correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy”, *The Guardian*, 30 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump>.

²² Aja Romano, “A history of ‘wokeness’”, *Vox*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-wokeness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>; Letitia Meynell, “Here’s what ‘woke’ means and how to respond to it”, *The Conversation*, 20 December 2023, <https://theconversation.com/heres-what-woke-means-and-how-to-respond-to-it-219588>; Michael Harriot, “War on wokeness: the year the right rallied around a made-up menace”, *The Guardian*, 21 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/dec/20/anti-woke-race-america-history>.

²³ Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 66-99.

offered by video games,²⁴ although Mukherjee and Zahra Rizvi have argued that these discussions have emphasised the role of games produced within the Global North (principally Europe and North America), thereby minimising the perspectives offered on these issues by games produced in the Global South (with an emphasis on South Asia in their study).²⁵ Thus even as interactions with historical experiences are being reappraised to accommodate colonial or subaltern perspectives, this discussion is often inherently framed through a prism of Western authorship which influences the conclusions which audiences draw from these interactions. As a notable proportion of major historical games originate from studios based in North American or European countries, there is significant evidence to support these scholarly arguments; this thesis does not seek to interrogate or challenge these debates, but to illustrate how these scholarly perspectives surrounding the reappraisal of history are reflected within creative and player discourses of historical games.

Many well-publicised incidents of these trends of historical reappraisal interact with matters of European Colonial history, in which European nations – most prominently Britain, France and Spain – established global empires and inflicted numerous oppressive policies upon indigenous groups,²⁶ including the infamous Trans-Atlantic slave trade which saw millions of Black Africans kidnapped and exported to the Americas for the profit of White European slave traders and plantation owners; similarly in the United States, incidents relating to the depiction and discussion of racial history remain an ongoing subject of controversy, as conservative political groups complain about historical erasure from “woke” revisionists and civil rights campaigners protest against continued violence towards ethnic minorities, most notably Black communities, by White establishment figures.²⁷

²⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power & The Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995); Souvik Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 13:5 (2018), pp. 504-520; Zahra Rizvi and Souvik Mukherjee, “‘Your Subaltern is not my Subaltern’: Intersectionality and the Dangers of a Single Game-Story”, *GAME*, vol. 10 (2021-2023), pp. 51-65.

²⁵ Rizvi and Mukherjee, “‘Your Subaltern is not my Subaltern’: Intersectionality and the Dangers of a Single Game-Story”, pp. 51-65; Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism”, pp. 504-520.

²⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power & The Production of History*; Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism”, pp. 504-520.

²⁷ See for examples, Sonsoles Madrid Gil, “Woke culture and the history of America: From colonisation to depersonalisation”, *Church, Communication and Culture*, vol. 8: 1 (2023), pp. 18-42; Alan Lester, “The Common Sense Group’s Culture War, the ‘Woke’ and British History”, *The University of Sussex*, 28 May 2021, <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/snapshotsofempire/2021/05/28/the-common-sense-groups-culture-war-the-woke-and-british-history/>; Jamie Doward, “I’ve been unfairly targeted, says academic at heart of National Trust ‘woke’ row”, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/20/ive-been-unfairly-targeted-says-academic-at-heart-of-national-trust-woke-row>.

As an example of this historical reappraisal, in 2020, a number of statues across the UK commemorating controversial historical figures, many of them Colonial figures, were vandalised amidst a series of race-related protests conducted in sympathy with the “Black Lives Matter” movement and parallel protests in America following the murder of an unarmed African American, George Floyd, by White police officers in the city of Minneapolis.²⁸ The most prominent of these incidents in the UK involved the statue of Edward Colston, a seventeenth century merchant and slave trader, which was forcibly removed from its plinth and thrown into Bristol Harbour by protestors, a dramatic act which immediately caught international headlines;²⁹ four protestors stood trial on charges of criminal damage for the act, but were ultimately acquitted,³⁰ although their case was subsequently referred to a Court of Appeal by the UK government, ostensibly for legal clarification with regards to similar potential cases in the future.³¹

Elsewhere, memorials to other pro-Colonial figures have been subjected to heightened scrutiny about their place in the public sphere: for instance, memorials to Dr Edward Morton Stanley, one of Britain’s most famous Victorian explorers, have been subjected to heightened debate after accusations were made of violence conducted against indigenous African populations during his expeditions, as well as his role in the exploration

²⁸ “George Floyd protests: The statues being defaced”, *BBC News*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-52963352>; Douglas Piper and Jennifer Brown, “Black Lives Matter protests: UK reaction to the killing of George Floyd”, *UK Parliament: House of Commons Library*, 4 June 2020, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/black-lives-matter-protests-uk-reaction/>; “How George Floyd’s death sparked a wave of anti-racism protests”, *The Guardian*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/29/george-floyd-death-fuelled-anti-racism-protests-britain>; Derrick Bryson Taylor, “George Floyd Protests: A Timeline”, *New York Times*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>; Erika D. Smith, “2020 was the year America embraced Black Lives Matter as a movement, not just a moment”, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 December 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-12-16/black-lives-matter-protests-george-floyd-coronavirus-covid-2020>; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield I* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021), p. 26.

²⁹ See for examples, Jack Grey, “Bristol George Floyd protest: Colston statue toppled”, *BBC News*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-52955868>; “Black Lives Matter protesters in UK topple statue of British slave trader”, *France 24*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200607-black-lives-matter-protesters-topple-statue-of-british-slave-trader-in-bristol>; “Protestors in England topple statue of slave trader Edward Colston into harbour”, *CBS News*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-floyd-protest-edward-colston-statue-thrown-into-bristol-harbor-today-2020-06-07/>.

³⁰ “Edward Colston Statue: Four cleared of criminal damage”, *BBC News*, 5 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-59727161>; “Colston’s statue verdict ‘landmark’ in Britain’s slave history”, *BBC News*, 6 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-59892211>.

³¹ “Edward Colston statue case sent to Court of Appeal”, *BBC News*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-61081824>; “Bristol Colston statue toppling was ‘violent act’, say judges”, *BBC News*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-63059300>.

and subsequent exploitation of the Congo by European powers.³² In a similar vein, the re-installation of a statue to Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in Lima, Peru in early 2025 was met with protests from Indigenous communities due to Pizarro's role in the conquest of Peru as a Spanish colonial territory and the destruction of the Inca civilisation; supporters of the statue's re-installation acknowledged the contested narrative of Pizarro's historical role, but that 'Peru should not erase its history' by concealing such a pivotal figure in their national history.³³ Some commentators have criticised this widespread, revisionist attitude to contested historical figures as an attempt to "rewrite" history and erase or conceal elements of historical narratives which do not conform to the mores of modern society,³⁴ while others have decried the excessive violence towards historical monuments while generally sympathising with the desire to address the mistakes of the past and improve modern understanding of history.³⁵ Regardless of political interpretation, it must be recognised that long-held preconceptions about particular aspects of history are steadily being challenged by modern debate.

As a premier form of modern entertainment media, the relationship of video games to the presentation of the past can play a critical role in this discussion. One could point to any number of examples for the importance of how increasingly diverse perspectives and increased representation in video games has helped to redefine the media's presentation of historical narratives or cultures. One example has already been discussed in the form of portraying the perspectives of those groups and individuals characterised as "villains" within popular historical narratives through the lens of a video game, as well as the subsequent opposition these depictions received from some communities. However, when one refers to "diversity" and "representation" in modern discussion, the common responses typically refer

³² "HM Stanley: Denbigh votes on statue of Victorian explorer", *BBC News*, 15 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-58919358>.

³³ Leonardo Rocha and Aoife Walsh, "Statue of Spanish Conquistador reinstalled in central Lima", *BBC News*, 19 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y62p6dn8no>.

³⁴ See for examples, Gordon Rayner, "BBC guilty of 'rewriting British history' to promote woke agenda in 'biased' documentaries", *The Telegraph*, 28 December 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/12/28/bbc-guilty-rewriting-british-history-promote-woke-agenda-biased/>; Elizabeth Haigh, "'Biased' BBC is 'rewriting British history to promote woke agenda', a group of leading academics warn", *The Daily Mail*, 29 December 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11581105/Biased-BBC-rewriting-British-history-promote-woke-agenda-leading-academics-warn.html>.

³⁵ See for examples, Will Lloyd, "How the National Trust won the war on woke", *The New Statesman*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2024/04/how-the-national-trust-won-the-war-on-woke>; Pamela Parkes, "Who was Edward Colston and why is Bristol divided by his legacy?", *BBC News*, 8 June 2020 (first published February 2018), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-42404825>.

to subjects such as ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. In these fields, video games have acted both as offenders and defenders of changing social attitudes.

As an example, let us look at gaming's depictions of Arabic or Middle Eastern characters. As noted by Vit Šisler, depictions of Arabic characters in video games have historically fallen into two broad categories: either traditional, Orientalist stereotypes, such as those found in "classic" video games such as *Prince of Persia* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992) or *Metal Slug* (1996), or the post-9/11 view equating Middle Eastern characters with terrorists and insurgents, as seen in games ranging from 2003's *Command and Conquer: Generals* to 2019's remake of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, amongst numerous others.³⁶

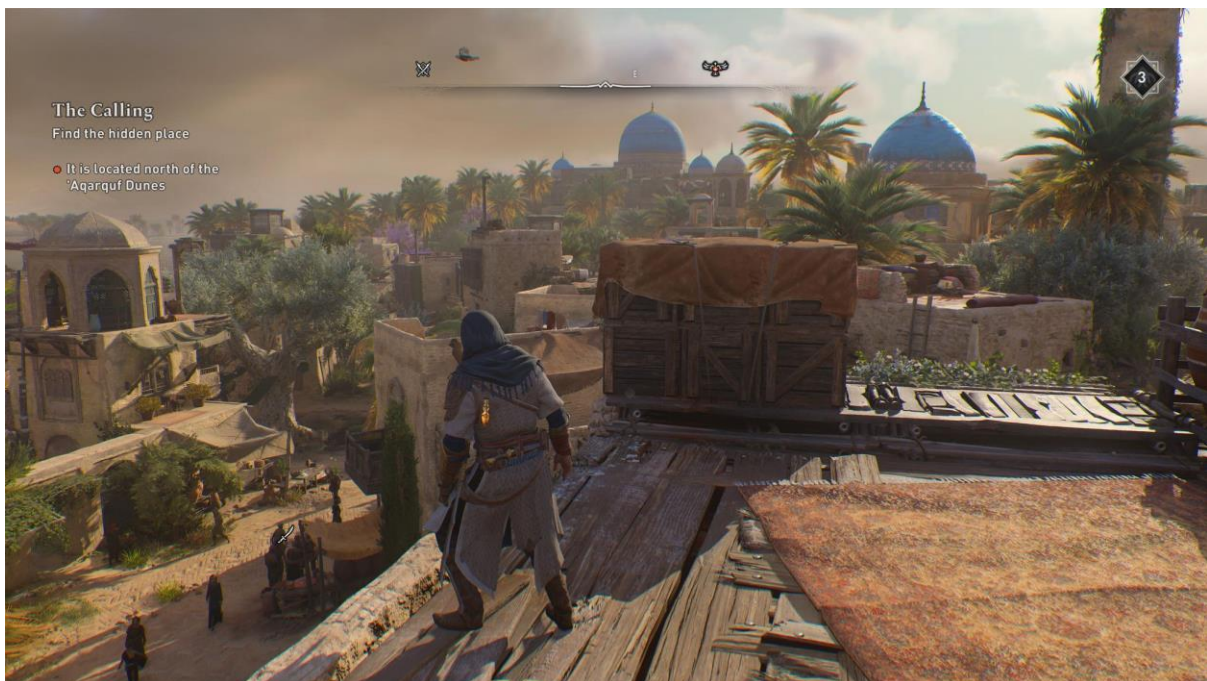


Figure 2.1: Gameplay still-image from *Assassin's Creed: Mirage* (Ubisoft, 2023).

However, some exceptions to these categories can be identified, in which Arabic or Middle Eastern perspectives are depicted with greater nuance, most often characterised by their positioning of an Arabic or Middle Eastern character as the player protagonist. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise, for instance, features multiple instances of Arabic protagonists, notably including the original *Assassin's Creed* (2007), whose primary protagonist, Altaïr Ibn-La'Alhad, is a Syrian member of the eponymous group operating in the Holy Land during the

³⁶ Vit Šisler, "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 11:2 (2008), pp. 203-220; Hossam Fazulla, "The rise of the video game Arab hero", *BBC News*, 2 July 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-61916551>.

Third Crusade.³⁷ *Assassin's Creed: Mirage* – which utilises ninth century Baghdad for its setting and aesthetic, and positions an Arabic side-character from the series' previous game, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, as *Mirage*'s player protagonist – has received particular praise for its detailed and nuanced depiction of Arabic culture.³⁸ The First World War-set *Battlefield I* also features an Arabic protagonist for one of its single-player narrative campaigns, in which players participate in a dramatized version of the Jordanian uprising against the Ottoman Empire during WWI, playing as a female Bedouin Arab partisan fighting alongside the legendary British figure Lawrence of Arabia.³⁹ However, despite these noteworthy examples, it remains comparatively rare for modern games – regardless of setting – to feature an explicitly Arabic character as the primary playable protagonist in a historical setting, particularly by contrast to the frequency with which White Male American characters feature as game protagonists.⁴⁰ Consequently, the categories identified by Šisler continue to assert a greater or lesser degree of influence over representations of Middle Eastern figures and culture.

As in the case of playing as the Germans in a game with a WWII-era setting, a major barrier to improved representation of Middle Eastern or Arabic groups and historical narratives remains a perception, particularly with Western, Euro-American audiences, that Arabic and Middle Eastern groups are considered or portrayed as hostile entities.⁴¹ Despite the overtly problematic nature of such a simplistic view, not least that many such portrayals are framed within the overtly pro-Western and militarised context of the so-called “War on

³⁷ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed* (2007), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft.

³⁸ Ubisoft Bordeaux, *Assassin's Creed: Mirage* (2023), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft; Joshua Duckworth, “Assassin's Creed Mirage Historian Talks Cultural Representation in Baghdad”, *GameRant*, 6 October 2023, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-mirage-baghdad-cultural-representation/>; Jeffrey Rousseau, “Making Assassin's Creed Mirage culturally and linguistically relevant”, *GamesIndustry.biz*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/making-assassins-creed-mirage-culturally-and-linguistically-relevant>; Tom Richardson, “London Games Festival shines a light on diversity”, *BBC News*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-68769829>.

³⁹ EA DICE, *Battlefield I – Nothing is Written* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

⁴⁰ Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”, pp. 203-220; Dmitri Williams *et al*, “The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games”, *New Media and Society*, vol. 11:5 (2009), pp. 816-831; Johannes Breuer, Ruth Festl and Thorsten Quandt, “In the Army Now – Narrative Elements and Realism in Military First-Person Shooters”, cited in Eva Kingsepp, “Experiencing and Performing Memory: Second World War videogames as a practice of remembrance”, in Patrick Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 228.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

Terror”,⁴² a legacy of antagonistic portrayals in numerous entertainment media, including films like *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *6 Days* (2017) – which present dramatized versions of real-world incidents involving Arab or Islamic terrorists⁴³ – television shows like *NCIS* (2003-present) – an **American** crime drama series whose contemporary setting regularly engages with contemporary geopolitical events such as 9/11 and American military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan⁴⁴ – and video games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007), creates cultural and psychological barriers within gaming audiences that prove challenging for developers to overcome, even when attempting to portray sympathetic perspectives of these groups.⁴⁵

Moreover, many of the aforementioned game examples of Arabic perspectives were developed by Western companies and auteurs, thereby further emphasising the problematic nature of gaming’s historic representations of Arabic culture and characters as fundamentally Western perspectives designed to resonate with Western audiences; *Battlefield I*, for instance, allows the player to act as an Arabic character within one of its single-player narrative stories, however their actions are narrated – and therefore, to a certain extent, dictated – by the Western European historical character of Lawrence of Arabia.⁴⁶ *Assassin’s Creed: Mirage* has been praised by game critics for challenging this trend of Western-centric interpretation of Arabic history, and for representing its Arabic characters and setting with a detail and “authenticity” that respects its subject.⁴⁷ However, the praise levelled on *Mirage* highlights it in contrast to other games depicting Arabic history, and thus reflects the influence of Western authorial perspectives on demographics and cultures depicted within historical video games.⁴⁸

⁴² Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”, pp. 208-212; John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 145-160; Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims: Digital War Games, Islamophobia, and the Global War of Terror”, *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol. 6: 1 (2021), pp. 33-51.

⁴³ *Zero Dark Thirty*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (2012, Colombia Pictures) [DVD]; *6 Days*, directed by Toa Fraser (2017, Icon Film Distribution and Transmission Films). Available on Netflix.

⁴⁴ *NCIS*, created by Donald P. Bellisario and Don McGill (broadcast 23 September 2003-present on CBS). Available on Disney+ streaming.

⁴⁵ Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Nintendo Wii. Published by Activision; Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”, pp. 203-219; Mirrlees and Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims”, pp. 33-51; Fazulla, “The rise of the video game Arab hero”.

⁴⁶ EA DICE, *Battlefield I – Nothing Is Written* (2016).

⁴⁷ Richardson, “London Games Festival shines a light on diversity”.

⁴⁸ Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”, pp. 203-220.

As the example of depictions of Arabic perspectives in video games reflects, the dominance of “established” perspectives in games development remains significant despite evidence of on-going change. The impact of the American national perspective upon video game narratives has already been discussed in the previous chapter, however similar trends reflecting Western authorial perspectives, and therein often implicitly those of White Male demographics, can be identified elsewhere too. In 2020, the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment (UKIE), a UK-based video games industry body, published the results of a demographic survey of UK game developers conducted in partnership with the University of Sheffield. This survey concluded that 70 per cent of developers working in the UK gaming industry were Male – compared to 28 per cent Female, and 2 per cent Non-binary (or other) – and only 10 per cent of UK game developers were of Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.⁴⁹ A similar demographic survey by these same organisations in 2022 indicated a slight shift in these percentages, principally along gender lines – 67 per cent Male, 30 per cent Female and 3 per cent Non-binary (or other)⁵⁰ – however the overall demographic make-up of UK games development has remained relatively consistent. Within these developer demographics, the White Male demographic remains prominent by a substantial margin, even as gaming audiences continue to grow and diversify around the globe. Moreover, despite this evidence for ongoing diversification amongst development communities, the gaming medium continues to be associated with the Male authorial perspective, in part because of the dominance of men – in many cases, White, Western men – within senior and public facing roles within major game studios and partly due to the active marginalisation of female members of gaming communities.⁵¹

This demographic dominance of the White, Western and Male authorial perspectives naturally impacts upon the games which are created by these teams. The *Assassin’s Creed* series, for instance, regularly features a disclaimer – displayed during each game’s “start-up” loading screen – emphasising the demographic and cultural diversity of the game’s

⁴⁹ Mark Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census: Understanding diversity in the UK games industry workforce”, UKIE (2020), p. 23; UKIE, *#RaiseTheGame: Inspiring Diversity and Inclusion in The Games Industry* (2020), pp. 4-5: <https://raisethethegame.com/media/Website%20Content/RaiseTheGame%20Guidance%20Report%20Feb%2020.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Mark Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census 2022”, UKIE (2022), p. 31.

⁵¹ Benjamin Paaßen, Thekla Morgenroth & Michelle Stratemeyer, “What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture”, *Sex Roles*, vol. 76 (2017), pp. 421-435.

development teams.⁵² While developers are conscious of the implied perspectives indicated by their demographic composition, and have actively taken strides to improve their engagement with marginalised demographics, the presentation of marginalised perspectives in games has frequently resulted in controversy when the subsequent portrayals of these groups by video games are perceived to be disrespectful to these marginalised communities. For instance, the stealth-action game *This Is My Land* (2021) – which allows players to explore the “Wild West” as a Native American chief – was criticised by commentators of Indigenous American heritage due to the game’s lack of input during development from the communities it attempts to depict; instead, the game was described by one commentator of Cree heritage as an ‘Indigenous revenge fantasy’ which perpetuates an ‘Indigenous monolith misconception’ built on homogenised stereotypes from Western media.⁵³ Additionally, the game’s developers – Game-Labs, a four-person team based in Ukraine – were accused of ignoring, and even actively erasing, the criticism they received from Indigenous American members of their game’s community in favour of ‘claiming that they are innocent by pleading ignorance, and then put the burden of showing why their behaviour was offensive on the very group they were offending.’⁵⁴

While one could argue that a small developer team based in Eastern Europe could be forgiven for making certain errors in their depiction of Indigenous American cultures due to their geographical and cultural separation from their game’s subject, *This is My Land* is not the only historical game to have proved controversial due to the misrepresentation of Indigenous groups. The triple-A strategy game *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI*, developed and published by major studios Firaxis Games and 2K, experienced a similar controversy regarding its own in-game depiction of Cree culture, which was criticised by modern Cree leaders as being ‘not in concert with our traditional ways and world view’.⁵⁵ These incidents starkly highlight the divergence of historical and authorial perspectives which can occur

⁵² Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of Shadows’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”, *Eurogamer*, 2 November 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-boss-discusses-devastating-impact-of-shadows-diversity-and-inclusivity-backlash>.

⁵³ Game-Labs LLC, *This Is My Land* (2021), PC; Baylee Giroux, “‘This is My Land’ Wants to Sell an Indigenous Revenge Fantasy, But Without Any Indigenous Input”, *Vice*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7eq5y/this-land-is-my-land-wants-to-sell-an-indigenous-revenge-fantasy-but-without-any-indigenous-input>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Andy Chalk, “Poundmaker Cree Nation leader criticizes Cree portrayal in Civilization 6”, *PC Gamer*, 8 January 2018, <https://www.pcgamer.com/poundmaker-cree-nation-leader-criticizes-cree-portrayal-in-civilization-6/>.

between the modern communities engaging with a historical game; while the White European developers asserted that they were being respectful and authentic to the Indigenous cultures depicted within *This Is My Land* and *Sid Meier's Civilisation VI*, players whose identities were intrinsically linked with these cultures vocally critiqued aspects of these games which they deemed to be disrespectful or perpetuate myths about their cultures.

Such accusations, regardless of veracity under closer examination, highlight a fundamental flaw within the gaming medium in that it remains, or even that it is simply *perceived* to be, dominated by White Male authors with little to no knowledge of marginalised cultures or perspectives. This in turn prompts players from marginalised communities to speak out if they believe their culture or demographic is being misrepresented by a particular game. "Indie" gaming – a longstanding element in PC gaming culture and a slowly growing element of console gaming – has notably challenged this trend of White-dominated authorship with games from independent developers highlighting unique or under-represented cultures and demographics, such as the game *Tales of Kenzara: Zau* (2024) which reflects the lead developer's Kenyan heritage in its narrative and design.⁵⁶ However, the relatively modest resources, both in regards to development and marketing, of indie games typically limits their ability to attract mass audiences and thereby enter the wider cultural conversation of gaming as a medium; triple-A games, such as *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed*, with vastly greater development and especially marketing resources continue to dominate gaming discourse, and thus their representations of marginalised cultures and demographics – both within their games and within their development teams – assert a strong influence over how gaming communities perceive the perspectives of these same cultures and demographics offered within video games.

The demographic imbalance of video game authorship has also been reflected within games themselves, from the perspective of game protagonists. In a study conducted between 2005-2006, 150 video games across the nine major gaming platforms of the time were analysed to assess the representations of various gender, ethnic and age groups within

⁵⁶ Andrew Rogers and Tom Richardson, "Can Tales of Kenzara: Zau unlock a new worlds of video game stories?", *BBC News*, 23 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-68790072.amp>.

video games compared to the actual demographic balance of the US population.⁵⁷ The results showed an overwhelming majority of games – 85 per cent of those surveyed – portrayed male characters as leading figures, whether as primary or secondary characters; only 10 per cent of games assessed portrayed female characters in a primary role, and barely 14 per cent in a secondary role. Even without referring to population statistics, which were an approximate 50/50 split between male and female at the time of the survey, this demonstrates an immense imbalance in the demographic representation of video games. Ethnic and age demographics displayed similar favouritism: of the games studied in the survey, 80 per cent of all characters assessed were White and 87 per cent were adults (as distinct from teens and the elderly).⁵⁸

While one can offer some arguments in defence of these findings – for instance, that Whites are shown to be the largest ethnic demographic in the US population, and therefore more likely to experience demographic representation within a gaming context – the sheer scale of representation for specific demographics (namely White Male adults) and the heavy under-representation of almost all other demographics throughout the gaming landscape is striking.⁵⁹ Moreover, despite efforts to address this imbalance in the years since this survey, video game representation remains heavily weighted in favour of Western White Male adult characters, adding considerable impetus to the calls for change.

If one applies this demographic-based argument to history, and the historical perspectives represented within gaming, one can see clear influences as to why this demographic imbalance has proven difficult to challenge. Using Yannick Rochat's quantitative study of historical games as a guide, we can see that a significant proportion of historical games are set within the context of World War II – 515 games with this setting released between 1981 and 2015, approximately a third of all historical games released within this time-frame.⁶⁰ Although a considerable number of nations and demographics participated in this conflict, because of video games' tendency to focus on the combative aspects of the war, whether in regards to strategy and tactics or "boots-on-the-ground"

⁵⁷ Williams *et al*, "The virtual census", pp. 821-824.

⁵⁸ Williams *et al*, "The virtual census", pp. 820-828.

⁵⁹ Williams *et al*, "The virtual census", p. 820 & pp. 829-831.

⁶⁰ Yannick Rochat, "A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)", in Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 12.

action, the focus of these games falls predominantly on White American and European adult men, who formed by far the largest demographic group of the combatants participating in the European and Mediterranean theatres of WWII; the Asian and Pacific theatres are largely overlooked within gaming, and those extant examples of games depicting game narratives within the Pacific or Asian theatres – like *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (2003) and *Call of Duty: World at War* – are depicted predominantly from a White Male American perspective.⁶¹

Similarly, although Colonial troops contributed significantly to both World Wars, particularly on the Allied side, their contributions to the war effort have been under-represented or overlooked by gaming depictions of these conflicts until comparatively recently. One of the few notable examples of Colonial troops being prominently depicted within a WWII game is *Battlefield V*, which includes a narrative campaign from the perspective of French Senegalese troops within the conflict.⁶²

Likewise, when earlier historical periods are examined, the focus of these periods within gaming depictions remains heavily influenced by European and American history, and in particular by periods and scenarios where White Male adults are the dominant participating demographic: this can be seen in games set in the Classical era – such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, *Rome: Total War* and *Ryse: Son of Rome* (2013) – or the Middle Ages – such as *Total War: Medieval II* (2006) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* – wherein the depicted history of these periods is primarily focused on events within Europe and primarily from the perspectives of ethnically-White Europeans.⁶³

As such, even when these titles incorporate elements of global cultures as playable experiences – such as the inclusion of the Aztecs in the “Kingdoms” expansion of *Medieval II: Total War*, Indigenous American tribes in the “Warpath” expansion of *Empire: Total War* (2009), or of medieval African and Asian cultures in *Crusader Kings III* – these cultures and

⁶¹ EA Los Angeles, *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (2003), Xbox, PlayStation and GameCube. Published by Electronic Arts; Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Nintendo Wii. Published by Activision.

⁶² EA DICE, *Battlefield V – Tirailleur* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

⁶³ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*; Creative Assembly, *Rome: Total War* (2004), PC. Published by Activision and SEGA; Crytek, *Ryse: Son of Rome* (2013), Xbox and PC. Published by Microsoft Studios; Creative Assembly, *Medieval II: Total War* (2006), PC. Published by SEGA; Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2024. Published by Deep Silver.

demographics are often inherently positioned as secondary to the White European or Western experience of these periods, which are given primacy in both marketing materials for these games and the presentation of gameplay options to the player.⁶⁴ Games which clearly focus upon Asian or African history, cultures and characters with minimal White European or Western demographic representation, such as *Shogun: Total War* (2000), *Total War: Three Kingdoms* (2019), *Ghost of Tsushima*, and *Tales of Kenzara: Zau*, stand as distinct minorities within the broader spectrum of historical game experiences.⁶⁵

Furthermore, video games are designed with the intention of resonating with the audiences that play them. Historically, a significant majority of these player audiences have been the White communities of North America and Europe; Dmitri Williams *et al*, surveying the proportional relationships between in-game demographic representation and player demographics within the US, noted that White Males comprised significant majorities within the percentage figures for ethnic and gender groups within the US “gaming” population, both as players and developers, thereby influencing the prominence of White Males as in-game characters to appeal to these communities.⁶⁶ Yet North America and Europe are also where a significant proportion of games developers are geographically based;⁶⁷ as discussed in the previous chapter, this geographic factor in both gaming audiences and development is a significant contributor to the heavy emphasis of American-led narratives within gaming, and consequently guides understanding and engagement with demographic representation within games.

Even if one argues that game developers should use this existing predisposition to focus future games on under-represented demographics, the solution is not as simple as just deciding to portray an under-represented culture or demographic group within a game. The

⁶⁴ Creative Assembly, *Medieval II: Total War - Kingdoms* (2007), PC. Published by SEGA; Creative Assembly, *Empire: Total War – The Warpath Campaign* (2009), PC. Published by SEGA; Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III* (2020), PC. Released on Xbox and PlayStation in 2022. Published by Paradox Interactive.

⁶⁵ Creative Assembly, *Shogun: Total War* (2000), PC. Published by Electronic Arts and SEGA; Creative Assembly, *Total War: Three Kingdoms* (2019), PC. Published by SEGA; Sucker Punch Productions, *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020), PlayStation. Released on PC in 2022. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment; Richardson, “Can Tales of Kenzara: Zau unlock a new worlds of video game stories?”.

⁶⁶ Williams *et al*, “The virtual census”, p. 820 & p. 830.

⁶⁷ J Clement, “Distribution of game developers worldwide as of April 2021, by region”, *Statista*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453785/game-developer-region-distribution-worldwide/>; Dean Takahasi, “The U.S. game industry has 2,457 companies supporting 220,000 jobs”, *VentureBeat*, 14 February 2017, <https://venturebeat.com/2017/02/14/the-u-s-game-industry-has-2457-companies-supporting-220000-jobs/>.

commercial imperative of larger titles, particularly within the triple-A gaming category, to recoup the financial resources invested in their creation and subsequently turn a profit encourages developers and publishers to create games with established audiences, be they based on thematic or gameplay genres.⁶⁸ This commercial pressure encourages triple-A games especially, with significantly greater financial investments to recoup, towards experiences which their commercial executives deem to be “safe bets”: experiences which statistical trends have previously shown to be commercially viable, and are therefore more likely to sell successfully.⁶⁹

Consequently, developers at larger studios are encouraged to accommodate (or at least avoid alienating) as many audience demographics as possible within their game content in order to facilitate greater sales revenue, which places limits upon the creative freedom of developers to depict under-represented perspectives within games which subsequently appear increasingly homogenised.⁷⁰ This influence towards financially “safe” projects has been acknowledged by certain publishers, along with the unfortunate consequences for developers that such partnerships can be ‘devastating’ if a game is unable to support itself or the developer financially, as certain publishers seek to ensure the recovery of their initial investments.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Williams *et al*, “The virtual census”, pp. 829-831; Nick Webber, “Paying for the Past: Ownership and the Monetisation of History”, *Historical Games Network*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.historicalgames.net/paying-for-the-past-the-ownership-and-monetisation-of-history/>

⁶⁹ Webber, “Paying for the Past: Ownership and the Monetisation of History”; David B. Nieborg, “How To Study Game Publishers: Activision Blizzard’s Corporate History”, and Lies van Roessel and Jan Švelch, “Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization”, in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 179-216; WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blatLhvdh0w>; GameSpot, *Game Developers Aren’t Taking Enough Risks | Spot On*, online video recording, 7 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOrSzdZbCIE>; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 20 December 2018 [36:58-37:48]

⁷⁰ Webber, “Paying for the Past: Ownership and the Monetisation of History”; Nieborg, “How To Study Game Publishers”, pp. 179-196; WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*; Anonymous, “Video Games have a diversity problem that runs deeper than race or gender”, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/sep/10/video-games-diversity-problem-runs-deeper-than-race-gender>.

⁷¹ Anna Koselke, “Manor Lords publisher says ‘so many games fail’ because of bad contracts where publishers insist on making all their money back before devs get a bite of revenue”, *GamesRadar+*, 16 August 2024, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/city-builder/manor-lords-publisher-says-so-many-games-fail-because-of-bad-contracts-where-publishers-insist-on-making-all-their-money-back-before-devs-get-a-bite-of-revenue/>; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary | Gameumentary*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE2goNeshY> [14:35-15:27]; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [16:22-19:32, 28:22-32:54].

Elements of this “safe bet” attitude to gaming depictions of historical periods can be readily identified, not least through the heavy emphasis upon WWII within gaming, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, has a firmly established and successful precedent within historical media. Similar “safe bet” interpretations of history can also be identified in games which depict Asian or African history, as many notable examples emphasise history of these regions which is familiar to global audiences through historical popular culture; for instance, games depicting Japanese history and protagonists, such as *Shogun: Total War*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows* (2025), frequently focus upon samurai and associated historical periods due to their popularity and recognition with Western audiences in historical pop-culture.⁷² This mentality inherently relies on broad historical interpretation through the use of historical iconography divorced from its historical narrative context, as discussed in the previous chapter.

On the other hand, in this commercial environment of games development, representation of marginalised perspectives can arguably help a game to establish a unique identity or selling point within competitive markets and thus mitigate any degree of market saturation which might discourage potential customers. In the case of historical games, the speculative, trend-based mentality amongst triple-A studios – or even simply the popular belief of publishers’ adherence to this mentality – heightens the importance of “indie” games and developers with greater creative freedom to depict these under-represented cultural and demographic perspectives within games, even if the attendant lack of resources available to these developers places limits upon the types or extent of the experiences their games can offer.⁷³ Some have suggested that, in the long-term, triple-A games publishers will be forced to appeal to audiences in Asia, Africa and the Middle East in order to sustain financial growth.⁷⁴ However, in the short term, games publishers remain primarily focused on established Western audiences and the depiction of in-game perspectives which appeal

⁷² *Shogun: Total War*; *Ghost of Tsushima*; Andrew Brown, “Assassin’s Creed Shadows was originally envisioned without Yasuke, but Ubisoft wanted the full feudal fantasy: ‘We were sort of making a stealth tank, and it didn’t quite work’”, *GamesRadar+*, 1 April 2025, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/assassin-s-creed/assassins-creed-shadows-was-originally-envisioned-without-yasuke-but-ubisoft-wanted-the-full-feudal-fantasy-we-were-sort-of-making-a-stealth-tank-and-it-didnt-quite-work/>.

⁷³ WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*.

⁷⁴ Richardson, “London Games Festival shines a light on diversity”; Fazulla, “The rise of the video game Arab hero”; Michiel Buijsman, “Global games market to hit \$189 billion in 2025 as growth shifts to console”, *Newzoo*, 9 September 2025, <https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/global-games-market-to-hit-189-billion-in-2025>.

to the commercially dominant gaming demographics in these countries, and those game experiences which engage more overtly with audiences outside Europe and America, or are produced by Euro-American companies, experience additional marginalisation and reduction within cultural discourse.⁷⁵

Depictions of Marginalised Perspectives in Historical Games

Although games remain principally interested in appealing to player audiences in White-dominated Western countries, this is not to say that historical games have failed to include more diverse characters. Indeed, some historical characters in games are depicted to represent marginalised demographics with a frequency that borders on cultural cliché. However, certain inclusive characters within historical media are arguably more questionable, either drawing heavily upon historical pop-culture archetypes over agreed historical narratives or implemented in fashions which expose their depictions to accusations of “tokenism” – a negative term inferring the inclusion of marginalised communities in order to claim support for these groups but without demonstrating genuine or meaningful representation – or other critical appellations which expose these depictions to political arguments surrounding accusations of “forced inclusivity”.⁷⁶ In this section, three major demographics which have been historically marginalised by historical entertainment media – women, non-White ethnicities, and LGBTQ+ communities – shall be examined in order to identify significant issues surrounding their depiction within historical video games, as well as commonalities affecting the representation of marginalised demographics more broadly within the gaming medium.

Women in Historical Games

Of the three marginalised demographics identified above, women have the longest and strongest history of representation within the video game medium. From “classic” video

⁷⁵ Rizvi and Mukherjee, “‘Your Subaltern is not my Subaltern’: Intersectionality and the Dangers of a Single Game-Story”, pp. 51-65.

⁷⁶ “Tokenism”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tokenism>; Zoe Hawkins, “Diversity is great – but do we run the risk of tokenism?”, *Critical Hit*, 5 June 2015, <https://www.criticalhit.net/gaming/diversity-is-great-but-do-we-run-the-risk-of-tokenism/>.

game protagonists like Samus Aran from the *Metroid* series (1986-2023) and Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise (1996-present) to modern female protagonists like Ellie from *The Last of Us* games (2013-2020) and Aloy from the *Horizon* series (2016-2022) amongst countless others, female video game characters have played a prominent role within the medium for decades. The same is true of historical games, perhaps most visibly within the *Assassin's Creed* series, where female characters have featured prominently as playable protagonists throughout numerous entries, ranging from *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* (2012) to the most recent entry in the franchise, *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*.⁷⁷ However, despite this visibility, demographic surveys of game characters have suggested that female characters are still heavily under-represented proportional to real-world populations; for example, a survey of video games sold in the USA between 2005-2006 reported that female characters comprised only 15 per cent of those represented, and frequently in secondary or supporting narrative roles.⁷⁸

In some cases, games have depicted women fulfilling particular historical character roles with a frequency that draws upon established historical pop-culture tropes. One notable example are female Soviet snipers in WWII games, whose depictions include multiple historical games across the years such as *Call of Duty: Finest Hour* (2004), *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (2021) and *Sniper Elite 4's Covert Heroes* additional content (2017) to name but a few.⁷⁹ Yet these common instances of female historical characters are typically inspired by either historical evidence or established media precedent. Female Soviet snipers can be said to fall into both categories, as the successes of historically-identifiable female Soviet snipers like Roza Shanina and Lyudmila Pavilchenko were heavily publicised by contemporary Soviet propaganda,⁸⁰ and fictional characters based upon these figures have subsequently been depicted in post-war cinematic media such as *Enemy at the Gates*

⁷⁷ Ubisoft Sofia, *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), PlayStation Vita. Released as *Assassin's Creed: Liberation HD* on Xbox, PlayStation and PC in 2014, and Nintendo Switch and Google Stadia in 2019. Published by Ubisoft; Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Shadows: Who are Naoe and Yasuke?*, online video recording, YouTube, 15 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nszrx939ZVA>.

⁷⁸ Williams *et al*, "The virtual census", pp. 824-827 & p. 831.

⁷⁹ Spark Unlimited, Kuju Entertainment and Exakt Entertainment, *Call of Duty* (2004), Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo GameCube. Published by Activision; Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (2021), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Activision; Rebellion Developments, *Sniper Elite 4 – Covert Heroes DLC* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC.

⁸⁰ A. G. Morgan, *Stalin's Sniper: The War Diary of Roza Shanina* (Independent publication, 2020); Lyudmila Pavilchenko, *Lady Death: The Memoirs of Stalin's Sniper* (Barnsley: Greenhill Books, 2018); Lyuba Vinogradova, *Avenging Angels: Soviet Women Snipers on the Eastern Front (1941-45)* (London: MacLehose Press, 2018).

(2001).⁸¹ A similar situation can be identified with female participation in the French Resistance, whose depictions in diverse entertainment media such as *The Longest Day* (1962), *'Allo 'Allo*, *Call of Duty 3* and *Call of Duty: WWII* highlights and emphasises female membership within resistance groups but builds upon verifiable historical evidence of such participation, albeit to a potentially distorted degree.⁸²

However, certain recurring historical female character archetypes have been subjected to greater debate, with their frequency of depiction within historical media contrasted with their conflicted existence within academic discourse. For example, many games depicting the Viking-era incorporate representations of “shieldmaidens” and other interpretations of female Viking warriors, which have become an accepted element of historical pop-culture for this historical era.⁸³

In *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, for instance, the player is presented with three options for the Viking protagonist character's adult appearance, which dictate the character's gender in various sections of gameplay: female only, male only, and “Let the Animus decide” (a combination of both gender versions of the character, whose title refers to one of the overarching science-fiction elements which underpin the *Assassin's Creed* game series as a wider “narrative universe”).⁸⁴ The last of these gender options functions as the default option for the game, and, significantly, presents the game's protagonist as a female character for the majority of gameplay which, in keeping with the *Assassin's Creed* series as a whole, features a heavy emphasis on combat activities, including the raiding of monasteries and fortress assaults which resonate with the particular histories of Norse conquest and colonisation in Western Europe.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, *Expeditions: Viking* allows the player to create their own unique protagonist (either male or female), who inherits the leadership of their Viking clan upon the commencement of the game and is immediately joined by a “shieldmaiden”

⁸¹ *Enemy At The Gates*, directed by Jean-Jaques Annaud (2001, Paramount Pictures) [DVD].

⁸² *The Longest Day*, directed by Darryl F. Zanuck (1962, CinemaScope) [DVD]; *'Allo 'Allo*, created by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft (broadcast 30 December 1982 – 14 December 1992 on BBC1) [DVD]; Treyarch, *Call of Duty 3* (2006), Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Wii. Published by Activision; Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Activision; Claire Andrieu, “Women in the French Resistance: Revisiting the Historical Record”, *French Politics, Culture and Society*, vol 18: 1 (2000), pp. 13-27.

⁸³ Marie-Louise Meier, “‘The hardest battles are fought in the mind’: the role of women in Viking games”, in Draycott, *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games*, pp. 75-98.

⁸⁴ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

companion character,⁸⁶ while the Viking-themed *Northern Lords* content expansion released in 2021 for *Crusader Kings III* includes the optional “shieldmaiden” trait, a selectable character trait which permits female characters to override cultural gender restrictions on combat participation if their “physical prowess” characteristic is above a pre-determined numerical threshold.⁸⁷

These inclusions mirror similar popular depictions of “shieldmaidens” in other modern historical media such as television streaming series and historical reenactment.⁸⁸ In Amazon Prime’s long-running drama series *Vikings* (2013-2020), originally produced for the History Channel, the primary example of this “shieldmaiden” phenomenon is that of the character Lagertha (played by Katherine Winnick), one of the many love interests of the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok (played by Travis Fimmel) who features as a primary protagonist of the show’s first four series, and is herself a major protagonist throughout the drama’s six series run.⁸⁹ Lagertha is repeatedly identified as a “shieldmaiden” throughout the drama, and the relationship between her and Ragnar within the series is corroborated by, and largely based upon, literary evidence from the Norse sagas and Saxo Grammaticus’ *History of the Danes*, a thirteenth-century text which interweaves Norse mythology with Danish history and outright names ‘Lathgertha’, a lover of Ragnar Loðbrok, as a ‘skilled female fighter, who bore a man’s temper in a girl’s body’.⁹⁰ However, Lagertha is only the most prominent representative of a “shieldmaiden” within the *Vikings* series; many of the named female characters throughout the drama series’ run actively participate in combat within both small and large-scale engagements, alongside innumerable scores of unnamed female background extras.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Logic Artists, *Expeditions: Viking* (2017), PC.

⁸⁷ Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III – Northern Lords* (2021), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

⁸⁸ Meier, “‘The hardest battles are fought in the mind’: the role of women in Viking games”, pp. 75-98; Klaudia Karpińska, “Women in Viking Reenactment”, in Tom Birkett & Roderick Dale (eds.), *The Vikings Reimagined: Reception, Recovery, Engagement* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2019), pp. 70-85.

⁸⁹ *Vikings*, created by Michael Hirst (broadcast 3 March 2013 – 30 December 2020 on History Channel and Amazon Prime). Available on Amazon Prime.

⁹⁰ *Vikings*; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), pp. 176-179; Angus A Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, *The Viking Age: A Reader* (Second edition; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 95-96.

⁹¹ *Vikings*.

Meanwhile, Netflix's *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2023), adapted from the historical novel series by Bernard Cornwell, boasts two prominent female warrior characters across both sides of the Anglo-Viking conflict: Brida, a shieldmaiden of mixed Anglo-Viking heritage (played by Emily Cox); and Æthelflæd, the legendary Lady of Mercia and daughter of Alfred "the Great" (played by Millie Brady).⁹² Although Brida is an entirely fictional character and thus largely free from constraints of historical realism, Æthelflæd is a verified historical figure and enjoyed a prodigious career as the *de facto* ruler of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia both before and after the death of her husband; during her known career, Æthelflæd led armies against the Vikings on multiple occasions during the early-tenth century,⁹³ feats which are portrayed by *The Last Kingdom* through the lens of active participation in combat.

In addition to these media depictions, female historical re-enactors have become an increasingly visible demographic within portrayals of the Viking period since the 1990s,⁹⁴ with the "Viking shieldmaiden" concept providing a popular and commonly accepted forum for personal self-expression, as well as a useful avenue to facilitate female participation in traditionally male-dominated combat displays.⁹⁵ This personal self-expressionism is, arguably, a significant consideration with regards to the depiction of "Viking shieldmaidens" in historical gaming, as many of the aforementioned instances of its overt inclusion, notably including *Crusader Kings III* and *Expeditions: Viking*, occur within games featuring "role-playing" or "character creation" gameplay mechanics, the latter of which shall be explored in more detail later in this chapter, which offer players greater capacity for agency and personal ownership over their individual characters. By contrast, *Thrones of Britannia: A Total War Saga*, a strategy game with an almost identical setting and timeframe as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and *Expeditions: Viking*, features no female characters visibly participating in its battles (although *Thrones of Britannia* can randomly spawn "off-screen" female characters with a "shieldmaiden" personality trait, which offers in-game modifiers for their attendant

⁹² *The Last Kingdom*, created by Stephen Butchard (broadcast 15 October 2015 – 9 March 2022 on BBC2 and Netflix). Available on Netflix.

⁹³ Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England* (London: Hutchinson, 2021), pp. 257-258.

⁹⁴ Karpińska, "Women in Viking Reenactment", pp. 70-85.

⁹⁵ Karpińska, "Women in Viking Reenactment", pp. 79-81.

male spouse character but, significantly, does not facilitate female character involvement in combat).⁹⁶

Despite the frequency of their representation within historical entertainment media, there is uncertainty and ongoing debate within academic circles regarding whether the “female Viking warrior” can be considered an evidence-supported historical phenomenon.⁹⁷ Much of the cited evidence for “shieldmaidens” comes from literary sources, where descriptions of female warriors have been theorised as attempting to reconcile medieval understandings of female social status with participation in male-dominated activities such as warfare; writing in the early 1990s, Birgit and Peter Sawyer argued that ‘the motif of the young, unmarried woman who carries arms and acts like a man [was] the literary expression of situations where, in the absence of a male heir, a daughter became the surrogate son responsible for what was normally man’s business’.⁹⁸ Alongside this analysis, the Sawyers actively claimed that the “female Viking warrior” concept had been all-but discarded as a legitimate historical phenomenon by contemporary academics.⁹⁹

However, more recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed the existence of a Viking-era “warrior burial” containing a female grave occupant, although the exact interpretation of the relationship between this female individual and the martial-associated grave goods discovered alongside them remains inconclusive; multiple potential interpretations of the grave findings have been proposed, many of which infer symbolic or strategic military leadership rather than direct, physical participation in combat as per the traditional and popular interpretation of the “Viking shieldmaiden” concept.¹⁰⁰ Significantly, these debates, in addition to those interpreting literary sources describing female Viking

⁹⁶ Creative Assembly, *Thrones of Britannia: A Total War Saga* (2018), PC. Published by SEGA.

⁹⁷ See for examples, Meier, “‘The hardest battles are fought in the mind’: the role of women in Viking games”, pp. 75-98; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, pp. 176-179; Birgit Sawyer and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 188 & p. 190; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al*, ‘A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics’, *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, vol. 164: 4 (2017), pp. 853-860; Neil Price *et al.*, “Viking warrior women?: Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581”, *Antiquity*, vol. 73: 367 (2019), pp. 181-198; Marianne Moen, “Was there such a thing as a female Viking warrior?”, *ScienceNorway.no*, 24 November 2021, <https://sciencenorway.no/history-researchers-zone-share-your-science/was-there-such-a-thing-as-a-female-viking-warrior/1940564>.

⁹⁸ Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, p. 190.

⁹⁹ Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁰ Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al*, ‘A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics’, pp. 853-860; Price *et al.*, “Viking warrior women?: Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581”, pp. 181-198.

warriors, remain firmly seated within academic perspectives of this phenomenon: the discovery of a confirmed female grave occupant in a Viking-era “warrior burial” received attention from 130 official news agencies, in addition to innumerable online outlets, who widely proclaimed the discovery as apparent confirmation of female Viking warriors, thereby legitimising the “shieldmaiden” phenomenon seen across historical popular-culture.¹⁰¹

This popular view of apparent historical confirmation of an existing pop-culture phenomenon – even in spite of academic uncertainty – is a significant point, and highlights that while popular media, such as video games, often draws from history for narrative inspiration, it also calls upon it for validation of existing narrative phenomena, even if those pop-culture phenomena bare only partial resemblance to their established historical realities. This is particularly notable in contested situations such as representations of marginalised communities, where historical precedents – particularly when confirmed by academic research – serves as a powerful support against modern actors opposed to inclusive authorial perspectives of historical eras.

Attitudes and debates towards female representation in gaming, both from the perspective of players and games development, have been a significant and prominent element of the changing socio-political landscape within the video game medium for several years.¹⁰² Arguably the most notable incident of this socio-political transformation was the so-called “GamerGate” movement, a leading example of a “culture war” within the context of video games.¹⁰³ GamerGate was initially sparked in 2014 by derogatory remarks from the disgruntled ex-partner of a female “indie” developer, which spuriously claimed that she had traded sexual favours in exchange for positive critical reviews of her game.¹⁰⁴ The controversy rapidly spread and escalated as right-wing outlets and commentators attacked

¹⁰¹ Price *et al.*, “Viking warrior women?: Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581”, p. 182.

¹⁰² Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang, “Sexism in Video Games and the Gaming Community”, and Rachel Kowert, Johannes Brauer, and Thorsten Quandt, “Women Are From *FarmVille*, Men Are From *ViceCity*: The Cycle of Exclusion and Sexism in Video Game Content and Culture”, in Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Social Aspects of Digital Gaming* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 115-152.

¹⁰³ Leigh Alexander, “Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody is Winning”, *Time*, 5 September 2014, <https://time.com/3274247/video-game-culture-war/>; Caitlin Dewey, “The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need to read”, *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/>; Chris Ip, “How Do We Know What We Know About #GamerGate”, *Colombia Journalism Review*, 23 October 2014, https://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/gamergate.php; “Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars – but were afraid to ask”.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Salter, *Crime, Justice and Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 43.

female game developers and their defenders – such as feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian – with misogynistic abuse, coordinated harassment campaigns, and, in the most extreme cases, sent rape or death threats to victims, signalling their political sympathies via the social media tag “#GamerGate”.¹⁰⁵ GamerGate gained significant attention in mainstream media, notably following the cancellation of a public-speaking engagement by Sarkeesian in October 2014 after threats of a mass shooting if the event took place were issued by a GamerGate supporter.¹⁰⁶

Proponents of the GamerGate movement claimed that games journalists and developers were in collusion to aggressively promote issues of gender equality and inclusivity within games to the detriment of gaming in general.¹⁰⁷ Some male game developers voiced their support for GamerGate as an expression of opposition to what they described as the impact of “social justice warriors” upon the artistic integrity of their games, which they claimed was pressuring them to present socio-politically progressive experiences in order to avoid public criticism.¹⁰⁸

It is important to note that many of the claims presented by GamerGate supporters regarding the promotion of ethical practice in game review processes have been systematically disproven, and subsequent analysis has indicated that such claims were promoted as a reactionary response to criticism of GamerGate advocates’ personal attacks against female game developers.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, although the GamerGate movement has

¹⁰⁵ Salter, *Crime, Justice and Social Media*, p. 43; Dewey, “The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need to read”; Ip, “How Do We Know What We Know About #GamerGate”.

¹⁰⁶ Dewey, “The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need to read”; Saeed Ahemed and Tony Marco, “Anita Sarkeesian forced to cancel Utah State speech after mass shooting threat”, *CNN*, 15 October 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/15/tech/utah-anita-sarkeesian-threat/>; Leo Kelion, “Feminist video-games talk cancelled after massacre threat”, *BBC News*, 15 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-29626809>.

¹⁰⁷ Andrea Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?: Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity”, *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2: 4 (2016) [Accessed via Sage Journals: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305116672484>]; Jesse Singal, “Gamergate Should Stop Lying To Journalists – and Itself”, *The Cut*, 20 October 2014, <https://www.thecut.com/2014/10/gamergate-should-stop-lying-to-itself.html>.

¹⁰⁸ For example, see Stephen Totilo, “My E3 Meeting With A Pro-GamerGate Developer”, *Kotaku*, 2 July 2015, <https://kotaku.com/my-e3-meeting-with-a-pro-gamergate-developer-1715511964>.

¹⁰⁹ Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?”; Ip, “How Do We Know What We Know About #GamerGate”; Alexander, “Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody is Winning”; Emily St. James, “#GamerGate has won a few battles. It will lose the war.”, *Vox*, 23 October 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/10/23/7044593/gamergate>; Torill Elvira Mortensen, “Anger, Fear and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate”, *Games & Culture*, vol. 12: 8 (2016) [Accessed via Sage Journals: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555412016640408>].

been interpreted as “ending” in 2015, the after-effects have been pronounced as the gaming industry steadily takes corrective steps to improve circumstances for women within the industry and wider gaming communities, even if subsequent controversies both within gaming and popular culture more widely have demonstrated that the process of confronting the underlying discriminatory attitudes that prompted the GamerGate movement remains an on-going challenge, even a decade after the controversial movement began.¹¹⁰ This, as senior Ubisoft developer Marc-Alexis Côté says, provides an ‘added challenge of distinguishing between genuine feedback and attacks driven by intolerance’.¹¹¹

The strength of these anti-feminist attitudes within the gaming industry, and their consequences for games development, has been vividly illustrated by a number of heavily publicised scandals within major games publishers, exposing widespread anti-social behaviour towards female employees and workplace harassment culture. Activision-Blizzard, publishers of numerous game franchises including *Call of Duty* and *World of Warcraft*, were amongst the companies more severely affected by these incidents, as they were subjected to an onslaught of accusations of misogynistic behaviour and sexual harassment towards female staff within the workplace; amongst the more serious accusations were reports that frequent abusive and misogynistic behaviour within the publisher had caused one female employee to commit suicide.¹¹² The allegations against Activision-Blizzard reached such ferocity that the publisher was investigated and sued by the American state of California with regards to the reports of sexual harassment and toxic workplace culture.¹¹³ Meanwhile, mass protests and resignations from Activision-Blizzard’s

¹¹⁰ See for examples, Keza MacDonald, “It’s 10 years since Gamergate – the industry must now stand up to far-right trolls”, *The Guardian*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2024/mar/08/gamergate-trolls-woke-game-consultants>; Keza MacDonald, “The disturbing online misogyny of Gamergate has returned – if it ever went away”, *The Guardian*, 19 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/article/2024/jun/19/the-disturbing-online-misogyny-of-gamergate-has-returned-if-it-ever-went-away>; Richardson, “No one forced us to make a game with a diverse cast”; Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of Shadows’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”; Kempshall, *The History and Politics of Star Wars*, pp. 202-207.

¹¹¹ Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of Shadows’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”.

¹¹² Gus Garcia-Roberts and Shannon Liao, “Activision Blizzard sued for wrongful death by family of employee who killed herself”, *Washington Post*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2022/03/04/activision-blizzard-employee-suicide-lawsuit/>; Matt Wales, “Activision Blizzard being sued by family of employee who died by suicide”, *Eurogamer*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.eurogamer.net/activision-blizzard-being-sued-by-family-of-employee-who-committed-suicide>.

¹¹³ “California sues Activision Blizzard over alleged harassment”, *BBC News*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-57929543>; Maeve Allsop, “Activision Blizzard Sued Over ‘Frat Boy’

development teams as a result of the publisher's response to the scandal were cited by some gaming news outlets as contributing to the publisher approaching tech-giant Microsoft (owners of the Xbox gaming platform) with offers of a commercial acquisition,¹¹⁴ a seismic event within the gaming industry that grabbed headlines in mainstream news.¹¹⁵

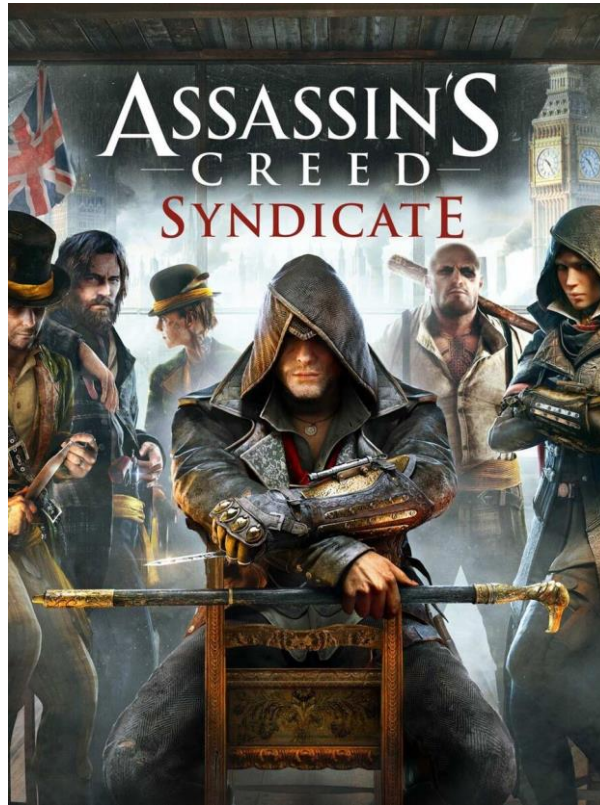


Figure 2.2: Cover art for *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (Ubisoft, 2015).

Another high-profile, and more clearly illustrated incident of toxic behaviour within a game developer was the scandal involving the former Chief Creative Officer at Ubisoft, Serge Hascoët. In a lengthy *Bloomberg* report on allegations of widespread sexism and harassment culture within Ubisoft, it was reported that Hascoët had repeatedly forced

Culture, Harassment (1)", *Bloomberg Law*, 21 July 2021, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/activision-blizzard-sued-by-california-over-frat-boy-culture>.

¹¹⁴ Jordan Novet, "Microsoft's talks with Activision started days after report on sexual misconduct sent stock tumbling", *CNBC*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/18/microsofts-activision-talks-started-after-reporting-on-sex-misconduct.html>; WhatCulture Gaming, *The REAL Reason Xbox Bought Activision*, online video recording, 21 January 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aA-mp_HZlIkE.

¹¹⁵ See for examples, Michael Race and Zoe Kleinmann, "Microsoft completes \$69bn takeover of Call of Duty maker Activision Blizzard", *BBC News*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-67080391>; Dan Milmo, "Microsoft completes \$69bn deal to buy Call of Duty maker Activision Blizzard", *The Guardian*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/oct/13/microsoft-deal-to-buy-call-of-duty-maker-activision-blizzard-cleared-by-uk>; Kellen Browning and David McCabe, "Microsoft Closes \$69 Billion Activision Deal, Overcoming Regulators Objections", *The New York Times*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/technology/microsoft-activision-blizzard-deal-closes.html>.

games under development by the publisher to feature a male primary protagonist, as he reportedly claimed that a female leading character would hinder the affected games' sales.¹¹⁶ Among the titles alleged to have been forced to make this alteration were multiple entries in the *Assassin's Creed* historical game series, including *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* and *Assassin's Creed: Origins*.¹¹⁷

The side-lining of female characters is particularly detectable in the case of *Syndicate*, which prominently features the sibling relationship between its dual protagonists Jacob and Evie Frye within the game's central narrative, yet the game's marketing and promotion focused overwhelmingly on the male protagonist, Jacob; on *Syndicate's* "cover art" (Figure 2.2), which was used to promote the game and fronted physical sale copies of the title, Jacob is prominently positioned in the artwork's centre foreground, the traditional placement of each *Assassin's Creed* game's main protagonist, while Evie is placed to the side – literally sidelined – along with generic Non-Player Characters (NPCs), and she is entirely absent from the game's initial CGI announcement trailer.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, in the case of *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, reports claim that *Origins'* originally planned protagonist was to be a female character – included in the final game as the supporting protagonist, Aya – however the alleged intervention of Hascoët and other unnamed Ubisoft executives resulted in the creation of *Origins'* male protagonist, Bayek, as the primary player character and the subsequent diminution of the gameplay and narrative role of the planned female protagonist; although the female protagonist Aya remains playable in certain sections of the narrative, these are constrained as short "set piece events", and the player is given no ability to explore the game's wider "open world" as this character or to alter her in-game equipment to suit player preferences, both of which are features of gameplay as *Origins'* male protagonist.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Jason Schreier, "Ubisoft Family Accused of Mishandling Sexual Misconduct Claims", *Bloomberg*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-21/ubisoft-sexual-misconduct-scandal-harassment-sexism-and-abuse>; Joe Parlock, "New report claims Assassin's Creed developers were pressured into minimising female protagonists", *PC Gamer*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/amp/new-report-claims-assassins-creed-developers-were-pressured-into-minimising-female-protagonists/>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate E3 Cinematic Trailer*, online video recording, YouTube, 16 June 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTBbwgsyxvg>.

¹¹⁹ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Google Stadia in 2020. Published by Ubisoft; Schreier, "Ubisoft Family Accused of Mishandling Sexual Misconduct Claims"; Parlock, "New report claims Assassin's Creed developers were pressured into minimising female protagonists";

Abhorrent as these allegations of female minimisation are, they are not the first time that Ubisoft's flagship franchise has courted controversy for its treatment of women within its games. Following the release of 2014's *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, Ubisoft received vocal criticism from players for the series' shortage of playable female characters, including within its online co-operative and competitive multiplayer suites. Ubisoft's attempts to defend their stance, claiming that implementing playable female character models within *Unity* would require too much work to implement at such a late stage of development, simply fuelled the controversy and were interpreted by the gaming public as flimsy excuses for laziness at best and misogyny at worst.¹²⁰ In both of these incidents, the authorial perspective of the affected game's creators was cited as a significant factor in the decision to minimise or exclude playable female perspectives within the affected historical game.

The developers of more recent *Assassin's Creed* titles have clearly been aware of this perceived lack of support for women in gaming and in the historical narrative, and have taken steps to address this imbalance in the company's recent releases. Some of these actions have been small, such as the inclusion of a fan-designed feminist variation of the Assassin symbol as an optional in-game cosmetic in *Valhalla*.¹²¹ Meanwhile, more prominent efforts have also been undertaken, such as the inclusion of either dual male and female protagonists or gender customisation in almost every *Assassin's Creed* game released since the debate sparked by *Unity* culminating in the default preference for the option of a female protagonist in *Valhalla*.¹²² Among the few exceptions to this pattern, *Origins* was reportedly forced to reduce the intended female protagonist, Aya, to a partially-playable secondary role in favour of a male protagonist,¹²³ while *Assassin's Creed: Mirage* reportedly began development as expansion content for *Valhalla*, exploring the backstory of a side-

Brittini Finley, "Assassin's Creed Origins minimized Aya's role", *GameRant*, 23 July 2020, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-origins-aya-ubisoft-sexism/>

¹²⁰ Yannick LeJacq, "Ubisoft Cuts Plans for Female Assassins in *Unity* (UPDATE)", *Kotaku*, 11 June 2014, <https://kotaku.com/ubisoft-cut-plans-for-female-assassins-in-unity-1589278349>; Colin Campbell, "Ubisoft responds to Assassin's Creed Unity female character furore", *Polygon*, 11 June 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/6/11/5801374/ubisoft-responds-to-assassins-creed-unity-women-character-furore>.

¹²¹ Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed Valhalla includes tattooed logo of AC Sisterhood fan movement", *Eurogamer*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2020-09-29-assassins-creed-valhalla-developers-will-include-a-nod-to-the-ac-sisterhood-fan-movement>.

¹²² *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.

¹²³ Schreier, "Ubisoft Family Accused of Mishandling Sexual Misconduct Claims"; Parlock, "New report claims Assassin's Creed developers were pressured into minimising female protagonists"; Finley, "Assassin's Creed Origins minimized Aya's role".

character from that game, and was eventually expanded to become a stand-alone title.¹²⁴ *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* continues this pattern of inclusivity as the game also features dual protagonists, including a female Asian protagonist, Naoe, who, according to *Shadows'* developers, represents the stories of real women who defied historic gender expectations to participate in conflict.¹²⁵

These moves to include playable female perspectives within *Assassin's Creed* games not only help to address the specific criticisms levelled at the *Assassin's Creed* series for a lack of gender diversity but also help to increase the appeal of the games themselves. Demographic surveys of gamers have indicated that women form an ever-growing percentage of the gaming community: the analysis of demographic representation within games conducted by Williams *et al* in 2009 reported that women represented 38 per cent of game players, while the American gaming regulator, the Entertainment Software Association, estimated that 46 per cent of American gamers in 2021 were women.¹²⁶

Additionally, an online survey conducted by the website Quantic Foundry in 2020 found that while most gamers prefer to play as a protagonist of the same gender identity as themselves, significant percentages of respondents identifying as both male and non-binary expressed interest in playing as a female protagonist.¹²⁷ While some of the rationales proposed for the interest by male-identifying players reinforces preconceptions that video games are designed for the male gaze and offer a means of objectifying women, the Quantic Foundry survey also suggested that female game protagonists offered male-identifying players a safe environment in which to explore gender identity.¹²⁸ Therefore, the inclusion of female protagonist characters within games, either as stand-alone protagonists or as an

¹²⁴ Jason Schreier, "Ubisoft Plans New Assassin's Creed Game to Help Fill Its Schedule", *Bloomberg*, 9 February 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-09/ubisoft-plans-new-assassin-s-creed-game-to-help-fill-schedule?sref=6UP7OzYf>; Owen S. Good, "Ubisoft confirms Assassin's Creed Mirage after multiple leaks", *Polygon*, 1 September 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23332863/assassins-creed-mirage-confirmed-release-date-ubisoft>.

¹²⁵ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Shadows: Who are Naoe and Yasuke?*; Phillips, "Assassin's Creed boss discusses 'devastating' impact of *Shadows'* diversity and inclusivity backlash".

¹²⁶ Williams *et al*, "The virtual census", p. 831; "2021 Essential Facts About The Video Game Industry", *Entertainment Software Association*, <https://www.theesa.com/resource/2021-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/>.

¹²⁷ Nick Yee, "About one out of three men prefer playing female characters. Rethinking the importance of female protagonists in video games", *Quantic Foundry*, 05 August 2021, <https://quanticfoundry.com/2021/08/05/character-gender/>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

optional player choice, enables developers to offer game protagonists which appeal to as many players as possible to ensure that their games are a commercial success, as well as reflecting the diversity of the gaming community.

The actions of recent *Assassin's Creed* games to improve female representation have been mirrored across the games industry, with multiple recent historical games prominently highlighting historic female participation in either gameplay or narrative. In 2018, Creative Assembly updated *Total War: Rome II* to periodically spawn female “generals” for certain factions, an update highlighted principally by a minority of players voicing their opposition to the feature and the developers’ refusal to remove it.¹²⁹ In 2021, Creative Assembly released a Downloadable Content (DLC) expansion for *Troy: A Total War Saga* which introduced two factions of Amazons, the famous race of warrior women from Hellenic myth, into the game’s euhemeristic depiction of the Trojan War.¹³⁰ Both *Battlefield I* and *Battlefield V* included single-player narratives with female protagonists, both depicting female participation in resistance movements during the World Wars.¹³¹ *Red Dead Redemption 2* featured seven female characters within its principle cast who feature prominently through the game’s narrative, even if the game’s playable protagonist remained male.¹³²

Even smaller game experiences have taken steps to improve the representation of women in historical scenarios: amongst games portraying gangsters of the American Prohibition, for instance, 2002’s Third-Person action-adventure game *Mafia* features only a single prominent female character in a supporting role, while 2003’s isometric Real-Time Strategy game *Chicago: 1930* features no notable female characters at all.¹³³ Both of these experiences contrast significantly with the representation demonstrated within 2020’s Turn-

¹²⁹ Draycott, *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games*, pp. 1-3; Liz Lanier, “‘Total War: Rome II’ Won’t Remove Female Generals Despite Bad Reviews & Backlash”, *Variety*, 25 September 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/total-war-rome-ii-female-generals-1202956389/>; Jordyn Lukomski, “‘Accuracy’ vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games”, *NYMG*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17807>.

¹³⁰ Creative Assembly, *Troy: A Total War Saga – Amazons* (2021), PC. Published by SEGA.

¹³¹ EA DICE, *Battlefield I – Nothing Is Written* (2016); EA DICE, *Battlefield V – Nordlys* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

¹³² Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on PC and Google Stadia in 2019; Esther Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, in John Wills and Esther Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), pp. 128-145.

¹³³ Illusion Softworks, *Mafia* (2002), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Gathering of Developers, Inc; Spellbound, *Chicago: 1930* (2004), PC. Published by Microids.

Based Tactics and empire-management game *Empire of Sin*, which features five playable female characters amongst its fifteen optional protagonists alongside more than twenty recruitable female NPC side-characters.¹³⁴ Although, as Ubisoft developers noted in the case of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*, female protagonists in historical scenarios still experience some opposition by a vocal minority of players, female perspectives within historical games have become significantly more accepted by gaming communities, thereby enabling greater frequency of representation.¹³⁵

However, it is also worth observing these female historical perspectives in a slightly wider context of female activity within games and the context of the roles which they occupy. Many of the repeated instances of popular female historical characters discussed above – such as Soviet snipers, resistance fighters, and Viking shieldmaidens – can be classified as instances of women operating within masculine or male-dominated spheres of activity – a point noted in the context of “shieldmaidens” by Viking reenactors¹³⁶ – which potentially raises questions about the agency attributed to these female characters and that of women acting outside of masculine activities.

This issue is explicitly addressed by Esther Wright in the context of *Red Dead Redemption 2* and its portrayal of the American “Wild West”, as although the game features several female characters within its core cast, many of these merely serve peripheral roles within the male-centric primary narrative, while the only female character to undergo significant narrative development – Sadie Adler – does so by ‘[overcoming] her initial trauma by progressively occupying more of a masculine role’, with one of her first acts of narrative agency being the acquisition of more masculine attire; as Wright comments, ‘in that she [Sadie] is narratively significant at all, it is only by fitting into the space she can occupy within a... narrative defined by masculinity, violence and brutality’.¹³⁷

Although these comments are specifically directed against *Red Dead Redemption 2* and its developer-publisher Rockstar Games, a wider assessment of the roles and narratives of other historical video games demonstrates significant parity between these critiques of

¹³⁴ Romero Games, *Empire of Sin* (2020), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

¹³⁵ Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of *Shadows*’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”.

¹³⁶ Karpińska, “Women in Viking Reenactment”, pp. 79-81.

¹³⁷ Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, pp. 128-145.

female representation in *Red Dead Redemption 2* and other instances of female characters provided gameplay and narrative agency in historical games – the broad strokes descriptions given above for Sadie Adler’s narrative share significant parallels with the narratives for *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, both of which are playable with female protagonists operating within heavily masculine narrative and gameplay roles (due in part to the inclusion of alternatively playable male protagonists within these same games, leading to the creation of narratives which must function with either protagonist despite the two female protagonists being considered the “canonical” choices within the franchise lore), while the earlier discussion regarding “Viking shieldmaidens” theorised their existence within the cultural framing of women occupying male social roles – and as such could be argued to reflect upon wider issues of how women are represented and engaged with by video games and the gaming industry.¹³⁸

This “masculinisation” of female game characters has also impacted upon character design. Wright highlights that one of Sadie Adler’s first acts of narrative agency in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is the acquisition of new, overtly more masculine clothing, attire which this character wears for the remainder of the game and was presented wearing in pre-release promotional materials.¹³⁹ Meanwhile, gaming commentators noted the more masculine design attributes of *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*’s female protagonist, Cassandra – notably their more visibly muscular body build and lack of so-called “boob armour” (an oft-ridiculed feature of fictional female character design favouring overt sexualisation in supposedly protective clothing) – by contrast to female game characters such as Lara Croft which present more sexualised designs, even in spite of character redesigns to “modernise” the appearance of these more “feminine” characters.¹⁴⁰ Yet even though some gaming commentators have praised these more “masculine” female characters as signs of progress away from older, more overtly-sexualised female character designs intended for the male gaze towards more ‘realistic female bodies’, these more “masculine” female characters have experienced push-back from (often male) elements of gaming communities; Cassandra’s

¹³⁸ Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, pp. 128-145; Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, “What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture”, pp. 421-435.

¹³⁹ Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, pp. 128-145.

¹⁴⁰ Sam Greer, “We need to talk about Cassandra(’s biceps)”, *Eurogamer*, 9 November 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/we-need-to-talk-about-kassandra-s-biceps>.

more muscular design received some opposition from players who deemed it to be insufficiently “feminine” – one Steam forum user described Cassandra’s character design as ‘like a guy in drag’ – while the playable female character of Abby in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) was vocally criticised on social media for being “too masculine” as a female character, to the extent that the character even became the subject of unfounded transphobic abuse.¹⁴¹

Consequently, while we can see a willingness to facilitate female representation within gaming, that representation faces implicit boundaries within the authorial perspectives of gaming, both from the developer perspective – in the case of facilitating female representation through narratives and roles which are perceived as enabling agency within gameplay, even if these roles emphasise historical pop-culture narratives or fit within masculinised narrative tropes – and in the player perspective – through debates about female body forms revealing the dominance of the male gaze in authoring female characters and the vocal sexism of toxic elements of player communities.

Representation of Non-White Ethnicities in Historical Games

Alongside the increasingly visible representation of female characters, recent historical games have similarly endeavoured to bring characters from non-White ethnic backgrounds into greater prominence within White-dominated historical and gamic contexts. Recent studies have indicated that knowledge of non-White historical narratives in Western countries remains overlooked even despite increasing attention within entertainment media;¹⁴² a recent poll reported by the UK newspaper *The Guardian* suggested that barely a quarter of respondents were aware of Jamaican or Kenyan military

¹⁴¹ Super Soaker, “What the heck is wrong with Cassandra’s body?”, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey - Steam Community Forum*, 13 October 2018, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/812140/discussions/0/3397295779069253628/>; Amy Coles, “The rampant body-shaming of Abby in *The Last of Us Part II* shows gamers still can’t accept a realistic female lead”, *The Independent*, 9 July 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/last-of-us-2-abby-gaming-naughty-dog-a9609616.html>.

¹⁴² Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-2; Éadaoin Agnew, “Historical films and TV shows are embracing diversity – but real historical voices are still overlooked”, *The Conversation*, 2 May 2025, <https://theconversation.com/historical-films-and-tv-shows-are-embracing-diversity-but-real-historical-voices-are-still-overlooked-253191>.

contributions to the British war effort in WWII.¹⁴³ Efforts to acknowledge Colonial histories in particular has seen an increase in representation for Black and other “minority” ethnic groups, including within historical contexts traditionally dominated by White characters, albeit tempered by the inherent sensitivity of these historical subjects and the frequently derogatory presentation of non-White communities in historical societies, which create additional challenges for developers aiming to present sympathetic representation of non-White characters within these narratives.

In recent years, numerous triple-A games have prominently featured non-White characters, either as playable protagonists or as prominent supporting characters, with a particular emphasis on Black representation. In 2016’s *Mafia III*, players of a series previously dominated by White Male characters are placed in control of a Black protagonist in a 1960s-era fictional surrogate of New Orleans.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, *Battlefield V* dedicates one of its single-player narratives to exploring the story of Senegalese Tirailleurs, French Colonial troops brought to Europe during WWII to assist with the liberation of the French homeland but who suffered mistreatment from their White counterparts and were subsequently excluded from the historical record;¹⁴⁵ this game narrative not only fulfils the desire to represent a non-White perspective in a White-dominated conflict, it also spotlights a historic injustice committed to those same non-White participants.¹⁴⁶ The strategy game *The Great War: Western Front* makes similar efforts to acknowledge Colonial contributions to the conduct of the war in Europe; both Indian and Gurkha Commonwealth troops featured as playable units for the Allied faction in the launch version of the game, and French North African and Senegalese Colonial troops were added in a subsequent content update.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Chris Osuh, “Britons largely unaware of Black and Asian contributions to war effort, research shows”, *The Guardian*, 4 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/04/britons-largely-unaware-of-black-and-asian-contribution-to-ww2-effort-research-shows>.

¹⁴⁴ Hangar 13, *Mafia III* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, PC, Apple Mac and Google Stadia. Published by 2K.

¹⁴⁵ *Battlefield V – Tirailleur*.

¹⁴⁶ Kat Bailey, “Battlefield V’s Best War Story So Far is ‘Tirailleur’, A Story That Highlights a Lesser-Known But Awful Historical Injustice”, *VG247*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.vg247.com/battlefield-vs-best-war-story-so-far-is-tirailleur-a-story-that-highlights-a-lesser-known-but-awful-historical-injustice>; Mike Thompson, “Paris liberation made ‘whites only’”, *BBC News*, 6 April 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7984436.stm>.

¹⁴⁷ Petroglyph Games, *The Great War: Western Front* (2023), PC. Published by Frontier Foundry; The Great War: Western Front, “June Update | Upcoming Mod Support”, *The Great War: Western Front – Steam*, 21 June 2023, <https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/2109370?emclan=103582791472376521&emgid=6477912663355609807>; The Great War: Western Front, “June Update (2.0.0) | Patch Notes”, *The Great War: Western Front –*

Multiple *Assassin's Creed* titles have featured non-White protagonists, ranging from Connor, the Native American central protagonist of *Assassin's Creed III*,¹⁴⁸ and Aveline, the Black female protagonist of *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*, an *AC III* spin-off title set in eighteenth century French Louisiana,¹⁴⁹ to Bayek, the Egyptian protagonist of *Assassin's Creed: Origins* – set during the reign of Cleopatra in Egypt's Ptolemaic period of antiquity – and Basim, the Arabic protagonist of ninth century Baghdad-set *Assassin's Creed: Mirage*.¹⁵⁰ The latest addition to this roster is the character of Yasuke, a Black African samurai in late sixteenth century Japan and one of the dual-protagonists of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*,¹⁵¹ whose inclusion was intended to facilitate an examination of “East meets West” perspectives interacting within the game's historical setting.¹⁵²

Sadly, historical legacies of racial abuse towards non-White communities have largely acted as an impediment to their portrayal as the protagonists of historical games. While less problematic for film or television histories, the participatory element of gaming makes the issue of historic racism a more significant barrier for representation as developers are reluctant to subject players to any systemic abuse which may have existed in historical societies or to present these historic actions and mentalities in a fashion which may legitimise them in the present.¹⁵³ Gamic depictions of WWII, for example, commonly present free intermingling of White and non-White ethnicities within their in-game depictions of US troops, whereas the reality saw enforced racial segregation within the US military of the 1940s, leading to tensions and some violent clashes between White and Black American troops stationed in the non-segregated UK during WWII, such as the racially-motivated mutiny known as the “Battle of Bamber Bridge” in 1943.¹⁵⁴

Steam, 28 June 2023,

<https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/2109370?emclan=103582791472376521&emgid=3669919470492292030>.

¹⁴⁸ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed III* (2012), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Nintendo Wii. Published by Ubisoft.

¹⁴⁹ *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*.

¹⁵⁰ *Assassin's Creed: Origins*; *Assassin's Creed: Mirage*.

¹⁵¹ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Shadows: Who are Naoe and Yasuke?*.

¹⁵² Brown, “Assassin's Creed Shadows was originally envisioned without Yasuke, but Ubisoft wanted the full feudal fantasy’.

¹⁵³ Agnew, “Historical films and TV shows are embracing diversity – but real historical voices are still overlooked”; Chapman and Linderorth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140.

¹⁵⁴ Emily Charles, “‘The treated us royally’? Black Americans in Britain during WW2”, *Imperial War Museum*, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/they-treated-us-royally-the-experiences-of-black-americans-in-britain-during-the-second-world-war>; Alan Rice, “Black troops were welcome in Britain, but Jim Crow wasn't: the race riot of one night in June 1943”, *Black History Month*, 1 February 2021,

Exceptionally, *Mafia III* unflinchingly incorporates prejudicial attitudes and racist slurs against Black communities, which are also directed at the game's player protagonist, in its depiction of 1960's America as a deliberate means of acknowledging and confronting these attitudes; the game opens with a disclaimer from the developers stating that the depiction of these racist attitudes within *Mafia III* is representative of those prevalent during the game's historical setting, and that the exclusion of 'this very real and shameful part of our past would have been offensive to the millions who faced – and still face – bigotry, discrimination, prejudice and racism in all its forms.'¹⁵⁵ *Red Dead Redemption 2* takes a similar approach, depicting historically racist attitudes within its game world which the White player protagonist stands apart from in both narrative and gameplay actions, thereby enabling the player to confront and attack these historically-reflective racist elements for in-game reward;¹⁵⁶ as examples, the player can encounter Klu Klux Klan members while exploring *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s game world and, unlike most other NPCs encountered during free exploration of the game world, killing and robbing these KKK members does not earn negative "Honor" points (the game's morality gameplay mechanic) for the player,¹⁵⁷ while the player can earn positive "Honor" points by participating in the optional side-mission "The Iniquities of History" through which they meet and uncover the past of a former slave catcher who has lost their home and livelihood through the abolition of slavery, ultimately confronting (and optionally killing) the slave catcher for their so-called "legacy".¹⁵⁸

As attitudes towards social equality continue to develop, however, the expectation within player communities for developers to include non-White characters in their games grows. Though multiple developers have asserted that they are not forced to incorporate diverse characters into their games,¹⁵⁹ games have occasionally incorporated non-White

<https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/civil-rights-movement/black-troops-were-welcome-in-britain-but-jim-crow-wasnt-the-race-riot-of-one-night-in-june-1943/>.

¹⁵⁵ *Mafia III*; Wesley Yin-Poole, "Mafia 3's in-game statement on its depiction of racism", *Eurogamer*, 7 October 2016, <https://www.eurogamer.net/mafia-3s-in-game-statement-on-its-depiction-of-racism>; Tauriq Moosa, "Mafia III is just a game, but it shines a spotlight on the reality of racism", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/20/mafia-iii-videogame-racism>.

¹⁵⁶ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Hilary Jane Locke, "'You Are A True Progressive': *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics", *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20:1 (2021), pp. 174-191.

¹⁵⁷ Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁸ "The Iniquities of History", *Red Dead Wiki*, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/The_Iniquities_of_History.

¹⁵⁹ See for examples, Richardson, "No one forced us to make a game with a diverse cast"; Phillips, "Assassin's Creed boss discusses 'devastating' impact of Shadows' diversity and inclusivity backlash".

characters where the narrative justification or implementation is potentially questionable within the strictly historical context of a particular game, thereby potentially exposing developers to accusations of politicised demographic inclusion. This phenomenon mirrors incidents of what some commentators have described as “colour-blind casting” in historical films, wherein roles within entertainment media are cast without consideration of ethnicity, ostensibly in order to foster inclusivity but has been cited in criticism of the depiction of White-ethnic historical figures by non-White actors.¹⁶⁰ Historical games have similarly featured depictions of non-White characters which could be construed as “colour-blind casting”: *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, for instance, introduced the character of Vagn, a Black Viking raider NPC, as an in-game vendor and activity-giver in its free *River Raids* expansion, but gives no narrative explanation within his backstory to explore his unique ethnicity.¹⁶¹ *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* includes a handful of other non-White characters throughout its run-time, yet only a handful are given any context to explore their uniqueness amidst the game’s largely homogenous White-ethnic demographic landscape.

While this development attitude does fulfil the desire to improve non-White representation in historical games, it can potentially disrupt the historical experience as players attempt to interpret and engage with the creative decisions of the developers to incorporate representation of non-White demographics where this conflicts with the audience’s personal understanding of the historical period being depicted. Stefan Aguirre Quiroga has noted that online forums such as *AskHistorians* regularly feature questions regarding the presence of non-White ethnic groups within historical scenarios – often with an emphasis on European historical scenarios, which, he notes, are perceived as homogeneously White ethnic – as a consequence of the representation of non-White ethnicities in entertainment media depicting these historical events.¹⁶² The reasons behind these repeated questions are varied, ranging from lack of knowledge to aggressive racism,

¹⁶⁰ For examples, see, Micha Frazer-Carroll, “‘It’s dangerous not to see colour’: colour-blind casting all its cracked up to be?”, *The Guardian*, 11 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/aug/11/its-dangerous-not-to-see-race-is-colour-blind-casting-all-its-cracked-up-to-be>; Maya Phillips, “‘Hamilton’, ‘The Simpsons’, and the Problem with Colorblind Casting”, *The New York Times*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/arts/television/hamilton-colorblind-casting.html>; “Historical Accuracy in Films and the Tiffany Problem”.

¹⁶¹ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla – River Raids* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Ubisoft; “Vagn”, *Assassin’s Creed Wiki*, <https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Vagn>.

¹⁶² Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-2.

yet their frequency is noted as indicative of a fundamental perception of the absence of non-White ethnicities from the historical settings about which the questions are made.¹⁶³

As in the previous chapter's discussion of the difficulties of presenting the player with the perspectives of historical "villains", implementing characters and perspectives from marginalised demographics into historical games can potentially create ludo-narrative dissonance, whereby the game experience with which the player is interacting contrasts and potentially conflicts with their personal understanding of the game's historical narrative context. In the case of marginalised demographic representation, this ludo-narrative dissonance can occur in instances whereby the popular understanding of a given historical period is demographically homogenous and excludes the marginalised demographic being represented, even if the inclusion of that demographic by a game is supported by historical evidence.¹⁶⁴ In many instances, players who experience this ludo-narrative dissonance have asserted that the affected historical experience interacts, either directly or sub-textually, with modern socio-political discourse by consciously incorporating diverse characters or protagonists, often resulting in controversy as opposing opinions of this phenomenon are voiced and debated. Amongst the games which could be cited as examples for this latter behaviour include the First World War-set *Battlefield I*, which, as noted by Quiroga, experienced significant online debate as members of the player community voiced opposition to the inclusion of non-White character models within the game's online multiplayer suite;¹⁶⁵ more recently, both the medieval Role-Playing Game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* and feudal Japanese-set *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* received varying degrees of opposition from players over their respective inclusions of non-White historical characters in historical contexts that were perceived as precluding Black representation.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39.

¹⁶⁵ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-4.

¹⁶⁶ Chantelle Lee, "Assassin's Creed Fans Slam Decision to Include Black Samurai in Feudal Japan Story", *TIME*, 16 May 2024, <https://time.com/6978997/assassins-creed-shadow-yasuke-controversy/>; Matt Kim, "Let's Not Pretend We're Mad the New Assassin's Creed Shadows Samurai Isn't Asian", *IGN*, 17 May 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/assassins-creed-shadows-yasuke-asian-protagonist>; Conor Murray, "Upcoming 'Assassin's Creed' Game Attacked as 'Woke' Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It's Based On A Real Black Warrior", *Forbes*, 24 May 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2024/05/24/upcoming-assassins-creed-game-attacked-as-woke-over-black-samurai-protagonist-but-its-based-on-a-real-black-warrior/>.

Quiroga observes that many instances of opposition to the inclusion of non-White characters in video games, such as the First World War-set *Battlefield 1*, on the grounds of “historical accuracy” – a phenomenon which shall be explored in detail in Chapter 3 – have espoused similar problematic rationales and mentalities to those noted in connection to “#GamerGate” regarding the representation of women, arguing against demographic inclusion in historical games even after the demonstration of historical evidence which delegitimises these claims.¹⁶⁷ These mentalities, Quiroga asserts, and their usage of claims of “historical accuracy” as legitimisation of their opposition, is reflective of the propagation of a particular historical narrative, such as the popular understanding of the First World War, as a “White mythic space”. This is a phenomenon which Quiroga defines as:

‘a historical or fictional (such as high fantasy or science-fiction) setting that has been re-imagined as a racially homogenous space which is consequently considered to be the authentic representation of that setting despite what historical research has established or what the creators of that fictional universe had intended’.¹⁶⁸

Although Quiroga’s description of “White mythic spaces” is inherently reflective of its role within Western histories, wherein figures from non-White ethnicities are frequently marginalised in favour of dominant White majorities, the underlying mentalities may be observed in other situations wherein historical White ethnic dominance does not intrinsically apply, such as in the predominantly Asian *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows*.¹⁶⁹

This tension between modern popular understanding of history and historical records is a scenario which has also been identified in popular discourse of other historical fiction throughout entertainment media, and has been associated with the historiographical phenomenon known as the “Tiffany Problem”.¹⁷⁰ In these instances, engagement or representation of issues of demographic inclusion in modern historical media is interpreted as anachronistic or otherwise “historically inaccurate”, thereby reflecting contemporary debates within a piece of historical media rather than highlighting historic exemplars by modern, popular audiences.¹⁷¹ This phenomenon is especially problematic in that it also

¹⁶⁷ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-4.

¹⁶⁸ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁹ Lee, “Assassin’s Creed Fans Slam Decision to Include Black Samurai in Feudal Japan Story”; Kim, “Let’s Not Pretend We’re Mad the New Assassin’s Creed Shadows Samurai Isn’t Asian”; Murray, “Upcoming ‘Assassin’s Creed’ Game Attacked as ‘Woke’ Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It’s Based On A Real Black Warrior”.

¹⁷⁰ Franco, “The Tiffany Problem: When History Doesn’t Seem to Make Sense”.

¹⁷¹ Franco, “The Tiffany Problem: When History Doesn’t Seem to Make Sense”; Boker22s, “The Tiffany Problem”; “Historical Accuracy in Films and the Tiffany Problem”.

manifests in instances where game depictions of gender and ethnicity in historical contexts are legitimised by contemporary sources, reinforcing Quiroga's statements about "White mythic spaces" in that these racially-segregating phenomena within historical memory possess an ability to self-perpetuate even when confronted with historical evidence which contradicts them.¹⁷²

Recent controversy surrounding the inclusion of Yasuke as a playable protagonist in *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* highlights this situation. Yasuke was a known, if mysterious, historical figure, thereby enabling the game's developers at Ubisoft a creative space to craft their version of his character while adhering to historical research which justifies and supports their depiction of late sixteenth century Japan.¹⁷³ However, Yasuke's inclusion within the game prompted immediate opposition from gamers and commentators who asserted that a Black samurai was not "historically accurate", or was otherwise a demonstration of a "woke agenda" solely intended to engage with modern discussions of demographic representation within games.¹⁷⁴ These protests included comments from right-wing political commentators, such as the controversial tech-billionaire Elon Musk who commented on the social media platform X that 'DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion] kills art', a statement made in support of a social media account calling for *Shadows'* release to be delayed amidst the controversy surrounding Yasuke's inclusion.¹⁷⁵ Other arguments lodged against the inclusion of Yasuke as a playable protagonist focused on the inclusion of a

¹⁷² Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 27-31.

¹⁷³ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Shadows: Who are Naoe and Yasuke?*; Matt Purslow, "Who is Yasuke? Assassin's Creed Shadows' Black Samurai Explained", *IGN*, 15 May 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/who-is-yasuke-assassins-creed-shadows-black-samurai-explained>; Jacquelyne Germain, "Who Was Yasuke, Japan's First Black Samurai", *Smithsonian Magazine*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-yasuke-japans-first-black-samurai-180981416/>.

¹⁷⁴ Dominik Bošnjak, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Creative Director Issues Statement on Latest Controversy", *GameRant*, 19 January 2025, <https://gamerant.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-lgbtq-saudi-arabia-controversy-response/>; Chantelle Lee, "Assassin's Creed Fans Slam Decision to Include Black Samurai in Feudal Japan Story", *TIME*, 16 May 2024, <https://time.com/6978997/assassins-creed-shadow-yasuke-controversy/>; Matt Kim, "Let's Not Pretend We're Mad the New Assassin's Creed Shadows Samurai Isn't Asian", *IGN*, 17 May 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/assassins-creed-shadows-yasuke-asian-protagonist>; Conor Murray, "Upcoming 'Assassin's Creed' Game Attacked as 'Woke' Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It's Based On A Real Black Warrior", *Forbes*, 24 May 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2024/05/24/upcoming-assassins-creed-game-attacked-as-woke-over-black-samurai-protagonist-but-its-based-on-a-real-black-warrior/>.

¹⁷⁵ Victoria Phillips Kennedy, "Assassin's Creed Shadows boss explains why he ignored Elon Musk after backlash over African samurai Yasuke", *Eurogamer*, 14 June 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-shadows-boss-explains-why-he-ignored-elon-musk-after-backlash-over-african-samurai-yasuke>; Murray, "Upcoming 'Assassin's Creed' Game Attacked as 'Woke' Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It's Based On A Real Black Warrior".

Black character in an Asian historical scenario, arguing that – due to Asian history’s own limited representation in Western gaming historiography – the setting of *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows* should have prompted the inclusion of a male Asian protagonist to fill Yasuke’s gameplay role as a samurai archetype.¹⁷⁶

In asserting their defence of Yasuke’s inclusion within *Shadows*, the moderators of an *Assassin’s Creed* Reddit forum stated that those discussions perpetuating opposition to Yasuke’s portrayal on the grounds of “historical inaccuracy” had no purpose other than ‘thinly veiling bad faith intent’.¹⁷⁷ One may also point to this controversy – perpetuated significantly by conservative White individuals – as bearing many characteristics of what Quiroga terms a “White mythic space”, in that historical figures from non-White ethnic origins are erased for not conforming to a ‘racially homogenous space which is consequently considered to be the authentic representation of that setting despite what historical research has established or what the creators of that fictional universe had intended’.¹⁷⁸

However, the severity of the controversy surrounding Yasuke’s inclusion within *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows* was such that the head of Ubisoft, Yves Guillemot, publicly stated in late 2024 that the game’s commercial release was delayed from its original planned date in November 2024 to March 2025 specifically to allow time for the publisher-developer to bolster the technical presentation of the game and allow the company to present its counter-narrative in defence of the title, which was conducted through public presentations of gameplay footage rather than through direct engagement with politicised arguments on social media over racial ideology.¹⁷⁹ Consequently, we can see racially-motivated attacks on historical games having a noticeable, and potentially detrimental, commercial influence which publishers feel obliged to mitigate and one which we can see repeated in games engaging with non-White cultures.

¹⁷⁶ Lee, “Assassin’s Creed Fans Slam Decision to Include Black Samurai in Feudal Japan Story”

¹⁷⁷ Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed reddit takes firm stance on Yasuke ‘debate’”.

¹⁷⁸ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Tom Philips, “‘We Had To Stop Focusing on Those Who Hated Us’: Ubisoft Says Yasuke Backlash Directly Led to Assassin’s Creed Shadows Delay”, *IGN*, 6 November 2025, <https://www.ign.com/articles/we-had-to-stop-focusing-on-those-who-hated-us-ubisoft-says-yasuke-backlash-directly-led-to-assassins-creed-shadows-delay>.



Figure 2.3: Promotional image of Yasuke and Naoe, the dual protagonists of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* (Ubisoft, 2025).

While Yasuke's character acted as a particular lightning rod of controversy surrounding *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* – even serving as the foundation for a Japanese petition calling for the game to be cancelled¹⁸⁰ – it was not the sole source of objection to the game's depiction of feudal Japan witnessed in online discussions. Japanese communities lodged multiple complaints against *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* and its depiction of Japanese culture; while some of these objections mirrored Western arguments against inclusion of a Black character at the expense of an Asian protagonist, which was interpreted by some as a form of “anti-Asian” racism,¹⁸¹ Japanese commentators also raised objections to the ability for players to destroy culturally-significant religious objects within in-game depictions of Japanese temples. These particular complaints were repeated and addressed by Japanese politicians, including Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who feared that the ability to damage or destroy these shrines within *Shadows* might encourage real-life vandalism by

¹⁸⁰ Grant Taylor-Hill, “Japanese petition to cancel AC Shadows gets 30,000 signatures”, *Insider Gaming*, 2 July 2024, <https://insider-gaming.com/japanese-petition-ac-shadows/>; Adam Starkey, “Petition to cancel Assassin's Creed Shadows hits 38,000 signatures in Japan”, *Metro*, 3 July 2024, <https://metro.co.uk/2024/07/03/petition-cancel-assassins-creed-shadows-hits-38-000-names-japan-21152469/>; Dalton Cooper, “Petition to Cancel Assassin's Creed Shadows is Blowing Up”, *GameRant*, 7 July 2024, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-shadows-petition/>.

¹⁸¹ Lee, “Assassin's Creed Fans Slam Decision to Include Black Samurai in Feudal Japan Story”.

tourists at the sites being represented, and denounced the disrespect for regional culture reflected by the game as a result.¹⁸²

Many of these debates erupted several months before *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*' release, during a period in which Ubisoft was advertising the upcoming game without revealing details of its exact content.¹⁸³ Therefore, observing and analysing the responses, from both gamers and academics, to these contested issues within *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* both before and after the game's release will offer fascinating future opportunities to observe the divergent authorial perspectives of games' interactions with issues of demographic and cultural representation in a historical context; for instance, following Japanese protests against the in-game ability to damage or destroy sacred shrines, Ubisoft introduced a gameplay patch which made these religious artefacts indestructible within the game, while also censoring the amount of blood and physical violence depicted within these cultural spaces.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, the announcement by Yves Guillemot ascribing the delay of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*' commercial release to the online controversy surrounding Yasuke's inclusion highlights how significantly these controversies effect developer-publisher commercial decisions, but which are rarely detailed publicly until a significant period after the event.¹⁸⁵

Additionally, further separation between pre-release controversies and the addition of time spent interacting with a historical game through active gameplay will enable additional insight into the politicisation of gaming's perspectives of history in modern discourse. For instance, it was reported after *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*' release that Yasuke was not originally intended to be featured as a playable character. The gaming news outlet

¹⁸² Wesley Yin-Poole, "The Prime Minister of Japan Responded to a Question About Assassin's Creed Shadows Today - Here's What's Actually Going On", *IGN*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.ign.com/articles/the-prime-minister-of-japan-responded-to-a-question-about-assassins-creed-shadows-today-heres-whats-actually-going-on>; Ali Shutler, "'Assassin's Creed Shadows' removes controversial feature after backlash from Japan's prime minister", *NME*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.nme.com/news/gaming-news/assassins-creed-shadows-day-one-patch-shrines-temples-japan-3847800>.

¹⁸³ Kennedy, "Assassin's Creed Shadows' boss explains why he ignored Elon Musk after backlash over African samurai Yasuke"; Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed reddit takes firm stance on Yasuke 'debate', says Ubisoft 'exacerbated' issue with statement", *Eurogamer*, 29 July 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-reddit-takes-firm-stance-on-yasuke-debate-says-ubisoft-exacerbated-issue-with-statement>.

¹⁸⁴ Shutler, "'Assassin's Creed Shadows' removes controversial feature after backlash from Japan's prime minister".

¹⁸⁵ Phillips, "'We Had To Stop Focusing on Those Who Hated Us': Ubisoft Says Yasuke Backlash Directly Led to Assassin's Creed Shadows Delay".

GamesRadar reported excerpts from an interview with *Assassin's Creed* Creative Director Jonathan Dumont which stated that *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* was originally planned to utilise a single protagonist within the historical and gameplay role of a shinobi (the role filled by *Shadows'* female protagonist, Naoe), but that a second protagonist occupying the samurai role was added to avoid diluting the gameplay fantasy of playing as either a stealthy or combat-oriented character archetype. According to Dumont, Yasuke was selected to become a playable protagonist only after the technical gameplay perspective of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* had been widened to incorporate this secondary technical and historical perspective, with many elements of his characterisation within gameplay – such as slower movement and climbing ability or an inability to traverse certain terrain features without “breaking” them – designed to emphasise the differing technical perspectives offered by the contrasting playstyles of the two character archetypes.¹⁸⁶

The controversy surrounding the depiction of Yasuke as a Black character in a historical context is also notable in that not only did some post-release reviews of *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* acknowledge that the game's inclusion of Yasuke and its depiction of his origins was justified within the game's narrative,¹⁸⁷ multiple gaming commentators observed that the opposition to Yasuke as a game character conformed to a wider trend of resistance from conservative outlets against inclusive gaming characters, highlighting similar problematic ideologies to those exhibited within the GamerGate controversy.¹⁸⁸

This political toxicity surrounding attempts to portray non-White characters in historical games is further indicated by reports in October 2025 from gaming news outlets claiming that Ubisoft had cancelled a proposed *Assassin's Creed* game in July 2024, which was reported to have been set following the American Civil War and would feature a Black former slave as the player protagonist. This cancellation, revealed through interviews with anonymous Ubisoft developers, was heavily attributed as a direct consequence of the hostile debate surrounding Yasuke's depiction within *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* and the online

¹⁸⁶ Brown, “Assassin's Creed Shadows was originally envisioned without Yasuke, but Ubisoft wanted the full feudal fantasy: ‘We were sort of making a stealth tank, and it didn't quite work’”.

¹⁸⁷ See for example, Tom Phillips, “Assassin's Creed Shadows review”, *Eurogamer*, 18 March 2025, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-shadows-review>.

¹⁸⁸ See for examples MacDonald, “The disturbing online misogyny of Gamergate has returned – if it ever went away”; Phillips, “Assassin's Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of Shadows’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”; Murray, “Upcoming ‘Assassin's Creed’ Game Attacked as ‘Woke’ Over Black Samurai Protagonist – But It's Based On A Real Black Warrior”.

harassment experienced by Ubisoft employees as a result. However, these reports also indicated that the decision to cancel the proposed *Assassin's Creed* game was in response to concerns regarding the wider political climate of modern gaming, with a particular emphasis on the political culture of the United States, which was perceived as being too unstable to accept a game exploring the proposed historical era and subject matter.¹⁸⁹

Non-White representation in historical games is among the more challenging representational debates in modern gaming. As historically marginalised communities facing ongoing abuse in modern society, games face significant pressures from non-White communities of all descriptions, as well as sympathetic White communities willing to accept revisionist histories, to address historic imbalances towards the representation of these communities within video games. This offers creative opportunities for developers to spotlight historic perspectives and narratives showcasing the experiences of non-White figures in historical contexts where these figures have been overlooked or erased, however they require careful handling by developers to ensure respectful depiction of these marginalised groups and acknowledge their historic perspectives without diluting their experiences to create distorted reflections of the past as an egalitarian idyl.

However, as multiple incidents in recent years have demonstrated, the established marginalisation of non-White communities from historical media has reinforced widespread perceptions of particular histories as “White mythic spaces”, creating White-dominated narratives espoused by hostile modern actors to oppose the revision of these narratives by games aiming to improve representation for non-White communities. Recent incidents have also shown that these White-dominant interests act to preserve their historical dominance by actively stoking online controversies around video games, denouncing

¹⁸⁹ Stephen Totilo, “Scoop: Ubisoft cancelled a post-Civil War *Assassin's Creed* last year”, *Game File*, 8 October 2025, <https://www.gamefile.news/p/scoop-ubisoft-cancelled-a-post-civil>; Aron Garst, “Ubisoft Canceled Civil War-Based *Assassin's Creed* Over Controversy Concerns – Report”, *GameSpot*, 8 October 2025, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/ubisoft-canceled-civil-war-based-assassins-creed-over-controversy-concerns-report/1100-6535320/>; Tom Philips, “*Assassin's Creed* Set During Post-Civil War Period Canceled Last Year Due to Increasing Concerns Over U.S. Political Climate — Report”, *IGN*, 9 October 2025, <https://www.ign.com/articles/assassins-creed-set-during-post-civil-war-period-canceled-last-year-due-to-increasing-concerns-over-us-political-climate-report>; Paul Tassi, “An ‘*Assassin's Creed*’ Civil War Game Was Canceled Because Of Yasuke Reaction, US Politics”, *Forbes*, 9 October 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2025/10/09/an-assassins-creed-civil-war-game-was-canceled-because-of-yasuke-reaction-us-politics/>; Sophie McEvoy, “Report: Ubisoft cancels *Assassin's Creed* game set in post-Civil War US”, *GamesIndustry.biz*, 10 October 2025, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/report-ubisoft-cancels-assassins-creed-game-set-in-post-civil-war-us>.

historical games with non-White representation as “woke” or “historically inaccurate”, with an aim to force game studios to remove inclusive content by attempting to negatively influence the commercial viability of games featuring non-White representation within these “White mythic spaces”.

These are challenges which historians should acknowledge in their examinations of non-White histories in games and offer some of the more striking examples of the influence of clashing authorial perspectives upon the depiction of history in video games. As long as modern White conservative actors continue to oppose the increased representation of non-White communities in entertainment media such as historical games, the engagement with these communities by these media will continue to experience challenges which restrict or undermine the depiction of their histories and perpetuate White dominance within historical gaming.

Depictions of LGBTQ+ Communities in Historical Gamic Contexts

Similar issues to those affecting the implementation of non-White characters in historical games have affected the depiction of LGBTQ+ communities in a historical context. As with other groups traditionally classified as “minorities” within Western media, LGBTQ+ communities have received severe mistreatment throughout history, resulting in legacies of under-acknowledgement, misunderstanding or stigmatisation.¹⁹⁰ Social advances in recent decades – linked by Jess Root-Williams *et al* to an accumulation of multiple socio-political factors, including increased representation in higher education and the growth of social media usage, collectively referred to as “the Great Awakening” in 2014¹⁹¹ – have made significant strides to address these legacies and aid the normalisation of gender-diverse communities in wider society, yet the issue of their stigmatisation by society historically presents a sharp contrast to the promotion of sympathetic treatment today. As in the case of other marginalised groups, modern media creatives have expressed a strong desire to

¹⁹⁰ Keilbart, “Queer Authenticity in the History of Games”, pp. 179-198; Jess Root-Williams, Taylor M. Kessner, and Jeremy Bernier, “Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin’s Creed*”, *Games and Culture*, 3 November 2024, pp. 1-26 [Accessed online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15554120241291087>].

¹⁹¹ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, “Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin’s Creed*”, p. 1.

reflect and support normalisation efforts by sympathetically integrating LGBTQ+ representation into their creations; for instance, the BBC historical drama series *Gentleman Jack* (2019-2022) – which portrays the life and relationships of Anne Lister, a nineteenth century landowner and industrialist popularly styled as “the first modern lesbian”, and which referenced Lister’s private diaries within the series – was highly praised for its depiction of a lesbian romance in a period drama, and the newspaper *The Guardian* reported that the series had helped members of modern LGBTQ+ communities gain confidence in their identities.¹⁹²

In the case of video games, efforts to improve representation of LGBTQ+ communities within games are also driven by the growing percentage of developers who personally identify with these demographics. The UKIE’s census of UK games developers in 2020 indicated that 3 per cent of UK games developers identified as non-binary or trans-gender,¹⁹³ with approximately 21 per cent of developers identifying as anything other than heterosexual;¹⁹⁴ although the UKIE’s 2022 census indicated similar percentages of non-binary or trans-gender developers,¹⁹⁵ the percentage of developers identifying as other than heterosexual had increased to 24 per cent.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, in both of these surveys, the percentages of LGBTQ+ communities present in games development were noted as significantly higher than the comparable average percentages for the overall UK population;¹⁹⁷ therefore, even without access to comparable demographic statistics for player communities, growing representation of LGBTQ+ perspectives within games has a significant impact for these demographics due to their greater proportional presence within gaming communities.

Partly as a response to the increasing proportion of LGBTQ+ demographics within games development and player communities, video games have actively pursued increased representation for LGBTQ+ communities. However, the manner in which this has been

¹⁹² *Gentleman Jack*, created by Sally Wainwright (broadcast 22 April 2019 – 13 June 2022 on BBC1 and HBO). Available on BBC iPlayer; Alexei Duggins *et al.*, “‘Gentlemen Jack has genuinely saved lives’: readers respond to the show’s cancellation”, *The Guardian*, 15 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/jul/15/gentleman-jack-has-genuinely-saved-lives-readers-respond-to-the-shows-cancellation>.

¹⁹³ Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census”, p. 23.

¹⁹⁴ Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census”, p. 27.

¹⁹⁵ Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census 2022”, p. 31.

¹⁹⁶ Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census 2022”, p. 33.

¹⁹⁷ Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census”, p. 23 & p. 27; Taylor, “UK Games Industry Census 2022”, p. 31 & p. 33.

implemented into games has varied in its execution, especially in regard to games with historical settings or contexts.¹⁹⁸ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, for instance, was the first entry in that franchise which enabled players and the game's protagonist to engage in same-sex romantic relationships,¹⁹⁹ and its ancient Greek setting provided clear evidentiary reasons to contextually legitimise its inclusion; the available sources for ancient Greece, both from history and mythology, provide plentiful evidence to support the cultural acceptance of same-sex relationships in ancient Greece, thereby justifying their inclusion in a gamic depiction of that historical setting;²⁰⁰ indeed, according to the analysis by Root-Williams *et al*, the scale of LGBTQ+ representation within *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* may arguably be disproportionately inclusive by comparison to the historic reality.²⁰¹ However, the freedom of player expression offered by *Odyssey's* inclusion of opportunities to conduct same-sex relationships resulted in controversy as a result of a fixed narrative sequence in the game's *Legacy of the First Blade* DLC expansion, which required the player protagonist (regardless of motivation, gender or sexuality) to engage in a heterosexual relationship resulting in a child in order to facilitate the story's narrative, which was perceived by some commentators to actively contradict the capacity for gender self-expressionism throughout the rest of the game by forcing LGBTQ+ players to conform to a hetero-normative scenario.²⁰²

The *Assassin's Creed* series continued this socio-gameplay mechanic of permitting the player to define their character's sexuality into the subsequent game, the Viking era-set *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.²⁰³ However, the contextual evidence for similar same-sex

¹⁹⁸ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, "Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin's Creed*", pp. 1-26.

¹⁹⁹ Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; Nick Romano, "Ok, Cupid: An ode to same-sex romancing in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*", *Entertainment Weekly*, 9 October 2018, <https://ew.com/gaming/2018/10/09/assassins-creed-odyssey-lgbtq/>.

²⁰⁰ For examples, see Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003), p. 64; K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Boston, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1989); Thomas K. Hubbard (ed.), *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008).

²⁰¹ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, "Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin's Creed*", p. 1.

²⁰² Heather Alexandra, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Latest DLC Has A Romantic Ending You Can't Change", *Kotaku*, 15 January 2019, <https://kotaku.com/assassins-creed-odysseys-latest-dlc-has-a-romantic-endi-1831784459>; Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey DLC breezes past its baby controversy and doesn't dare to look back", *Eurogamer*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-odyssey-dlc-breezes-past-its-baby-controversy-and-doesnt-dare-look-back>.

²⁰³ Matt T.M. Kim, "Assassin's Creed Valhalla Won't Restrict Romance Options Based on Eivor's Gender", *IGN*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.ign.com/articles/assassins-creed-valhalla-eivor-gender-romance-no-restrictions>.

relationships becomes far more difficult to demonstrate in this historical setting; while this does not necessarily disprove the existence of LGBTQ+ perspectives in this period, it also makes defending their inclusion within a gaming context from hostile modern commentators more challenging. Perhaps tellingly, the ability to define the sexuality of *Valhalla's* protagonist was framed by Ubisoft's representatives as a gameplay mechanic in interviews with the gaming press, a mechanism for player agency within gameplay rather than as an opportunity to offer new perspectives on Viking society.²⁰⁴ In this context, it could be argued that integration of mechanics exploring gender identity within historical games is a stronger indicator of current authorial perspectives towards the enablement of player agency and representation of LGBTQ+ communities within gaming than of historic perspectives towards these groups.

This technical perspective of LGBTQ+ representation is supported by the knowledge that the majority of romance interactions in both *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Valhalla* are available to the player regardless of which gender version of these games' protagonist they choose to portray, thereby requiring the player to actively interpret these characters through an LGBTQ+ authorial perspective within gameplay in order to create these particular character narratives. Moreover, both of these experiences fall under the category of Role-Playing Games, or otherwise feature Role-Playing gameplay mechanics, thereby emphasising the agency of players to pursue LGBTQ+ interactions depending on personal interpretation of a given character or narrative.²⁰⁵ As noted by Root-Williams *et al*, 'in enabling the player to make choices about [their chosen AC protagonist], the sexual identities of certain romanceable NPCs are unspecified. In this respect, the NPCs are not deemed queer, but the player's choices can be'.²⁰⁶

Valhalla's developers subsequently compounded this interpretation of LGBTQ+ representation as an indicator of authorial perspectives on representation by introducing an openly gender-fluid character: a merchant named Azar, who features as a notable side-

²⁰⁴ Kim, "Assassin's Creed Valhalla Won't Restrict Romance Options Based on Eivor's Gender"; Mike Williams, "Assassin's Creed: Valhalla Goes Big On Stealth With One-Hit Kills, Social Stealth, and Feigning Death", *VG24*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.vg247.com/assassins-creed-valhalla-goes-big-on-stealth-with-one-hit-kills-social-stealth-and-feigning-death>.

²⁰⁵ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, "Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin's Creed*", pp. 1-26.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

character and vendor in *Valhalla's Wrath of the Druids* expansion (2021).²⁰⁷ However, the integration of this individual within the game as a side-character and vendor NPC offers limited narrative space to acknowledge or explore their unique character. Additionally, as Root-Williams *et al* observe, although the representation of *Valhalla's* protagonist, Eivor, as either male or female (and, within the lore of the game, featuring both male and female aspects) does not directly constitute transgender or non-binary representation, the nuance it represents may be regarded as relevant to discussion of the experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals. These forms of LGBTQ+ representation can potentially give rise to hostile accusations of “tokenism”, thereby inferring the inclusion of marginalised communities in order to claim support for these groups but without demonstrating true or meaningful representation and consequently undermining any positive intention behind these inclusive characters.²⁰⁸

Qualitative assessments of historical games show that games are steadily improving their depictions of LGBTQ+ figures; Root-Williams *et al* conducted a qualitative survey, supported by practical gameplay experience, of every main entry in the *Assassin's Creed* series to assess their representation of LGBTQ+ figures over time in relation to shifting societal attitudes to LGBTQ+ inclusion: their findings show that although earlier entries in the series (i.e. those produced before 2014 and the “Great Awakening”) severely under-represented LGBTQ+ figures, most games released after 2014 demonstrated significantly higher than expected representation for LGBTQ+ figures.²⁰⁹ However, Lara Keilbart asserts that games are behind the cultural curve already set by film and television in regards to offering authentic representations of LGBTQ+ figures.²¹⁰ One could argue that longer development times for video games – assessed by some developers to average between five and ten years for modern productions – naturally result in many games feeling “behind the times” with regards to evolving socio-cultural phenomena such as attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities.²¹¹ Despite this possibility, Keilbart particularly identifies higher-budget

²⁰⁷ “Azar”, *Assassin's Creed Wiki*, <https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Azar>.

²⁰⁸ “Tokenism”, *Cambridge Dictionary*.

²⁰⁹ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, “Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin's Creed*”, pp. 1-26.

²¹⁰ Keilbart, “Queer Authenticity in the History of Games”, pp. 179-180.

²¹¹ J Brodie Shirey, “Nintendo Explains Why Game Development Cycles Are Getting Longer”, *GameRant*, 5 July 2024, <https://gamerant.com/why-do-games-take-so-long-to-come-out-nintendo/>.

‘mainstream games’ – in other words, triple-A games – as having a notably poorer record of LGBTQ+ representation than smaller indie titles.²¹² Critically, Root-Williams *et al* note that *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*’s attitudes to LGBTQ+ representation, while significant improvements over earlier games in the *Assassin’s Creed* series, share more similarities with each other as LGBTQ+ representations as a result of their production after socio-political shifts which permit and accept greater LGBTQ+ representation within gaming culture on a wider scale.²¹³

As identified throughout this thesis, triple-A games are inherently designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience in order to maximise their commercial viability.²¹⁴ Consequently, nuanced representation of individual demographics or engagement with their unique perspectives can become lost as a result of this requirement for broad appeal. This perspective is supported by instances, such as those within *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, wherein romance options which may present opportunities for LGBTQ+ representation are made available to players regardless of their player character’s gender, and as such rely on player interaction to generate LGBTQ+ narratives.²¹⁵ It is particularly in this context that accusations of “tokenism” can arise, as games try to include and represent as many audiences as possible, but in doing so are perceived to represent or engage with certain audiences – typically marginalised communities – only at a comparatively superficial level. “Tokenism” is a commonly cited issue in the context of video games, which some commentators have claimed stems from underlying attitudes opposed to increased representation within gaming communities,²¹⁶ and which have been demonstrated repeatedly within this chapter. In the context of LGBTQ+ representation, it is a particularly challenging connotation to refute, as the politicised perspectives of modern audiences also

²¹² Keilbart, “Queer Authenticity in the History of Games”, 179-194.

²¹³ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, “Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin’s Creed*”, pp. 1-26.

²¹⁴ Webber, “Paying for the Past: Ownership and the Monetisation of History”; Nieborg, “How To Study Game Publishers”, pp. 179-196.

²¹⁵ Root-Williams, Kessner, and Bernier, “Representation and its Historical Antecedents in New Media: The Queer-ious Case of *Assassin’s Creed*”, pp. 1-26.

²¹⁶ For examples, see Hawkins, “Diversity is great – but do we run the risk of tokenism?”; Amanda C. Cote, “Tits, Tokenism, and Trash-Talk: Overt Sexism in Game Culture” in Amanda C. Cote, *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Gaming* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), pp. 56-85; Jenna Drenten, Robert L. Harrison, and Nicholas J. Pendarvis, “More Gamer, Less Girl: Gendered Boundaries, Tokenism, and the Cultural Persistence of Male Dominance”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 50: 1 (2023), pp. 2-24; igorthegreat, “Diversity and Inclusion: A Short Conversation”, *Stealth Gaming*, 25 November 2024, <https://www.stealthgaming.net/blog/diversity-and-inclusion-in-gaming/>.

interact with historiographical dilemmas surrounding gaps, stigma and obfuscation in the historical record for LGBTQ+ communities.

Part of the difficulty in attempting to promote LGBTQ+ representation in a historical context can be identifying LGBTQ+ figures to represent. A factor noted in the strength of *Gentleman Jack*'s depiction of a lesbian romance in a historical drama was its reference to the private diaries of the historical figure upon whom the series was based.²¹⁷ This, in itself, highlights a significant point: the historical evidence supporting the series' LGBTQ+ characters came from *private* diaries. Individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ frequently received considerable stigmatization throughout history, which was historically legitimised in many instances by legal strictures or prevailing cultural doctrine. As such, many historical LGBTQ+ communities were forced to actively conceal their existence to avoid persecution. While more modern periods have the benefit of written and photographic records to confirm the existence of LGBTQ+ communities, historians and creators of modern media for older historical eras are left with only fragmentary evidence – if any – of these communities to work from to determine the attitudes towards these groups in older historical contexts and thus facilitate their representation within historical entertainment such as video games. As Keilbart has remarked, this has resulted in LGBTQ+ culture being 'neglected, deemed unworthy or outright erased' by modern media, or otherwise represented in unflattering or antagonistic fashions which reflect dominant hetero-normative attitudes.²¹⁸ This attitude has, until recently, been mirrored in video games, with LGBTQ+ characters frequently presented as either exaggerated caricatures designed to emphasise their Otherness, or narratively framed as antagonists to be defeated by hetero-normative protagonists.²¹⁹

In the context of video games, developers face growing pressures to improve their representations of marginalised demographics as the player population increasingly diversifies and demands for in-game characters with whom they can identify grow in

²¹⁷ For examples, see "BBC One and HBO announce original new drama series *Shibden Hall* from award-winning writer Sally Wainwright", *BBC Media Centre*, 5 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2017/bbc-one-announces-shibden-hall>; Tim Goodman, "'Gentleman Jack': TV Review", *The Hollywood Reporter*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/gentleman-jack-review-1202036/>.

²¹⁸ Keilbart, "Queer Authenticity in the History of Games", pp. 184-187.

²¹⁹ Keilbart, "Queer Authenticity in the History of Games", pp. 184-194.

volume.²²⁰ However, implementing LGBTQ+ perspectives into historical contexts within games can prove challenging. Although one can argue that, as creative and fictional media, games offer a forum to depict the perspectives of historic LGBTQ+ communities whose narratives have been lost or actively destroyed, their implementation can prove problematic in historical contexts, particularly where evidence of normalised cultural stigma against LGBTQ+ communities has survived; in medieval England, for example, Church scholars repeatedly issued harsh condemnation of homosexuality, and their harsh views not only survived in written documents but also occasionally bled through into popular literature from the period.²²¹

In this historiographical scenario, portraying openly LGBTQ+ characters in historical context where evidence of stigmatisation survives poses similar difficulties to the representation of non-White ethnic groups, wherein developers face the choice of either depicting the historical stigma towards these demographics – which may potentially be perceived as legitimising these antagonistic behaviours – or to omit any historically-evidenced discrimination, which may expose the game and its creators to accusations of “historical inaccuracy” and a “woke agenda”, or of concealing historical traumas.²²² This is potentially a lose-lose scenario for developers, wherein any action they take to represent the perspectives of LGBTQ+ communities within historical games may receive voluble opposition, however the underlying motivation is the ultimately the same. As with depictions of historical “villains” within games, a primary interest of historical games developers in depictions of marginalised communities is the ‘moral obligation of not upsetting those who have had horrific experiences, or, at the very least those whose identities are deeply linked with the victims of such experiences’.²²³ As such, the developers’ emphasis within depictions of marginalised demographics is broadly to ensure a positive relationship with these communities; this is further reflected by the point that many

²²⁰ Erica Neely, “No Player is Ideal: Why Video Game Designers Cannot Ethically Ignore Players’ Real-World Identities,” conference paper (2017), p. 5, quoted in Keilbart, “Queer Authenticity in the History of Games”, p. 183.

²²¹ Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 569-570.

²²² For example see, Dominik Bošnjak, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Creative Director Issues Statement on Latest Controversy”, *GameRant*, 19 January 2025, <https://gamerant.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-lgbtq-saudi-arabia-controversy-response/>; Tom Richardson, “Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic”, *BBC News*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgxp0jl15lo>.

²²³ Chapman and Linderth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140.

incidents of opposition towards marginalised demographic inclusion within games, as with the GamerGate controversy, originate from politically conservative, White, heterosexual male elements of the gaming community.²²⁴

However, modern political opposition is not the only challenge regarding the implementation of marginalised demographics within games, a situation perhaps most significant in the case of LGBTQ+ communities. From a purely historical perspective, perhaps the greatest challenge in the implementation of LGBTQ+ perspectives within historical games is often the lack of clarity offered by surviving historical records, which, as discussed above, only offer fragmentary insight. Alongside the challenge of partial evidence, some surviving historical sources, notably from antiquity and medieval periods, utilised terminology in their texts to either describe social customs and rituals or promote political criticism which could potentially be interpreted as evidence for LGBTQ+ communities by modern audiences unfamiliar with the cultural nuances of writers from the period. For instance, medieval epic and romantic literature occasionally utilised open accusations of homosexuality or effeminacy as a form of derision or slander;²²⁵ hints of feminine connotations being used against men as a form of criticism in a medieval context can be observed through reports that spindles and distaffs – both tools used in textile production, a medieval industry commonly associated with women – were presented to men who erred from committing to going on crusade, with one medieval text saying ‘whoever did not participate in this expedition should betake himself *with shame to women’s work*’ [author’s italics].²²⁶

Similar challenges can be identified in the case of the Roman emperor Elagabalus, who was recently reclassified as a transgender-woman by a British local museum, a decision which received attention from national news outlets.²²⁷ Although the contemporary historian Dio reported that the emperor was ‘termed wife, mistress and queen’, classicists

²²⁴ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-4; MacDonald, “It’s 10 years since Gamergate – the industry must now stand up to far-right trolls”; MacDonald, “The disturbing online misogyny of Gamergate has returned – if it ever went away”; Tom Phillips, “Working in the Shadows: how an Assassin’s Creed researcher braved the backlash”, *Eurogamer*, 2 May 2025, <https://www.eurogamer.net/working-in-the-shadows-how-an-assassins-creed-researcher-braved-the-backlash>.

²²⁵ Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225*, pp. 569-570.

²²⁶ Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225*, p. 369; Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 51.

²²⁷ Yasmin Rufo, “Museum reclassifies Roman emperor as trans-woman”, *BBC News*, 21 November 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-67484645>.

have cautiously noted that this was not written as a direct quote by Elagabalus, and that ‘effeminate language and words were used as a way of criticising or weakening a political figure’,²²⁸ thereby re-emphasising the difficulty of distinguishing historical evidence for LGBTQ+ individuals or communities from derogatory gossip; in the BBC’s report on the reclassification, classicist Shushma Malik was quoted warning that ‘the historians we use to try and understand the life of Elagabalus are extremely hostile towards him, and therefore cannot be taken at face value. We don’t have any direct evidence from Elagabalus himself of his own words.’²²⁹ This problem increases the challenge for developers attempting to represent LGBTQ+ communities within historical games, as evidence which may be cited in defence of their inclusion may be alternatively interpreted, thereby perpetuating politicised debates based on these contradictory authorial perspectives of history and heightening the significance of media like *Gentlemen Jack* which are able to demonstrate primary evidence of historic LGBTQ+ communities.

As this thesis shall repeatedly highlight, popular discourse of historical games frequently invokes the concept of “historical accuracy” as an arbiter of validity, and the shortage of clear surviving evidence of LGBTQ+ perspectives from many historical periods exposes their depictions within games to politicised accusations of “historical inaccuracy”, thereby potentially undermining the cultural authority of an affected game’s historical depiction if the surviving evidence from the period is perceived to indicate an absence or stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ communities. This can potentially leave the creators of these historical games vulnerable to accusations of “tokenism” or “woke agenda” via their inclusion. Indications of this latter mentality can be observed in the pre-release discourse surrounding *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, a “historically authentic” medieval RPG game and direct sequel to 2018’s *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, in which the sequel was heavily criticised by a portion of the gaming community for the inclusion of a same-sex kiss between

²²⁸ Rufo, “Museum reclassifies Roman emperor as trans-woman”; Josiah Osgood, “Cassius Dio’s Secret History of Elagabalus”, in Carsten Hjort Lange, and Jesper Majbom Madsen (eds.), *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician* (Ebook: BRILL, 2016), pp. 177-190; Zachary Hertz, “How to Do the History of Elagabalus”, in Ella Haselswerdt, Sara H. Lindheim, and Kirk Ormand (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Queer Theory* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 408-422; Chrysanthos S. Chrysanthou, “Sex and Power in Cassius Dio’s Roman History”, *Mnemosyne*, vol. 74: 4 (2021), pp. 598-625.

²²⁹ Rufo, “Museum reclassifies Roman emperor as trans-woman”.

two male characters within an in-game cinematic, with accusations claiming that the game's developers had "gone woke" by choosing to incorporate this scene.²³⁰

While some may rightfully question why the representation of marginalised demographics in historical games requires supporting evidence to be considered valid, a through-current of popular discourse regarding the presentation of history within games is an audience's perception of a given historical period;²³¹ as a feature of modern discourse with a high degree of public visibility in social media, LGBTQ+ representation in a historical context in particular can encounter the issue of being perceived as a transposition of modern views into a past scenario, presenting the same behavioural patterns and associations identified in relation to the interpretation of historical phenomena as anachronistic within the "Tiffany Problem".²³² As such the demonstration of historical precedent recorded in contemporary source materials – where extant – provides a significant element of support for the representation of LGBTQ+ perspectives in historic contexts. Therefore, the ability of game developers and other media creators to link their presentation of historical LGBTQ+ communities to evidence from contemporary sources – as in the case of *Gentleman Jack* with the diaries of Anne Lister – offers a powerful supporting argument against politicised counteraccusations of "historical inaccuracy".

Historical Representation and Gameplay Mechanisms

As admirable as these shifts towards representing diverse demographic and cultural perspectives within historical media are considered amongst modern audiences, especially as a rejection of toxic and anti-social behaviours within gaming communities and the companies creating these media, they can also create challenges for historians attempting to use these same media as a means of examining the past. These challenges are particularly noticeable within the technical perspectives offered by video games with character customisation mechanisms – such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* – as this technical feature forces the game to create a functional gameplay experience regardless of which gender, ethnicity or sexuality the player selects; Jonathon

²³⁰ Bošnjak, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Creative Director Issues Statement on Latest Controversy".

²³¹ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39.

²³² Franco, "The Tiffany Problem: When History Doesn't Seem to Make Sense".

Dumont, Creative Director for *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, stated that they did not 'want to restrict players to a specific playstyle or have them miss some parts of the experience because they chose to play with a female or a male hero'.²³³

The most prominent side-effect of this technical requirement for functionality may be observed during player interactions with NPCs who, in the majority of instances, are required to make no distinction as to the player character's gender or ethnicity and will instead refer to them by a neutral title specific to the narrative context of their character, such as "Eagle Bearer" for the protagonist of *Odyssey* or "Wolf-Kissed" for *Valhalla's* protagonist.²³⁴ This identity neutrality is similarly perceptible in games incorporating character customisation within entirely fictional settings, such as *Cyberpunk 2077* whose player protagonist is known simply as "V".²³⁵ While some games record alternative dialogue to reflect the consequences of player choice in determining their character's gender, re-recording voice actors presenting alternate pronouns to match the chosen gender of the protagonist character in games where this choice is available, this represents a significant and time-consuming outlay of additional work for the developers – who must check, alter and re-record any cutscenes or dialogue which incorporates an affected name or pronoun – hence the preference for simpler, neutral titles which minimise the work required by developers.²³⁶

However, gaming experiences which provide no distinction between genders or ethnicities in a historical context have the potential to foster misleading impressions of social equality in historical societies which stands in direct comparison or contrast to incidents of social inequality and oppression in the modern day, and which may also conflict with evidence of inequality which survives for the historical periods being portrayed. In certain incidents, the lack of distinction for the player avatar's gender or ethnicity can become jarringly obvious when events and activities around the player draw attention to breaches of historical gender or racial boundaries, which the player and their avatar are miraculously excused from without any in-game explanation.

²³³ Stuart Cullen, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey Interview", *Codec Moments*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.codecmoments.com/assassins-creed-odyssey-interview/>.

²³⁴ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*; *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.

²³⁵ CD Projekt RED, *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by CD Projekt.

²³⁶ Cullen, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey Interview".

A prominent case of this discrepancy can occur in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* when the player travels to Olympia to attend and participate in the Olympic Games.²³⁷ The historical sources report that the Olympics could only be participated in by men during the Classical era, and in some cases only by citizens (which, in Classical Greece, similarly only applied to men).²³⁸ Likewise, as Paul Cartledge notes, while some women, notably Cynisca of Sparta, did win Olympic wreaths during the Classical era, these victories were conducted on their behalf by anonymous male proxies, and strict rules existed restricting the ability of women even to spectate at Olympic events during the Classical era.²³⁹ Therefore, encountering *Odyssey's* optional side-quest "Kallipateira" – in which a woman is put on trial and faces the death penalty for attempting to covertly watch her son compete in the Games, and is based upon an anecdotal story of a supposedly real incident – is especially jarring to encounter when playing as *Odyssey's* female protagonist, Cassandra.²⁴⁰ As the player is narratively required to participate in the Games regardless of their chosen protagonist's gender, the player's character is actively encouraged by several NPCs to attend and participate;²⁴¹ comparing these reactions to the hostile treatment of the accused woman in the "Kallipateira" side-quest creates a noticeably disjointed experience, both in regard to gameplay and historicity.

This narrative dissonance is less prominent in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, given the popular cultural image of Viking society's more egalitarian treatment of women, particularly via the debated historical phenomenon of "female Viking warriors", and *Valhalla's* widespread depiction of female characters in equal status to men,²⁴² yet it is still a challenging feature of modern games' interactions with the cultural attitudes of historical societies where player interactions may overtly conflict with evidence from the contemporary sources. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, the "masculinisation" of female characters as part of their attribution of narrative agency within historical games is a

²³⁷ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*.

²³⁸ Nigel B. Crowther, "Athlete and State: Qualifying for the Olympic Games in Ancient Greece", *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 23: 1 (1996), pp. 38-40.

²³⁹ Cartledge, *The Spartans*, p. 33 & pp. 198-199.

²⁴⁰ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*; Crowther, "Athlete and State", pp. 38-40.

²⁴¹ *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*.

²⁴² *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*; Meier, "'The hardest battles are fought in the mind': the role of women in Viking games", pp. 75-98; Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, pp. 176-179; Moen, "Was there such a thing as a female Viking warrior?".

potentially problematic phenomenon.²⁴³ The creation of gameplay and narrative formats which must function through the lens of either male or female protagonists due to character selection or customisation systems inherently favours the “masculinisation” of female perspectives, as such raises questions about the experiences which these “masculinised” female narratives present in terms of gameplay accessibility and the consequences for perceived historical agency.

Selectable character gender is but one form of character customisation in video games, alongside customisable ethnicity or sexual identity. The options for player agency and self-expression which this form of game mechanic creates – despite any historiographical issues which may result – have seen their growing implementation within the gaming medium. Commonly utilised as a feature of the Role-Playing Game genre, the manner and degree in which players may customise their character differs between games. In some instances, like *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* or *Valhalla*, the customisation options are more limited, restricting players to a binary choice of genders for the protagonist character and a small pool of cosmetic customisations with few notable effects on gameplay, such as hair colour or style.²⁴⁴

Meanwhile, other games – including the *Expeditions* historical RPG series, *Mount & Blade: Bannerlord* (2022) and *Crusader Kings III*, or multiplayer experiences, such as in *Red Dead Online* (2018-present) – feature in-depth “character creator” systems, allowing players to minutely craft any number of potential characteristics of their player avatars, including gender, sexuality, hair, eye and skin colour, personality, and so on.²⁴⁵ The greater priority given to player agency and inter-player social interaction within these character customisation mechanisms implicitly overrides considerations of historical narrative or any attendant stigmatization towards particular demographics, placing control over these historical perspectives in the individual power of players.²⁴⁶ This creates the potential for

²⁴³ Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, pp. 128-145.

²⁴⁴ *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*; *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*.

²⁴⁵ See for examples, *Crusader Kings III*; *Expeditions: Viking*; Logic Artists, *Expeditions: Rome* (2022), PC. Published by THQ Nordic; TaleWorlds Entertainment, *Mount & Blade: Bannerlord* (2022), Xbox, PlayStation and PC; Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Online* (2019), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia; EA DICE, *Battlefield V* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

²⁴⁶ Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 15: 2 (2020), pp. 148-152.

games to further override historical narratives and generate controversy as these individual experiences conflict with personal understandings of historical events.

However, certain games have attempted to include mechanical systems which accommodate character creation systems within technical perspectives of a historical period which reflect attitudes consistent with the cultural views of the time. *Crusader Kings III*, for example, features numerous mechanical modifiers which may reflect upon a character's demographic and promote particular cultural views within certain in-game historical contexts. Many of the historical cultures within *Crusader Kings III* utilise "Male-Preference" succession laws by default, in which male characters are given automatic preference to female characters in the succession to territory and titles after a character dies. This system also applies a penalty to characters' "Opinion", a numerical system incorporating character personality modifiers and interaction effects, such as belief systems, which can influence a player's ability to conduct specific interactions between characters. Under "Male-Preference" succession laws, any female "ruler" character automatically receives a negative penalty to their "Opinion" relationship with male "ruler" characters of the same culture, making it potentially more difficult for players of female characters to form agreements based upon this numerical system and thereby conduct successful interactions within the game.²⁴⁷

Similarly, *Crusader Kings III*'s character creation system incorporates variables to generate gay, bisexual and asexual characters. Although this does not preclude these characters from producing children – a key element of gameplay, as the primary objective of *Crusader Kings III* is to ensure the survival of the chosen player character's dynasty throughout multiple generations – some potential interactions between characters are restricted when attempting to engage with characters of incompatible sexualities; for example, the "Seduce" or "Romance" interactions, which can strengthen character bonds and potentially create beneficial gameplay opportunities for the player, are unusable on characters with a sexuality incompatible with that of the player character. Furthermore, interactions between homosexual characters can potentially acquire penalty modifiers which

²⁴⁷ *Crusader Kings III*.

identify these interactions as transgressions within medieval cultures, potentially marking these characters as “criminals” and opening possibilities for hostile character interactions.²⁴⁸

Yet although these systems can indicate historic cultural attitudes towards gender or sexuality, they are not perfect representations; *Crusader Kings III*’s “Opinion” penalty to female rulers, for example, can be negated and overridden with sufficient positive modifiers to this numerical mechanic. Likewise, similar historic attitudes to issues of race are more challenging to depict effectively in historical games due to ongoing issues of racial discrimination. The approaches taken by *Mafia III* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* reflect that games have attempted to find methods of acknowledging these historic prejudices within games,²⁴⁹ however these more curated historical depictions contrast notably with games featuring character customisation mechanics.

Moreover, while the absence of character customisation mechanics is often a technical requirement of more curated game narratives, the absence of customisation mechanics in certain gameplay contexts can generate controversies amongst player communities, particularly where these interact with issues of demographic representation. In recent years, a number of controversies, several of which have been mentioned within this chapter, have arisen on internet forums in which video game players have argued over incidents of increased representation for non-White and non-Male demographics, or their exclusion, within historical games; many of the more notable examples of this phenomenon involve characters curated by game developers, over whom players have no authorial agency through character creator systems or cosmetic customisation mechanics.

Two notable examples of this phenomenon can be witnessed in connection with recent historical entries in the *Battlefield* multiplayer shooter franchise. Social media forums experienced heated debate following the release of the initial announcement trailer for *Battlefield V*, which ended with a lingering shot of a female soldier with a prosthetic limb, as gamers either complained about the inclusion of a female soldier or bemoaned the sexism of the trailer’s detractors, with both sides of the debate citing cursory historical examples to

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ *Mafia III*; Yin-Poole, “Mafia 3’s in-game statement on its depiction of racism”; Moosa, “Mafia III is just a game, but it shines a spotlight on the reality of racism”; *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Locke, “‘You Are A True Progressive’, pp. 174-191.

support their conflicting perspectives; defenders of the trailer cited the numbers of women who served within the major combatants' armed forces during WWII, while critics emphasised the non-combatant roles fulfilled by these women.²⁵⁰ It is also significant to note that the character design which prompted this controversy did not feature as a playable character model within the final game, appearing solely within official promotional materials; the developers of *Battlefield V* defended the inclusion of female characters within its online multiplayer gameplay, stating that 'player choice and female playable characters are here to stay' and that the developers wanted to 'give players [the] choice to choose and customise the characters they play with', although the more exaggerated designs shown in pre-release promotional materials were 'dialled back' to more historically appropriate designs as a response to player criticism.²⁵¹

The previous *Battlefield* game, 2016's WWI-set *Battlefield 1*, similarly attracted controversy for its depictions of diverse and inclusive demographic perspectives, in this case through the depiction of non-White characters which some players argued were "historically inaccurate" in a conflict popularly viewed as White-dominated. In this instance, *Battlefield 1* and its developers EA DICE were accused of politically-motivated historical inaccuracies and "blackwashing" the game's depiction of the First World War through the widespread implementation of non-White demographics within the game's depictions of British and German forces on the Western Front; a particular focus of this controversy, as discussed by Quiroga, was the implementation of non-customisable character models portraying people of colour within the game's multiplayer suite.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Lukomski, "'Accuracy' vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games"; Matt Kim, "Battlefield V Doubles Down on the Representation of Women in World War II", *USgamer*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/battlefield-5-women-world-war-2>; Luke Plunkett, "Oh No, There Are Women In Battlefield V", *Kotaku*, 23 May 2018, <https://kotaku.com/oh-no-there-are-women-in-battlefield-v-1826275455>.

²⁵¹ Alex Kane, "EA DICE Exec Fires Back About Women in 'Battlefield V'", *Variety*, 25 May 2018 [Accessed via Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180607153827/https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/battlefield-v-women-1202822531/>]; Ali Jones, "DICE is 'dialling back' Battlefield V's character customisation", *PCGamesN*, 13 September 2018, <https://www.pcgamesn.com/battlefield-v/battlefield-v-authentic-customisation>.

²⁵² Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 2-3; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, "Context, Representation, Historical Racism: Colonialism and Colonial Soldiers in *Battlefield 1*", *Historical Games Network*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.historicalgames.net/context-representation-historical-racism-colonialism-and-colonial-soldiers-in-battlefield-1/>.

As Quiroga notes, the active participation of non-White demographics on the Western Front is well-documented and readily acknowledged amongst scholars of the First World War;²⁵³ perhaps as a reflection of this academic discourse via its development collaboration with the UK's Imperial War Museums, the strategy game *The Great War: Western Front* readily acknowledges the contribution of non-White Colonial troops via their inclusion as distinct entities within the game's depiction of WWI.²⁵⁴ However, the player community of *Battlefield I* did not acknowledge these non-White historical narratives, with opponents of the inclusion of these non-White characters instead arguing the incorporation of non-White individuals within a European WWI context to be factually incorrect and anachronistic with the game's historical setting. It is this perception within popular discourse of racial representation in a historical context – in this case, the Western Front of WWI – being regarded as factually incorrect which Quiroga points to as a key characteristic of a “White mythic space” within popular historical memory, which has implicitly concealed non-White activity within a given historical event through its depiction by White ethnic characters in entertainment media, and subsequently acts to challenge attempts by revisionist media to reintroduce these non-White perspectives into the historical narrative.

As Quiroga observes, popular media such as films, television and video games have played key roles in creating and perpetuating mythic spaces within historical memory;²⁵⁵ ergo, the popular-cultural image of the First World War, reflected by the controversy surrounding *Battlefield I*, as being implicitly regarded as ethnically White is as a result of its media authorship, in which Western creators and White ethnic actors have featured most prominently with limited express acknowledgement of active non-White contributions to WWI within media depictions of the conflict until the 1990s and early-2000s.²⁵⁶

Quiroga specifically emphasises the issue of mythic spaces in relation to racial representation – justifiably so, as the controversy surrounding *Battlefield I* and more recently regarding the inclusion of Yasuke in *Assassin's Creed: Shadows* reflect issues of opposition to depictions of historically-recorded non-White figures in contexts which are perceived as racially and historically anomalous – although aspects of this phenomenon of “mythic

²⁵³ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 3 & pp. 5-9.

²⁵⁴ *The Great War: Western Front*.

²⁵⁵ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 14-21.

²⁵⁶ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 52-57.

spaces” can also be identified within opposition to depictions of sexually-diverse characters in historical contexts. Quiroga notes that while historical memory can and has changed over time, mythic spaces are similarly reactive to change in order to deny evidence which may render them invalid. The observation that ‘at its most powerful, historical memory can turn a singular interpretation into historical fact’ is a significant acknowledgement, which helps to interpret the vocal opposition to the evidenced inclusion of numerous marginalised demographics in media portrayals of historical events.²⁵⁷ Furthermore, it also helps the interpretation of decreased or less prominent controversies in instances where character customisation mechanics or role-playing systems grant players agency to enact their interpretation of a historical character, thereby enabling players to create interactions which support their subjective understanding of a historical world.

Subjective History, “Culture Wars” and the “Tiffany Problem”

Games are not alone in encountering difficulties surrounding contrasting ideas of representation in media depictions of history, and the knotty issues of historical interpretation which these depictions highlight; Quiroga, for example, notes that many of the attributes of WWI as a “White mythic space” had been established and utilised by popular culture – notably film and television – before video games rose to prominence as a media form.²⁵⁸ However, conflicting interpretations of history within its depictions by modern media may also be observed in contrasting representations of a single historical event or character and the responses which they each engender.

As an example, two separate media projects portraying the ancient Egyptian queen Cleopatra provoked controversy with regards to the casting of the actresses chosen to portray the historical monarch: in 2020, the Israeli actress Gal Gadot was accused of “whitewashing” by Western commentators after announcing that she would portray the Egyptian queen in a planned film project,²⁵⁹ while, in 2023, the Netflix docudrama *African*

²⁵⁷ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 26.

²⁵⁸ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 4-5.

²⁵⁹ “Gal Gadot’s Cleopatra film sparks ‘whitewashing’ claims”, *BBC News*, 13 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-54529836>; “Gal Gadot defends Cleopatra casting after ‘whitewashing’ controversy”, *BBC News*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-55409187>.

Queens: Queen Cleopatra was criticised by Egyptians for casting a Black actress as Cleopatra, thereby allegedly promoting 'Afrocentric thinking... which includes slogans and writings aimed at distorting and erasing the Egyptian identity.'²⁶⁰ These particular incidents, wherein two separate representations of the same historical figure received criticism from different audiences for distinctly "opposite" representations, highlight and emphasise a key difficulty in presenting history in the modern age of global, mass media: the subjectivity of History.

Every individual playing a historical video game has their own personal interpretation and experience of the game's historical period which they wish to perform, a situation exacerbated in instances where the history in question has a strong popular-culture identity. *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* became the first *Assassin's Creed* game to earn \$1 billion in profits,²⁶¹ yet its Viking aesthetic contributes to a succession of Viking-themed influences within popular-culture – including the streaming series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*²⁶² – as well as building upon the popularity of *Assassin's Creed* as a game franchise, or the popularity of particular game design formulae.²⁶³ This broad thematic appeal reflects itself within historical games, particularly within the gameplay of triple-A games like *Assassin's Creed*, where personal agency over determining a player's interactions with the historical experience is emphasised. This is a situation of which even "internal" gaming commentators are conscious, and its implications for the historiographical perspectives offered by games can also be discerned.²⁶⁴

Ideas and understandings of demographic representation within history can vary by community, region, or country, and often rely more upon prevailing socio-political opinions and a selective interpretation of historical evidence than a thorough evaluation of the known facts. The result of these subjective understandings can be conflict, where the interpretations offered by different perspectives contradict each other, ultimately leading to

²⁶⁰ "Egyptians complain over Netflix depiction of Cleopatra as black", *BBC News*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-65322821>.

²⁶¹ Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed Valhalla passes \$1bn revenue", *Eurogamer*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-valhalla-passes-usd1bn-revenue>.

²⁶² *Vikings*; *The Last Kingdom*.

²⁶³ WhatCulture Gaming, *Can Assassin's Creed: Shadows Save Ubisoft?*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 June 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BNzMh8NVfc>.

²⁶⁴ For examples, see Muriel and Crawford, "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society", p. 148; Brown, "Assassin's Creed Shadows was originally envisioned without Yasuke, but Ubisoft wanted the full feudal fantasy"; WhatCulture Gaming, *Nobody Can Decide on Assassin's Creed Shadows*, online video recording, YouTube, 3 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXUWUVFQwVA>.

“culture wars” as proponents of these conflicting authorial perspectives challenge the validity of the opposing view. Many of the incidents of modern protest against Colonial historical figures have been framed in the context of these “culture wars”, as modern ideologies conflict with attitudes and figures presented as laudable in the past, resulting in debate over the place of these historic figures in modern historical narratives.²⁶⁵ The same can be said of the numerous controversies explored throughout this chapter surrounding the inclusion of characters from marginalised demographics in historical gaming contexts, in which “#GamerGate” is cited as a leading example of a gaming “culture war” and a clear parallel for behaviours reflected in subsequent incidents.²⁶⁶

Consequently, identifying and exploring marginalised perspectives or narratives in historical games within this politicised environment of “culture wars” is highly challenging, as attempting to engage with these perspectives may be vulnerable to negative accusations of “tokenism” or “woke agenda” within their authorship, which may camouflage any positive historiographical intent underlying the representation of these marginalised perspectives. As observed by Luke Dale, a voice and motion-capture performer for historical RPG *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which experienced controversy surrounding its depiction of marginalised demographics, gaming controversies such as those identified by Quiroga are primarily perpetuated by ‘people that are really politically involved and [who] care very much about politics and not gaming and they've just used this as a weapon, but they're not necessarily into gaming’.²⁶⁷

Therefore, the developers of historical video games – or creators of any historical media – face an impossible dilemma of attempting to create a product which reflects the recorded history of a particular period and appeals to a broad global audience, whilst simultaneously attempting to accommodate or overcome conflicting perspectives and interpretations of the history in question. This difficulty is heightened for historical periods with a high cultural profile, especially those such as WWI where long-standing cultural

²⁶⁵ “Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars”, *The Guardian*.

²⁶⁶ “Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars”, *The Guardian*; Alexander, “Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody is Winning”; MacDonald, “It’s 10 years since Gamergate – the industry must now stand up to far-right trolls”; MacDonald, “The disturbing online misogyny of Gamergate has returned – if it ever went away”; Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 3-4.

²⁶⁷ Richardson, “Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic”.

depictions have created a demographically homogeneous “mythic space” in historical memory.²⁶⁸

Historical fiction writers have encountered similar issues for all manner of historical phenomena which would be identified by modern audiences as modern anachronisms because of the popular association with these phenomena in the modern day, a scenario which has been identified in popular discourse in connection with the “Tiffany Problem”.²⁶⁹ Although not an exact application of this phenomenon, the underlying attitudes within the “Tiffany Problem” goes some way to explaining the increasing volatility of social discourse surrounding the demographics of historical characters represented within video games, as the influence of the behaviours within the “Tiffany Problem” become more pronounced as the contrast between the evidence of historical sources and subjective modern popular understandings of historical events become more widely observed. Because of their popularity and cultural influence, entertainment media such as video games play a significant role in shaping these modern popular understandings.²⁷⁰ However, each new title faces the difficult task of reshaping the subjective interpretations created and reinforced by its predecessors; in the case of marginalised demographics, this means video games are fighting an uphill battle to depict respectful and historiographically accepted versions of history against earlier, possibly culturally-entrenched video games which have possibly depicted these same demographics in unflattering or stereotyped fashions, even assuming these groups have been depicted at all.

Meanwhile, the subjectivity of historical experiences within video games can also help to explain the growing interest towards the inclusion of character customisation mechanics in games, as these systems grant increased options to players to craft a unique persona within a historical space that reflects their personal experience and – to some extent – demographic perspective,²⁷¹ and thereby enable them to play out their subjective understanding of a given historical period. However, the inclusion of these character

²⁶⁸ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, pp. 1-11.

²⁶⁹ Franco, “The Tiffany Problem: When History Doesn’t Seem to Make Sense”.

²⁷⁰ For examples, see Lukáš Kolek, Ivan Ropovik, Vít Šisler, Herre van Oostendorp, and Cyril Brom, “Video games and attitude change: a meta-analysis”, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 75 (2023); Lukáš Kolek, Patrícia Martinková, Michaela Vařejková, Vít Šisler, Cyril Brom, “Is video games' effect on attitudes universal? Results from an empirical study comparing video games' impact on the attitude change of players with different backgrounds”, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 40: 2 (2024), pp. 667-684.

²⁷¹ Muriel and Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, p. 148

customisation systems is restricted by other mechanical requirements of the gaming medium, which counterbalance the greater expressive freedom offered by character creation mechanics with demands for gameplay, narrative and artistic focus; if developers allow players the gameplay freedom to craft their own personal player protagonist, this naturally limits the developers' ability to craft a focused and emotionally impactful narrative experience, and vice versa.

In a similar vein, games developers and publishers remain mindful of the commercial and market factors which may influence their creative decisions for future titles. Across 2023 and 2024, a large number of game studios, including major publishers and smaller developers, announced that they were being forced to make major job cuts amidst financial uncertainty and rising development costs.²⁷² In order to sustain commercial growth, commentators have suggested that the gaming industry will need to increase its sales in regions like Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, which in turn will encourage the creation of gaming content which attracts and appeals to these audiences.²⁷³ A central pillar of this prospective appeal would need to be the inclusion and representation of characters and narratives which accurately and respectfully depict the people and cultures of these regions, and *Assassin's Creed: Mirage* has been specifically identified as a praise-worthy example of this content evolution in practice.²⁷⁴ Similarly, new games, such as the recently released *Unknown 9: Awakening* (2024), aim to explore narratives and cultures previously under-represented in gaming, with the employment of artists with associated cultural and demographic backgrounds – such as *Unknown 9*'s hiring of mixed British-Indian heritage actress Anya Charlotra to perform the game's Indian protagonist – intended to offer

²⁷² Mickey Carrol, "Why are thousands of video game workers losing their jobs?", *Sky News*, 17 April 2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/record-job-losses-despite-an-industry-on-the-rise-whats-going-on-in-uk-gaming-13113559>; Megan Farokhmanesh, "2024 Was the Year the Bottom Fell Out of the Games Industry", *WIRED*, 20 December 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/2024-was-the-year-the-bottom-fell-out-of-the-games-industry/>; Jennifer Maas, "One in 10 Video Game Developers Were Laid Off in 2024, GCD Report finds", *Variety*, 21 January 2025, <https://variety.com/2025/gaming/news/video-game-layoffs-2024-report-gdc-1236277739/>; Jessica Clement, "Number of video game industry employees laid off worldwide from 2022 to 2024", *Statista*, 27 February 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1458214/worldwide-gaming-industry-layoffs/>.

²⁷³ Richardson, "London Games Festival shines a light on diversity".

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

respectful and culturally authentic performances which appeal to the demographics being depicted as well as broader gaming audiences.²⁷⁵

Triple-A game experiences such as these are inherently compromised as explorations of specific marginalised demographics due to their need to appeal commercially to the broadest possible gaming audience to support its associated financial costs, however the willingness of triple-A developers and publishers to engage concertedly with these historical narratives reflects a growing willingness in traditionally White-Western dominated companies to facilitate gaming's development as an inclusive medium, despite on-going incidents of harassment and anti-social behaviour against marginalised demographics.

While there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that political controversies surrounding historical games are more representative of online discourse by vocal, politically minded individuals within gaming communities than of gamers as a collective group, the influence that political controversies can have on the public image of a video game can be significant.²⁷⁶ Games developers are evidently conscious of past controversies and offences to marginalised communities and their narrative perspectives, and individual companies have taken steps to address these offences and ensure more respectful and authentic representation of these groups in upcoming releases; for example, after causing offence to the Cree community with the representation of their culture in *Sid Meier's Civilisation VI*, the *Civilisation* series' developer Firaxis announced that they would be consulting with members of the Shawnee community to ensure an 'authentic, sincere recreation' of the Shawnee culture and its historic figure Tecumseh in *Sid Meier's Civilisation VII* (2025), including hiring a Shawnee voice actor to voice Tecumseh in Shawnee language.²⁷⁷ However, while the nature of these initiatives reflects the desire by developers to engage with marginalised communities and their historic experiences more "faithfully", the individual implementation

²⁷⁵ Abu Bakar Yasin and Amber Haque, "Witcher TV star's gaming debut a chance for self-exploration", *BBC News*, 16 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y9v510dy9o>.

²⁷⁶ See for example, Richardson, "Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic".

²⁷⁷ Graham Lee Brewer and Matt O'Brien, "Civilization 7 makers work with Shawnee to bring sincere representation of the tribe to the game", *Associated Press*, 4 October 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/civ7-shawnee-tecumseh-firaxis-civilization-32ca02931e9cdeb024a9a0abb7081d2a>; Andy Chalk, "After botching the Cree nation in Civ 6, Firaxis established a partnership with the Shawnee to ensure 'authentic, sincere' representation in Civilization 7", *PC Gamer*, 8 October 2024, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/strategy/after-botching-the-cree-nation-in-civ-6-firaxis-established-a-partnership-with-the-shawnee-to-ensure-authentic-sincere-representation-in-civilization-7/>.

of these initiatives also means that the rate of development of games companies' attitudes towards marginalised demographics may differ significantly between companies, and attitudes reflected within the games authored by a development studio or publisher may not necessarily be reflected to the same degree by the attitudes towards these communities within their personnel.

Moreover, even as games attempt to improve their representation of marginalised communities, there remains a voluble tension between these depictions and their reception by different groups within the gaming community. This tension often manifests through declarations of "historical inaccuracies" where these depictions conflict with subjective interpretations of how a particular demographic should be represented within the narrative of a given historical period. This in of itself is symptomatic of a larger, more deeply rooted issue of how history is discussed and presented in the context of entertainment media like video games. At the heart of this discourse, as at the heart of all discussion of historical media, lies the concept of "historical accuracy", or one of the many other variant adjectives used to indicate the factual correctness of historical media with regards to the historical subject under portrayal, and popular understanding of what this concept fundamentally represents. Therefore, it is essential to address and confront the centrality of this concept, its understanding from various authorial perspectives within the gaming industry, and its detailed implications for the basic concept of a "historical" experience in the video game medium.

Chapter 3: History as an Experience of Detail - “Accuracy” and “Authenticity” as Perspectives of History in Video Games

In popular discourse surrounding historical video games, the concept of “historical accuracy” may frequently be found to be either the principal or dominant subject of analysis or metric of quality of a video game with a historical setting or aesthetic. Regardless of franchise or genre of gameplay, social media such as YouTube and forums such as Reddit are populated with commentators debating the particular historiographical merits of video games with historical contexts, often using the term “historical accuracy”, or some variation thereof, as a metric for the quality of the given historical game.¹ This discourse has grown in volume alongside improvements in video game graphics technology, and frequently boils down to discussing the “level of detail” which the developers have included in a particular game.

In some cases, this discourse strays into discussion of “realism” and immersion, thereby equating a feeling of reality and detail with historical fact. Developers themselves reinforce this perspective of “historical accuracy” by championing their “attention to detail” or “commitment to historical accuracy” with showcase videos highlighting specific in-game features or “behind-the-scenes” efforts to translate real-world objects and effects into their games.² In others, “historical accuracy” is cited as a validator for hostility towards a game’s depiction of a historical world, particularly in relation to depictions of politically controversial issues such as demographic representations for marginalised communities within historic contexts.

¹ This discourse is far too populous to cite in its entirety. For select examples, see GameSpot, *Accuracy vs. Authenticity in Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 3 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y73HFDnUOJo>; TheGamingHistorians, *Historical accuracy in videogames: important or not?*, online video recording, YouTube, 12 December 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la7xb_b9j_s; Real Pixels, *How Historically Accurate is Red Dead Redemption 2?*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Yz8Eu56ePY>; Conduit Gaming, *Why Historical Accuracy Matters (and Doesn’t) in Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 April 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY1Z01Losts>.

² For example, see Rebellion, *Sniper Elite 5 Spotlight – Weapons and Customisation*, online video recording, YouTube, 14 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy4ShfYhIX8>.

In some instances, the intensity of the debate surrounding the “accuracy” or “realism” of gaming’s depiction of in-game objects has resulted in extreme responses by their participants. In June 2021, a player of the popular MMO combat game *War Thunder* (2012-present) – which features military vehicles and aircraft from history and the modern day – attempted to win an argument about the accuracy of the game’s depiction of the British Challenger 2 tank by posting classified materials concerning the Challenger 2 to online forums.³ Similar leaks of sensitive military documents regarding the accuracy of depictions of French and Chinese tanks within the game occurred only a few months later,⁴ and in early 2023, another player published classified documents regarding American F-16 and F-15E fighter planes, even though the latter aircraft was not represented within the game at the time of the leak.⁵ In each case, the posts were deleted by forum moderators as breaches of forum standards,⁶ but the fact that the culprits in each case cared so emphatically that these vehicles should be depicted “accurately” within the game is evidence of the obsessive, sometimes excessive passion with which this subject is argued in online gaming communities.

More recently, an online petition calling for the cancellation of *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows* prior to its release, citing a ‘lack of historical accuracy and cultural respect’ towards the game’s depiction of feudal Japan, rapidly gathered support from global gaming communities. While the petition drew upon similar arguments to on-going controversy regarding the game’s inclusion of a Black samurai character (based on a recorded historical figure, as discussed in the previous chapter), the Japanese petition specifically accused Ubisoft of misunderstanding the historic role and context of the samurai class through its

³ Andy Chalk, “War Thunder fan says tank is inaccurate, leaks classified military documents to prove it”, *PC Gamer*, 21 July 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/war-thunder-fan-says-tank-is-inaccurate-leaks-classified-military-documents-to-prove-it/>.

⁴ Rich Stanton, “War Thunder fan leaks classified military documents to win argument about tanks – again”, *PC Gamer*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/war-thunder-fan-leaks-classified-military-documents-to-win-an-argument-about-tanksagain/>; Noah Smith, “Fans wanted a war game to be more real, so they leaked classified docs”, *Washington Post*, 5 August 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2022/08/05/tank-plan-leaks-war-thunder/>.

⁵ Ed Nightingale, “Yet more military documents leaked on War Thunder forum”, *Eurogamer*, 19 January 2023, <https://www.eurogamer.net/yet-more-military-documents-leaked-on-war-thunder-forum>; Luke Plunkett, “War Thunder Players Are, Once Again, Posting Military Documents On Forums”, *Kotaku*, 19 January 2023, <https://kotaku.com/war-thunder-military-documents-classified-leak-forum-1850009524>.

⁶ Stanton, “War Thunder fan leaks classified military documents”; Smith, “Fans wanted a war game to be more real”; Nightingale, “Yet more military documents leaked on War Thunder forum”; Plunkett, “War Thunder Players Are, Once Again, Posting Military Documents On Forums”.

depiction of Yasuke, which the petition claimed amounted to ‘a serious insult to Japanese culture and history, and may also be linked to Asian racism’.⁷

In parallel with this petition, Ubisoft also received complaints about the accuracy of certain artefacts and architectural features depicted in the game, in which some commentators criticised Ubisoft for depicting examples anachronous with the game’s historical setting,⁸ while also receiving protests for the use of a Japanese reenactment group’s logo within game concept art without permission.⁹ In response to the various controversies regarding *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows’* representation of Feudal Japan, veteran *Assassin’s Creed* art director Thierry Dansereau stated in discussions with *Eurogamer* that:

[*Assassin’s Creed: Shadows’* developers] worked with a lot of experts, just to understand well the time period... so we’re making sure that we depict this world in a respectful way, while fulfilling the gameplay needs and making it entertaining... if we have offended [people] we are sorry but this was not the goal. We’ve paid a lot of attention to stay as respectful as possible to Japanese culture, but creative choices are made on our side, based on all the discussions we had with our own group of experts.¹⁰

A formal statement issued by Ubisoft on social media in response to these same controversies stated that ‘while [they] strive for authenticity in everything [they] do, *Assassin’s Creed* games are works of fiction inspired by real historical events and figures’.¹¹ In a lengthy Reddit post defending *Assassin’s Creed: Shadows’* fictionalised depiction of

⁷ Grant Taylor-Hill, “Japanese petition to cancel AC Shadows gets 30,000 signatures”, *Insider Gaming*, 2 July 2024, <https://insider-gaming.com/japanese-petition-ac-shadows/>; Adam Starkey, “Petition to cancel Assassin’s Creed Shadows hits 38,000 signatures in Japan”, *Metro*, 3 July 2024, <https://metro.co.uk/2024/07/03/petition-cancel-assassins-creed-shadows-hits-38-000-names-japan-21152469/>; Dalton Cooper, “Petition to Cancel Assassin’s Creed Shadows is Blowing Up”, *GameRant*, 7 July 2024, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-shadows-petition/>.

⁸ Kaan Serin, “Following historical error complaints, Assassin’s Creed Shadows director promises the trailer’s architectural inaccuracies will be ironed out for the RPG’s launch”, *GamesRadar*, 12 June 2024, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/assassin-s-creed/following-historical-error-complaints-assassins-creed-shadows-director-promises-the-trailers-architectural-inaccuracies-will-be-ironed-out-for-the-rpgs-launch/>.

⁹ Tom Phillips, “Ubisoft sorry Assassin’s Creed Shadows artwork features real-life historical re-enactment group logo”, *Eurogamer*, 9 July 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/ubisoft-sorry-assassins-creed-shadows-artwork-features-real-life-historical-re-enactment-group-logo>.

¹⁰ Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed Shadows developer on adapting Japanese culture, social media pressures and Ubisoft’s controversial apology”, *Eurogamer*, 12 September 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-shadows-developer-on-adapting-japanese-culture-social-media-pressure-and-ubisofts-controversial-apology>.

¹¹ Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed Shadows team acknowledges elements ‘that have caused concern among Japanese fans’”, *Eurogamer*, 23 July 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-shadows-team-acknowledges-elements-that-have-caused-concern-among-japanese-fans>.

Yasuke and attempting to close down discussions ‘thinly veiling bad faith intent’, moderators on an official *Assassin’s Creed* Reddit forum responded that ‘we do not chase accuracy within this franchise’ and that the games were intended to ‘compel you to do your own external research after immersing you in a glimpse of authenticity’.¹² In each of these official responses, the term “authenticity”, or sentiments associated with its use, is utilised as an indication of the pursuit of historical fidelity, even if this fidelity is explicitly or implicitly caveated by flaws due to gameplay or narrative. Equally, these replies – and the controversies which inspired them – are overtly framed within authorial perspectives of the larger, loosely defined concept of “historical accuracy” and the heated debate which this idea inspires in the context of historical games. As seen elsewhere in this thesis, even when not addressed directly this concept of “historical accuracy” has profound consequences for the interpretation and discussion of historical subjects within video games, creating ripple effects within other perspectives and phenomena of historical games.

The dominance of the concept of “historical accuracy” in gaming discourse is such that it has even impacted academic discussion of video games, with various academics exploring the factual representation of history within certain historical titles.¹³ However, as scholars such as Esther Wright have observed, this popular concept of “historical accuracy” is frequently vague and ill-defined – as demonstrated by the variety of alternate terms utilised in its discussion, notably interchanging “accuracy” with “authenticity” or “realism” as common synonyms within this discourse – and relies on a high degree of subjectivity on the part of the individual engaging with the game under scrutiny.¹⁴ As such, this popular

¹² Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed reddit takes firm stance on Yasuke ‘debate’, says Ubisoft ‘exacerbated’ issue with statement”, *Eurogamer*, 29 July 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-reddit-takes-firm-stance-on-yasuke-debate-says-ubisoft-exacerbated-issue-with-statement>.

¹³ For examples, see Andrew J. Salvati and Johnathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past”, and Josef Köstelbauer, “The Strange Attraction of Simulation”, in Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot (eds.), *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2013), pp. 153-183; Claire Manning, “Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games”, in Jane Draycott (ed.) *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games* (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 57-71; Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, in Alexander Von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 243-254; Helen Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*” in Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 28-39.

¹⁴ Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 18-20; Laura Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 24 (2020), pp. 127-144. See also, Rick Lane,

emphasis on a debate which engages with historical games at a relatively surface-level is sometimes employed by critics of historical games as a reason to question the authority of video games as a method of historical inquiry.¹⁵

Instead, academic scholarship frequently employs the term “historical authenticity”, a term which can – and has been used to – discuss similar factual issues as “historical accuracy” while also permitting space to discuss looser thematic issues of conceptual legitimacy.¹⁶ Yet, as this author has found, discussion of “historical accuracy” is so engrained into the culture of discussing historical games that it can sometimes be a powerful subconscious influence, a trap which participants can fall into even when trying to avoid it. As such, it is an element of historical game analysis that must be acknowledged and examined, even if its influence should ultimately be superseded by alternative intellectual approaches.

In this chapter, the popular concept of “historical accuracy” and its usage in discussions of historical games shall be explored, with the term “historical authenticity” explored as a distinct but alternative perspective of this same phenomenon. Within this discussion, these terms shall be defined and explored in relation to distinct case study games – notably *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* – to understand how these terms are used to both critique and defend the depiction of historical subjects within video games, and the consequences for interpretation of historical subjects which the use of these terms can entail. This exploration shall illustrate the significant divergences of understanding between popular, creative and academic interpretations of these terms of “historical accuracy” and “authenticity”, underlining the implicit subjectivity of

“Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – impressively detailed medieval life sim”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/feb/15/kingdom-come-deliverance-review-medieval-rpg>.

¹⁵ For examples, see Philip Sabin, *Lost Battles: Reconstructing the Great Clashes of the Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), p. xviii; Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 22-25.

¹⁶ Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, pp. 127-144. For examples, see Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*; Salvati and Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past”, pp. 153-167; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Manning, “Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games”, pp. 57-71; Eugen Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/2719#more-2719>; Eugen Pfister, “Why History in Digital Games matters: Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths” in Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 47-72.

interpretation of historical depiction within video games and key flaws within the emphasis of this phenomenon in historical gaming discourse.

Defining “Accuracy” and “Authenticity” within Historical Games

In order to examine the significance of contrasting authorial perspectives of “historical accuracy” versus “historical authenticity”, and the implications these have for interpreting the depiction of history within video games, first we must establish clear definitions for these terms. Although the definitions used within this chapter can be identified through examination of the usage of these terms in popular and academic discussions of historical games, they have also been identified by Laura Saxton within the wider creation of historical fiction; Saxton’s analysis focuses primarily on case studies of historical fictions within literature and audio-visual media such as film and television, and as such their usage in the context of video games is equally applicable as works of audio-visual historical fiction.¹⁷ Moreover, these arguments surrounding the concept of “historical accuracy” inherently reflect more closely upon games which may be identified as examples of what Chapman refers to as the ‘realist simulation style’, whose high graphical fidelity and implicit claims to presenting the “true” history invoke challenge where these games diverge from historical records (or even subjective understandings of historical periods).¹⁸

Although informally defined and interpreted, the concept of “historical accuracy” is commonly understood within gaming communities as a qualitative comparison of a video game’s portrayal of a given historical period, practice or incident in comparison to a predetermined “factual” record.¹⁹ The factuality of this interpretation is sometimes debatable, relying on popular-cultural assumptions of a historical period instead of contemporary and academic texts by its interpreters, but the fundamental principle is readily identifiable; the more “historically accurate” a game is, the better its representation of a historical event in relation to its sources is considered by gaming audiences.

¹⁷ Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, pp. 127-144.

¹⁸ Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), pp. 61-69.

¹⁹ Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 18-20; Iain Donald and Andrew Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, *Media Education Journal*, vol. 66 (2020), pp. 15-17.

Despite its prominence in discourse surrounding historical games, the popular attitude towards “historical accuracy” overlooks an important reality. When trying to examine video games as a historical source, several fundamental and sometimes contradictory issues must be taken into consideration. On the one hand, video games are an artistic medium, which offers their creators a multitude of opportunities to craft a unique historical experience, which can and should be as thoroughly researched as the developers are prepared or able to make it, but which also conveys the particular artistic visions of their creators.²⁰ Video games are also primarily a form of entertainment, and the necessity to keep the game experience “fun” is amongst the highest priorities of any game developer, even if this ultimately conflicts with or impacts upon considerations of “historical accuracy”.²¹ Additionally, video games, especially triple-A games, are also a commercial venture, and publishers will expect a finished game product to include content which enables the game’s sales to recoup its investment costs and generate profit.²²

The discourse between these competing demands of artistry, entertainment and commercial objectives, even without any technical limitations imposed by the digital format of the medium, is one that has played out through the history of the gaming medium, and will continue to do so into the future.²³ Similarly, the closer a game moves towards a realistic portrayal of people, artefacts, or buildings in their digital worlds, the closer towards real-world legal or political obstacles they may come; for example, many digital firearms within video games will include fictional names or deliberate inaccuracies in their digital

²⁰ Peter Claus and John Herriot, *History: An Introduction to theory, method and practice* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2012), p. 275.

²¹ Matthew Gault, “‘Battlefield 1’ Sacrificed Historical Accuracy To Make The Great War Fun’, *VICE*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/battlefield-1-historical-accuracy/>; Sabin, *Simulating War*, pp. 23-25.

²² David B. Nieborg, “How To Study Game Publishers: Activision Blizzard’s Corporate History”, and Lies van Roessel and Jan Švelch, “Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization”, in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 179-216; WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blatLhvdh0w>; GameSpot, *Game Developers Aren’t Taking Enough Risks | Spot On*, online video recording, 7 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOrSzdZbCIE>.

²³ For examples, see Jason Schreier, *Blood, Sweat And Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2017); Jason Schreier, *Press Reset: Ruin And Recovery In The Video Game Industry* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2021).

depictions to avoid copyright or trademark infringement of the real-world firearms they are representing.²⁴

The impact of these competing perspectives of what a historical game should be is easily demonstrated in an examination of the early years of the three major triple-A historical FPS franchises: *Medal of Honor*, *Call of Duty*, and *Battlefield*. *Medal of Honor* was the first to be created, beginning as an off-shoot from the post-production of *Saving Private Ryan*, when Stephen Spielberg pitched the idea of an educational gameplay supplement for the film to the gaming publisher Electronic Arts (EA); the result of these discussions, the original *Medal of Honor* video game, was a critical and commercial success and spawned a franchise of sequel games.²⁵ The *Medal of Honor* series' recreation of the D-Day Landings on Omaha Beach in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002) has been praised for its sense of realism, reflected by gameplay features such as a mechanic which can cause the player to be randomly killed without warning during the beach assault, thereby heightening the sense of danger and unpredictability of the historic event.²⁶

However, after the success of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, creative disagreements between the games' developers and EA executives saw many of the developers leave to form their own company, Infinity Ward. Backed by a new publisher, Activision, these developers produced the first *Call of Duty*; while also developed with an underlying effort to ensure "historical accuracy", the success of *Call of Duty* was partly reliant on a number of technical developments as an FPS gameplay experience, such as automatic saving, which opened the genre to more casual gamers and made playing the game more accessible to the public.²⁷ At the same time, the competing entry in the *Medal of Honor* series, *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (2003), was widely criticised for its weak gameplay, which overshadowed

²⁴ GameSpot, *Why Video Game Guns Have Weird Names And Designs – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okMhLCaPuuM>.

²⁵ Debra Ramsey, "Brutal Games: *Call of Duty* and the Cultural Narrative of World War II", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54: 2 (2015), pp. 96-98; GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor*, online video recording, YouTube, 23 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bj3qAlkbQw8&t=8s> [2:00-4:55].

²⁶ Linde Egberts and Koos Bosma (eds.), *Companion to European Heritage Revivals* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2014), pp. 97-99; GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [8:25-11:42].

²⁷ Ramsey, "Brutal Games", pp. 96-98; Gamespot Staff, "Call of Duty Q&A", *GameSpot*, 1 May 2003, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/call-of-duty-qanda/1100-6026083/>; GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [13:36-15:22].

its depiction of the Pacific Campaign, a previously under-represented aspect of WWII's narrative depiction within gaming.²⁸

Subsequent *Medal of Honor* games followed this same pattern, eliciting praise for their engaging historical narratives, but regularly underwhelming audiences with gameplay which failed to meet player expectations.²⁹ In Debra Ramsey's words, 'in the quest for historical authenticity and the drive to venerate the soldier, the developers of *Medal of Honor* lost sight of the importance of *play* to the gamer' [original italics].³⁰ The increasing popularity of multiplayer-focused games such as *Battlefield* made games with an emphasis on narrative-focused historical content more challenging to market, thereby guiding developers of subsequent historical FPS games away from narrative experiences, which emphasised and explored "authentic" historical content, towards multiplayer gameplay-focused experiences with an illusory historical aesthetic.³¹

Video games attempting to pursue "historical accuracy" are also constrained by the limits of technology. Video games are, regardless of genre, a technical exercise, relying on complicated computer algorithms and reams of precise code even to render the smallest blade of grass or speck of blood on a warrior's sword, let alone the vast level geometry that comprises physical in-game landscapes. Invisible walls, indestructible environments, "copy-paste" character models and animations; the power and complexity of video games and the technology that goes into creating them frequently requires technical compromises which can break the "realism" of the digital world within a game, placing severe restrictions on what is practically possible for games to achieve. In contrast to the real, physical world, this technological threshold ensures that there will always be limitations and flaws to the historical worlds that can be rendered within games.

This, in turn, inevitably generates "historical inaccuracies" within gameplay as history is condensed and curated into the confines of this digital format. For example, the absence of civilians from historical battlefields – particularly in games depicting World War II, a conflict where civilian casualties vastly outnumbered casualties of uniformed combatants –

²⁸ Ramsey, "Brutal Games", pp. 96-98; GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [15:25-17:25].

²⁹ GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [17:25-28:05].

³⁰ Ramsey, "Brutal Games", p. 97.

³¹ GVMERS, *The Rise and Fall of Medal of Honor* [21:10-21:27].

is a serious and glaring omission from a historiographical perspective of gaming.³² However, the amount of time and effort required to research, design, model, and code civilians with their own unique behaviours into a game world can be prohibitively demanding for even the largest development studios, and will rarely be attempted unless it contributes in a significant manner towards the gameplay experience, as in the case of immersive “open world” games like the *Assassin’s Creed* series, or of the survival strategy game *This War of Mine* (2014), which overtly focuses its gameplay experience on the struggle of civilians attempting to survive in an active warzone.³³

Similar problems of forced historiographical “inaccuracies” or omissions can be caused by real-world legal considerations, where a person, object or technique is protected by copyright measures or other legal statutes which actively prevent their “accurate” replication within a video game unless a licensing agreement has been made between a game’s developers and the copyright holder. During development of *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, developers at Ubisoft were required to make subtle alterations to the game’s depiction of Notre Dame Cathedral due to restrictions imposed by French copyright law on certain architectural features of the famous Parisian landmark.³⁴ Similarly, Activision, makers of the *Call of Duty* games, were sued in 2017 by the company AM General for trademark infringement resulting from unlicensed depiction of the Humvee military vehicle in *Call of Duty’s Modern Warfare* sub-series (2008-2023); while the case was eventually ruled in favour of Activision for a sincere artistic effort to faithfully depict the modern American military, this case, in conjunction with the *War Thunder* controversies mentioned at the start of this chapter, highlights a difficulty inherent to more “accurate” depictions of real-world artefacts and scenarios as doing so increases the legal complexity of their digital portrayal, and thus increases the challenge of simply making a video game.³⁵ As such, specialist simulation titles, whose detail and technical accuracy within their depictions is a core element of their appeal, are among the minority of titles who will actively take the time to

³² Ramsey, “Brutal Games”, pp. 107-109.

³³ Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Quebec *et al.*, *Assassin’s Creed* (2007-present), Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, PC, and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; 11 Bit Studios, *This War of Mine* (2014), PC. Subsequently released on Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch.

³⁴ Simone de Rochefort, “Assassin’s Creed Unity can’t help rebuild Notre-Dame, and that’s OK”, *Polygon*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/features/22790314/assassins-creed-unity-notre-dame-restoration-accuracy>.

³⁵ GameSpot, *Why Video Game Guns Have Weird Names And Designs – Loadout*.

ensure that the necessary legal agreements for “accurate” representation of in-game ephemera are secured during development.³⁶

The overall problem faced by video game developers, like all writers of non-factual historical content regardless of medium, is balancing the established facts of history with their own creative interpretations of events, a feat for which creators of historical entertainment are frequently chastised by critics.³⁷ As the historical novelist Bernard Cornwell writes in the preface to his non-fiction account of the Battle of Waterloo:

History is rarely kind to historical novelists by providing a neat plot with great characters who act within a defined time-period, so we are forced to manipulate history to make our own plots work.³⁸

This sentiment similarly applies for historical video games, particularly those which feature some form of single-player narrative component. The necessity to deliver a compelling fictional story within the boundaries of history requires a degree of creative license which, due to the nature of history both as a subject and as a discipline, is more restrictive than many other game genres. Yet even “true” historical accounts are not impervious to manipulation, as John Glancy notes in relation to the various accounts of the *Bravo-Two-Zero* SAS mission produced by its participants, all of which purport to tell the “definitive” story and lambast their rivals’ inaccuracies.³⁹

All historical writing, whether fictional or not, features some element of interpretation on behalf of the author, knowingly or otherwise, which is then also subjected to the interpretations of the consumer;⁴⁰ an example of this subjective interpretation was raised in the previous chapter in the form of the “Tiffany Problem”.⁴¹ This subjectivity is

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See for examples, Sabin, *Lost Battles*, p. xviii; Elsa Keslassy, “French Historians Slam Ridley Scott’s ‘Napoleon’ Inaccuracies: ‘Like Spitting in the Face of French People’”, *Variety*, 6 December 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/napoleon-inaccuracies-french-historians-pyramids-1235823975/>; Dr Michael Rowe, “Disjointed, rushed, inaccurate: historian reviews Ridley Scott’s Napoleon”, *King’s College London*, 6 December 2023, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/disjointed-rushed-inaccurate-historian-reviews-ridley-scotts-napoleon>.

³⁸ Bernard Cornwell, *Waterloo: The History of Four Days, Three Armies and Three Battles* (London: William Collins, 2015), p.8.

³⁹ John Glancy, “Creative License vs Historical Authority”, *Historical Games Network*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.historicalgames.net/creative-licence-vs-historical-authority/>.

⁴⁰ Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The art of interactive narrative* (Indianapolis, Ind.: David Dwyer, 2003), p. 2.

⁴¹ Samantha Franco, “The Tiffany Problem: When History Doesn’t Seem to Make Sense”, *The Vintage News*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2022/04/08/tiffany-problem/>.

essential to providing individual perspectives of a historical event or game, and thus the effects of this subjectivity upon the depiction of historical phenomena must be accounted for in subsequent analysis. Thus, provided a representation of the past is sufficiently well researched to offer a *convincing* depiction of the past, it can be utilised for the study of history in some capacity, even if closer examination reveals the inclusion of certain factual inaccuracies.

The concept of “historical accuracy” in video games is further limited by the inability to guarantee that research into the associated history will produce a complete depiction of the period in question. The simple passage of time incurs a natural attrition of source material, even before considering materials lost to carelessness, disaster, and deliberate destruction. Classicists and medievalists, for instance, understand the frustration of trying to reconstruct an account of a given time period, only to be stymied by great gaps in the narrative because crucial materials have been lost to time, while the surviving sources offer only fragmentary insight.⁴² In describing the issues of writing about medieval history, Marc Morris says:

One of the frustrations of travelling back almost a millennium into the past is precisely that most of the characters we encounter are two-dimensional. Often they are no more than names on a page – shadows cast by a single, flickering flame. There are *kings* [original italics] for whom we do not possess a single reliable contemporary description – not so much as even an adjective. Any attempt to discuss their personalities would be idle speculation... poets are allowed to amplify their knowledge by roaming through the fields of fiction. So too are the historical novelists of our own day...⁴³

These sentiments align perfectly with Cornwell’s earlier comment, albeit from a more traditionally academic perspective. Because the traditional historical source material can only ever tell us so much about an event, it falls to creative and artistic sources to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge and give the historical accounts a degree of character and personality to make them relatable and intelligible to modern audiences. This interpretive relationship also often overlooks or minimises any considerations of reliability within period source material, a requirement further heightened if the subject of study produced few or no written records of their own, forcing modern audiences to rely on contemporary texts

⁴² Marc Morris, *The Norman Conquest* (London: Windmill Books, 2013), pp. 4-5.

⁴³ Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, pp. 6-7.

written by outsiders with whom the subject of study may have had a potentially hostile relationship or who possessed only incomplete information about their subject.

On the other hand, trying to extrapolate historical evidence on the basis of overtly antagonistic sources can be just as problematic as a lack of evidence, as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* demonstrates. *Valhalla's* "cinematic reveal" trailer features an aggressive narration by King Alfred "the Great" juxtaposed with scenes of the game's protagonist, Eivor, and their Viking clansmen acting in deliberate contrast to statements of the narration, forming an overt challenge to the traditional narrative of Vikings as marauding heathens.⁴⁴ In one scene, during a Viking raid on an English village, the narration states that the Vikings 'murder and kill blindly', at which point the viewer is shown the protagonist Eivor sparing an Anglo-Saxon woman and her children from attack, as well as actively preventing another Viking from attacking them.⁴⁵ In the following scene, the narration claims that a new Viking settlement 'scar[s] the lands of England. Lands they'll never defend, never love', which is contrasted by Vikings and Saxons happily interacting as the settlement is built, the bright, happy visuals contrasting markedly with the doom-laden tone of the narration.⁴⁶ These attitudes were also translated into the main game, wherein Viking and Saxon characters willingly accept each other and happily collaborate within the creation of the player protagonist's new settlement in England, while the player is actively chastised for the killing of civilian non-combatants in the game's open world, triggering a "game over" screen if committed too frequently.⁴⁷ Therefore, *Valhalla* actively promotes a version of history wherein the Vikings only kill enemy combatants, which even a casual glance at the contemporary historical sources – either written or archaeological – shows to be demonstrably untrue. In this case, historical inaccuracies can be generated in a game by efforts to compensate for the biases of the contemporary historical sources used to create the game.

Valhalla is required by necessity to portray its Viking protagonists in a sympathetic light, which actively contradicts large portions of the surviving written source material, in

⁴⁴ Assassin's Creed UK, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Cinematic World Premier Trailer*, online video recording, YouTube, 30 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kjsxl01XWsA>.

⁴⁵ *Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Cinematic World Premier Trailer* [0:37-0:44].

⁴⁶ *Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Cinematic World Premier Trailer* [0:47-0:57].

⁴⁷ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

order to create an emotional connection between the player and their in-game avatar. However, in doing so, *Valhalla* actively promotes a historical perspective which conceals some of the more controversial aspects of its historical subject, framing them either in the context of its narrative antagonists – who the player is narratively obliged to confront and defeat – or obscuring them from its depiction of the Viking-era altogether. Consequently, we can see that particular elements of a historical narrative, which would be required in a strictly “accurate” historical depiction, may be re-framed or excised by a video game in order to suit the unique narrative presented by a particular game’s historical experience. This narrative framing enables a historical game to remain largely “authentic” to its historical subject, employing narrative devices such as “heroes” and “villains” to represent controversial topics while shielding the player from association.

The desire to make history relatable to a modern audience is one of the primary drives of historical game developers; to frame key events of history like the Battle of Hastings or the D-Day Landings in a way that enables us to broadly understand what it was like to be there.⁴⁸ In this way, historical games can function like “interactive docudramas” or, as shall be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, as a form of “digital reenactment”, providing a three-dimensional environment with which to observe, participate in and interpret historical events from either a given or chosen narrative or technical perspective. Likewise, the gaps in the historical narrative because of culture, class or gender, or simple loss of source material, allow game developers space within which to craft fully-fledged artistic experiences, provided that they continue to defer to the existing historical scholarship and physical materials as a guide. This, in turn, links back to issues attendant to portraying history from the perspectives of people or groups depicted as “villains” by the historical sources, as developers’ efforts to circumvent or compensate for political biases or censorship of the source material naturally entails the inclusion or perpetuation of certain historical “inaccuracies” in order to create an acceptable version of these historical characters for a game’s modern audience.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Egberts and Bosma (eds.), *Companion to European Heritage Revivals*, pp. 97-99.

⁴⁹ Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, “Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games” in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 147-149.

A final, compelling argument for the problematic nature of “historical accuracy” as a metric of a game’s historical quality is the simple fact that some periods of history cannot be precisely defined, due to their transitions occurring as a result of gradual processes instead of definitive moments. As an example, although the term “medieval” conjures up clear imagery of stone castles and knights in armour from the popular imagination, its professional application is far broader and, according to its modern European interpretation, encompasses the breadth of the millennium between the end of the Roman Empire in Western Europe and the beginnings of the Renaissance. In the UK, for instance, the beginning of the “early medieval” period is estimated at around the year 410, while the end of the “medieval” period has been placed with the coronation of King Henry VII – the first of the Tudor dynasty – in 1485.⁵⁰ Alternatively, *Crusader Kings III* portrays the medieval world across a potential time-span between the years 867 to 1453, demarcating particular technological advances and aesthetic designs to particular sub-divisions of the medieval era to preserve a degree of historical chronology.⁵¹

Consequently, “medieval” games are presented with varying parameters for the historical evidence which may be considered acceptable for inclusion, and can result in games which include historical elements which are not strictly “accurate” for the precise date depicted by the game, yet are still technically “authentic” for the broader “medieval” period. Examples of this can be seen within *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, which depicts Vikings in the early 870s wielding two-handed great swords and attacking stone castles at various points throughout the game, for even though these latter two artefacts are strictly anachronous for the mid-ninth century setting of the game, they are still considered “medieval” within popular understanding of this historical epoch.⁵²

Likewise, even “clearly defined” historical periods such as WWII are debated in some circles. While the end of WWII is clearly defined by the formal cessation of hostilities following the surrender of Imperial Japan, the beginning has been contested by those, like

⁵⁰ See for example, “An Introduction to Early Medieval England (c. 410-1066)”, *English Heritage*, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/early-medieval/>; “An Introduction to Medieval England”, *English Heritage*, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval/>.

⁵¹ *Crusader Kings III*.

⁵² *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*; Megan Arnott, “The tourist gaze and the ‘medieval’ landscape” in Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 121-136.

Richard Overy, who assert that the international conflicts of the 1930s, beginning with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, mark the beginning of the global conflict instead of using the traditional Euro-centric start date of Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, or the Soviet-oriented narrative of the "Great Patriotic War" beginning with Operation Barbarossa in 1941;⁵³ the strategy game *Hearts of Iron IV* offers a suggestion towards this interpretation of WWII's earlier beginnings, as the game offers players the option of choosing to commence gameplay in either a 1936 dateline – amidst conflicts like the Italian invasion of Eritrea and the Spanish Civil War – or in 1939, the traditional "start date" of WWII.⁵⁴

As such, there is an element of self-defeatism in attempting to argue the "accuracy" of history which cannot be "accurately" defined to begin with, dealing instead with looser concepts of thematic iconography and cultural phenomena within a historical timeframe. In this context, the phenomena discussed in earlier chapters, whereby chronological relationships and narratives are minimised or disregarded in favour of period-appropriate iconography, gains greater cultural legitimacy in its employment by entertainment media such as video games.

These issues – creative license, technical practicality, interpretation of the available research, and the need to appeal to a broad player audience – taken in isolation or in combination, are why the term "historical accuracy" is often avoided from a developer's perspective, with spokespersons of historical games developers instead favouring more oblique language that enables a degree of artistic flexibility in discussion of their projects. For example, Jason Kingsley, head of Rebellion Developments, the studio responsible for developing and publishing the *Sniper Elite* games, states that one term they use to describe their games is 'historically plausible',⁵⁵ thereby implying that the events depicted within the game are compatible with the established facts of the period, but are not necessarily true in every regard.

Another widely used term in discussion of historical games is the term "historically authentic". On the surface, the difference between this term and that of "historical

⁵³ Richard Overy, *Blood & Ruins: The Great Imperial War, 1931-1945* (New York: Viking Press, 2022).

⁵⁴ Paradox Development Studio, *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

⁵⁵ GameSpot, *Historian & Rebellion CEO Reacts to Historical Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 26 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWWqVFIOcAc> [11:39-11:47].

accuracy” may be dismissed as purely semantic, and indeed one can argue that the terms may be and have been used interchangeably.⁵⁶ Academic scholars have dedicated considerable time and energy – far more than could be concisely explored within this thesis – to differentiating between “historical accuracy” and “historical authenticity” within heritage discussions of the past, including those of historical video games, but these debates are often hard to detect outside of academic perspectives of historical representation; as Eugen Pfister says ‘when players discuss history in games in forums, they usually don't talk about post-structuralist paradigm shifts but about a very concrete question: how historically accurate is the game?’.⁵⁷ However, there is a subtle, yet significant terminological difference between these two terms “accuracy” and “authenticity”, which becomes clearer upon a closer examination of their respective definitions.⁵⁸

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “accuracy” is defined as ‘the state or quality of being accurate’ or ‘the closeness of a measurement, calculation, or specification to the correct value’.⁵⁹ While certain definitions of “authenticity” may be deemed similar to those of “accuracy”, others identify an element of personal judgement that plays a role in its determination, such as the OED’s definition 3b: ‘the quality of truthful correspondence between inner feelings and their outward expression’.⁶⁰ This subjective quality is more clearly demonstrated in the OED’s definitions for “authentic” as an adjective, which can be applied to anything ‘genuine; not feigned or false’ or ‘presenting the characteristics of the original’.⁶¹ Therefore, using these definitions, to describe a historical game as “accurate” implies that every detail within it is correct according to the known historical record, both physical and textual, of the historical period, individuals or events that it depicts; this is usually the context in which “historical accuracy” is employed in popular gaming discourse.⁶²

⁵⁶ For examples, see Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 18; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 29-30; Donald and Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, pp. 15-17.

⁵⁷ Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”.

⁵⁸ Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, pp. 127-144.

⁵⁹ “Accuracy”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1281>.

⁶⁰ “Authenticity”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13325>.

⁶¹ “Authentic”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13314>.

⁶² Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”; Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, pp. 127-144.

Meanwhile, describing a historical game as “authentic” implies a believable experience supported by historical research, yet which allows for sufficient artistic or creative license as to enable certain factual inaccuracies or creative freedoms necessary for the production of an entertaining game, provided that the final product remains truthful to the overall historical image of a period offered by the available source material.⁶³ This subtle difference offers game developers the conceptual leeway needed to accommodate the technical limitations and artistic possibilities of the gaming medium to present a historical game, while also allowing them to insert entertaining gameplay features whose historical evidence is more difficult to demonstrate, such as the inclusion of fantastical or mythological elements under the guise of exploring the culture of a historical period or civilisation.

However, it should also be recognised how complex and unstable the terms “accuracy” and “authenticity” are, especially within popular discourse about history in gaming. As already stated, the terms “accuracy” and “authenticity” are sometimes used interchangeably in gaming discourse, both in common and academic usage, along with other similar terms such as “realism”.⁶⁴ In some cases, the interchangeability between these terms can be perceived in a discussion of similar issues at different scales, with “accuracy” used by players to refer to a game’s overall depiction of history as well as in the micro-sense of precise digital replication of individual artefacts within a game. In others, the interchangeability of these terms has occurred as a result of the complex semantic differences between these concepts, which have not been clearly indicated to the general public.

The *Assassin’s Creed* series offers a prime example of how complex the difference between “accuracy” and “authenticity” is in the popular consciousness surrounding video games. After the 2019 Notre Dame Cathedral fire, it was rumoured that *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* had employed highly accurate and detailed 3D models of the building to depict the famous landmark within the game, and that these would be subsequently used to aid the

⁶³ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 60; Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, pp. 127-144.

⁶⁴ See for examples, Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 18; Donald and Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, pp. 15-17; Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, pp. 127-144.

cathedral's reconstruction.⁶⁵ Despite the prevalence of these rumours in public discourse, which continue to be cited in the context of the *Assassin's Creed* series' attitude to recreating historical worlds,⁶⁶ *Unity's* developers at Ubisoft denied the possibility of utilising their digital models of Notre Dame in the reconstruction efforts due to the architectural changes that had been made in order to facilitate the cathedral's in-game depiction. Some of these changes were made for gameplay reasons, others were needed to overcome the limitations of the game's graphics engine to depict more intricate architectural features, such as wall carvings and stained glass, while others were legal necessities required to navigate the complexities of French copyright law which applied to specific features of the site.⁶⁷ Therefore, despite the visual detail of Notre Dame's depiction within *Unity*, it was not an "accurate" representation, despite the popular assumption to the contrary.

However, the fact that *Unity's* version of Notre Dame was able to generate and sustain this popular belief could be said to indicate its value as an "authentic" depiction, as per the definitions previously described. Moreover, as this example also demonstrates, it is not necessarily in a developer's interests to attempt to create a "historically accurate" video game; while individual elements may be integrated "accurately" or "authentically" into a historical game, the overall product faces too many pressures from a developer's and publisher's perspective to invest too heavily into the historical fidelity of their product. Although Helen Young discusses this manner of 'selective authenticity' as a criticism of commercial historical games, particularly titles such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* which emphasise "historical authenticity" as part of their product marketing and therefore utilise the guise of "authenticity" to camouflage authorial decisions within development, Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson adopt a more pragmatic outlook, recognising that historical video games can never achieve true "accuracy" but that 'selective realism' can enhance the historical "feeling" of a game and contribute to the game experience by offering contextual interest and additional challenge within gameplay mechanisms.⁶⁸ These views accord with

⁶⁵ "Notre-Dame Fire: Assassin's Creed's maker pledges aid", *BBC News Online*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-47963835>.

⁶⁶ Serin, "Following historical error complaints, Assassin's Creed Shadows director promises the trailer's architectural inaccuracies will be ironed out for the RPG's launch".

⁶⁷ Rochefort, "Assassin's Creed Unity can't help rebuild Notre-Dame, and that's OK".

⁶⁸ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39; Traynor and Ferguson, "Shooting for Accuracy", pp. 243-254.

similar perspectives offered by popular commentators of historical games, examples of which shall be explored later in this chapter. Games are entertainment, first and foremost, and so must sometimes sacrifice “historical accuracy” in order to preserve this entertainment aspect of their function, even if this contradicts implicit objectives of historical fidelity.⁶⁹

Financial considerations on the part of a game’s developer or publisher also play a considerable role in determining the level of “historical authenticity” of a historical game. As the development budgets of triple-A games like *Assassin’s Creed* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* continue to rise, so too does the developers’ ability to depict historical worlds with greater “accuracy” within their games due to the additional development resources this higher funding enables. However, this increased funding simultaneously increases the amount of revenue required by a game’s publisher in order to return their initial investment, let alone generate profits from a particular game.⁷⁰ These monetisation practices are generating significant discourse within the gaming industry, as triple-A developers and publishers are being forced to increasingly utilise additional means of generating revenue as game production budgets increase. This, in turn, is provoking negative responses from consumers as games are perceived to fail to justify this increasing monetisation, raising questions about the sustainability of the current triple-A game business model.⁷¹

With regards to historical games, this growing imperative to remain commercially sustainable amidst rising development costs means that game studios cannot necessarily afford to pursue “historically accurate” games which may either be prohibitively expensive to develop, or only appeal to a limited audience and thereby limit the publisher’s ability to recoup development costs.⁷² Instead, many modern triple-A games – most notably the

⁶⁹ de Rochefort, “Assassin’s Creed Unity can’t help rebuild Notre-Dame, and that’s OK”; Gault, “‘Battlefield 1’ Sacrificed Historical Accuracy To Make The Great War Fun’.

⁷⁰ van Roessel and Švelch, “Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization”, pp. 197-216.

⁷¹ See for examples, WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*; Stephen Powell, “Sid Meier warns the games industry about monetisation”, *BBC News*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-60304123>; WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting “100 Hour Games”*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyv9PX8809o>; GameSpot, *Microtransactions are getting out of hand | Spot On*, online video recording, 28 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmxxuE6293g>; IGN, *Console Gaming is Too Damn Expensive, Something Has to Give*, online video recording, 2 May 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p83MTH9DodA>.

⁷² Traynor and Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, pp. 243-254.

Assassin's Creed games – incorporate elements of fantasy or mythology which can be employed to increase the entertainment value of the game experience by enabling heightened spectacle or greater gameplay options, though potentially at the cost of a game experience's historiographical integrity if these features – often incorporated under the guise of in-game examination of historical cultural beliefs – transgress their contextual boundaries and impact upon “historical” gameplay scenarios.⁷³

This integration of fictional and fantastical elements into a historical game experience particularly enables the implementation of in-game microtransactions – a widespread and frequently controversial system of optional gaming content which requires the player to use game-specific “premium currencies” or real-world money to purchase in-game items – which are frequently utilised to sell additional or exclusive content to players.⁷⁴ In a multiplayer context, such as within *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield* or *For Honor*, these microtransactions also build upon the social dimension of gameplay and employ psychological phenomena in order to encourage players to spend additional money within a game, sometimes in contexts which have been criticised as exploitative of players, particularly children.⁷⁵ In various instances, microtransactions have been utilised as a means to introduce mythological, fantasy or science-fiction inspired items and cosmetics, or direct references to other games or franchises, into gameplay within the primary historical setting;

⁷³ For examples, see Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey – The Fate of Atlantis* (2019), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla – Dawn of Ragnarök* (2022), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

⁷⁴ van Roessel and Švelch, “Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization”, pp. 197-216; Martin Ivanov, Helmut Wittenzeller, and Marcin Wardaszko, “Video game monetization mechanisms in triple A (AAA) video games”, in Marcin Wardaszko *et al.* (eds.), *Simulation Gaming Through Times and Disciplines: 50th International Simulation and Gaming Association Conference, ISAGA 2019 Warsaw, Poland, August 26–30, 2019 Revised Selected Papers* (Warsaw: Kozminski University, 2019), pp. 392-394; WhatCulture Gaming, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla's Aggressive Microtransactions Are Ruining The Game*, online video recording, 08 February 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnVKA1JcU>.

⁷⁵ WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*; Matthew E. Perls, “Regulating In-Game Monetization: Implications of Regulation on Games Production”, in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 217-234; “Insert More Coins: The Psychology Behind Microtransactions”, *Touro University Worldwide*, 25 February 2016, <https://www.tuw.edu/psychology/psychology-behind-microtransactions/>; “The Rip-Off Games: How the new business model of online gaming exploits children”, *The Parent Zone*, 29 August 2019 [Accessed online: https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/PZ_The_Rip-off_Games_2019.pdf].

many of the purchasable items in the “Store” menus of *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, for example, fall into these categories.⁷⁶

These inclusions may dilute the immersion of the historical experience of a potentially “historically authentic” game in favour of gameplay and player choice; this latter consideration is frequently emphasised by publishers in response to negative player feedback by commenting that microtransactions are optional features of a game experience, even if, from the perspective of players, they are perceived to have been implemented in ways which are believed to aggressively encourage additional purchases.⁷⁷ Therefore, compromises towards the historical content of a game, either with regards to factual integrity in order to generate revenue or attract a wider, but less scholarly-minded audience, or towards the scale and scope of a “historically accurate” game, must be expected by academics seeking to analyse historical games.

In order to retain the interest of more varied audiences, developers have created a number of strategies to allow players with varying levels of historical interest and desire for “historical accuracy” to cater to their individual interests. In some instances, this variety exists in the form of differing levels of gameplay difficulty; in many entries of the *Sniper Elite* series, the hardest level of gameplay difficulty is titled “Authentic” and forces the player to experience the game without any digital aids, while also including realistic environmental considerations within gameplay mechanics such as bullet trajectory and wind speed, while

⁷⁶ For examples, see Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*.

⁷⁷ For examples, see Perls, “Regulating In-Game Monetization”, pp. 217-234; Elena Petrovskaya, “‘Very sneaky tactics’: we asked gamers about how they feel about monetisation in digital gaming”, *The Conversation*, 23 December 2021, <https://theconversation.com/very-sneaky-tactics-we-asked-gamers-how-they-feel-about-monetisation-in-digital-gaming-173030>; Erin Gibson, Mark D. Griffiths, Filipa Calado, and Andrew Harris, “Videogame player experiences with micro-transactions: An interpretive phenomenological analysis”, *Computers in Human Behaviour*, vol. 145 (2023) [Accessed online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563223001176>]; Damian Bank, “Problematic monetization in mobile games in the context of the human right to economic self-determination”, *Computers in Human Behaviour*, vol. 149 (2023) [Accessed online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563223003096>]; Whatculture Gaming, *Blizzard DEFENDS Game-Breaking Diablo Immortal Microtransactions*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 July 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN--LBizMS0>.

the “Hardcore mode” for *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* was emphasised as offering greater realism within the game’s historical world in addition to increasing gameplay difficulty.⁷⁸

In other instances, developers will utilise the capabilities enabled by modern “live-service” gaming practices to release a given historical game and subsequently develop new content based on feedback from the player community, released either as DLC expansions or as microtransactions.⁷⁹ Whether released as optional expansions or in-game microtransactions, this approach can enable players to “cherry-pick” particular optional gameplay elements or historical features that they wish to either include or exclude from their game experience – thereby granting greater personal agency over the historical perspective offered by the game and making each player’s experience of the history therein more subjective – while also permitting developers or publishers to recoup additional revenue from these subsidiary purchases. *Crusader Kings III* is a clear example of this trend, as the developers, Paradox Interactive, have released numerous additional content expansions since the game’s initial release – including the Viking-themed *Northern Lords* expansion or the *Fate of Iberia* expansion which delves into the specific complexities of medieval Spain – all of which contribute unique historical narrative, aesthetic or gameplay elements to the in-game experience not included in the original release version of the game.⁸⁰

For others, the desire for more “historical accuracy” has prompted the creation of specialised modes within commercially available historical games. Perhaps the most well-known of these specialist modes is the “Discovery Tour” from recent *Assassin’s Creed* games; this feature allows players to explore the game’s historical open world without any combat encounters and interact with objects or NPCs to learn more about the related history of that character, object or subject.⁸¹ The mode also permits a degree of insight into the particular

⁷⁸ See for examples, *Sniper Elite 4*; *Sniper Elite 5*; Warhorse Studios, “This is Hardcore: Adventuring inside a brutal new Bohemia”, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, 15 April 2025, <https://kingdomcomerpg.com/en/news/hardcore-mode>.

⁷⁹ Ivanov, Wittenzeller, and Wardaszko, “Video game monetization mechanisms in triple A (AAA) video games”, pp. 420-424.

⁸⁰ Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III* (2020), PC. Released on Xbox and PlayStation in 2022. Published by Paradox Interactive; Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III – Northern Lords* (2021), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive; Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III – The Fate of Iberia* (2022), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive.

⁸¹ Andrew Webster, “Assassin’s Creed Origins’ new educational mode is a violence-free tour through ancient Egypt”, *The Verge*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/20/17033024/assassins-creed->

game's development, allowing the developers to showcase or acknowledge some of the work made to adapt or interpret historical evidence into the game. First included in 2017's *Assassin's Creed: Origins*,⁸² "Discovery Tour" proved to be such a success with players that Ubisoft has included and iterated upon it with every subsequent new game in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.⁸³ This feature was intended principally as an educational tool and has enjoyed significant acclaim as such.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, other games have catered to gamers' desire for a more, or less, historical experience in active gameplay. For example, *Troy: A Total War Saga*, attempts to portray a euhemeristic version of the legendary Trojan War, acknowledging the more fantastical or mythological elements of the conflict's narrative and interpreting them in a "historically plausible" fashion.⁸⁵ Alongside *Troy*'s release on the Steam PC gaming platform, *Troy*'s developers Creative Assembly also released a major content update entitled "Mythos", which allowed players to choose two new alternate game modes, enabling players to decide whether they wanted to play the game as a more rigidly "Historical" experience – which removed references to Greek mythological influences in the game and restructured gameplay accordingly – or allowed them to play a more fantastical experience with increased emphasis on its mythological aspects, which also included the addition of narrative arcs that allowed players to recruit creatures from Greek mythology such as the Hydra or Cerberus.⁸⁶ Significantly, while the mythological experience was included only as a purchasable expansion for the game, Creative Assembly released the "Historical" mode to all players for free, with the developers expressing a belief that while not all of their players

[origins-discovery-tour-educational-mode-release](#); Kevin Murnane, "Ubisoft Puts People Before Profits With The 'Discovery Tour' for 'Assassin's Creed Origins'", *Forbes*, 23 February 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinmurnane/2018/02/23/ubisoft-puts-people-before-profits-with-the-discovery-tour-for-assassins-creed-origins/>.

⁸² Murnane, "Ubisoft Puts People Before Profits With The 'Discovery Tour' for 'Assassin's Creed Origins'".

⁸³ "Assassin's Creed Discovery Tour", *Assassin's Creed – Ubisoft*, <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/assassins-creed/discovery-tour>; Colin Campbell, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Discovery Tour is an inspiring journey through ancient Greece," *Polygon*, 10 September 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2019/9/10/20859403/assassins-creed-odysseys-discovery-tour-review-ancient-greece-education-game>.

⁸⁴ Murnane, "Ubisoft Puts People Before Profits With The 'Discovery Tour' for 'Assassin's Creed Origins'"; "Discovery Tour Viking Age: can video games teach history?", *BBC News*, 19 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/technology-58967120>.

⁸⁵ Creative Assembly, *Troy: A Total War Saga* (2020), PC. Published by SEGA; Ella McConnell, "Myths, Monsters & Meaning: The Truth Behind the Myth", *Total War*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.totalwar.com/blog/myths-monsters-and-meaning-the-truth-behind-the-myth/>.

⁸⁶ Creative Assembly, *Troy: A Total War Saga – Mythos* (2021), PC. Published by SEGA.

would want the more fantastical experience, a significant proportion of players would express interest in a more “historically authentic” version of the game, and thus designed the “Historical” gameplay mode with this desire in mind.⁸⁷

Perhaps most significantly, the desire for more “historically accurate” experiences within historical games has prompted independent developers to either modify existing experiences and share their “mods” with the gaming community, or to develop their own fully-fledged games with an emphasis upon “historically accurate” game content. This “indie” gaming movement is an especially important consideration in the modern gaming industry, where questions about the economic sustainability of the high-budget triple-A game are being raised.⁸⁸

A number of historical games wherein features and gameplay elements inherent to “mainstream” games are minimised in favour of greater “historical accuracy” have been created in recent years by indie developers with an express intention of creating more “historically authentic” gaming experiences; *Post Scriptum* (2018) – subsequently renamed as *Squad ’44* – and *Hell Let Loose* (2021) are both WWII multiplayer FPS games which have both been created for, and garnered significant commercial success because of, a desire within the wider gaming community for more “realistic” historical gaming experiences by comparison to “mainstream” FPS titles such as *Call of Duty*.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, *Manor Lords*, a combined city-builder and real-time strategy game principally developed by a one-man indie developer, pursues its aims of “historical authenticity” both through its visual representation of its medieval setting – which was progressively refined from its early broad scope to a more focused fifteenth century Germanic setting to provide greater chronological consistency within its architectural and fashion styles⁹⁰ – and also through gameplay as a

⁸⁷ “TROY goes fully historical with free update alongside MYTHOS: A Total War Saga: TROY”, *Total War*, 11 August 2021, <https://www.totalwar.com/blog/troy-historical-mode>.

⁸⁸ See for examples, WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*; WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting “100 Hour Games”*; GameSpot, *Microtransactions are getting out of hand | Spot On*; IGN, *Console Gaming is Too Damn Expensive, Something Has to Give*.

⁸⁹ Offworld Industries, *Squad ’44* [formerly *Post Scriptum*] (2018), PC; Black Matter, Cover 6 Studios, and Expression Games, *Hell Let Loose* (2021), PC. Later released on Xbox and PlayStation. Published by Team17 Digital Ltd.

⁹⁰ Slavic Magic, *Manor Lords* (2023), PC. Published by Hooded Horse; Manor Lords, “Manor Lords - Tester applications open!”, *Manor Lords – Steam*, 9 July 2022, <https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/1363080?emclan=103582791467743290&emgid=3201507077132251086>.

primary feature of the game is its “organic” city-building, thereby abandoning the “grid-based” building mechanics seen in similar games, such as *CivCity: Rome*, in order to reflect more fluid and “historically authentic” building practices.⁹¹ The desire for more “realistic” niche experiences has been a boon for academics seeking “battle simulators” for their research and, although many commercially available historical games are considered to fall short in this regard, improvements in historical games have opened avenues for researchers and students in this field.⁹²

The inverse to the desire for greater “historical accuracy” is, naturally, a similar desire for *less* “historical accuracy”, often as a consequence of the demand for greater entertainment. The aforementioned “Mythos” update for *Troy: A Total War Saga* was principally focused on the introduction of mythological creatures and “divine intervention” mechanics to the core gameplay experience,⁹³ and recent *Assassin’s Creed* games have similarly utilised interpretations of mythology to incorporate more fantastical gameplay elements and mechanics – such as teleportation or invisibility – into the game experience.⁹⁴ Many of the larger triple-A game publishers have enabled – or exploited – this desire for more entertainment over historical authenticity by including cosmetic items inspired by mythology or modern popular culture, often implemented through the form of in-game microtransactions.⁹⁵

Unfortunately, as discussed in previous chapters, ideas and perspectives of “historical accuracy” or “authenticity” have become increasingly embroiled in wider political debates, most notably surrounding the inclusion and representation of marginalised demographics.⁹⁶

⁹¹ *Manor Lords*; Manor Lords, “Manor Lords - Tester applications open!”, FireFly Studios, *CivCity: Rome* (2006), PC. Published by 2K.

⁹² Sabin, *Lost Battles*, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁹³ *Troy: A Total War Saga – Mythos*.

⁹⁴ See for examples, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey – The Fate of Atlantis*; Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla – Dawn of Ragnarök*.

⁹⁵ For examples, see *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*; *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*; EA DICE, *Battlefield V* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts; Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Activision.

⁹⁶ See for examples, Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Donald and Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, p. 16; Manning, “Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games”, pp. 57-58; Jordyn Lukomski, “‘Accuracy’ vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games”, *NYMG*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17807>; Liz Lanier, “‘Total War: Rome II’ Won’t Remove Female Generals Despite Bad Reviews & Backlash”, *Variety*, 25 September 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/total-war-rome-ii-female-generals-1202956389/>.

For instance, following a targeted surge in negative player feedback and game reviews – a phenomenon referred to as “review bombing”⁹⁷ – in response to a 2018 update which incorporated female “generals” for certain culture factions in *Total War: Rome II*, Ella McConnel, a community content editor for *Total War*’s developers, Creative Assembly, replied to critics of the update by stating that ‘*Total War* games are historically authentic, not historically accurate’, acknowledging that ‘there are many aspects of the games that aren’t as they were in history, for a variety of reasons’ and provocatively stating that ‘if having female units upsets you that much you can either mod them out or just not play’.⁹⁸

This incident again highlights the distinction in usage of these terms, with developers favouring the more oblique “authenticity” to accommodate for technical and authorial compromises made during a game’s development, and players the more rigid “accuracy” in deference to a subjectively “realistic” depiction of history, and the distinct authorial perspectives within the understanding of historical games which these terms imply. It also emphasises the difficulties faced by developers in that highly vocal members of the player community will oppose any moves by historical games to reflect a version of history which contradicts their personal understanding or interpretation of events, even if that contradiction is supported by historical research and is, therefore, more “historically accurate” from a historical perspective of games.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ For examples, see Grey Carter, “Metacritic Brings Down The Hammer On ‘Review Bombers’”, *The Escapist Magazine*, 24 September 2011, <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/Metacritic-Brings-Down-The-Hammer-On-Review-Bombers/>; Kirk McKeand, “A brief history of how Steam review bombing damages developers”, *PCGamesN*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.pcgamesn.com/history-of-steam-review-bombing>. Although typically a hostile or malicious act, “review bombing” has also been employed in a supportive context, notably in the case of *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, which received a “positive review bomb” following the 2019 Notre Dame Cathedral fire: Samuel Horti, “Assassin’s Creed Unity gets reverse review bombed following Ubisoft’s Notre Dame support”, *PC Gamer*, 20 April 2019, <https://www.pcgamer.com/assassins-creed-unity-gets-reverse-review-bombed-following-ubisofts-notre-dame-support/>; Owen S. Good, “‘Positive review bomb’ of Assassin’s Creed Unity posed a quandary to Steam”, *Polygon*, 22 May 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/2019/5/22/18636266/assassins-creed-unity-steam-review-bomb-valve>; Emma Kent, “Assassin’s Creed Unity positive review bomb leaves Valve confused”, *Eurogamer*, 22 May 2019, <https://www.eurogamer.net/valve-seems-very-confused-by-positive-review-bombing>.

⁹⁸ Wesley Yin-Poole, “Steam users review bomb *Total War: Rome 2* over female characters”, *Eurogamer*, 25 September 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/total-war-rome-2-review-bombed-on-steam-over-female-characters-creative-assembly-says-its-working-as-intended>; Lanier, “‘Total War: Rome II’ Won’t Remove Female Generals Despite Bad Reviews & Backlash”; Lukomski, “‘Accuracy’ vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games”.

⁹⁹ Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield I* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021), pp. 3-4.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the politicisation of “historical accuracy”, or its alternate terminology, has become a recurring theme of gaming discourse, in parallel with increasing efforts by developers to improve the representation of marginalised demographics within gaming and ongoing debates about games’ attitudes to these issues, to the extent where some view “historical accuracy” as ‘a scapegoat for a lack of diversity in games’.¹⁰⁰ As a result, the use of terms like “historical accuracy” or “authenticity” within popular discourse to discuss the historical perspective(s) offered by a game experience has arguably lost its principal context, and applications of these terms in regards to the historiographical rigour of a game’s presentation of a historical world have been subsumed either by politically motivated debates or by more gameplay-centric ideas of “immersion” or visual fidelity. In order to demonstrate these divergences, it is important to look in detail at instances where “historical accuracy” has been used to discuss historical games in significantly different contexts, thereby clearly highlighting the flexibility with which this rigidly interpreted term is applied.

Perfection in an imperfect world?: Case Studies of “Accurate” Historical Games

‘People expect more realism,’¹⁰¹ notes the developer of *Manor Lords*, words that perfectly summarise the artistic direction that the developers of countless historically set video games, from big-budget triple-A titles to passion project indie games, have embarked upon in recent years and which continues to direct the trajectory of the historical game genre. However, while players and historians revel in the gloriously detail-oriented creations that result from this process, the challenges faced by their developers and publishers increase substantially. Where a technical or creative challenge might prove a minor nuisance to one game, the same issue could prove a major obstacle to a “historically accurate” game if the available solutions threaten to compromise that vaunted statement of quality.

¹⁰⁰ Donald and Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, pp. 15-17; Lukomski, “‘Accuracy’ vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games”; Jordan Gerblich, “Manor Lords dev doesn’t like calling the city-builder “historically accurate” because “nothing truly is” and wants to find “a balance between gameplay and realism”, *GamesRadar+*, 26 April 2024, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/city-builder/manor-lords-dev-doesnt-like-calling-the-city-builder-historically-accurate-because-nothing-truly-is-and-wants-to-find-a-balance-between-gameplay-and-realism/>.

¹⁰¹ Manor Lords, “Manor Lords - Tester applications open!”.

Furthermore, by pursuing this obsessive attention to detail and incorporating it into the very fabric of their titles, developers run the risk of excluding large swathes of the prospective player-base whose interest for such detail is weaker or non-existent. That in turn limits a game's attractiveness to the commercially lucrative "casual" gamer market, who often comprise an unknown majority of any game's sales; ergo, making a historical game *too* focused on "historical accuracy" is likely to hinder its market value. This delicate balancing act, of creating a historically detailed game that remains attractive to the gaming market and an enjoyable gaming experience, is one which every game with a historical setting is required to make, and one which is marked by both successes and failures.

I will now examine how two games, both released in 2018 to broad critical and commercial success, have approached the challenge of creating the most "historically accurate" video game possible. I shall explore some of the unique facets of each game's presentation of history, and some of the ways that the developers of each game attempted to present players with the most realistic historical world possible within the confines of the gaming medium. I will also explore the insights that can be gleaned from each title's reception about how history is understood in the gaming sphere, and the subsequent consequences for engaging with video games for historical study. Ultimately, this discussion demonstrates that the popular conceptualisation of "historical accuracy" in the video game space is fundamentally flawed, and its use as a measure for the quality of a game's depiction of history should be abandoned in favour of more nuanced consideration of an individual game's place within the wider gaming industry and the narrower sub-genre that is historical gaming.

A Hard Day's Knight: Depicting the Past in Kingdom Come: Deliverance

Set in the rolling hills and lush forests of fifteenth century rural Bohemia, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (KCD), by Warhorse Studios,¹⁰² was designed and marketed from its inception to be a game experience that was as "historically authentic" as possible.¹⁰³ This level of "historical authenticity" has received praise from historians and specialist

¹⁰² Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2024. Published by Deep Silver.

¹⁰³ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", p. 28.

commentators; as an example, medieval armour scholar Tobias Capwell praised *KCD*'s depiction of medieval armour, both for its acknowledgement of various armour types used historically and their implementation within the game, as well as particular details featured on historic armours depicted within the game which correctly correlated with the game's historical setting.¹⁰⁴ *KCD* serves as a primary example of Chapman's 'realist simulation style' of historical game, but also of the dangers therein where the implicit claims of this form of historical depiction to "historical accuracy" or "authenticity" and the problematic consequences of politicised interpretations of these terms.¹⁰⁵

The Czech developers' commitment to this philosophy of "historical authenticity" created numerous challenges during the game's creation process, such as disagreements with prospective publishers who wished to introduce more cinematic or fantasy elements that would make it more acceptable to a wider gaming audience.¹⁰⁶ The developers' resistance to these efforts to make *KCD* more "accessible" to player audiences by prospective publishers cost them potential financial support for the game, which was ultimately developed for a reported total of \$36.5 million including marketing costs and crowdfunding sources,¹⁰⁷ a relatively low figure for a modern triple-A game like *KCD*, and which resulted in periods of financial uncertainty within Warhorse Studios while development took place without funding, which ultimately resulted in features planned for inclusion needing to be cut from the final game.¹⁰⁸ *KCD* ultimately achieved sales of more than 8 million units by November 2024, 1 million of which were reportedly sold within the game's first two weeks on sale in 2018.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ See for example, GameSpot, *Historian & Armour Expert Reacts to Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, online video recording, YouTube, 31 January, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szCsSOqjfNE&t=5s> [7:30-9:00].

¹⁰⁵ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 61-66; Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39.

¹⁰⁶ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 20 December 2018 [36:57-37:48]; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary | Gameumentary*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE2goNeshY> [15:27-16:50]; Alex Raisbeck, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance creator says his RPG series only exists because he was 'p****ed' at the lack of historical games", *GamesRadar*, 1 November 2024, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/rpg/kingdom-come-deliverance-creator-says-his-rpg-series-only-exists-because-he-was-p-ed-at-the-lack-of-historical-games/>.

¹⁰⁷ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [39:12-49:06]; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary | Gameumentary* [15:27-19:58]; Alessio Palumbo, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Reportedly Cost 36.5 Million Dollars", *WCCFTech*, 4 March 2018, <https://wccfttech.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-cost-36-m-dollars/>.

¹⁰⁸ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [33:09-33:59 & 49:06-50:54].

¹⁰⁹ J Clement, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance cumulative units sold worldwide 2018-2024", *Statista*, 6 November 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1479095/kingdom-come-deliverance-games-sales-worldwide/>;

However, the developers' firm commitment to developing the most "historically authentic" game achievable ultimately contributed to ensuring the quality of the final game. While some gaming commentators criticised flaws in *KCD*'s performance from a purely "gaming" perspective – noting character animations which felt "outdated" and the absence of common gameplay features such as "auto-save" mechanics – *KCD*'s commitment to an immersive and "historically accurate" depiction of a medieval world was readily acknowledged by the gaming media.¹¹⁰ Academic scholars, such as Miroslav Neumann, have also praised *KCD* for its attitude towards a more "authentic" depiction of medieval material culture, albeit caveated with specific criticisms towards certain material elements within the game's overall construction of medieval Bohemia.¹¹¹

Among the areas of *KCD*'s design which were contested between the developers' vision for "historical accuracy" and publishers' requests for player accessibility was "world traversal" – the player's ability to move around the game world, which includes so-called "fast travel" mechanics that quickly transport the player avatar across vast portions of the game map, usually via a loading screen – and the frequency with which the player encounters enemy NPCs and other gameplay interactions while travelling through the game world. In interviews, several of *KCD*'s developers openly critiqued triple-A RPG games for over-populating their game worlds with gameplay activities within a condensed digital space; this, they claimed, complicates world traversal and de-sensitises the player to the significance of these encounters by providing 'instant gratification'.¹¹² In response, the *KCD*

Sherif Saed, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance has sold more than 1 million copies", *VG24/7*, 22 February 2018, <https://www.vg247.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-has-sold-1-million-copies>.

¹¹⁰ See for examples, Lane, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – impressively detailed medieval life sim"; Robert Purchase, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – history is a double-edged sword", *Eurogamer*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review>; Leana Hafer, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review", *IGN*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/02/17/kingdom-come-deliverance-review>; Andy Kelly, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review", *PC Gamer*, 14 February 2018, <https://www.pcgamer.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-review/>; Luke Plunkett, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance: The Kotaku Review", *Kotaku*, 14 March 2018, <https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-the-kotaku-review-1823606430>; Edwin Evans-Thirwell, "Wot I Think: Kingdom Come – Deliverance", *Rock Paper Shotgun*, 13 February 2018, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-review>.

¹¹¹ Miroslav Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, vol. 11:2 (2019), pp. 69-76.

¹¹² Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | *Gameumentary* [34:14-34:53].

development team deliberately limited the number and frequency of so-called “random encounters” and combat during world traversal.¹¹³

Furthermore, unlike most games, *KCD*’s interpretation of “fast-travel” does not immediately transport the player to a designated point; instead, the player’s avatar is automatically transported along the game’s road network, which takes additional time and allows the possibility of random encounters, which the player is given the opportunity to either investigate or attempt to avoid.¹¹⁴ Prospective publishers reportedly claimed this would leave the game world feeling ‘boring’,¹¹⁵ however this approach can make these encounters more impactful and narratively engaging, as the player is unsure whether they will encounter a wandering trader, duelling challenges or bandit ambushes, and also gives these instances a sense of realism in their unpredictability.¹¹⁶ Moreover, by tying *KCD*’s “fast-travel” mechanic to the game’s road network instead of instantly teleporting across the map via a loading screen, the game retains a degree of player immersion in the historical world for the sake of an in-game mechanic, thereby maintaining the overall feeling of “historical authenticity”.

The developers also acknowledged that traversal of their game world was impacted by technological considerations: *KCD* utilises real-world locations for its game, however the chosen graphics engine that Warhorse Studios utilised to generate *KCD*’s historical world could only support a maximum area size equivalent to sixteen square kilometres.¹¹⁷ Consequently, a degree of selective editing was required to ensure that key geographical locations could be accommodated within the game’s condensed digital environment, which was primarily achieved by removing “empty” space from rural areas between the significant urban locations required for the game’s story.¹¹⁸ In this instance, the technological capabilities of the game forced a compromise to the “historical accuracy” of the game, yet retained sufficient real-world influences to remain “authentic”.

¹¹³ Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | *Gameumentary* [34:53-35:08].

¹¹⁴ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹¹⁵ Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | *Gameumentary* [35:08-35:24].

¹¹⁶ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹¹⁷ Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, p. 71; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [22:08]; Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Digital Artbook*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Digital Artbook*, p. 6.

Another crucial area of *KCD*'s game design where "historical accuracy" was given emphasis, but ultimately required alterations to accommodate the game's technical limitations, was *KCD*'s combat system. Combat plays a significant role within *KCD*, both as a gameplay mechanic and as a feature of the game's historical narrative since combat is a significant element of how the medieval period is understood in modern popular culture.¹¹⁹ However, the combat seen in most medieval action games, such as *Assassin's Creed*, is designed to be cinematic and visually engaging, thereby heightening the player's excitement but compromising its practical technique with exaggerated and dramatic movements.¹²⁰ In order to ensure the authenticity of *KCD*'s combat, Warhorse Studios consulted with historical weapons experts, HEMA practitioners and historical re-enactors to amass evidence of the techniques prevalent during the period of the game's setting, which were then compiled to create the combat styles seen within the game.¹²¹ These same historical combat specialists collaborated with Warhorse Studios to undertake motion-capture performances of these historical combat styles to ensure that these techniques were modelled realistically for the game.¹²² Neumann, in his assessment of *KCD*'s depiction of a medieval world, highlighted *KCD*'s combat system as a particular point of praise which elevated *KCD* above other Role-Playing Games as an "authentic" depiction of medieval life, describing *KCD*'s combat system as 'the closest way of experiencing real fight (except VR)'.¹²³

Some critics found the experience of *KCD*'s authentic combat style difficult to play,¹²⁴ particularly given that *KCD* is experienced from a First-Person technical perspective which narrows the player's field of vision and limits their ability to see the combat being performed;¹²⁵ this was particularly noted as a criticism of gameplay in combat encounters against multiple enemies, which occur regularly within the game as part of larger narrative

¹¹⁹ Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", pp. 72-73; *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 05 February 2019 [3:02].

¹²⁰ *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [3:08-3:46].

¹²¹ Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", pp. 72-73; *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [47:34-49:33]; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [1:04:14-1:05:18].

¹²² *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [16:26-17:00].

¹²³ Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", p. 76.

¹²⁴ See for examples, Purchase, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – history is a double-edged sword"; Plunkett, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance: The Kotaku Review"; Evans-Thirwell, "Wot I Think: Kingdom Come – Deliverance".

¹²⁵ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance; Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [44:42-46:02].

set-pieces, but which were deemed particularly difficult by some game critics as a result of *KCD*'s combat mechanics and technical visual framing.¹²⁶ However, *KCD*'s developers noted an awareness that these concerns could arise, yet decided to keep the authentic combat performances as they believed that the game both looked and felt more realistic with their inclusion,¹²⁷ a belief supported by praise from historical weaponry specialists not involved with the game's production.¹²⁸ Neumann, for example, praised the game's materially accurate implementation of medieval combat – highlighting, for example, the inclusion of different types of sword and their relative effectiveness against unarmoured opponents compared to those in armour by contrast to weapons such as axes or maces – and the game's overall attitude to recreating medieval combat; Neumann did identify some criticisms, however, such as the under-representation of polearm weapons such as spears, and the absence of crossbows and gunpowder weapons which Neumann suggests is anachronistic for the period in which *KCD* is set.¹²⁹



Figure 3.1: Gameplay still-image depicting combat in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018).

¹²⁶ See for examples, Purchase, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – history is a double-edged sword"; Plunkett, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance: The Kotaku Review".

¹²⁷ *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [15:40-16:25].

¹²⁸ For example, see GameSpot, *Historian & Armour Expert Reacts to Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹²⁹ Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", pp. 69-76.

Additionally, the developers actively worked with expert historical combat practitioners, some of whom were active gamers themselves, to overcome the challenges inherent to translating a physical activity like sword-fighting to a virtual medium; this required the deliberate creation of some technical inaccuracies in the historical combat techniques depicted within *KCD* to accommodate for the decreased visual perception present in the technical perspective offered by the game, such as exaggerating movements within the authentic combat techniques in order to “telegraph” an opponent’s attacks, thereby giving players greater opportunity to anticipate and respond to opponent’s attacks. These efforts were intended to make the combat more accessible to players and to compensate for the absence of “micromovements” within the digital reproduction that are essential to “read” an opponent in real sword-fighting.¹³⁰ This mirrors techniques implemented by other games to compensate for the altered perception and reaction environment of a video game by deliberately exaggerating movements within combat to ensure their on-screen visibility to the player and provide opportunity to respond within gameplay; for example, *Ghost of Tsushima*, in which the player can challenge enemies to ‘Standoff’ sword duels and predict when an enemy is preparing to attack by watching the movement of their feet.¹³¹

In some instances, the technical limitations of the gaming medium were actively utilised to heighten player immersion within *KCD*’s historical world. For example, under certain circumstances, *KCD* deliberately accentuates the restrictions of the game’s First-Person technical perspective when in combat; upon entering combat encounters after equipping the player avatar with a helmet featuring a visor, the game applies an animated filter to the player’s screen, which narrows the player’s field of vision by “greying out” part of the screen to match the eye-holes of the equipped visor (Figure 3.1), thereby authentically imitating the restricted visual perspective offered by wearing the equivalent helmet in real life.¹³² This effect, in concert with the game’s overall approach to creating medieval combat, emphasises the ultimate goal of *KCD*’s development ethos, wherein the

¹³⁰ *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [44:42-47:32].

¹³¹ Sucker Punch Productions, *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020), PlayStation. Released on PC in 2022. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment; Jeff Ramos, “Ghost of Tsushima standoff guide”, *Polygon*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/ghost-of-tsushima-guide/21311871/standoff-how-to-win-tips-advice-timing>.

¹³² *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; GameSpot, *Historian & Armour Expert Reacts to Kingdom Come: Deliverance* [13:35-14:38].

actions and *feeling* of the historical experience were recreated as authentically as possible within the technical confines of the gaming medium.¹³³

In terms of historiography, *KCD* is also a noteworthy contributor to video gaming's depiction of history for its decisions to showcase historical perspectives that are rarely seen or understood in popular media. *KCD*'s setting of early-fifteenth century Bohemia, for instance, is an intriguing one, in part because it was chosen to highlight a medieval conflict which is comparatively unknown outside of local historical circles;¹³⁴ Western histories whose narratives we might deem "relevant" to the study of this historical setting offer few details, focusing instead upon the larger political events affecting the wider Holy Roman Empire at this time.¹³⁵ This is arguably a reflection within video games of a phenomenon identified by Xavier Rubillo-Campillo within the publication of table-top wargames, wherein the traditional dominance of Anglo-American authorial perspectives has resulted in a dominance of associated historical perspectives, which has prompted a diversification of in-game historical perspectives with the growth of European-based game authorship.¹³⁶

The events of *KCD*'s narrative, and the broader historical backdrop of the game itself, revolve around a dynastic struggle between King Wenceslas IV, ruler of Bohemia and the Holy Roman Empire, and his half-brother Sigismund, King of Hungary. Wenceslas' idle and inept attitude to ruling angered a cadre of German and Bohemian nobles, who forced Wenceslas' deposition. Sigismund was invited to replace his relative on the Bohemian throne and began a campaign of devastation throughout Bohemia ostensibly in the name of "restoring order" to his brother's domain.¹³⁷ As highlighted within the game, this was simply propaganda, as he also targeted a number of nobles and settlements loyal to Wenceslas' rule, including the silver-mining town of Skalitz ruled by one of the King's supporters, Sir

¹³³ *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [17:00-18:27, 44:42-46:28].

¹³⁴ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [24:41-25:22].

¹³⁵ See for examples, Joachim Leuschner, *Germany in the late Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 183-185; F.R. H. Du Boulay, *Germany in the Later Middle Ages* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), pp. 42-47.

¹³⁶ Xavier Rubillo-Campillo, "A digital humanities approach to European presence in historical wargames", in Jan Heinemann, Riccardo Masini, and Frédéric Serval (eds.), *Euro War Games* (Bénodet, Fr.: Nuts! Publishing, 2024), pp. 71-90.

¹³⁷ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", p. 70; Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 30-31; Leuschner, *Germany in the late Middle Ages*, pp. 183-185; Du Boulay, *Germany in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 45-46.

Radzig Kobyla;¹³⁸ the sacking of the historical settlement of Skalitz forms the initiating event of *KCD*'s narrative,¹³⁹ and Sir Radzig features prominently throughout the course of the game, to the extent that he may almost be considered a secondary protagonist.¹⁴⁰ However, while this political conflict may be the subject of local historical discourse, its details are comparatively unknown outside of Eastern Europe.¹⁴¹

By contrast, Western European scholarship for the Late Middle Ages, in particular that of France and the UK, is principally focused on the period of intermittent conflicts collectively dubbed the Hundred Years War and its impact on wider Western European society. For instance, in the same year that *KCD* is set – 1403 – a Welsh rebellion led by Owain Glyndŵr was beginning to take on an international dimension, as France and other Continental enemies of England's King Henry IV established diplomatic agreements to support the Welsh uprising, even as Owain's allies amongst rebels led by Percy Hotspur suffered defeat at the Battle of Shrewsbury.¹⁴² Furthermore, Western European scholarship for this entire period at the beginning of the fifteenth century is overshadowed by the dramatic politico-military event that was the Battle of Agincourt in 1415.¹⁴³ The cultural legacy of this particular battle, especially in Britain courtesy of William Shakespeare and the iconic St Crispin's Day monologue in his *Henry V*, means that it is all but impossible to discuss this particular period in modern, Western European scholarship without reference to Agincourt in some fashion (as this author has demonstrated).¹⁴⁴ This also means that events taking place further afield with little to no impact upon that conflict – such as the dynastic struggle highlighted in *KCD* – are largely ignored by the Western historical narrative due to their separation from the build-up to that momentous day in 1415; while some English or

¹³⁸ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; "Silver Skaltiz", *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Silver_Skalitz; "Stříbrná Skalice", *Cesty a Památky*, <https://www.cestyapamatky.cz/kolinsko/stribrna-skalice>.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; "Radzig Kobyla", *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Radzig_Kobyla.

¹⁴¹ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [24:41-25:22].

¹⁴² See for examples, S. B. Chrimes, C. D. Ross and R. A. Griffiths (eds.), *Fifteenth-century England, 1399-1509: Studies in politics and society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), pp. 146-149; John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England 1370-1529* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1983), p. 175; A. J. Pollard, *Late Medieval England 1399-1509* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2000), pp. 40-41 & p. 45.

¹⁴³ See for examples, Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England*, pp. 177-178; Pollard, *Late Medieval England*, pp. 75-78.

¹⁴⁴ See for examples, Chrimes, Ross and Griffiths, *Fifteenth-century England*; Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England*; Pollard, *Late Medieval England 1399-1509*.

French histories make reference to the Kings Wenceslas and Sigismund, they are only mentioned sporadically, as tangents or peripherals to events taking place between England and France.

However, arguably thanks to *KCD*, international attention has been brought to this particular narrative of the medieval world, and new media projects exploring this period of Eastern European history have appeared since *KCD*'s release. Among these is the English-language Czech film *Medieval* (2022),¹⁴⁵ depicting the early life of Jan Žižka – a famous medieval Czech warrior and national hero comparable to Scottish hero William Wallace – and which overlaps in many historiographical aspects with *KCD*; in a Czech media interview, *Medieval*'s director, Petr Ják, admitted to a mutual discourse with *KCD*'s lead developer, Daniel Vávra, on their respective projects, and that video game adaptations of *Medieval* were in production.¹⁴⁶

Perhaps one of *KCD*'s most noteworthy contributions to medieval video game historiography and variations on perspectives of the medieval world is that it positions the player as a member of the peasant classes. The protagonist of *KCD*, Henry of Skalitz, begins the game as a blacksmith's son. As the in-game narrative progresses, and the player is introduced to further elements of gameplay, such as learning horsemanship, literacy and the arts of warfare, Henry slowly begins to rise through society as a member of Sir Radzig's household retinue, until ultimately finishing the game as a member of the knightly class (aided by a third-act narrative revelation that Henry is Sir Radzig's illegitimate son, thereby elevating him into the "knightly class" of the lower aristocracy).¹⁴⁷ Young describes this narrative as 'fundamentally a modern neoliberal storyline', for 'it is only through a governmental process of reshaping his peasant self into a fighter who is useful and has value

¹⁴⁵ *Medieval*, directed by Petr Ják (2022, Bywater Productions); Matt Lewis, 'The Czech Braveheart: Jan Žižka's Film Portrayal in 'Medieval'', *HistoryHit*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.historyhit.com/culture/the-czech-braveheart/>.

¹⁴⁶ Lukas Kral, "Petr Ják is completing the most expensive film in domestic cinematography. 'I was interested in the birth of a fighter,' he says of Jan Žižka. He compares it to Braveheart with a Czech story", *Kinobox*, 21 April 2022, <https://www.kinobox.cz/clanky/rozhovory/21931-petr-jakl-o-janu-zizkovi>. The reference to discussion between Ják and Vávra about their overlapping projects is perhaps reflective of Jan Žižka's inclusion as a prominent supporting character within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* (2025), the sequel to *KCD*. For further information about Jan Žižka, see for example Victor Verney, *Warrior of God: Jan Zizka and the Hussite Revolution* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2009).

¹⁴⁷ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

in the feudal political system and war-torn context, underpinned by the mechanics of the game', by which the player may be killed and respawn if they make incorrect decisions which Young argues mirrors the protection from consequence of real-world privilege, 'that Henry and the player are rewarded'.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, this social depiction of the medieval world from the perspective of a peasant protagonist stands in notable contrast to innumerable other games, which regularly position the player from the outset as either part of the nobility or as an established member of the warrior classes, which were frequently considered one and the same by medieval scholars, and are thus written as such in modern texts.¹⁴⁹ Within the gaming medium, Role-Playing games such as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and *Expeditions: Viking*, and strategy titles like the *Total War* and *Crusader Kings* series offer ready examples of the tendency to present the player with the warrior or noble's perspective in a medieval context, often with significant cross-over between the two roles.¹⁵⁰

There are many ways one can explain gaming's predisposition towards portraying the upper classes of medieval society; for instance, gaming as a power fantasy and the enabling of player agency, which function more appropriately in the narrative context of the medieval nobility. With regards to historiography, perhaps the simplest explanation is the predilection of historical sources, which video games are obliged to consult for their research, to present events from the perspective of rulers rather than the ruled. Medieval chronicles offer some of the clearest evidence of this practice, by focusing almost exclusively on the reigns of kings and their interactions with their peers amidst the senior aristocracy, with only the occasional passing reference to the anonymous masses over whom these elites hold sway.¹⁵¹

Records of events like battles do not help this impression of lower-class intangibility, as medieval chroniclers are notoriously unreliable when it comes to indicating the size of a

¹⁴⁸ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", p. 31.

¹⁴⁹ For examples, see Phillipe Contamine (trans. by Michael Jones), *War in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 31-32 & p. 238; Michael Jones, *The Black Prince* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd., 2017), pp. 52 & 83-84; Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England* (London: Hutchinson, 2021), p. 209 & 223.

¹⁵⁰ *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*; Logic Artists, *Expeditions: Viking* (2017), PC; Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings* (2004-2020), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive *et al.*

¹⁵¹ For example, see Dorothy Whitelock (trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961).

given military force;¹⁵² Marc Morris demonstrates this problem admirably when describing the difficulty of estimating William the Conqueror's invasion force in his history of the Norman Conquest of England, as none of the contemporary chronicles can agree on a figure for the number of his troops or ships, and all of their estimates are wildly inflated beyond any scope of practical recruitment for the period, instead intending to reflect a sense of awe-inspiring scale rather than striving for quantitative precision.¹⁵³ This intangibility within the historical record further helps to de-humanise and anonymise the lower orders of medieval society, giving them a sense of inconsequence which does not provide a strong narrative basis for a video game. By contrast, members of the aristocracy are regularly identified by contemporary sources, and descriptions of their physical appearance or activities within the historiography impart a greater sense of tangibility upon which to base representations of these characters within video games.

A feeling of inconsequence is further emphasised in the case of medieval women, as shown by one of *KCD*'s additional content expansions, the *A Woman's Lot* DLC (2019). Part of this additional content allows the player to experience the game's opening prologue from the perspective of Theresa, a prominent female supporting character and optional romantic interest of the main game's protagonist, Henry.¹⁵⁴ Medieval European women were often culturally expected to play a subordinate, and frequently domestic, role in contemporary society;¹⁵⁵ this is demonstrated within *KCD*'s primary game experience as Theresa can be found performing domestic chores at the home of a relative following the events of the game's prologue, and aiding her in household tasks such as gathering laundry contributes to her romantic narrative.¹⁵⁶ Theresa's story in the *A Woman's Lot* DLC gives further indications of the role that lower-class medieval women were expected to fulfil through the conduct of household chores as part of gameplay objectives, as well as the suggestion of an arranged

¹⁵² See for examples, Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, pp. 150-153; Sophie Thérèse Ambler, *The Song of Simon de Montfort: England's First Revolutionary and the Death of Chivalry* (London: Picador, 2019), p. 274; Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress. Queen. Warrior.* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 135.

¹⁵³ Morris, *The Norman Conquest*, pp. 150-153.

¹⁵⁴ Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – A Woman's Lot* (2019), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Deep Silver; "Theresa", *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, <https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Theresa>.

¹⁵⁵ For examples see Hanley, *Matilda*, p.2, pp. 143-147 & pp. 153-156; Susan Mosher Stuard, "Introduction", in Susan Mosher Stuard (ed.), *Women in Medieval Society* (Philadelphia, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press Inc., 1976), pp. 1-11; Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200-1500* (Second Edition: London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁵⁶ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

marriage within the DLC's story. However, the fact that the DLC's narrative is intrinsically tied to an atypical event (the sacking of the protagonist's home settlement by an invading army) and to a male-centric primary narrative and gameplay experience (the main game) means that much of this DLC inherently requires the female protagonist character to act outside of her traditionally-expected gender role for both narrative and gameplay purposes as she fights for survival in a hostile situation (Figure 3.2).¹⁵⁷



Figure 3.2: Official gameplay still-image from *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – A Woman's Lot* (Warhorse Studios, 2018).

Of particular note in this regard is the gameplay ability for the player character to engage in combat.¹⁵⁸ The narrative circumstances of *A Woman's Lot* provide a plausible and justifiable context for a “historically authentic” female protagonist like Theresa to engage in this gameplay activity, yet despite this, *KCD* makes it clear that Theresa is unsuited to combat. During the *A Woman's Lot* narrative, Theresa's gameplay skills and abilities are pre-set and cannot be “learned” or improved,¹⁵⁹ in stark contrast to the main protagonist, Henry, who is able to begin improving his combat ability during *KCD*'s opening prologue.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – A Woman's Lot*.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – A Woman's Lot*; “A Woman's Lot”, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/A_Woman%27s_Lot.

¹⁶⁰ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

Moreover, Theresa cannot equip armour, which, alongside her restricted gameplay abilities, places her character at a distinct disadvantage in combat against even lone enemies.¹⁶¹

When this experience is contrasted to Theresa's largely passive, domestic presence in the main game, it becomes clear how great the dichotomy between the two experiences becomes. Furthermore, when this playable female experience within *KCD* is contrasted with playable female characters in other historical games – for instance, the female protagonists of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, who experience few or no narrative or gameplay restrictions on the basis of gender, but who operate in more fictionalised or fantastical narrative circumstances¹⁶² – we begin to see how restrictive the confines of “historical accuracy” become when applied to a female perspective within a medieval setting. As a result, the *A Woman's Lot* DLC highlights many of the logical and narrative restrictions that historical video games must attempt to circumvent in order to present gamers with a playable female perspective within a “historically accurate” experience, hence their comparative rarity within the diaspora of historical gaming experiences.

While *KCD's* “accurate” recreation of a medieval world was widely praised by gaming critics for the sense of realism and immersion which it engendered, it was also cited up by some commentators as a source of criticism. In some cases, these criticisms against *KCD's* authenticity cited anachronistic exclusions of historical artefacts or phenomena which should have been represented within *KCD's* historical setting, such as the absence of crossbows from the game.¹⁶³ However many of the “historical inaccuracies” noted in wider discussion of *KCD's* depiction of medieval history related to the game's depiction – or rather lack thereof – of marginalised demographic groups, most frequently non-White ethnic and cultural groups.¹⁶⁴ While these criticisms of a historical game's attitudes towards

¹⁶¹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – A Woman's Lot*; “A Woman's Lot”, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*.

¹⁶² *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*; *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.

¹⁶³ Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance”, pp. 72-73.

¹⁶⁴ For examples, see Evans-Thirwell, “Wot I Think: Kingdom Come – Deliverance”; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Martin Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at Kingdom Come: Deliverance and its historical claim”, in Fernández Sirvent, Rafael y Gutiérrez Lloret, Rosa Ana (eds.), *Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea, Universidad de Alicante 20-22 de septiembre de 2018* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2019), pp. 380-394; Reid McCarter, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy”, *Unwinnable*, 2 March 2018, <https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/>.

demographic representation within the framing of “historical accuracy” were been mentioned in the previous chapter, they are worth re-examining within the specific context of discussions of “historical accuracy” within *KCD* as a detailed example of how the concept of “historical accuracy” is employed within politicised discussions of historical games.

Amongst the critics who cited “inaccuracies” with *KCD*’s depiction of marginalised groups in medieval Europe was *Eurogamer* reviewer Robert Purchase, who highlighted *KCD*’s lack of racial diversity beyond the game’s Cuman enemy NPCs as a major criticism of the title, and suggested that the game’s location along the legendary Silk Road offered enough ‘readily available doubt’ to call the exclusion of non-White characters into question.¹⁶⁵ Leaving aside any considerations regarding the factual accuracy of Purchase’s remarks, it is important to note that accusations of ingrained racial stereotypes within *KCD* continued to spread post-release. Multiple writers, both academic and informal, have critiqued *KCD*’s decision to exclude people of colour with the exception of the game’s Cuman enemies, and the consequent implications for *KCD*’s assertions of “historical accuracy”;¹⁶⁶ Neumann, for instance, noted that the Cuman enemies within *KCD* were purposefully Othered as ‘an almost barbaric danger’ through their use of nomadic-styled equipment and Hungarian language which the player character (nor the player, through the use of subtitles) can understand,¹⁶⁷ while another writer even suggested this creative decision to position the only non-White ethnic community represented within the game was a concerning attempt to rewrite Czech history to promote modern ‘anti-immigrant, anti-European Union’ political ideology.¹⁶⁸

Certain moments within *KCD* indicate that the developers were conscious of this purposeful Othering of the game’s only non-White community. For instance, in the side-quest “Masquerade”, the protagonist Henry is recruited to aid a scheme of highway robbery by helping his co-conspirators disguise themselves as Cumans, thereby exploiting their reputation as foreign reavers to avoid detection; however, after obtaining the required equipment from Cuman enemies, the protagonist is informed that the resulting garb does

¹⁶⁵ Purchase, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – history is a double-edged sword”.

¹⁶⁶ For examples, see Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and its historical claim”, pp. 380-394; McCarter, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy”.

¹⁶⁷ Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 72-73.

¹⁶⁸ McCarter, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy”.

not look like a “real” Cuman. The player is then dispatched with a second round of objectives, in which they are tasked with questioning supposed “witnesses” to the Cumans and their activities, who regale the player with outlandish stories that exaggerate the Cumans’ barbarism, and then acquiring additional ingredients to adorn the Cuman equipment and make it look more “authentic” to the game’s characters.¹⁶⁹ The entire quest is framed in a manner which clearly acknowledges its ridiculousness, with the protagonist repeatedly commenting in dialogue that the reality of the Cumans has been twisted, yet its underlying theme conforms to the wider trend observed by Neumann and Young amongst others of the Cumans being overtly Othered on a cultural level by the history presented within *KCD*.¹⁷⁰

Purchase also highlighted the personal politics of *KCD*’s lead developer, Daniel Vávra, as a reason to challenge the game’s attitudes towards race and gender representation.¹⁷¹ As a supporter of the GamerGate movement, Vávra voiced his criticism of gaming journalism’s aggressive tendencies towards “progressive” socio-political attitudes; he contested that his opposition was not with the socio-political attitudes themselves, but with the belligerent manner they are promoted by the wider gaming community.¹⁷² Vávra claimed that the aggressive promotion of “progressive” attitudes threatened to stifle the gaming industry through the toxicity of the discourse these debates engender, thereby forcing developers to present progressive experiences in an attempt to avoid being subjected to public criticism.¹⁷³ As evidence of these toxic behaviours, Vávra reported that he and *KCD*’s development team had received hate-mail accusing them of racism due of the lack of non-White characters three years *before* *KCD*’s official release, thereby highlighting the readiness with which some

¹⁶⁹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*; “Masquerade”, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, <https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Masquerade>.

¹⁷⁰ Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 72-73; Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and its historical claim”, pp. 380-394; McCarter, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy”.

¹⁷¹ Purchase, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* review – history is a double-edged sword”. See also Nathan Grayson, “*Kingdom Come* Owes Its Popularity To ‘Realism’ And Conservative Politics”, *Kotaku*, 2 March 2018, <https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208>.

¹⁷² Stephen Totilo, “My E3 Meeting With A Pro-GamerGate Developer”, *Kotaku*, 2 July 2015, <https://kotaku.com/my-e3-meeting-with-a-pro-gamergate-developer-1715511964>.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

members of the gaming community formed and acted upon pre-emptive conclusions about the game.¹⁷⁴

As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the arguments proposed by GamerGate supporters have been subsequently disproven in later academic analysis.¹⁷⁵ It is notable, however, that during interviews for an online documentary into *KCD*'s development – in which the wider development team at Warhorse Studios presented their collective narrative of how the game was created – Vávra personally refused to name the historian that Warhorse Studios consulted during their research, openly stating that this action was in order to prevent the historian being dragged into the 'toxic, stupid discussions' that surround "political correctness" in gaming and the specific influence of Vávra's personal politics upon *KCD*, indicating his clear personal belief in the hostility of gaming communities towards commentators who do not conform to "progressive" views.¹⁷⁶ As noted by Young, Vávra and *KCD* received some praise from select outlets for 'resisting' these forces within 'modern identity politics', while other writers who praised *KCD* for its overall attitude to "authenticity" remarked that this attitude was, in their view, implemented selectively in order to support the ideological position of the game's lead creator.¹⁷⁷ Young argues that Warhorse's emphasis on historical authenticity, which she notes the studio admitted was sometimes implemented selectively such as in the technical compromises made to depictions of sword-fighting techniques, framed the studio as 'a faithful transmitter of past reality rather than creative agents making specific and deliberate choices about the digital representation of an imagined past'.¹⁷⁸

While both Vávra and his colleagues at Warhorse Studios have publicly acknowledged his limitations as a critical commentator, stating that Vávra can be 'too quick with words' and that they 'do not necessarily agree with all his views', they also defended

¹⁷⁴ Totilo, "My E3 Meeting with a Pro-GamerGate Developer"; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | Gameumentary [46:24-48:04].

¹⁷⁵ Andrea Braithwaite, "It's About Ethics in Games Journalism?: Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity", *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2: 4 (2016) [Accessed via Sage Journals: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305116672484>]; Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate", *Games & Culture*, vol. 12: 8 (2016) [Accessed via Sage Journals: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555412016640408>].

¹⁷⁶ Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | Gameumentary [50:06-50:57].

¹⁷⁷ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", p. 28.

¹⁷⁸ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", p. 31.

their assertions that the game was thoroughly researched before release and that the gaming community can be over-zealous in their persecution of developers.¹⁷⁹ Likewise, Martin Klíma, the co-founder of Warhorse Studios alongside Vávra, stated that while he had ‘known Daniel [Vávra] for many years and [does] not necessarily agree with all his views’, Vávra’s ‘strong views on freedom... or listening to certain music [does] not make someone a Nazi’.¹⁸⁰

Nor is the experience of *KCD*’s developers an isolated case. Developers and contributing performers from numerous video games, and even external gaming commentators, have been subjected to toxic behaviour, abuse, harassment, and even death threats in recent years as a consequence of major and minor objections to their work within video games by aggressively vocal members of the global gaming community.¹⁸¹ Likewise, other developers have expressed concerns that ‘the vocal audiences still lack empathy for the staff at a company’, and that ‘there’s an idea “that one person, like the director, is responsible for every popular aspect of a game. Video games have many directors... a game is its team, not its auteur”’.¹⁸² Nevertheless, Vávra’s personal political views were identified by multiple outlets as a point of contention, or at least an area of concern, for the “authenticity” of *KCD*’s version of history.

In defence against the accusations of “historical inaccuracy” towards *KCD*, Vávra not only referred to the impracticality of trying to explore every conceivable nuance of the

¹⁷⁹ Dictator, “Separating Games from their Creators – Kingdom Come: Deliverance”, *Resetera*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.resetera.com/threads/separating-games-from-their-creators-kingdom-come-deliverance.17250/>; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | *Gameumentary* [44:21-54:48].

¹⁸⁰ “Separating Games from their Creators – Kingdom Come: Deliverance”.

¹⁸¹ See for examples, Stephen Totilo, “Another Day, Another Death Threat From Gamers to The People Who Make Video Games”, *Kotaku*, 23 April 2012, <https://kotaku.com/another-day-another-death-threat-from-gamers-to-the-pe-5904367>; Leo Kelion, “Feminist video-games talk cancelled after massacre threat”, *BBC News*, 15 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-29626809>; “Online culture war prompts mass shooting threat”, *CBS News*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gamergate-online-culture-war-over-women-in-video-games-prompts-death-threats/>; Paul Tassi, “The Last of Us Part 2’s Laura Bailey Getting Death Threats Over Abbey Role”, *Forbes*, 5 July 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2020/07/05/the-last-us-part-2s-laura-bailey-getting-death-threats-over-abby-role/>; Wesley Yin-Poole, “Palworld Dev Says They Have Received Death Threats Amid Pokémon ‘Rip-Off’ Claims”, *IGN*, 22 January 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/palworld-devs-says-they-have-received-death-threats-amid-pokemon-rip-off-claims>; Alex Stedman, “Ubisoft CEO Condemns ‘Hateful Acts’ Against Developers Following AC Shadows Backlash”, *IGN*, 27 June 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/ubisoft-ceo-condemns-hateful-acts-against-developers-following-ac-shadows-backlash>.

¹⁸² Austin Wood, “‘We cough up a chunk of our soul’: 32 game devs, from Doom’s John Romero to Helldivers 2 and Palworld leads, explain what people get wrong about games”, *GamesRadar+*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/game-devs-explain-what-people-get-wrong-about-games/>.

medieval world – thus answering critics who pointed to the anachronistic exclusion of certain material elements, such as crossbows, from the game¹⁸³ – but also stood firmly by the assertion that the game was researched as thoroughly as possible during development, with regular consultation with historians and specialists.¹⁸⁴ One of those historians, Professor Petr Čornej of Charles University, Prague, was interviewed for *KCD*'s development documentary, and actively addressed the problematic issue of applying modern social attitudes to portrayals of history.¹⁸⁵ Martin Klíma also defended *KCD*'s "authentic" portrayal of history, stating that 'after more than four years of intensive research, it can be stated that there is no proof that there were no dark-skinned people in Bohemia and vice versa. There are many things that we cannot prove', but that *KCD* is 'not a game about medieval Europe, but [tells] a story that is located in a very small part of medieval Europe. [*KCD*] does not focus on the "big story", not on wars, kings or popes, but on the story of ordinary people.'¹⁸⁶ Therefore, while *KCD* may be critiqued on specific historiographical grounds, its developers maintain that the depth of research conducted and contributing to *KCD*'s development justifiably presents an "authentic" version of the overall historical world which they were intending to depict.

Young argues that comments such as these, and those quoted above by Vávra and Klíma, perpetuate 'fantasies of racial and cultural purity' which exclude People of Colour from understandings of medieval history by dismissing arguments which contradict or disrupt these White-dominant fantasies under the guise of historical authenticity and issues of research or political corruption of the argument.¹⁸⁷ This interpretation bears particular significance in the context of the politicisation of "historical accuracy" or "authenticity" as an argument deployed against diversity and inclusion within video games, and tallies notably with Quiroga's concept of "White mythic spaces" within historical pop-culture.¹⁸⁸

Conversely, while highlighting the exclusion of peoples of colour on the grounds of "historical authenticity" as a criticism of *KCD*, Young also defended the game's developers by

¹⁸³ Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", pp. 69-76.

¹⁸⁴ Totilo, "My E3 Meeting With A Pro-GamerGate Developer"; "Separating Games from their Creators – Kingdom Come: Deliverance".

¹⁸⁵ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [25:52-27:04].

¹⁸⁶ "Separating Games from their Creators – Kingdom Come: Deliverance".

¹⁸⁷ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", p. 28.

¹⁸⁸ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 4.

observing that no degree of evidence would have been sufficient to defend the *inclusion* of people of colour in their depiction of medieval history, as audience expectation, which developers are frequently required to acknowledge, casts medieval Europe as an ethnically White landscape (to the extent that medieval Europe arguably qualifies under Quiroga's definition, explored in the previous chapter, as a "White mythic space").¹⁸⁹ Multiple incidents have been highlighted within this thesis which illustrate that a popular understanding of an ethnically homogenous historical scenario as an "authentic" image of that history may result in opposition within popular discourse to the inclusion of demographic diversity in a historical video game, even in cases where that diversity is supported as "historically accurate" by contemporary sources.¹⁹⁰ Young's comments emphasise the unfortunate Catch-22 scenario that plagues the presentation of politically controversial issues, such as demographic representation, within historical narratives in the context of a video game, and which can be subjectively argued either for or against a game's depiction of a historical setting under the dubious guise of "historical accuracy" and its synonyms.

Furthermore, a new perspective of some of the criticisms towards *KCD*'s historical depiction has been provided following the announcement and release of a sequel game to *KCD*.¹⁹¹ In April 2024, Warhorse Studios publicly announced *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, a narrative sequel to the first game, which was commercially released in February 2025. In the announcement trailer, several historical features absent from *KCD* could be clearly seen in both cinematics and gameplay, such as crossbows and early gunpowder weapons, simultaneously acknowledging the criticism of these artefacts' absence from the original game and reflecting the greater development resources available for the sequel title.¹⁹² This

¹⁸⁹ Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39; Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*, p. 4.

¹⁹⁰ See for examples, Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39; Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*; Stedman, "Ubisoft CEO Condemns 'Hateful Acts' Against Developers Following AC Shadows Backlash"; Yin-Poole, "Steam users review bomb Total War: Rome 2 over female characters"; Lukomski, "'Accuracy' vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games"; Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed boss discusses 'devastating' impact of Shadows' diversity and inclusivity backlash", *Eurogamer*, 2 November 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-boss-discusses-devastating-impact-of-shadows-diversity-and-inclusivity-backlash>.

¹⁹¹ Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* (2025), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Deep Silver.

¹⁹² Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II Official Announce Trailer*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMZFM6JC47Q>.

latter point was openly addressed by Daniel Vávra, who stated in the sequel's announcement video that the new game would fulfil the creative vision of the original game, but which Warhorse Studios were previously unable to achieve because of a shortage of personnel and finances.¹⁹³

Similarly, in an online interview with gaming journalism website *IGN* regarding the new game, a spokesperson for Warhorse Studios addressed the controversy regarding “historical accuracy” in the original *KCD* game, in which only criticisms of *KCD*'s lack of demographic representation were discussed, stating that the sequel would be partially set in a ‘relatively cosmopolitan city’ and that ‘in a place like this, people can expect a wide range of ethnicities and different characters that [*KCD*'s protagonist] Henry will meet on his journey’.¹⁹⁴ While this does not translate into widespread representation of non-White ethnic figures, it does include more varied and positive representation: the most overt representation of this can be seen in the character of Musa of Mali, an African Muslim scholar, healer and courtier who is initially encountered by the player within the encampment of King Sigismund's army and appears within several key narrative quests.¹⁹⁵ This authorial perspective not only indicates efforts made to acknowledge and address the controversy which surrounded the original game for its representation (or lack thereof) of non-White ethnicities, it also retroactively argues in defence of the historical depiction within the earlier title, which members of Warhorse Studios have repeatedly emphasised takes place in a relatively rural setting where more ethnically diverse characters would have been rarer.¹⁹⁶

An additional strand of responsive authorship can be evidenced within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* via sequences which endeavour to humanise Cuman characters within

¹⁹³ Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II Official Game Reveal*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R48DEEjyS5k>.

¹⁹⁴ Kat Bailey, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance II Interview: New Setting Will Feature ‘Wide Range Of Ethnicities And Different Characters’”, *IGN*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/warhorse-studios-kingdom-come-deliverance-ii-interview>; Rick Lane, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 isn’t just bigger, it’s more diverse, with Warhorse adding a ‘wide range of ethnicities and different characters’”, *PC Gamer*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/rpg/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-isnt-just-bigger-its-more-diverse-with-warhorse-adding-a-wide-range-of-ethnicities-and-different-characters/>.

¹⁹⁵ “Musa of Mali”, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Musa_of_Mali; “Musa of Mali | Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Wiki”, *Fextralife*, <https://kingdomcomedeliverance2.wiki.fextralife.com/Musa+of+Mali>.

¹⁹⁶ “Separating Games from their Creators – Kingdom Come: Deliverance”.

the sequel, offering overt responses to popular and academic criticisms of the original *KCD* for portraying this ethnic group exclusively as antagonists (even if their visual depiction continues the manner of ‘Turkic’, ‘almost barbaric’ depiction noted in criticisms of the first game as a means of clear, visual identification for this socio-ethnic group).¹⁹⁷ For example, within the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* side-mission “Invaders”, the player protagonist Henry is tasked with ensuring that a group of Cumans cease frequenting a local tavern as their presence is scaring away other customers. While it is possible to complete the quest through combat, the primary objective path sees Henry converse with the Cumans, gaining an insight into their culture and their reasons for coming to Bohemia while also explaining the source of Henry’s own hostility towards Cumans to them, resulting – if successful – in a mutual understanding that neither side is inherently bad, but that the circumstances of the Cumans’ wartime activities have created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and antagonism.¹⁹⁸ Through this side-quest, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* not only contributes to an underlying theme of its own game narrative – that war can force good people to do bad things – but also retroactively defends its more antagonistic portrayal of Cumans in the original game, reminding the player audience of the circumstances of the protagonist’s introduction to the Cumans (through traumatic circumstances which implicitly inform his understanding of these people) prior to his opportunity to acquire a more nuanced understanding through events within the sequel game.

It should also be noted that in January 2025, shortly before the *KCD* sequel’s release, a wave of critical and accusatory forum posts by gamers accused Warhorse Studios of “selling out” and “going woke” due to the reported inclusion of a same-sex kiss within an in-game cinematic present within *KCD*’s sequel, as well as the inclusion of Black African characters like Musa of Mali who may be encountered within the sequel game;¹⁹⁹ in the case of Musa of Mali, this Black African character was criticised by some players not only on racial grounds as a ‘diversity hire of a character’ but also cultural and historical bases, as some

¹⁹⁷ For examples, see McCarter, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy”; Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance”, pp. 69-76; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39

¹⁹⁸ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*.

¹⁹⁹ Dominik Bošnjak, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 Creative Director Issues Statement on Latest Controversy”, *GameRant*, 19 January 2025, <https://gamerant.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-lgbtq-saudi-arabia-controversy-response/>.

forum users argued that Musa's in-game remarks on the advances of Islamic Africa were both factually incorrect and patronising to players, actively insulting and contradicting other players who attempted to counter their claims.²⁰⁰ As noted by Luke Dale, a voice artist and motion-capture performer for both *KCD* and its sequel, 'with the first game there was a backlash from a more left-wing mentality and then there's been something of a backlash this time around from the right-wing mentality'.²⁰¹ The contrasting incidents of hostile player reactions between *KCD* and its sequel, both of which cited "historical accuracy" as justification for their opposition to the game's depiction of contested issues, further emphasises the significance of Young's comments that audience expectations of how a historical event should be portrayed within the gaming medium impacts upon conceptualisations of "historical accuracy", and that any misalignment of these public understandings with historical records will impact upon players' willingness to legitimise the depiction of history within a historical game like *KCD*.²⁰²

KCD is a game which clearly has ambitious intentions with regards to the depiction of history within the gaming medium, but whose execution of those ambitions is debatable depending on the interpretation of the individual interacting with the game. From an authorial perspective, it represents a concerted attempt to create a more "historically accurate" product than other historical video games given the *KCD* developers' emphasis upon "authenticity" even within the game's mechanics, even refusing certain compromises which would sacrifice "historical accuracy" for the sake of entertainment value. From a narrative perspective, it offers interesting historiographical variations on the medieval period by comparison to other notable historical media, emphasising a more lower-class historical perspective of the medieval world from a region often overlooked by entertainment media depictions of the era.

However, the emphasis within the game's production and marketing upon "historical accuracy" or "authenticity" is also arguably the game's greatest weakness, as it exposes the game and its creators to the subjectivity of the political discourse surrounding these terms.

²⁰⁰ See for example, daraptor, "Musa of Mali", *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II - Steam Community Forum*, 9 February 2025, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1771300/discussions/0/601895828709226399/>.

²⁰¹ Tom Richardson, "Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic", *BBC News*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgxp0jl15lo>.

²⁰² Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39.

The most notable instances of this vulnerability may be viewed in relation to the game's representation of marginalised demographics and the personal politics of its lead developer, even within discussions of "historical accuracy" which highlight less controversial historiographical errors. Consequently, any arguments engaging with discussion of historical content within *KCD* remain entangled within the politicised application of "historical accuracy" and its synonyms to modern debates of racial and demographic representation within video games, which overshadows the popular perception of any deeper consequences or innovations for an "authentic" depiction of a historical world within a video game which *KCD* may represent. The creation of a sequel experience in the form of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* offers additional perspectives on the history within *KCD*, as certain authorial perspectives within the sequel either challenge or reinforce those within the former title, with the popular authorial debate regarding "historical accuracy" and demographic diversity once again at the forefront of discussion. Therefore, a wider examination of these two games in comparison to each other may illustrate deeper insights into this franchise's attitudes to "historical authenticity", as well as those of its developers who were identified as a point of potential concern in the former game's depiction of history.

The Good, the Bad, and the Unnecessary?: "Historical Accuracy" in Red Dead Redemption

2

The second "historically accurate" game that shall be examined herein is *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)*,²⁰³ a technical sequel and narrative forerunner to the highly praised Western action-RPG *Red Dead Redemption* (2010).²⁰⁴ Developed and published by Rockstar Games and released in 2018, the same year as *KCD*, *RDR2* is set in a fictional version of the American "Wild West" and recounts the story of the downfall of the Van der Linde Gang, a fictional group of outlaws to whom the protagonists of both *Red Dead Redemption* games belong, thereby linking with the events of the first game's narrative while also presenting its

²⁰³ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on PC and Google Stadia in 2019.

²⁰⁴ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2023 and PC in 2024.

own story.²⁰⁵ Whereas *KCD* was produced and marketed on a relatively modest budget (by triple-A gaming standards) of \$36.5 million in total,²⁰⁶ estimates by industry analysts have suggested a figure of approximately \$540 million in total for *RDR2*'s development and marketing costs, not only putting *RDR2* firmly within the triple-A gaming category but also placing it amongst the most expensive games ever created.²⁰⁷ This investment was met with a high degree of critical and commercial success. Initial reviews at the time of *RDR2*'s release were highly positive,²⁰⁸ and more than 17 million copies were sold in the game's first few weeks on sale;²⁰⁹ as of September 2022, *RDR2* had sold more than 46 million units worldwide.²¹⁰

RDR2 has had an equally sizable impact on how the public perceives and understands the depiction of history in the video game medium. Since its release, *RDR2* has been called a 'landmark game' and, of particular note, a 'new high-water mark for lifelike video game worlds' in reference to the detail given to *RDR2*'s modelling of in-game artefacts and historical environments.²¹¹ The belief that *RDR2* has created a new yardstick for realism and immersion in video games is echoed across the gaming community, and much of this praise rests on *RDR2*'s foundation in 'obsessive detail'.²¹² However, there is an underlying perception within gaming communities that this immersive realism inherently reflects the

²⁰⁵ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; John Wills and Esther Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), pp. 3-4.

²⁰⁶ Palumbo, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Reportedly Cost 36.5 Million Dollars".

²⁰⁷ Dean Takahashi, "Red Dead Redemption 2 could hit 20 million in sales – and turn a profit – by December", *VentureBeat*, 31 October 2018, <https://venturebeat.com/business/red-dead-redemption-2-could-hit-20-million-in-sales-and-turn-a-profit-by-december/>; Kyle Gratton, "Red Dead Redemption 2 Cost Roughly \$540 Million To Make", *ScreenRant*, 21 August 2021, <https://screenrant.com/red-dead-redemption-2-cost-rockstar-development/>.

²⁰⁸ See for examples, Keza MacDonald, "Red Dead Redemption 2 review – gripping western is a near miracle", *The Guardian*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/25/red-dead-redemption-2-review-western-playstation-xbox-rockstar>; Kirk Hamilton, "Red Dead Redemption 2: The Kotaku Review", *Kotaku*, 25 October 2018, <https://kotaku.com/red-dead-redemption-2-the-kotaku-review-1829984369>; Dave Their, "'Red Dead Redemption 2' Review: A Long, Hard, Lonesome Road", *Forbes*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/games/2018/10/25/red-dead-redemption-2-review-a-long-hard-lonesome-road/>.

²⁰⁹ Samit Sarkar, "Red Dead Redemption 2 tops 17 million copies shipped", *Polygon*, 7 November 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/11/7/18073314/red-dead-redemption-2-sales-17-million-units>.

²¹⁰ Brendan Sinclair, "Take-Two losses deeper than forecast", *GamesIndustry.biz*, 7 November 2022, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/take-two-losses-deeper-than-forecast>.

²¹¹ MacDonald, "Red Dead Redemption 2 review – gripping western is a near miracle".

²¹² MacDonald, "Red Dead Redemption 2 review – gripping western is a near miracle"; John Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?", *The Conversation*, 12 November 2018, <https://theconversation.com/red-dead-redemption-2-can-a-video-game-be-too-realistic-106404>.

popular concept of “historical accuracy”.²¹³ For instance, in December 2025, the gaming news outlet *PC Gamer* reported that a YouTuber and *RDR2* player had privately undertaken an extensive survey of the population of *RDR2*’s fictional town of Valentine to compare the game’s demographic make-up to data from the United States 1907 census and assess the “historical accuracy” of the game’s population composition; the resulting survey reported that although the game over-represented certain population statistics, such as unemployment, none of the demographics assessed by the survey were ‘so far off that the illusion [of authenticity] ever breaks, even when scrutinised at this level’.²¹⁴

Significantly, this perception of “historical accuracy” due to immersive detail within *RDR2* immediately begins to fragment upon closer analysis of the game, beyond the literal on-screen depiction of Western realia, which reveals deeply rooted influences from popular culture of the Western genre as well as the triple-A gaming sphere. The recent academic text *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence in the Video Game West* (2023) draws together a number of academic essays to highlight the position of *RDR2* as a transitional, sometimes contradictory experience between traditional and revised historical perspectives of the American West, which ‘panders to the idolization of the violent gunslinger but also hints at the tragedy and complexity of the frontier’.²¹⁵ The popular authorial perspective of “historical accuracy” within *RDR2* has been actively challenged by those involved in *RDR2*’s production; Dan Houser, one of the lead developers of *RDR2* and a co-founder of Rockstar Games, stated that *RDR2* ‘may be a work of historical fiction, but it’s not a work of history’.²¹⁶ However, the duality between established and progressive perspectives of the American West has become a widespread pattern within Rockstar’s games, as noted by

²¹³ Iain Donald and Andrew Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, *Media Education Journal*, vol. 66 (2020), pp. 15-23. See for examples, Real Pixels, “How Historically Accurate is Red Dead Redemption 2?”; John Vanderhoef and Matthew Thomas Payne, “Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 22:3 (2022). [Accessed online: http://gamestudies.org/2203/articles/vanderhoef_payne].

²¹⁴ Justin Wagner, “A Red Dead Redemption 2 fan conducted an in-game census to test Rockstar’s historical accuracy and found it wasn’t half bad: ‘It’s videogame-ified in a lot of ways, but not as much you might guess’”, *PC Gamer*, 11 December 2025, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/adventure/a-red-dead-redemption-2-fan-conducted-an-in-game-census-to-test-rockstars-historical-accuracy-and-found-it-wasnt-half-bad-its-videogame-ified-in-a-lot-of-ways-but-not-as-much-you-might-guess/>.

²¹⁵ Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 6-8.

²¹⁶ Sam White, “Red Dead Redemption 2: The inside story of the most lifelike video game ever made”, *GQ Magazine*, 24 October 2018, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/red-dead-redemption-2-interview>.

Esther Wright, for although '[Rockstar's] games espouse a preoccupation with contrasting the "real" America and its history with the falsehoods that have become popularly remembered', these same games have also 'had a hand in perpetuating a number of falsehoods' which they have outwardly attempted to challenge.²¹⁷

Although set in a fictionalised version of America – reflected primarily through altered names, such as renaming the Winchester rifle, an iconic staple of the Western genre, as the "Lancaster Repeater" within the game²¹⁸ – *RDR2* nevertheless strives to make every conceivable detail of its game environment as detailed and realistic as possible. The end result is a game world that has been hailed for its beauty, evoking the imagery of landscape artists like Frederick Remington and Albert Bierstadt.²¹⁹ Everywhere the player looks, the game world has been designed to feel as lifelike as possible, with enormous effort undertaken to model key assets and background features alike with care and precision which reflect historical reality.²²⁰ So detailed is *RDR2*'s recreation of its historical world that academic researchers have identified a greater ability to recognise animal species and their behaviours amongst gamers who had played *RDR2* than people who had not.²²¹ Although some commentators have linked this popular fascination with the micro-detail of *RDR2*'s game world to a widespread phenomenon in modern gaming of emphasising the fine visual details in graphically-advanced titles²²² – one of *RDR2*'s reviewers colourfully described this graphical obsession as 'detail porn'²²³ – the level of detail on display in *RDR2*'s creation is unquestionably rich and contributes to the "realistic" feel of the historical game world, a phenomenon which Iain Donald and Andrew Reid have described as 'material accuracy'.²²⁴

²¹⁷ Esther Wright, "'What's Famous' and 'What's True': Women's Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*", in Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 128-145.

²¹⁸ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; GameSpot, *Firearms Expert Reacts to Red Dead Redemption 2's Guns*, online video recording, YouTube, 6 February 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PB50Li6czys>.

²¹⁹ John Wills, "Sublime Reflection and Mundane Realism in Rockstar's Historic West", in Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 183-199; Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?"

²²⁰ See for examples, GameSpot, *Wild West Expert Reacts To Red Dead Redemption 2*, online video recording, YouTube, 25 September 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_BL8xnYags; GameSpot, *Wild West Expert Reacts To More Of Red Dead Redemption 2*, online video recording, YouTube, 20 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRhxQp0tdCM>.

²²¹ "Red Dead Redemption research: 'Gamers learn about nature'", *BBC News*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-57805418>.

²²² Hamilton, "Red Dead Redemption 2: The *Kotaku* Review"; Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?"

²²³ Hamilton, "Red Dead Redemption 2: The *Kotaku* Review".

²²⁴ Donald and Reid, "The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*", p. 16.

Take, as an example, the efforts made to model the horses within *RDR2*. Horses are, naturally, a key feature of any Wild West media. As such, the presence and use of horses forms a strong, if sometimes subtle, element of *RDR2*'s gameplay; the player is required to feed and care for their horse, and is given the ability to customise their horse's saddle, mane and tail, and even their name in order to facilitate a sense of personal investment.²²⁵ Furthermore, the killing of a horse throughout the game, whether deliberate or accidental, earns the player a penalty within the game's morality mechanics, while the death of the player protagonist's own horse at the close of the main narrative is purposefully emphasised as an emotional beat amidst the chaos of the story's conclusion.²²⁶ In terms of physical appearance, Rockstar reportedly took more than three thousand images of various horse breeds to ensure that their digital counterparts looked and moved realistically within the game.²²⁷



Figure 3.3: Official gameplay still-image from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018).

However, this was not the extent of Rockstar's attention to detail when it came to modelling their in-game steeds. At the time of the game's release, social media was flooded with comments and discussion focusing on *RDR2*'s horses as gamers noticed that their steed's genitalia would change size depending on the temperature of the surrounding in-

²²⁵ *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?"

game environment.²²⁸ This detail is not only incredibly specific, but it also carries no practical purpose or consequences for gameplay, and so immediately raises questions about the reason for its inclusion. The same can be said for animating background activities, such as a cliff-top sword duel between one of the protagonist's allies and an enemy NPC during an early game mission, which takes place in the middle of a fierce gun battle and can only be seen clearly if the player risks ignoring their attackers to focus on this distant and half-hidden event.²²⁹

Ultimately, like many details within the game, the inclusion of these small, background details is purely in pursuit of creating the most detailed and immersive version of the "Wild West" possible. This degree of detail was only made possible because of additional work by the developers, which was in turn facilitated by the scale of financial investment on Rockstar's behalf as a publisher. As already mentioned, *RDR2*'s budget has been variously estimated between \$370 million and \$540 million, a level of investment only made possible thanks to the commercial success of Rockstar's other principle franchise, *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*), and in particular the online "live service" platform *Grand Theft Auto Online* (2013), which was released in accompaniment of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013); by 2017, four years after the online title's release, *GTA Online* was estimated to have generated \$1.09 billion solely in profits, a figure which has only continue to grow with sustained revenue in the years since.²³⁰

Yet the popular fascination with the minute details enabled by this high financial investment in *RDR2* has come to dominate the perception of the game in the public consciousness such that these details have become synonymous with the title, and potentially established a level of expectation for graphical quality and realism – which is

²²⁸ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?"; Vanderhoef and Payne, "Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in *Red Dead Redemption 2*"; WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Times Video Game Realism Went Too Far*, online video recording, YouTube, 2 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2lyW5FJIs> [10:08-11:22].

²²⁹ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Brother Foller, *RDR2 – Charles's legendary Sword fight at the top of a mountain that You Might have Missed*, online video recording, YouTube, 13 June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hePEhLq56I>.

²³⁰ Derek Strickland, "GTA Online earned \$1.09 billion, says analyst firm", *TweakTown*, 22 July 2017, <https://www.tweaktown.com/news/58516/gta-online-earned-1-09-billion-analyst-firm/index.html>; Derek Strickland, "GTA V made half a billion dollars in 2019, was #3 best earning game", *TweakTown*, 4 January 2020, <https://www.tweaktown.com/news/69666/gta-made-half-billion-dollars-2019-3-best-earning-game/index.html>.

sometimes used synonymously with “historical accuracy” in popular discourse – in the representation of its in-game historical ephemera which is unattainable for most game developers; a *Eurogamer* analysis of *RDR2*’s technical presentation summarised it as ‘an exceptional achievement, and a one-of-a-kind title’.²³¹ The reviewer comment that *RDR2* represents a ‘high-water mark’ for gamic depictions of history, while clearly intended as praise, also carries with it an undertone that the degree of fidelity within *RDR2* is in the extreme range of what video games can achieve within a digital recreation,²³² and may therefore be interpreted in some regards as atypical of what the majority of games are able, and possibly even should attempt, to depict.

RDR2’s attention to detail, however, is not merely restricted to the depiction of physical objects. Throughout the game, the player has the opportunity to purchase newspapers from vendors in the major towns of the game world, which recount prominent events from the game’s narrative and tangential incidents throughout the game world from the historical perspective of “establishment” figures or organisations.²³³ This not only serves as a form of environmental and historical story-telling, enhancing the game world and the core narrative through player exploration as the player must optionally seek out and acquire these newspapers, it offers players the opportunity to understand how events and characters that the player has engaged with would have been presented to the public in late-nineteenth century America.

In particular, these newspaper entries highlight the disparity between modern social values – as relayed by the actions and dialogue of the player avatar, Arthur Morgan – and those of the historical period in which the game is set. At various points throughout the game, particularly in *RDR2*’s sixth and final chapter, the player can observe the abuses inflicted upon Native American communities by members of the “establishment”, such as prominent industrialists and the military. Within the game’s newspapers, these actions are presented as praiseworthy efforts engineered to “civilise” the Native Americans or punish them for their “barbaric” ways, which reflects how they were interpreted by broader

²³¹ John Linneman, “Red Dead Redemption 2 analysis: a once-in-a-generation technological achievement”, *Eurogamer*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/digitalfoundry-2018-red-dead-redemption-2-tech-analysis>.

²³² MacDonald, “Red Dead Redemption 2 review – gripping western is a near miracle”.

²³³ *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

American society in the era of the game's setting.²³⁴ This is a significant historiographical point, thereby emphasising game's commitment to the presentation of history which can be uncomfortable for modern audiences to acknowledge. Unfortunately, as with the details mentioned previously, these newspapers are an optional feature of the game which can be actively ignored by the player if they so choose, which therefore limits their historiographical impact.

From an authorial perspective, there are also indications that *RDR2* is not as "historically accurate" as has sometimes been suggested by popular commentators. The guns of *RDR2*, for instance, form a significant element of gameplay and the game's overall presentation of the "Wild West", and commentators have praised the level of precision given to modelling the game's various firearms and animating their operation, thereby contributing to the feeling of playing in an immersive digital world.²³⁵ However, their utilisation within the game also overtly draws upon popular Western mythology. A notable instance of these elements comes within a series of optional side-missions entitled "The Noblest Of Men, And A Woman", in which the player protagonist helps the struggling author of a book about famous gunslingers by meeting and photographing his subjects; in many cases, these meetings with the gunslingers results in the player being challenged to quick-draw duels,²³⁶ thereby drawing upon the classic "Wild West" cliché embodied by the gunslinger protagonists of countless Western films, including the likes of Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" in Sergio Leone's "Dollars" trilogy of spaghetti-Westerns (1964-1966) and Doc Holliday as played by Val Kilmer in *Tombstone* (1994) amongst other exemplars of this Western character trope.²³⁷

²³⁴ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Hilary Jane Locke and Thomas Ashley Mackay, "You Are A True Progressive: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics", *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20:1 (2021), pp. 174-193; Esther Wright, "Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption*, and narratives of 'Progress'", *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 16: 3 (2021), pp. 5-13.

²³⁵ For example, see GameSpot, *Firearms Expert Reacts To Red Dead Redemption 2's Guns*.

²³⁶ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Matt Gibbs, "'The Noblest Of Men, And A Woman' / Gunslinger Guide", *RDR2.org*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.rdr2.org/guides/the-noblest-of-men-and-a-woman-stranger-mission-guide/>.

²³⁷ Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 9-14; *A Fistful of Dollars*, directed by Sergio Leone (1964, Unidis, Constantin Film & Izaro Films) [DVD]; *For a Few Dollars More*, directed by Sergio Leone (1965, PEA & United Artists) [DVD]; *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly*, directed by Sergio Leone (1966, Produzioni Europee Associati) [DVD]; *Tombstone*, directed by George P. Cosmastos (1993, Buena Vista Pictures Distribution & Cinergi Productions) [DVD].

Likewise, from a technical perspective, *RDR2*'s guns bear close resemblance to countless digital firearms portrayed across various game genres. The mechanics of gun-combat within *RDR2* rely upon systems known as “hit-scanning”, which was pioneered in early First-Person Shooter games like *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993) and is one of the most common types of gun-play mechanics across the pantheon of video game genres. In layman's terms, “hit-scanning” generates a narrow beam along the player's line-of-sight (often originating from their avatar's head, rather than their weapon) which determines where the player's weapon is pointed. When the player presses the relevant control or key to generate the input which “fires” their weapon, this “hit-scan” beam interacts with the game's level-geometry and target hit-boxes, triggering near-instantaneous algorithms which activate the necessary audio-visual effects to indicate the gunshot and, more importantly, determine whether the player's action results in a “hit” and, if so, calculate how much damage this inflicts to the target. With regards to gameplay, “hit-scanning” enables games to incorporate gun-combat in an accessible fashion, providing a common, though unrealistic gameplay template which is easy for the player to learn and utilise, thereby promoting gameplay which is quick and simple to access by new or inexperienced players, and onto which the developers can iterate between games by programming effects to imitate more lifelike ballistic behaviour.²³⁸

By comparison, games which attempt to depict gun-combat more “accurately” from a technical perspective frequently utilise more immersive – and more realistic – “physics-based” ballistic mechanics, which spawn new in-game objects with each “bullet” fired by the player, each of which can have its own unique values and properties assigned to it by the game and which can be affected by the “physical” environment within the digital game world. This environmental impact can force the player to account for simulated “physical” effects, such as gravity and wind, upon their shots, thereby replicating considerations which can affect firearm projectiles in real life. In order to ensure that these in-game systems interact smoothly, games which use “physics-based” gun mechanics typically require greater computer processing power, and the unpredictability of these mechanics within gameplay requires greater effort on the player's behalf to acquire proficiency; together, this has

²³⁸ GameSpot, *How do Bullets Work in Games? – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 14 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaCqPHmHTXE> [3:13-5:42].

historically meant that “physics-based” gun mechanics have been predominantly used more selectively by games, appearing with greater frequency in titles wherein more realistic simulations of ballistics and gun-combat formed core elements of gameplay, such as in the *Sniper Elite* series. Although improvements in computer processing power have enabled these “physics-based” mechanics to become more widespread in recent years, they are still an essential requirement of more “accurate” shooter experiences in gaming.²³⁹ Thus, *RDR2*’s preference for more accessible but less realistic “hit-scan” gun-combat mechanics is a telling indication of its less “historically accurate” and more “entertainment focused” design.

This aspect of *RDR2* goes largely unrecognised by most players, demonstrating both the average gamer’s ignorance of how games function on a mechanical level and how “historical accuracy” is applied with varying degrees of exactness and understanding within a video game context, even in relation to a single game. Instead, player attention within *RDR2* has largely focused on the inescapable visual elements of *RDR2*’s design, such as its landscapes and physical animations, and lifelike details designed to make the game’s digital world feel realistically immersive, such as NPCs consuming meals in real-time or the aforementioned horse genitals.²⁴⁰

Although the graphical detail of *RDR2*’s game world is undeniable, this manner of game development does not automatically equate to “historical accuracy”. As Donald and Reid and Sören Schoppmeier have all explored at length, although many features of *RDR2*’s world – from the central characters of the Van der Linde Gang, locales such as the city of San Denis, and narrative events such as train robberies which the player must participate in – draw strongly from real historical precedents to grant them “authenticity” or ‘material accuracy’, these features are all subtly influenced by prior Western media and manipulated for gameplay benefit which dilute any strict “historical accuracy” which they may claim.²⁴¹

²³⁹ “How do Bullets Work in Games? – Loadout” [5:43-10:47].

²⁴⁰ For example, see WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Times Video Game Realism Went Too Far*, [10:08-11:22]; WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Seriously Immersive Video Game Details You Missed*, online video recording, YouTube, 2 December 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAF_wqh8o8U [10:26-11:34].

²⁴¹ Sören Schoppmeier, “The Gameworld, the Interface, and the Genre: *Red Dead Redemption* and the Western in the Digital Age”, in Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 27-44; Donald and Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, pp. 15-23.

Similarly, although *RDR2* exhibits period-correct historical research and parallels with historical phenomena, “historical accuracy” is not a primary characteristic of the game’s pseudo-historical world despite suggestions to this effect by some gaming commentators.²⁴² This understanding is actively contradicted by developer statements describing *RDR2* as ‘a work of historical fiction, but it’s not a work of history’,²⁴³ and thus actively overlooks the undeniably a-historical influences that impacted the game’s creation, such as the need to retain accessible gameplay mechanics for its broad audience, or the game’s reliance on expected clichés of the Western genre to engineer an entertaining experience but which reinforces popular ideas of what “the Wild West” was like.²⁴⁴ With regards to the concept of “historical accuracy”, this reliance on a-historical influences and cultural cliché can be seen as a major weakness, and further evidence that “historical accuracy” as a concept within gaming requires a significant re-evaluation with regards to the cultural currency it enjoys within the popular gaming consciousness.

To further demonstrate *RDR2*’s limitations as a purely historical experience, despite its remarkable aesthetic detail, it is important to understand the types of a-historical influences that shaped its creation. The greatest of these is unquestionably *RDR2*’s media forebears. Gaming as an industry is inherently linked to broader constructions of popular culture and, as such, many historical games feature references, both subtle and overt, to the media historiography of the periods they depict. *RDR2* is no different, and features numerous references and parallels to entries in the Western media genre.²⁴⁵ *RDR2* features no less than 3 train robberies within its primary narrative, an act which traces its lineage in cinematic Western media as far back as the pioneering days of cinema with *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), while a train robbery in the second chapter of the game’s story features an overt recreation of a scene from *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* (2007), wherein the primary protagonist stands atop a wagon used to block a railway

²⁴² For example, see Real Pixels, *How Historically Accurate is Red Dead Redemption 2?*; GameSpot, *Wild West Expert Reacts To Red Dead Redemption 2*; GameSpot, *Wild West Expert Reacts To More Of Red Dead Redemption 2*.

²⁴³ White, “Red Dead Redemption 2: The inside story of the most lifelike video game ever made”.

²⁴⁴ Francesca Razzi, “Re-enacting the American Frontier in Contemporary Popular Culture: The Western Fantasy of *Red Dead Redemption II*”, *Iperstoria*, vol. 0: 18 (2021), pp. 291-307.

²⁴⁵ Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 9-14.

and is silhouetted by the light of an approaching train;²⁴⁶ the arc of the story's third chapter, which sees the gang attempt to profit by playing both sides of a local feud, is reminiscent of the plot of Sergio Leone's epic spaghetti-Western *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), starring Clint Eastwood;²⁴⁷ and the game's entire narrative, of the Van der Linde gang hounded by the law as their eponymous leader repeatedly tries to secure their futures with "one last job", bears many similarities to the overarching plot of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).²⁴⁸

The impact of *RDR2*'s media forebears was readily acknowledged by the game's developers, offering plentiful material from which to draw reference to create a recognisable and enjoyable Western experience, but also infusing genuine historical phenomena with myths that influenced their representation of particular Western phenomena; in the words of Michael Unsworth, writing director for Rockstar and one of *RDR2*'s lead developers, 'we're not making Little House on the Prairie but we're not making Bone Tomahawk either.'²⁴⁹ The use of Western media parallels by a senior developer to interpret *RDR2*'s depiction of the "Wild West", and the implicit understanding that Unsworth's audience can extrapolate his references to comprehend this framing, is a significant indication of *RDR2*'s cultural position and creative intentions within the wider canon of "Wild West" entertainment media; the game does not attempt to create a "historically accurate" depiction of the "real Wild West", but to tell an engaging story within the historical cultural phenomenon of the "Wild West".²⁵⁰

A principal influence on *RDR2* is, unquestionably, the original *Red Dead Redemption* (*RDR*) game from 2010, whose story follows on from the narrative of its sequel, with the epilogue of *RDR2* explicitly forming the connective tissue between the two games.²⁵¹ The original *RDR* takes place just over a decade after the main events of *RDR2*, and centres on former Van der Linde Gang member, John Marston, as he hunts down his former associates

²⁴⁶ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, p. 9; *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford*, directed by Andrew Dominik (2007, Warner Brothers Pictures) [DVD].

²⁴⁷ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; *A Fistful of Dollars*.

²⁴⁸ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, directed by George Roy Hill (1969, Twentieth Century Fox) [DVD].

²⁴⁹ Nick Cowen, *WRed Dead Redemption 2 Interview: Bringing the Virtual Frontier to Life*, *HistoryHit*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.historyhit.com/gaming/red-dead-redemption-2-interview-bringing-the-frontier-to-life/>.

²⁵⁰ Razzi, "Re-enacting the American Frontier in Contemporary Popular Culture", pp. 291-304.

²⁵¹ *Red Dead Redemption*; *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 3-4.

at the behest of a duplicitous lawman, Agent Ross, in order to ensure the safety of his wife and son.²⁵² Thus, the emphasis on *RDR2*'s story is on demonstrating how the characters of the earlier game came to be in their respective positions by the time of the original game's narrative, while also offering an opportunity to further develop those same characters by presenting them in a different narrative context and from the perspective of another character, with whom their relationships are potentially altered.

This new character is *RDR2*'s main protagonist, Arthur Morgan (Figure 3.4), a veteran member of the Van der Linde Gang who becomes increasingly disillusioned as the gang's eponymous leader, Dutch Van der Linde, proposes ever more reckless schemes to accumulate wealth for the gang's future while simultaneously attracting the ever-increasing wrath of the authorities, headed by members of the Pinkerton Detective Agency (including the original *RDR*'s Agent Ross, as a minor antagonist).²⁵³ However, *RDR2*'s narrative is an exercise in tragedy as not only does Arthur, terminally-infected with tuberculosis as a result of his actions on the gang's behalf, die at the hands of a traitor while helping John Marston seize the opportunity for the new life seen in the original game – wherein John becomes the playable protagonist during *RDR2*'s epilogue – the narrative foreknowledge that the prior game offers shows that Arthur and John's efforts to escape their outlaw past are ultimately in vain.²⁵⁴

The progression between the two *RDR* games can also be seen on a meta-level, as both not only reflect the technological capabilities of the hardware upon which they were respectively developed – both in terms of the detail of in-game assets and the scale of the game environment – but also in terms of a cultural progression in the depiction of the Wild West. In the original *RDR*, the player is principally restricted to the fictional state of New Austin and a region of Mexico, both of which are dominated by the traditional Western-genre landscapes of desert and cacti, while the enemies that the player must defeat fall into what might be considered the “stereotypical” enemies of a Western: outlaws, Mexicans and rogue Indians.²⁵⁵ Meanwhile, *RDR2* spends its time exploring a far larger and more diverse

²⁵² *Red Dead Redemption*.

²⁵³ *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

²⁵⁴ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 3-4.

²⁵⁵ *Red Dead Redemption*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 14-16.

landscape, with environments ranging from the snowy mountains of the Grizzlies and the open grasslands of the Heartlands, to the swampy bayous of Lemoyne and the urban sprawl of St Denis. While *RDR*'s desert region of New Austin also features in the game, player access is narratively and mechanically restricted until the epilogue when player control switches to John Marston and the narrative foundations for the events of the original game are explicitly laid;²⁵⁶ if the player attempts to enter this area while playing as Arthur Morgan, they will be promptly attacked and overwhelmed by hostile NPCs, forcibly returning the player to a narratively permitted area.²⁵⁷

Alongside more diverse Western landscapes, *RDR2*'s principal cast is more diverse than its predecessor, with three new non-White and six new female characters introduced among the significant central characters of *RDR2* alongside returning figures from the original game.²⁵⁸ This progression mirrors similar development in other media Westerns: in contrast to the exclusively White Male central cast of the classic 1960 original,²⁵⁹ the 2016 re-make of *The Magnificent Seven* features four non-White characters of various ethnicities amongst the eponymous central group while also prominently featuring a female supporting protagonist who plays a significant and active role within the film's narrative;²⁶⁰ the only female character to feature prominently in the original film is the passive and largely silent love interest for one of the central White Male cast.²⁶¹ Other recent Western media, such as the 2013 film *The Lone Ranger* and series such as *Deadwood* (2004-2006) and *Godless* (2017), have similarly granted greater narrative agency to marginalised demographics, particularly women, within their depictions of the "Wild West", by contrast to the predominantly White Male narratives of "classic" Westerns like *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968), *Rawhide* (1959-1965), and *The High Chaparral* (1967-1971).

However, although *RDR2* incorporates a more prominently diverse range of characters than its predecessor, the extent and manner of the game's attitude to representation of these diverse historical perspectives has been questioned by some

²⁵⁶ *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 14-16.

²⁵⁹ *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges (1960, United Artists) [DVD].

²⁶⁰ *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by Antoine Fuqua (2016, Sony Pictures Releasing) [DVD].

²⁶¹ *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).

scholars. Examples of this uncertainty are raised in the introduction to *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence in the Video Game West*: historically, Hispanic Americans and (predominantly White) women have been represented in Westerns as simplified and reductive stereotypes – as gun-toting bandits and sexualised damsels respectively – and although *RDR2* arguably also perpetuates these stereotypes through some of its characters (the returning character Javier Escuela for the former and the new character Karen Jones for the latter), the central cast who reflect these marginalised figures have been crafted by the developers with a clear attempt to portray these perspectives with greater sympathy.²⁶²

Meanwhile, the antagonist roles for *RDR2* are predominantly occupied by the forces of “civilisation” and serve to demonstrate the excesses carried out by figures who would traditionally have been framed as heroes in older historical narratives. *RDR2* prominently includes an industrialist, Leviticus Cornwall, as a principle antagonist who, alongside the Pinkerton detectives who hound the gang across the country, escalates the pursuit of the protagonist characters by law enforcement after the Van der Linde gang conducts a train heist against him during the game’s first chapter and subsequently target more of his enterprises throughout the course of the game.²⁶³ Cornwall’s name can be seen on numerous properties and operations throughout the game world, from the public trams in Saint Denis to oil fields in the Heartlands, and players are repeatedly shown the effects of his ruthless pursuit of profit.²⁶⁴ One of the most prominent of these occurs in the game’s sixth chapter, when the player attempts to help a tribe of Native Americans suffering under the combined efforts of Cornwall and the US Army to force them from land which the industrialist has designs on acquiring as the site of a new oil well (which is ultimately revealed to be a vain waste of effort during the game’s epilogue, as both an in-game newspaper and visiting the location in question reveals that no trace of oil is discovered on the site).²⁶⁵

²⁶² *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, pp. 14-16.

²⁶³ *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

²⁶⁴ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Locke and Mackay, “You Are A True Progressive”, pp. 184-186.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

This characterisation of a Western antagonist also finds parity with recent trends in media Westerns, with 2013's *The Lone Ranger* and 2016's *The Magnificent Seven* being prominent examples. In *The Lone Ranger*, which depicts the “origin story” of the titular character, the eponymous hero (played by Armie Hammer) and his Indian sidekick Tonto (played by Johnny Depp) work to stop a corrupt railway magnate who, conspiring with a cannibalistic outlaw and a complicit Army officer, frames a neighbouring tribe of Comanche Indians for attacks on farmsteads in order to seize the Comanche's land and the rich silver deposits therein to finance his railroad enterprise.²⁶⁶ Meanwhile, whereas the antagonist of the original *The Magnificent Seven* is simply a generic Mexican bandit chief (played by Eli Wallach) who steals crops to feed his followers at the expense of defenceless villagers,²⁶⁷ the villain of the 2016 re-make is a wealthy American industrialist and land baron (played by Peter Sarsgaard) who philosophically infers that his ruthless efforts to buy up land through intimidation and violence are legitimised by American capitalist ideology.²⁶⁸



Figure 3.4: Official promotional image of *Red Dead Redemption 2* protagonist Arthur Morgan (left) and supporting character Sadie Adler (right) (Rockstar Games, 2018).

At the core of the progression and evolution in *RDR2*'s depiction of “the Wild West” is the dominating influence of Rockstar's usage of American history as a thematic template in its depiction of a historical world, rather than a rigid adherence to the idea of “historical

²⁶⁶ *The Lone Ranger*, directed by Gore Verbinsky (2013, Walt Disney Pictures) [DVD].

²⁶⁷ *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).

²⁶⁸ *The Magnificent Seven* (2016).

accuracy”.²⁶⁹ This can be seen in various details of the game, such as the language and vernacular which the protagonists use to communicate. Michael Unsworth, one of *RDR2*’s lead writers, described that the game’s developers’ early efforts ‘veered into rootin’-tootin’-old-western territory in terms of dialogue.’²⁷⁰ Tellingly, he says that ‘even though some of it was authentic it started to sound very cliched, so we had to take a step back and have a rethink’;²⁷¹ his statement emphasises that although Rockstar conducted historical research to establish the historical basis for *RDR2*’s setting and establish immersive elements of its world, they then subsequently altered those foundations to ensure that the final product resonated better with a modern audience, thereby diluting its “historical accuracy” where this conflicted with modern expectations. This, as Chapman says:

offer[s] satisfaction through the reconstruction of our own implied cultural and historicized identity. In historical games, [players] can therefore sometimes establish resonance not only *through* the larger historical discourse but also by *(re)performing it* [original italics].²⁷²

This mode of historical representation is partly governed by Rockstar Games’ brand identity within the gaming space. For many years, Rockstar has been one of the most prominent developers of “open world games”,²⁷³ a game genre whose popularity has been attributed to the commercial success of Rockstar’s *GTA* series.²⁷⁴ Within this genre, exploration by the player is heavily encouraged, along with other concepts and applications of player agency within gameplay, such as offering multiple avenues and mechanisms for a player to accomplish gameplay objectives.²⁷⁵ Alongside this idea of player agency, and frequently embodied at an implicit level within Rockstar’s games, is the facility to allow the player to “break the rules”, most notably in regards to social moral constructs. As an example, a prominent mechanical component of both Rockstar’s *GTA* and *Red Dead* series is

²⁶⁹ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 17-18; Razzi, “Re-enacting the American Frontier in Contemporary Popular Culture”, pp. 291-304.

²⁷⁰ Cowen, “Red Dead Redemption 2 Interview”.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), p. 139.

²⁷³ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 12; Wright, “Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption*, and narratives of ‘Progress’”, pp. 3-4.

²⁷⁴ Their, “‘Red Dead Redemption 2’ Review: A Long, Hard, Lonesome Road”.

²⁷⁵ Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, “Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society”, *Games and Culture*, vol. 15: 2 (2020), p. 148.

the “Wanted” system, a gameplay mechanic that triggers incrementally stronger reactions to player “legal” transgressions by in-game law enforcement characters.²⁷⁶

Rockstar’s commercial brand has largely built itself on games which allow the player to indulge in the subversion of social norms and the deliberate invitation of controversy.²⁷⁷ In part, this controversial aspect of Rockstar’s gaming identity has been driven by toxic elements of the gaming community; shortly after *RDR2*’s release, videos began appearing on YouTube of players recording themselves attacking a suffragette NPC in the game, often accompanied by numerous comments supporting the attacker’s actions.²⁷⁸ Even though these acts were not endorsed by Rockstar, the fact that they are possible within the systems Rockstar has established within their games contributes to the company’s image as an “outlaw” developer, which in turn allows gamers to exercise a degree of tolerance towards controversial incidents like this because they are inherent to the rebellious and irreverent player agency-led gameplay formula which Rockstar has championed.²⁷⁹ As Esther Wright puts it, ‘the brand values and expectations for “a Rockstar game” dictate what can be (and is) included in them, while the games themselves work to perpetuate this anticipation’.²⁸⁰

Rockstar’s willingness to accept its role as an “outlaw” within the gaming industry has been utilised within its own games to offer a satirical critique of both American culture and the cinema genres from which their games draw inspiration.²⁸¹ This cultural critique is the essence of Rockstar’s approach to creating historical games ‘about our cultural representations of the past... embodying (and commodifying) the very postmodern realisation that what we “know” of the past derives from discourses of the past’.²⁸² Like its predecessor, *RDR2*’s gameplay offers a variety of ‘archotypically “Western” gameplay actions

²⁷⁶ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 33.

²⁷⁷ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 13.

²⁷⁸ Kate Lyons, “Red Dead Redemption 2: game criticised over killing of suffragette”, *The Guardian*, 7 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/nov/07/red-dead-redemption-2-game-criticised-over-killing-of-suffragette>; Emanuel Maiberg, “‘Red Dead Redemption 2’ Players Are Excited to Attack and Kill Feminists in the Game”, *VICE*, 5 November 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ev3gmm/red-dead-redemption-2-players-are-excited-to-attack-and-kill-feminists-in-the-game>; Locke and Mackay, “You Are A True Progressive”, pp. 174-175.

²⁷⁹ Eric Kain, “This ‘Red Dead Redemption 2’ Feminist-Punching Controversy Is So Silly”, *Forbes*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2018/11/27/outrage-over-punching-a-feminist-in-red-dead-redemption-2-is-so-absurd/>.

²⁸⁰ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 12.

²⁸¹ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 13-15.

²⁸² Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 23-24.

from which players may create their own emergent narrative'.²⁸³ Many of these – from drinking in saloons and playing poker, to robbing banks and stagecoaches and duelling with gunslingers – are introduced to the player through missions, which in themselves are often parts of the game's core narrative, thereby reinforcing the narrative perspective that these activities are essential elements of the "Wild West".²⁸⁴

From this authorial perspective, *RDR2* can be considered an "authentic" recreation of the "Wild West" not because of its faithfulness to any factual historical reality but instead because of its faithfulness to a cultural understanding of that history.²⁸⁵ Unusually, it is also possible to see evidence of Rockstar employing this same culturally satirical design style to critique their own game brand and players; gaming critics have described the deliberately slow-paced, philosophical narrative and gameplay of *RDR2* in stark contrast to the anarchic *GTA* series, and even the open world formula which Rockstar has championed by encouraging a particular playstyle and interpretation of the protagonist.²⁸⁶ Despite positioning the player character as an outlaw, engaging in unlawful activity, such as killing or robbing NPCs, outside of the game's narrative missions earns the player negative "Honor" points, pushing their protagonist's morality towards the negative end of the spectrum and raising the likelihood of earning the game's "bad" narrative ending.²⁸⁷ Thus, Rockstar enables players to treat *RDR2*'s world like that of a *GTA* game and indulge in their violent Western outlaw fantasies, yet simultaneously punishes gamers who play in this fashion as it contradicts the philosophical undertones of the game's core narrative. One gaming commentator has even suggested that *RDR2*'s narrative serves as a meta-commentary on the development of Rockstar as a company, with the developer's "outlaw past" – as represented by games such as the *GTA* franchise and *Bully* (2006) and embodied within *RDR2* by Dutch's gang – being steadily restricted and suppressed by increasingly dominant

²⁸³ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 33; Razzi, "Re-enacting the American Frontier in Contemporary Popular Culture", pp. 291-304.

²⁸⁴ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 25.

²⁸⁵ Razzi, "Re-enacting the American Frontier in Contemporary Popular Culture", pp. 297-304; John Wills, "Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines: Videogames of the American West", *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 77: 2 (2008), pp. 273-303.

²⁸⁶ Hamilton, "Red Dead Redemption 2: The *Kotaku* Review"; Their, "'Red Dead Redemption 2' Review: A Long, Hard, Lonesome Road"; Vanderhoef and Payne, "Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in *Red Dead Redemption 2*".

²⁸⁷ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Wills and Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence*, p. 3; Locke and Mackay, "You Are A True Progressive", p. 183.

corporate interests and a changing world view unwilling to tolerate such “non-conformist” ideals.²⁸⁸

However, as Wright has noted, this “Rockstar Brand” is also arguably detrimental to the exploration of history via the video game medium by reducing history and historical cultures to ‘thematic obsessions’ utilised as products by gaming publishers rather than serious or influential engagements with the past.²⁸⁹ This is particularly significant in the case of women within the histories of the West portrayed by the *Red Dead* games, for although ‘ironic juxtaposition and subsequent critique of American history, politics and culture’ are central elements of the so-called “Rockstar Brand”, so too are ‘an obsession with mediating American masculinity and... the reliance on preexisting American popular culture to do so in a way that feels “authentic”’.²⁹⁰ This latter strand of Rockstar’s brand identity naturally results in an emphasis of White Male protagonists and a consequent marginalisation of (principally White) female historical perspectives. As Wright observes at length, although *RDR2* includes significantly more prominent female characters than its predecessor, many of these serve as adjuncts on the periphery of the male-centric primary narrative, while the most developed female character – Sadie Adler (Figure 3.4) – is narratively defined throughout the game by her relationship to a man (her husband, killed off-screen at the outset of the game) and, as she adopts a more prominent role as the story progresses, becomes increasingly masculinised and inherently Othered in distinction from the game’s other female characters.²⁹¹

RDR2 ultimately reflects contradictory intellectual and design philosophies, both of which embody competing approaches to creating a historical world within video games. At the micro-level, the game attempts to depict the most detailed historical environment possible, filled with intimate details that bring life to the game’s historical world and showcase the possibilities of modern video game graphics technology. At the macro-level, the game attempts to tell a fictional story of the American “Wild West” that pays homage to the media history of the Western genre and ties in with and expands upon the original *RDR*

²⁸⁸ WhatCulture Gaming, *Red Dead Redemption 2 Is About The Death of Rockstar*, online video recording, YouTube, 05 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAzgzlSNcnA&t=302s>.

²⁸⁹ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 17-18.

²⁹⁰ Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, pp. 129-130.

²⁹¹ Wright, “‘What’s Famous’ and ‘What’s True’: Women’s Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*”, pp. 135-145.

game. However, the goal of “historical accuracy”, as it is understood from a literal, popular perspective, is rarely given priority in its design; in those instances where it arguably has, it comes as a subsidiary or alternate interpretation of “realism” or “attention to detail” within the game’s recreation of in-game artefacts and wider immersion within the game experience.²⁹²

Instead, the driving priority was to create an enjoyable experience of Western fiction sufficiently steeped in the history of the late 1800s to feel seamlessly immersive and “authentic”, but also recognisable and relatable to modern audiences. That relatability inevitably carries inherent political commentary on the state of the modern world, presenting perspectives on aggressive capitalism and social equality which resonate with modern audiences, but which sometimes stand in sharp contrast to the history of the “Wild West” period as viewed from the historical perspective of its contemporary society. Moreover, the marketing of *RDR2* as part of the “Rockstar brand” carries with it certain connotations and expectations within the context of the gaming industry, both in regard to in-game content and commercial priorities.²⁹³ Of particular significance is the utilisation of narratively archetypal activities within *RDR2*’s gameplay, which align more closely with the collective popular culture understanding of the history which *RDR2* portrays through its fictional world than with the historical materials used to construct it. As a result, *RDR2*’s depiction of the American “Wild West” can only be considered “authentic” within certain nuanced definitions of the term.

Deconstructing perspectives on “historically accurate” video games

The problem that these two games – *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* – highlight in comparison to other major historical video games, such as *Assassin’s Creed* or *Battlefield V*, is how thin the line between a “depiction” and a “simulation” of history can be, as well as the difficulties surrounding the understanding of that distinction in popular discourse. Whereas the former term merely implies a version of

²⁹² Wills, “Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?”.

²⁹³ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 12-15; Wright, “Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption*, and narratives of ‘Progress’”, pp. 3-5.

events, which does not inherently purport to be wholly accurate,²⁹⁴ the latter implies that the version of events presented is as detailed and precise as the real event.²⁹⁵ Racing drivers and astronauts, for instance, utilise *simulators* as part of their training regimes, for the express reason that the experience they create is the closest possible reproduction of reality in a controlled situational environment.²⁹⁶ Even in an academic sense, the semantic distinction between a “simulation” and a “depiction” is a precarious one; although Chapman uses the term ‘simulation style’ to refer to the manner in which a game models and represents the past,²⁹⁷ he still emphasises that discussion of those games which pursue a ‘realist simulation style’ does not automatically reflect the “historical accuracy” of those experiences even if this type of historical game experience conveys implicit claims regarding the detail and authenticity of the historical worlds they portray, as he also uses this term in relation to ‘constructionalist simulation styles’ which portray narratively looser, more systemically interactive histories.²⁹⁸

Additionally, although arguments of “historical accuracy” more commonly attach themselves to games adopting realist simulation styles, examinations of discourse within gaming communities shows that this concept is also raised in discussion of games employing constructionalist simulation styles, such as the city-builder game *Manor Lords* or Grand-Strategy game *Crusader Kings III*.²⁹⁹ This emphasises that although historical games are technically “simulations” of historical worlds and subjects, the technical and authorial perspective of this term within the nomenclature of the video game industry infers particularly strong associations of “historical accuracy” within the history which “simulation” games impart by contrast to games which merely “depict” a historical subject.

²⁹⁴ “Depiction”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/depiction>; “Depict”, *The Britannica Dictionary*, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/depict>.

²⁹⁵ “Simulation”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/simulation>.

²⁹⁶ For examples, see “FORMULA WHY: How do F1 simulators work and why do teams need them?”, *Formula 1*, 9 June 2023, <https://www.formula1.com/en/latest/article/formula-why-how-do-f1-simulators-work-and-why-do-teams-need-them.3UjYyfeFMumTpkge6BZrwA>; “Why do Formula 1 teams need simulators?”, *Motorsport Engineer*, <https://motorsportengineer.net/why-do-formula-1-teams-need-simulators/>; Angelica D. Garcia, Johnathan Schlueter, and Eddie Paddock, “Training Astronauts using Hardware-In-The-Loop Simulations and Virtual Reality”, NASA (2020) [Accessed online: <https://ntrs.nasa.gov/api/citations/20200011545/downloads/20200011545.pdf>].

²⁹⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 59-84.

²⁹⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 61-75.

²⁹⁹ Gerblich, “Manor Lords dev doesn’t like calling the city-builder “historically accurate”.

From the perspective of developers of historical video games, this distinction between a “depiction” and a “simulation” of the past is a serious consideration, and can define their attitude towards the presentation of history throughout their game. Take, for example, indie Turn-Based Strategy game *The Troop*, which explores the experiences of British and Canadian forces fighting in Normandy in the wake of the D-Day Landings.³⁰⁰ Although the game portrays realistic vehicle models and landscapes, the developers, Giant Flame, make particular care to describe the title as ‘a game, not a simulation’. As the game’s official Steam description states:

The Troop is born from a life long passion for WW2 history and turn-based games. Our aim is to give a little glimpse of that history through an enjoyable challenge. The events depicted are set in the broad reality of the historical campaigns, the missions themselves however are fictional and geared towards an enjoyable challenge rather than a strict depiction of history. We hope only to do justice to the spirit of those countless memoirs and after action reports that survive and continue to fascinate us.³⁰¹

The comparison between this description of *The Troop* – which infers a more constructionalist depiction of historical events – and a game like *KCD*, which devotes itself to realism and authenticity at the most minute detail in spite of telling a fictional story, is immediate, and one which represents the balance that all historical video games designed for public consumption are forced to make. Whenever a game is designed principally for the purposes of entertainment, as opposed to primarily educational games, the need to balance historical detail with gameplay demands will always leave its mark upon the history it depicts. The difference between them, however, is reflected in the developer’s response to that influence. Some, like the developers of *The Troop*, accept the limitations of the medium, and so embrace the fact that their game will never be a “perfect” recreation of the historical events that they depict in order to create an entertaining experience which embodies the spirit of the history being represented. Others, as in the cases of *KCD* and *RDR2*, acknowledge the technical limitations imposed upon them by the gaming medium, but instead utilise gaming’s strengths as an interactive platform and offering an encompassing, 360-degree environment to push the boundaries of what is possible to depict in a historical representation.

³⁰⁰ Giant Flame, *The Troop* (2021), PC. Published by PLA Studios.

³⁰¹ *The Troop*, Giant Flame, Steam store page, https://store.steampowered.com/app/1363740/The_Troop/.

However, even though all of these titles are “games”, they are not inherently “simulations” within the authorial perspective of games development. Greg Styczeń, the solo developer of the city-builder and RTS *Manor Lords*, described in an interview that his game ‘prioritizes historical accuracy whenever possible’ within its game mechanics, but that he still strived to maintain ‘a balance between gameplay and realism’ so that the game did not ‘become just a simulation’.³⁰²

This distinction between a “game” and a “simulation” is particularly important to clarify in the video game space, as various series have achieved success by creating accurate digital simulations of real-world occupations. Games such as *Farming Simulator* (2008-2021), *Rail Simulator* (2007-2008), and even the more outlandish *Kerbal Space Programme* (2015) have all successfully translated the challenges and complexity of their associated real-world industries into a video game format. Each of these titles has developed their own dedicated fanbases and achieved sufficient financial and critical success to generate profit; the *Farming Simulator* series, for instance, has been so successful that the franchise has sold a combined total of 25 million copies, along with 90 million mobile downloads, across all platforms on which it had been released as of 2020.³⁰³

In the case of each of these “simulation” games, the primary fanbase for these titles are those people who possess a pre-existing enthusiasm for the subject being simulated. Evidence of this can be seen in *Kerbal Space Programme*, a space flight simulator developed by Mexican indie studio Squad, which couples animated aliens with a realistic physics engine that emulates the mechanics of achieving space flight;³⁰⁴ the game achieved critical acclaim for its realistic depiction of the challenges involved in space exploration, to which its simple gameplay loop and cartoon alien protagonists served to retain player enjoyment of the experience.³⁰⁵

³⁰² Brian Crecente, “Solo dev makes sophisticated sim *Manor Lords* using Unreal Engine”, *Unreal Engine*, <https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/developer-interviews/solo-dev-makes-sophisticated-sim-manor-lords-using-unreal-engine>; Gerblich, “Manor Lords dev doesn’t like calling the city-builder “historically accurate”.

³⁰³ “Giants Software on the quiet, surprising success of *Farming Simulator*”, *VentureBeat*, 10 January 2020, <https://venturebeat.com/games/giants-software-on-the-quiet-surprising-success-of-farming-simulator/>.

³⁰⁴ Squad, *Kerbal Space Program* (2015), Xbox, PlayStation and PC. Published by Private Division.

³⁰⁵ Richard Cobbett, “Kerbal Space Program Review”, *Eurogamer*, 5 May 2015, <https://www.eurogamer.net/kerbal-space-program-review>; Seth G. Macy, “Kerbal Space Program Review”, *IGN*, 15 May 2015, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/05/15/kerbal-space-program-review>; Justin Clark, “Kerbal Space Program Review”, *GameSpot*, 26 July 2016, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/kerbal-space-program-review/1900-6416128/>.

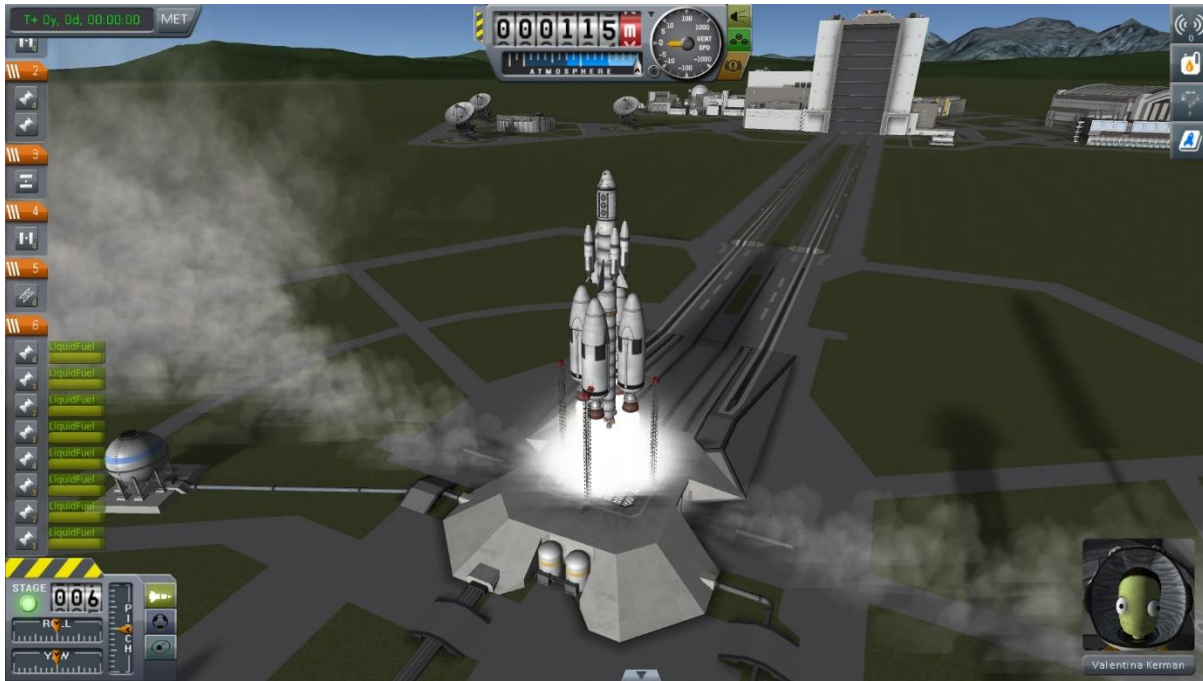


Figure 3.5: Gameplay still-image from *Kerbal Space Program* (Squad, 2015).

Kerbal Space Programme has also received particular interest and praise from the scientific and space-observer community, attracting interest from YouTube content creators like Scott Manley and Tim Dodd “the Everyday Astronaut”,³⁰⁶ and even dedicated space-flight organisations like NASA, the European Space Agency and SpaceX.³⁰⁷ From a comparable perspective of specialist interest, it is unsurprising that historical enthusiasts have demonstrated particular interest in “historically accurate” games from independent studios, like *KCD* or *Hell Let Loose*, and discussed their detailed recreations of their respective historical settings as “simulations” of these histories; *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*,

³⁰⁶ See for examples, Scott Manley, *Kerbal Space Programme*, online video recordings, YouTube, 15 July 2011 – 17 October 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL29CCD4C7E542D28B>; Everyday Astronaut, *Kerbal Space Programme*, online video recordings, YouTube, 4 January 2017 – 20 December 2024, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWzKfs3icbT7j_vwl-g8ZDK0RGUV_bSl.

³⁰⁷ Sam White, “Minecraft in space: Why Nasa is embracing Kerbal Space Program”, *The Guardian*, 22 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/may/22/kerbal-space-program-why-nasa-minecraft>; Karl B. Hille, “Gamers Tackle Virtual Asteroid Sampling Mission”, NASA, 13 June 2016, <https://www.nasa.gov/centers-and-facilities/goddard/gamers-tackle-virtual-asteroid-sampling-mission/>; Tariq Malik, “Kerbal Space Program teams up with European Space Agency for ‘Shared Horizons’ expansion”, *Space.com*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.space.com/kerbal-space-program-esa-shared-horizons-expansion.html>; “Kerbal’s ‘Shared Horizons’ launched with real ESA missions”, *European Space Agency*, 1 July 2020, https://www.esa.int/About_Us/Branding_and_Partnerships/Kerbal_s_Shared_Horizons_launched_with_real_ESA_missions; Matthew Williams, “How Kerbal Space Program is Inspiring Real Mission Designs”, *Universe Today*, 25 April 2025, <https://www.universetoday.com/articles/how-kerbal-space-program-is-inspiring-real-mission-designs>.

for example, has been colloquially referred to as a “medieval simulator” or “knight simulator” by some gaming commentators, while a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign for *Hell Let Loose* actively described the game as ‘a simulation of war... not an arcade arena shooter’.³⁰⁸

On the other hand, the pre-existing interest in a “simulation” game’s core audience also creates challenges for the developers involved. In discussions with *WhatCulture Gaming*, ex-Ubisoft turned indie developer Tommy Miller rated racing simulators, for example, as amongst the most challenging types of games to create because of the minute attention to detail demanded by the developers, who are themselves fans of the genre, and the backlash from the equally devoted player-base if the developers fail to achieve universal accuracy regarding the in-game depictions of individual vehicles;³⁰⁹ having worked on triple-A racing games during his career, Miller’s experience has given him first-hand insight into the behaviours present in the development and consumption of racing simulators.³¹⁰ These same behaviours can also be frequently observed in the creation and consumption of historical games. Often, the developers of a historical game have a keen interest in the history that their game attempts to depict and so strive to ensure that every possible detail conforms to the available source material of the period. Likewise, those players who gravitate to these types of historical experiences also frequently exhibit a keen interest in history and are therefore more likely to identify and voice their criticisms if the developers are perceived to have committed a historiographical error.

This is where the two case studies explored in this chapter, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, fundamentally differ. Both games were developed with a keen attention to detail, with the goal of creating as “realistic” a game world as possible within the technical constraints of each game’s resources. The difference is the manner in which this attitude to accuracy was conveyed to and received by the gaming audience and wider public.

³⁰⁸ See for example, Lane, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – impressively detailed medieval life sim”; Black Matter, “Hell Let Loose”, *Kickstarter*, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/blackmatter/hell-let-loose/description>.

³⁰⁹ WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Hardest Video Game Genres To Make (From A Game Developer)*, online video recording, YouTube, 13 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vfwblz-zF4A> [4:53-6:13].

³¹⁰ WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Hardest Video Game Genres To Make (From A Game Developer)* [4:53-6:13].

In *KCD*, “historical accuracy” was a central pillar of the game’s creation, and the game was marketed on that basis from the beginning; *KCD*’s Kickstarter campaign, which was vital for attracting finance for the game’s development, expressly stated the desire to ‘make the experience as authentic as possible’.³¹¹ Even though this was subsequently downplayed by one of *KCD*’s historical consultants, Joanna Nowak, her comments should be considered in the context of the game’s reception post-release; Nowak’s defence of *KCD*, which she described as a ‘historically credible’ game and ‘not a medieval simulator’,³¹² came as part of a lecture series in which Klára Hübnerová, a history professor at Masaryk University, roundly criticised *KCD* for its “historically inaccurate” portrayals of women and gender roles, the Cuman NPCs as villains, and the promotion of history through the form of national mythology.³¹³ While those involved in *KCD*’s development have acknowledged that certain compromises needed to be made due to technical restrictions within development,³¹⁴ the project’s stated central goal of making the most “historically accurate” game possible remained continuous throughout its development. Furthermore, with the release of a sequel to *KCD* in 2025, players and critics have gained an additional comparative perspective on the original *KCD* game, which even today is viewed, whether positively or negatively, as pursuing “historical accuracy” as its central gameplay focus.³¹⁵

By comparison, while *RDR2*’s marketing referenced its emphasis on detail in recreating the “Wild West”,³¹⁶ its role within the game experience was conveyed differently to player audiences by comparison to *KCD*. This can be seen in the game’s description by the digital gaming retailer, Steam; various mentions are made to the game’s advanced, highly detailed graphics, utilising technological improvements to offer, for instance:

increased draw distances [i.e. the range at which in-game objects are generated within the digital environment]; higher quality global illumination and ambient occlusion for improved day and night

³¹¹ Warhorse Studios, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance”, *Kickstarter*, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1294225970/kingdom-come-deliverance>.

³¹² Historický ústav Masarykovy univerzity, *Kingdom Come - přednáška VIII FINÁLE - O KCD s historičkou studia Warhorse Joannou Nowak*, online video recording, YouTube, 6 December 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0haSpyrnSew>.

³¹³ Michal Čuřín, “Shame on the Creators, Praise for the Players? On Gender Stereotypes and Subversive Gaming in Digital Games”, *Gender and Research*, vol. 23:1 (2022), pp. 32-56.

³¹⁴ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [49:06-50:54].

³¹⁵ WhatCulture Gaming, *You Are Not Ready For Kingdom Come Deliverance 2 (HANDS-ON)*, online video recording, YouTube, 10 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYdZyES3KJI&t=906s>.

³¹⁶ For example, see Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2: Official Gameplay Video*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dw_oH5oiUSE.

lighting; improved reflections and deeper, higher resolution shadows at all distances; tessellated tree textures and improved grass and fur textures for added realism in every plant and animal.³¹⁷

This lengthy description emphasises the level of detail pursued in the game's visual presentation, a technological perspective reinforced within the previously discussed *Eurogamer* technological review.³¹⁸ Neither of these descriptions make any mention of efforts to give "historical accuracy" or "authenticity" to the title's in-game mechanics or depiction of the game's historical world. Moreover, any aspersions to "historical authenticity" which are made by *RDR2* are produced within the larger context of the "Rockstar brand", defined by 'a desire to emulate a very specific kind of Western "realism"' that, to a greater or lesser extent, relies on emphasising the inaccurate stereotypes embedded within the Western media genre as part of *RDR2*'s engagement with history.³¹⁹

Similarly, on a technical level, while some of Rockstar's official marketing videos did highlight "realistic" elements of gameplay, such as the need to maintain weapons to counteract deterioration from dirt or use, the format of these videos did not effectively convey the centrality of these mechanics to the gameplay experience. The videos in question bear similarities in style to marketing videos which describe the various activities which the player can undertake in the game's "open world", both mandatory and optional;³²⁰ these types of videos are a common marketing feature also employed by other "open world" games, notably the *Assassin's Creed* series,³²¹ which could be interpreted to imply that gameplay mechanics which are central to the game experience were included as optional features. As Nathan Grayson, a *Kotaku* reviewer, commented in relation to *KCD*, 'immersion, as gamers define it, is more often about choice or the illusion of choice than it is than it is everything working correctly or lining up to particular standards of historical accuracy'.³²²

³¹⁷ *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Rockstar Games, Steam store page, https://store.steampowered.com/app/1174180/Red_Dead_Redemption_2/.

³¹⁸ Linneman, "Red Dead Redemption 2 analysis: a once-in-a-generation technological achievement".

³¹⁹ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 17-18; Wright, "'What's Famous' and 'What's True': Women's Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*", pp. 128-145.

³²⁰ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2: Official Gameplay Video Part 2*, online video recording, 1 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb-tlY6ytk8&t=92s>.

³²¹ For example, see Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Gameplay Overview Trailer*, online video recording, YouTube, 12 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrWKP2iTPb8>.

³²² Grayson, "Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics".

Crucially, some of *RDR2*'s developers have stated in interviews that the game was never intended to function as a simulation of history; *RDR2*'s Writing Director, Michael Unsworth, stated that 'the Old West was a tough and bleak time and people didn't live very long. But that wouldn't be a very fun game. [Perhaps] if we were creating some nineteenth century survival simulator'.³²³ In conjunction with Greg Styczeń's remarks about *Manor Lords*,³²⁴ it is clear that, from the authorial perspective of the gaming industry, a "simulation" game is not meant to be an inherently entertaining experience, but to represent a chosen subject with as much precision as possible. This in turn emphasises a fundamental purpose of video games that they are meant to be fun, and that "simulation" games stretch the realism of a digital experience beyond what is considered to be entertainment for the broad majority; a central element of developers' work is 'making something people will want to play, not just that they can play'.³²⁵

This aspect of whether a "simulation" game is considered enjoyable is also highlighted within another important difference between *KCD* and *RDR2*: their reception by the gaming public. While *KCD* received broadly positive gameplay reviews from both players and critics alike, a common feature of the game's reception was its perception as a niche gaming experience. Many reviews of *KCD* on sites such as Metacritic acknowledged *KCD*'s overt intentions as a "historically accurate" experience designed for a specific audience, regardless of whether or not the review's writer enjoyed the game.³²⁶ Elsewhere, some gaming commentators have criticised *KCD* as an example of bad game design, although these comments were made *without* acknowledging *KCD*'s intention of being a "historically accurate" experience, exclusively viewing *KCD* from the authorial perspective of an action-RPG gameplay template directly comparable to more fictional game experiences such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* or *Cyberpunk 2077*;³²⁷ ahead of the release of *KCD*'s sequel, some gaming commentators reassessed *KCD* and its commitment to "historical accuracy" within

³²³ Cowen, "Red Dead Redemption 2 Interview".

³²⁴ Gerblich, "Manor Lords dev doesn't like calling the city-builder "historically accurate".

³²⁵ Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?"; Wood, "'We cough up a chunk of our soul': 32 game devs, from Doom's John Romero to Helldivers 2 and Palworld leads, explain what people get wrong about games".

³²⁶ "Kingdom Come: Deliverance", Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/kingdom-come-deliverance/>.

³²⁷ Grayson, "Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics"; WhatCulture Gaming, *10 Terrible Video Game First Levels That Made Us Rage Quit*, online video recording, YouTube, 2 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yRXKP7M11g> [10:14-11:20].

gameplay, citing it as an early example of a “hyper-realism” game design trend which included titles like *RDR2*.³²⁸ Martin Bostal similarly highlights this division within player responses to *KCD* with regards to immediate post-release player discussions on social media, whereby more gameplay-focused players criticised the game for its technical condition – criticising software bugs which made the game “unplayable” and graphical models which appeared outdated by contrast to other contemporary triple-A releases – while more narrative-focused players defended the game by overlooking these technical flaws to praise the game’s historical depiction.³²⁹

The divided response to *KCD* indicates that while a definite market for “historically accurate” video games does exist, it exists as a relatively narrow sub-section within the overall gaming industry. As a result, estimating the size or significance of this audience is incredibly challenging, and naturally varies with each game. Even the creators of “historically accurate” games have a hard time predicting how much interest their titles will attract:³³⁰ *KCD* attracted just over £1.1 million from roughly 35,000 participants in its public Kickstarter campaign, far exceeding developer expectations,³³¹ and was calculated to have sold approximately 1 million copies within its first 2 weeks on sale, reaching 8 million copies worldwide by November 2024,³³² this figure had increased to 10 million copies sold by May 2025 following the commercial release of *KCD*’s sequel, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, in early February.³³³ Meanwhile *Manor Lords*, a “historically accurate” medieval City-Builder and Real-Time Strategy game, was “wishlist” on the Steam PC gaming platform by more than 3 million prospective players, becoming the most “wishlist” game on the platform shortly prior to its release,³³⁴ even though the game’s developer’s own initial predictions were of only 10 to 15 thousand potential players at most.³³⁵

³²⁸ WhatCulture Gaming, *You Are Not Ready For Kingdom Come Deliverance 2 (HANDS-ON)*.

³²⁹ Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past”, pp. 380-394

³³⁰ *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [39:12-43:42].

³³¹ “Kingdom Come: Deliverance”, *Kickstarter*; Dave Tach, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance funded after two uncertain years”, *Polygon*, 21 February 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/2/21/5433100/kingdom-come-deliverance-kickstarter-funded>.

³³² Clement, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance cumulative units sold worldwide 2018-2024”.

³³³ Jessica Clement, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance II cumulative units sold worldwide 2025”, *Statista*, 6 May 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1560431/kingdom-come-deliverance-ii-games-sales-worldwide/>.

³³⁴ Ed Nightingale, “Manor Lords surpasses 3m Steam wishlists ahead of release this week”, *Eurogamer*, 22 April 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/manor-lords-surpasses-3m-steam-wishlists-ahead-of-release-this-week>.

³³⁵ Manor Lords, *Twitter*, 28 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/LordsManor/status/1508497386183827469>.

Even though these commercial figures for “historically accurate” games exceeded developer expectations in both cases, these figures must be viewed in a wider, comparative perspective of the gaming medium: for instance, the total “gamer” population exclusively in the USA was estimated at 227 million in 2021,³³⁶ and that an estimated 3.24 billion people worldwide regularly played video games in the same year.³³⁷ Likewise, by comparison to triple-A games within similar gameplay genres, it is noticeable that games which favour more “historically accurate” experiences within gameplay demonstrate notably smaller commercial appeal: medieval-fantasy RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for instance, sold over 3.7 million copies within its initial release period,³³⁸ far exceeding *KCD*’s sales over a similar commercial period.

However, these figures do not rely exclusively on indications of the perceived appeal of “historical accuracy”, as gameplay genre, the number or choice of hardware platforms on which a game is released, or the influence of player communities can significantly influence the sales figures for games offering similar historical or gameplay experiences. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* sold over 1 million copies within its first 24 hours on sale, exceeding sales of 2 million copies by the end of its first full month on sale; this success, far surpassing the commercial performance of the original *KCD* following its release, has been partially attributed by gaming commentators to the influence of the dedicated player community pre-established by the original *KCD* game.³³⁹ Similarly increased sales between popular historical games and their sequels can be seen in the cases of the *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *Assassin’s Creed* franchises to name but a few, further emphasising the

³³⁶ “2021 Essential Facts About The Video Game Industry”, *Entertainment Software Association*, <https://www.theesa.com/resource/2021-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/>.

³³⁷ J Clement, “Number of video gamers worldwide in 2021, by region”, *Statista*, 7 September 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/293304/number-video-gamers/>.

³³⁸ Mark Serrels, “Skyrim Sales Estimated At 3.7 million In Two Days”, *Kotaku*, 15 November 2011 [Retrieved from WebArchive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150929021336/http://www.kotaku.com.au/2011/11/skyrim-sales-estimated-at-3-4-million-in-two-days/>].

³³⁹ Clement, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance II cumulative units sold worldwide 2025”; Rick Lane, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 sold 5 times more than the original in its first month”, *PC Gamer*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.pcgamer.com/games/rpg/kingdom-come-deliverance-2-sold-5-times-more-than-the-original-in-its-first-month/>.

significance of player communities to the perpetuation and growth of established gaming franchises.³⁴⁰

Therefore, despite responses to “historically accurate” games which exceeded their developers’ expectations, it is clear that “historically accurate” games still principally appeal to a comparatively small, but dedicated player-base before they go on sale and new players can be attracted by word-of-mouth, which even then reflects a comparatively minor proportion of the global gaming community. Furthermore, this core player-base typically expects high standards of “historical accuracy” from the titles they play, sometimes exceeding what even the developers themselves anticipated; during the development of *Manor Lords*, several features were reworked because either the developer or feedback from the game’s initial gameplay testers deigned them not to be “realistic” enough.³⁴¹

By contrast, *RDR2* was aimed at a far wider audience from its inception, and was calculated to have sold more than 17 million copies within its first two weeks on sale, reaching more than 67 million copies sold by November 2024.³⁴² As a long-awaited sequel to a highly popular and well-regarded game, it immediately attracted interest from players who had experienced the original game, along with long-standing fans of Rockstar’s other successful brand, *GTA*.³⁴³ *RDR2*’s pre-release marketing appeared to lean into the association with Rockstar’s other popular franchise as, alongside panoramic shots to demonstrate the beauty of the new game’s environment, much of the trailers focused on action sequences and crime-fuelled escapades, like those found in a *GTA* game.³⁴⁴ Upon

³⁴⁰ Ryan Dinsdale, “Call of Duty Franchise Reaches Half a Billion Sales... Not Even Counting Black Ops 6”, *IGN*, 31 October 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/call-of-duty-franchise-reaches-half-a-billion-sales-not-counting-black-ops-6>; J Clement, “Call of Duty lifetime series unit sales 2014-2024”, *Statista*, 12 December 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1244224/cod-lifetime-unit-sales/>.

³⁴¹ Manor Lords, “Manor Lords - Tester applications open!”.

³⁴² Sarah Fields, “Red Dead Redemption 2 Passes Incredible Sales Milestone”, *GameRant*, 7 November 2024, <https://gamerant.com/red-dead-redemption-2-sales-milestone-release-six-months/>; J Clement, “RDR2 cumulative units sold worldwide 2018-2025”, *Statista*, 7 Feb 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1284941/rdr2-unit-sales-worldwide-total/>.

³⁴³ Christopher Hooton, “Red Dead Redemption 2 is happening: Rockstar posts Western image”, *The Independent*, 17 October 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/red-dead-redemption-xbox-one-ps4-release-date-rockstars-posts-wild-west-sequel-image-a7365736.html>; Eddie Makuch, “Red Dead Redemption 2 Seemingly Teased With First Image”, *GameSpot*, 20 October 2016, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-2-seemingly-teased-with-first-/1100-6444516/>.

³⁴⁴ For examples, see Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2: Official Trailer #2*, online video recording, YouTube, 28 September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F63h3v9QV7w>; Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2 Launch Trailer*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVRzx17WHVk>.

release, some players criticised the manner in which *RDR2* was played, describing it as ‘boring’, ‘slow’ or featuring ‘clunky controls’.³⁴⁵ As John Wills notes, in *RDR2*’s case the pursuit of realism became a hindrance to some players ability to enjoy the game experience, particularly when one contrasts *RDR2* with the inherently unrealistic actions and exaggerated entertainment of *GTA*.³⁴⁶

The concept of the “Rockstar brand” continues to subliminally dictate the perception of *RDR2*’s gameplay, however this “Rockstar brand” is inherently ahistorical; it formulates content according to ‘thematic obsessions’ within historical popular culture which enables, and to some extent encourages, anarchic behaviour in gameplay, which overrides any implicit exploration of historical narratives or subjects within the game experience.³⁴⁷ As Esther Wright notes, this implicitly undermines the presentation of historical subjects within these experiences, instead providing an authorial perspective of the past which permits engagement with a claimed “authentic” past without offering any significant challenge to established historical narratives.³⁴⁸

RDR2 is also governed by larger commercial interests than *KCD*, both in regard to the need to recoup the atypically high investment into its development and also to mirror Rockstar’s flagship franchise, *GTA*, in generating profit. These considerations may be glimpsed through reports of *RDR2*’s sales revenue, which reportedly achieved more than \$725 million within its first 3 days on sale, making it the second highest-grossing entertainment media launch in history and surpassed only by *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), which generated more than \$1 billion in reported revenue within its launch period.³⁴⁹

The demand for *RDR2* to generate sustained profit may principally be observed through the release and reception of *Red Dead Online*: a Massively Multiplayer Online experience utilising the mechanical and gameplay assets of *RDR2*, but which was marketed as an independent product and drew heavily upon creative elements and development

³⁴⁵ Vanderhoef and Payne, “Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”.

³⁴⁶ Wills, “Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?”.

³⁴⁷ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 11-18.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Takahashi, “Red Dead Redemption 2 could hit 20 million in sales – and turn a profit – by December”.

experience from *GTA Online*.³⁵⁰ Pre-release marketing by Rockstar developers openly contrasted the ‘change of pace’ between *Red Dead Online* and *GTA Online*, saying that ‘like the single player game’s story of Arthur Morgan, we want people to settle into their online characters and feel like every activity makes sense for the character, the setting and the time’.³⁵¹

Despite positive reviews of gameplay from a technical perspective,³⁵² *Red Dead Online* received numerous criticisms over time from a gameplay perspective, most notably regarding its perceived shortage of available gameplay content, circumstances which were actively and regularly compared with that of *GTA Online*. *Red Dead Online*’s shortage of content was theorised by players as having been deliberately partitioned by Rockstar in order to facilitate a protracted, microtransaction-oriented “live-service” business model, and drew unfavourable comparison with the regularity of content updates produced for *GTA Online*.³⁵³

The unfavourable comparison regarding the investment of resources into *Red Dead Online* by contrast to *GTA Online*, and Rockstar’s perceived treatment of the two properties as a publisher, was further emphasised when Rockstar announced the withdrawal of active developer support for *Red Dead Online* in 2022. Rockstar’s stated motive for the decision was the redeployment of developer resources to the creation of *Grand Theft Auto VI*

³⁵⁰ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Online* (2019), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia; Jon Ryan, “Red Dead Online: Devs Reveal First Details”, *IGN*, 19 September 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/09/19/red-dead-online-devs-reveal-first-details>.

³⁵¹ Ryan, “Red Dead Online: Devs Reveal First Details”.

³⁵² See for examples, Matt Martin, “Red Dead Online is GTA with all the bloat removed”, *VG24/7*, 30 November 2018, <https://www.vg247.com/red-dead-online-is-gta-online>; Martin Robinson, “Red Dead Online gets back to the Rockstar I love”, *Eurogamer*, 29 November 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/red-dead-online-puts-the-freedom-back-into-rockstars-exquisite-world>; Luke Reilly, “Red Dead Online Review”, *IGN*, 7 June 2019, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/06/07/red-dead-online-review>.

³⁵³ See for examples, Cass Marshal, “Red Dead Online continues to struggle where GTA succeeds”, *Polygon*, 25 August 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/8/25/21375941/red-dead-online-frontier-roles-designs-gta-businesses>; Lauren Morton, “Red Dead Online didn’t die in 2021, but it’s surviving on rations for 2022”, *PC Gamer*, 29 December 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/red-dead-online-didnt-die-in-2021-but-its-surviving-on-rations-for-2022/>; Stephan Nunneley-Jackson, “Red Dead Online players are upset over the lack of content”, *VG24/7*, 8 January 2022, <https://www.vg247.com/red-dead-online-players-are-upset-over-the-lack-of-content>; Zack Zweizen, “Red Dead Online Players Are Frustrated After Months Without A Major Update”, *Kotaku*, 9 January 2022, <https://kotaku.com/red-dead-online-players-are-frustrated-after-months-wit-1848329178>; Cass Marshal, “Red Dead Online fans are demanding answers from Rockstar”, *Polygon*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/22876656/save-red-dead-online-hashtag-fan-frustration-update-schedule>; Rebekah Valentine, “#SaveRedDeadOnline Is a Cry For Support From Red Dead Online Fans to Rockstar”, *IGN*, 11 January 2022, <https://www.ign.com/articles/save-red-dead-online-cry-for-support-rockstar>.

(originally scheduled for release in 2025), which necessitated changes to how *Red Dead Online* was supported by Rockstar's development teams.³⁵⁴ However, external gaming commentators speculated that the decision had been motivated by *Red Dead Online*'s failure to match the revenue generated by its *GTA Online* counterpart, a game experience which continues to receive regular new content updates over a decade after its original release and was reported to generate profits of \$600 million in 2019 exclusively via the sale of microtransactions.³⁵⁵ This perceived disparity between Rockstar's treatment of its two online experiences was particularly emphasised by commentators who highlighted the announcement of forthcoming content for *GTA Online* within the same developer article which announced the removal of support from *Red Dead Online*.³⁵⁶

In both positive and negative contexts, the experience of *Red Dead Online* was actively compared by players to that of *GTA Online*, vividly illustrating that player perceptions of what a "Rockstar game" represents continue to be influenced primarily by the experience of *GTA* and its impact upon the "Rockstar brand".³⁵⁷ In this way, it is possible to identify the difficulties faced by larger, more commercially-oriented games to both produce and maintain a "historically authentic" gameplay experience in the face of both commercial and player demands, by contrast to smaller, more artistically-focused experiences like *KCD*. A notable element within this contrast can be ascribed to the technical perspectives required of single-player, narrative-oriented game experiences – like those of *KCD* and *RDR2* – by comparison to multiplayer, "live-service sandbox" experiences like *Red Dead Online*, as the authorial requirements of the contrasting experiences differ significantly and thus impact upon their perception by gaming communities.

Another issue which both *KCD* and *RDR2* highlight are the difficulties faced by game developers in creating experiences that reflect the historical reality conveyed by the

³⁵⁴ Rockstar Games, "Grand Theft Auto and Red Dead Online Community Update", *Rockstar Games*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/9k74k52737912k/grand-theft-auto-and-red-dead-online-community-update>.

³⁵⁵ Wes Fenlon, "GTA Online makes half a billion dollars a year even though it's a hot mess", *PC Gamer*, 23 September 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/gta-online-makes-half-a-billion-dollars-a-year-even-though-its-a-hot-mess/>.

³⁵⁶ Zack Zweizen, "Red Dead Online Won't Get Big Updates As Rockstar Shifts To GTA 6", *Kotaku*, 7 July 2022, <https://kotaku.com/red-dead-online-rockstar-games-gta-6-rdo-update-1849152956>; WhatCulture Gaming, *Rockstar Just Killed Red Dead Online For GTA 6*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 July 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxOFzB16QM>.

³⁵⁷ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 11-18.

available source material of their chosen period while also remaining acceptable to modern social and political attitudes, and the frequent tension between these objectives.³⁵⁸ In *KCD*, this was highlighted by debate surrounding the game's depiction of marginalised demographics, notably non-White ethnicities and women, in the game's presentation of medieval Europe,³⁵⁹ a debate which has been revitalised via the opposition expressed on online forums towards the inclusion of non-White individuals and LGBTQ+ romantic options within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, a direct contrast with the controversy surrounding the first game which has been noted by those involved in these games' creation.³⁶⁰

RDR2, meanwhile, has experienced multiple controversies; alongside the aforementioned anti-feminist incidents,³⁶¹ *RDR2* became embroiled in debate when some players attacked negative reviews of *RDR2* in the belief that they were designed to promote an alleged political agenda (without clearly indicating what this supposed agenda entailed).³⁶² As with *KCD*, individuals – in *RDR2*'s case, game reviewers – were targeted by hostile elements of the gaming community as embodiments of negativity towards the game in question, even though the criticisms highlighted by the reviews of *RDR2* which attracted hostility were broadly reflected by the community at large.³⁶³

These instances highlight a fundamental weakness of the modern gaming community as a critical entity: internal discourse frequently becomes heavily politicised, with little moderation or allowance for context or subjectivity. Significantly, it is this same mercurial collective that often guides and defines the discussion surrounding “historical accuracy” in video games and is the most vocal proponent of that ideal.

³⁵⁸ Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Locke and Mackay, “You Are A True Progressive”, pp. 174-193.

³⁵⁹ See for examples Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and its historical claim”, pp. 380-394; McCarter, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy”.

³⁶⁰ Bošnjak, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2* Creative Director Issues Statement on Latest Controversy”; Richardson, “Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic”.

³⁶¹ Lyons, “*Red Dead Redemption 2*: game criticised over killing of suffragette”; Maiberg, “‘*Red Dead Redemption 2*’ Players Are Excited to Attack and Kill Feminists in the Game”; Locke and Mackay, “You Are A True Progressive”, pp. 174-175.

³⁶² Aisha Hassan, “Reactions to this *Red Dead Redemption 2* rating show a dark side to game reviews”, *Quartz*, 31 October 2018, <https://qz.com/quartz/1445700/red-dead-redemption-2-review-reactions-show-a-dark-side>.

³⁶³ Ibid.

Popular understanding of history, and how the media is expected to present history, frequently creates problems for video game developers, yet which the developers themselves often reinforce by reacting to modern social and political attitudes towards content within their games. In particular, triple-A games, with their greater marketing budgets and higher public visibility, are particularly vulnerable to public scrutiny and negative feedback. Adrienne Shaw has noted that assertions of “historical accuracy” or the extent of research by developers are utilised to ‘pre-empt critiques’ of a game’s depiction of the past, yet in doing so these development companies also attempt to conceal the creative decisions made to curate the experience of the past for the gaming audience, a point repeated by Young in her critique of *KCD*’s attitude towards authenticity, particularly within the context of racial politics.³⁶⁴ While an essential step in the development process, this curation increases the authorial perspective that a historical game exists primarily as an expression of modern views and ideologies, regardless of whether the associated depiction is supported by historical evidence. If the historical subject matter touches on issues that are contested in modern discourse – such as gender, sexuality, or ethnicity – or members of the development team are seen to have controversial views on these subjects – such as *KCD* developer Daniel Vávra’s stated support for the GamerGate controversy – then the resulting historical experience is viewed as an expression or commentary of those modern opinions.³⁶⁵

The utilisation of “historical accuracy” within politicised debates is an especially problematic scenario from a historical perspective, as subsequently attempting to defend or disprove a game’s depiction of contested historical phenomena with supportive evidence can then be potentially characterised within popular discourse as “taking sides” in the modern debate, thereby alienating gamers with opposing views or who themselves wish to remain outside these debates and simply enjoy the game experience under scrutiny. All historical sources contain biases and interpretations, but the inherently polarised popular outlook of history’s presentation within modern games is unhealthy for academic discourse

³⁶⁴ Adrienne Shaw, “The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in *Assassin’s Creed III*”, *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, vol. 9:14 (2015), p. 12, quoted in Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 53-54; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39.

³⁶⁵ Totilo, “My E3 Meeting with a Pro-GamerGate Developer”; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39.

as it creates the danger of exposing the scholars involved to the attentions of hostile commentators in real life. Even some gaming commentators have acknowledged that the term “historical accuracy” has become dangerously embroiled in modern diversity politics; one gaming outlet described it as having become ‘a scapegoat for a lack of diversity in games’.³⁶⁶

As Young says, ‘historical authenticity has little to do with verifiable historical fact even though it is predicated as a concept on the existence of an objective and knowable historical truth’.³⁶⁷ Instead, “historical accuracy” or “authenticity” are socially and culturally constructed terms which intend to confer the authority of an agreed historical understanding to subjective interpretations of historical events, and consequently dictate the historical perspectives which can be represented within historical media in relation to this constructed understanding of the past.³⁶⁸ Therefore, decentralising the concept of “historical accuracy” within academic discussion of historical games not only opens new avenues for research by facilitating analysis of games as cultural discourse about history, but could also serve to help protect academics from toxic voices online.

All of these issues emphasise one crucial phenomenon: history is often a subjective experience, not a factual record, within the video game space. This, naturally, leads to different approaches to developing a historical video game, but the ultimate goal for developers and publishers is to create an experience that entertains. Within this authorial perspective, “authenticity” can offer additive benefits such as contextual interest or technical challenge within gameplay interactions which increase the potential appeal of a historical game experience, but which may not be fiscally, technically or legally viable to implement across the entirety of a historical game’s representation of a historical period.³⁶⁹

While this business-led mentality of game design may appear cynical, it is a crucial element in understanding the modern video game medium. Even the most successful historical games, such as *Crusader Kings III* – which ranked third amongst PC Gamer’s Top

³⁶⁶ Gerblich, “Manor Lords dev doesn’t like calling the city-builder “historically accurate”.

³⁶⁷ Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 29-30.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Traynor and Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, pp. 243-254.

100 PC Games of 2022 and 2023 –³⁷⁰ or *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* – which was the first AC game to earn more than \$1 billion in revenue –³⁷¹ attract players who are drawn to particular styles or genres of gameplay rather than appealing exclusively to historical enthusiasts.³⁷² These levels of commercial success are only possible if developers are willing to make compromises to historical source material or the presentation of historical subjects within their games, sacrificing rigid “historical accuracy” in order to create an entertaining experience which can appeal to a wider, more “casual” audience.³⁷³

Previous chapters have discussed games’ attitudes to history as an aesthetic and iconographic genre rather than a narrative phenomenon, and gaming’s attitudes to the issue of “historical accuracy” are arguably one of the most significant identifiers of this iconographic mentality: a historical game does not need to be entirely “historically accurate” as long as the iconographic components which are used to create a game’s historical world are suitably “authentic” to the historical period being portrayed. Consequently, the emphasis given to this concept in academic scholarship should be redirected towards alternate discussions of how engagement with historical games can be interpreted and assessed.

³⁷⁰ Phil Savage, “The Top 100 PC Games”, *PC Gamer*, 5 October 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-top-100-pc-games-2022/>; “PC Gamer Top 100 2023”, magazine pullout, in *PC Gamer*, vol. 387 (October 2023), p. 30.

³⁷¹ Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed Valhalla passes \$1bn revenue”, *Eurogamer*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-valhalla-passes-usd1bn-revenue>.

³⁷² Traynor and Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, pp. 243-254; Joshua Wollens, “Crusader Kings 3 celebrates 3 years with stats showing we’re 45% more likely to do a murder than fall in love”, *PC Gamer*, 1 September 2023, <https://www.pcgamer.com/crusader-kings-3-celebrates-3-years-with-stats-showing-were-45-more-likely-to-do-a-murder-than-fall-in-love/>.

³⁷³ Gault, “‘Battlefield 1’ Sacrificed Historical Accuracy To Make The Great War Fun’.

Chapter 4: History as a Recreation - Historical Reenactment as a Perspective of Historical Gaming

As this thesis has shown, historical video games are too greatly influenced by the demands of gameplay and internal game mechanics, as well as being situated within competing subjective views of both the history which they represent and the modern world which consumes them, to perceive these games as empirically “historical” sources. However, their significance as influential platforms for the presentation and interpretation of history remains. How then should we approach historical games? How can we interpret the history which is being presented to modern audiences through these media? An alternative authorial perspective on historical games could be to view them as a form of “digital historical reenactment”, a media which aims to present a tactile approximation of a historical setting with a view to inform and entertain within this historical depiction, but which is inherently restricted by limitations set by the modern context of its presentation. Throughout this chapter, the parallels and comparisons between reenactment and historical games shall be illustrated to facilitate this interpretation on a practical level, emphasising both comparisons of how participants of these media approach and undertake constructions of historical subjects and of how audiences engage with these media to interact with and interpret historical content.

The relationship between historians and historical reenactment is a complex issue in its own right. Re-enactors are often viewed in the popular consciousness as strange people who choose to spend their valuable free time dressing up in historical costume for little practical purpose,¹ and are sometimes wrongly or collectively identified with Live-Action Role Players (LARPs), who blend pseudo-historical imagery with interpretations of fictional genres and media, such as fantasy and science-fiction.² Re-enactors have also been

¹ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Second edition; London: Routledge, 2016), p. 109; Kate Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry: behind the boom in historical reenactment”, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2024, <https://amp.theguardian.com/stage/2024/nov/11/muskets-chain-mail-and-medieval-laundry-historical-reenactment-living-history>.

² This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences. See also, de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 112; Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Play” in Vanessa Agnew, Johnathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 178.

perceived by select socio-political groups as embodiments of cultural ideologies which are no longer considered legitimate in the modern day; Krzysztof Olechnicki and Tomasz Szlendak, for instance, identify reenactment as vulnerable to feminist critiques of being associated with a 'dangerous cultural niche, which enables the restoration of past patriarchal male dominance'.³

This confused perception of reenactment in the cultural zeitgeist becomes even more uncertain for re-enactors of military scenarios – which, as shall be discussed, is a popular and widespread element of reenactment practice – as this can create the appearance of “playing at war”, thereby making light of real world conflicts and disrespecting those who fought and died in real life.⁴ Re-enactors who portray politically-sensitive historical subjects, such as the Germans in WWII reenactments, are especially controversial as the perception of disrespecting the real-life victims of actions committed by the depicted parties via the act of “playing” them within a reenactment is coupled to an implied association between the re-enactors with the ideologies of the subject which they represent.⁵

While forms of reenactment – sometimes known under the broader term of “living history” – can be a useful tool for reproducing historical items and techniques and demonstrating their use, thereby enabling easier interpretation of archaeological finds and historical monuments to a non-academic audience,⁶ re-enactors themselves can also be a practical nuisance if archaeological sites are used for reenactment purposes, thereby requiring additional work to filter out any objects deposited by re-enactors – such as chainmail links, belt buckles and other small objects which might easily be broken or lost in the course of a reenactment event – which might be potentially mistaken for “true”

³ Krzysztof Olechnicki and Tomasz Szlendak, “Historical Reenactment in Poland: Between Faithfulness to History and the Imperative of Specularity”, *Polish Sociological Review*, vol. 209: 1 (2020), p. 4; Juliane Tomann, “Female Counter-Curation: A Case Study of Polish Napoleonic War Reenactment”, *International Public History*, vol. 5: 2 (2022), pp. 81-82.

⁴ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 114.

⁵ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116; Kamila Baraneicka-Olszewska, “Representing the Other and the Democratisation of History: Polish Reenactors in Nazi Uniforms”, *International Public History*, vol. 4: 2 (2021), pp. 117-125; Alastair Lockhart, “WWII reenactment group who dress up as Nazis are condemned by campaigners as ‘insensitive and grossly offensive’”, *Daily Mail Online*, 20 June 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10933901/WWII-Nazi-enactment-group-condemned-campaigners-insensitive-grossly-offensive.html>; *Dark Tourist – Episode 5: Europe*, written by David Farrier and Paul Horan (broadcast 28 July 2018 on Netflix). [1:44-12:42]. This is a phenomenon which this author has also experienced in the context of medieval reenactment regarding ideas of gender, race and religion.

⁶ David Dean, “Living History”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 120-125; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 122-125.

archaeological finds.⁷ Similarly, re-enactors can help educate the public on historical events and social practices within a heritage context, and are frequently employed for visual reconstructions in television documentaries as part of this process,⁸ yet their frequent status as amateur researchers – in the sense of not possessing formal academic training or degrees, or of not being directly overseen by professional historians or heritage groups – can lead to wildly varying standards of “factual accuracy” and procedural rigour in constructing their representation of a historical subject.⁹ Likewise, attitudes towards inclusivity and gender roles among participants of reenactment can ‘wobble precariously from one group to the next’, with some citing issues of historical accuracy or a desire not to ‘rewrite history’ as a defence for restricting participation.¹⁰

Yet regardless of individual variant practices and intellectual approaches to performance, re-enactors are united by the common goal of recreating history for modern audiences. As John Tosh says, ‘the first aspiration [of historical writing] is one to which nearly all historians would own: to discover what happened in the past and what it was like to live in the past’;¹¹ this statement could apply equally to “traditional” historical scholarship or to historical reenactment, with the latter practice embodying this goal via the act of researching and subsequently experiencing this understanding of the past through physical performance. Within this reenactment performance, a common emphasis is upon “authenticity”, heightening the desire to present a historical epoch in as detailed and factually correct a manner as possible, yet regularly caveated by requirements or necessities of the modern world.¹²

⁷ See for example, *Time Team – 1066: The Lost Battlefield* (broadcast 1 December 2013 on Channel Four). Material consulted online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bm-gARMbWiA> [7:20-9:05; 10:13-11:42; 15:30-16:35].

⁸ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 117-125; Stellar Bruzzi, “Documentary”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 49-52; *Weekend Warriors – Episode 4: The Norman Siege of Rochester* (broadcast 28 January 2015 on UKTV).

⁹ Anne Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 74-78.

¹⁰ Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

¹¹ John Tosh (ed.), *Historians on History* (2nd ed.; London: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009), p. 2.

¹² Stephen Gapps, “Mobile Monuments: A view of historical reenactment and authenticity from inside the costume cupboard of history”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 13: 3 (2009), pp. 395-409; Vanessa Agnew & Juliane Tomann, “Authenticity”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 20-24.

Many of these same issues regarding the interpretation and depiction of history within a historical reenactment are also present in the discussion and analysis of video games as historical tools, and several – notably issues of politicised interpretation of portrayals of historical events and controversy surrounding participation from the historical perspective of “villainous” historical agents, issues of demographic inclusion within a historical medium and the contested dominance of politically conservative male authorship, the popularity of warfare and other military historical subjects, and issues of balancing historical authenticity with practical limitations of a given historical medium – have been explored in the course of this thesis. Therefore, it is worth considering these two phenomena of historical games and historical reenactment in context with each other, as the mutual prominence of these phenomena within both video games and reenactment enables the illustration of key issues within popular engagement with history as a wider subject.

Thankfully, as with historical game studies, there is an ever-growing corpus of academic work which has endeavoured to examine various facets of the broad phenomenon that is historical reenactment. Scholars have been examining reenactment and “living history” for years, with texts such as Jay Anderson’s *Time Machines* – published in 1984, and offering an examination of American contemporary “living history” and reenactment practices¹³ – laying the foundations for modern exploration of the subject. One of the modern leaders in this field is Vanessa Agnew, whose works on reenactment are still essential academic reading on the subject after almost twenty years;¹⁴ among the recent texts Agnew has contributed to is the *Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, a detailed encyclopaedia of reenactment and many of its key facets featuring contributions from numerous authors, which Agnew co-edited along with contributing several chapters.¹⁵ These contributions include co-authoring a chapter on Authenticity, which examines ideas that have already been discussed in this thesis with regards to games under the form of historical accuracy.¹⁶ Another key chapter in this same

¹³ Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State & Local History, 1984).

¹⁴ See for examples, Vanessa Agnew, “Introduction: What is Reenactment?”, *Criticism*, vol. 46: 3 (2004), pp. 327-399; Vanessa Agnew, “History’s Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 11: 3 (2007), pp. 299-312.

¹⁵ Vanessa Agnew, Johnathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁶ Agnew & Tomann, “Authenticity”, pp. 20-24.

text, written by gaming scholar Pieter Van den Heede, actively identifies video gaming as a potential form or aspect of historical reenactment,¹⁷ thereby heightening the significance of the discussion herein.

As with academic examination of historical games, there is a significant scholarly focus upon concepts of authenticity within reenactment, within which Stephen Gapps' *Mobile Monuments* is a particularly noteworthy text for this analysis given his personal involvement in reenactments;¹⁸ historian and re-enactor Emma Nelson, of the University of Manchester, likewise explores how the phenomena of historical authenticity is understood and applied within reenactment from a re-enactor's perspective.¹⁹ As Gapps observes, 're-enactors often go to extraordinary lengths to acquire and animate the look and feel of history', but whose ability and willingness to portray an "authentic" vision of history is 'tempered by the various levels of performance competency possessed by individual reenactors and reenactment groups'. While some re-enactors are willing to adopt a "'close enough is good enough" version of reenactment' which is willing to accommodate certain flaws and "quality of life" compromises for the benefit of participants, as long as the appearance of historicity is maintained to the casual observer, others pursue authenticity to a strict, even extreme degree, believing that detailed authenticity is critical to ensuring the *feeling* of a historical experience.²⁰

These behaviours parallel attitudes already discussed within the creation of historical games, with some games – such as the *Assassin's Creed* titles and others within the triple-A gaming category – willing to accept certain historiographical compromises in order to suit requirements of the game user while maintaining historical aesthetics, while other games – such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* or "indie" games like *Manor Lords* – aim to adhere as closely as possible to more factually rigorous depictions of history in order to convey an "authentic" historical experience.

¹⁷ Pieter Van den Heede, "Gaming", in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 84-88.

¹⁸ Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", pp. 395-409.

¹⁹ Emma Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity: Historical Reenactment and the Medieval World", in Oliver Jones and Eleanor Chadwick (eds.), *Performing medievalism: tips, tricks and tropes from early artistic practice for the modern performer* (London: Bloomsbury, publication forthcoming). I am very grateful to Emma for sharing a pre-publication copy of this chapter with me.

²⁰ Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", pp. 396-399; Bræder, "Expertise and Amateurism", pp. 74-78.

Alongside these texts and others, of additional note is a strong corpus of work emanating from reenactment scholars in Eastern and Central Europe, such as Krzysztof Olechnicki, Tomasz Szlendak and Kamila Baraneicka-Olszewska;²¹ Eastern and Central European countries like Czechia and Poland have strong reenactment cultures which boomed in popularity after the collapse of the Soviet Union,²² and manufacturers in countries like Poland and Ukraine are significant suppliers of modern reenactment paraphernalia.²³ As such, by comparing their discussions with texts such as Rebecca Schnieder's *Performing Remains* – which incorporates discussion of the experiences of American historical re-enactors²⁴ – the works by these Eastern European scholars can greatly aid with demonstrating the commonalities of reenactment as a participatory experience and a means of historical interaction, despite regional or individual variations of practice, while also dispelling the idea that reenactment is solely a hobby enjoyed in the wealthy West.

Meanwhile, games studies writers, including scholars such as Adam Chapman and Jerome de Groot, have noted the similarities between reenactment and games as means of experiencing or performing versions of history;²⁵ Chapman describes games as a form of 'digital-ludic reenactment' which can 'help us to understand historical challenges, the skills needed to overcome them and the relevant information to these processes',²⁶ and even dedicates an entire chapter of his *Digital Games as History* to exploring the connections between historical games and reenactment.²⁷ Annette Vowinckle also connects historical games and reenactments as two competing interpretations of historical simulation, offering the "user" the means of replicating and exerting a degree of agency over the outcomes, although her analysis examines the concept of simulation in comparison between its interpretation as imitative representation – which she applies to both video games and reenactments – and the politico-scientific form of "simulation", wherein "simulations" are

²¹ For examples, see Olechnicki and Szlendak, "Historical Reenactment in Poland", pp. 3-22; Kamila Baraneicka-Olszewska, "Representing the Other and the Democratisation of History", pp. 117-125.

²² Olechnicki and Szlendak, "Historical Reenactment in Poland", p. 4.

²³ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

²⁴ Rebecca Schnieder, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁵ Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), pp. 180-188 & 198-230; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 105-106.

²⁶ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 186.

²⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 198-230.

conducted to predict future events, a form which she considers antithetical to historical inquiry.²⁸

Therefore, it is justifiable to assert, like Chapman and Van den Heede, that this comparison between historical games and reenactment can be taken a step further and become a direct equivalence between the two media. However, whereas Chapman's analysis examines games as a platform for behaviours akin to reenactment and player communities performing as re-enactors,²⁹ this discussion shall examine the direct parallels and comparisons between the subjective experience of engaging with historical subjects via the media of historical games and reenactments.

The particular qualification of this author to make and explore these connections and comparisons is that, in addition to being a keen historical gamer, I am, like Stephen Gapps, also an active historical re-enactor.³⁰ In 2016, I joined the Historia Normannis reenactment society, a group dedicated to depicting life in medieval Britain during the twelfth century.³¹ As a society, Historia Normannis draws together members from across the British Isles and beyond to stage annual events at castles and other heritage sites on behalf of local councils and heritage organisations such as English Heritage.³² Therefore, in contrast to Chapman's discussion of the connections between gaming and reenactment, which focuses primarily on theoretical analysis and approaches the subject principally from a gaming perspective,³³ this chapter will draw upon this author's personal experiences of reenactment to not only define and contextualise their particular experience within the broader phenomenon of reenactment culture, but also how the author's experiences can serve as a case study for how a comparison of the experience of reenactment, both from the perspective of an audience and of a participant, can be made to that of the experience of interacting with a historical video game. Consequently, phenomena discussed within this chapter will be

²⁸ Annette Vowinkel, "Past Futures: From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games", *Historical Social Research*, vol. 34: 2 (2009), pp. 322-332.

²⁹ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 198-230.

³⁰ Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", p. 396.

³¹ Historia Normannis, <https://normannis.co.uk/>. I am very grateful to Historia Normannis for granting permission to use internal group materials for the purposes of this thesis. For additional discussion of Historia Normannis' reenactment performance practices, see Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", pp. 6-10.

³² This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

³³ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 198-230.

highlighted where the author has had direct personal experience of the phenomenon, or where analysis is derived from the author's perspective and interpretation of their experiences.

Crucially, this chapter will show that while both gaming and reenactment are inherently imperfect portrayals of history, what perspectives of these historical media can offer towards depicting and engaging with the past should be analysed, in spite of their flaws, as significant elements of modern heritage culture and popular understanding of history. In particular, the analysis in this chapter shall demonstrate that an understanding of methodological challenges within reenactment and how the reenactment medium engages with historical subjects can supply valuable insight for the interpretation of historical subjects within video games, which may open new avenues for interpreting and analysing both video games' constructions of historical events and responses to historical games within popular discourse.

Defining Historical Reenactment & its Practices

Before examining how historical video games compare to historical reenactment, it is important to quantify the experience that these games are being compared to. "Historical reenactment", in one form or another, has a surprisingly lengthy history. The Romans staged reenactments of their victories, including naval battles, in the Colosseum as a form of entertainment and propaganda.³⁴ American Civil War reenactments began as a result of veterans, from both sides of the conflict, congregating on their shared battlegrounds almost fifty years after the conflict ended, before burgeoning as a popular pastime of hobbyists trying to 'keep the war "alive"' in the 1950s, 'as the last people who could remember the war were passing away'.³⁵ Elsewhere, a tradition of historical pageants and fayres gained popularity during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, blending local folk traditions and pseudo-historical ideology under the guise of recreating the past.³⁶ As

³⁴ Mads Daugberg, "Battle", in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, p. 25.

³⁵ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 8; Rory Turner, "Bloodless Battles: The Civil War Reenacted", *TDR* (1988-), vol. 34: 4 (1990), pp. 123-136.

³⁶ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 125-128; Amy M. Tyson, "Pageant", in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 163-168; Angela Bartie et al.,

Chapman notes, ‘in a sense, heritage activities are always a form of reenactment’, as they work to preserve history and enable modern audiences to interact directly with historical subjects, an interpretation which facilitates the understanding of historical games as a form of reenactment.³⁷

Historical reenactment, in the modern culturally recognised sense, has existed in the UK since the early 1970s. Amongst its early pioneers was the Sealed Knot. Founded in 1968, making it the oldest surviving reenactment group in the UK,³⁸ the Sealed Knot depicts large-scale battles from the English Civil War period, with a secondary focus on presenting “living history” from the same era of the seventeenth century.³⁹ This dual focus of modern reenactment is a significant point, for while the grand spectacle of recreated historical conflict is a major attraction for both members of reenactment groups and for the public composing the audiences of reenactment events, it is frequently counterbalanced or supported with a desire to portray the day-to-day existence of those living within a historical period. This allows re-enactors to attempt a degree of equality between high-concept ideas of history – what Vanessa Agnew calls, with some justification, ‘the perennial favourites of grade-school history’,⁴⁰ like famous historical events such as the Battle of Hastings, and well-known historical periods such as the Roman Empire or World War II – with more niche subjects designed to reflect the otherwise unseen everyday reality beneath the obvious landmarks of history. The dual focus of the Sealed Knot also emphasises that historical reenactment is an ‘umbrella term [which] contains a kaleidoscope of forms’ as a practical phenomenon,⁴¹ and that a particular reenactment group’s approach to portraying the past may encompass several methods.

From a perspective of historical scholarship, reenactment shares strong parallels to certain aspects of the “historicist” school of historical scholarship championed by writers like Leopold von Ranke; emphasising the Otherness of history to contemporary society, but simultaneously maintaining that the only way of understanding such a distinctly different

“Historical Pageants and the Medieval Past in Twentieth-Century England”, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 133: 563 (2018), pp. 866-902.

³⁷ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 180.

³⁸ The Sealed Knot, <https://www.thesealedknot.org.uk/>.

³⁹ The Sealed Knot, “About Us”, <https://www.thesealedknot.org.uk/about/>.

⁴⁰ Agnew, “Introduction: What is Reenactment?”, p. 327.

⁴¹ Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

society is to totally immerse oneself in it in order to see the past ‘how it really was’.⁴² Furthermore, due to the lack of unified regulation in matters of research and production across reenactment as a wider intellectual discipline, as well as varying participant backgrounds, re-enactors frequently default to a knowledge and understanding of the original source material of their chosen historical period as an indicator of professionalism and intellectual authority;⁴³ as in the historicist school of historical scholarship, a thorough command of the original source material is considered a vital element of legitimacy amongst more dedicated re-enactors.⁴⁴ However, while traditional historicists approached history principally from the technical perspective of surviving documents and textual sources,⁴⁵ re-enactors bring an additional element of physical performance to their examination of the past. Gapps’ description of reenactment as ‘more visceral, insistent, perhaps more creative – but definitely more audacious – than formal historical writing’ is worth remembering, for while ‘like historians, reenactors not only tell stories but cite evidence... by virtue of its performative nature, reenactment is open-ended – an ephemeral site of history’ which engages with popular understandings of the past as well as conventions of its own medium.⁴⁶

As mentioned above, historical reenactment can encompass a variety of potential forms of historical representation and engagement. Some reenactment groups focus primarily on the depiction of historical combat, a practice which can be conveyed more safely and more convincingly for certain periods – such as Roman or medieval reenactments, where there is a greater emphasis on melee combat – than others, such as Napoleonic or World War reenactments or any other period that involves firearms.⁴⁷ These reconstructed engagements provide a large-scale spectacle for events which draw audiences to historical sites, and regular staging of specific historical battles, such as English Heritage’s annual Battle of Hastings reenactment, can draw substantial crowds to individual sites.⁴⁸ Other

⁴² E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Reprinted ed.; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 3; Tosh, *Historians on History*, pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-78; this statement is also based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

⁴⁴ Tosh, *Historians on History*, p. 3; Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-78.

⁴⁵ Tosh, *Historians on History*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 397-399.

⁴⁷ This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

⁴⁸ “Battle of Hastings re-enacted by 1,000 soldiers for 950th anniversary”, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/oct/15/battle-of-hastings-re-enacted-950th-anniversary>; Jonny

reenactment groups may focus on or incorporate displays of normal day-to-day life in a historical period, such as crafts, trades, and domestic activities such as cooking; this is a facet of reenactment which is generally referred to as “living history”.⁴⁹ This facet in particular is highly valuable for heritage sites, as it allows the public to observe how a historical space might have been occupied and furnished during a historical period rather than relying solely on the visitors’ imagination. Moreover, filling a historical space with tangible objects serves to further enable public engagement by allowing visitors the opportunity to physically interact with displays and replica artefacts, engaging additional senses such as touch or smell, rather than relying exclusively on passive visual observation.⁵⁰

Some heritage sites have incorporated dedicated elements of “living history” display into the fabric of their public engagement strategies;⁵¹ for example, between 2007 and 2009, English Heritage staff undertook a major project to fill the rooms of the central keep at Dover Castle with authentic replica artefacts that would enable the public to visualise how these spaces might have appeared when the castle was first built (Figure 4.1).⁵² Meanwhile, dedicated “living history” sites – sometimes known under the moniker of “living museums” – such as the Black Country Living Museum, Weald & Downland Living Museum, Cosmeston Medieval Village, and Mountfitchet Castle,⁵³ maintain preserved or reconstructed historic buildings or settlements, offering expansive and immersive physical environments for public engagement with diverse historical material and “living history” displays in a more permanent situational context.⁵⁴

Weeks, “Battle of Hastings revisited: hundreds re-enact conflict of 1066”, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/16/battle-of-hastings-revisited-reenact-1066>.

⁴⁹ Dean, “Living History”, pp. 120-125.

⁵⁰ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 122-125.

⁵¹ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 122-125; Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 396-399 & pp. 402-403.

⁵² “Dover Castle: Things to See and Do – The Great Tower”, *English Heritage*, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/dover-castle/things-to-do/the-great-tower/>. See also, *Dover Castle: a Time Team Special* (broadcast 19 December 2009 on Channel Four) [Accessed online: *Time Team Official*, YouTube, 20 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjpOclgklwA>]; Tod’s Workshop, *Dover Castle – Some things I made*, online video recording, YouTube, 10 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwLSMrn-I94>.

⁵³ *Black Country Living Museum*, official website, <https://bclm.com/>; *Weald & Downland Living Museum*, official website, <https://www.wealddown.co.uk/>; *Cosmeston Medieval Village*, Vale of Glamorgan Council website, <https://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/en/enjoying/Coast-and-Countryside/cosmeston-lakes-country-park/cosmeston-medieval-village/Cosmeston-Medieval-Village.aspx>; *Mountfitchet Castle & Norman Village of 1066*, <https://mountfitchetcastle.com/about-mountfitchet-castle/>.

⁵⁴ “The UK’s best living museums: readers’ top 10 travel tips”, *The Guardian*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2019/feb/07/uk-best-living-museums-readers-top-10-travel-tips>.

Some “living history” sites have even offered modern craftsmen and scholars and an opportunity to study period construction practices by building replica historical structures using period-correct tools, materials and techniques; for example, the *Park in the Past* project near Oswestry, Wales, has rewilded a former industrial park in an effort to learn through re-creation about the area’s Bronze Age landscape,⁵⁵ and has used an ongoing series of crowdfunding campaigns to finance the developing construction of a Roman auxiliary timber fort using period-authentic materials and techniques.⁵⁶ Critically, these “living history” sites allow visitors to acquire insight into the relatively mundane aspects of daily life experienced by historical characters, which are frequently reported in only fragmentary records by traditional historical sources and are often marginalised by cinematic or gaming depictions of a historical period, or whose presentation via reenactment enables a better understanding of their application.



Figure 4.1: Reconstructed interior furnishings in the Great Tower at Dover Castle (English Heritage: image from author’s collection).

⁵⁵ “Prehistoric Landscape”, *Park in the Past*, <https://parkinthepast.org.uk/prehistoric-landscape/>.

⁵⁶ “Britain’s Big Fort Build”, *Park in the Past*, <https://parkinthepast.org.uk/the-roman-fort-project/>.

Depending on the historical period being portrayed, re-enactors may also be required to explore the historical evidence available and actively experiment in order to ascertain how a historical period or specific historical objects may have operated, appeared, or been employed; this process of active practical research in order to recreate history is known as “experimental archaeology”, and has been identified by academics as a niche, but valuable strand of historical study.⁵⁷ By drawing reference from surviving examples or visual representations, experimental archaeologists aim to reconstruct historical objects or practices by utilising the same tools or techniques as used by their historical counterparts; in many cases, these techniques may need to be deduced through practice and experimentation where extant records have not survived in detail or relevant practices have changed over time alongside technological developments.

While Gunter Schöbel maintains that experimental archaeology is an ostensibly scientific discipline, demanding rigorous procedure and thorough documentation to ensure the validity of its results,⁵⁸ this is an inherently academic perspective of this practice, which may demand a degree of professionalism beyond the capabilities or interest of many re-enactors. Experimental archaeology from the perspective of re-enactors can focus principally upon the practical experience of creating and interacting with a historic artefact and understanding the thought processes of historical craftsmen, with the creation of a historically authentic product a consequence of this process.⁵⁹ By this definition, any re-enactors or modern artisans who create period-authentic replica artefacts or structures using period-appropriate tools or techniques can be said to engage in experimental archaeology as, fundamentally, they are attempting to recreate the techniques of the past by producing a plausibly-authentic replica of a historical artefact or practice.⁶⁰

The benefit of preserving these historic techniques through reenactment and experimentation can also have practical applications beyond the enjoyment felt by those involved in their preservation or the realism they lend to depictions of the past. In a previous chapter, it was discussed that the alleged “historical accuracy” of digital models of

⁵⁷ Gunter Schöbel, “Experimental Archaeology”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 67-73.

⁵⁸ Schöbel, “Experimental Archaeology”, p. 67.

⁵⁹ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 2 & p. 11.

⁶⁰ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 13.

Notre Dame used in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* would enable their use in the restoration of the Cathedral following the 2019 fire which caused significant damage to the historic landmark; these assertions ultimately proved to be incorrect due to the alterations made to the Cathedral's in-game depiction for legal and technological reasons.⁶¹

However, the landmark's reconstruction was substantially aided thanks to a French experimental archaeology project and "living history" site at Gudelon Castle, where artisans and craftspeople have engaged in the construction of a medieval castle from the ground up using period-authentic tools and techniques;⁶² the skills and experience developed over the course of this project, which began in 1997, have been invaluable in training the craftspeople tasked with restoring Notre Dame's medieval architecture, as modern production methods would not have the same resilience due to fundamental changes in construction practices and tools.⁶³ The devastation wrought upon Notre Dame and the application of techniques redeveloped through experimental archaeology serves as a dramatic reminder of the importance of preserving the practical techniques of history alongside the artefacts and sites they were used to create, and that maintaining or rediscovering the skills of historical artisans and craftsmen through practical reenactment forms an essential element of this conservation.

As well as different groups adopting different methodological approaches to historical reenactment, this cultural phenomenon is undertaken with differing degrees of intensity between different groups, periods of historical interest, and in different countries. Gapps, for example, notes that:

Australian reenactors, perhaps less amenable to public drama than North Americans, are more inclined to use so-called 'second person' techniques when performing a person from the past.

⁶¹ Simone de Rochefort, "Assassin's Creed Unity can't help rebuild Notre-Dame, and that's OK", *Polygon*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/features/22790314/assassins-creed-unity-notre-dame-restoration-accuracy>.

⁶² Kim Willsher, "'They said it was impossible': how medieval carpenters are rebuilding Notre Dame", *The Guardian*, 20 August 2022, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/20/notre-dame-cathedral-fire-rebuild-medieval-carpenters-guledon>; "Experimental archaeology: an open-air laboratory", *Guédelon*, <https://www.guedelon.fr/en/la-d%C3%A9marche>; "Methodology: hands-on learning", *Guédelon*, <https://www.guedelon.fr/en/la-methodologie>.

⁶³ Willsher, "'They said it was impossible': how medieval carpenters are rebuilding Notre Dame".

Reenactors in the United States, in contrast, often use 'first person' role-playing styles when researching a character and try to bring them 'alive' for expectant audiences.⁶⁴

Possibly one of the most widely recognised elements of reenactment culture is an emphasis – arguably bordering on fetishisation by some reenactors – of “historical accuracy” as part of the performance of history.⁶⁵ Both Stephen Gapps and Anne Bræder record multiple self-identified categories of re-enactors, using terms originating within American Civil War reenactment, whose commitment and “professionalism” as re-enactors range across several gradations determined by the degree of authenticity within the construction of their historical performance: at the top of these spectrums are the most dedicated, “hardcore” re-enactors, who present almost flawless recreations of historical figures down to minute details such as weathering, hairstyle and posture, and, in the most extreme examples, willingly ‘undergo feats of physical endurance such as sleeping out in winter under the “same conditions” experienced by, for example, soldiers in the past’ in order to ‘gain the physical experience of authenticity’.⁶⁶ At the lowest gradation are the least experienced or most amateurish re-enactors, known colloquially as “farbs” – an abbreviation with a contested etymology amongst reenactment scholars, but which Bræder defines as referring to ‘a reenactor who is judged as having failed to establish a legitimate link to history’.⁶⁷

Within the typology of re-enactors described by Gapps and Bræder, the description which most closely identifies members of *Historia Normannis* is – by this author’s interpretation – arguably the classification of “progressives”; this category of re-enactors is one which Bræder defines as ‘slightly lower on the scale of dress authenticity’ than “hardcore” re-enactors due to minor flaws in costume, personal appearance or mannerisms, such as ‘being deemed “too clean” or “too neat”’, but whose representation of the past adheres more closely to the surviving period source material than either “mainstream” re-

⁶⁴ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 399.

⁶⁵ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 109-125; Van den Heede, “Gaming”, pp. 84-88; Martin Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at Kingdom Come: Deliverance and its historical claim”, in Fernández Sirvent, Rafael y Gutiérrez Lloret, Rosa Ana (eds.), *Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea, Universidad de Alicante 20-22 de septiembre de 2018* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2019), pp. 380-394. This statement is also based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

⁶⁶ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 399-400; Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-75.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

enactors – who Bræder identifies as demonstrating significant authenticity flaws in their presentation such as utilising inauthentic materials within historical costumes or wearing costumes and accoutrements incorrectly – or “farb” re-enactors, who Bræder reports as exhibiting such ‘egregious’ presentational flaws within their attire or performance as to represent ‘assaults on the very integrity of reenactment itself’.⁶⁸

However, this author would also note that the typology employed by Gapps and Bræder provides very firmly divided categories, which, although reflective of the range of attitudes to “historical accuracy” within reenactment culture, this author would argue does not wholly represent the complex spectrum of attitudes which reenactors can adopt, as individuals and even entire groups may present characteristics from multiple classifications within Gapps and Bræder’s typology of reenactors, sometimes simultaneously. Moreover, much of this attitude to “historical accuracy” within reenactment presented by the typology employed by Gapps and Bræder compares strongly with attitudes to what Donald and Reid have described as ‘material accuracy’ within the realm of video games, where the emphasis of developers lies on accurate recreation of the material elements of a historical subject in order to create an impression of historical realism.⁶⁹ Although this aspect of historical reenactment is a significant element of the medium’s engagement with historical subjects, it is not necessarily its exclusive characteristic, and so should be viewed within a wider context.

While it should be recognised that this typology of re-enactors employed by Gapps and Bræder is inherently restrictive, and potentially subjective, in the application of its categories to particular groups or individual re-enactors, it does provide a framework by which to understand the variety of attitudes towards concepts of “professionalism” and “historical authenticity” expressed by re-enactors, ranging from those most committed to recreating and experiencing the past to those more interested in conveying an appearance of historicity drawn from historical pop-culture. Gapps, for example, more generously describes “farbs” as re-enactors whose ‘historical knowledge may be vast, but their

⁶⁸ Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-75.

⁶⁹ Iain Donald and Andrew Reid, “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*”, *Media Education Journal*, vol. 66 (2020), pp. 15-23. See also Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past”, pp. 380-394; Miroslav Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, vol. 11:2 (2019), pp. 69-76.

knowledge and conception of reenactment conventions remain limited', thereby emphasising that these classifications refer to a re-enactor's conformity to informally accepted standards of presentation within reenactment and the contrasting authorial perspectives of reenactment as a historical medium that they infer.⁷⁰

Alongside these varied approaches to historical reenactment, there is a similarly diverse range of applications and motives for the phenomenon, which are significant elements to understanding reenactment's place in modern historical culture. As Rebecca Schnieder notes, 'the practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act has exploded in performance-based art alongside the burgeoning of historical reenactment and "living history" in various history museums, theme parks, and preservation societies', thereby transforming reenactment into a catch-all term for 'the popular and practice-based wing of what has been called the twentieth century academic "memory industry"'.⁷¹ A growing number of historical institutions and heritage sites employ re-enactors, either for short-term events or as long-term staff members, as a means of facilitating public engagement with the history on display, allowing the public to interact with responsive and relatable figures instead of passive artefacts.⁷²

Long-term investment of this kind is an essential element of "living museums" of the kind discussed above, as public interaction with re-enactors in period-appropriate costumes is a key element of the experience offered by such sites. The inclusion of set-piece "event displays", such as combat performances, also provides an element of spectacle, which is often significant to help attract audiences to events by offering dramatic action in contrast to passive displays and artefacts. The capacity of re-enactors to operate as "historical performers" in this fashion has similarly seen widespread employment in TV documentaries, where re-enactors are frequently used to visualise historical events being described without relying exclusively on the audience's imagination or stylised images from historical sources.⁷³

To many of those involved, reenactment is also a leisure past-time. As Olechnicki and Szlendack observe in discussion of Polish re-enactors, 'reenactment is a type of active hobby

⁷⁰ Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", pp. 399-400.

⁷¹ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 2.

⁷² de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 122-125; Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", p. 399 & pp. 402-405

⁷³ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 117-122; Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35: 1 (2008), pp. 72-89.

that turns into a lifestyle,⁷⁴ whose appeal is partly derived from its distinction from the modern vocations of its participants.⁷⁵ This personal investment encourages members to participate with as much emphasis on individual commitment as that of the group, to develop and hone their own personal display within the overall reenactment provided at an event, and re-enactors' passion for the subject matter naturally fosters a degree of dedication that facilitates willingness to endure some discomforts for the sake of the overall experience. This leisure aspect of reenactment can also result in participants continuing to engage in reenactment in spite of changes in personal circumstances, changing between groups to continue participating in the hobby overall, leading to lengthy periods of participation that can subsequently span generations as younger members are introduced to reenactment by their parents: in the words of one re-enactor, 'it's one of the few areas you see where teenagers and pensioners are genuinely mates'.⁷⁶

A significant caveat with regards to participation in reenactment, which is worth noting, is its financial cost. Obtaining the requisite materials and equipment to produce and develop a reenactment display and costume is a significant financial investment, which contributes to the medium's perception as a middle-class hobby and can potentially act as a barrier to participation for re-enactors with more limited financial resources.⁷⁷ Moreover, the leisure aspect of reenactment also raises questions about the darker side of reenactment. The often-violent subject matter of reenactment displays which focus on combat, warfare, or controversial historical periods or subjects bring with them questions surrounding the appeal of portraying these historical phenomena and their participants;⁷⁸ similar questions have surrounded video games for years, with criticism of widespread depictions of violence and other mature subjects within games frequently cited by critics of the medium as a negative influence upon younger audiences.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Olechnicki and Szlendak, "Historical Reenactment in Poland", p. 3.

⁷⁵ Jade Cuttle, "I'm a mixed Black female re-enactor in a sea of men with beards", *The Guardian*, 1 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/dec/01/im-a-mixed-black-female-historical-re-enactor-in-a-sea-of-men-with-beards>.

⁷⁶ Wyver, "Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry".

⁷⁷ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences. See also, Wyver, "Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry".

⁷⁸ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 114-116; *Dark Tourist – Episode 5* [1:44 – 12:42].

⁷⁹ See for examples, Guy Porter and Vladan Starcevic, "Are Violent Video Games Harmful?", *Australian Psychiatry*, vol. 15: 5 (2007), pp. 422-426; Jodi L. Whitaker, André Melzer, Georges Steffen, and Brad J.

Similarly, the common, but variable emphasis and application of “historical accuracy” within reenactment culture highlights the problematic nature of reenactment groups whose participants impose restrictions upon gender roles under the guise of not “rewriting history”, by comparison to groups who permit gender diverse participation in historically male-dominated activities during reenactment events, such as displays of combat, while wearing male-presenting costume as a concession to historical reality.⁸⁰ The emphasis of combat and other male-dominated displays as central elements of reenactment have also been identified as perceived barriers for inclusion, particularly, as Juliane Tomann has observed, amongst female re-enactors, who continue to form a comparative minority within a predominantly male-dominated medium.⁸¹ As demonstrated at length in previous sections of this thesis, these latter issues of “historical accuracy” and debated implementation of demographic inclusivity are likewise prominent aspects of discourse surrounding historical games.



Figure 4.2: Part of a Historia Normannis “living history” encampment (author’s collection).

Bushman, “The Allure of the Forbidden: Breaking Taboos, Frustration, and Attraction to Violent Video Games”, *Psychological Science*, vol. 24: 4 (2013), pp. 507-513.

⁸⁰ Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

⁸¹ Tomann, “Female Counter-Curation”, pp. 81-92.

Within this landscape of reenactment, Historia Normannis adopts many practices which draw comparison to those of the Sealed Knot. In Historia Normannis' portrayals of medieval history, combat displays play a prominent role, generating spectacle for the public, and functioning as focused, limited duration "event displays" which can be used to structure an overall reenactment event in conjunction with a "living history" encampment, allowing the public to observe a variety of medieval crafts and vocations and interact directly with re-enactors.⁸² The society operates as three core branches, each covering one of three major dimensions of medieval life: "Bellatores", within which matters relating to combat displays, training and combatant safety are governed; "Laboratores", which covers all non-combatant activities and "civilian" displays; and "Oratores", a specialist branch governing displays and activities relating to medieval religious institutions, broadly operating in parallel to the "civilian" branch but functionally distinct to reflect the unique historical nuances and hierarchies of the medieval Church.⁸³

Despite encouraging authenticity and research within its construction of history, the prevalence of members within Historia Normannis without formal backgrounds in historical study encourages a simplistic, even rudimentary attitude to researching the past, emphasising broad and ready knowledge of contemporary sources as an indicator of intellectual authority.⁸⁴ These attitudes are subsequently reflected in attitudes towards the authenticity of Historia Normannis' displays; items and practices which can be supported by and directly compared to contemporary evidence are validated, and those based upon supposition (even if logical) or demonstrating severe divergences from historical sources are challenged.⁸⁵ However, in spite of this emphasis upon authenticity, Historia Normannis recognises that certain compromises are required as elements of the modern world to which it belongs, such as forbidding discrimination and other participation barriers on the basis of gender or ethnicity.⁸⁶ In this context, Historia Normannis may be viewed as an archetypal

⁸² This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences. See also, Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", pp. 6-10.

⁸³ Historia Normannis, *Ecclesiastical Regulations*, v.2.1, p.4; Historia Normannis, *Laboratores & Civilian Regulations*, v.1.3, p.6; Historia Normannis, *High Constable Wargear & Combat Regulations*, v.2.3, p.5. See also, Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", p. 7.

⁸⁴ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences. See also, Bræder, "Expertise and Amateurism", pp. 74-78.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences. See also, Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", pp. 6-10.

reenactment group onto which individual nuances and practices are applied, thereby providing a legitimate case-study for comparing the experience of engaging with the past through reenactment to the experience of interacting with a historical video game.

Assessing Perspectives on the Historical Experience in Reenactment and Gaming

Having described what historical reenactment is and provided a general summary of how it operates, it is now possible to explore how the historical experience of reenactment compares to that of historical video games and examine the perspectives of history that they present. In order to properly illustrate how a historical game may be likened to reenactment, it will be necessary to examine specific case studies in detail: for reenactment, we shall remain with *Historia Normannis*, while for games we shall return to examples which have been explored in previous chapters of this thesis, namely *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, *Crusader Kings III*, and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. In this latter case, this text may be used in direct comparison to that of Bostal, who assessed the historical reconstruction within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* via a comparison – albeit a figurative, and arguably cursory, one – to historical reenactment practice;⁸⁷ thus, his conclusions may be compared and contrasted with those in this thesis on the basis of this author's direct personal experiences of reenactment.

While these games span multiple gameplay genres and historical settings, there are a number of common elements which, alongside individual nuances, are important points of comparison for reenactment. Among these points is that each of these games features a setting from the medieval period – thus providing relevant comparison to a medieval reenactment group like *Historia Normannis* – and that they incorporate, to varying degrees, gameplay mechanics found in the digital Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre. This latter point is, arguably, the more significant factor for determining a relevant comparison for the experience of historical games to that of reenactment, a rationale for which may be identified through examination of Chapman's assessment of games as a means of reenactment.

⁸⁷ Bostal, "Medieval video games as reenactment of the past", pp. 380-394.

Chapman, in his analysis of games as a form of reenactment, identifies two principal actions which can be undertaken through the process of reenactment: '*exploratory* (what possibilities for action you can perceive) and *performatory* (what actions you can do)' [original italics]. From a technical perspective, games principally focus on one or other of these sets of challenges at a mechanical level; games with an emphasis on exploratory challenges are 'those games wherein the challenge lies in knowing what action to take, but performing the action itself is relatively easy,' whereas games with a focus on performatory challenges are 'those wherein the actions the player is supposed to take are generally clear, but taking these actions can be challenging'.⁸⁸ For the most part, Chapman observes that games are primarily a means of re-enacting exploratory challenges rather than performatory ones, as 'manipulating a controller (or keyboard and mouse) is nothing like, for example, running, carrying or jumping'. This is undeniable, as the inherently digital nature of the gaming medium separates the player from the physical nature and effects of the events depicted, presenting them only as abstract or exaggerated representations of these events, which can only be interacted with via the pressing of controls with a limited variety of functions.⁸⁹

However, the technical perspective offered by some game genres – most notably First-Person Shooters and other games, like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which utilise the same format of restricted visual framing – greatly facilitate gaming as a method of reenactment, as the manner in which information is visually depicted on screen and relayed to the player can be made to mimic the manner information is accessed by an individual in a physical context, such as reenactment or in the original historic context these media attempt to represent; Chapman even goes so far as to suggest that games with a First-Person visual perspective are 'probably best suited to reenactment' in a gamic context.⁹⁰ From a principally technical perspective of games, this is a sound conclusion for, as de Groot says, within these game experiences 'the player is put in the position of performing a character whilst simultaneously seduced by point of view to identify bodily and wholly with this character';⁹¹ therefore, the experience of "seeing" a historical world within these First-

⁸⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 182.

⁸⁹ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 183.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 153.

Person gaming experiences is the closest digital approximation of “seeing” a re-enacted historic reality.

I would expand upon this assertion, for although a First-Person technical perspective offers the player the most engaging visual format for reenactment within games, equally as important is the consideration of the gameplay genre of the game in question. Chapman, in his analysis, emphasises First-Person games within a principally conflict-focused historical gameplay context; examples he cites include *Brothers in Arms* (2005-2008), *War Thunder* (2012-present), and *Steel Armour: Blaze of War* (2011).⁹² Within the gameplay of these titles, the primary, or even sole, consideration for the player is the combat with which they must engage. This offers a particularly limited set of exploratory challenges for the player to engage with within the mechanics of these games, particularly games such as *Brothers in Arms* or older *Call of Duty* titles which channel the player through comparatively linear gameplay environments or narrative scenarios.

Therefore, games which offer more open gameplay environments – whereby players’ decision-making is less determinant upon the artificial confines of the game environment or situational narrative, or where players are offered more avenues and interactions within the game to choose from, potentially including non-combative interactions and activities – combined with role-playing gameplay mechanics – forcing the player to consider more performatory mechanisms such as effects of weight, hunger, tiredness, illness or temperature, which are not otherwise represented within a digital format, upon their ability to perform interactions within the game – would arguably offer a more effective environment for reenactment within historical games. Within this space, “open world” RPG games such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Red Dead Redemption 2* or *Mount and Blade: Bannerlord* (2022) arguably offer the strongest digital environments for reenactment, as they include these more open digital environmental structures and performatory challenges within gameplay.

One could potentially argue that “mil-sim” games such as *Hell Let Loose* (2021) may also be included within this category, for these experiences emphasise more “authentic” constructions of military hierarchies and contextual weapon usage within their gameplay,

⁹² Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 198-225.

thereby encouraging players to cooperate in more historically appropriate fashions than “popular” First-Person Shooters and multiplayer combat games, such as *Call of Duty*, *Brothers in Arms* and *War Thunder*, where such hierarchies and distributive systems must be recreated artificially by “gaming re-enactors”.⁹³ However, for the purposes of this analysis, RPG games and mechanisms will remain the primary point of comparison between games and reenactment due to the greater emphasis on performatory reenactment mechanisms within gameplay in these experiences.

The first step in participating in reenactment, as in many video games, is the creation of your character or persona, a process which mirrors the creation of a player avatar in many games. Whether this means selecting from a number of pre-determined options or the ability to create custom identities, the act of creating or choosing their character marks a person’s entry into either medium. Many games with more curated, or more story-focused, experiences provide players with pre-made characters, realised through motion-capture and vocal performances, to ensure an appropriate fit with the game’s narrative but may subsequently allow players the means of personalising their appearance. This is the approach taken by *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, amongst others, as both games feature curated narratives and pre-prepared cinematic cutscenes, but include mechanics to alter cosmetic elements such as the clothing and hairstyles of their respective protagonists.⁹⁴

By comparison, *Crusader Kings III* incorporates both pre-determined “starting characters”, representative of notable historical figures within the game’s historical time frame, as well as a character customisation system within which players may create their own custom characters, enabling the unrestricted alteration of physical attributes and costume from the available options alongside the implementation of gameplay modifiers reflecting their character’s personality.⁹⁵ Each of these approaches offers players a degree of agency within the gameplay experience, allowing them to mould even structured narratives

⁹³ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 210-215.

⁹⁴ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft; Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2024. Published by Deep Silver.

⁹⁵ Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings III* (2020), PC. Released on Xbox and PlayStation in 2022. Published by Paradox Interactive.

to their personal preferences and thus potentially deliver a more emotive experience as in-game events occur to “their” character.⁹⁶

While the creation or adoption of a unique character is a smaller element of reenactment, and in some contexts may not be required at all, participants may still adopt “characters” or “personas” for events in order to support the performative illusion of presenting the past to a modern audience. This can be as small as simply selecting a period-appropriate name by which a re-enactor is known during events, or extend as far as developing a fully-fledged persona and backstory for your personal character;⁹⁷ in *Historia Normannis*, the minimum requirement of all members is to choose a persona name, by which they are addressed during events, from a list of period-authentic names appropriate to the cultural status of the re-enactor’s character and their level within the society.⁹⁸

This character creation process within reenactment can enable a valuable forum for self-expression for participants, particularly within the ‘very white, middle-class hobby’ that reenactment is perceived as.⁹⁹ In an examination of female participation within Viking reenactment groups, Klaudia Karpińska observed the frequent employment of the concept of the “Viking shieldmaiden” – a still-debated historical phenomenon of female warriors within Norse society during the Viking Age¹⁰⁰ – by re-enactors as a contextually-legitimised avenue for female participation within combat displays, a traditionally male-dominated aspect of the reenactment medium.¹⁰¹ This mentality mirrors that identified by Juliane Tomann in the case of female participation within combat displays in Polish Napoleonic War reenactment; a female Polish re-enactor interviewed by Tomann cited historic incidents of women disguised in male-presenting uniforms within the historical period she re-enacts as a supporting argument for her decision to “cross-dress” in order to participate within combat reenactments requiring male-presenting costume, thereby contextually legitimising

⁹⁶ Adam Muller, “Immersive engagement: Designing and testing a virtual Indian Residential School exhibition”, in Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Dirk von Lehn & Stephen Cook (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 302.

⁹⁷ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 7.

⁹⁸ This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

⁹⁹ Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

¹⁰⁰ Marianne Moen, “Was there such a thing as a female Viking warrior?”, *ScienceNorway.no*, 24 November 2021, <https://sciencenorway.no/history-researchers-zone-share-your-science/was-there-such-a-thing-as-a-female-viking-warrior/1940564>.

¹⁰¹ Klaudia Karpińska, “Women in Viking Reenactment”, in Tom Birkett & Roderick Dale (eds.), *The Vikings Reimagined: Reception, Recovery, Engagement* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2019), pp. 79-81.

participation which might otherwise be perceived as a transgression against authenticity. In Tomann's example, this decision to facilitate female participation within male-dominated reenactment contexts is identified as entirely pragmatic; despite Tomann's identification of gender-subversive commentary within the act of cross-dressing for the purposes of reenactment, the re-enactor interviewed for her study viewed it principally as a means of enabling greater personal enjoyment from the hobby.¹⁰²

Some reenactments offer a variation of this character creation process by allocating participants with the name and identity of a real individual as part of the historical reenactment; as an example, for the centenary commemorations of WWI, a commemorative art project saw re-enactors donning the uniforms and equipment of British soldiers from that conflict occupy public spaces across the UK, such as town squares and train stations, and employed this practice of allocating real identities of soldiers who died during WWI to participants in order to foster an empathetic connection with the public audiences who interacted with them, to engender a sense of interacting directly with the soldiers killed in battle a century ago.¹⁰³

Gapps refers to these techniques as "'first person" role-playing styles' permitting re-enactors to 'assume the identities of real or hypothetical historical individuals... These hypothetical characters, who "could have existed", can be called upon to fill discrete representational voids.' Significantly, he highlights that 'for North Americans at least, these first-person portrayals have... become markers of authenticity',¹⁰⁴ granting their practitioners an additional degree of legitimacy as historical representations within the medium of reenactment, in contrast to "third-person" forms of historical interpretation, which are likened to 'costumed interpreters or historians'.¹⁰⁵ These performative perspectives mirror discussions surrounding the technical perspectives of video games, with players 'performing a character whilst simultaneously seduced by point of view to identify bodily and wholly with this character' in "First-Person" technical perspectives and "Third-Person" perspectives

¹⁰² Tomann, "Female Counter-Curation", pp. 89-90.

¹⁰³ "'WWI Soldiers' Appear Across UK in Somme Tribute", *Sky News*, 1 July 2016, <https://news.sky.com/story/wwi-soldiers-appear-across-uk-in-somme-tribute-10331127>; "Artists behind 'ghost soldiers' project revealed", *BBC News*, 1 July 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-36682140>.

¹⁰⁴ Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", p. 399.

¹⁰⁵ Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", p. 10.

which separate the player from the character via whom they interact with the game world.¹⁰⁶

The perception and discussion of historical characters in video games, notably within triple-A games such as the *Assassin's Creed* series, is often reflective of attitudes to authenticity similar to those exhibited within reenactment, whereby known historical figures are discussed in relation to their recorded narratives, and fictional characters are discussed as theoretical representations of anonymous or overlooked historical groups.¹⁰⁷ However, the practice of utilising real individuals as “roles” within a reenactment, especially in a military reenactment context, can also prove controversial amongst external commentators and raise accusations of cultural insensitivity, of making light of real-world death and sacrifice by “playing soldiers”, or by portraying specific historical perspectives deemed “villainous” in the popular historical narrative, such as the Germans in WWII reenactments.¹⁰⁸ Historia Normannis, however, prefers to avoid representations of real individuals by members of the society at events, favouring what Nelson terms ‘plausible history’; this terminology, which ‘allows significant creative and interpretative freedom [to Historia Normannis], while reflecting “imitative” authenticity in its looser sense’, parallels terms employed by historical game developers to facilitate historically detailed, but creatively flexible game experiences.¹⁰⁹

Alongside the creation of the player or participant’s “character” is the selection of their costume. A common feature of video games, particularly within the RPG gameplay genre, is inventory management, allowing the player to change between various items of clothing and equipment utilised by their character. In some games, such as *Crusader Kings*

¹⁰⁶ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 153; Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The art of interactive narrative* (Indianapolis, Ind.: David Dwyer, 2003), pp. 75-76; Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment* (Second edition; Burlington, Mass.: Focal Press, 2008), pp. 93-94.

¹⁰⁷ See for example, Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Shadows: Who are Naoe and Yasuke?*, online video recording, YouTube, 15 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nszrx939ZVA>; Tom Phillips, “Assassin's Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of Shadows’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”, *Eurogamer*, 2 November 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-boss-discusses-devastating-impact-of-shadows-diversity-and-inclusivity-backlash>.

¹⁰⁸ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 116; Lockhart, “WWII reenactment group condemned by campaigners”; Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), pp. 143-160.

¹⁰⁹ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, pp. 6-7; GameSpot, *Historian & Rebellion CEO Reacts to Historical Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 26 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWVqVFIOcAc>.

III, this choice is purely cosmetic, with negligible gameplay or narrative consequences beyond those which the player's subjective experience of the game may impose.¹¹⁰ Other games, such as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, make the choice of a character's costume or equipment a significant gameplay feature, either to facilitate gameplay by attaching unique modifiers to specific items which alter the underlying mechanics of the gameplay to either boost or hinder the player, or by narratively requiring the player to utilise particular items of equipment or clothing during certain sections of gameplay. Often, more advanced game items must be purchased from in-game vendors and can be restricted to certain character "levels", requiring the player to "level up" by completing narrative missions, world exploration or gameplay encounters to acquire "experience points" or fulfil certain narrative prerequisites.¹¹¹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* applies this concept of gaining proficiency through experience literally, and actively requires players to engage with individual skills, such as combat proficiency with specific weapons, horsemanship and even literacy, before the player can utilise them effectively within gameplay.¹¹²

This concept of "levelling up" through experience is also reflected within *Historia Normannis'* construction of a reenactment. Within *Historia Normannis*, all new members start out at the lowest rank of the society by default. As a member gains experience within the society's individual branches – producing items for the society, participating in combat, presenting displays to the public, and so on – the individual may progress up the tiers of the relevant branch when they are assessed to have reached the required criteria, allowing them access to more expensive and decorative items to portray wealthier and higher-status characters in exchange for an expectation of greater contribution to the running of the society and quality of an individual member's presentation to the public; for instance, it is broadly assumed in society guidance documents that officers of individual *Historia Normannis* groups are of high enough rank to portray knights or other nobility characters, with more senior impressions reflecting more extensive responsibilities, either over larger

¹¹⁰ *Crusader Kings III*.

¹¹¹ See for examples, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*; *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹¹² *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

groups or regional or national-level organisational positions.¹¹³ Individual elements of these contributions – such as production of reenactment clothing or the cooking of food at events – may also be examined and graded by associated “guilds”, allowing members an avenue through which to both develop a specific display for public presentation as well as helping to facilitate promotion within the wider society.¹¹⁴ In this way, members can aspire to “level up” their personal position within the reenactment society and develop their portrayal of a medieval character, while also enabling Historia Normannis to broadly retain the intended pyramidal structure of the medieval society it aims to depict.

This “levelled” structure within reenactment can, as in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, feed into the hierarchical depiction of the associated historical period, which is reflected within the costumes worn by participating re-enactors. Within Historia Normannis, all members of the society wear clothing made using period-appropriate materials and based on surviving extant examples and artistic depictions, whose styles, colours and degree of decoration is then varied to reflect the social tier portrayed by the individual; for example, darker colours, or colours historically achieved by using rarer or more expensive dyes, are restricted to the more senior levels of the society to reflect the wealth and status that the characters of these re-enactors would have enjoyed historically.¹¹⁵ Likewise, particular weapons or items of combat equipment are restricted to specific tiers of the combat-focused branch of the society to reflect either the social standing of the user or the professionalisation of their character: for example, by comparison to some historical video games, such as *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, where swords are commonly wielded by peasants and nobility alike,¹¹⁶ Historia Normannis restricts the use of swords in combat to higher-ranked combatants portraying knights or professional soldiers in their retinues to reflect the sword’s role as a symbol of prestige within twelfth century society;¹¹⁷ while members portraying middle-tier professional soldiers are not prohibited from wielding a sword, they are encouraged to utilise alternative weapons, such as spears or axes, to thereby reflect the

¹¹³ Historia Normannis, *Constabulary Handbook*, v.1.0a, pp. 12-15; Historia Normannis, *High Steward’s Laboratores Handbook*, v1.1, pp. 9-11.

¹¹⁴ Normannis, *High Steward’s Laboratores Handbook*, pp. 12-14.

¹¹⁵ Historia Normannis, *Clothing and Attire Regulations*, v1.3, pp. 18-19.

¹¹⁶ *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*.

¹¹⁷ Normannis, *Wargear & Combat Regulations*, p.42.

lower and more diverse social class backgrounds and proficiencies of the historical characters they are representing.¹¹⁸

On occasion, games will force players to equip specific items or pieces of clothing to suit in-game scenarios or personas, a practice also performed in certain branches of reenactment. For example, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* features a narrative and gameplay sequence set within a monastery, during which players are required to wear monastic robes; while the player can obtain non-monastic clothing via gameplay and equip it within the monastery, doing so will result in punishment if caught.¹¹⁹ *Historia Normannis* also allows members to portray monks or other members of the clergy, requiring them to wear particular items of clothing to reflect their ecclesiastical status,¹²⁰ and encouraging the participation in specific types of displays, such as manuscript illumination or brewing, alongside broadly discouraging participation in others, most notably combat displays, while portraying an ecclesiastical character.¹²¹

A common component of reenactment, as in video games, is combat.¹²² This aspect of video games has been exploited for televised competitions, some of which predate modern e-sports tournaments. In the mid-2000s, two competitive “game show” programmes were produced – 2004’s *Decisive Battles*, broadcast in the USA on the History Channel, and the BBC’s *Time Commanders*, broadcast over two series in 2003 and 2005 respectively – wherein contestants, overseen by military history experts, were challenged with “re-enacting” and re-fighting historical battles created using the game engine of strategy game, *Rome: Total War*;¹²³ the game engine’s developers, Creative Assembly, were directly acknowledged as part of the American show, *Decisive Battles*, but only received a mention in the credits of *Time Commanders* due to BBC rules on product placement.

¹¹⁸ Normannis, *Wargear & Combat Regulations*, p.27.

¹¹⁹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹²⁰ Normannis, *Clothing and Attire Regulations*, pp. 55-81.

¹²¹ *Historia Normannis*, *Lord Chancellor’s Oratores Handbook*, v.1.0, pp. 21-27; *Historia Normannis*, *Ecclesiastical & Holy Order Regulations (Oratores)*, v.1.0, p. 22 & pp. 25-40.

¹²² Daugberg, “Battle”, pp. 25-29; Tomann, “Female Counter-Curation”, pp. 81-92; Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 10.

¹²³ John Gaudiosi, “Rome: First a Game, Now on TV”, *Wired*, 17 May 2004, <https://www.wired.com/2004/05/rome-first-a-game-now-on-tv/>.

Similarly, museums and heritage institutions, such as English Heritage, regularly stage combat displays as special limited-time events to entice the public to explore their sites.

In both video games and reenactment, combat is a popular inclusion as it provides visual spectacle for the audience, utilising the drama and uncertainty of the combat alongside the (possible) scale aspect of large groups of combatants to awe the crowd.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, it also provides an enjoyable physical and mental challenge for participants.¹²⁵ However, by necessity, they are both imperfect recreations. From a technical perspective of gaming, all combat simulations, from First-Person Shooters to Real-Time Strategy games, are underwritten by mathematical algorithms, whose interactions result in predetermined outcomes.¹²⁶ Strategic studies scholar Philip Sabin has criticized games' simulation of combat on the grounds that these numerical systems struggle to accurately replicate the realities of historical combat; either combat is designed more for entertainment value than realism, allowing players to survive severe injuries and continue fighting as a "one-man army" in the *Call of Duty* vein,¹²⁷ or participants simply rush in, inflict massive mutual casualties, and then break apart within a few minutes once one side's numbers or morale numeric has been sufficiently depleted.¹²⁸ These historiographical inaccuracies are mechanical necessities of gaming in order to make gameplay in these titles accessible to the broadest possible audience, thereby minimising the influence of player skill in determining the outcome of combat in these games; this phenomenon is highlighted and emphasised by the combat of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which, although replicated with greater attention to technical accuracy via consultation with specialist sword-fighting practitioners and reenactors, was frequently described as difficult or awkward to engage with by reviewers and other gaming commentators.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Daugberg, "Battle", pp. 25-29; Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", p. 10.

¹²⁵ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

¹²⁶ Philip Sabin, *Lost Battles: Reconstructing the Great Clashes of the Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), p. xviii.

¹²⁷ Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 23.

¹²⁸ Sabin, *Lost Battles*, p. xviii; *Simulating War*, p. 25.

¹²⁹ Bostal, "Medieval video games as reenactment of the past", pp. 380-394; Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: Kingdom Come: Deliverance", pp. 69-76. See also, Robert Purchase, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – history is a double-edged sword", *Eurogamer*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review>; Luke Plunkett, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance: The Kotaku Review", *Kotaku*, 14 March 2018, <https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-the-kotaku-review-1823606430>; Edwin Evans-Thirwell, "Wot I Think: Kingdom Come –

By contrast, as reenactments involve living participants, preparations for combat displays are naturally more complex to ensure participant safety, which necessitates a degree of sacrifice with regards to historical accuracy for the purposes of the recreation.¹³⁰ While some historical reenactments are inherently designed to recreate specific historical conflicts, others merely reflect attitudes and approaches to warfare for a particular period, which is then adapted to the narrative script of a particular event.

This, in addition to the practicalities of the chosen period's combat itself, can determine how much pre-planned "scripting" is incorporated into the display. This "display scripting", whereby factors such as narrative cues or special set-piece events, pyrotechnic elements, combat "casualties" and the overall victors, are agreed and coordinated beforehand by the participating re-enactors is sometimes an essential practical, narrative or safety requirement;¹³¹ for example, reenactment combat for a historical period which utilises firearms, such as the American Civil War, Napoleonic era or World Wars, mandates a certain degree of "scripting" in advance of a display as such combat is inherently impossible to conduct safely under true "live" circumstances, and the inclusion of pyrotechnic elements to simulate combat with these firearms even within scripted reenactments likewise demands prior organisation to ensure the safety of participants and audience members;¹³² Alan Larsen, an experienced reenactor who has participated in events across a reenactment career spanning over forty years, told the *Independent* newspaper in 2015 that he was nearly killed during an American Civil War reenactment in 1986, in which another participant's firearm turned a stray item into an accidental projectile which severed Larsen's carotid artery, requiring the emergency aid of a former army medic (also participating in the reenactment) to save his life.¹³³

Deliverance", *Rock Paper Shotgun*, 13 February 2018, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-review>.

¹³⁰ Gábor Fábán, "Historical European Martial Arts and Historical Reenactment: Concepts, Problems, Approaches in Our Experience", *EXARC Journal*, vol. 2 (2014), pp. 24-27.

¹³¹ Daugberg, "Battle", pp. 28-29. This statement is also based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

¹³² This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

¹³³ Adam Lusher, "Battle of Waterloo: How taking part in a re-enactment nearly cost me my life", *Independent*, 6 June 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/battle-of-waterloo-how-taking-part-in-a-reenactment-nearly-cost-me-my-life-10302512.html>.

The safety limitations required to avoid these forms of incidents can lend reenactment combat a sense of “sanitising” or “trivialising” warfare and violence by separating the audience and participants from the severity of the consequences of war – a point repeated in discussions of video game combat by both Sabin and Young amongst others¹³⁴ – however most re-enactors refute this belief, arguing that reenactment battles are ‘not about the glorification of war’ but ‘about honouring our predecessors’ through the acknowledgement of warfare as a prominent element of history.¹³⁵ Moreover, while the absence of gore and true physical injury as part of reenactment battles does inherently “sanitise” reenactment combat, re-enactors are conscious of this shortcoming and attempt to substitute for this within their performance; in *Historia Normannis*, for example, part of a participant’s expected conduct at events is the ability to “act up” contextual injuries or death such that the audience believes the participant to be truly injured or dead.¹³⁶



Figure 4.3: Large-scale battle at a Historia Normannis event (author’s collection).

¹³⁴ Sabin, *Simulating War*, pp. 23-25; Helen Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*” in Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 31.

¹³⁵ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 114; Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

¹³⁶ This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

For some reenactment periods or groups, such as those utilising combat derived from Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), gamic systems can be utilised to permit competitive and more “realistic” combat to be performed safely under “live” circumstances with the incorporation of certain safety systems, such as protective armour and blunted weapons.¹³⁷ *Historia Normannis*, for instance, utilises a hit-point system whereby blows to designated areas of the body on participating re-enactors are counted towards a total number of points for each individual, designed to simulate a person’s ability to continue fighting in close-quarters combat.¹³⁸ This system also incorporates elements such as armour, the amount and type of which can increase the number of hits a combatant can receive before submitting.¹³⁹ *Historia Normannis’* combat systems also incorporate rules for contextual blows which would be immediately fatal or incapacitating in real combat, and therefore circumvent the constructed rules of hit-points;¹⁴⁰ this system not only enhances the visual display for the audience by maintaining an element of realism that might otherwise be lost in the necessary safety systems, it enhances the practical performance by maintaining an element of chance that would occur in real combat and ensures that neither the audience nor participants can be sure of the outcome, thus giving both reason to emotionally invest in the performance of the combat display.

In many respects, this “hit-point” system parallels the mechanical considerations for combat in video game design: characters are ascribed with “hit boxes” which detect and register input from an attacking player or Non-Player Characters (NPCs), and underlying algorithms then calculate whether the placement and damage value of the attack achieve a sum value greater than the defensive numeric of the target and result in either damage to the target or a “kill”. These algorithms may also determine whether a digital attack has delivered a “critical hit”, which may incur increased or outright fatal damage to the target regardless of their remaining hit points.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Fábíán, “Historical European Martial Arts and Historical Reenactment”, pp. 24-27; Daugberg, “Battle”, pp. 28-29.

¹³⁸ *Historia Normannis, High Constable Combat & Field Manual, v.1.0a*, pp. 7-19. See also Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 7.

¹³⁹ *Normannis, High Constable Combat & Field Manual*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁴⁰ *Normannis, Constabulary Handbook*, p. 24. See also, Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ GameSpot, *How do Bullets Work in Games? – Loadout*, online video recording, YouTube, 14 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaCqHmHTXE> [3:13-5:42].

A competitive factor within reenactment combat also adds an important and hard to capture element of historical immersion, one whose absence Sabin identifies as a criticism of video games' simulation of combat: the psychological element.¹⁴² Although combat in video games is mechanically competitive, with the player challenged either by other players or by the game itself through computer-controlled NPCs, the digital reality of the medium means that the consequences for defeat in combat are typically minimal. Player avatars are typically provided with "health bars" that deplete through sustained attack, granting the player an unrealistic ability to withstand injury and thus dulls their psychological sensitivity to risk. Likewise, in many cases, "death" in a video game simply results in the player being "respawned" at the nearest point where their progress was saved by the game, incurring only the loss of any progress made during gameplay since that point.

Together, this lack of significant risk and consequence encourages players towards unrealistically aggressive or dramatic playstyles in the knowledge that any dangers are relatively inconsequential and they can simply "respawn" and try again if they "die".¹⁴³ So common are these mechanics that 2016's *Battlefield I* actively draws attention to them by incorporating the feature of "respawning" as a narrative device in the game's introductory single-player prologue; after informing players that '[they] are not expected to survive', the game places the player in a combat scenario which is deliberately overwhelming – regardless of difficulty or skill level, the player will eventually be defeated – and, upon their in-game "death", the player is shown their avatar's demise in a Third-Person view before gameplay transitions to a new playable First-Person perspective within the same over-arching battle.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, NPCs in games, ranging across gameplay genres from First-Person Shooters like *Call of Duty* and Third-Person action-adventure games like *Assassin's Creed* to Real-Time Strategy titles like *Total War*, are controlled by computer code within the game itself, and as such rarely incorporate systems to accurately simulate the primal Human instincts for self-preservation.¹⁴⁵ Instead, as Sabin identifies, most NPCs will simply continue fighting, mechanically whittling away at the numerical values for their own and their opponent's

¹⁴² Sabin, *Simulating War*, p. 25.

¹⁴³ Sabin, *Simulating War*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ EA DICE, *Battlefield I – Storm of Steel* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

¹⁴⁵ Sabin, *Simulating War*, p. 25.

“health”, until they are ordered to stop by input from the player, moved out of range of combat or one side is defeated.¹⁴⁶

By making reenactment combat both mechanically and psychologically competitive, the participants must not only think about fighting their opponent, bringing with it considerations of technique, experience, and natural instincts for self-preservation, but also forcing participants to mentally adapt to changing conditions and the effect of their equipment on their bodies.¹⁴⁷ These latter experiences are what Chapman refers to as performatory challenges of reenactment, and which are difficult to convey effectively within a digital recreation to an audience which is not physically participating in the experience; as Chapman notes, ‘games can make us aware, through their representations, of the *existence of performatory historical challenges* [original italics] that faced historical agents, however, they cannot allow us to actually reenact these challenges and learn how to deal with them’.¹⁴⁸ As such, any representation of these challenges within games is only a partial translation of the experience.

A common attempt to re-enact the performatory effect of physical equipment within video games are so-called “encumbrance” mechanics. These are numerical systems, frequently included in RPGs, designed to reflect physical weight and carrying capacity, and which offer a means of conveying the weight of historical equipment in a digital gamic context. As many re-enactors will testify, the sheer mass of historical armour or equipment can be significant for the wearer;¹⁴⁹ encumbrance mechanics represent an attempt to accommodate this effect within the digital medium of gaming. Some games treat these encumbrance values as “hard limits”, wherein the player avatar is unable to carry items whose cumulative weight values will exceed their “carrying capacity” value. Others will permit the player to exceed this capacity value but will apply progressively greater penalties to restrict character movement as this value is approached and exceeded. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* incorporates both formats, as while the player may exceed their “carrying capacity” in exchange for penalties to movement which become incrementally stronger as

¹⁴⁶ Sabin, *Lost Battles*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁷ “On the Knight Shift”, *English Heritage Member’s Magazine*, Summer 2023, p. 42.

¹⁴⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 183.

¹⁴⁹ For examples, see Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”; “On the Knight Shift”, p. 42.

the excess weight increases, their in-game horse mount may only be loaded with items up to a set limit, which may be increased by either purchasing specific equipment items (which partially occupy this capacity value in exchange for beneficially significant increases), or by purchasing alternate mounts with greater inherent carrying capacity.¹⁵⁰

However, the primary penalty in these encumbrance mechanics is typically only of speed and range of action; if the player avatar becomes “over-encumbered”, their character actions are mechanically slowed, or certain actions such as climbing or jumping may be mechanically prohibited while “over-encumbered”. The physical experience of *wearing* historical clothing and armour cannot be fully conveyed through digital recreations, in particular with regards to the effects of heat build-up felt from wearing the many layers required for some historical armours.¹⁵¹ This latter consideration can be as significant as an armour’s physical weight, as prolonged heat accumulation through activity, and especially in sunny or warm climates, can lead to exhaustion and even heatstroke in extreme cases, which naturally compromise a re-enactor’s ability to perform physical activities such as combat.¹⁵² This form of performatory experience is rarely depicted in video games; *Red Dead Redemption 2* is rare in that it features a temperature mechanic within its gameplay, in which the presented ambient temperature of the game environment, in combination with player character’s clothing, can contribute to either overheating or hypothermia, both resulting in accelerated health and stamina loss, but which otherwise have limited impact upon gameplay.¹⁵³

The psychological appeal to both historical reenactment and video games must also be considered. Reenactment shares a similar psychological draw as video games in that they allow participants to escape the reality of their everyday lives into new and exciting worlds which are dramatically different than their own;¹⁵⁴ writing about her experiences as a Viking re-enactor, Jade Cuttle notes that most of her fellow re-enactors occupy professional roles

¹⁵⁰ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹⁵¹ “On the Knight Shift”, p. 42; this statement is also based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

¹⁵² This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

¹⁵³ Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), Xbox and PlayStation. Released on PC and Google Stadia in 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Cuttle, “I’m a mixed Black female re-enactor in a sea of men with beards’.

with few historical associations, and that reenactment enables them a form of psychological detox akin to ‘an extreme form of forest-bathing’.¹⁵⁵

“Escapism” is a phenomenon that has been frequently discussed in relation to the appeal of video games, and has been identified in association with both positive and negative psychological effects.¹⁵⁶ This is not an isolated phenomenon of Western countries, or symptomatic of the modern state of the gaming industry. Peter Kose, a Czech sword-fighting expert who collaborated in the development of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, says that ‘mental escapism’ was invaluable to the growth of reenactment culture in Cold War-era Czechoslovakia as it facilitated a form of ‘psychological emigration’ that was otherwise impossible for those living behind the Iron Curtain.¹⁵⁷ In either case, gaming or reenactment enables a participant to step beyond their everyday circumstances into new, exciting worlds and narrative scenarios.

The psychological aspect of gaming and reenactment can also be employed as a means of understanding the experience of the past. By placing gamers into similar unscripted scenarios as those faced by historical actors, it is also possible to replicate or reenact some historical thought processes and attitudes, which cannot be achieved through fully scripted recreations or in reenactment scenarios where restrictions to ensure participant safety would prohibit an action to take place. This can be particularly noticeable in scenarios within the multiplayer gaming space, where developers are required to ensure balance between competing players, and consequently participants begin to exhibit particular behaviours as one side or the other attempts to gain a winning advantage. For example, reviewers for *Chivalry II* (2021), a medieval-inspired multiplayer combat game, noted an instinctual dislike for players utilising the game’s archery combat, who could interrupt the fast-paced close-quarters combat of other players by killing their in-game

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ See for examples, Dominik Diamond, “When life gives you lemons, video games can be the escape we need”, *The Guardian*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2022/jul/19/when-life-gives-you-lemons-video-games-can-be-the-escape-we-need>; Lucas M. Marques *et al*, “Escaping through virtual gaming – what is the association with emotional, social and mental health? A systematic review”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14 (2023) [Accessed online: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1257685/full>]; Umer Hussain, Sami Jabarkhail, George B. Cunningham, Jean A. Marsden, “The dual-nature of escapism in video gaming: A meta-analytic approach”, *Computers in Human Behaviour Reports*, vol. 3 (2021) [Accessed online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2451958821000294>].

¹⁵⁷ *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [4:41-5:10].

avatars from a distance beyond their target's ability to retaliate, a practice framed by players as 'unsporting' or 'unchivalrous';¹⁵⁸ this dislike for archer players within *Chivalry II*, and its framing in the context of 'unchivalrous' behaviour, forms a strong parallel with the historical characterisation and disdain for medieval crossbowmen, who were respected, feared and despised in equal measure for their ability to enable a soldier of common origins to threaten and potentially kill a fully-armed knight or even a king with near impunity, thus circumventing the social conventions of "chivalric" combat.¹⁵⁹

It should be noted, however, that attempting to understand historical psychology through practical reenactment is a particularly imperfect science, as our interactions with historical practices are inherently coloured by our own modern psychological environment. Chapman cites an example of a researcher who, in re-enacting seventeenth and eighteenth century horse-riding techniques, identified a personal fear of falling from the saddle which paralleled concerns noted in period riding manuals; however, whereas the modern researcher's concerns lay primarily in terms of safety and the risk of injury from the fall, historical concerns emphasised the social stigma that falling from the saddle would incur.¹⁶⁰ This is, perhaps, a key flaw with reenactment as a means of historical interaction: while we can use the experience of re-performing the past to gain insight into how the past operated, and may glimpse the psychologies of the past through practical performance, we cannot know for certain how individuals in the past understood and thought about historical phenomena because re-enactors are fundamentally modern agents, with a wholly different manner of experiencing the world and psychologies coloured by those modern experiences.¹⁶¹

De Groot's assessment of reenactment contradicts the idea that by re-enacting the past we can gain insight into historical mindsets and, consequently, understand history more

¹⁵⁸ Tyler Wilde, "Chivalry 2 Review", *PC Gamer*, 22 June 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/chivalry-2-review/>.

¹⁵⁹ See for examples, Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 254; Michael S. Bryant, *A World History of War Crimes: From Antiquity to the Present* (Second edition; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 95; Hunt Janin with Ursula Carlson, *Mercenaries in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Jefferson, NC; McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2013), pp. 37-39; Marc Morris, *Castle: A History of the Buildings that Shaped Medieval Britain* (London: Channel Four Books, 2003), pp. 79-81.

¹⁶⁰ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p. 181.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

effectively, but his views may be influenced by his choice of case study. In *Consuming History*, de Groot identifies the reenactment umbrella group WARS (World War Axis Reenactment Society) which incorporates various British reenactment groups who portray the German military from WWII, noting that ‘the authenticity is compromised by ideology’ given the umbrella society’s open refusal to condone or associate itself or its members with right-wing Nazi beliefs;¹⁶² as de Groot points out, ‘the first rule of WARS is “never perform a Nazi salute, even as a joke”’.¹⁶³ Such specific political restrictions are necessary and understandable for the protection of the society’s members from political repercussions and preserving their overall intentions of both portraying the history of the period and honouring the memory of combatants from *all* nations, however these restrictions do nevertheless remove the re-enactor’s ability to understand the motivations of their historical counterparts, thus limiting the educational potential of the reenactment and emphasising the experience’s separation from the history it represents.¹⁶⁴

Although de Groot’s choice of the WARS group to emphasise the separation of reenactments from the mentalities of the past is effective, it is perhaps too much so. As Gapps’ likewise observes, ‘there is... a fine line between participation that suggests complicity with the historical project and participation that involves working the politics of visibility’.¹⁶⁵ Even in spite of these efforts by WARS and other similar WWII German reenactment groups to distance themselves from Nazi ideology for the purposes of historical reenactment, the mere act of association with the imagery and artefacts connected to these castigated historical figures can be enough to provoke controversy amongst external commentators, and even cancellation of reenactment events, where the representation of a historical subject and the association of participants with proscribed historical phenomena is considered disrespectful.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁶³ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 115.

¹⁶⁴ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116. See also, Panzergrenadier Regiment 304 Living History Group, “Group Policies”, <https://304thpzgren.com/group-policies/>.

¹⁶⁵ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 405.

¹⁶⁶ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 116; Lockhart, “WWII reenactment group condemned by campaigners”; *Dark Tourist – Episode 5: Europe* [1:44 – 12:42]. See also, “Nazi uniforms banned at Lancashire Railway WWII event”, *BBC News*, 27 May 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-13572992>; “North Yorkshire Moors Railway withdraws WW2 German soldier invitation”, *BBC News*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-43655322>.

These same issues occur repeatedly in relation to historical games, as this thesis has shown in Chapters 1 and 2, including in the context of presenting video game players with the German perspective of WWII; in response to controversy surrounding the inclusion of a playable German character within *Battlefield V*, the game's developers at EA DICE issued press statements attempting to clarify that the player character was 'not a Nazi'.¹⁶⁷ The similarity of these incidents between historical games and reenactment strongly infers that objections to portrayals of controversial histories within these media derive from concerns of association with or endorsement of proscribed historical ideologies by participants in their modern representations, and of subsequent offence caused to communities affected by these historical actors.¹⁶⁸

To avoid such negative associations, video games often present the player as separate from the controversial ideologies of the past, enabling the player to confront and defeat these negative views narratively and mechanically, and granting the player/participant a degree of absolution for engaging with controversial history. A similar example of this can be seen in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, whereby the player protagonist Arthur Morgan interacts with social and racial attitudes presented within the historical game world as an avatar of modern social ideology.¹⁶⁹ However, this Othering of the past greatly restricts the modern participants' ability to understand these same mentalities, thereby limiting our ability to interpret the actions of the past so that they may be identified and understood in the present.¹⁷⁰

Gapps observes that 'what appears a democratic possibility [within reenactment] – that anyone can reenact anyone else – is in fact imbued with social memory'. While this

¹⁶⁷ EA DICE, *Battlefield V* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts; Andy Chalk, "Battlefield 5's German campaign mission is 'not a hero story'", *PC Gamer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.pcgamer.com/battlefield-5s-german-campaign-mission-is-not-a-hero-story/>; Wesley Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story', insists DICE", *Eurogamer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-10-18-the-battlefield-5-campaign-lets-you-play-as-the-nazis-but-its-not-a-hero-story-insists-dice>.

¹⁶⁸ Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games" in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 140.

¹⁶⁹ *Red Dead Redemption 2*; Hilary Jane Locke and Thomas Ashley Mackay, "You Are A True Progressive: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics", *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20:1 (2021), pp. 174-193; Esther Wright, "Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption*, and narratives of 'Progress'", *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 16: 3 (2021), pp. 5-13.

¹⁷⁰ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116; Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", p. 405.

understanding of reenactment helps to interpret the reluctance to permit engagement with controversial historical perspectives – that social memory identifying particular historical groups as too offensive to depict restricts the ability of reenactors to engage with associated histories – he also notes that this phenomenon of social memory can produce negative effects whereby certain participants are restricted to the portrayal of particular histories or roles within a reenactment on the basis of their demographic; ‘people are relegated to certain histories on the grounds of their race or gender because audiences cannot make sense of things any other way’.¹⁷¹ Many reenactment societies affirm their status as non-political groups, thereby emphasising their intention to present an “objective” portrayal of the past by removing or decentralising overtly political elements. Although, as de Groot notes, this aspiration for political neutrality conflicts with reenactment’s underlying intention to ensure historical authenticity, it is a requirement enforced by the attitudes of the modern-day participants and audiences who create and observe a reenactment; for instance, as a consequence of the use of historical imagery and associations by extreme political groups with whom re-enactors do not wish to be linked.¹⁷²

The decentralisation of political elements of a reenactment is also a significant consequence of ensuring that reenactment as a medium remains accessible and enjoyable for all participants, in spite of Gapps’ and Tomann’s observations about the implicit exclusion of certain individuals from re-enacting particular histories on the basis of ethnicity or gender.¹⁷³ Jade Cuttle, writing about her experiences as a Viking re-enactor, notes that her experience as a mixed-Black re-enactor is often ‘historically inauthentic’, and acknowledges that some ethnic restrictions existed within the historical period which her group depicts, but that the reenactment group with which she participates maintains that ‘history belongs to everyone’ and that diverse demographic participation offers avenues to explore the potential of historical interactions rather than remaining confined strictly to the documentary record.¹⁷⁴

However, the reenactment of certain historical perspectives – such as portrayals of German soldiers in WWII contexts or of historically-recorded instances of gender restriction

¹⁷¹ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 405; Tomann, “Female Counter-Curation”, pp. 81-92.

¹⁷² de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁷³ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 405; Tomann, “Female Counter-Curation”, pp. 81-92.

¹⁷⁴ Cuttle, “I’m a mixed Black female re-enactor in a sea of men with beards’.

– remain a politically sensitive issue, and have incited controversy with external observers due to the underlying political associations between the re-enactor and their historical subject.¹⁷⁵ As Gapps observes in discussion of re-enacting controversial histories:

to be concerned that there are indeed limits to representation is to suggest that some things are so horrific that they cannot be represented... the implication here is that some histories might then fail to be remembered. Yet... it is not in the extreme nature of the event, but rather in the mechanisms of its representation that possibilities for publicly remembering traumatic events may occur. The debate about remembering horrific pasts has, then, a good deal to do with the available forms of representation, rather than with any fixed sets of limits or prescribed sensitivities. Forms of representation such as performance can, with care, become avenues for giving expression to extreme experiences from the past. The danger, then, is that certain histories should perhaps remain, for the moment, “unreenactable”.¹⁷⁶

However, while the contextual circumstances of reenactment groups justifies the reluctance to depict or associate with controversial historical events or ideologies, as ‘the politics of individual and collective historical representations are sharpened because the bodily form so easily offends’,¹⁷⁷ it is not necessarily a universal trait of reenactment as a broader phenomenon that it prohibits engagement with historical beliefs. Historia Normannis, for example, primarily focuses on portraying life in Britain during the twelfth century; while certain aspects of medieval thought, such as attitudes towards medieval Britain’s Jewish community, are not portrayed as an intrinsic part of the society’s reenactment practices due to their specific historical context,¹⁷⁸ the society encourages its re-enactors to interact more generally with other members according to the manners and customs of the period. This is most notably applied with regards to the medieval Church, whose influence and beliefs pervaded medieval society more widely and more prominently than they do in the modern day.¹⁷⁹ Historia Normannis even provides instructional documents advising members how to conduct interactions with members portraying

¹⁷⁵ See for examples, de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116; Tomann, “Female Counter-Curation”, pp. 81-92; Lockhart, “WWII reenactment group who dress up as Nazis are condemned by campaigners as ‘insensitive and grossly offensive’”; “Nazi uniforms banned at Lancashire Railway WWII event”, *BBC News*; “North Yorkshire Moors Railway withdraws WW” German soldier invitation”, *BBC News*; Robert A. Slayton, “Reenacting Evil: A genuine problem with simulated war”, *Commentary*, October 2011, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/robert-slayton/reenacting-evil/>.

¹⁷⁶ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 404-405.

¹⁷⁷ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 407.

¹⁷⁸ See for example, Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225*, pp. 346-360.

¹⁷⁹ Normannis, *Ecclesiastical Regulations*, p. 8; Historia Normannis, *Oratores Knowledge Primer*.

religious characters at events.¹⁸⁰ This process then permits re-enactors to begin to understand the psychological importance of the role played by the Church in medieval society and, consequently, their influence as political agents in the recorded history of the period. Given that Bostal and Robert Houghton both identify religion as an experience often excluded from serious engagement in historical video games, efforts such as this to represent and engage with this aspect of historical thought within reenactment gain additional significance within public interactions with history.¹⁸¹

It must be acknowledged that this is not a faultless process and relies heavily upon individuals to apply these ideas of historical belief to their own personal performances when interacting before the public. Yet it does demonstrate that reenactments can attempt to present the cultures and ideologies of historical actors, even if the re-enactors portraying them maintain modern views. Consequently, by performing these interactions, it can generate inquiry from either the public audience or the participating re-enactors about the implications of such interactions, thus providing a “safe space” for re-enactors to discuss more controversial mentalities and phenomena without the requirement to perform them.¹⁸² As such de Groot’s argument that reenactment cannot explore historical psychologies should be considered in moderation, as the enforced separation between re-enactors and their subject does not inherently exclude the potential to portray and engage with historical ideologies, even if such interactions remain coloured by modern understandings. Moreover, the comparison to historical video games (particularly commercially available historical games), which suffer similar issues with representing and engaging with historical ideologies is notable; therefore, we can suggest that these challenges speak to wider issues of how historical media engage with their subjects, in that certain historical phenomena are deemed, as Gapps’ terms it, ‘unreenactable’ within an interactive media format owing to either the complexity of the subject or its sensitivity amongst modern audiences, which then serves as a potential barrier to understanding these topics.

¹⁸⁰ Normannis, *Oratores Knowledge Primer*.

¹⁸¹ Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past”, pp. 392-393; Robert Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 9: 2 (2023), pp. 11-12.

¹⁸² This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

However, as these case studies demonstrate, the form and extent that the presentation of historical ideologies can be undertaken is distinctly situational and will inherently be conducted in the context of modern socio-political sensitivities. It also requires a significant degree of awareness on behalf of the re-enactor as a performer, both to interpret the historical ideology in an appropriate manner and to communicate the facts effectively to their audience. This same skill is also a key aspect of the developers' struggle in video games, to translate the historical material accumulated in their research into a suitable format which respects the historical environment and thematic tone of the game being created while remaining acceptable to their intended audience.¹⁸³ Likewise, this dialogue between perspectives of the past and present also relies on the audiences being receptive and understanding of the differences between the historical reality and the cultural circumstances of the reenactment or game which is interpreting it.¹⁸⁴

These issues all speak to a shared dilemma of games and reenactment, the complex problem of their temporal relationships to their subjects. Games and reenactments are both inherently products of the modern world, created by modern participants for modern audiences, and yet simultaneously also present or re-perform incidents and phenomena of the past, which both creating participants and the observing audience *know* isn't the historical reality and yet willingly *believe* that it represents its historical subject.¹⁸⁵

In this context, the principal method of engaging with historical subjects in a reenactment, from the perspective of an audience, is through immediately recognisable phenomena and iconography. This can include visual and aesthetic symbols, such as types or styles of clothing, but also incorporates the communication historiographical content by anchoring it to a recognisable historical event, period or character; *Historia Normannis*, for example, portrays the period of history covering the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth

¹⁸³ Chapman and Linderth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", p. 140; Locke and Mackay, "You Are A True Progressive", pp. 174-193.

¹⁸⁴ Locke and Mackay, "You Are A True Progressive", pp. 174-193; Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39; Claire Manning, "Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games", in Jane Draycott (ed.) *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games* (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 57-71; Eugen Pfister, "This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!", *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/2719#more-2719>; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 20 December 2018 [25:52-27:04].

¹⁸⁵ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, pp. 8-10.

centuries, but often gravitates towards portraying later dates within this time period at public events due to the ease of anchoring the reenactment to publicly recognisable histories such as King Richard the Lionheart or King John and *Magna Carta*.¹⁸⁶ Both of these strategies contribute to a phenomenon which this thesis has already identified as being readily utilised in the context of historical games: the use of history as forms of iconography, which manipulates or is potentially disconnected from its immediate context within the recorded historical narrative in order to facilitate engagement with historical subjects by a modern audience.

It is also in this space between perspectives of reenactment as a recreation of the past and as a perspective of modern engagement with history where questions and issues of historical accuracy or authenticity typically arise, just as in the case of video games. In her analysis of authenticity within reenactment, Nelson has observed that both of these terms are ‘nebulous, open-ended, and resistant to simple definition’, thereby both facilitating their widespread use within reenactment communities while also hindering scholarly interpretation of the meanings applied to them.¹⁸⁷ This is particularly notable for, as in observations of authenticity within gaming discourse, some scholars have contended that re-enactors use the terms “authenticity” and “historical accuracy” interchangeably.¹⁸⁸ Consequently, various scholars have attempted to classify the attribution of authenticity to and within reenactment as a representation of history, resulting in numerous intersecting typologies of authenticity within academic perspectives of reenactment, noting varying distinctions between the authenticity of an objective original artefact and the imitative, experiential authenticity of a reenactment performance.¹⁸⁹

These distinctions between individual perspectives of authenticity are necessary to identify, for individual re-enactors approach the medium with differing attitudes to the application of authenticity.¹⁹⁰ While some re-enactors finesse their costumes and

¹⁸⁶ This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

¹⁸⁷ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 3.

¹⁸⁸ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 11; Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”; Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), p. 18; Laura Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 24 (2020), pp. 127-144.

¹⁸⁹ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, pp. 3-6.

¹⁹⁰ Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, pp. 10-11; Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-78.

impressions to near flawlessly mimic period images – particularly from historical periods where photographic evidence survives – others are willing to accommodate some anachronisms or flaws for the benefit of the participants.¹⁹¹ ‘The National Trust has a 10-yard rule,’ says one re-enactor who volunteers as a costumed guide at a UK heritage site: ‘it’s got to look authentic so long as you don’t lean in too close’.¹⁹² Members of the audience viewing a reenactment or playing a historical game often make assumptions as to the precision of the recreation in relation to the historical reality, thus resulting in criticism of the interpretation if the known facts do not precisely align with their depiction in games or reenactments, or even to how that historical reality is perceived to have been; ‘authenticity is a currency and competency standard within the reenactor’s history work,’ notes Gapps, ‘but it often relies on a “shared authority” of the historian and their publics. If something is too authentic it can fail to be perceived as historical’.¹⁹³

This mentality is mirrored by historical games which make specific anachronisms to suit audiences expectations and understandings of the subject, or to facilitate the gameplay experience; for example, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* purposefully exaggerated its depiction of the city-state of Sparta during the Peloponnesian War to make the city appear ‘more grandiose’ than its historic reality because the developers ‘wanted Sparta to be this awesome, amazing, epic looking Greek location’.¹⁹⁴ However, this perception of manipulating history for entertainment is not aided by games or “farb” re-enactors who employ only the illusion of historical imagery in factually misrepresentative fashions, without meaningful engagement with historical subjects or narratives.¹⁹⁵

Similarly, assertions within the reenactment or gaming communities that a depiction of the past is as thoroughly researched and as close to the historical reality as possible (to which this author has also contributed) may lead members of each medium’s respective audiences to potentially accentuate small inaccuracies out of proportion to their overall significance. Individual cases in both gaming and reenactment mediums reflect a spectrum

¹⁹¹ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 396-399; Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-75; Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

¹⁹² Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

¹⁹³ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 398.

¹⁹⁴ Michael Higham, “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey Director Talks Story And RPG Inspirations”, *GameSpot*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/assassins-creed-odyssey-director-talks-story-and-r/1100-6459994/>.

¹⁹⁵ Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-75.

of attitudes to the concept of authenticity, but whose execution is often influenced by practical limitations of the respective medium. As in historical games, historical authenticity is applied to reenactment as both an empirical measurement of historical fact and a subjective experience of historical feeling, authorial perspectives which are occasionally contradictory within the mechanisms by which reenactment and games portray historical subjects to their audiences.¹⁹⁶

Crucially, re-enactors share the same awareness of the flaws in their recreations of the past that game developers do. As thoroughly researched as many reenactments are, knowledge gaps, performative requirements and other anachronisms caused by modern participants and audiences can compromise a reenactment's depiction of the past.¹⁹⁷ "Authentic" replica artefacts may be constructed using modern, non-authentic materials or production techniques; members' body shapes may be unrepresentative of physiques of corresponding historical individuals; modern health and safety equipment may be present on a reenactment display, even if camouflaged: minor incongruities such as these which are almost unavoidable in the construction of a historical reenactment as part of modern society, but whose influence on the authenticity of a depiction of a historical era can be mitigated such that it does not disrupt the illusion of historicity for non-specialist audiences, and can even be potentially manipulated to enhance the audience's belief in the authenticity of the overall experience of a reenactment.¹⁹⁸

In the case of *Historia Normannis*, any knowledge gap within the society's recreation of the past is partially exacerbated by the internal method for validating historical material utilised for society reference. By requiring an item or practice to be evidenced within a minimum of three primary sources from the society's period of interest, *Historia Normannis* simultaneously ensures that the version of history it depicts is thoroughly researched – thereby limiting the impact of rare or esoteric items from the sources or potentially erroneous interpretations thereof – but also potentially excludes many ordinary objects or

¹⁹⁶ Agnew & Tomann, "Authenticity", pp. 20-24; Bræder, "Expertise and Amateurism", pp. 74-75; Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", pp. 396-399; Wyver, "Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry".

¹⁹⁷ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 114; Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 8; Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", p. 13.

¹⁹⁸ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 114-116; Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", pp. 396-401; Agnew and Tomann, "Authenticity", p. 23; Bræder, "Expertise and Amateurism", pp. 74-75; Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", pp. 13-14.

practices which either went unrecorded or for which the evidence has not survived in sufficient quantity.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, codifying the research gathered in this way as standardised “regulations” guarantees a relatively consistent level and manner of historical presentation throughout *Historia Normannis* as a reenactment society, while also potentially creating a too-uniform stylistic appearance of artefacts which are depicted.²⁰⁰ Similarly, re-enactors understand that modern attitudes to issues such as ethnic or gender norms do not necessarily mirror those of the past, yet, as modern actors, they must present a version of the past which conforms to these modern standards.²⁰¹

As such, re-enactors frequently stress to their audiences that their depictions of history only show a hypothetical presentation of the past, reflecting what history *might* have been like; moreover, if assertions of historical accuracy are made, they are often given in the context of technical accuracy – ensuring that a particular object or practice is reproduced correctly on the basis of surviving evidence – even if its accompanying presentational context within a reenactment event is of variable authenticity.²⁰² As discussed previously, this attitude of stressing technical accuracy of individual artefacts within an “authentic” but flawed wider representation is likewise how game developers attempt to describe their digital visions of history: in spite of their meticulous research into a given period or event, game developers are aware that they are creating an interpretation of events based upon historical reference material, not a definitive recreation.²⁰³ Bostal and Neumann, for instance, both praise the physical depiction of medieval artefacts and architecture within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*’s digital environment, even though they both maintain criticisms of the game’s broader construction of a medieval world.²⁰⁴ However, the experience that these games are able to offer allows players to ‘feel like you’re connecting

¹⁹⁹ This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences. See also Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 8.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Cuttle, “I’m a mixed Black female re-enactor in a sea of men with beards”; Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

²⁰² This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences. See also, Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 398; Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 14.

²⁰³ See for examples, GameSpot, *Historian & Rebellion CEO Reacts to Historical Video Games* [10:29-11:47]; Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary | Gameumentary*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE2goNeshY> [26:20-28:43].

²⁰⁴ Bostal, “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past”, pp. 380-394; Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 69-76.

with another age, you feel like you're understanding something about our history',²⁰⁵ which mirrors the outspoken goal of historical reenactment.

The parallels and mutual relationships between reenactment and historical video games also extends into their employment as tools for heritage preservation and engagement. Reenactment and other forms of "living history" serve as useful source bases for the development of historical games, as they help to test and preserve the ways in which the past was experienced which can then be reproduced within a digital format. Music is one such experience, and historical musical instruments are frequently employed by games to enhance the ambience of a historical world through the creation of original music or reproductions of period-appropriate songs which may be encountered in both diegetic and non-diegetic forms;²⁰⁶ diegetic game interactions are experienced by both the player and their in-game avatar, while non-diegetic are experienced only by the player.²⁰⁷ This practice of creating "authentic" music via historical instruments often results in collaborations with folk musicians experienced in the use of these instruments;²⁰⁸ for example, the soundtrack for *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* was created via a collaboration with Einar Selvik, a Norwegian musician familiar with playing a variety of Viking-era instruments, and who had previously helped to create original music for the *Vikings* TV series.²⁰⁹

Similarly, re-enactors who practise historical fighting styles, such as practitioners of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), help to accurately recreate combat techniques for public display, and have been utilised by video game developers as specialist consultants to provide practical demonstrations and motion-capture performances of these techniques;

²⁰⁵ Ali Jones, "Steam's most-anticipated city-builder is set to make millions, but Manor Lords' CEO, "I don't think the money weighs heavily", *GamesRadar+*, 25 April 2024, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/city-builder/steams-most-anticipated-city-builder-is-set-to-make-millions-but-for-manor-lords-ceo-i-dont-think-the-money-weighs-that-heavily/>.

²⁰⁶ Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden, "Digital Approaches to Historical Acoustemologies: Replication and Reenactment", in Mary Canton Lingold, Darren Mueller and Whitney Trettien (eds.), *Digital Sound Studies* (London: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 223.

²⁰⁷ "Diegetic", *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/diegetic>; "Non-diegetic", *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/non-diegetic>.

²⁰⁸ Geoffroy-Schwinden, "Digital Approaches to Historical Acoustemologies: Replication and Reenactment", p. 223.

²⁰⁹ Youssef Maguid, "Game Makers Podcast – Einar Selvik on the Music of Assassin's Creed Valhalla", *Ubisoft*, 7 January 2021, <https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/10viz5kf9dL3OVpZZnMlvN/game-makers-podcast-einar-selvik-on-the-music-of-assassins-creed-valhalla>; Erica Pope, "Interview: Einar Selvik Talks Assassin's Creed Valhalla", *Soundtracks Scores and More*, 13 November 2020, <https://soundtracksscoresandmore.com/2020/11/13/interveiw-einar-selvik-talks-assassins-creed-valhalla/>.

various re-enactors and HEMA specialists collaborated with Warhorse Studios to create the medieval combat within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*,²¹⁰ which included providing motion-capture performances as well as technical consultation to adapt these performances to the First-Person digital format of the game.²¹¹ This last point is especially significant, as both games and reenactment are forced to incorporate some necessary anachronisms or technical flaws to allow the audience to engage with the historical subject in their respective medium; both mediums, for instance, primarily engage with their audiences by the use of modern languages and syntax, thereby easing the audience's ability to interpret events but potentially obscuring linguistic complexities which may have existed during a given period.²¹² This imperative to remain intelligible and, more significantly, entertaining for the public audience is another shared characteristic of both reenactments and historical games, one which, as has been stated repeatedly throughout this thesis, is traditionally highlighted as a flaw of these media.

Furthermore, digital models utilised in video games like *Assassin's Creed* or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* can offer insight into how historic structures may have appeared in years gone by, especially if the structures in question have fallen into ruin or been re-employed and altered over time; this, in of itself, can be interpreted as a form of reenactment in the sense of re-performing a historic past, and bears similarities to the employment of re-enactors for reconstructions of historical events within documentary films.²¹³ Game environments can be used to depict entire settlements and surrounding landscapes in their historical forms, including structures built from materials such as wood or thatch which would not have survived to the modern day. Only specific "living history" exhibitions like the period furnishings within the keep at Dover Castle, or experimental archaeology projects like

²¹⁰ *Fechtbuch: The Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 05 February 2019.

²¹¹ *Fechtbuch: The Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* [16:26-17:00].

²¹² See for example, Bostal, "Medieval video games as reenactment of the past", p. 391; Amy Briscoe, "A Linguistic Guide to *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*", *WIRED*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/assassins-creed-valhalla-linguistic-guide/>; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 20 December 2018 [1:10:44-1:11:30].

²¹³ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 111 & pp. 117-122; Bostal, "Medieval video games as reenactment of the past", pp. 380-394; Neumann, "Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 69-76; Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment & the Fantasmatic Subject", pp. 72-89; Ning Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience", *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 26 (1999), pp. 349-370; "Kicking off 'Visualising Canterbury Castle'", *Castle Studies Trust*, 30 May 2025, <https://castlestudiustrust.org/blog/2025/05/30/kicking-off-visualising-canterbury-castle/>.

that at Gudélon Castle offer a real-world environment where these historic spaces may be presented in a practical medium to modern audiences.²¹⁴

However, the relative scarcity and real-world physical and financial vulnerabilities of “living history” sites, like those highlighted by the Notre Dame fire and its aftermath, emphasise the value of alternative or supplementary means of recording and preserving artefacts and structures. Digital media such as video games not only provide a forum to depict historical features where experimental archaeology projects cannot be undertaken practically or where there is potential for future damage, they also offer a supplementary means of recording and preserving sites undergoing other forms of engagement and conservation, and, lastly, can enable dissemination of historical material beyond the scope of traditional heritage interactions.

This facility of gaming, as a new outlet for heritage preservation and public engagement, is receiving growing support from the heritage industry.²¹⁵ Scholars such as Luke Holmes and Robert Houghton have explored and interrogated the complexities of employing video games in heritage contexts, identifying both advantages and flaws to the use of games by the heritage sector; Holmes, for instance, observes that games help to make history ‘sticky, relatable and exciting’, while Houghton notes that one of the greatest assets offered by commercial video games to heritage institutions is their public engagement power. Likewise, both scholars note that the cost of high-fidelity digital games – experiences represented by games from the “triple-A” game category – is beyond the practical and fiscal scope of most museum exhibitions, forcing “heritage games” to adopt more simplified interactive formats and graphical styles, even though these more visually and interactively rich game experiences draw more commercial interest from player communities.²¹⁶ Despite these potential flaws, dedicated partnerships between museums, heritage groups and

²¹⁴ *Dover Castle: a Time Team Special*; Willsher, “‘They said it was impossible’: how medieval carpenters are rebuilding Notre Dame”.

²¹⁵ Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, pp. 1-29; Luke Holmes, “The Heritage Game”, in Alexander Von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 105-118.

²¹⁶ Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, pp. 1-29; Holmes, “The Heritage Game”, pp. 105-118.

games developers are already producing exciting new possibilities for observing interactions and relationships between games and the heritage sector.²¹⁷

On the one hand there are games such as *The Great War: Western Front*, which was developed in close collaboration with the Imperial War Museums to incorporate the history of WWI as a key element of the game's mechanics and its technical perspective of WWI, and not simply as a surface-level aesthetic.²¹⁸ An example of this technical perspective of the historical narrative of WWI within *The Great War* is its inclusion of "National Will", a numerical system by which the game indicates each combatant side's desire to conduct the war, and which can thereby enable the player to achieve victory via historically representative attritional tactics rather than counter-factual means.²¹⁹ The significance of this historically representative tool within gameplay is reflected in player achievement data for *The Great War*, in which the percentages of players who have successfully completed a campaign (as either combatant side) are dramatically higher than the percentage of players who have completed a campaign by successfully capturing the opposing side's headquarters, the alternate victory method provided alongside the depletion of the opponent's "National Will", and which is framed in traditional gaming depictions of WWI as the mythical "right way" to win the war.²²⁰

On the other hand, there are historical exhibitions which incorporate game environments as part of their recreation of a historical space, such as the *878 AD* exhibition created by Hampshire Cultural Trust in collaboration with Ubisoft to utilise *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla's* recreation of the city of Winchester in the Viking Age alongside re-enactors as part

²¹⁷ Houghton, "Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games", pp. 1-29; Holmes, "The Heritage Game", pp. 105-118. See also, Peter Higgins, "Unlocking the glass case", in Lewi, Smith, von Lehn & Cook (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites*, pp. 326-334; Leslie D. Hall and James Mountain Chief Sanderville, "United Sugpaiq Alutiiq (USA) Video Game: Preserving Traditional Knowledge, Culture and Language", *Educational Technology*, vol. 49: 6 (2009), pp. 20-24; Lina Eklund, Björn Sjöblom and Patrick Prax, "Lost in Translation: Video Games Becoming Cultural Heritage", *Games and Culture*, vol. 13: 4 (2019), pp. 444-460; Richard Cole, "Mashing Up History and Heritage in Assassin's Creed Odyssey", *Games and Culture*, vol. 17: 6 (2022), pp. 915-928.

²¹⁸ Petroglyph Games, *The Great War: Western Front* (2023), PC. Published by Frontier Foundry.

²¹⁹ *The Great War: Western Front*; Phil Savage, "The Great War: Western Front is an RTS you'll win by inches, not miles", *PC Gamer*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-great-war-western-front-is-an-rt-s-youll-win-by-inches-not-miles/>; Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), pp. 58-70.

²²⁰ *The Great War: Western Front*; *The Great War: Western Front*, "Global Achievements", *Steam*, <https://steamcommunity.com/stats/2109370/achievements>; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 58-70.

of an “augmented reality” museum experience (Figure 4.4);²²¹ shortly before the completion of this thesis, a new project was announced by the UK’s Castle Studies Trust to develop an immersive and explorable digital reconstruction of Canterbury Castle utilising Unreal Engine 5, a graphics engine frequently used in video game development.²²²



Figure 4.4: Costumed re-enactment performance combined with digital game backdrops at the *878 AD* exhibition (Hampshire Cultural Trust, in partnership with Ubisoft).

Initiatives such as *878 AD* demonstrate a directly comparable form of heritage experience to the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, where a permanent re-enactor presence has been directly integrated into the museum’s presentation of its historical subject.²²³ Crucially, in the case of both the *878 AD* heritage experience and the Jorvik Viking Centre, video games and reenactment have not replaced the traditional museum experience; in both

²²¹ “The Experience”, *878 AD*, <https://878ad.co.uk/the-experience/>; “About 878 AD”, *878 AD*, <https://878ad.co.uk/about/>.

²²² “Kicking off ‘Visualising Canterbury Castle’”.

²²³ “JORVIK Story”, *JORVIK Viking Centre*, <https://www.jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk/about/jorvik-story/>.

cases, games and reenactment have been integrated into museum experiences as an interactive supplement to aid engagement beyond the scope of traditional museum exhibitions, thereby offering an additional or alternative means of engaging with the past within a heritage context.²²⁴

However, as Houghton observes, initiatives which employ commercially available video games, such as the use of *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* by the *878 AD* experience, frequently isolate and diminish the “play” aspect of the historical games which they utilise as foundations, aiding the heritage experience by ‘adapting traditional techniques rather than by incorporating playful elements’. Houghton notes that this restriction is an understandable limitation of the museum heritage experience, wherein cost, accessibility for children and non-gamers, time limitations for crowds, and lingering perceptions of games as unsuitable for “serious” historical subjects restrict museum experiences from implementing commercially available video games in ways which influence the core heritage experience too significantly. Yet he also notes the reduction of “play” elements from teaching experiences within video games themselves, a critique noted in the context of the *Assassin's Creed* series’ “Discovery Tours” educational feature which ‘remove almost all the gameplay aspects in favour of creating an experience closer to that received through a more traditional museum’.²²⁵

One of the arguments frequently used to justify both historical games and historical reenactment is their facility as an educational tool for those who engage with them. While there has been detectable educational benefits from engagement with these media,²²⁶ the effectiveness of both mediums is dependent on the degree of interaction an individual has with the respective medium. Reenactments, for instance, are performed for large public audiences, many of whom may engage with the re-enactors to ask questions and learn more about the history of the period being depicted, or about the reenactment experience. However, these interactions are typically fleeting, lasting only a few minutes or so, and the

²²⁴ Holmes, “The Heritage Game”, pp. 105-118.

²²⁵ Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, pp. 3-4.

²²⁶ See for examples, Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, pp. 6-9; Olechnicki and Szlendak, “Historical Reenactment in Poland”, pp. 3-22; “Red Dead Redemption research: ‘Gamers learn about nature’”, *BBC News*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-57805418>.

information imparted relies on the audience's memory for its longevity; if a particular member of the public engages with multiple re-enactors at an event, it is highly probable that most of the information they receive will have been lost by the time they leave the event.²²⁷ Furthermore, due to the broad demographic range of reenactment event audiences and the fleeting nature of their interactions with performers, any information delivered by re-enactors is heavily simplified and "sanitised" to make it suitable for "family audiences"; as noted above, the same criticisms can be made regarding the restricted implementation of gamic systems into heritage experiences.²²⁸ The true educational value of reenactment can only be found through active participation. Once engaged in reenactment, participants regularly find intriguing subjects which they are then inspired to go away and research, which can potentially lead to the development of related displays for public events.²²⁹

This phenomenon has been identified amongst Polish re-enactors by Olechnicki and Szlendak, and it is also something which this author has observed during experiences of reenactment within *Historia Normannis*. This author has observed members joining *Historia Normannis* with little or no knowledge of the historical period portrayed by the society, and subsequently begin researching niche subjects to display at events once they have become committed to reenactment; these research interests have ranged from more material or practical subjects such as blacksmithing, brewing and fishing, to more ephemeral or eccentric topics such as medieval ideas and understandings of supernatural phenomena or the economy of medieval eel farming.²³⁰ Moreover, the rate at which participants may be inspired to begin this research can vary; for some, it may take a few years of experience to develop the confidence to begin researching in this manner, whereas others may begin only a few months after joining.²³¹

As with other subjective experiences, the results of this phenomenon rely as much upon the individuals involved as the experience with which they are engaging. Nelson, for

²²⁷ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

²²⁸ Houghton, "Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games", p. 4.

²²⁹ Olechnicki and Szlendak, "Historical Reenactment in Poland", pp. 3-22; Cuttle, "I'm a mixed Black female re-enactor in a sea of men with beards'.

²³⁰ This statement is based upon the author's first-hand personal experiences.

²³¹ Ibid.

instance, notes a case of a forty-nine page research document submitted by one Historia Normannis member which became highly controversial within the society, receiving various challenges against the educational background and research practices of the author, while detractors were in turn accused of elitism and ‘gatekeeping who can and can’t research’.²³² As such, quantifying this phenomenon of “amateur research” within reenactment with precision is made difficult, but may offer intriguing insights into the educational benefits of participation in reenactment if undertaken.

While not a precise parallel, this same behaviour can be also observed in engagement with historical games; if observed passively, the educational value of a game is often fleeting and limited, but if a player engages directly with the historical experience, the educational value is amplified by the player’s longer and more intimate exposure to the historical world.²³³ This can then prompt players to conduct further exploration of historical subjects which have interested them, or to research subjects which have challenged their understandings of a historical world. In contrast to reenactment, the primary means of engaging with a historical game is typically as a direct participant, thereby greatly improving their potential to intrigue their audiences into exploring their historical subject in greater detail.²³⁴ It was partly to fulfil this desire amongst its players that Ubisoft began implementing its educational “Discovery Tour” mode into the *Assassin’s Creed* series, a feature which has received significant critical and popular acclaim for allowing players to explore historical worlds without interruptions from combat or gameplay objectives.²³⁵

These examples of the relationships between games and reenactment are only a small, illustrative sample of the comparisons which can be made between these media. However, key aspects of these relationships may be summarised. Games and reenactments utilise similar *mechanics* and constructional formulae in order to structure their recreations

²³² Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”, p. 8.

²³³ Houghton, “Awesome, But Impractical? Deeper Engagement with the Middle Ages through Commercial Digital Games”, pp. 6-9.

²³⁴ See for examples, Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Andrew McMichael, “PC Games and the Teaching of History”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 40: 2 (2007), pp. 203-218; William B. Robinson, “Stimulation, Not Simulation: An Alternate Approach to History Teaching Games”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 46:4 (2013), pp. 577-588; A. Martin Wainwright, “Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 47: 4 (2014), pp. 579-612.

²³⁵ Kevin Murnane, “Ubisoft Puts People Before Profits With The ‘Discovery Tour’ for ‘Assassin’s Creed Origins’”, *Forbes*, 23 February 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinmurnane/2018/02/23/ubisoft-puts-people-before-profits-with-the-discovery-tour-for-assassins-creed-origins/>.

of historical events which, while varying on a case-by-case basis in their details, facilitate engagement with historical subjects and either exploratory or performatory challenges within the experience of history. Games and reenactments are also governed by similar **mentalities** within their participants and audiences, emphasising historical authenticity and interaction with historical sources, but where engagement is conducted within contrasting social and psychological environments that create tension between adherence to these historical materials and popular understanding of the history to which they relate, as well as between competing historical and modern cultural norms. Both of these phenomena contribute to games and reenactments as a **performance** of historical subjects, both informing and entertaining participants and audiences alike and which may be further utilised by heritage organisations or additional media for either of these purposes.

Historical Reenactment as a Perspective of Digital Games

With this new insight into the comparisons between historical reenactment and historical video games, it should now be possible to confidently view historical games as a form of digital reenactment, and consequently to assess both scholarly and popular interactions with historical games from that authorial and historiographical perspective. Historical games and reenactment are both media designed to entertain as well as educate, and while these objectives occupy varying priorities between individual examples within these respective media, their combined influence results in similar attitudes and compromises towards the performance of history for public audiences.

This is a particularly important point to reinforce, for while specialist scholars may be able to identify significant historiographical flaws and anachronisms within a game or reenactment's depiction of historical events or phenomena, these media are fundamentally intended to engage with broad audiences within which groups of non-specialists – with little or no detailed knowledge of the subject on display – form significant proportions of the audience. While games and reenactments each retain certain nuances which enable more suitable avenues for historical interaction – such as games portraying historic environments in the context of a given period or event, and reenactment enabling interaction with performatory experiences of history – both media enable audiences to experience a

performative historical perspective which may be used to supplement “traditional” educational and heritage practices and interactions.

The employment of either games or reenactment as an educational tool is, to some extent, only countenanced because of a shared emphasis upon historical authenticity to attach a quality of legitimacy to their authorial perspectives of the past. As noted previously, authenticity and arguments surrounding synonymous concepts such as historical accuracy are a widespread feature of historical game discourse, both in popular discourse and academic scholarship,²³⁶ and reenactment has similarly experienced academic interest in concepts of authenticity within the medium and its constructions of the past.²³⁷ While both games and reenactment regularly exhibit an emphasis upon authenticity to validate and legitimise their constructions of a historical period, both media are inherently compromised by modern circumstances which place limitations upon the abilities of their respective mediums to portray historical events; games, as previously discussed, must balance technological limitations, commercial pressures and entertainment objectives with the faithful depiction of history, while reenactment must additionally account for the practical limitations of presenting replica artefacts within modern physical spaces. As such, while many games and re-enactors aim to present an “authentic” representation of historical characters and events – and individual exemplars within each medium may achieve near faultless reproductions – many participants in these media adopt more pragmatic standards, encouraging an outward appearance of authenticity which remains faithful to the recorded evidence of a historical period, but which may exhibit notable historiographical flaws or “inaccuracies” under close scrutiny.²³⁸

²³⁶ For examples, see Manning, “Expectations vs Reality: Perceived accuracy when women are in historical video games”, pp. 57-71; Andrew J. Salvati and Johnathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past”, and Josef Köstelbauer, “The Strange Attraction of Simulation”, in Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot (eds.), *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2013), pp. 153-183; Lisa Traynor and Johnathan Ferguson, “Shooting for Accuracy”, in Alexander Von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Callum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 243-254; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39.

²³⁷ Agnew & Tomann, “Authenticity”, pp. 20-24; Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-78; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 115-116; Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 396-409; Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”; Tilde Strandbygaard Jessen & Anette Warring, “Questing Authenticity: rethinking enlightenment and experience in living history”, *Nordisk Museologi*, vol 1 (2019), pp. 25-39.

²³⁸ Agnew & Tomann, “Authenticity”, pp. 20-24; Bræder, “Expertise and Amateurism”, pp. 74-75; Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, pp. 396-399; Nelson, “Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity”; Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

Similarly to previously discussed incidents regarding historical games, the concept of authenticity is sometimes over-emphasised within reenactment in order to 'pre-empt critiques' of a reenactment's depiction of the past.²³⁹ This is particularly significant in cases of demographic representation or participation, where historical attitudes and ideologies do not align with those of the modern audiences interacting with a game or reenactment. Tensions between historical subjects and modern socio-political views are a frequent source of debate and controversy surrounding both games and reenactment. In many cases, these incidents illustrate that the mechanisms of reenactment available within these media become a limiting factor on the historical narratives and experiences which games or reenactments are permitted or able to portray to audiences, who perceive depiction of or association with these narratives to be culturally disrespectful or factually misleading, rather than signifying an unwillingness by the creators of these depictions to engage with these narratives.²⁴⁰ As Eugen Pfister notes in the case of historical games and Nelson observes in that of reenactment, discussions of historical authenticity are 'a philosophical and academic debate without a satisfactory conclusion for anyone' but whose interpretation is nevertheless indivisible from engagement with history within these media.²⁴¹

A significant limiting factor of both games and reenactment is their financial cost, an aspect which has not been widely discussed or acknowledged (even within this thesis) which nonetheless places restrictions on the accessibility of each medium to potential participants. As products of the modern world, both games and reenactment demand a degree of individual investment, particularly in terms of finances. In the case of reenactment, this principally stems from the need to acquire physical replica items produced by specialist craftspeople; as a result, groups must either exercise particular care with purchases from external retailers to ensure that items are suitable for use or are forced to make their items internally with purchased materials, which must also be acquired selectively to ensure

²³⁹ Adrienne Shaw, "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in *Assassin's Creed III*", *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, vol. 9:14 (2015), p. 12, quoted in Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 53-54.

²⁴⁰ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 208-210; de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 114-116; Gapps, "Mobile Monuments", pp. 404-405; Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", pp. 28-39.

²⁴¹ Pfister, "This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!"; Nelson, "Authentic Interpretation and Interpreting Authenticity", p. 15.

suitability.²⁴² Both of these approaches are expensive and contribute to the popular image of reenactment as a middle-class pastime,²⁴³ and future studies could attempt to quantify the fiscal outlay required within participation in reenactment compared to gaming and the sociological perceptions of these media. However, reenactment events are comparatively easy to access as an external “consumer” audience, frequently requiring either no access charge at all or a nominal fee for entry to sites hosting reenactment events.²⁴⁴

Although considerations of implementing appropriate historical costumes and objects are likewise significant for historical video game development, gaming as a medium primarily suffers from financial considerations of producing and accessing games themselves, both in regard to game software and the hardware required to operate them, which increasingly define gaming as an elite hobby. While the lower individual cost of video games broadly enables more widespread engagement, and independent “hobbyist” games development has been greatly facilitated by the free distribution of development technology such as the Unreal games engine,²⁴⁵ concerns have been raised amongst gaming communities about rising financial costs for both consumers and developers, particularly in relation to triple-A games. These cost-increases have prompted questions about the financial sustainability of current business practices within the gaming industry from publishers, developers and players alike.²⁴⁶ In both cases, the fiscal outlay required to engage in either reenactment or gaming limits the ability of participants with more limited financial resources to engage with the respective medium, while also encouraging certain technical compromises to the construction of a historical depiction in order to facilitate wider engagement.

²⁴² This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

²⁴³ Wyver, “Muskets, chain mail and medieval laundry”.

²⁴⁴ This statement is based upon the author’s first-hand personal experiences.

²⁴⁵ See for examples, Brendan Sinclair, “Epic launches Unreal Engine 5”, *GamesIndustry.biz*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/epic-launches-unreal-engine-5>; Joe Foley, “Unreal Engine dominates as the most successful game engine, data reveals”, *Creative Bloq*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.creativebloq.com/3d/video-game-design/unreal-engine-dominates-as-the-most-successful-game-engine-data-reveals>.

²⁴⁶ For examples, see WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blatLhvdh0w>; WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting “100 Hour Games”*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyv9PX8809o>; GameSpot, *Microtransactions are getting out of hand | Spot On*, online video recording, 28 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmxxuE6293g>; IGN, *Console Gaming is Too Damn Expensive, Something Has to Give*, online video recording, 2 May 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p83MTH9DodA>.

The cultural accessibility of these media, combined with their emphasis upon authenticity – broadly adopted to at least a degree commonly accepted as denoting legitimacy amongst non-specialist audiences – is also essential to their utilisation as educational tools by heritage institutions and documentary media.²⁴⁷ The popular emphasis upon authenticity within both games and reenactment is fundamental to their interpretation, as this emphasis informs engagement and authorial perspectives of games or reenactments as depictions of history by both participants and audiences. Therefore, the range of attitudes towards authenticity and the understanding of this concept amongst those involved with the creation of gaming's or reenactment's portrayals of the past, particularly in relation to practical challenges within each medium, is highly significant and reflects the divergent authorial and historical perspectives of authenticity as a historical phenomenon.

²⁴⁷ For examples, see de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 117-125; Bruzzi, "Documentary", pp. 49-52; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 143-160; Muller, "Immersive engagement", pp. 296-304; Higgins, "Unlocking the glass case", pp. 326-334.

Conclusion: Perspective in Historical Video Games

Within the turbulent landscape of video gaming as a medium, historical games remain a significant, if sometimes challenging to quantify, element of the medium. Well-known triple-A titles such as the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption* remain at the forefront of discourse, both popular and academic, surrounding the depiction of history within the gaming medium. Yet as the triple-A gaming industry increasingly experiences conflicting expectations from players and publishers, highlighted by repeated instances of triple-A games displaying what players and critics perceive as aggressively implemented monetisation and creative stagnation, smaller, more creatively experimental "double-A" and "indie" gaming experiences, such as *Manor Lords* and *Tales of Kenzara: Zau*, have increasingly arisen to respond to market gaps left by the larger triple-A productions and allow independent developers to express their own artistic stories.¹

Meanwhile, the increasing public profile of video gaming as a medium has increased the pressure of ongoing socio-political forces upon the representation of these subjects within gaming contexts, exposing games and their creators to these influences and raising the pressure for them to conform to the expectations of these values;² in some contexts, as with scandals of workplace harassment and toxic behaviour within development companies or player communities, this pressure has been justifiably necessary to expose and address harmful behaviours within gaming communities,³ while in others, most notably in the context of representation of marginalised demographics in historical contexts, these socio-political influences have left game creators feeling vulnerable to extreme views from a vocal

¹ See for examples, WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blatLhvdh0w>; WhatCulture Gaming, *People Are Rejecting "100 Hour Games"*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyv9PX8809o>; WhatCulture Gaming, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla's Aggressive Microtransactions Are Ruining The Game*, online video recording, 08 February 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnVKA1IJcU>.

² For example, see Tom Richardson, "No one forced us to make a game with a diverse cast", *BBC News*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4nnn69l483o>.

³ See for examples, Jason Schreier, "Ubisoft Family Accused of Mishandling Sexual Misconduct Claims", *Bloomberg*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-21/ubisoft-sexual-misconduct-scandal-harassment-sexism-and-abuse>;

minority of external commentators, even if this feeling of vulnerability has subsequently prompted controversial responses by these developers.⁴

The public responses to historical games, as well as to the commercial and artistic decisions of historical games' creators, offer illuminating insights into the forms in which history is presented, understood and discussed within the gaming space. By highlighting and deconstructing the concept of "perspective" in relation to its potential applications to historical games as a lens for technical, historical and authorial interpretation, we can identify and analyse common phenomena within these responses, and thereby gain a greater understanding of how history is utilised and understood within the context of the gaming medium. This thesis has particularly sought to emphasise the importance of authorial perspectives in relation to historical games, both in the context of historical games' creators and in relation to the perspectives of consumers in subsequent commentary surrounding these games. Likewise, by acknowledging the effect of authorial influences from gaming as a wider industry and cultural phenomenon upon historical titles, it is possible to identify and explore rationales which affect the interpretation and utilisation of historical content within the video game medium.

In the first instance, the concept of narrative, and the inherent perspective of history as a narrative subject, can impact the technical and authorial perspectives offered by video games, as well as creating challenges for games as a medium, most notably in that strict adherence to the surviving written historical narrative places restrictions upon the creative freedom and personal agency available to both game creators and consumers. With regards to creators, adherence to historical narrative can provide a clear, established narrative framework to build upon within "realist" simulations of historical worlds, and allow game consumers to interact with legitimate historical characters and phenomena in ways which allow games to highlight these historical perspectives in greater depth than other historical entertainment media – such as film or television – are able to achieve thanks to gaming's capacity for the player to explore historical material in a personally interactive manner.

⁴ See for examples, Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed boss discusses 'devastating' impact of Shadows' diversity and inclusivity backlash", *Eurogamer*, 2 November 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-boss-discusses-devastating-impact-of-shadows-diversity-and-inclusivity-backlash>; Stephen Totilo, "My E3 Meeting With A Pro-GamerGate Developer", *Kotaku*, 2 July 2015, <https://kotaku.com/my-e3-meeting-with-a-pro-gamergate-developer-1715511964>.

At the same time, this adherence to recorded historical narratives limits game developers' ability to present their own authorial perspectives of those narratives and the histories to which they relate, and can restrict the ability of developers to compile research if extant records for a particular historical perspective cannot be reliably obtained. Consequently, developers are required to focus overwhelmingly on fictional characters and restrict the ability of these characters to influence historical events – or otherwise create experiences in which the recorded historical narrative is not disrupted by player interaction, which similarly infringes upon the agency offered to consumers of these historical experiences. In particular, the perception that an individual player's narrative choices are without impact or consequence, or are otherwise disconnected from the game experience, can provoke negative player responses which may prove detrimental to the game in question.⁵ This is a phenomenon borne of wider developments in gaming and games' narrative presentation, in which historical games are situated and interpreted by popular commentators in similar gamic contexts to non-historical experiences, such as within gameplay genres which emphasise player agency and its impact, with historical aesthetics and narrative contexts applied as a means to distinguish a game from its gameplay genre competitors.⁶

A fundamental problem with presenting narratives set in the past is, inherently, that the events depicted have already occurred, their outcomes already determined. While writers of game narratives can use this to foreshadow or allude to historical events which occur later in the chronological context of a game's setting – or even to events and phenomena in the modern-day – and thereby exploit a player's knowledge of the historical narrative in order to generate emotional responses which heighten the impact of in-game events, this also presents the challenge of contextualising players' actions in a game within the known narrative of that period. Thus, if game designers choose to adhere closely to the known historical narrative of a period, the player's personal agency is necessarily limited, potentially reducing them – via their protagonist avatar – to a relatively passive agent in historical events, placing the narrative power with their known historical actors, and limiting

⁵ See for example, Heather Alexandra, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Latest DLC Has A Romantic Ending You Can't Change", *Kotaku*, 15 January 2019, <https://kotaku.com/assassins-creed-odyseys-latest-dlc-has-a-romantic-endi-1831784459>.

⁶ See for examples, Gameumentary, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Documentary* | Gameumentary, online video recording, YouTube, 24 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE2goNeshY> [25:14-25:29]

player interaction to peripheral engagement with events. This manner of presenting historical perspective is antithetical to the requirements of games as an interactive medium, which fundamentally demands that the player is made a primary agent of events, and that the individual player's actions and responses form the determining factor in a title's gameplay narrative outcomes. Consequently, if game developers decide to integrate mechanics which allow the player to influence the outcome of a game's narrative, they are required to divorce their titles from specific elements of the recorded historical narrative.

This separation between the player and recorded historical events may only be minor – such as placing a fictional narrative within the context of a historical period as a vehicle to interpret the recorded narrative, as in the case of many *Assassin's Creed* narratives – yet it subtly transforms the depiction of the past in the affected game into one of narratives within historical phenomena, which uses recognisable historical iconography to remain anchored to the chosen period. This allows developers to facilitate a greater degree of player agency, but at the cost of a strictly defined “historical narrative”; depending on game genre, this overt narrative may be sacrificed entirely to facilitate “constructionalist” gameplay genres which demand unrestricted player agency within the mechanical interactions permitted by the game, and which engage more overtly with themes, imagery and processes from historical worlds than recorded narratives.

Similarly, the facilitation of player agency within the technical and authorial perspective of games as a “power fantasy” encourages the creation of narratives within historical contexts which facilitate these narratives, notably within historical narrative contexts of conflict and positions of authority. Consequently, the historical narrative as recorded by contemporary sources becomes a narrative framework to support player agency within the gameplay context, providing key initiating and “landmark” events onto which historically derived aesthetics and phenomena may be applied and explored at the player's discretion. This iconographic approach to historical narrative relies upon a degree of common knowledge of a historical period or individual historical figures to orientate and contextualize the player's interactions with events, which also works to the advantage of games developers, who can utilise these recognisable elements for narrative and marketing benefit.

Separating the player from the historical events with which they are interacting through the video game can also be fundamental in enabling the depiction of controversial historical perspectives within games, namely of those associated with groups or individuals identified as “villains” within pop-culture historical narratives. Depicting controversial historical figures and groups as game antagonists has long been considered an acceptable method of engagement, with most historical games offering a form of conflict against these figures which permits a cathartic expression of righteous opposition.⁷ It has also resulted in the parallel justification and cultural deification of those perspectives which opposed these “villainous” historical actors, further enhancing the perceived legitimacy of the historical perspectives framed as “heroes” within historical games.⁸

However, this same historiographical stereotyping reduces the nuances of the incumbent historical narratives of these “heroes” and “villains”, masking the narratives of associated groups with non-aligned or opposing values or actions through homogenisation and exaggeration for entertainment effect. These parallel impacts from engrained presentation of historical “villains” complicate the efforts of those game experiences which attempt to present or interact with history from the viewpoint of these groups via the generation of ludo-narrative dissonance.⁹ In order to minimise or circumvent this phenomenon, games are forced either to engage with these controversial historical perspectives on a purely aesthetic level – as in the case of competitive multiplayer experiences, like *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* – or, depending on gameplay genre of the title in question, by designing narratively-sympathetic fictional characters – who may represent or embody larger non-aligned communities – in order to present perspectives of these “villainous” groups while remaining detached from the controversial actions of the historical agents in question.¹⁰

⁷ See for examples, Eva Kingsepp, “Experiencing and Performing Memory: Second World War videogames as a practice of remembrance”, in Patrick Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 219; Debra Ramsey, “Brutal Games: *Call of Duty* and the Cultural Narrative of World War II”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54: 2 (2015), pp. 94-114.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), p. 161; Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, “Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games” in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 145-149.

¹⁰ Ibid.

In both forms, games provide the player an acceptable format within the history being reflected on screen to interact with controversial historical perspectives from their narrative viewpoint within the context of gameplay by fostering a sense of “plausible deniability” between game players and their interactions with controversial historical perspectives. The popular identification of certain historical perspectives as homogenised “villains” restricts games’ ability to engage with narratives presented from the perspective of these groups for fear of provoking negative reactions from communities linked to the victims of these historical “villains” or otherwise alienating potential commercial audiences.¹¹ Therefore, even though formats exist which enable video games to explore and interact with controversial historical perspectives, developers rarely do so within curated narrative game formats due to the more overt associations between players and these controversial perspectives which more direct experiences permit; gameplay genres where players are mechanically required to perform in-game acts as controversial perspectives while narratively divorced from these groups, such as within competitive multiplayer games, or where the player’s in-game agency inherently enables divergence from established historical narratives, such as Grand Strategy games, are less controversial formats for engagement with these perspectives, but must still limit the amount of overt imagery and narrative interaction relating to these controversial histories in order to minimise players’ ability to actively associate with these perspectives.¹²

In the second instance, video games as a historical medium are inherently reflective of modern cultural ideology, and both receptive of and susceptible to changing circumstances within modern communities. While this has enabled a growing degree of interaction with historical perspectives narratively framed as “villains” within popular-culture as the psychological separation between these figures and living communities increases – thereby enabling these groups to be culturally re-appraised in a “safe space”¹³ – this awareness of modern socio-cultural shifts has been most particularly evident in relation to discourse surrounding the representation of marginalised communities within games and historic contexts. Until recently, a significant majority of video games presented Western White Male perspectives of historical periods and events, with depictions of female, non-

¹¹ Chapman and Linderth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), pp. 4-6.

White, or gender-diverse demographics either largely excluded from representation or presented in contexts which promoted the aforementioned White Male perspective.¹⁴

As historic offenders of marginalised communities, video games face clear pressures to address these imbalances.¹⁵ This is particularly significant as an on-going phenomenon within video gaming as modern gaming communities also reflect greater than average representation of certain marginalised groups in proportion to wider national populations,¹⁶ and gaming commentators have identified potential long-term commercial incentives for expanding games' appeal beyond traditionally dominant White Western audiences.¹⁷ Developers have made notable strides in recent years to incorporate and represent marginalised communities in newer games.

Some perspectives and demographics have been easier to implement within games than others and as such have seen more widespread representation, particularly where historical context or gameplay genre has facilitated greater options for incorporating these diverse perspectives. In this regard, female representation has been implemented most widely, with modern triple-A games such as the *Assassin's Creed* series incorporating either both male and female playable protagonists or gender selection customisation mechanics.¹⁸ However, non-White and LGBTQ+ demographics are also increasingly experiencing inclusion within modern games, although often in more circumstantial contexts such as through the

¹⁴ Dmitri Williams *et al*, "The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games", *New Media and Society*, vol. 11:5 (2009), pp. 815-834; Lara Keilbart, "Queer Authenticity in the History of Games: Experiences of Knowing, Negotiating and Portraying Queerness in Games throughout the Last Four Decades" in Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 179-198.

¹⁵ See for examples, Vit Šisler, "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 11:2 (2008), pp. 203-220; Lara Keilbart, "Queer Authenticity in the History of Games: Experiences of Knowing, Negotiating and Portraying Queerness in Games throughout the Last Four Decades" in Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 179-194.

¹⁶ See for examples, Mark Taylor, "UK Games Industry Census: Understanding diversity in the UK games industry workforce", *UKIE* (2020), p. 23 & p. 27; UKIE, *#RaiseTheGame: Inspiring Diversity and Inclusion in The Games Industry* (2020), pp. 4-5: <https://raisethegame.com/media/Website%20Content/RaiseTheGame%20Guidance%20Report%20Feb%202020.pdf>.

¹⁷ See for example, Tom Richardson, "London Games Festival shines a light on diversity", *BBC News*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-68769829>.

¹⁸ See for examples, Tom Phillips, "Assassin's Creed boss discusses 'devastating' impact of Shadows' diversity and inclusivity backlash", *Eurogamer*, 2 November 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-boss-discusses-devastating-impact-of-shadows-diversity-and-inclusivity-backlash>; Stuart Cullen, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey Interview", *Codec Moments*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.codecmoments.com/assassins-creed-odyssey-interview/>.

use of romance mechanics to enable player protagonists to optionally engage in same-sex relationships.¹⁹ On occasion, this increased demographic representation has been implemented within historical games in a mechanically or narratively flawed manner – for instance, by presenting contradictory attitudes to transgressions of historic social gender norms within a single game experience as a result of player protagonist gender-selection mechanics – but many of these historiographical flaws can be identified as consequences of conflicting interactions between gameplay and in-game historical narrative, wherein the need to facilitate player agency within gameplay results in an unintended consequence of contradictory narrative and technical perspectives.

Many modern instances of the representation of marginalised communities in historical contexts within gaming have received politicised questions relating to the faithfulness or legitimacy of their in-game depictions. While much of the negativity towards these depictions has been voiced by aggressive or hostile modern commentators, often – but not exclusively – of a politically-conservative mindset,²⁰ certain instances of depicting marginalised demographics in historical games have raised questions in the context of social stigma towards these communities recorded in the historical sources; developers are hesitant to present controversial behaviours by historical societies in ways which may legitimise these attitudes, such as presenting them as shared or endorsed by a game's player protagonist, however the omission of these historically-recorded stigmas can be potentially damaging in regards to the historical perspective offered by these games by potentially “glossing over” historic injustices.²¹ Some games have attempted to strike a balance

¹⁹ See for example, Nick Romano, “Ok, Cupid: An ode to same-sex romancing in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*”, *Entertainment Weekly*, 9 October 2018, <https://ew.com/gaming/2018/10/09/assassins-creed-odyssey-lgbtq/>.

²⁰ Phillips, “Assassin's Creed boss discusses ‘devastating’ impact of Shadows’ diversity and inclusivity backlash”; Tom Phillips, “Working in the Shadows: how an Assassin's Creed researcher braved the backlash”, *Eurogamer*, 2 May 2025, <https://www.eurogamer.net/working-in-the-shadows-how-an-assassins-creed-researcher-braved-the-backlash/>; Tom Richardson, “Nine years and 3 million words of script: Acting in a video game epic”, *BBC News*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgxp0jl15lo>.

²¹ Chapman and Linderth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140; Hilary Jane Locke and Thomas Ashley Mackay, “You Are A True Progressive: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics”, *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20:1 (2021), pp. 174-193; Eugen Pfister, “‘Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hankenkreuzen!’: Imaginations of the Holocaust and Crimes Against Humanity During World War II in Digital Games”, in von Lünen, Lewis, Litherland and Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens*, pp. 267-284; Eugen Pfister, “‘The Führer’s facial hair and name can also be reinstated in the virtual world’: Taboos, Authenticity and the Second World War”, *The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, vol. 9: 1 (2020) [Accessed online: <https://www.gamejournal.it/the-fuhrers-facial-hair/>]; Alaiks, “Historical Responsibility: how is HOI4 doing?”, *Paradox Forum*, 3 February 2021, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/historical-responsibility-how-is-hoi4-doing.1455005/>.

between these two phenomena – incorporating sympathetic perspectives of marginalised communities while also acknowledging the historic mistreatment of these groups²² – however, the process is an imperfect one, hindered by unspoken imperatives amongst larger game development studios and publishers to avoid alienating potential players by depicting historical traumas in too explicit a fashion or otherwise associating the player with these abuses.²³

Furthermore, while the opposition demonstrated to games’ artistic choices on the basis of politicised views on ethnicity, gender or sexuality are naturally troubling, the mere fact that these controversies arise demonstrates a fundamental divergence in the authorial perspectives of how these matters should be presented and engaged with in the video game medium. This is particularly significant in the context of historical games, as the direct interaction between the representation of marginalised communities and the historical context of a game demonstrates a subjective perception of what history represents and how it should consequently be depicted in a game format.

In these instances, history within games obtains the authorial perspective of a subjective experience, reliant on the interpretation of an individual creator or consumer to validate a game’s depiction of the past. While this can unfortunately expose a game’s depiction of the past to negative phenomena such as “culture wars”, it can also be invaluable as a means of fostering engagement with history within games, as each individual’s experience of that history is subtly unique. This perspective of historiographical writing within games also legitimises the inclusion by developers of historical folklore and popular culture alongside recorded historical events and phenomena, as utilising supplementary influences to offer the broadest range of possible historical experiences thus places the emphasis on the player to decide what form of historical experience they wish to engage with and consider “historical”. This authorial perspective is reinforced by the widespread

²² See for examples, Locke and Mackay, “You Are A True Progressive”, pp. 174-193; Kat Bailey, “Battlefield V’s Best War Story So Far is ‘Tirailleur’, A Story That Highlights a Lesser-Known But Awful Historical Injustice”, VG247, 18 October 2018, <https://www.vg247.com/battlefield-vs-best-war-story-so-far-is-tirailleur-a-story-that-highlights-a-lesser-known-but-awful-historical-injustice>; Wesley Yin-Poole, “Mafia 3’s in-game statement on its depiction of racism”, *Eurogamer*, 7 October 2016, <https://www.eurogamer.net/mafia-3s-in-game-statement-on-its-depiction-of-racism>; Tauriq Moosa, “Mafia III is just a game, but it shines a spotlight on the reality of racism”, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/20/mafia-iii-videogame-racism>.

²³ Chapman and Linderth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play’, p. 140.

inclusion of optional content in modern games, either through additional DLC expansions or in-game microtransactions, which a player is empowered to either include or exclude from their experience of a historical game if they choose, thereby making each individual's subjective perspective of the history provided by a historical game more personal.

Both of these issues – the competing authorial perspectives of gameplay design requirements and historical records, and the politicised discussion of conflicting subjective modern viewpoints of historical subjects – highlight the fundamentally problematic nature of the popular concept of “historical accuracy” as an empirical measure for the legitimacy of the historical perspectives explored and presented within video games. While the popular understanding of historical accuracy implies a definitive, quantitative metric for determining the quality of a video game's depiction of a historical period in relation to the reality, the subjective interpretation of this phenomenon to varied gameplay formats, narrative scenarios and political beliefs, not to mention potentially varied interpretations of the historical sources used to support these judgements, renders the concept of historical accuracy highly contentious as an objective means of assessing the value of gaming's interactions with historical subjects. This problematic nature is reinforced by the varied usage of the concept of historical accuracy by different authorial perspectives interacting with historical games, with applications in differing contexts inferring separate degrees of factual precision.²⁴ This divergence of authorial perspectives creates issues for academic scholarship exploring the understanding of history within gaming, as significant proportions of the debate in both popular and academic discourse become devoted, whether intentionally or not, to arguing the merits of a game's historical depiction with regards to the contested term of historical accuracy in relation to its contextual usage.

Discourse of historical accuracy is further impeded by the variance of terminology used by both popular and academic discussion to refer to this popular concept, with terms like ‘accuracy’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘realism’ all utilised to describe this phenomenon with little clear distinction made between them, or as synonyms for the same phenomenon.²⁵

²⁴ Eugen Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”, *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft*, 15 July 2020, <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/2719#more-2719>.

²⁵ Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), p. 18; Rick Lane, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – impressively detailed medieval life sim”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/feb/15/kingdom-come-deliverance-review-medieval-rpg>.

Consequently, it is possible to encounter historical games such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, both of which have received popular praise for their individual approaches to historical accuracy but in very different forms and contexts, and which have received very different responses by gaming communities.

On the one hand, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was widely praised by gaming commentators for its attempt to create a historically accurate medieval world within a role-playing game despite limitations imposed by the development studio's relatively limited resources, yet received significant popular and academic criticism for its treatments of non-White and female demographics within the game's medieval setting, which was specifically attributed to the personal politics of the game's lead developer despite the development studio's insistence that these representations were appropriate for the game's historical context.²⁶ On the other hand, *Red Dead Redemption 2* has been popularly described by players and gaming commentators as a historically accurate experience due to the high graphical fidelity and immersive detail of its in-game recreation of a turn-of-the-century Western world.²⁷ However, a closer examination shows the experience within *Red Dead Redemption 2* to be built upon cultural mythology of "the Wild West" and precedent established by earlier Westerns in varied forms of popular-culture, as well as the 'brand identity' of the game's publisher, Rockstar, both of which emphasise entertainment and player engagement over historiographical precision.²⁸

²⁶ Robert Purchase, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – history is a double-edged sword", *Eurogamer*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review>; Nathan Grayson, "Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics", *Kotaku*, 2 March 2018, <https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208>; Helen Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*" in Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (eds.), *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 28-39; Martin Bostal, "Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and its historical claim", in Fernández Sirvent, Rafael y Gutiérrez Lloret, Rosa Ana (eds.), *Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea, Universidad de Alicante 20-22 de septiembre de 2018* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2019), pp. 380-394; Dictator, "Separating Games from their Creators – *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*", *Resetera*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.resetera.com/threads/separating-games-from-their-creators-kingdom-come-deliverance.17250/>.

²⁷ See for examples, Keza MacDonald, "Red Dead Redemption 2 review – gripping western is a near miracle", *The Guardian*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/25/red-dead-redemption-2-review-western-playstation-xbox-rockstar>; John Wills, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a video game be too realistic?", *The Conversation*, 12 November 2018, <https://theconversation.com/red-dead-redemption-2-can-a-video-game-be-too-realistic-106404>.

²⁸ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 12-15; Wright, "Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption*, and narratives of 'Progress'", pp. 3-5.

Closer analysis of the respective definitions of the terms ‘accuracy’ and ‘authenticity’ offers clearer avenues for making a distinction between their usage in a historical game context.²⁹ These definitions also support the utilisation of the term “historical authenticity” to describe and explore depictions of history within video games as based upon evidential fact but not purporting or able to precisely depict historical reality; significantly, this authorial perspective of historical authenticity has been utilised by game developers in response to negative controversies amongst player communities regarding politically-motivated arguments of historical ‘inaccuracies’ within a game.³⁰

Clarifying and subsequently emphasising this distinction between “historical accuracy” and “historical authenticity” can thereby allow discourse of historical games to accommodate the creative and technological licence required to interpret historical sources for the video game medium, and thus facilitate academic discussion to explore the interactions between games and utilisation of history and historical phenomena beyond literal factual replication. As such, while academia already utilises the term ‘historical authenticity’ to discuss the representation of the past within video games,³¹ its working definition can be adapted to incorporate greater awareness of historical games’ wider position within the video game medium and the effects which wider gaming trends impose upon historical games as commercial and entertainment artefacts which subsequently impact their depiction of historical subjects. This then facilitates a greater examination of how history is understood and employed in the wider sphere of popular entertainment

²⁹ Laura Saxton, “A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction”, *Rethinking History*, vol. 24 (2020), pp. 127-144; “Accuracy”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1281>; “Authenticity”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13325>.

³⁰ See for examples, Liz Lanier, “‘Total War: Rome II’ Won’t Remove Female Generals Despite Bad Reviews & Backlash”, *Variety*, 25 September 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/total-war-rome-ii-female-generals-1202956389/>; Tom Phillips, “Assassin’s Creed reddit takes firm stance on Yasuke ‘debate’, says Ubisoft ‘exacerbated’ issue with statement”, *Eurogamer*, 29 July 2024, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-reddit-takes-firm-stance-on-yasuke-debate-says-ubisoft-exacerbated-issue-with-statement>; Historický ústav Masarykovy univerzity, *Kingdom Come - přednáška VIII FINÁLE - O KCD s historičkou studia Warhorse Joannou Nowak*, online video recording, YouTube, 6 December 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhaSpyrnSew>.

³¹ See for examples, Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”; Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*”, pp. 28-39; Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman (eds.), *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020); Andrew J. Salvati and Johnathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past” in Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot (eds.), *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2013), pp. 153-167.

culture, and consequently how games can be utilised to influence and observe this understanding.

This perspective of historical games as a medium with inherent historiographical flaws, yet still capable of offering informative and entertaining historical experiences, bears many parallels to that of historical reenactment, which experiences many similar historiographical challenges in the construction and perception of its depictions of the past: both games and reenactment seek to interpret and present history for modern audiences; both are constrained by the socio-cultural expectations and circumstances of their modern participants and audiences; and both are frequently subject to discussions regarding historical authenticity as both a measure of factual fidelity and as a political argument to restrict certain interactions with historical content.³² Furthermore, relationships between games and reenactment as forms of historical interpretation and performance can already be seen and examined, such as the usage of re-enactors as specialist consultants within game development or games being employed similarly to reenactments as a form of public engagement by heritage institutions or documentary media.³³

As participatory media featuring significant degrees of interactivity on the part of their respective participants, reenactment and historical games share many characteristics with regards to historical presentation. Both games and reenactments require participants to personally engage with historical subjects within the constructed narrative framings of their respective medium, although these media are better individually suited to particular

³² See for examples, Pfister, "This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!"; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield I* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021); Stephen Gapps, "Mobile Monuments: A view of historical reenactment and authenticity from inside the costume cupboard of history", *Rethinking History*, vol. 13: 3 (2009), pp. 395-409; Juliane Tomann, "Female Counter-Curation: A Case Study of Polish Napoleonic War Reenactment", *International Public History*, vol. 5: 2 (2022), pp. 81-92.

³³ *Fechtbuch: Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come*, digital video recording, Steam Video, 05 February 2019 [16:26-17:00]; Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Second edition; London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 117-125; Stellar Bruzzi, "Documentary", in Vanessa Agnew, Johnathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 49-52; Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), pp. 143-160; Adam Muller, "Immersive engagement: Designing and testing a virtual Indian Residential School exhibition" and Peter Higgins, "Unlocking the glass case", in Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Dirk von Lehn & Stephen Cook (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 296-304 & pp. 326-334.

interactions – with gaming better suited to exploratory historical experiences and reenactment to performative interactions with history.³⁴

Similarly, as public-facing methods of historical engagement, both encounter similar challenges and situations with regards to audience perception of historical subjects, in particular regarding subjective issues of “authenticity”, demographic representation and political controversy. What Stephen Gapps refers to as ‘a “shared authority” between historians and their publics’ is equally observable within games as in reenactment, for despite the shared emphasis upon historical authenticity in both media, there are instances in both games and reenactment in which ‘if something is too authentic it can fail to be perceived as historical’, thus requiring the creators of these historical performances to commit specific factual errors in order to accommodate certain popular-cultural understandings of their audiences of what constitutes an “authentic” recreation of a given historical subject.³⁵

Consequently, parallels can be observed within the responses between both games and reenactments to these challenges to suit the authorial perspectives of their modern creators and audiences. This naturally forces compromises to the historical content which is presented to their respective audiences to suit or accommodate the mechanisms and cultural expectations of the respective medium. Therefore, while some scholars have already noted and examined the similarities between these media, the wider academic perspective of historical games can be re-evaluated to consider games and reenactment as directly comparable historical media, or even that games (in some forms and contexts) can be considered to be a digital form of reenactment.³⁶ This alternate authorial perspective of historical engagement within video games offers new avenues for interaction with historical content through the gaming medium, as well as opening new avenues to employ historical games within heritage contexts.

Historical games offer a multitude of ways of experiencing historical content. However, they are fundamentally compromised as representations of the past by the very

³⁴ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 182-183.

³⁵ Gapps, “Mobile Monuments”, p. 398; Young, “Race & Historical Authenticity”, pp. 28-39.

³⁶ Pieter Van den Heede, “Gaming”, in Agnew, Lamb and Tomann (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, pp. 84-88; Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 198-230.

nature and requirements of the video game medium itself – to provide unique, creative experiences which resonate with and entertain their players, and generate sufficient profit to sustain themselves and the developers which create them – which can conflict with the requirements of history as a subject. Many of the phenomena identified throughout this thesis engage with fundamental precepts of history as a professional discipline, which, given gaming’s interactions with broad, non-specialist audiences, could be said to emphasise the significance of these issues as core questions of how history is “written” in modern scholarship, or similarly of how history is utilised and understood within modern media. This thesis has particularly emphasised engagement with triple-A historical games, notably the *Assassin’s Creed* series, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, as the role of these titles within popular discussions and perspectives of video games more broadly, as well as within specific perspectives of historical games, is such that they are often integral, either directly or indirectly, to gaming discussions of historical subjects.

The nature of historical games as entertainment for modern audiences and as artistic products designed by modern creators while also acting as representations of the histories they depict places them in a transitional state, whereby they exist as reflections of both the past and the present which created them; in this regard, historical games can arguably be considered to be like any other historical source. As pieces of modern entertainment media, the perspectives that games offer of the past are complicated and restricted by the demands imposed by their modern context and audiences, as games operate within an inherently commercial environment and – in a significant percentage of cases – must generate revenue from sales or other forms of monetisation to sustain themselves and their creators.³⁷

While the requirement to justify financial investment is also shared by historical film or television, the need for a game to sustain the cost of its continued operation,

³⁷ See for examples, Lies van Roessel, and Jan Švelch, “Who Creates Microtransactions: The Production Context of Video Game Monetization”, in Olli Sotomaa and Jan Švelch, *Game Production Studies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 197-216; WhatCulture Gaming, *The Rise of AA Games*; Stephen Powell, “Sid Meier warns the games industry about monetisation”, *BBC News*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-60304123>; Anna Koselke, “Manor Lords publisher says ‘so many games fail’ because of bad contracts where publishers insist on making all their money back before devs get a bite of revenue”, *GamesRadar+*, 16 August 2024, <https://www.gamesradar.com/games/city-builder/manor-lords-publisher-says-so-many-games-fail-because-of-bad-contracts-where-publishers-insist-on-making-all-their-money-back-before-devs-get-a-bite-of-revenue/>; *Deliverance: The Making of Kingdom Come* [16:22-19:32, 28:22-32:54].

maintenance, and the development of post-release content, is a unique trait of the gaming medium, and as such can be a significant factor in influencing the historical content included within a video game or the actions of players, developers or publishers in response to the discussion of features within historical games. This also means that games must also conform to certain popular conceptions of historical subjects to appeal to their audiences; even if a game subsequently subverts these expectations, the need to connect with familiar historical iconography or popular understandings of history as a form of “cultural marketing” channels historical games into emphasising particular historical perspectives as a response to commercial pressures.

These factors force the history depicted by video games to conform to these requirements, with significant consequences for the types of history depicted by games and the manner in which it is presented to players. Historical perspectives which facilitate gaming imperatives for spectacle and power fantasy are given greater prominence within gaming, in particular emphasising narratives and scenarios of historical conflict and warfare which remain fundamental to the mechanics of some of the most popular gaming genres. Historical narratives are often manipulated or overridden to facilitate the actions of players within fictionalised play-spaces, yet these are controlled and framed by developers to ensure that players remain separate from the most controversial historical characters and incidents as much as possible. Likewise, games attempting to create experiences which appeal to the broadest range of possible modern audiences sacrifice some artistic capacity to engage with historical perspectives of specific demographics in historical scenarios as attempting to do so may alienate potential audiences and thereby compromise the game’s commercial viability.

Consequently, the manner in which historical games are interpreted and interacted with should be re-evaluated; as games are not literal representations of historical fact, they should not be treated as such. Discourse regarding “historical accuracy” within video games will not simply disappear, particularly in light of the concept’s dominance in popular discourse of historical games.³⁸ However, the concept and its attendant terminology should be approached with greater caution and consideration for games as a modern artistic and entertainment format within scholarly analysis. Objective historical phenomena such as

³⁸ Pfister, “This (Historical Authenticity) Means War!”.

physical artefacts and locations can be modelled “accurately” within game environments *to an extent*, but they all ultimately exist to contribute to and enhance the immersion of subjectively “authentic” historical worlds designed to be interacted with for the enjoyment of modern audiences, and, as such, also draw influences from other video games and forms of popular culture while constructing historical worlds which conform to subjective popular understandings of the period being depicted. Likewise, as performances of historical phenomena as entertainment for modern audiences, games can be considered within the authorial perspective of historical reenactment, and methodologies applied to the interpretation of the latter phenomenon as a form of historical presentation and engagement can be applied to historical games.

Many of the issues examined within this thesis can be said to indicate a general lack of critical thought within popular discussion of historical games, which could be argued to indicate a weakness of video games as a historical medium. It is undeniably a limitation of the medium from an academic perspective, as the commercial imperative to avoid alienating potential customers dissuades nuanced engagement with historical subjects and ideologies deemed unacceptably controversial by modern audiences, instead favouring broader engagement with historical phenomena via what Esther Wright terms ‘thematic obsessions’.³⁹ This consequently places limits upon the ability of specialist scholars to engage with these histories via the gaming medium. However, this is a limitation imposed upon gaming by its audiences and their discussion of historical subjects within games, rather than necessarily a flaw of the medium itself; developers, principally smaller, indie developers but occasionally also larger, triple-A studios, have occasionally included content within their games which has attempted to portray more nuanced historical narratives and encourage critical thought about historical events and characters, but the degree of success they have encountered in furthering these objectives within gaming communities has been mixed.

As such, we should instead view historical games as a means of interacting with perspectives of history, rather than principally as a means of depicting history itself. This view reinforces the value of work by scholars such as Helen Young’s and Stefan Quiroga’s examinations of interactions between concepts of “historical authenticity” and discourse

³⁹ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 17-18.

regarding racial representation politics within games,⁴⁰ or of Esther Wright's exploration of games companies' employment of "historical authenticity" as a commercial tool.⁴¹

Likewise, this view of examining games as a means of exploring interactions with history also emphasises the parallels between games and reenactment as forms of historical engagement, as well as the similarities between the understanding and employment of these media, due to their varied application and usage as leisure-entertainment as well as educational gateways through direct participation and within documentary media and heritage contexts.⁴² This analysis can subsequently form the basis for future exploration of historical games, directly comparing the subjective interactions between participants within games and reenactment to historical subjects and audiences of these media, allowing scholars to better identify specific compromises and manipulations made to historical subjects in order to perform them for the public, and also identify the rationales for presenting specific historical perspectives within these media.

This thesis has primarily focused its attention upon exploring the complexity of perspective and its variant interpretations within historical video games in the broadest sense, primarily highlighting the historiographical influence of authorial perspectives within discussion of historical games and how these interact with technical and historical viewpoints presented by historical games. Consequently, some of these individual perspectives may have received lesser degrees of engagement than others, or significant perspectives warranting detailed examination may have been overlooked in favour of these broader discussions. Similarly, significant scholarship on individual perspectives discussed within this thesis may have been overlooked due to the scale of the discourse undertaken by this thesis and the need to condense these larger phenomena to examine them within the context of perspective.

⁴⁰ Quiroga, *White Mythic Space*; Young, "Race & Historical Authenticity", pp. 28-39.

⁴¹ Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*.

⁴² For examples, see de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 111 & pp. 117-122; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 143-160; Muller, "Immersive engagement", pp. 296-304; Higgins, "Unlocking the glass case", pp. 326-334; Krzysztof Olechnicki and Tomasz Szlendak, "Historical Reenactment in Poland: Between Faithfulness to History and the Imperative of Specularity", *Polish Sociological Review*, vol. 209: 1 (2020), pp. 3-22; Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35: 1 (2008), pp. 72-89; Ning Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience", *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 26 (1999), pp. 349-370; "Kicking off 'Visualising Canterbury Castle'", *Castle Studies Trust*, 30 May 2025, <https://castlestudiestrust.org/blog/2025/05/30/kicking-off-visualising-canterbury-castle/>.

However, exploring these perspectives in a broader analysis allows us to see connections between phenomena, underlying influences and commonalities inherent to popular discussions of historical games or to video games as a wider commercial, entertainment, and artistic medium which influence the depiction of history within games and popular understandings of historical subjects. In particular, the commercial and entertainment influences within video game development play a significant role in guiding authorial perspectives of historical games. Technological improvements and advances in graphical fidelity have expanded the scope of games utilising Chapman's "realist" simulation style – such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* or *Red Dead Redemption 2* – both enabling smaller developers to engage with this manner of presentation and deeper, more granular depictions of historical worlds by larger studios, while games employing Chapman's constructionalist simulation style – such as *Crusader Kings III* – have enjoyed significant commercial longevity and thematic adaptability within current commercial practices of the "games as a service" business model. Despite the diverging authorial perspectives of history which these simulation styles entail, a wider analysis of historical games allows us to identify shared issues within popular interpretation of these contrasting experiences, such as the popular emphasis on "historical accuracy" and debates over representations of marginalised demographics in historic contexts; while games employing "realist" simulation styles are, arguably, more vulnerable to these debates, the impact of these issues upon constructionalist historical games can also be observed, thereby emphasising the significance of understanding these shared authorial perspectives where technological or historical perspectives contrast.

Future works may enable more detailed examination of particular perspectives offered by specific historical games, or of specific interactions between competing perspectives. Quantitative studies, for example, could follow and refine the methodology utilised by scholars such as Yannick Rochat by surveying historical games by period, setting and protagonist to identify specific historical perspectives which have been either over- or under-represented through depictions within historical games, thereby allowing an identification of patterns within historical games which illustrate underlying historical, cultural and commercial factors affecting the depiction of history within the gaming

medium.⁴³ Similarly, quantitative comparisons of popular historical or authorial perspectives within historical video games may be compared to those of historical table-top games or cinematic media, allowing a wider identification of particular trends within historical game authorship in the context of historical media on a larger scale. As an ever-developing field, future works may also be able to take advantage of future developments within the video game industry and scholarship in historical games studies to present additional context to the conclusions reached within this thesis, either by incorporating discussions of games utilised on platforms excluded from this study – such as mobile games – or of smaller, indie or “double-A” games which challenge the perspectives presented and explored primarily within discussion of triple-A games.

This point is particularly significant in relation to the engagement with specific “creator” or “consumer” perspectives of historical games. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, video game development is a notoriously enclosed community, and academic scholars have experienced difficulties in attempting to engage with developer studios and publishers to learn their perspectives of a game’s development.⁴⁴ As such, discussion of developers’ and publisher’s perspectives within this thesis has been conducted overwhelmingly through second-hand sources, favouring direct quotes where possible but with the awareness that these secondary sources may have reported “insider” quotes selectively in order to suit the narrative objectives of the article or report in question. Future studies, particularly ones engaging directly with first-hand accounts from developers and publishers of historical games, may be able to better illustrate and explore the “creator” perspective of historical game development, without needing to account for selectivity on the part of external, secondary reporters.

In a similar vein, although mentioned at numerous points throughout this thesis, the perspectives offered within player communities have not been subjected to detailed analysis within this thesis, largely for the sake of clarity and practicality; the potential scale of discussion that dedicated analysis of the perspectives within social media and other player community forums can entail demands its prioritisation in a separate study, in order to

⁴³ Yannick Rochat, “A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)”, in Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 3-19.

⁴⁴ For example, see Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p. 9.

explore the topic in sufficient detail. Future works could examine these authorial perspectives – either from the “creator” or “consumer” sides – via quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews, thereby allowing scholars to assess the interactions with historical games from the viewpoints of specific communities, identifying commonalities within individual experiences from these authorial perspectives and unique nuances which impact the perception and usage of historical subjects within games.

The term “perspective” is a multi-faceted one within the context of historical video games, presenting a wealth of potential interpretations which can illuminate possible avenues for scholarly inquiry. This thesis has endeavoured to demonstrate the scope of that potential, identifying notable perspectives and their significance to the study of historical games. As new games and new scholarship emerge, new perspectives will offer support and challenge to the conclusions reached within this thesis. However, only by analysing fundamental ideas within historical writing such as the concept of perspective can we begin to understand how non-academic media such as video games engage with history, and the impact these interactions have upon popular understanding of history.

List of Featured Games

Game Series:

Creative Assembly and Feral Interactive, *Total War* (2000-present), PC. Published by Electronic Arts, Activision, and Sega.

Dreamworks Interactive, Respawn Software, Electronic Arts *et al.*, *Medal of Honor* (1999-2020), Gameboy Advance, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Game Cube and Wii, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

EA DICE *et al.*, *Battlefield* (2002-present), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

Infinity Ward, Treyarch, Sledgehammer Games, Raven Software *et al.*, *Call of Duty* (2003-present), Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, and PC. Published by Activision.

MicroProse, Activision, and Firaxis Games, *Sid Meier's Civilisation* (1991-present). Published by MicroProse, Activision, Hasbro Interactive, 2K Games *et al.*

Muse Software *et al.*, *Wolfenstein* (1981-2019), PC, Xbox, and PlayStation. Published by Bethesda Softworks *et al.*

Logic Artists, *Expeditions* (2013-2022), PC. Published by Bit Composer, Logic Artists and THQ Nordic.

Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings* (2004-2020), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive *et al.*

Paradox Development Studio, *Hearts of Iron* (2002-2016), PC. Published by Paradox Interactive *et al.*

Rebellion Developments, *Sniper Elite* (2005-present), PC, Xbox, and PlayStation.

Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Quebec *et al.*, *Assassin's Creed* (2007-present), Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, PC, and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal and Ubisoft Toronto, *Watch Dogs* (2014-2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC, Nintendo Wii U and Google Stadia. Published by Ubisoft.

US Army, *America's Army* (2002-2013), Xbox, PlayStation and PC.

Westwood Studios, Westwood Pacific & EA Los Angeles, *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* (1996-2008), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Westwood Studios, Virgin Interactive Entertainment and Electronic Arts.

Individual Games:

11 Bit Studios, *This War of Mine* (2014), PC. Subsequently released on Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch.

2015, Inc., *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

Adamvision Studios & Sneakybox, *Missile Command: Recharged* (2022), PC. Published by Atari.

Bethesda Game Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), Xbox, PlayStation and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2017. Published by Bethesda Softworks.

Bioware, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), Xbox and PC. Released on Nintendo Switch in 2021. Published by Microsoft Game Studios and LucasArts.

Bird's Eye Games, *Regiments* (2022), PC. Published by MicroProse.

Black Matter, Cover 6 Studios, and Expression Games, *Hell Let Loose* (2021), PC. Later released on Xbox and PlayStation. Published by Team17 Digital Ltd.

Blue Omega Entertainment and Point of View, Inc., *Damnation* (2009), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Codemasters.

Brave Lamb Studios, *War Hospital* (2024), Xbox, PlayStation and PC. Published by Nacom.

CD Projekt RED, *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, PC and Google Stadia. Published by CD Projekt.

Creative Assembly, *Medieval II: Total War* (2006), PC. Published by SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Napoleon: Total War* (2010), PC. Published by SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Shogun: Total War* (2000), PC. Published by Electronic Arts and SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Thrones of Britannia: A Total War Saga* (2018), PC. Published by SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Total War: Attila* (2015), PC. Published by SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Total War: Rome II* (2013), PC. Published by SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Total War: Three Kingdoms* (2019), PC. Published by SEGA.

Creative Assembly, *Troy: A Total War Saga* (2020), PC. Published by SEGA.

Crytek, *Ryse: Son of Rome* (2013), Xbox and PC. Published by Microsoft Studios.

Darkmatter Games, *Warlord: Britannia* (2022), PC.

Destructive Creations, *Hatred* (2015), PC.

Destructive Creations, *War Mongrels* (2021), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC.

EA DICE, *Battlefield 1942* (2002), PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

EA DICE, *Battlefield I* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

EA DICE, *Battlefield V* (2018), Xbox, PlayStation, and PC. Published by Electronic Arts.

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