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13 Beyond Education and Impact: Games as Research Tools and Outputs

Abstract: The potential of games as learning and teaching tools is increasingly difficult to deny. However, the possibility of using games as tools for scholarly historical research and communication is much less widely accepted. This chapter notes this discrepancy and highlights three emergent approaches towards the use of games in academic study through the use of a “Gamic Mode” of history, the creation and modification of games as simulacra to explore historical arguments, and the possibilities presented by roleplay as a means to engage with history and historiography. The similarities between the educational and scholarly potential of these games is emphasized throughout the chapter and it is ultimately argued that the varied approaches highlighted here represent the emergence and consolidation of a new historical method.

Introduction

The chapters of this volume have highlighted the vast and varied potential of games as learning and teaching tools. The impact of games within and outside an educational setting has been re-emphasized. The potency of carefully deployed commercial games has been highlighted as a tool for the consideration of modern perceptions of the Middle Ages, as an exploratory roleplaying environment, and as an alternative perspective on political and economic systems. The value of custom built games as introductory tools to a new period, theme or region, or as a way to explore deeper historical systems and arguments, has been demonstrated. The power of student led game design and modification has been highlighted as an alternative means of exploring and expressing analysis and debate. The applicability of these approaches within the heritage sector has also been underlined. These pieces contribute to a considerable and growing body of scholarship around the use of history games for teaching.

But the use, creation, and modification of games within the field of history can be taken further. The possibilities around the use of history games as research outputs and tools have been debated for some time and a growing number of scholars have considered theoretical and practical methods to utilize games in this manner. These approaches have often been met with skepticism: the use of games

as historical research tools is rarely considered,¹ largely because of the common perception of games as a medium unsuited for scholarly history.² However, there is a growing recognition of the capacity of games to present serious history and to perform a useful function within the academy – albeit one very distinct from that of traditional research outputs and methods.³ Indeed, games have been used for similar purposes within fields closely associated with history – most notably within Archaeology and Anthropology.⁴

The tentative acceptance of games as research tools rests in part on their growing use in these adjacent fields, but also in large part on their increasingly recognized value within educational methods.⁵ The demonstrable capacity of games as teaching tools at undergraduate or even postgraduate levels of study highlights the capacity of these games as valuable approaches to complex historical and historiographical issues. The detailed worlds and mechanics presented

1 Annette Vowinckel, “Past Futures: From Re-Enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 34, no. 2 (2009): 322; Dawn Spring, “Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015): 209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714>; Robert Houghton, “World, Structure and Play: A Framework for Games as Historical Research Outputs, Tools, and Processes,” *Práticas Da História* 7 (2018): 12–13.

2 Vinicius Marino Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools for Social Science History,” *Historian* 79, no. 4 (2017): 795–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hisn.12674>; Houghton, “World, Structure and Play,” 14.

3 Jeremy Antley, “Going Beyond the Textual in History,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2012), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/going-beyond-the-textual-in-history-by-jeremy-antley/>; Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools,” 818–19; Houghton, “World, Structure and Play,” 35–41.

4 Shawn Graham, “TravellerSim: Growing Settlement Structures and Territories with Agent-Based Modeling,” 2006, <https://doi.org/10.17613/m6g29k>; Gabriel Wurzer, ed., *Agent-Based Modeling and Simulation in Archaeology*, Advances in Geographic Information Science (Cham: Springer, 2015); Wendy H. Cegielski and J. Daniel Rogers, “Rethinking the Role of Agent-Based Modeling in Archaeology,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 41 (March 2016): 283–98, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2016.01.009>; Shawn Graham, “Agent Based Models, Archaeogaming, and the Useful Deaths of Digital Romans,” in *The Interactive Past: Archaeology, Heritage & Video Games*, ed. Angenitus Arie Andries Mol et al. (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017), 123–31.

5 Juan Francisco Jiménez Hirriart, “How to Be a ‘Good’ Anglo-Saxon: Designing and Using Historical Video Games in Primary Schools,” in *Communicating the Past in the Digital Age: Proceedings of the International Conference on Digital Methods in Teaching and Learning in Archaeology (12th-13th October 2018)*, ed. Sebastian Hageneuer (Ubiquity Press, 2020), 149–50, <https://doi.org/10.5334/bch>; Robert Houghton, “Scholarly History through Digital Games: Pedagogical Practice as Research Method,” in *Return to the Interactive Past: The Interplay of Video Games and Histories*, ed. Csilla E. Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke et al. (Sidestone Press, 2021), 137–55.

within some modern games can approach or exceed that of even the largest historical research projects. There is little reason in principle why suitably informed and critical consideration and development of historical games should not form a valid scholarly approach.

This chapter addresses the embryonic historiographical development of these approaches to research through games and connects them to the methods represented throughout the chapters of this volume. To this end, I will briefly define and outline the three most prominent emergent approaches to historical research through games – which may be termed “Gamic,” “Simulacrum,” and “Roleplaying” – and consider the ways in which the games and methods discussed throughout the course of this volume may be applied to create scholarly research games within each of these schools.

The “Gamic” Mode

The “Gamic” approach emerged as a reaction to the growing body of scholarship around the use of games in the history classroom and the accompanying discussion of their capability to represent history in a serious if not scholarly manner. In particular, this school of thought criticizes the ability of commercial games – and academic games which followed the same design principles – to conduct scholarly history. This reaction ran alongside the growth of digital modelling systems within the neighboring discipline of Archaeology, and seems to have been driven at least in part by a concern that this drive to simulation would infiltrate the field of history and challenge the authority of its traditional means of enquiry.⁶ Proponents of this Gamic system echo the concerns raised by Galloway and de Groot that games can only represent a single, reductive, and unquestionable view of historical cause and effect and are therefore ill-equipped to explore and evaluate the complicated nuance of historical argument.⁷ They deride the relevance of the counterfactual history which commercial games allow their players to create.⁸ As such, while this school recognizes a potential for games

⁶ Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools,” 795–96.

⁷ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Electronic Mediations 18 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 104; Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Second edition (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 7–8.

⁸ Jerremie Clyde, Howard Hopkins, and Glenn Wilkinson, “Beyond the ‘Historical’ Simulation: Using Theories of History to Inform Scholarly Game Design,” *Loading . . . The Journal of*

to conduct scholarly history, it maintains that such history cannot be conducted through the design approach of commercial companies.

The main proponents of the Gamic school – Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson – defined a “gamic mode of history” as “the construction of scholarly historical arguments as scholarly games.”⁹ In doing so, they echo Kee’s earlier design of a theoretical game where players would create historical arguments on the basis of the selection and interpretation of sources presented in the game.¹⁰ They see this Gamic mode as distinct from the representation of history within typical digital games: in the Gamic mode the game is a historical argument, while Clyde et al. perceive historical digital games as attempts to reconstruct or simulate the past.¹¹ As such they reject the scholarly value of games like *Medal of Honour* which engage with history through unsubstantiated references to data and a focus on storytelling and world building over explanation of events.¹² They likewise reject simulation games such as *Civilization* which present models of history and allow players to alter past events as, by their reckoning, this is of no scholarly value.¹³ Their hypothesized Gamic mode “communicates historical truths and simulate an argument rather than the past”: games in this format are designed to represent the construction of arguments from accepted data points.¹⁴

This Gamic mode of history is presented as distinct from the traditional “textual mode” present within scholarly monographs and other written outputs,¹⁵ but nevertheless openly and deliberately shares a number of qualities with these more traditional approaches. It emphasizes the importance of a constructed narrative within the Gamic mode to closely match the narrative structure of research within the textual mode.¹⁶ Just as is the case with history in the textual mode, their Gamic history must be rooted in the primary sources and secondary literature, although digital elements like links to sources or the in-game presentation of documents may be introduced to facilitate and augment

the Canadian Game Studies Association 6, no. 9 (2012): 11, <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/viewArticle/105>.

9 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 3.

10 Kevin Kee, “Computerized History Games: Narrative Options,” *Simulation & Gaming* 42, no. 4 (August 2011): 435–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878108325441>.

11 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, “Beyond the ‘Historical’ Simulation,” 6.

12 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 9–10.

13 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 10–11.

14 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 12.

15 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 3.

16 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 8.

this referencing.¹⁷ Essentially, games produced through the Gamic approach reject many aspects of commercial games and instead emphasize their similarities to traditional scholarly outputs to justify their academic authority.

The Gamic school has influenced several areas of historical game theory. Perhaps most notably, Chapman's realist-conceptual descriptive scale for historical games rests in part on the approach to historical games outlined by this school.¹⁸ Its ideas around the presentation of historiography rather than history through games have been considered in the construction of teaching games¹⁹ and the broader theory of scholarly game creation.²⁰ Its ideas are of huge importance to understanding some of the ways in which games may communicate history and informs historical game design and study.

However, the practical application of the Gamic approach has been limited. Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson produced *Shadows of Utopia: Exploring the Thinking of Robert Owen* – a digital game which provides an abstract exploration of Owen's historical theory designed for scholarly exploration and discussion.²¹ Clyde and Wilkinson also created the tabletop *The History Game* which makes use of an abstract system of mechanics to represent and communicate the methodological construction of historical arguments.²² More recently – and perhaps more visibly – Martínez constructed a digital game titled *Time Historians* which provides a more tangible setting of Ancient Egypt and tasks the players with gathering historical information; selecting, ignoring, and interpreting different data points, and collaboratively constructing historical arguments through game play.²³ Beyond these examples though, there has been limited impact of this influential theory in practice. Indeed, of the approaches discussed within this volume only Horswell's use of *Assassin's Creed* as an exploration of the construction of history can be particularly associated with the Gamic approach.

17 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, 13.

18 Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, Routledge Advances in Game Studies 7 (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 60–61.

19 Charalambos Poullis et al., "Evaluation of 'The Seafarers': A Serious Game on Seaborne Trade in the Mediterranean Sea during the Classical Period," *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage* 12 (2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.daach.2019.e00090>.

20 Spring, "Gaming History," 208–10.

21 Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation," 11–13.

22 Jerremie Clyde and Glenn R. Wilkinson, "More Than a Game . . . Teaching in the Gamic Mode: Disciplinary Knowledge, Digital Literacy, and Collaboration," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 1 (2012): 45–66.

23 Manuel Alejandro Cruz Martínez, "The Potential of Video Games for Exploring Deconstructionist History" (PhD, University of Sussex, 2019).

There are several contributing reasons for this limited uptake. Gamic history focuses on the construction of arguments rather than the arguments themselves. This is a vitally important element of historical study, but one which is usually reduced to an auxiliary capacity even within traditional textual mode outputs: historiography is key to scholarly history, but the history itself almost always takes center stage. The fundamental distinction from commercial historical games which the Gamic approach demands is also an issue here. The method mandates unusual and abstract mechanics and storytelling along relatively narrow and rigid lines which limits the breadth of its applicability and perhaps makes the method less accessible to both historians and designers. Further, by tying history in games so closely to traditional academic outputs and methods, the proponents of Gamic history remove much of what makes games unique and innovative. The games produced through this method allow the exploration and development of a particular tool of historical analysis, but maintain the core elements of traditional textual history. They create games which can act as excellent teaching aids or as intriguing variants of traditional approaches, but ultimately (and actively) refrain from expanding a historical approach in a substantially new direction. The Gamic approach is informative and incredibly useful in certain circumstances, but this utility has remained rather narrow in practice.

The “Simulacrum” Approach

Although the roots of the “Simulacrum” school predate Clyde’s work,²⁴ its dominant thinking crystallized in response to the Gamic mode,²⁵ and was designed to address many of the same core issues: to demonstrate the utility of historical games as scholarly outputs and tools; and to address the limitations of a simulation model of history. However, while the Gamic school calls for a new type of game, the Simulacrum school emphasizes the capacity of existing formats of historical digital games to serve as valid scholarly outputs simply through a more learned and academically rigorous approach to their construction, play and modification, and emphasizes the value of digital games as a unique medium of communication and analysis. As such, proponents of this system tend

²⁴ Vowinckel, “Past Futures.”

²⁵ Antley, “Going Beyond the Textual”; Jeremiah McCall, “Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History,” *History Teacher* 1 (2012): 9–28; Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools”; Houghton, “World, Structure and Play.”

to argue that attempts to create games which perform the same function to traditional historical outputs and which employ fundamentally the same methods substantially undermines the utility of the medium.²⁶

In contrast with the Gamic mode, this approach embraces the potential utility of games' audio-visual environments as representations of material and physical culture and of geography, arguing that these elements of games may perform the functions of images, maps, and charts in innovative ways.²⁷ Within the Simulacrum approach, the veracity of these details is not an absolute concern: the point is to create an image which is informed by historical research and analysis, and which provides an environment which communicates this theory.²⁸ As a corollary of this, Staley has underlined the potential of games as alternatives to literary history in a more abstract manner – through the use of audio-visual storytelling techniques he has suggested that games may present a coherent account of historical events and analysis.²⁹

More significantly, this approach accepts the value of game mechanics as systems-based explanations of history as opposed to the narrative form prescribed by the Gamic school.³⁰ Rather than viewing games as attempts to reconstruct historical events and systems, this school of thought sees games as theoretical models,³¹ and argues that their mechanics should be seen as presentations of historical

26 Houghton, "World, Structure and Play," 15–16.

27 Spring, "Gaming History," 212; Houghton, "World, Structure and Play," 21–25.

28 Blair Apgar, "Visiting the Unvisited: Using Architectural Models in Video Games to Enhance Sense-Oriented Learning," in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games 2 (25 May – 28 May 2021): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2021); Andy Ashton, "The Medieval Influence: *Foundation* (Game)," in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games 2 (25 May – 28 May 2021): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2021); Tea de Rougemont, "Medieval Letterings – Gameplay, Argumentum and Conservation," in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games 2 (25 May – 28 May 2021): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2021).

29 David J. Staley, *Computers, Visualization, and History: How New Technology Will Transform Our Understanding of the Past*, Second Edition, History, the Humanities, and the New Technology (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2014).

30 McCall, "Navigating the Problem Space"; Antley, "Going Beyond the Textual"; Carvalho, "Videogames as Tools," 806–7; Houghton, "World, Structure and Play," 25–27.

31 Douglas N. Dow, "Historical Veneers: Anachronism, Simulation, and Art History in Assassin's Creed II," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 218–19; Andrew B. R. Elliott, "Simulations and Simulacra: History in Video Games," *Práticas Da História* 5 (2017): 29–31.

arguments rather than absolute claims to authoritative historical accuracy.³² As Elliott has it, a historical game is not so much a simulation but “a simulacrum, a model which reflects modern ideas about the past even if those are not technically faithful to the historical facts.”³³ Coltrain and Ramsay have repeated these ideas almost verbatim and suggested that they may be applied to the study of the humanities more generally.³⁴ Ultimately then, this approach constructs game rules and mechanics on the basis of historical arguments and maintains that the outputs may be valid scholarly materials on the basis of appropriate research,³⁵ referencing of primary and secondary sources,³⁶ and clarity of presentation of arguments and data.³⁷ As Wainwright and Ortega have demonstrated within the classroom,³⁸ critical play of historical games may be used to explore and question the arguments on which their mechanics are based, representing a fundamentally different communication and reception of these arguments, but one which may nonetheless be academically rigorous through the application of the appropriate skillset and historical and ludic literacies.³⁹

By extension, the modification of the mechanics of historical games would therefore represent the construction of counter-arguments to those posed by the original game and could hence form a new medium for the conduct of historical debate.⁴⁰ This approach has been used pedagogically by Kee and Graham who rightly emphasize the educational potential for students to create their own historical arguments based on the modification of existing game mechanics.⁴¹ The

32 Adam Chapman, “Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2012): 42; McCall, “Navigating the Problem Space,” 18; Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 75; Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools,” 812–13.

33 Elliott, “Simulations and Simulacra,” 31.

34 James Coltrain and Stephen Ramsay, “Can Video Games Be Humanities Scholarship?,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 36–45, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvg251hk>.

35 Houghton, “World, Structure and Play,” 26–27.

36 Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools,” 811.

37 Antley, “Going Beyond the Textual.”

38 A. Martin Wainwright, “Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games,” *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (2014): 579–612; Stephen Ortega, “Representing the Past: Video Games Challenge to the Historical Narrative,” *Syllabus* 4, no. 1 (2015): 1–13.

39 Houghton, “World, Structure and Play,” 27–29.

40 Jakub Majewski, “The Potential for Modding Communities in Cultural Heritage,” in *The Interactive Past: Archaeology, Heritage & Video Games*, ed. Angenitus Arie Andries Mol et al. (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017), 185–205; Houghton, “World, Structure and Play,” 27–30.

41 Kevin Kee and Shawn Graham, “Teaching History in an Age of Pervasive Computing: The Case for Games in the High School and Undergraduate Classroom,” in *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 270–91,

method could readily be adapted to an academic research environment and resolves a key issue around scholarly games: it enables the game to represent more than one perspective.⁴²

A number of games have been developed using the theory and methods described within the Simulacrum school. Carvalho has led the construction of *The Triumphs of Turlough* which considers the political and military dynamics of medieval Ireland through mechanics based on his historical research and deployed through his theoretical work on scholarly games, making use of complexity theory to provide a less anthropocentric approach to history.⁴³ My game, *The Investiture Contest* – described in chapter ten – considers socio-political influence in northern Italy in the late eleventh century and serves as a forum for debate of the period and historical structures through its facilitation of user-modification, and was developed as both a teaching and a research tool.⁴⁴ Hepburn and Armstrong are currently developing the game *Strange Sickness* as a tool to communicate their research within public and academic circles.⁴⁵ Migliazzo, Morley, and Celico are constructing a range of games based on their individual research as practical demonstrations of their “Custom Design” approach to research games which has players explore and test the arguments set out through the mechanics of a game through play.⁴⁶ These games have acknowledged limitations, but demonstrate

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65swr0.17>; Shawn Graham, “Rolling Your Own: On Modding Commercial Games for Educational Goals,” in *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 214–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65swr0>.

42 Houghton, “Scholarly History through Digital Games.”

43 Carvalho, “Videogames as Tools”; Vinicius Marino Carvalho, “‘The Triumphs of Turlough’: A Scholarly Videogame about Medieval Ireland,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games (30 June – 3 July 2020): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2020), 17–18, https://issuu.com/theuniversityofwinchester/docs/final_mamg20_threads; Vinicius Marino Carvalho, “Analysing and Developing Videogames for Experimental History: Kingdom Simulators and the Historians,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games 2 (25 May – 28 May 2021): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2021).

44 Robert Houghton, “‘Losing Is Fun’: Asymmetric Rules and Play for Teaching and Research,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games (30 June – 3 July 2020): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2020), 19, https://issuu.com/theuniversityofwinchester/docs/final_mamg20_threads.

45 William Hepburn and Jackson Armstrong, “*Strange Sickness*: Running a Crowdfunding Campaign for a Historical Research-Based Game,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games 2 (25 May – 28 May 2021): Twitter Conference Proceedings*, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2021).

46 Francesco Migliazzo, Jacob Morley, and Giuseppe Celico, “Presenting Your Research Through Games,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games II (25 May – 28 May 2021): Twitter*

the substantial potential of this medium to act as historical research tools in a variety of manners distinct from traditional approaches.

Many of the teaching approaches discussed within this volume can readily be adapted for historical research purposes. *Akritas* as described by Stamou, Sotiropoulou, Mylonas, and Voutos represents the construction of historical arguments through game story and mechanics at a more basic but fundamentally similar manner to Carvalho's approach. The modding approach advocated by Champion, Nurmikko-Fuller, and Grant within *Skyrim* has demonstrable utility within the classroom but could be readily adapted to present academic research around culture, architecture, and landscape. Klaasen's in class development of *Virtus* and *Distaff* presents a method of the collaborative construction of arguments and debate through game design which may be granted greater authority through broader and deeper exploitation of primary sources and engagement with historiographical traditions. The soundscapes constructed within the *York Mystery Plays* by Lopez, Hardin, and Wan have undeniable educational and outreach impact, but these representations of acoustic transmission have practical applications within architectural, cultural, and religious historical study.

Variations of the Simulacrum approach have come to dominate thinking around scholarly history through games in recent years. The methods it describes are more practical and accessible than those of the Gamic school and have the potential to discuss historical themes and issues rather than simply the methods by which history is constructed. Perhaps most tellingly, Clyde and Wilkinson have diluted their Gamic approach, moving away from their earlier declaration that commercial games have no value for historical study to instead echo the Simulacrum school's vision of user modification of games as a means of historical analysis and debate.⁴⁷ Gamic history is still important and influential, but its applicability is much narrower and more limited than that of the Simulacrum school.

Conference Proceedings, ed. Robert Houghton (Winchester: The Public Medievalist / University of Winchester, 2021).

⁴⁷ Jerremie Clyde and Glenn R. Wilkinson, "Rhetorical Replay and the Challenge of Gamic History: Silencing the Siren Song of Digital Simulation," in *Emerging Technologies in Virtual Learning Environments*, ed. Kim Becnel, Advances in Educational Technologies and Instructional (AETID) Book Series (Hershey PA: IGI Global, 2019), 180–82.

Roleplaying History

The use of Roleplaying for historical research is truly embryonic. While both the Gamic and Simulacrum schools have somewhat established processes and publications spanning around a decade, the “Roleplaying” school has only emerged in the last few years. This school has some notable similarities with the Simulacrum school, most fundamentally in that it accepts games as a new and viable means to explore history on their own terms. Indeed there is substantial overlap between the two and it remains to be seen if the Roleplaying school should be considered as distinct from the Simulacrum school or as an interesting offshoot.

In any event, the Roleplaying school is distinct for the approach through which it engages with history: while the Simulacrum school focuses on the creation and modification of the audio-visual and mechanical components of games as the means by which history is communicated, the Roleplaying school looks instead to the potential of games to allow their players to experience the character of the figures they represent and hence to understand their motivations and actions and the broader world in which they lived.

Roleplay within historical games is a rather understudied area. It does not fit within many of the frameworks constructed for the categorization and analysis of this media. Chapman’s dichotomy between audio-visual realist simulations and mechanical conceptual simulations is perhaps the most influential framework for the discussion of historical games and its utility is impossible to deny, but the model nevertheless largely ignores the place of roleplay within these games.⁴⁸ Chapman, and his many followers, place roleplaying games squarely in the centre of this scale – neither quite realist nor conceptual – but do not typically discuss their unique qualities which games with roleplaying elements provide to their discussion of history. Nolden has highlighted this peculiarity and notes that roleplay and multiplayer elements may allow players to engage with history in new ways which go beyond Chapman’s model.⁴⁹ It should be noted that Chapman has always emphasized that his model was not

⁴⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 59–89.

⁴⁹ Nico Nolden, “Social Practices of History in Digital Possibility Spaces: Historicity, Mediality, Performativity, Authenticity,” in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, ed. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann, *Studies of Digital Media Culture* 12 (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verl, 2020), 85–88; Nico Nolden, *Geschichte Und Erinnerung in Computerspielen: Erinnerungskulturelle Wissenssysteme* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110586053>.

intended to be prescriptive,⁵⁰ but its application has often ignored this important nuance.

The omission of roleplay from Chapman's model is particularly significant as the potential of roleplay in history teaching has long been posited and various methods have been deployed in classrooms globally for several decades.⁵¹ A key recent development within this pedagogical field has been the creation and expansion of the *Reacting to the Past* series of games which have gained particular traction within several universities in the USA.⁵² A number of studies have demonstrated that games which permit and encourage roleplay may have a particularly prominent impact on their players' understanding of the past both within⁵³ and outside the classroom,⁵⁴ and so the genre is certainly worthy of further investigation.

The educational value of roleplay at tertiary level implies a potential for the approach as a scholarly historical research tool and a handful of adaptations and developments of this roleplay have emerged within medieval scholarly circles in recent years. Hayes, Cromwell, Dar, Ochała, and Scheerlinck have made use of a customized *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign to explore a collaboratively constructed vision of the early medieval Middle East as a means to highlight potential

50 Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 60–61.

51 Sharon M. Fennessey, *History in the Spotlight: Creative Drama and Theatre Practices for the Social Studies Classroom* / Sharon M. Fennessey (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000); Kathryn N. McDaniel, "Four Elements of Successful Historical Role-Playing in the Classroom," *The History Teacher* 33, no. 3 (May 2000): 357, <https://doi.org/10.2307/495033>.

52 Thomas C. Buchanan and Edward Palmer, "Role Immersion in a History Course: Online versus Face-to-Face in Reacting to the Past," *Computers & Education* 108 (May 2017): 85–95, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.12.008>; Kathryn E. Joyce, Andy Lamey, and Noel Martin, "Teaching Philosophy through a Role-Immersion Game: Reacting to the Past," *Teaching Philosophy* 41, no. 2 (2018): 175–98, <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201851487>.

53 R. G. McLaughlan and D. Kirkpatrick, "Online Roleplay: Design for Active Learning," *European Journal of Engineering Education* 29, no. 4 (December 2004): 477–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043790410001716293>; Robert McLaughlan and Denise Kirkpatrick, "Peer Learning Using Computer Supported Roleplay Simulations," in *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning from and with Each Other*, ed. David Boud, Ruth Cohen, and Jane Sampson (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 141–55, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1683620>.

54 Robert Houghton, "Where Did You Learn That? The Self-Perceived Educational Impact of Historical Computer Games on Undergraduates," *Gamevironments* 5 (2016): 27–28; Eve Stirling and Jamie Wood, "'Actual History Doesn't Take Place': Digital Gaming, Accuracy and Authenticity," *Game Studies* 21, no. 1 (May 2021), http://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/stirling_wood; Robert Houghton, "History Games for Boys? Gender, Genre and the Self-Perceived Impact of Historical Games on Undergraduate Historians," *Gamevironments* 14 (2021): 1–49, <https://doi.org/10.26092/ELIB/918>.

research questions.⁵⁵ Migliazzo, Morley, and Celico take an alternative approach with their “Road to Success” system whereby they encourage the use of roleplay as a means to communicate and text historical analysis, taking a game built around Migliazzo’s research into the interactions of the Italian city states as their core example.⁵⁶ This process shares core similarities with the Simulacrum methods described above, but differs fundamentally in its emphasis on players adopting the character of their role to explore historical environments rather than relying on the mechanics of the game to define arguments and analysis.

Several of the pedagogical approaches described throughout this volume may inform the development of scholarly games with a focus on roleplay. The use of *Skyrim* by DeVine and *Crusader Kings* by Kuran, Tozoglu, and Tavernari place a considerable emphasis on the adoption of historical character roles by students – an exploratory method which may be profitably transferred to academic study in a similar manner to the methods deployed by Hayes. Gottlieb and Clyde through their *Lost and Found* games, and Konshuh and Klaasen through their *Renaissance Marriage* game, take an approach which places somewhat more emphasis on game mechanics but nevertheless incorporates roleplay as a key element: an approach with similarities to the Road to Success model described by Migliazzo, Morley, and Celico which may provide an alternative and more flexible means to articulate and debate historical theories.

These roleplaying approaches to historical research and analysis are very much in the embryonic and formative stages of development. They typically overlap with the approaches described within the Simulacrum school, but they nevertheless represent an important new and underutilized subfield with substantial potential as implied by the growing use of roleplay within tertiary history education. The arguments they produce through play may be more abstract than those created through the Simulacrum approach, but this approach is more immediately flexible and does not rely on the construction of detailed and coherent rules.

Conclusion

There are, therefore, numerous and varied means by which games may be profitably employed for historical research – moving well beyond acting as simulations of the past. The Gamic approach may be used to explore the construction

55 Jennifer Cromwell et al., “‘Dice on the Nile’: Roleplaying History” (Manchester: Manchester Game Studies Network, 2021).

56 Migliazzo, Morley, and Celico, “Presenting Your Research Through Games.”

and deconstruction of historical arguments in an abstract but nevertheless learned manner which closely approaches the communication methods of traditional written accounts. The Simulacrum school promotes the consideration of historical sites, events, and analysis through game world, mechanics, play, and modification in a more concrete manner through an emphasis on the unique properties of games to create a new approach to the communication of history distinct from that of monographs or scholarly articles. The emphasis on roleplay by a growing number of scholars highlights a new and distinct approach which encourages a more free-form interaction with scholarly history with less emphasis on rules and more concern for player interaction and interpretation.

These approaches almost invariably share core characteristics with teaching methods currently in use at a number of universities and other higher education institutions. This is not coincidental: the pedagogical possibilities presented by games frequently translate or transpose to methods applicable to scholarly research just as traditional methods of teaching research, analysis, and argument mirror academic approaches. If we accept games as viable teaching tools at graduate and postgraduate level, then we must at least consider their potential as tools for the communication and development of historical research. The difference between an educational and scholarly game is very similar to the distinction between a dissertation and a scholarly article. There may be distinctions in precise method, depth, and authority, but the form remains fundamentally analogous. As such, the educational methods deployed using history games – including those addressed within this volume – may easily form the basis for scholarly approaches.

It should be underlined that the divisions outlined within this chapter are by no means definitive, inflexible, or static. The categorization of these approaches into “schools” is in some ways premature given their emergent nature and, as is the case with Chapman’s model,⁵⁷ this framework should be seen as descriptive and porous rather than prescriptive and absolute. There are overlaps in approach between each of these schools – most notably an emphasis on scholarly rigour in the collection of data and clear representation of arguments – and it is inevitable that some methods will straddle two or more of these groups or sit beyond the framework entirely. The development of the Simulacrum school was influenced by the emergence of the Gamic approach – even if this influence frequently manifested as a drive to justify the uniqueness of games as historical tools or to defend the scholarly validity of games in their own right. Leading figures within the Gamic school have in turn been influenced by the approaches of Simulacrum scholars, most notably in the recognition of game modification as a means of

57 Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 60–61.

historical debate. Meanwhile, Roleplay has arisen as a method which mirrors or echoes many of the processes proposed within the Simulacrum approach. As illustrated above, the thinking within and around these schools is fluid and has changed substantially even over the past decade.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that certain divergent trends and clusters of approaches are emerging even within this very young field. These carry advantages and disadvantages and, just as is the case within the classroom, are each better suited for particular scholarly research and approaches. As the fields around historical education and research through games grow and evolve, it becomes increasingly necessary to engage with the approaches of previous teachers and scholars, and we have reached the point where the categorization of these approaches is necessary even as any categorization must reduce nuance.

Ultimately, just as games present valuable and wide-ranging opportunities for pedagogical development, they highlight a new avenue for the communication, interrogation, and iteration of historical research. Just as ludic teaching methods stand apart from traditional educational approaches, the use of games for research is significantly different from typical means of historical scholarship. But just as these teaching approaches are still valid pedagogical tools when deployed through a sufficiently critical approach, games may act as effective and authoritative research tools when constructed and played with an appropriate degree of historical and ludic literacy. This requires a change in attitudes towards the legitimacy of games as representations of the past and discussions of history and the cultivation of a skill set somewhat distinct from regular historical expertise. Nevertheless, the growing use and success of games within the history classroom demonstrates a softening of these attitudes and highlights the accessibility of requisite game design and criticism abilities. The emergence of numerous scholarly historical games demonstrates a growing interest in these approaches and suggests a shift from theory to practice. These approaches are embryonic and prototypical, and their impact on general historical approaches should not be overstated: as Carvalho has highlighted, games will not revolutionise history.⁵⁸ But these shifts still represent important expansions of the tools available for the exploration of history. The development of games for teaching, engagement, and research are closely entwined and we should expect the expansion and diversification of each of these areas over the next decade.

58 Carvalho, "Videogames as Tools," 818.

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