Introduction

Crusades and crusading in modern games

Robert Houghton

The crusades are used frequently and extensively as source material for digital games. The first of the *Assassin's Creed* series with its free-running action across the cities of the Middle East during the Third Crusade is perhaps the best-known, and best-selling, example, but modern representations of the crusades are influential across almost every genre. Real-time Strategy Games such as *Stronghold: Crusader* or *Age of Empires II* explore the characters and events of the crusades in a fairly simple and linear manner.[1] The crusades are key to the world building of roleplaying games (RPG) such as *Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader* or *Legacy of Kain* but their reach extends to almost every RPG presentation of Western 'holy warriors' from the Crusaders of *Diablo III* and the Templars of *Elder Scrolls Online* to the Paladins ubiquitous to *World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy*, and a host of games which draw on the *Dungeons and Dragons* ruleset. Grand Strategy Games such as *Civilization*, *Medieval: Total War*, or *Crusader Kings* almost invariably incorporate the crusades into their complex explorations of medieval politics and society.[2]

The use of the crusades, and the Middle Ages more generally, in digital games in this manner has influenced public perceptions in several ways. These games have introduced a vast and largely untapped audience to this period of history.[3] They have underlined the fact that the Middle Ages did not end at the boundaries of Europe, and highlighted that armoured knights and elaborate castles existed within an intricate and diverse wider world.[4] They have acted as educational tools at several levels of study.[5] Ultimately, they have provided a new historical approach to the crusades which is of interest and utility to students, academics, and the wider world.

However, these games almost never provide a coherent or thorough explanation and examination of the crusades. There is a tendency towards simplification of very complex events into simple binary conflicts between Christians and Muslims.[6] Gameplay is typically Eurocentric, producing a

skewed perspective of the period with non-Christian and non-white characters and groups relegated to a supporting role.[7] A focus on violence and warfare (which is comparatively easy to model, and which often helps to sell games)[8] robs many games of nuance. The historical research which supports the creation of these games is sometimes based on outdated works, unreliable websites, or popular misconceptions.[9] Many games lean more heavily on medieval and modern fictions about the period than on modern academic historical research.[10] Creation of enjoyable gameplay and catering to audience expectations frequently overshadows any attempts at 'historical accuracy'.[11]

Historical misrepresentations within games are problematic because these media can exert a substantial influence over their players' understanding of the past both inside and outwith the classroom.[12] The potential of digital games as historical learning and communication tools is powerful and increasingly recognised within academic and industry circles.[13] Games can address important issues in a mature and considered manner.[14] They can present complex stories through innovative and diverse methods.[15] Games with a historical setting or themes can engage their players with the past, introducing them to new periods and issues and providing a formative understanding of events and underlying trends.[16] As Bogost has demonstrated, the procedural rhetoric by which games construct and express their arguments can be immensely compelling and can dramatically influence players' perspectives.[17] This interactive engagement often represents the deepest interaction a player has with the past,[18] and this is particularly true in relation to pre-modern periods.[19] As a result, games can be powerful educational tools. They can act as an entry point to specific periods and events or to historical themes.[20] They can be used to teach historical theory through their mechanics.[21] By engaging with these mechanics through play and modification, students may conduct historical debate, create counter-arguments and develop a more nuanced understanding of the past.[22] There is even potential to use games as academic research tools, communicating historical data and arguments and facilitating debate.[23]

However, the potency of games as influencing media can easily lead to their audiences obtaining fundamentally incomplete, shallow or misleading impressions about the crusades and the Middle Ages more generally.[24] This can be an issue within the history classroom as this often deeply embedded formative understanding can be hard to reconcile with the course content, primary sources, and historiographical trends and increasingly requires teachers to be aware of themes and representations within modern games.[25]

Beyond the classroom, the potent influencing capabilities of digital games can severely colour their players' understanding of the past.[26] This becomes an issue when a game's representation of a period takes on the form of

harmful modern perceptions and ideologies. Strategy games frequently follow an acritical model of colonialism and imperialism which emphasises violent expansionism as the core driver of civilisation and whitewashes the human and cultural consequences of these political models.[27] The focus on white male characters and emphasis on violence within many historical digital games,[28] in combination with their claimed authority,[29] can easily lead to the emergence and consolidation of a distorted view of the period which can contribute to racist and misogynist understandings of the modern world: the presentation of the Middle Ages and other historical periods as White feeds into the expectations of extremist and mainstream players and goes unchallenged by acritical design studios.[30] Historical accuracy is often cited as the reason for a lack of diversity in images of the Middle Ages presented by games and other modern media, but in many cases this accuracy is selective and incomplete and serves only to reinforce the perspectives and prejudices of the core audience.[31]

The use of the crusades and crusading tropes within and around digital games is an important battleground within this ideological conflict. Crusade rhetoric has been deployed consistently by right-wing groups across media formats to support their modern ideologies of racial and religious purity and the need to protect their pure nation from outsiders.[32] The same rhetoric has been embraced by Islamic extremists in support of their campaigns against the West.[33] Beyond this, within popular imagination and political rhetoric the crusades are closely connected to the ideologies of colonialism, imperialism, and racial and religious violence.[34] These popular visualisations of the crusades correspond closely to the various issues common within digital games in general. As a result, games about the crusades can easily support some of the most extreme ideologies.

This is not to say that representations of the crusades in all digital games are inevitably and absolutely problematic. While many games present overly simplistic visualisations which lean on outdated viewpoints and troubling ideologies, even these limited representations can be of educational use when approached critically.[35] Counter-play and user-modification may replace or challenge many of these Eurocentric perspectives with more balanced approaches.[36] Beyond this, several games which address the crusades provide nuanced and thoughtful elements within their core narrative and mechanics, even if they retain some troublesome elements. For example, *Assassin's Creed* presents a non-Western viewpoint through its player character while *Crusader Kings II* provides a relatively detailed and nuanced representation of the medieval Middle East even if it occasionally relies on outdated viewpoints and stereotypes. Other games, such as *Dante's Inferno*, make use of tropes and misconceptions about the crusades to engage with modern ideas and issues in constructive ways. Ultimately, as is the case with

historical representations in games more generally, the issue is the presentation of historical content in certain games rather than the fundamental characteristics of the medium.[37]

This book draws together several strands and themes surrounding the representation of the crusades within digital games. Roland Wenskaus' chapter highlights the presence of crusading tropes in games within both the fantasy and science fiction genres to demonstrate that the influence of the crusades and their attendant literature stretches well beyond historical games. In her chapter, Katherine J. Lewis discusses the portrayal of crusader masculinity within *Dante's Inferno* and considers the adaption of these medieval masculinities for a modern audience. Oana-Alexandra Chirilă's article draws on the widespread and ongoing discussion of the representation of the Islamic world in modern games to provide a focused and in-depth analysis of the potential to develop a more holistic and balanced ludic vision. Robert Houghton discusses the restrictions of game mechanics and player expectations which limit the exploration of the political and social development of the crusades within strategy games and suggests some practical solutions to these issues. In the final chapter Andreas Körber, Johannes Meyer-Hamme, and Robert Houghton address the potential of digital games as learning and teaching tools for the study of the crusades.

Taken as a whole, these chapters provide a diverse but coherent exploration of the place of the crusades within games and the opportunities posed by this media form for greater engagement with and discussion of this theme. This volume is by no means encyclopaedic, but represents an important starting point for the subject.

Notes

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3 Robert Houghton, "Where Did You Learn That? The Self-Perceived Educational Impact of Historical Computer Games on Undergraduates," *Gamevironments* 5 (2016): 26.

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