

# A Violent Medium for a Violent Era: Brutal Medievalist Combat in *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*

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This essay highlights the emphasis placed on brutal combat through the audio-visual and mechanical elements of recent medievalist digital games. Through the analysis of a pair of case studies – the roleplaying games *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) – it argues that while this violent and bloody medievalism is in part a product of broader trends within cinematic, ludic, and experiential medievalism, these trends are exaggerated and modified through the particular requirements and expectations of digital games as a medium and roleplaying games as a genre. The essay further contends that this combination of tropes and tendencies leads to a unique and particularly graphic representation of violence that mixes medievalist and gaming trends in a somewhat distinct manner. Furthermore, it notes that the influence of popular medievalist tropes has led to the creation of a distinct and “medieval” set of combat mechanics within several games.

Understanding the representational trends within medievalist digital games and the factors behind the prevalence of these trends is increasingly important. Historical digital games can exert a huge influence on their players’ understanding of their subject period,<sup>1</sup> and there is a growing body of evi-

<sup>1</sup> Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, *Australians and the Past: A National Survey* (Perth: University of Queensland Press, 2003); Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Létourneau, and David Northrup, “Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,” *The Public Historian* 31.1 (February 2009): 15–34, <<https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2009.31.1.15>> (last accessed November 18, 2022); Margaret Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts*, 2013, <<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442667648>> (last accessed October 16, 2023); Robert Houghton, “Where Did You Learn That? The Self-Perceived Educational

dence that this effect can be deeper and more pronounced than that exerted by other media.<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that the potency of this influence appears to be particularly pronounced within medievalist games (alongside those set elsewhere in the premodern world).<sup>3</sup> The impact of these games within and outside the classroom demands a more thorough understanding of the medievalist worlds that they present, particularly as these games are increasingly used for historical education<sup>4</sup> and research.<sup>5</sup>

Medievalist computer games exhibit a set of tendencies and tropes that are related to but nonetheless distinct from those found within other forms of medievalism. Certainly, medievalist computer games are influenced by other medievalisms both consciously and unconsciously: literary approaches to the medieval are echoed within computer games as they are in multiple other media;<sup>6</sup> cinema and television provide the basis for the audio-visual effects and framings within many games;<sup>7</sup> medievalist musical trends form the foundation of audio effects and ambiance in games;<sup>8</sup> card and tabletop

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Impact of Historical Computer Games on Undergraduates,” *Gamevironments* 5 (2016): 8–45; and Robert Houghton, “History Games for Boys? Gender, Genre and the Self-Perceived Impact of Historical Games on Undergraduate Historians,” *Gamevironments* 14 (2021): 1–49, July 28, 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.26092/ELIB/918>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Sian Beavers, “The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games” (Ph.D. thesis, Open University, 2019), 78–80; Jeremiah McCall, “Playing with the Past: History and Video Games (and Why It Might Matter),” *Journal of Geek Studies* 6.1 (2019): 38–39; and Houghton, “History Games for Boys?,” 28–29.

<sup>3</sup> Houghton, “Where Did You Learn That?”; Beavers, “The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games”; and Houghton, “History Games for Boys?”.

<sup>4</sup> *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games: Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact*, ed. Robert Houghton (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Dawn Spring, “Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship,” *Rethinking History* 19.2 (2015): 207–21, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); Robert Houghton, “World, Structure and Play: A Framework for Games as Historical Research Outputs, Tools, and Processes,” *Práticas Da História* 7 (2018): 11–43; and 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. (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2021), 137–55.

<sup>6</sup> Brenda Kay Laurel, “Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System,” (unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 1986); Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); and Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Vít Šisler, “From Kuma\War to Quraish: Representation of Islam in Arab and American Video Games,” in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Heidi Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 114–20.

<sup>8</sup> James Cook, “Sonic Medievalism, World Building, and Cultural Identity in Fantasy Video Games,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXIX: Politics and Medievalism (Studies)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 217–38, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxhrjqn>>

games inform many of the core mechanics of computer games; <sup>9</sup> roleplay and re-enactment events and societies exhibit similar “experiential medievalisms” (as described by Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl) to those that emerge within digital games.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, all of these elements exist as part of an evolving set of political, cultural, and social medievalisms.<sup>11</sup> However, medievalist digital games are subject not only to medievalist trends, but also to those of gaming: to the limitations and requirements of the medium, and to the understandings and intentions of their players. The combination of these elements produces a form of medievalism that is clearly related to those of other media and formats, but is nevertheless distinct: as Oliver Chadwick has argued, the adaptation of medievalism into different media is fundamentally influenced by the nature of the new medium.<sup>12</sup> Computer games represent a gestalt medievalism, combining trends present within cinematic, mechanical, and experiential medievalisms, but also exaggerating, mitigating, and mutating them in diverse and sometimes unexpected manners.

The clearest – if most basic – example of this amalgamation of medievalisms is the frequent and graphic combat present within medievalist digital games. The medievalism of computer games is particularly and uniquely brutal both in terms of their audio-visuals their mechanics. Games that employ medieval elements have a demonstrable tendency toward combat or warfare. Games such as *Chivalry* (2012) and *Mordhau* (2019) focus on personal combat, while games like *Medieval: Total War* (2002) or *Field of Glory II: Medieval* (2021) position the player as the commander of an army. Bloodshed is a common theme within action and adventure games such as the *Assassin’s Creed* series (since 2007), strategy games such as *Crusader Kings* (2004), and the vast range of roleplaying games that draw on medievalism to construct their settings. The centrality of combat is even drawn into more typically

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(last accessed December 9, 2022); and Stephanie Lind, “Music as Temporal Disruption in *Assassin’s Creed*,” *The Soundtrack* 11.1 (August 1, 2020): 57–73, <[https://doi.org/10.1386/ts\\_00005\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ts_00005_1)> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> William J. White, “The Right to Dream of the Middle Ages Simulating the Medieval in Tabletop RPGs,” in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16–17; Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 159; and Troy Goodfellow, “A New Kind of History: The Culture of Wargame Scenario Design Communities,” in *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 149.

<sup>10</sup> Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2013), 122–36.

<sup>11</sup> Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 140–55; and Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Chadwick, “Courtly Violence, Digital Play: Adapting Medieval Courtly Masculinities in *Dante’s Inferno*,” in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (New York: Routledge, 2014), 150–51.

peaceful genres including city builders like *Kingdoms and Castles* (2017) or *Foundation* (2019), and social simulators such as *The Sims: Medieval* (2011). Very few medievalist games provide a peaceful image of the Middle Ages.

This focus on, usually bloody, combat is certainly influenced by the broader trend toward brutality within popular medievalism. The emphasis of a barbaric Middle Ages within contemporary medievalism has been extensively analyzed across multiple media.<sup>13</sup> The medieval period is commonly associated with warfare,<sup>14</sup> and a substantial range of medievalist media – perhaps most notably *Game of Thrones*<sup>15</sup> – use a dark and violent setting as a source of perceived authenticity.<sup>16</sup> This appeal to authenticity and accuracy can act as an effective marketing tool,<sup>17</sup> and, as Andrew Elliott has highlighted, the use of violence within recent medievalist television series such as the *Borgias* (2011–13), *Game of Thrones* (2011–19), and *Pillars of the Earth* (2010) is often driven by commercial power of this violence.<sup>18</sup> Re-enactment often centers around the physically violent aspects of medievalism such as the full-body combat tournaments and wars of the Society for Creative Anachronism,<sup>19</sup> or the range of jousting societies and competitions,<sup>20</sup> much of which draws on the popular vision of the martial aspects of the Middle Ages,<sup>21</sup> and a desire

<sup>13</sup> David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 13–15; Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 12–15; and Robert Houghton and Karl Alvestad, “Accuracy and Authenticity – Interactions in Contemporary Medievalism,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, ed. Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1–3, <[https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452?locatt=label:secondary\\_bloomsburyCollections](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452?locatt=label:secondary_bloomsburyCollections)> (last accessed December 9, 202).

<sup>14</sup> Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Middle Ages in Popular Imagination: Memory, Film and Medievalism* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 29–30.

<sup>15</sup> Hilary Jane Locke, “Beyond ‘Tits and Dragons’: Medievalism, Medieval History, and Perceptions in *Game of Thrones*,” in *From Medievalism to Early-Modernism: Adapting the English Past*, ed. Marina Gerzić and Aidan Norrie (London: Routledge, 2018), 171–72; and KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, *Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy: From Tolkien to Game of Thrones* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 103–40.

<sup>16</sup> James L. Smith, “Medievalisms of Moral Panic,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXV: Medievalism and Modernity*, ed. Karl Fugelso, Joshua Davies, and Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), 158–59, <[www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt19x3hn8.16](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt19x3hn8.16)> (last accessed December 10, 2022); Locke, “Beyond ‘Tits and Dragons,’” 171–72; and Houghton and Alvestad, “Accuracy and Authenticity,” 4.

<sup>17</sup> Bettina Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 20; and Houghton and Alvestad, “Accuracy and Authenticity,” 4.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew B. R. Elliott, “‘Our Minds Are in the Gutter, But Some of Us Are Watching Starz...’” in *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to a Game of Thrones*, ed. Helen Young (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015), 97–116.

<sup>19</sup> Michael A. Cramer, *Medieval Fantasy as Performance: The Society for Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 95–96.

<sup>20</sup> Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 130–33.

<sup>21</sup> Cramer, *Medieval Fantasy as Performance*, 94–95.

of participants to engage in violence.<sup>22</sup> Depictions of graphic medievalist violence have formed potent political tools: John Aberth has catalogued the use of brutality within medievalist films including *Alfred the Great* (1969), *The Crusades* (1935), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) as anti- (Vietnam) war,<sup>23</sup> anti-imperialist,<sup>24</sup> and anti-Nazi<sup>25</sup> devices, respectively. This approach echoes the earlier use of medievalist violence as a diatribe against modern warfare deployed by Tolkien, Scott, and numerous others.<sup>26</sup> In many cases, violence in the Middle Ages is amplified through modern medievalism to distinguish the period from the more civilized modern world.<sup>27</sup>

However, the predominance of combat within medievalist games is also a consequence of trends within game design. Computer games are notoriously violent. Despite the overemphasis of this characteristic within popular perceptions of the media,<sup>28</sup> the existence of a substantial range of games that marginalize or eschew violence,<sup>29</sup> and the demonstrable capacity of games to present complex non-violent stories, the substantial majority of games retain violence as their core element.<sup>30</sup> To some extent this is a consequence of the computational limitations of games and the relative ease with which they may model combat in comparison to social or personal themes.<sup>31</sup> But this trend is also driven by the perceived preference of the target audience (young men) for violent games.<sup>32</sup> In any event, computer games demonstrate an inarguable trend toward violence.

<sup>22</sup> Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 130–33.

<sup>23</sup> John Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 48–51.

<sup>24</sup> Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies*, 102–4.

<sup>25</sup> Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies*, 116–17.

<sup>26</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy*, 31–70.

<sup>27</sup> Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling, “Medievalism as Fun and Games,” in *Studies in Medievalism XVIII: Defining Medievalism(s) II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 4, <[https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81w18?turn\\_away=true](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81w18?turn_away=true)> (last accessed October 23, 2023); and Smith, “Medievalisms of Moral Panic,” 163.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa A. Kort-Butler, “Gamers on Gaming: A Research Note Comparing Behaviors and Beliefs of Gamers, Video Game Players, and Non-Players,” *Sociological Inquiry*, 12, April 26, 2020, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12363>>, last accessed December 9, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 135–36.

<sup>30</sup> Emil Lundedal Hammar, “Producing & Playing Hegemonic Pasts: Historical Digital Games as Memory-Making Media,” (unpublished dissertation, Arctic University of Norway, 2020), <<https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/17717>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Adam Chapman, “Playing Against the Past? Representing the Play Element of Historical Cultures in Video Games,” in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, ed. Alexander von Lünen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 143–44.

<sup>32</sup> Jeanne B. Funk and Debra D. Buchman, “Playing Violent Video and Computer Games and Adolescent Self-Concept,” *Journal of Communication* 46. 2 (June 1996): 19–32, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1996.tb01472.x>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); M. D

Moreover, digital games provide a fundamentally different engagement with bloodshed than that granted by most other forms of medievalism. As outlined above, medievalist digital games are invariably influenced by other medievalisms, but games remain a distinct format in large part because of their interactive nature and facilitation of play.<sup>33</sup> Games allow (indeed, they must allow) their players agency and influence over their stories and worlds in a manner distinct from other media.<sup>34</sup> As Espen J. Aarseth outlines, a game comprises not only the audio-visual game-world presented to the player, but also a structure of rules and mechanics that govern this world and facilitate play.<sup>35</sup> Games must therefore construct their medievalisms in a very different manner from most other medievalisms, and their audience must experience these medievalisms in a very different way.<sup>36</sup> The nature of the medium has an inevitable impact on the worlds it portrays.

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Griffiths, Mark N. O. Davies, and Darren Chappell, "Online Computer Gaming: A Comparison of Adolescent and Adult Gamers," *Journal of Adolescence* 27.1 (February 2004): 87–96, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2003.10.007>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and T. Hartmann, I. Möller, and C. Krause, "Factors Underlying Male and Female Use of Violent Video Games," *New Media & Society* 17.11 (December 1, 2015): 1777–94, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814533067>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Eric Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 158–59; Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 16–17; and Houghton, "World, Structure and Play," 17–21.

<sup>34</sup> Espen J. Aarseth, "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse," in *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 367–68; 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), 217–18; Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 30; Andrew B. R. Elliott, "Simulations and Simulacra: History in Video Games," *Práticas Da História* 5 (2017): 20–21; Jeremiah McCall, "Video Games as Participatory Public History," in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. D. M. Dean, 1st ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 405–6; and Krijn H. J. Boom et al., "Teaching through Play: Using Video Games as a Platform to Teach about the Past," 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 (London: Ubiquity Press, 2020), 30–31, <<https://doi.org/10.5334/bch>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," *Game Approaches/SPil-Veje. Papers from Spilforskning.Dk Conference*, 2004, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Emil Lundedal Hammar, "Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*," *Rethinking History* 21.3 (July 3, 2017): 390, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256622>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).



This experiential aspect is evident within several other forms of medievalism but is nevertheless manifested in a distinct manner within computer games. Pugh and Weisl classify digital games alongside medievalist re-enactment, roleplay, and tabletop games as “experiential medievalism”: by allowing their participants to experience the medieval and to “become” medieval in a way that literature and film cannot.<sup>37</sup> However, these forms of experiential medievalism differ in some fundamental ways. Re-enactment and tabletop games require (and allow) face-to-face interaction, which is rare within digital games. Re-enactment (and, to a lesser extent, tabletop games) are much more physical in their medievalism than digital games. Each of these forms rely on rules to facilitate play, but the complexity of these rules and the way in which they are enforced is fundamentally different. Likewise, while each of these formats engage with literary, cinematic, and other medievalisms, they do so in very different manners and to differing degrees. Most notably, digital games are much more able to incorporate cinematic effects into their medievalism than either re-enactment or tabletop games.

This piece contends that computer games present a Middle Ages that is particularly visceral and that they do this in a manner that is related to, but distinct from that of other medievalisms. It argues that this is a consequence of the expectations of the medium and the mechanical requirements required to fulfill these expectations. It further argues that the influence of medievalism more broadly has led to the creation of several mechanics that are peculiar to medievalist digital games and distinguishes them from games set in other periods. To this end, I will make two core points:

1. Many medievalist digital games combine the spectacle of medievalist cinema with the interactivity of experiential medievalism to create a particularly bloody audio-visual depiction of medievalist combat.
2. By drawing on the mechanics of tabletop medievalist games and introducing new systems specific to computer games, numerous medievalist digital games place a further emphasis on the brutality of the Middle Ages and do so in a manner that also sets the period apart from the violence of other eras.

Ultimately, this piece contends that the distinct representation of medievalist barbarity within computer games represents a prominent example of the differing trends between digital ludic medievalism and medievalism more generally.

The representation of combat within medievalist games is of particular significance as the issue exerts a huge degree of influence over digital ludic medievalism more generally. The prevalence of brutal interpersonal violence can have a pronounced impact on representations of gendered and racial

<sup>37</sup> Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 122.

violence, and can exist as a manifestation of state sponsored imperialist or colonialist violence. It can demand the construction of systems of morality to justify mass murder, often building clash-of-civilizations narratives along racialized or religious lines, and it can distort presentations of science and society. Each of these issues is of vital importance, and ultimately more significant and interesting than the discussion of bodily harm. Nevertheless, this discussion of combat is of foundational consequence in understanding the medievalism of computer games.

*Bloody Audio-Visuals in Dragon Age: Origins*

The audio-visual environments of medievalist digital games often place a substantial emphasis on combat and in doing so draw on a combination of tendencies within other forms of medievalism, distorted and exaggerated by the mechanical requirements of the medium and by its experiential nature. Medievalist games lean heavily on the visual effects and approaches of medievalist cinema to emphasize gore and explicit violence, but they often do so to a particularly extreme extent, and the player-centric perspective of these games often serves to further emphasize the extent and frequency of bodily harm. Furthermore, the agency granted to the player allows and requires a more thorough exploration of this violence than is supplied through most other forms of medievalism, while also modifying their audiences experience of bloodshed.

*Dragon Age: Origins* provides a very clear example of graphic and repeated bloodshed within a medievalist digital game. This critically acclaimed role-playing game had substantial reach by selling well over 3 million copies and spawned a hugely successful series, but nevertheless follows many standard fantasy and gaming tropes. The game casts the player as a Grey Warden charged with protecting the land of Ferelden from the Blight of Darkspawn, which threatens to destroy all life before it. Standard fantasy races appear in abundance with dwarves and elves appearing as recruitable characters, while fantasy staple monsters such as ogres, dragons, and the Orc-like Darkspawn appear for the player to slaughter. Throughout the game, the player leads a party of up to four characters who progressively gain experience – mainly by killing enemies – that allows them to “Level Up” and acquire new abilities based on their character class (the standard warrior, rogue, and mage) and specialization (such as Berserker, Bard, and Shapeshifter). The story is structured around a series of mandatory and optional quests that often have an impact on the ultimate outcome of the game. Each of these elements are relatively common within tabletop and digital roleplaying games, although the *Dragon Age* series has been credited for executing them in an effective and sometimes innovative manner, with detailed and carefully considered



representations of cultures and religions,<sup>38</sup> and gender and sexuality<sup>39</sup> – even as the limitations of the game’s approach to race<sup>40</sup> and romantic relationships<sup>41</sup> have been identified.

The combat within *Dragon Age: Origins* is a particularly bloody affair. The game, like most other roleplaying games, focuses primarily on combat, with most quests being resolved through violence and most mechanics being directed toward inflicting bodily harm. However, while the centering of combat is common to roleplaying games, the audio-visual representation of this violence is especially graphic. When an attack lands, it prompts a massive spray of viscera from its target, which is often substantially larger than the target itself. The early quest “Mischief in the Larder” requires the player’s party to kill a number of rats within the titular larder, each of which explode into a surprisingly substantial cloud of blood when slain. Larger opponents expel correspondingly greater volumes of gore, with ogres and dragons spraying torrents of blood when mortally wounded. Furthermore, a number of special abilities that may be acquired by the player character and their party add to the carnage by granting particular blood-related graphical effects. For example, when using the “Blood Fury” ability, “The warrior sprays tainted blood to knock back nearby enemies” accompanied with an appropriately dramatic expulsion of blood from the character. The medievalist combat portrayed within *Dragon Age* is presented as extensively and repeatedly bloody.

<sup>38</sup> Kristin M. S. Bezio, “Maker’s Breath – Religion, Magic, and the ‘Godless’ World of BioWare’s *Dragon Age II* (2011),” *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014): 135–39, <<https://doi.org/10.11588/REL.2014.0.12156>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); Markus Wiemker and Jan Wysocki, “‘When People Pray, a God Is Born ... This God Is You!’ An Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games,” *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (2014): 206–7, <<https://doi.org/10.11588/REL.2014.0.12167>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Alicia McKenzie, “A Patchwork World: Medieval History and World-Building in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*,” *The Year’s Work in Medievalism* 33 (2018): 60–61.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Kelly, “Approaching the Digital Courting Process in *Dragon Age 2*,” in *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, ed. Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 47–49; Ciaran Devlin and Anne Holohan, “Cultures of Experimentation: Role-Playing Games and Sexual Identity,” in *Studies in Media and Communications* 11 (Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016), 109–38, <<https://doi.org/10.1108/S2050-206020160000011016>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Mohamed S. Hassan, “You Can Be Anyone; but There Are Limits. A Gendered Reading of Sexuality and Player Avatar Identification in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*,” *Gamevironments* 6 (2017): 48–54.

<sup>40</sup> Nathaniel Poor, “Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance,” *Games and Culture* 7.5 (September 2012): 391–92, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012454224>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Greer, “Playing Queer: Affordances for Sexuality in *Fable* and *Dragon Age*,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 5.1 (March 1, 2013): 12–17, <[https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.5.1.3\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.5.1.3_1)> (last accessed December 9, 2022); Kelly, “Approaching the Digital Courting Process,” 52–59; and Hassan, “You Can Be Anyone,” 54–55.

*Dragon Age* further emphasizes the bloody nature of medieval combat and life through the persistence of bloodstains within the game. The blood spilt within combat taints characters' armor and weapons over the course of the battle and remains in place afterwards. This typically leaves characters covered in red even after the smallest of confrontations: the aforementioned quest "Mischief in the Larder" can easily leave the player's party spattered with blood. These blood stains persist into cut scenes where the player's party remains covered in gore. In the case of "Mischief in the Larder" the player character almost immediately enters a conversation with their mother who appears completely unfazed by their child's appearance. Although a handful of non-player characters take note of the player's party's blood-soaked appearance – such as the villainous Vaughan during the "A Day for Celebration" quest – in most cases this goes unremarked. Blood drenching is presented as commonplace and unworthy of comment.

This extensive blood spatter is combined with a range of visually spectacular "finishing moves" (termed "Deathblows" or "Messy Kills" within the game). When a character kills an opponent there is a semi-random chance that one of several finishing moves will be performed, including decapitation, impalement, and the complete disintegration of the enemy's torso. These vary depending on the weapons wielded – dual wielding blades may result in the decapitation of an opponent through a scissors motion, for example – and are accompanied by an extensive expulsion of viscera. Different finishing moves are used on the various fantastic beasts faced over the course of the game: when killing an ogre, the attacking character staggers the massive creature with a slash across its body before launching themselves into the air to land on the beast's chest and plunge their blades into either side of the base of its neck. The game glories in the spectacle of these brutal attacks and in doing so further emphasizes the centrality of bloody violence within its medievalism.

Each of these elements leans heavily on broader medievalist tendencies, cinematic approaches, and a common drive for spectacle.<sup>42</sup> These bloodshed effects clearly mirror those typical of cinematic medievalism, such as the graphic sprays of blood that appear sporadically throughout *Braveheart* (1995) as William Wallace and his allies tear through hapless English soldiers. Warriors emerging from battle drenched in blood is likewise a relatively common effect within medievalist cinema – the Battle of the Bastards in *Game of Thrones*, for example, infamously left the hero, Jon Snow, covered in

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Hutchinson, "Making the Water Move: Techno-Historic Limits in the Game Aesthetics of *Myst* and *Doom*," *Game Studies* 8.1 (2008), <<http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hutch>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Ergin Bulut, "One-Dimensional Creativity: A Marcusean Critique of Work and Play in the Video Game Industry," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 16.2 (June 4, 2018): 766–67, <<https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v16i2.930>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

blood and mud by the time of his final confrontation with the evil Ramsey Bolton. Finishing moves are likewise evident within medievalist cinema: strong parallels with the Deathblows of *Dragon Age* can be found within the *Lord of the Rings* films (2001–03) through Aragorn’s decapitation of a number of opponents and Legolas’ acrobatic scaling and execution of giant trolls and other beasts.

However, the bloodshed of *Dragon Age* is considerably more extensive and more frequent than within almost any piece of cinematic medievalism. While *Braveheart*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Lord of the Rings* each provide extensive representations of bloody medievalist combat, these form a comparatively small part of the shows’ run time. Likewise, while the body counts accrued by leading characters are substantial within these shows – William Wallace in *Braveheart* (thirty-three),<sup>43</sup> Aragorn over the course of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (sixty),<sup>44</sup> and Jon Snow over the eight seasons of *Game of Thrones* (more than 100) – these are dwarfed by the thousands of deaths caused by the player’s party by the conclusion of *Dragon Age*. Furthermore, the bloodshed within *Dragon Age* is more consistently explosive: within *Braveheart*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Lord of the Rings*, dramatic bloodshed, characters coated in gore, and spectacular finishing moves are relatively infrequent, but they form an almost constant part of the combat of *Dragon Age*. In fact, player characters within *Dragon Age* may well spend more than half of the game covered in gore. Overwrought bloodletting is viewed as a defining characteristic of the series, with several players complaining about a perceived reduction in gore effects within the third game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), and a substantial volume of commentary on this issue by players on game forums and through (largely affectionate) parodies.

The centrality of bloodshed within *Dragon Age* is emphasized further through the typical positioning of the player’s viewpoint. By default, the camera of *Dragon Age* employs a third-person perspective in which the camera follows the player character, a perspective that provides a very clear and proximate depiction of the character’s stylish or brutal movements and their bloody consequences. The choice of this perspective is driven in large part by the requirements of the medium: the player must be granted a clear vision of what is happening to facilitate gameplay, and the use of this perspective follows a long convention within digital games. However, the perspective also

<sup>43</sup> “Braveheart,” *Movie Body Counts*, <[http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR\\_Fellowship.htm](http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR_Fellowship.htm)> (last accessed July 11, 2022).

<sup>44</sup> “Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring,” *Movie Body Counts*, <[http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR\\_Fellowship.htm](http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR_Fellowship.htm)> (last accessed July 11, 2022); “Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers,” *Movie Body Counts*, <[http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR\\_Two\\_Towers.htm](http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR_Two_Towers.htm)> (last accessed July 11, 2022); and “Lord of the Rings: Return of the King,” *Movie Body Counts*, <[http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR\\_Two\\_Towers.htm](http://www.moviebodycounts.com/LotR_Two_Towers.htm)> (last accessed July 11, 2022).

centers the view of visceral violence to a much greater degree than is typical within cinematic medievalism.

Furthermore, the interactive and experiential nature of *Dragon Age* requires that this combat be thoroughly modeled, and that the player investigate this model quite thoroughly. As highlighted above, cinematic medievalism often makes use of dramatic bloodshed. However, these medievalisms are limited by their fixed vantage points and linearity: the viewer can see only what the creator intends, typically in the sequence they intended. Digital games must allow players to progress through the game via a range of routes: the objects of a game and their possible interactions must therefore be modeled from every perspective from which they may be viewed and for every way in which the player may engage with them.<sup>45</sup> This requires the construction of a holistic, if truncated, world for the player to explore,<sup>46</sup> and grants a broader, and often deeper, representation than that supplied by other media. *Dragon Age* requires that the player control a party of four characters, selecting their actions from an extensive list of strategic options, and coordinating their attacks. The game allows the action to be paused while the player issues orders to their characters – typically capturing the spray of blood from newly opened wounds. Pausing and planning in this manner is almost essential during challenging encounters and when playing the game at higher levels of difficulty. The player is required to examine the bloodshed they witness carefully and repeatedly while also planning the most effective means by which to conduct further acts of violence – an engagement with bloodshed that is substantially different from that received by viewing a similarly bloody piece of medievalist cinema.

Moreover, the intellectual connection between the player and their avatar within *Dragon Age* provides a more personal experience of violence. Many games make use of a range of techniques to encourage their players to identify with and roleplay as their characters.<sup>47</sup> This can include the player customi-

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Zakowski, “Time and Temporality in the Mass Effect Series: A Narratological Approach,” *Games and Culture* 9.1 (January 2014): 59, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412013512421>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Houghton, “World, Structure and Play,” 18.

<sup>46</sup> Ian Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen Tekinbaş (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 117–40; Jeremiah McCall, “Historical Simulations as Problem Spaces: Criticism and Classroom Use,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1.2 (2012), <<http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/historical-simulations-as-problem-spaces-by-jeremiah-mccall/>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, 3rd ed. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press/Taylor & Francis, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Burn, “Playing Roles,” in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*, ed. Diane Carr (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 87.

zation of avatars,<sup>48</sup> use of “blank slate” protagonists ready to absorb a player’s personality,<sup>49</sup> or provision of decisions throughout the game that allow players to impose their moral or social viewpoint on the world.<sup>50</sup> *Dragon Age* makes use of each of these elements to contribute to player immersion and engagement with their worlds, with the consequence that many players overlap their own identity with that of their character. This can deepen the impact of game experiences including bloodshed: particularly when the protagonist is causing this violence.

While *Dragon Age: Origins* is a particularly prominent example and, as Karen Zook suggests, this great effusion of blood forms part of a series of interconnected metaphors within the game,<sup>51</sup> similar levels of bloodshed are visible within a broad range of medievalist games. Roleplaying games such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Skyrim* (2011) make copious use of blood spatter during combat, with this blood persisting on clothing, weapons, and the environment. Likewise, *Skyrim* contains a substantial variety of finishing moves for the player to perform accompanied by sweeping camera moves and – often – blood spraying across the camera. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* presents player injuries through audio-visual feedback, including blood across the first-person perspective camera and graying of the screen. Beyond the roleplaying genre, adventure games such as *Assassin’s Creed* (2007) and action games such as *Chivalry* make use of similar approaches to present spectacular and gory combat, while strategy games, including *Total War: Attila* (2015), expand the same approaches in presenting blood-drenched battles between hundreds or even thousands of carefully rendered combatants.

Other experiential medievalisms, such as re-enactment and tabletop games, allow more free-roaming interactions with medievalist combat, but these medievalisms are limited by practical and safety constraints. Re-enactment allows interaction with the material culture of violence in a more tangible

<sup>48</sup> Tiziana Mancini and Federica Sibilla, “Offline Personality and Avatar Customisation. Discrepancy Profiles and Avatar Identification in a Sample of MMORPG Players,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 69 (April 2017): 275–83, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.12.031>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Kristine Jørgensen, “Game Characters as Narrative Devices: A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*,” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4.2 (2010): 315–31, <<https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6051>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Katherine Bessière, A. Fleming Seay, and Sara Kiesler, “The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in *World of Warcraft*,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 10.4 (August 2007): 530–35, <<https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2007.9994>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Paul R Messinger et al., “On the Relationship between My Avatar and Myself,” *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research* 1.2 (2008), <<https://jvwr-ojs-utexas.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/352>> (last accessed October 23, 2023).

<sup>51</sup> Karen Zook, “In the Blood of *Dragon Age: Origins*: Metaphor and Identity in Digital RPGs,” in *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game*, ed. Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock (New York: Continuum, 2012), 219–34.

manner than digital games through the re-creation and handling of weapons, armor, and other equipment,<sup>52</sup> but the scale of this engagement is limited by accessibility and affordability of materials. Re-enactment societies such as the Society for Creative Anachronism and International Jousting Association permit physical engagement with acts of medievalist violence through melee and jousting tournaments respectively where re-enactors don appropriate equipment to recreate a vision of medievalist combat. However, even the most brutal of re-enactment societies must adhere to legally mandated safety protocols by adding padding to armor, blunting weapons, or restricting attacks (typically to avoid the head).<sup>53</sup> Needless to say, although injury and even death are occasional consequences of this high-contact medievalism, these are not intended outcomes, nor are they encountered with anything approaching the level common to medievalist digital games. Likewise, while many tabletop games focus extensively on lethal combat and offer their players a vast range of means to kill their opponents, they lack the graphic audio-visual representations present within digital games. These other forms of experiential medievalism emphasize combat but do so in a different manner from digital games.

Medievalist computer games therefore exhibit a particular set of audio-visual tendencies that center brutal combat in a somewhat different, and typically more graphic, manner than other forms of medievalism. The computer-generated nature of the medium facilitates the creation of more spectacular and regular renditions of bloody violence, while the need to present visual cues to the player typically leads to the use of viewpoints that allow easy access to these cues that, in the case of violent games, requires a close and constant focus on combat and its effects. More **important**, the association of the player with their character can add additional depth and meaning to presentations of violence, engaging players with this violence in an experiential manner that can easily deepen its impact. Likewise, the interactive nature of games requires that acts of violence and conflict be mapped more thoroughly, so that the player may interact more fully with them, and that in turn allows the more thorough examination of violent activity. The medievalist worlds produced through this combination of driving factors are unsurprisingly brutal.

#### *Brutal Mechanics in Kingdom Come: Deliverance*

While the audio-visual elements described above form a clear depiction of a brutal Middle Ages, the mechanics of medievalist computer games can have an even more profound impact on the ways in which they represent combat

<sup>52</sup> Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 128–30.

<sup>53</sup> Cramer, *Medieval Fantasy as Performance*, 96–98.



and emphasize bloodshed. In contrast with other forms of medievalism, games and other experiential medievalisms must create working systems of rules and limitations in order to function.<sup>54</sup> Game mechanics must be able to facilitate the actions and choices of the player, and this requires the construction of complete and detailed rulesets around the events they describe, from economic systems in the *Patrician* series (1992–2010), to social interactions in *The Sims: Medieval*, to accounts of global politics in *Crusader Kings*. When, as is frequently the case, games focus on combat, then this violence must be modeled. This has given rise to a number of familiar statistics and rulesets within medievalist games – hit points, armor, speed of attack, range, and so forth – that create a system that is undoubtedly abstract and somewhat removed from reality, but can nevertheless be parsed by the player.<sup>55</sup> Typically through the open display of statistics or at the very least through visual and gameplay feedback, the player can see the damage they inflict. This creation and implementation of a consistent combat system draws a more complete and thoroughly quantified vision of combat than can be found in most other medievalisms.

More significantly, though, a growing number of medievalist digital games employ mechanics that describe particularly brutal combat. This may take the form of fragile player characters who may be incapacitated with a few blows, of complex or difficult combat mechanics that must be mastered to overcome opponents, or of more pronounced consequences for injury or death, as through weakening the character or losing progress. These systems are not unique within medievalist digital games – they appear in games set in other periods – but they are particularly commonplace within games set in a medieval or pseudo-medieval world and are often explicitly designed to present an especially brutal Middle Ages.

*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* provides a thorough example of several brutal mechanics present within many medievalist digital games. *Kingdom Come* is a roleplaying game, but, unlike *Dragon Age* and most other games within this genre, *Kingdom Come* eschews a fantasy world in favor of a historical setting – in this case the Kingdom of Bohemia in 1403. The game leans heavily on claims to historical accuracy,<sup>56</sup> which have been disputed in many quarters –

<sup>54</sup> Aarseth, “Playing Research,” 2; Jeremiah McCall, “Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History,” *History Teacher* 1 (2012): 9; and McCall, “Historical Simulations as Problem Spaces.”

<sup>55</sup> Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubeck, “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research,” in *Proceedings of the Challenges in Games AI Workshop*, Nineteenth National Conference of Artificial Intelligence, ed. Dan Fu, Stottler Henke, and Jeff Orkin (Menlo Park, CA: The AAAI Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ignacio Medel, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* y La Representación de La Baja Edad Media,” *E-Tramas* 1 (2018): 21–22; Martin Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past: A Look at *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and Its Historical Claim,” *Congreso Asociación*

most notably around racial diversity within the game,<sup>57</sup> but also surrounding the representation of gender roles,<sup>58</sup> and nationalism.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, these claims have formed a central part of the game's commercial success,<sup>60</sup> with more than 5 million copies sold. The developers of *Kingdom Come* support their claim to accuracy through recreation of a section of late medieval Bohemia with rather strong fidelity to geography,<sup>61</sup> architectural remains,<sup>62</sup> and material culture,<sup>63</sup> alongside a rejection of most obviously magical elements, and through a punishing combat system.<sup>64</sup> However, despite its historical setting, *Kingdom Come* follows many common fantasy tropes:<sup>65</sup> the player takes on the role of Henry, the son of a Blacksmith, and one of only a handful of survivors of the destruction of his hometown (Skalitz); they engage in a series of mandatory or optional quests mostly drawn from standard roleplaying staples (although Neuman highlights several that engage more closely with medieval religion);<sup>66</sup> these quests take them into progressively more challenging situations; the protagonist improves their skills over

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*de Historia Contemporánea – Actas 14* (2019): 381–84; and Eugen Pfister, “*Kingdom Come Deliverance: A Bohemian Forest Simulator*,” *Gamevironments* 11 (2019): 142.

<sup>57</sup> Helen Young, “Whiteness and Time: The Once, Present and Future Race,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXIV: Medievalism on the Margins*, ed. Karl Fugelso, Vincent Ferré, and Alicia C. Montoya (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 44–45, <[www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt12879b0.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt12879b0.9)> (last accessed December 10, 2022); McCall, “Playing with the Past,” 44–45; and Helen Young, “Race and Historical Authenticity *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, ed. Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 28–39, <[https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452?locatt=label:secondary\\_bloomsburyCollections](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452?locatt=label:secondary_bloomsburyCollections)> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> Pfister, “*Kingdom Come Deliverance: A Bohemian Forest Simulator*,” 143.

<sup>59</sup> Eugen Pfister, “Why History in Digital Games Matters: Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths,” in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, ed. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verl, 2020), 60–62.

<sup>60</sup> Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past,” 384.

<sup>61</sup> Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past,” 384–86, and Miroslav Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC Game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*,” *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal* 11.2 (July 1, 2019): 71, <<https://doi.org/10.5817/cphj-2019-020>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Medel, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* y La Representación de La Baja Edad Media,” 25; Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past,” 386–88; Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC Game,” 71; and Young, “Race and Historical Authenticity,” 32–33.

<sup>63</sup> Medel, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* y La Representación de La Baja Edad Media,” 27, and Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past,” 388.

<sup>64</sup> Medel, “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* y La Representación de La Baja Edad Media,” 23–24; Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past,” 389–90; Pfister, “*Kingdom Come Deliverance: A Bohemian Forest Simulator*,” 142; and Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC Game,” 72–75.

<sup>65</sup> Bostal, “Medieval Video Games as Reenactment of the Past,” 384.

<sup>66</sup> Neumann, “Representation of Medieval Realia in PC Game,” 71.

the course of the game (in this case through using individual skills); and there is a substantial emphasis placed on violence, both as a solution to quests and as a core game-mechanic.

While *Kingdom Come* follows many of the combat tropes common to medievalist digital games (such as a health meter, numerous physical attributes, frequent combat, and weapons and armor of varying effectiveness), it positions the player as a fragile and – initially – incapable fighter. The martial system within *Kingdom Come* is moderately complex, can be difficult to master, and almost always poses a lethal threat to the player's character. Combat in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* primarily revolves around a system of attacking and blocking. When in melee, the player is presented with a five-pointed targeting reticule that allows them to direct blows and parries to the head, arms, legs, and chest. A successful attack requires the player to evade their opponents' guard (signaled by the visible position of their opponent's weapon) by targeting an unprotected area, while effective blocking is achieved by the player positioning their weapon in the area under attack (again, signaled by the positioning of their opponent's weapon). More advanced techniques such as dodging, perfect blocks, ripostes, feints, and combos may be learnt over the course of the game and typically require quicker reflexes to deploy successfully. Defeating an opponent requires the depletion of their health bar through successful attacks, but players must also manage their stamina – a quantifiable resource that regenerates slowly over time – carefully: attacking, blocking, and (especially) being struck depletes the character's stamina, and running out of stamina effectively renders the character unable to fight, leaving them open to attack and swift death. Success within this system demands careful timing and positioning of attacks and blocks and provides an image of medieval combat in which defeat and death are always a risk.

Combat within *Kingdom Come* is therefore very unforgiving, and this contributes to the game's equation of the Middle Ages with brutal violence.<sup>67</sup> The difficulty inherent in the combat system is frequently noted within game guides and forums and is particularly notable when fighting multiple enemies simultaneously as, unlike *Dragon Age* and many other roleplaying games, *Kingdom Come* offers no means to attack more than one opponent at a time, leaving the player vulnerable to assault from multiple angles. The player is actively encouraged to avoid confrontations in which they are outnumbered or otherwise outmatched – most notably during the early quest "Run!" where the player must escape from an assault on their home in Skalitz while pursued by attacking mercenaries. Attempting to fight even one of these figures is risky for most players, and, as intimated by the title of the quest, the recommended strategy is instead to flee.

<sup>67</sup> Medel, "*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* y La Representación de La Baja Edad Media," 28–29.

Combat mechanics are particularly unforgiving during the early sections of *Kingdom Come*, owing to the underlying progression mechanics of the game. A character's combat effectiveness is governed by three core statistics: strength, which increases damage dealt and reduces the stamina expended when attacking; agility, which governs how fast Henry moves and attacks; and vitality, which increases maximum stamina and the rate at which stamina recovers. It is further influenced by a series of skills that represent proficiency with various weapons (ax, bow, mace, sword, and unarmed) and increasing the damage dealt when using them, at blocking (defense) and speed of attack (warfare), and by a range of "perks" that unlock new combos of attacks or otherwise improve Henry's abilities. Although players will typically complete the game controlling a competent fighter, at the start of the game Henry's stats and skills are very low, which severely hampers the player's ability in combat by reducing the damage dealt by their attacks, the window of opportunity they have to make or block attacks, and their capacity to remain in combat for a prolonged period. At the same time, the player lacks the weapons, armor, and other equipment that aids combat later in the game. As such, Henry is especially vulnerable early in the opening hours of play at the same point that new players are still learning the combat techniques. This early weakness acts as a stark lesson in taking a cautious approach to combat, which is often carried through to the rest of the game. Moreover, this early weakness can easily cement the game's brutal depiction of the medieval period through the repeated deaths the typical player will suffer.

The mechanics of *Kingdom Come* also quantify and emphasize the longer-term consequences of medievalist bloodshed. Most medievalist media ignore or side-line injury through combat: most roleplaying games provide an easy and reliable system of healing – whether through potions, healing magic, or simply through automatic recovery after a fight. However, although *Kingdom Come* includes a range of healing potions – such as the "Lazarus Potion" and "Marigold Decoction" – these cannot be used during combat, typically take time to work, and are often prohibitively expensive in the early game. Healing can otherwise be accomplished through bed rest or visiting a bath house, both of which require returning to a settlement, or by consuming food, which is only efficient for small amounts of healing as overconsumption leads to an "overeating" penalty that reduces the player's maximum stamina (and hence their combat ability). Beyond this, several more serious injuries are modeled within the game including heavy bleeding (which will cause Henry to bleed out and die if left untreated), head injuries (which manifest as blood on the screen, occluding the player's vision), leg injuries (which prevent running), and arm injuries (which inhibit the use of weapons). These mechanics again center a brutal medievalism by emphasizing the strategic problems posed by injury, particularly in the context of a combat system that makes such wounds almost inevitable.

The mechanics around saving the game within *Kingdom Come* also serve to emphasize the precarity of medieval existence. The game will save automatically when starting a new quest or when resting in a bed. In both of these situations, the player is almost inevitably in a relatively safe position. To save the game manually, the player must consume a potion named “Saviour Schnapps.” This item is relatively expensive, prohibiting its use in the early game. It is also mildly alcoholic and may lead to drunkenness, which reduces the player’s stats and distorts the interface. Restricting saving in this manner sets *Kingdom Come* apart from most other modern roleplaying games – *Dragon Age*, for example, allows saving at almost any point outside of combat – and increases the stakes of combat substantially: death requires reloading from the most recent save and the loss of all progress since that save. In combination with the punishing combat throughout *Kingdom Come*, limiting the ability to save the game further emphasizes the brutality of the medieval period.

The brutality of the combat presented by these mechanics is further emphasized by their repetition throughout the game. Games rely on gameplay loops to a substantial extent: the player is led to repeat variations of the same actions with varying degrees of success and failure in order to progress through the game. This can establish the ideas represented through the game mechanics within a player’s understanding – indeed, this is one of the reasons why games can be effective learning tools.<sup>68</sup> These loops vary in size and complexity and frequently overlap. Within *Kingdom Come* a basic loop consists of engaging with an opponent through a series of attacks and blocks, causing and receiving damage in the process; this forms part of a larger loop wherein the player engages with an opponent, kills them, and moves on to another opponent; ultimately this forms part of a loop wherein the player kills opponents, is rewarded with experience points, uses these experience points to gain access to new abilities, and proceeds to use these abilities to kill more opponents. These loops draw the player in to repeated violence at the micro-level, obliging them to complete variations of the same actions, but also at a more macro-level by rewarding this violence with new and more effective means by which to engage in combat.

The impact of these violent gameplay loops is strengthened by the requirement that players engage with them – and frequently master them – in order to progress.<sup>69</sup> Defeating an opponent in *Kingdom Come* contributes to the

<sup>68</sup> Sandra Schamroth Abrams and Hannah R. Gerber, “Achieving through the Feedback Loop: Videogames, Authentic Assessment, and Meaningful Learning,” *The English Journal* 103.1 (2013): 95–103; Julie Bytheway, “A Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” *CALICO Journal* 32.3 (2015): 508–27; and Wim Westera, “Why and How Serious Games Can Become Far More Effective,” *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 22.1 (2019): 59–69.

<sup>69</sup> Juul, *Half-Real*, 56–57; Greg Koebel, “Simulating the Ages of Man: Periodization in *Civilization V* and *Europa Universalis IV*,” *Loading ... The Journal of the Canadian Game*

acquisition of stronger weapons and abilities but can also grant access to new areas and advance the narrative through the completion of quests. *Kingdom Come*, like many other games, provides rewards outside of the game through Steam Achievements or PlayStation Trophies recognizing a players' dedication and abilities, and many of these are reliant on killing certain numbers of opponents – such as “Serial Killer,” which requires the player to kill 200 people. As such, players are not only required to repeat violent actions, but are actively encouraged to develop a greater understanding of the mechanics that govern these actions in order to improve their martial proficiency.

Beyond *Kingdom Come*, numerous other medievalist digital games adopt mechanics that emphasize the brutality of combat in the period. *Mordhau*, *Chivalry*, and *For Honor* (2016) each present complex systems of combat incorporating various attacks, defenses, and counterattacks wherein mistakes are punishing and often fatal. Several games emphasize the fragility of the player's character. For example, the *Dark Souls* series (2011–16) requires the player to face off against a series of powerful enemies, many of whom can kill their character in a single strike. Avoiding death requires precise timing and a degree of patience and caution, and the game will inevitably kill the player character repeatedly. *Dark Souls* is also one of a number of medievalist games that punish the player for their character dying. By defeating enemies, characters acquire “Souls,” which act as the game's interchangeable currency and experience points. On the death of a character, any carried Souls are dropped and must be retrieved from the bloodstain left by the player – if the player dies again before collecting the Souls, they are lost permanently. *Dark Souls* (alongside the series' predecessor *Demon's Souls* (2009)) has spawned a substantial genre of computer games typically termed “Soulslikes”, which possess similar mechanics based around difficult and punishing combat. The Soulslike genre includes a large range of medievalist digital games including *Blasphemous* (2019), *Salt and Sanctuary* (2016), and *Lords of the Fallen* (2014). At the most extreme, various medievalist games make the death of player-controlled characters permanent (permadeath): if the character dies, the game is over, with no possibility to load a save. This practice was popularized through the early dungeon-crawler *Rogue* (1980), which has influenced a string of similar games (which collectively comprise the “Roguelike” genre) including *Darkest Dungeon* (2016), *Mordheim: City of the Damned* (2015), *Dungeons of Dredmor* (2011), and *For the King* (2017).

Many of these mechanics have been deployed within other historical and science fiction settings, but these brutal systems are especially associated with

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*Studies Association* 10.17 (2017): 65, and Robert Houghton, “If You're Going to Be the King, You'd Better Damn Well Act like the King: Setting Objectives to Encourage Realistic Play in Grand Strategy Computer Games,” in *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, ed. Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 190–93.



the medieval period. A number of Soulslikes, such as *Bloodborne* (2015) and *Remnant: From the Ashes* (2019), are set in post-medieval periods, while a handful of Roguelikes, such as *Cogmind* (2017) and *Doom: The Roguelike* (2002), make use of a science fiction setting. However, the vast majority of games within both genres employ a medieval or pseudo-medieval setting. Likewise, while a few games focus on complex and punishing melee in the modern period (such as *Hellish Quart* (2021)), the bulk of these games make use of medievalist settings. These brutal mechanics are often selected explicitly because of a perception of the Middle Ages as especially violent and as a means to create a more “realistic” experience for the player.<sup>70</sup> Broad medievalist trends influence the implementation of these mechanics, just as the mechanical requirements of these games influence the ways in which they represent the period.

Many of the violent mechanics of medievalist digital games are heavily influenced by their tabletop predecessors. Tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) and *Rune Quest* (1978) focused heavily on combat between individuals and small groups and constructed detailed systems of rules to model these clashes, while other games, such as *Chainmail* (1971) and *Warhammer* (1983), created similar mechanics to govern battles between larger groups. Many of these rulesets were transcribed relatively faithfully to digital formats through games such as *Baldur’s Gate* (1998) (*Dungeons and Dragons*), and *Shadow of the Horned Rat* (1995) (*Warhammer*) and their influence is visible across a plethora of other medievalist digital games (and within other forms of medievalism, such as live-action roleplay). The core combat systems of *Dragon Age*, *Kingdom Come*, and many other medievalist digital games ultimately draw on the same systems of hit points, attributes, and experience common to these older tabletop games. Systems of punishing combat and permadeath likewise originate within medievalist tabletop games. As a result, the influence of these older analog games has contributed strongly to the presentation of the Middle Ages as a bloody and brutal period within medievalist digital games.

However, although medievalist tabletop games quantified and systematized the perceived brutality of the Middle Ages through their mechanics, the computing power of medievalist digital games has allowed the expansion and elaboration of these mechanics and their brutal implications. Where tabletop games rely on their players to calculate the outcomes of attacks, digital games automate these formulations. This automation has a number of consequences: it allows the results of combat to be calculated more swiftly and precisely, which allows more complex mechanics to be employed without substantially slowing play and allows more frequent engagement in combat.

<sup>70</sup> Beavers, “The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games,” 159–61; and Pfister, “*Kingdom Come Deliverance: A Bohemian Forest Simulator*.”

As a result, digital medievalist games facilitate a smoother and often more detailed engagement with combat, and, in doing so, ensure that their players spend more time focused on the violence, rather than the mechanics behind it. In combination with the audio-visual elements of digital games, this creates a distinct image of medievalist violence.

The mechanics of medievalist digital games therefore create a representation of medieval violence that is distinct from that found in other medievalism. Violence is described in more detail – indeed, it must be described in more detail for the game to function. Moreover, the mechanical systems of medievalist games allow for new representations of the precarity of life within the period. The repetition of violent gameplay loops and necessary mastery of violent mechanics present a more constant form of violence within these games and oblige the audience to engage with it to a much greater extent than within most other medievalisms. Although these representations are a product of broader medievalist trends toward brutality and draw heavily on the systems employed within medievalist tabletop games, they are exaggerated and distorted through the requirements of digital games as a medium: the systems needed to facilitate play create a distinct form of medievalism. Likewise, the popular perception of the Middle Ages as a brutal period creates a distinct form of violence within digital games.

#### *Conclusion: Beyond Combat*

Violence is endemic in medievalist digital games and, although these violent trends are related to those of other medievalisms, they are combined and modified in a distinct manner within digital games. This distinction is a product of the particular nature of games and the needs of an experiential medium that centers interactivity and play, in combination with the audio-visual nature of the medium. Their audio-visual requirements and capacities allow the player to experience violence in more detail, more frequently, and from a closer perspective. Their mechanics must provide a consistent and coherent model for this violence and encourage the repetition and mastery of conflict.

It should be acknowledged and emphasized that these violent trends are not universal across games or players. Many medievalist digital games provide the opportunity for non-violent (or less violent) play through more diverse mechanics. The *Crusader Kings* series allows players to focus on the theological, economic, or social enrichment of their realms, rather than more bloodthirsty conquest and intrigue. Stealth games, such as *Styx: Master of Shadows* (2014) and the *Thief* series (1998–2014), actively encourage players to avoid combat through challenges and achievements. A handful of roleplaying games – including *Planescape: Torment* (1999) – allow the player to navigate their way through the plot using stealth, diplomacy, and manipulation, avoiding

violence almost entirely. Across almost every game, a section of players seeks to avoid combat through their decisions and through counterplay. Ludic digital medievalism is often more nuanced than bloody and brutal combat, but, to move away from a focus on violence, these games must overcome conventions around both their structure and theme.

It should also be noted that many medievalist games that focus on combat put an equal or greater emphasis on chivalric virtues than on brutal battle. Several games, including *World of Warcraft* (2004–present)<sup>71</sup> and *Dante's Inferno* (2010),<sup>72</sup> lean heavily and directly on the ideals of Arthurian romance in their construction of quests, storylines, and morality. At a broader and more abstract level, the concept of a fair and honorable fight as a manifestation of chivalry is a common modern medievalism and often appears within the mechanics of medievalist games as a form of balance.<sup>73</sup> These approaches are obviously connected to broader medievalist trends in which martial violence has frequently been used as a celebration of honorable combat and manly virtue,<sup>74</sup> although their use within medievalist digital games is modified by the requirements of the medium.

Nevertheless, medievalist digital games tend to focus on brutal combat, and this has a substantial impact on the ways in which they represent almost every aspect of the period and contributes to a series of broader distinctions between digital games and other medievalist media. The focus on bloodshed places social, economic, political, and personal themes on the periphery of medievalist games, subordinating them to the needs of violent worlds, mechanics, and play.<sup>75</sup> Games frequently seek to justify the violence conducted by the player,<sup>76</sup> and medievalist games often turn to popular and sim-

<sup>71</sup> Kristin Noone and Jennifer Kavetsky, "Sir Thomas Malory and the Death Knights of New Avalon: Imagining Medieval Identities in *World of Warcraft*," in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, 93–106.

<sup>72</sup> Chadwick, "Courtly Violence, Digital Play," 153–55.

<sup>73</sup> Chapman, "Playing Against the Past?," 144–47.

<sup>74</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. Wiliam Weaver (London: Pan Books, 1987), 69; and Andrew Lynch, "Medievalism and the Ideology of War," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 137–38, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781316091708.010>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>75</sup> Nicolas de Zamaróczy, "Are We What We Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Computer Games," *International Studies Perspectives* 18.2 (2017): 166–67, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekv010>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and A. Martin Wainwright, *Virtual History: How Videogames Portray the Past* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 84–91.

<sup>76</sup> Christoph Klimmt et al., "How Players Manage Moral Concerns to Make Video Game Violence Enjoyable," *Communications* 31.3 (January 1, 2006): 313, <<https://doi.org/10.1515/COMMUN.2006.020>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); Tilo Hartmann and Peter Vorderer, "It's Okay to Shoot a Character: Moral Disengagement in Violent Video Games," *Journal of Communication* 60.1 (March 2010): 98–100, <<https://doi.org/10>>

plified ideas around chivalry and medieval morality,<sup>77</sup> or emphasize religious and racial divisions promoting narratives of a clash of civilizations<sup>78</sup> or of colonialism.<sup>79</sup> The perceived dominance of straight men within medievalist martial roles contributes to the marginalization of women and queer characters,<sup>80</sup> or to their assignment to particular – normally supportive – combat roles.<sup>81</sup> Although other factors certainly influence these representations, the primacy of violence within medievalist games can act as a powerful influence over their representation of the period as a whole.

While the peculiarities of brutal combat within medievalist digital games are their clearest divergence from medievalisms more generally, a range of other, more complex, distinctions may be observed. Representations of an Enlightenment “Dark Age” or Romantic “Heroic Age” (common within medievalism more generally)<sup>82</sup> can be found throughout medievalist games that often to resort to the presentation of a backwards and superstitious period. However, strategy games require mechanics that present a Whiggish march of progress narrative throughout their timespan as part of a continuous movement toward a glorious future.<sup>83</sup> This march-of-progress nar-

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.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01459.x> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Tilo Hartmann, K. Maja Krakowiak, and Mina Tsay-Vogel, “How Violent Video Games Communicate Violence: A Literature Review and Content Analysis of Moral Disengagement Factors,” *Communication Monographs* 81.3 (July 3, 2014): 312–15, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2014.922206>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>77</sup> Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, 126–27.

<sup>78</sup> Vít Šisler, “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2008): 208–10, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407088333>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Kathrin Trattner, “Religion, Games, and Othering: An Intersectional Approach,” *Gamevironments* 4 (2016): 35–38.

<sup>79</sup> Leigh Schwartz, “Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games,” *Space and Culture* 9.3 (2006): 321, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331206289019>>, last accessed December 9, 2022; Will Robinson, “Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames,” *Analog Game Studies* 6.3 (December 2, 2014), <<http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames/>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Sabine Harrer, “Casual Empire: Video Games as Neocolonial Praxis,” *Open Library of Humanities* 4.1 (2018): 3–10, <<https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.210>> (last accessed December 9, 2022).

<sup>80</sup> Amy S. Kaufman, “Romancing the Game: Magic, Writing, and the Feminine in *Neverwinter Nights*,” in *Studies in Medievalism XVI: Medievalism in Technology Old and New*, ed. Karl Fugelso and Carol L. Robinson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 143–44; Lauryn S. Mayer, “Promises of Monsters: The Rethinking of Gender in MMORPGs,” in *Studies in Medievalism XVI: Medievalism in Technology Old and New*, ed. Karl Fugelso and Carol L. Robinson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 186–87.

<sup>81</sup> Kaufman, “Romancing the Game,” 144–45.

<sup>82</sup> Matthews, *Medievalism*, 20–21; Andrew B. R. Elliott, “Medievalism, Brexit, and the Myth of Nations,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXIX: Politics and Medievalism (Studies)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 77, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxhrjqn>> (last accessed December 9, 2022); and Kaufman and Sturtevant, *The Devil’s Historians*, 10–12.

<sup>83</sup> Claudio Fogu, “Digitizing Historical Consciousness,” *History and Theory* 48.2 (May 2009): 117, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2009.00500.x>> (last accessed December 9,

rative supersedes or at least modifies the Dark Age representation of other medievalisms. Likewise, religion is a prominent element of medievalisms in general, but treated with caution by game developers,<sup>84</sup> leading to a ubiquitous but shallow representation of Christianity, Islam, and occasionally other faiths within many medievalist games.<sup>85</sup> When medievalist trends meet conflicting game requirements they can easily create new and unexpected tendencies and tropes.

Ultimately, the trends within medievalist digital games are a product of the coalescence of the graphical and mechanical requirements and conventions of games, the agency of players, and the influence of popular perceptions of the period more generally. This produces an image of violence and other aspects of the period that often overlaps with medievalist tendencies within other media but is nonetheless distinct both in terms of its representation and the way in which this representation is communicated to the player. A particularly violent Middle Ages within most of these games is a consequence of the propensity for violent combat within popular medievalism and within gaming, and, although other visions are certainly possible, this will remain the case as long as games continue to be viewed as a violent medium and the Middle Ages are viewed as a violent period.

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2022); and Eva Vrtacic, "The Grand Narratives of Video Games: Sid Meier's *Civilization*," *Teorija in Praksa* 51.1 (2014): 95–97.

<sup>84</sup> Carl Heinze, *Mittelalter Computer Spiele: Zur Darstellung und Modellierung von Geschichte im populären Computerspiel*, *Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen* 8 (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verl, 2012), 170–71; and Šisler, "From Kuma\War to Quraish," 127.

<sup>85</sup> Heinze, *Mittelalter Computer Spiele*, 171–72; Šisler, "From Kuma\War to Quraish," 124–25; Frank Bosman, "The Poor Carpenter: Reinterpreting Christian Mythology in the *Assassin's Creed* Game Series," *Gamevironments* 4 (2016): 61–87; and Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 141–48.

