Proposal: Monk Simulator 1000.

By Allison Kuhl

My proposal is to make a video game about Cluny. Some may wonder: why make a video game about Cluny? However, video games are useful for history for two reasons. Firstly, instead of presenting history as an abstract of names and places, it places the player directly into the historical scenario as an active participant. This fosters a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of the scenario. Secondly, by the very act of creating a game which is meant to simulate a particular time period or system, the game is making an argument for how the time period operates. Together, this makes video games a powerful tool in which to teach history. By codifying the underlying assumptions of a society, the player is forced to inhabit these assumptions and operate with, in and through them. Therefore, by creating a game in which a player can act as a monk, they will be able to experience the life of a Cluniac monk, or at least, an argument for what life as a Cluniac monk, and more broadly, medieval society, might have been like. For these reasons, I believe that it would be beneficial to create a video game about the Abbey of Cluny. To support this, in this paper I will discuss first of all the scholarship on video games and pedagogy, then discuss how I intend to implement those points in my own game.

Video games, some might contend, are just for kids, therefore, why make a serious academic topic into a game? However, recent scholarship has focused on the educational properties of games, arguing that games are useful precisely because they can present serious topics in a fun and engaging way. Indeed, recent scholarship has began to realize the enormous teaching potential of video games. James Gee is one early author to advocate for games as educational tools.[[1]](#footnote-1) Video games provide students a space to explore and engage different identities and arguments, to work together with others and learn on their own.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, many historians, especially digital historians, have now begun to realize this potential and are calling for increase in games that foster historical education.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, it is not enough to stick historical figures into a game and expect kids to learn from it. Indeed, although games *can be* excellent teaching tools, that doesn’t they all are. Nor does it mean that everything it teaches is good as well. A good game can teach bad history, and a bad game can poorly teach excellent history. The difficult part is to find the intersection between the two. Digital historians have thus rigourously discussed the problem of what good history looks like in games. Some historians have pointed out the potential in games for micro-histories.[[4]](#footnote-4) By adapting a persona and a limited view-point through which to see history, players are given a close and more personal history which they can relate to and empathise with. Games also allow players through non-linear game-play to construct their own meanings and narratives, essentially doing the work of a historian.[[5]](#footnote-5) One game which is often discussed by historians is Sid Meier's Civilization. In Civilization, you play as an historical civilizations, say the Aztecs, and guide them throughout history. In an ironic turn of events, you could then theoretically conquer Spain - which of course, we know is a non-historical event! However, historians have argued although this promotes a *different* historical understanding, it is still useful for teaching history.[[6]](#footnote-6) Through counterfactual narratives, players can see that under different circumstances history might have turned out very differently! This forces them to consider not who did this or conquered who, but rather *why*. Thus players are guided to the underpinning systems and processes that form history. Of course, simulations are not without its flaws. McCall, for example, notes we must be critical of the various complications such as the quantification of unquantifiable variables (such as happiness), the omniscient perspective games such as Civilization offer, and the necessary simplifications of complicated things a game might have to make.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nonetheless, he argues that simulations are examples of good history. From this example, we see that a game’s arguments just come from its content, but also its form.[[8]](#footnote-8) The processes of a game , i. e., the gameplay, the mechanics, and so forth, which affect how you play the game, are just as powerful teaching tools as the content itself. These processes is what Ian Bogost terms *procedural rhetoric*.[[9]](#footnote-9) A good historical game, therefore, must both have a persuasive form, but also accurate content. In both case, video games have enormous potential in teaching students (or, potentially, others as well!). There is thus a need and a place to create games that are both good history and good games. I hope that my game will be both.

Although the details of the game are still in development and therefore subject to change, I hope for my game to combine the best aspects of simulation and role-playing, creating an engaging and educational experience for users to enjoy. The game will likely take place in Twine, which is an open-source software meant to create interactive, non-linear text-based fiction. The concept is the following: you will play as an aristocrat from the 12th century, and to win, you need to get to heaven. To do this, you must have less than a certain number of sins. The game will keep track of how many sins you commit. Sins include things like killing people, disobeying the abbot, sleeping in late, stealing, and so forth. Your sin will disappear once you confess them, but the points will transfer into your penance points, which you must work to deplete. If you die with no sins or penance points, you will go directly to heaven. Otherwise, you will have to wait a few turns as your penance points go down as people pray for you.

There will be several pathways one might pursue. First of all, you may play as either a male or a female. Secondly, you will either begin in the monastery as an oblate, or stay in the secular world and convert to the monastic life later on if you wish. Depending on these initial choices, the game will proceed very differently! For example, if you a male, you will be able to become a knight and slaughter people, and if you are a woman you have to get married and manage your household (the only way *not* to get married (in case your husband is a jerk and you don’t like him), is to join the monastery). Unfortunately I do not have all the ideas of the secular pathway mapped out, since it calls for much more research of medieval society, but I hope to be able to offer it nonetheless. By offering it as a choice, players might be able to think about the reasons a secular man or woman might convert to the monastic life.

The monastic pathway will be simpler to implement, since it is more repetitive. It will follow the daily schedule of a monk, slightly compressed and simplified for time’s sake. You will repeat this for a certain amount of days (perhaps 10 or a few more, if you begin in the monastery), then die. There will be many little decisions you have to make each day: for example, waking up in time, listening to the Rule of Benedict during lunch, confessing your sins in the chapter meeting, and so forth. You will have to perform certain prayers, hopefully in some kind of interesting way which I have yet to figure out yet. I am still working out the details, but I think that the game will make you type out the prayers. At first you will have a prompt, but eventually you will have to type them in on your own. If you make a mistake, your sin points will increase, and the prompt will appear again. The aim is to make you memorize the words, and maybe think about them too, similar to what the monks would do while singing. If you are oblate, they will be in English, but if you come later in the monastery they will be in Latin. To proceed, you need to type in the prayers correctly. You will face other problems throughout your life – for example, you might encounter demons, or an visitor might try and get you to leave the monastery. In each case, you will have to do the proper action – that is, you must behave as the medieval ideal, as described in monastic literature. In this way, you will learn how to behave like a monk and what they considered to be good and bad.

In conclusion, although much more research and fine-tuning needs to be done, my video game will place the player into the shoes of a medieval man or woman, allowing them to create their own historical narrative about Cluny. Through the procedural rhetoric of the game, I hope to guide players to a deeper understanding of the systems that guided medieval society, especially that of the monastery. Video games are a valuable historical tool, and I hope to use it to make an interesting and exciting game which presents a good argument for medieval life.

Annotated Bibliography

Video Games and Learning

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2007.

His formulation of ‘procedural rhetoric’ is often cited by proponents of history for video games. The book is an interesting read which examines how video games mount arguments, often through the mechanics and other processes therein.

Chapman, Adam. “Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames”, *Journal of Digital Humanities,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2012)accessed Dec 1st, 2015. http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman/#privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman-n-1

The journal has several interesting articles on history and video games, although this is the one I cited in the proposal. It discusses the value of the medium as a whole for video games, and that games must be seen on their own terms and not inferior to literature.

Christiansen, Peter. *Medieval Ethics: Designing Historical Systems*. April 15, 2015. PlaythePast.org http://www.playthepast.org/?p=5174

Any of the articles on this website is a host of information about history and video games. This one deals directly with the middle ages and so I have cited it here. The article examines how medieval ethics system is portrayed in Crusader Kings 2. I should hope to be able to do something similar, but oriented more towards the monastery.

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Accessed November 26, 2015. ProQuest ebrary.

A seminal work in the field and often quoted. It was an interesting read. An interesting book about the use of video games in learning, and how learning takes place in video games, using all the latest postmodern scholarship on education and literature. Chapter 6 I found especially useful, since it talks about inhabiting different cultural models, which I would like to try and do.

Kevin Kee and Shawn Graham and Pat Dunae and John Lutz et. al. "Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming." *The Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (2009): 303-326. https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed November 26, 2015).

A good introduction to the current state of history and video games, as well as the possibilities therein. Discusses some of the positive benefits of games and its potentials for use of history.

Kline, Daniel T., ed. Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture : Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2013. Accessed November 26, 2015. ProQuest ebrary.

This book talks briefly about how the Middle Ages have been used in video games, which might be useful. However, a lot of it deals with fantasy games like Warcraft and how the Middle Ages are represented there, which is interesting but not useful for my case.

McCall, Jeremiah. 2012. “Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History”. *The History Teacher* 46 (1). Society for History Education: 9–28. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.carleton.ca/stable/43264070

Although this mostly deals with simulation games a la Civilization or Total War and other top down God mode games, it is still useful for examining how systems and the procedures of a game can teach history. It lauds the potential of using simulations to teach about history, but also warns of some of the things educators must be careful about.

Taylor, Jamie. *History as it can be Played: A New Public History*, Feb 25, 2015. PlaythePast.org. http://www.playthepast.org/?p=5091

Discusses the rise of ‘serious gaming’ and the benefits of counterfactual histories.

1. James Paul Gee. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) Accessed November 26, 2015, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kevin Kee and Shawn Graham and Pat Dunae and John Lutz et. al. "Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming." *The Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (2009): 303-326. https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed November 26, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gee, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jamie Taylor, *History as it can be Played: A New Public History*, PlaythePast.org, accessed Dec 1st, 2015. see also Jeremiah McCall. 2012. “Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History”. *The History Teacher* 46 (1). Society for History Education: 9–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McCall, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Adam Chapman, “Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames”, *Journal of Digital Humanities,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2012)accessed Dec 1st, 2015. http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman/#privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman-n-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)