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HIST 501D
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What (Might Have) Really Happened: Video Games for Historical Research and Education

Introduction

In the past several decades, historians have found themselves questioning the nature of their field. The "noble dream" of objectivity has been undeniably ended by poststructuralist and other critiques; even a historian who rejects the more radical claim that all narratives of history are equally constructed and therefore equally valid must acknowledge that saying "what really happened" in the sense of recreating an objective reality has been proven impossible.[^1] On the material side, the rising digital realm has revolutionized research and archiving. This revolution in how historians access data has begun to be accompanied by changes in how they present it. Beyond the simple transfer of books and journals to digital formats, some historical research - particularly that intended for public consumption - is now being presented in apps, mapping software, and even simulations. A particular type of simulation, video games, is the topic of this paper.

Video games likely immediately conjure images of screaming teenage boys playing *Call of Duty*. This does not seem like auspicious ground for real historical work to grow from, and indeed, the medium contains many potential pitfalls. But judicious use of video games can open new doors for historical theory and publication, and provide an accessible and engaging entry for new generations of historians. This paper will examine both of these potential applications. It will first explore the benefits and drawbacks of a video game's structure for a historian seeking new ways of thinking about the past and especially contigency. It will then consider the possibilities and limits of video games as vehicles for publishing historical research. Finally, it will turn to the problem of training new historians, examining the ways historical video games - both those created by historians and those intended for entertainment - can teach college-level students about the practice of professional history.

Video Games as Theoretical Tools

Video games, which by their nature require the ability to make counterfactual choices and create scenarios that did not happen, go against the standard practices of professional history.[^2] But is that a bad thing? Or does it open the door for new ways of thinking and talking about history? The suggestion that video games or "video game logic" could be of theoretical value to historians is not meant to imply that research should be conducted using video games. Rather, a number of scholars have suggested that the way video games engage with history and the way players engage with history via video games could offer a new template for historians to view their work.

In his 2009 article "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," Claudio Fogu examined the ways in which video games de-emphasize traditional ideas of history as "transcendental and immanent... action, representation, and consciousness."[^3] In his analysis, the way historical video games render history as a series of contingencies with different outcomes rather than a grand narrative offers lessons for historians seeking to move away from the modern- and West-centric ideas of "'History' (the ensemble of all human actions in time), the semantic collapse of 'history' with 'the past', and... the transfiguration of the ancient conception of

history... into the idea of historic eventfulness."[^4] The video game approach also "transforms time into space," presenting history not as a linear progression forward but as a stacking and expanding development of experience.[^5] This presentation recalls older conceptions of "history as a trans-temporal reservoir of moral lessons" or experiences.[^6] Put more simply, Fogu concluded that the ways in which history is reinterpreted and made into "what may happen" counterfactuals in a video game challenges historians' understanding of the concept of "History" in ways that can help them incorporate poststructuralist critiques, move past the modern linear and "objective" framework, and begin more experientially-focused and contingent ways of thinking.[^7]

Also in 2009, Annette Vowinckel articulated a similar idea about the value of counterfactuals in video games in her article "From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games." Vowinckel staked out a slightly different perspective from Fogu, explicitly rejecting the idea of simulations as a tool for "prognoses of the future," as opposed to Fogu's more fanciful "what may happen."[^8] However, she too advocated for the examination of video games and their reconstruction of time and history in order to forward historical philosophy. She compared video games and other simulations to "a kind of time machine able to generate uncounted parallel (hi)stories."[^9] She saw great potential in this - the ability to "broaden our historical consciousness [by informing] us about historical alternatives and [keeping] us from interpreting historical events in the wake of their aftermath."[^10] The latter point is particularly salient; even historians who reject poststructuralism and thus may not find value in Fogu's proposals acknowledge the need to avoid determinism and treating events as "leading to" particular ends. If Vowinckel is correct, simulations like video games could be very useful for historians simply to keep their minds open and identify points of contingency that have been elided by narratives focused on the way things actually happened. This argument was further developed by A. Wainwright in his 2014 piece "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," when he noted that the creation of counterfactuals could be considered to be implicit in the creation of "factuals." "To identify causal relationships is implicitly to speculate on what would have occurred if those causes had not existed, thereby considering alternate outcomes as well."[^11] In that sense, Vowinckel's suggestion is merely to make explicit that which is already happening, awakening the historian to their own thought processes.

Of course, there is a reason counterfactuals have generally been avoided in the professional historical community. There are limits to what can reasonably be changed while maintaining a recognizable connection to reality, and predicting how each variable might affect other variables is an extremely tricky process. Video games and other simulations can help with that, insofar as they are computers which can work much more quickly than the average human; but they are still running models constructed by human inputs and assumptions. As a result, they might reinforce certain biases when a historian runs a simulation a number of times and "discovers" that a variable influenced by their own bias leads to a particular result more often than not.[^12] The use of video games and simulations for counterfactuals in particular therefore requires careful self-reflection from the historian, and a clear knowledge that they are using the technology to stimulate different thinking rather than as any kind of quantifiable testing.

Video Games as Publishing Methods

In her 2011 book *Planned Obsolence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick encouraged historians to explore new methods of disseminating their work. She considered this necessary both to take advantage of new digital technologies and to escape the "undead" - increasingly difficult to publish, but still demanded for tenure - monograph format.[^13] Fitzpatrick did not address video games, but her work is relevant to them. Video games can address a number of the issues she raised, including marketability and the need for historians to be more open and collaborative in their work. The "crisis

in scholarly publishing" has been ongoing for decades, and thus far a solution seems to have eluded academia.[^14] The problem is a simple one, even if the solution is not: academic publishers are profit-seeking - or at least investment-recouping - organizations, and the market for monographs is shrinking. The scholarly value of a book is no guarantee that it will be published, simply because it needs to be marketable in addition to solid research.[^15] And the list of academic books that can reach markets beyond increasingly financially-strained academic institutions is short; *Cotton Mather's Spanish Lessons*, despite its fascinating new way of examining early America, is unlikely to end up on beach read lists this summer. The end result is that academics struggle to bring their interpretations to the public, partially due to publishers' decisions and partially due to lack of consumer interest.

Video games, on the other hand, are only growing in popularity and profitability. In 2004, at the same moment that monograph sales were falling precipitously, the video game *Halo 2* brought in $125 million in a single day.[^16] In 2022, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* grossed $1 billion in 10 days.[^17] Obviously, the fact that first person shooter games are popular does not imply that more historically focused games will be, but it is reasonable to wonder if there might be more of a market for a video game than a monograph. At the very least, a video game can reach a broader audience; Serena Zabin's *The Boston Massacre: A Family History* might not catch the layperson's eye on the shelf by itself, but the accompanying game located at the Old State House Museum in Boston will share her research with tourists who might otherwise never have seen her interpretation.[^18] A video game is not going to be the proper medium for every project. The aforementioned Cotton Mather book focuses heavily on material and literary culture, which most likely will not translate well into a game. But some projects can be translated into games, and it is therefore worth examining the potential and pitfalls of the medium.

Perhaps the most obvious objection to the idea of video games as ways of publishing research is the problem of choice. A game in which the player is guided to the correct ending is more of an "interactive story"; an "open world" game in which the player can choose anything they want is unlikely to communicate what the creators intended.[^19] In both cases, positivism is a real danger; presenting an interactive story could risk the project appearing more authoritative about things like visualizations than it should, while an "open world" game could result in things which were only possible in the barest sense of the term being taken as plausible. Some research has indicated that players are more accepting of inaccuracy in video games as opposed to other media, and thus might be more critical of video game imagery than they would of a text description, but the fact remains that a historical video game faces a Scylla and Charybdis in trying to guide its players without steering them.[^20] There is however a workable middle ground, one example of which is the *Pox in the City* project directed by Lisa Rosner. Rosner's goal with the game was not to inform players of a particular chain of events, but rather of the socioeconomic dynamics, medical practices, and cultural values of Philadelphia in 1802.[^21] As a result, the player was largely free to pursue their goal - getting the public to accept the new cowpox vaccine - in whatever way they pleased; the education came from the environment in which events played out rather than from events themselves.[^22] This methodology is also useful for projects like Zabin's, which was structured around a real event but like *Pox in the City* was meant to convey the social and cultural environment rather than pass judgement on what happened.[^23] As with most digital history technologies, judicious use and knowing precisely what one's goal is will be key if more historians seek to turn their research into games.

While choice is a problem in historical projects, it can also be a benefit. A carefully designed game - again, *Pox in the City* is an excellent example - can demonstrate contingency in ways traditional monographs cannot. As Jeremiah McCall pointed out in his 2012 article "Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History," "text... can present the motives and outcomes of one choice at a time,

though many in a series... [the medium] can certainly suggest possibilities, but [cannot] allow the student to make choices in any way similar to those faced by historical actors."[^24] A monograph or article can talk about the concept of contingency, could perhaps even write out a few different scenarios, but it cannot capture the actual experience of choices or their consequences. Bearing that in mind, a video game could prove to be as good or even better at communicating certain historical information than a traditional text-based format. *Pox in the City* allowed players to choose how they wanted to go about their goal, including decisions like going door-to-door, enlisting community leaders, or asking patients to come to them in order to spread the news about the vaccine.[^25] This opened the door for players to learn about the role of contingency in historical events without compromising the main point of the project. A player who chose "wrong" and lost the game would still learn the things Rosner meant to share, and could replay and see how different choices could lead to totally different outcomes.

Video games can be powerful tools for presenting research, but that power comes at a price - literally. *Pox in the City* was made possible by a $100,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant, plus a partnership with for-profit game developer EduWeb.[^26] Another game, *Mission US: No Turning Back*, received $400,000, and an additional game in the *Mission US* portfolio required an additional $325,000 for updates to preserve its playability in the long term.[^27] That money went to various computing software and hardware, and to paying many people - certainly not just the doctors who spearheaded the projects - to use them. Video games have the potential to earn more money if they are marketed commercially, but they also require a huge investment of resources upfront, which will doubtless be out of reach for most historians without assistance from grant programs. Video games also require a smaller but still significant investment of resources to use. A book can be purchased for fairly cheap and works unless it is destroyed; video games require an expensive piece of technology before they can even be purchased, and they often need internet access to run.[^28] In large parts of the globe, internet access is achieved via mobile phones and cellular data, so a project presented via video game may prove inaccessible for many. Given the potential for video games to appeal to non-academic audiences, it is possible that these constraints would have the effect of changing rather than limiting the audience; nonetheless, it is an important inequity for researchers to be aware of when considering games as a medium.

In addition to the difficulty of finding money and partners to produce a game, there is a difficulty in offering everyone involved sufficient credit. Of course, many games have credits that scroll at the end, but there are difficult questions to be asked in terms of valuing a contribution to the field. Does the developer who solves a tricky problem with the game's mechanics deserve as much credit as a scholar as the historian on whose work the game is based? Do graduate students who assist with the research before a game is developed get to put the game on their resumes? And on a similar note, how would one cite everything related to a project - supplementary materials? Citations as part of the credits? These are by no means insurmountable problems, but they are essential to consider if a historian wishes to turn their project into a game.

Video Games as Instructional Technologies

Research and publication are often just one part of a professional historian's work. Another central activity of the profession is training people - both future historians and college students who could simply benefit from thinking historically - in the methods and theories of the field. A number of educators have put considerable thought into the utility of video games in the classroom, particularly for teaching theory, and have offered both promising evidence of benefits and useful warnings of drawbacks.

Educators were already testing the utility of video games for student engagement and learning by the early 2000s. Andrew McMichael's article "PC Games and the Teaching of History" reported on his findings after

conducting a class on "Western Civilizations Through 1648" with PC games included in the course assignments. Students were expected to play games, including *Civilization III* (CIII), *Age of Empires*, and *Europa Universalis II*.[^29] Gameplay was conducted outside of class, along with more traditional readings, and then topics like the presentation of history in academia vs. pop culture were discussed in class. Additionally, students completed several essays examining topics like how progress occurs and how location impacts development.[^30] McMichael discovered that students improved their critical thinking skills, both about history and about life in general, when asked to analyze video games in the context of what they were learning in class.[^31] They also "reported that they were more comfortable analyzing the PC game in the context of primary sources than they were simply looking at documents alone," an interesting hint of how video games could not just supplement but actually enhance learning.[^32]

Seven years later, A. Martin Wainwright conducted a similar experiment. His article "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games" is a summation of the format and results of the first three offerings of his undergraduate "History in Video Games" class. The course was mainly focused around the game *Civilization IV* (CIV), which allows players to play as a particular civilization (for example, the Inca) and attempt to develop and gain control of the world. In addition to CIV, the class examined games such as *Railroad Tycoon II*, *Assassin's Creed II*, *Europa Universalis III*, and *Rome: Total War*.[^33] Wainwright's goal was not for the students to learn content from the games, but rather to use them as practical examples of how historians think about events and construct narratives. For example, *Railroad Tycoon II* featured in a section about economic/Marxist history, with students encouraged to think about how economic factors drove events in both it and the CIV game.[^34] CIV apparently proved especially useful for discussing complex ideas like cultural bias and postcolonialism, as students could see how technology was assumed to progress on a certain path that mimicked Western ideas, and how certain cultures were assumed to achieve certain innovations regardless of their prior in-game history.[^35] Wainwright of course included a number of critical texts alongside the games, but the action of analyzing the games rather than speaking abstractly apparently helped students comprehend and engage with historiography at a higher level than would typically be expected.[^36]

Both of these studies indicate real promise for the use of video games in historical education. The ability to engage students and make them feel comfortable tackling higher level skills like primary source analysis and historiography is particularly intriguing; being able to consistently teach those skills to students who are just taking their mandatory history class would be a major leap forward for historical knowledge in general society. However, as with every promising methodology, there are drawbacks. One issue both McMichael and Wainwright noted was the problem of technological and financial accessibility. McMichael ran into serious problems trying to make the required games available to his students at reasonable prices, while Wainwright noted that participants in his classes tended to be whiter than the school's general population, something he attributed to "fewer financial resources" among black and Latino students.[^37] Physical accessibility may also be an issue; in her own examination of video games for historical education, Lisa Rosner pointed out that "there really seem to be no set standards for how game designs address the needs of people with disabilities."[^38] Another potential problem lies in the immersive nature of some games. While most games for the mass market tend to steer clear of the most upsetting topics - ignoring Atlantic slavery in games about the early modern period and so forth - people can become distressed from any number of things. This is true of any history class, but the nature of a video game as opposed to a textbook does make the problem more likely to occur. The variable accessibility is a definite limitation to the usefulness of video games, as a major class resource must be accessible to every student. It is particularly important since video games would be taking quite a lot of time away from other resources. Syllabi are already densely packed, and video games - which take just as long or longer to "study" than texts - must be useful for all students and provide a real benefit to

education to justify the time investment.[^39] This can certainly be done, but as McMichael and Wainwright discovered, it requires careful planning and preparation. Professors who are interested in incorporating video games would likely see good results, but those who are not interested in rebuilding their syllabi around games could run into more problems than solutions.

Conclusion

Despite their growing popularity among the general public, video games are unlikely to become the next big thing in academic history. Some parts of the field are still struggling to accept environmental history or collaborative projects, let alone a technology with the reputation and potential pitfalls of video gaming. The format of an average game is not necessarily conducive to representing the kind of information from an average historical research project, and the audience for many projects is likely better served by formats other than games. And even if the field was ready, the expense and skills needed to produce games at a large scale would likely be prohibitive.

But this does not mean that video games are useless or should be ignored. To start with, a number of historians have found currently available mass-market games like the *Civilization* series useful both for their own thinking and for educating their students. Even scholars who ultimately decide games are not useful for those purposes will have improved their understanding of their own processes and pedagogy by examining the tools. Additionally, while video game production is too resource and labor-intensive for a single person or even the average academic department, there are grant opportunities and companies willing to invest in the production of games aimed at genuine historical education. Historians who worry about the competitiveness of traditional publishing or think a monograph may not be the best format for their project could do well to think about whether a game might be a good option and if so, to look for potential partners and funding sources. Digital history offers a bold new world of opportunities for scholars to construct their work in new formats and bring it to new audiences, and video games - for all of their constraints and associations with screaming teens in the basement - are one of those opportunities.[^40]

[^1]: Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 29.

[^2]: Jeremiah McCall, "Navigating the Problem Space: The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 1 (2012): 17.

[^3]: Claudio Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," *History and Theory* 48, no. 2, (2009): 115, 119.

[^4]: Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," 109.

[^5]: Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," 121.

[^6]: Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," 109.

[^7]: Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," 121.

[^8]: Annette Vowinckel, "From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games," *Historical Social Research* 34, no. 2 (2009): 323. Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," 121.

[^9] Vowinckel, "From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games," 331.

[^10] Vowinckel, "From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games," 331.

[^11]: A. Martin Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (2014): 593.

[^12]: McCall, "Navigating the Problem Space," 19.

[^13]: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 4, 10.

[^14]: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolence*, 3.

[^15]: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolence*, 4.

[^16]: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolence*, 3. Kurt Squire, "From Content to Context: Videogames as Designed Experience," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 8 (2006): 19.

[^17]: Eddie Makuch, "Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 Hits $1 Billion In Revenue In 10 Days, Faster Than Any Past CoD Title," GameSpot.com, GameSpot, November 7, 2022, accessed May 15, 2024, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-2-hits-1-billion-in-revenue-in-10-days-faster-than-any-past-cod-title/1100-6508942/

[^18]: Carleton College, "About," Witness to the Revolution, accessed May 15, 2024, https://bostonmassacre3d.amason.sites.carleton.edu/about/

[^19]: Lisa Rosner, "What's in a Game? A Survey of Digital Game Opportunities for Medical Historians," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 89, no. 2 (2015): 327.

[^20]: Andrew McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2 (2007): 213

[^21]: Lisa Rosner, "Pox and The City," National Endowment for the Humanities Grant Application Narrative Section, https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/richard_stockton_college_pox_and_the_city.pdf, 2.

[^22]: Rosner, "Pox and The City," 19.

[^23]: Serena Zabin, *The Boston Massacre: A Family History,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), xvi.

[^24]: McCall, "Navigating the Problem Space," 13.

[^25]: Rosner, "Pox and The City," 20.

[^26]: Rosner, "Pox and The City," 2.

[^27]: National Endowment for the Humanities, *Mission US: No Turning Back*, apps.neh.gov, accessed May 15, 2024, https://apps.neh.gov/publicquery/AwardDetail.aspx?gn=GI-230768-15. National Endowment for the Humanities, *Revitalizing Mission US*, apps.neh.gov, accessed May 15, 2024, https://apps.neh.gov/publicquery/AwardDetail.aspx?gn=HK-250704-16

[^28]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 208-209. Rosner, "What's in a Game?," 328.

[^29]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 206, 208.

[^30]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 209-210.

[^31]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 216.

[^32]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 214.

[^33]: Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," 584, 584, 589, 596, 601.

[^34]: Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," 584.

[^35]: Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," 585-586.

[^36]: Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," 579.

[^37]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 207-208. Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory Through Video Games," 580.

[^38]: Rosner, "What's in a Game?," 328.

[^39]: McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," 215.

[^40] This author would like to stress the "screaming teens in the basement" aspect of video games; he has a little brother and it genuinely sounds like a murder is happening in the basement whenever the kid plays *Madden*. One drawback that did not make it into the "education" section was "the very real risk of students disturbing their neighbors as they play."

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