

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN GAME STUDIES

Digital Games as History

How Videogames Represent the Past
and Offer Access to Historical Practice

Adam Chapman



Digital Games as History

This is a timely and important study of the ways in which video games can and do use history, and the ways in which a hugely successful modern medium can connect players with the past. Chapman is part of a new generation of scholars trained in interdisciplinary research and able to transcend disciplinary lines to answer provocative research questions. This book is highly recommended both to historians and games studies enthusiasts.

—*Andrew Elliott, University of Lincoln, UK*

This book provides the first in-depth exploration of video games as history. Chapman puts forth five basic categories of analysis for understanding historical video games: simulation and epistemology, time, space, narrative, and affordances. Through these methods of analysis he explores what these games offer as a new form of history and how they produce representations of the past. By taking an inter-disciplinary and accessible approach, the book provides a specific and firm first foundation upon which to build further examination of the potential of video games as a historical form.

Adam Chapman is a Post-Doctoral Fellow in Education and Historical Game Studies in the Department of Education, Communication and Learning at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

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To my mother, Therese Chapman, for inspiring my interest in history by being the first to make it come alive for me.

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Part I

Digital Games as History

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1 Introduction

Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities. Otherwise he will leave us to our own devices, leave us it may be to cultivate a species of dry professional arrogance growing out of the thin soil of antiquarian research. Such research, valuable not in itself but for some ulterior purpose, will be of little import except in so far as it is transmuted into common knowledge. The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.

—Becker (1931, para. 22)

I am told it is June the 6th 1944, 6.35am, just off the coast of Normandy. The sky is grey, the water a little choppy. The other soldiers huddling in the landing craft all look scared. Ahead, one of them nervously taps his rifle against the floor. A commanding voice shouts ‘Clear the ramp, thirty seconds!’ Suddenly, I hear the whistling of distant artillery shells answered nearby by crumps of impact and jets of water. Soldiers flinch with each explosion. The occupants of another close-by landing craft all fall injured or dead, strafed by a swooping enemy fighter-plane. We speed past. With a bang our transport stops. The ramp lowers to the sound of artillery and ricocheting machine-gun fire. Suddenly we are underwater. There are soldiers, some dead, some struggling with wounds and the water is filled with blood and whizzing bullets that leaving spiralling patterns in their wake. Breaking the surface I run forward onto the beach. There are bodies everywhere and in the distance huge concrete bunkers spew machine gun fire. The sounds of explosions, gunfire and men screaming are intense and confusing. I can feel the vibrations of these explosions and each impact is met with a geyser of sand. My objective is only to survive. I run towards a crater occupied by one of my compatriots. With a loud bang the air is filled with fire. I pause for a second, startled. Now the crater is empty, its sole occupant vaporised. Just as I am about to reach the comparative safety of the depression, machine-gun fire stitches the sand in front of me. The beach turns black as my perspective falls to the floor, side-on. There is a distant call for a medic, but it is too late. Abruptly I am confronted by two words: ‘continue’ or ‘exit’.

I put down the controller and sat back almost feeling breathless, turning to my friend who had shown me the game and was waiting eagerly to hear

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my reaction. We sat for a few minutes, inspired at least partly by the sense of disempowerment we were unused to games instilling in us and excitedly discussed how terrible and violent D-Day must have been and what a massive undertaking it was. This was not normally how games made us feel, this was not normally what games made us think. Put succinctly, this experience had stimulated our interest not only in the game itself but also the past that it represented. When I try and think of the first time I had the palpable sense, however basic, that maybe videogames could be history, it is this first encounter as a seventeen year old with *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (a WWII first-person shooter – ‘FPS’) that springs to mind. Look back at the game through the lens of today’s games and its limitations are so noticeable as to be almost laughable. But for us it was meaningful. It had offered us something we couldn’t express, but it was something different to the ways we normally engaged the past. We hadn’t read history or seen history. Instead, we had *played* it. Our role was not subsumed. It was in fact the exciting point.

Looking back now, I realise that although this experience stuck in my mind, it wasn’t actually the first time that I had engaged history through games. Four years earlier, in 1998, I started playing *Age of Empires* (see Figure 1.1), a historical real-time strategy (RTS) game that focused on the period spanning from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. My mother, glad to see me playing a game with what she perceived to be a little more in the way of substance, was happy to chat about it. We discussed the difference between

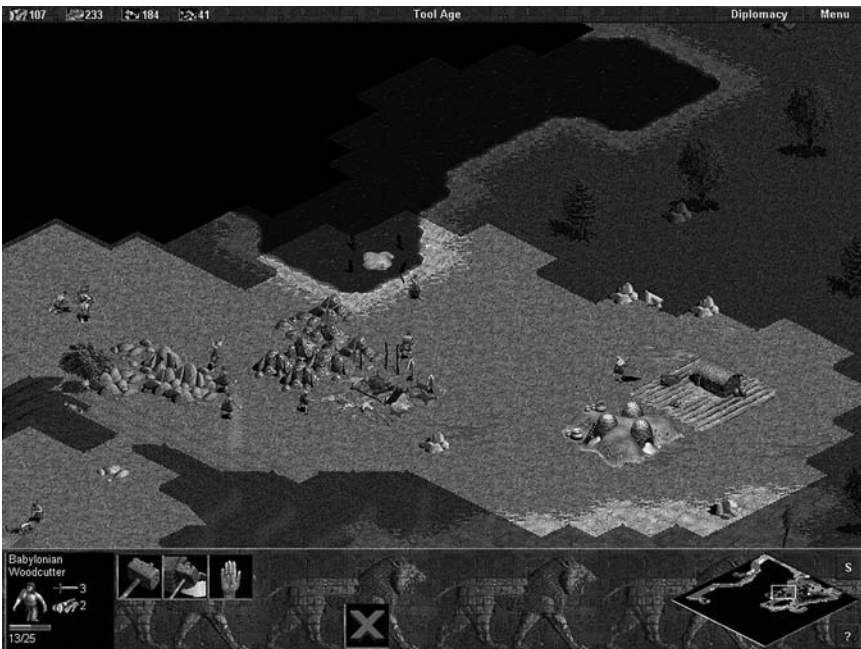


Figure 1.1 Screenshot of *Age of Empires*.

hunter-gatherer societies and agricultural societies, the changes that the Bronze and Iron Ages had brought about and the importance of technology in history, me drawing on my experiences in the game to do so. Again, we were asserting through our actions, if not our conscious recognition, that games could engage history.

These formative experiences perhaps account for why I have always been so interested in historical games, those games that in some way represent or relate to the past. For me, playing those games obviously felt fun, but I also felt that I gleaned something else from playing them, perhaps some kind of insight, perhaps just a stimulated interest in the past. I imagine that at least some other players (and probably some of the readers of this book) have had a similar sense at some point. *Digital Games as History* is at least partly generated by curiosity about this sensation. More specifically, this book seeks to examine digital games as a historical form by pursuing answers to three questions: How can we approach these historical games as scholars interested in them? How do they represent the past? What opportunities do they offer players in terms of actively engaging with history and historical practice?

Popular History

History, it is often claimed, is something in decline. The same anxieties seem to be repeatedly revisited. We worry about the state of history education, that too few study too little history and that the general public are disinterested and have too little knowledge of the past. Though these arguments undoubtedly sometimes have validity, generally they rest on the notion that “history” is a thing definable as only synonymous with official, educational, institutionalised and professional knowledge, forms and practices. This means that both the significance of the popular histories found in mainstream media and the nature of history as an active process of remembering performed by the public as well as professional historians, is often missed. Such perspectives generally ignore the role of the everyday, the local, the unofficial, the familial, the *popular*. Some scholars, journalists and political commentators, for example, are often highly critical and dismissive of popular history (see, for instance, the reactions of some historians to television history in Hunt 2006). These dismissals are often grounded in two common fears concerning popular engagements with history. First, that the public aren’t actually interested in history and that second, the ways in which the public receive history when they actually do so aren’t the ‘right’ ways. It is worth taking some time to examine both of these concerns.

First, it does not seem that the public and popular culture can really be accused of a lack of interest in the past. For example, Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998) discovered, in their seminal study of popular understanding and uses of the past, that (contrary to these perspectives) history was indeed important to ordinary Americans and a part of their everyday lives. This was

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not necessarily, however, the history found in textbooks. Instead, this was a history weaved with hobbies, collections, local and family history, museum visits and drawn from both multiple cultures (other than the typically rather monolithic national history) and cultural resources. Of course, what those who decry popular engagements with the past actually generally mean when they say that the public are not interested in history, is that the public don't engage with what they have determined to be the 'right' history (whether in terms of accuracy or historical topic). This kind of perspective even infiltrates popular perceptions. An anecdotal example: a friend of mine a few years ago said, rather shamefacedly, that he sadly knew nothing about history. I pointed out that, on the contrary, he actually knew an enormous amount about music history, particularly the history of bands such as *The Beatles*, *The Beach Boys* and *The Dead Kennedys*, their members, performances, music and the genres they emerged from and influenced. Hundreds of hours of research (e.g. reading websites, books, magazines, eyewitness accounts, watching performances and interviews and listening to music – including of course rarer or less well-known demos or recordings) had gone into this knowledge and yet he did not consider this to be history because it didn't match up with 'proper history' – the kind of history we would typically find in textbooks. And yet his dedication, practice and knowledge seemed to show many of the hallmarks of the kind of engagement that this 'proper' history is supposed to encourage. This example is hardly an isolated case, many of us know a great deal about the history of whatever we are passionate about, whether sports, cars, music or films, for example, yet many of us would probably similarly position ourselves as knowing little about the past.

It also seems rather strange to point to public disinterest in the past when history seems to be more popular than ever. Historical films such as *12 Years a Slave*, *Selma* and *The King's Speech* fill cinemas internationally. Historical novels such as *Wolf Hall* and *The Other Boleyn Girl* are bestsellers and have sparked a proliferation of similar novels, as well as being adapted for film or television (TV). Indeed, many of the most popular TV dramas, are also historical, series such as *Mad Men*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Downton Abbey*. And these series can be found alongside huge numbers of historical documentaries and historical reality TV programmes. When in 2006 Cannadine pointed in *History and Media* to how in the late 1990s and early 2000s "more history was being produced and consumed than ever before" (1), he also noted that in retrospect these years might end up seeming to be "more like a blip than a boom" (2). However, ten years later, this unprecedented interest in history seems to be showing no signs of abatement.

History Beyond the Academic Word

This brings us back to the second common objection to popular history. The reason that there are still concerns about popular disinterest, despite this

proliferation of popular interest in the past, is that these examples (although sometimes engaging the ‘right’ histories) are often dismissed because they occur in forms that emerge from popular culture. More specifically they are not the academic history book that is all too often seen as the only appropriate way to represent and engage the past and therefore as synonymous with history itself. This perspective rests on two problematic assumptions “first, that the current practice of written history is the only possible way of understanding the relationship of past to present; and second, that written history mirrors ‘reality’” (Rosenstone 1995, 49). As Schama notes, this first assumption that “real history is essentially coterminous with the printed book ... that only printed text is capable of carrying serious argument” (Schama 2006, 23) is a mistake, because western written history both emerges from oral history and is weaved with a number of continuing performative traditions of engagement with the past. But also because perspectives based on the primacy of the word underestimate the power and capabilities of images (often a part of these popular forms), ignoring work in fields such as iconography and iconology. This ignorance, Schama continues to explain, leads to an understanding of images as only *expressive* of culture (e.g. politics, economics and religion) rather than also possessing the power to *constitute* it. Furthermore, “If it is true that the word can do many things that images cannot, what about the reverse – don’t images carry ideas and information that cannot be handled by the word?” (Rosenstone 1995, 5). This is an important idea that will be returned to throughout, that perhaps comparisons between historical forms should therefore not be focused on judgments about what is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ but what is *different* and what types of engagement with the past this allows. After all, even “language itself is only a convention for doing history – one that privileges certain elements: facts, analysis, linearity. The clear implication: history need not be done on the page” (Rosenstone 1995, 11).

Although this means that the chosen form is an important part of how history is constituted (as this book argues), the changes that other forms introduce are not to the extent, epistemically speaking, often imagined by critics. As Munslow explains, “in turning the content of the past into a form like film we are actually not doing much that is very different in narrative-making terms than historians do when they write (2007a, 568)”. For example, historical filmmakers, just like historians, “use preferred arguments, sift the past ideologically, emplot, select the sources to be offered ‘in evidence’, focalise, contract and extend time, make decisions about the relative merits of structure over agency, use rhetoric, acknowledge the role of the reader/viewer, employ inference, and so on” (Munslow 2007a, 569). The same can be said of historical TV drama makers, authors of historical novels, and as I will argue, digital game developers. All these producers of history, regardless of form, make meaning out of the past, they both engage and produce the larger historical discourse and their produced histories are referential – that is to say they are constructed in relation to other narratives about, and

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evidence of, the past. Problems with identifying these other popular forms as capable of being history only arise when first, as Schama argues in relation to historical television, we judge them “by the degree to which the preoccupations of print historians are faithfully translated and reproduced” (2006, 24). Comparisons of this kind, across not only forms but also differing arenas of historical practice (i.e. the professional and popular), are unfair and comparing the content of popular history in its multitude of forms to professional printed history tells us nothing about the possibilities of these forms.

As these arguments hint at, the rejection of popular history is often not only based on the idea of the primacy of the written word but also the sole primacy of the *academic* word. However, this ignores that even the claims of academic history as to its mirroring of past realities, capturing *the* complete truth, have become more uncertain. As Rosenstone puts it, “historians tend to use written works of history to critique visual history as if that written history were itself something solid and unproblematic” (1995, 49). However, the linguistic turn and various postmodernist perspectives have questioned the supposedly unimpeachable authority of written academic history over the past few decades. This is not the place to rehash these debates and the legacy of postmodernism is still arguably undecided. However, it is probably not too much to say that it is more difficult to find a historian in the contemporary landscape of the discipline that does not harbor at least some doubts about the capability of even academic history to truly and entirely capture and reflect the past. Most historians probably (hopefully) have a sense, for example, that history is always constituted under moral and ideological assumptions or decisions, that “*all* history is situated, positioned and *for* something or someone” (Munslow 2007b, 41). That history as a narrative pursuit, even on the page, is partly subjective and therefore “has never simply reflected or captured the meaning of the past, but has always created meaning for the past” (Rosenstone 2007, 594). And that history is therefore a *fictive* construction, neither entirely factual nor (still being based on evidence) entirely fictional.

Although this position has been expanded and convincingly argued in recent decades (by theorists such as Frank Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, Hayden White, Elizabeth Ermarth and of course Robert Rosenstone and Alun Munslow), many of these later arguments can be traced back to earlier questioning of history’s supposedly objective scientific capabilities. Carr’s *What is History?* (1961), for example, famously questioned this notion by pointing to the subjectivities of historical writing and research, as did Carl Becker in his 1931 address to the American Historical Association, in which he argued that history is a “story that employs all the devices of literary art (statement and generalization, narration and description, comparison and comment and analogy)” (1931, para. 18). Such ideas do not deny the usefulness of, or need for, history. As Becker puts it, “Neither the value nor the dignity of history need suffer by regarding it as a foreshortened and incomplete representation of the reality that once was, an unstable pattern of

remembered things redesigned and newly colored to suit the convenience of those who make use of it" (1931, para. 23). Nor do such arguments (except in their most extreme of incarnations) deny the existence of facts. We can be certain, for example, that the Battle of Waterloo happened in 1815. Instead the argument is that these facts cannot speak for themselves and they are therefore "necessary (but not sufficient), for our understanding of the past" (Rosenstone 2007, 592). Dates, times and the existence of events contain little inherent meaning and, as such, history is necessarily about selecting particular facts and arranging them in particular ways into narratives and, in doing so, *creating* and *deciding* upon meaning.

These ideas have allowed a pluralisation of the past by questioning dominant narratives and, in doing so, allowing hitherto unheard voices and perspectives to speak. However, most relevantly to our current concerns, they have also pluralised because these conclusions about the subjective nature of history apply to *all* history. Differences between popular and academic history might then be a matter of *degree* (and *purpose*), but not *kind*. We cannot say that one is pure fiction while the other is *the* pure truth. As Munslow puts it, "there are always elements of the fictive/fictionality in all historying. It is simply unavoidable given that, ontologically, history is a narrative form" (2013, 287). This is not to say that there are no differences between popular and professional history and forms, and historians of the latter type are certainly experts of a particular kind. However, pointing to the subjective nature of all history, regardless of form, does mean that we cannot therefore intrinsically dismiss popular history as incapable of capturing the past without also therefore dismissing at least some aspects of professional history, because "The history written by historians, like the history informally fashioned by Mr. Everyman, is thus a convenient blend of truth and fancy, of what we commonly distinguish as 'fact' and 'interpretation'" (Becker 1931, para. 18).

Part of the problem here is that 'history' is a confusing word with a double meaning, "It is the past, but it is also the study and description of the past, storytelling of a particular kind" (Lukacs 2011, 1). Thus, "the past and history are different things" (Jenkins 1991, 7). Whilst the past once existed, it is now gone and the only way we have to engage it is through the subjective narrative representations we call history. It is this distinction, and this notion of the inherent subjectivities of history, that enables us to be able to talk about *historical* media (that is those media that in some way represent, relate to or use the past) without needing to anchor this solely in their perceived accuracy, i.e. their ability to capture 'history' in the sense of its first meaning, through the practice of its second. We can of course make the argument that popular history sometimes gets even the basic facts wrong or misses something out. However, popular history can often, even simultaneously, get many of the facts right and as White puts it, "Every mimetic text can be shown to have left something out of the description of its object or to have put something into it that is inessential to what *some* reader, with more or less authority, will regard as an adequate description" (1978, 3).

In addition, simply arranging facts is not the only way to make meaning about the past and metaphor and metonymy are also an important part of this, even for professional historians (Munslow 2007b; White 1973). History is always narrative, but this narrative doesn't necessarily have to detail the exact sequence of events that is understood to have taken place in the past in order to be historical. It is quite common, for example, to use one historical setting to say something about another and indeed professional historians often do this by making comparisons through time. So too, historical narratives (both popular and academic) often summarise, generalise, symbolise and conceptualise. Acknowledging this hints at the possibility that, for example, historical fictions (i.e. those works of history such as films, novels and games that utilise historical settings and yet in which key events or characters might be fictionalised) might also be used to say something meaningful about the past in which they are set. Rosenstone (2001, 61), for example, argues that history on the screen must be at least partly fictional (condensing or compressing events for example) in order to be true, as it cannot possibly be an exact replica of what actually happened. Thus, although still based on what literally happened, the recounting itself can never be literal. We can even propose that fantastical settings and narratives (such as fantasy and science fiction) could still be used metaphorically to argue about the past, offering particular notions of causality or exploring key ideas or concerns by mixing fantastical elements with those that are more conventionally historical. Foucault eloquently adds to these ideas about the complex relationship between fiction and truth when he states:

It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not as yet exist, that is, 'fictions' it. One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth. (1980, 193)

Fiction therefore, even while being devoid of some of the facts that we might consider to be pertinent, might still be used to say something we consider meaningful, important or even true. Put simply, what all these arguments ultimately mean is that we clearly need a definition of history, or at least the *historical*, that rests on more than only judgements of perceived accuracy or truth. Whereas facts and evidence are important, history is also more than this in both its popular and professional forms. Even academic histories may sometimes assert something we disagree with or perceive to be wrong, but this does not generally stop us (except in the most extreme of cases) referring to these texts as 'history' – being still written in reference to the past. Furthermore, simply criticising the *content* of individual popular histories on the more conventional basis of accuracy says nothing about the capabilities of the *forms* through which they are constructed and received and how

these might add to our shared understandings of the past in different ways. Given this and the aforementioned similarities between popular and more conventional histories (despite their often different audiences, forms and aims), it seems more productive to operate through a definition of history based on more than only judgements of including the ‘correct’ facts and which moves beyond the idea of history as only ‘properly’ communicable through the academic book. A definition that doesn’t simplistically place popular engagements with the past and the forms through which they occur as too fictional and/or too formally incapable to *be history*.

Here we can draw on the work of Rosenstone, who argues that, in order to be historical, a film must only “engage, directly or obliquely, the issues, ideas, data and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history ... the ongoing (multimedia) debate over the importance of events and the meaning of the past” (2001, 62). Rather than separating popular and professional practices and forms, such a definition allows for an exploration of their relationship. This allows us to take a different perspective on popular forms such as historical film, “to suggest that such works have already been doing history, *if by the phrase ‘doing history’ we mean*, rather than engaging in that traditional discourse (which films clearly cannot do), *seriously attempting to make meaning of the past*” (Rosenstone 2006, 37). Whereas we can debate what ‘serious’ might mean to different parties (particularly complex a notion in relation to games), the gist of Rosenstone’s perspective seems to be fruitful and one perfectly applicable to forms, of what we can therefore term ‘history’, other than film. Including, digital games.

Popular Perceptions of the Past and Popular History

This moves our definition of history beyond only the ‘official’ history found in academic books and/or as that which sufficiently (by whatever criteria we may use) captures the past. Instead, the historical becomes simply that which attempts to make meaning out of the past, that which uses historical themes, theories, evidence and/or arguments, that which refers to or represents the past or seeks to make a point relevant to how we perceive it (even if it is not a description of that past itself). This allows us to look seriously at the multitude of ways in which the past is actually engaged. For example, work by scholars such as De Groot (2009), Jordanova (2000), Rosenstone (2006) and Samuel (1994) has not only similarly taken popular engagements with, and forms of, history seriously but also, in doing so, has pointed to both the frequent complexity of these engagements and the myriad of ways that they can occur. Underpinning such work is the similar sense that questions focusing only on accuracy or on delineating what can’t be considered history aren’t particularly useful or indeed are even rather irrelevant. After all, these popular forms haven’t waited for the outcomes of these debates and are already working as history out in the world because they are treated as history by audiences who use them as a resource for establishing

an understanding of the past. These histories are therefore one of the many influences on our perception of the past, our historical consciousness, our collective or cultural memory.

This is unsurprising, after all disciplines such as media, film and literary studies are founded on the notion that media can communicate information and arguments to us and have an affect on our values and how we view the world. So too, history, at least as most of us know it, is not only constructed by historians but also by those involved in the production of multiple different cultural products and engaged in a variety of historical practices, as well as the local discourses with which they connect. Popular forms of history in fact have the potential to be particularly powerful precisely because they are often accessible, engaging and widely experienced. This is easy to demonstrate with a simple thought experiment. Think of the Normandy landings on D-Day. What springs to mind? Is it facts, maps, primary sources and arguments that we might find in a textbook in a history lesson? More likely, at least for those of us who aren't World War II (WWII) historians, we probably think of images drawn from popular media. Films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Longest Day* and for those of us who are gamers, perhaps that opening level of *Medal of Honor: Frontline*. It is relatively uncontroversial to argue that for most of us imagery and understandings drawn from popular media probably construct the past as much, if not more, than the books of professional historians (on which these popular media are often nonetheless based). After all, it is through popular media that most of us will primarily experience history after school.

The idea that popular media have a role in the construction of our cultural or collective memory is well established in memory studies. Landsberg argues, for example, that it is through contact with experiential popular histories that "a person sutures him or herself into a larger historical narrative" (2009, 222). Similarly, Wertsch (2002) demonstrates that collective memory is at least partially constituted from, and sustained in relation to, textual resources such as images and narratives, which function as cultural tools to aid in the individual appropriation and discussion of shared understandings of the past. Media such as films, documentaries, theatre, novels, cartoons, comics, advertisements and now digital games, are important because they are a widespread and shared source of these images and narratives. Underlying examination of these popular forms is also the idea that these kinds of history are important because, by playing a role in constructing our perceptions of the past, they are also part of forming our identities, our understandings of culture, society and even humanity. They might, as Landsberg puts it, "shape an individual's subjectivity and politics" (2009, 223).

However, examining popular histories and practices is not only important because they influence our perception of the past but also because they reflect it. For example, Jeffrey Richards writes, in his *Visions of Yesterday*, that myths are often more important than reality because they shape attitudes and movements (again lending weight to the notion that studying popular

forms and engagements must be done on the basis of more than judgements of accuracy). However, he also adds, “The popular arts have a great deal to tell us about people and their beliefs, their assumptions and their attitudes, their hopes and fears and dreams” (1973, xv). When we approach the past, we frame it through the lenses of the present, for most of us it is relevant only as we see it speaks in some way to this present. And these present day beliefs and ideals can often become startlingly apparent in the denaturalisation that setting them against the backdrop of the past can entail. As such, popular forms and engagements with history are important because they influence the way we see the past and thus have a role in constructing our present day identities, beliefs and ideals. However, they also in turn reflect these present day values and beliefs and demonstrate and affect why and how we turn to the past. It is these kinds of complex cultural cycles of exchange that makes studying how we represent and engage the past important.

In this light, many of the objections we might have to popular forms and practices and their engagements with the past seem to become rather irrelevant. In a sense, whether something is history relies only on an understanding by the audience that the words of the book, actions of the reenactment, images of the film or even the rules of the game relate to something not contained within the text but *of* the world in which they live and yet *in* the past. “Often it seems that historians wish to mark history out, to control and boundarise it” (De Groot 2009, 250). However, as Samuel (1994, 8) argues, to understand what history actually *is*, as a socially constituted idea and practice, we must look at the multitude of different and often popular ways in which it is constructed and received. Even for historians occupying a more conservative viewpoint, seeking “to protect the historical consciousness of the public, they must first understand how that group is informed and resourced” (De Groot 2009, 5). These popular historical forms are how most people engage the past whether we, as scholars, prefer these kinds of engagements or not. We are therefore better placed to seek to understand these engagements and the forms, such as digital games, in which they take place, if we are truly to comprehend the work that history actually does in the world.

Why Study Digital Historical Games?

What this all means is that “It is not professional history that will shape historical consciousness in the future but the yet-to-be-defined relationship between its own highly specialised representational strategies and the unconstrained profusion of popular histories that are being thrown up by various indigenous cultures around the world” (Harlan 2007, 108). In part, this book is an attempt to start to define this relationship with the form of digital historical games. But why look at games in particular? Well, many of the arguments throughout this book will support this focus, but there are three particular reasons that serve as a suitable starting point.

First, digital historical games (i.e. those digital games that make meaning out of the past) are immensely popular. They are a significant part, however inadvertently, of the boom in popular interest in the historical. For example, at the time of writing, the *Assassin's Creed* series has sold 93 million copies (Ubisoft Registration Document and Annual Report 2015), the *Brothers in Arms* series 6 million copies (Ubisoft Annual report 2008) and *Sid Meier's Civilization* series 24 million copies (Take-Two Annual Report 2014). Similarly even single historical games can sell in these kinds of numbers. *Red Dead Redemption*, for example, sold 14 million copies (Karmali 2015) and *Call of Duty: World at War*, a part of an enormously popular series, sold 11 million copies (McWhertor 2009), even without considering the other historical entries into the series. Recently, upon the release of *Total War: Attila*, Sega announced that there were now over one million unique players of the series every month (Calvin 2015). Digital games now regularly rival Hollywood and hold many of the biggest entertainment sales records. Many of these games are historical. They might not be bought as histories, purchased instead because they offer good gameplay or are part of a familiar franchise, but in a sense this doesn't really matter. Players are exposed to the offers of engagement with history and historical representations that these games entail and contain nonetheless. The kinds of sales numbers listed above make some digital historical games amongst the most successful histories of recent years and one of the most popular forms through which the past is engaged. Few history books or series (with perhaps the notable exception of the playful *Horrible Histories* series) manage sales even approaching these numbers and certainly even fewer academic history books.

It seems quite clear then that games have increasingly taken their place alongside the bricolage of different kinds of forms (e.g. novels, documentaries, films, websites, history books) that make up what we can call popular history. People explored history through games before this, tabletop wargames depicting historical conflicts, for example, have a history of use in military teaching and training, since at least the 19th century (Deterding 2010; Von Hilgers 2012). And indeed the historical development of digital games is also somewhat entwined with popular wargaming (Deterding 2010; Kostlbauer 2013; 2014). However, it is in the turn to the *digital* game (by which I mean, in a definition which is admittedly reductionist but adequate for our purposes, those games played on a screen) that we see the true proliferation of people engaging the past through games. This popularity means that digital historical games may well already hold a significant degree of power over popular understandings of the past. As such, understanding how the form of digital games works to represent and offer engagements with the past seems to be a worthy topic of investigation.

Second, digital historical games are worthy of our attention because of all of the arguments already made herein for popular history, but in particular the idea that forms other than print can constitute history. More specifically, I have argued previously (Chapman 2013a) for the legitimacy

of digital games as a historical form by pointing to how supposed flaws in the form are actually epistemic flaws common to the practice of all history and also to the similarities in the creative construction of game-based history to our other more traditional forms of history. Similarly, Kapell and Elliott's (2013) excellent introduction to their edited volume *Playing with the Past*, puts forward a very cogent case that also argues (amongst other things) that developers' attempts to represent the past through games have similarities to the historian's process. Indeed, this notion that games can be history underpins most of the existing work on digital historical games in some way or other, even if not always explicitly acknowledged. It therefore seems appropriate to somewhat accept and move beyond this idea. As such, although the notion that games can be history is certainly important and will be reinforced by many of the arguments presented within this book, it will also be at least partly assumed as a point to work from, with the aim here instead being focused on explaining *how* they work as history and *what* they offer by doing so. This assumption of the potential of digital games to be history means that I will also assume to use the term *developer-historian*, because, as Rosenstone writes in relation to film, "to accept film makers as historians ... is to accept a new sort of history" (2006, 159). This is not to claim that there are no differences between the developer-historian and professional historian (who clearly often have different aims, interests, professional standards and duties), instead by this term I simply mean to refer to those that make meaning about the past through the form of digital games.¹ Though this notion may at first seem outlandish, I hope that why I use this term will become more apparent as the book progresses.

The third initial reason that the study of digital games as history must be attended to, is that their enormous popularity is somewhat inversely matched by how relatively understudied they are. Indeed, the same can be said of many popular forms of history. As De Groot notes, "such cultural product widens access to historical appreciation, and it therefore is notable that the pedagogy, epistemology and methodology of such activities have not been particularly analysed by historians" (2006, 392), adding that to ignore popular media suggests "a shirking of a wider public duty" (2006, 411). This duty seems particularly pertinent with visual media as "for every person who reads a book on a historical topic ... many millions of people are likely to encounter that same past on the screen" (Rosenstone 2006, 12). In the case of digital historical games specifically, the relative lack of attention is no doubt partly due to the recency of their ascendance, but also to the fact that games have only recently begun to be taken seriously as a form of media in any regard. However, it does seem that "Rather than dismissing such works ... it seems more judicious to admit that we live in a world shaped, even in its historical consciousness, by the visual media, and to investigate exactly how ... [they] work to create a historical world" (Rosenstone 2006, 12).

Historical Game Studies

Some scholars have begun to do precisely this and it does seem that, what I prefer to term, ‘historical game studies’ (i.e. the study of those games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it), has started to cohere into a small but distinct field of interest. For example, at the University of Gothenburg in 2014, as part of our DSES (Doctoral School in Educational Sciences) initiative, we were able to run a course on historical representation in games that drew 19 PhD students interested in the topic from various parts of Europe and the USA. It is also becoming more common to see papers about historical games presented at a variety of digital humanities, games, heritage and history conferences. For example, the 2014 *Challenge the Past* conference, also in Gothenburg, had a track (thanks to a kind invitation to add this from organisers Jonathan Westin and Anna Foka) dedicated to digital historical games that eventually saw around 35 papers on the topic presented. Both this and the DSES course provided the critical mass to set up the ‘Historical Game Studies Network,’ a group that currently has over 150 members, who discuss ideas and collaborations and share information and publications relating to historical games.² This follows in the footsteps of websites such as *PlaythePast.org*, which has featured posts on the intersections of history and heritage with games since 2010. As such, although historical games are still relatively understudied, there is increasingly a shared discourse and focus beginning to form, an interest gradually cohering into a field.

In terms of literature, there are a number of journal articles on the topic of historical games (at least 80 individual articles), many of which are referenced herein, as well as a number of individual chapters on the topic in various edited volumes. These publications vary in their disciplinary perspectives (e.g. educational science, media studies, narratology, games design, game studies, cultural studies and of course history, heritage, archaeology and historiography) and engage a broad variety of different themes. However, a few particular strands of interest do seem to have started to coalesce. These are apparent if we turn to the few edited volumes and longer works on the topic of historical games. The aforementioned edited volume, *Playing with the Past* (Kapell and Elliott 2013), reflects this variety of interests and, in doing so, provides an excellent introduction to thinking about historical games. However, other edited volumes, monographs and theses have focused on more particular issues. These include the use of historical games in conflict simulation (Sabin 2007; 2012), education (Kee 2014; McCall 2011; Squire 2004) and heritage (Champion 2011). Yet other texts have concentrated on the representation of particular historical periods (content) in historical games. Kline’s (2014) edited volume, for example, looks at the representation of the Middle Ages, whilst Winnerling and Kerschbaumer’s (2014a; 2014b) concentrate on representations of Early Modernity. Similarly, Kempshall’s (2015) excellent book gives an in-depth examination of the portrayal of the First World War in digital games. These particular

concerns (conflict simulation, education, heritage and the representation of particular historical content) also crop up regularly in the aforementioned variety of journal articles and individual chapters, alongside some other recurring topics (representations of colonialism in strategy games, or representations of WWII in FPS games, for example).

Just as historical game studies has a variety of disciplinary perspectives and themes, so too there is variety in the games themselves. Digital historical games represent a number of different historical themes and periods and also include enormous variation in terms of their gameplay. For instance, examples of digital historical games might include: WWII FPS games; strategy games focused on particular periods, such as the Roman Empire (or even the whole of human history) sports games where we can reenact famous matches or races from sports history; simulator games where we can drive historical tanks, cars or planes; first-person multiplayer melee games focused on the combat of the Middle Ages; role-playing games inspired by the Chinese wuxia genre and myth; RTS games that allow for alternate histories of the Cold War; open-world action-adventure games in which we explore Renaissance Italian city states or New York in the 1950s; adventure games with contemporary settings that present us with recreations of the material culture of, and information about, the Aztec Empire; puzzle adventure games that explore different perspectives of WWI, as well as any number of other genres, themes and hybrids. Simply put, the variation in what we can call historical games is staggering, both in terms of content and in terms of form.

A Formalist Approach to Historical Games

As such, what approach is needed to allow us to say something about historical games as a whole? What kind of analytical framework can speak to, and across, the areas of interest in historical game studies, and be potentially useful to each, and yet also speak simultaneously to the huge variety of what we can term historical games? The answer seems to lie in looking at the structures of the form itself, both in terms of its universal properties and characteristics and in terms of its variations, in order to examine the implications that it has for both historical representation and players' engagement with history. In short, this is an approach grounded first and foremost in *formal analysis*, in order to explain the intersection between games and history. The start of such an approach can be found in the piece that I suspect many scholars (myself included) would posit as the beginnings of the formation of historical game studies. Uricchio's (2005) seminal chapter, "Simulation, History and Computer Games," looked beyond the content of individual games to begin to explore the formal relationship between games and history, considering the possibilities of the form and looking at how its structures and possibilities related to contemporary debates in historiography.

It seems that it might be fruitful to both expand and deepen such an approach, given that ultimately every avenue of investigation in relation to

historical games (education, heritage, historical content etc.) will eventually rely on some kind of broader understanding of digital games as a *historical form* (even while often contributing to this understanding). This kind of formalist approach can produce transferable and broadly relevant results. It tells us about the process of historical narration and the opportunities for audiences this creates, as well as about the content that is narrated. It is in essence a search for the core structures and properties of historical games, their language of representation, their ludic aesthetics of historical description, their implications for history and the opportunities that these create. Such an approach therefore aims to map out the form of digital historical games, its variations, possibilities, predispositions and limitations and is also a search for an analytical metalanguage to describe these aspects. It is this kind of formal analysis, using the depth and cohesion of voice that a monograph allows, that *Digital Games as History* aims to at least begin to provide.

As such, this book aims to take a broad viewpoint focused on the digital historical game form itself rather than the interpretation of individual games, the representation of particular historical content, or the uses of games outside of their current role in popular culture (although in doing so it aims to speak to each of these concerns). In a sense then, the book, although still making use of much of the excellent work done in historical game studies, draws most heavily in its approach from texts such as Robert Rosenstone's *History on Film/Film on History*, Hayden White's *Metahistory* and Alun Munslow's *Narrative and History*. Each of these texts similarly attempts to make broader claims about historical form by focusing on particular structures (and subcategories of variation). The approach offered here then aims to examine not only *what* is said in digital historical games but also *how* it is said, by searching for the formal structures that constrain and allow content, the stuff of history, to speak in different ways. And also aims to examine what these formal structures might offer audiences in terms of engaging with history.

As historians, we are generally rather good at interpreting and analysing content, after all this is a core part of our craft. We have perhaps though often been less attentive in our examinations of form. Instead, as Harlan (2007, 110) argues, there is a tendency to examine history produced in other forms with the same approach that we often take to academic history, focusing on accuracy and being concerned only with the analytic ends rather than formal means. In part, this relative inattention is because the relationship between form and content is easy to misalign. As Munslow notes, it seems to often be commonly assumed that "history presupposes the authority of content over form" (2010, 168). However, form always has a role in determining content, influencing what is selected, how this is arranged and ultimately what this therefore says. This is a concept of course eloquently encompassed in McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" (1964, 7), by which he meant that the characteristics of the medium have a

role in determining the content and how it is received. This also applies to history. As Rosenstone puts it, “Our sense of the past is shaped and limited by the possibilities and practices of the medium in which that past is conveyed, be it the printed page, the spoken word, the painting, the photograph, or the moving image” (2001, 59). The implications of this are that we must understand the form if we are to be able to properly approach the content. Historical forms are not in some way objective or innocent, even the form of written academic history has its own limitations, restrictions, concerns and pressures that it places on content. As such, it makes sense, as Ankersmit (1994, 162–81) has argued, to look beyond only trying to accrue more information about the past, to also consider the language that we use for speaking about that past. Similarly, if we wish to understand what digital historical games say about the past, then we must also understand the ways in which they say it (the language of history in/as games), and what they offer to audiences by doing so.

Content analysis is of course still useful and often important. However, as content cannot be entirely separated from the formal structures in which it is created (e.g. written, designed, coded, filmed) and received (e.g. read, viewed, played), if we wish to understand how history is constituted and experienced in games, we must also constantly attend to considerations of the game form (Chapman 2012). That is to say that we must look at how the formal structures and variations in these structures operate to produce meaning and the ways in which they allow players to engage with the past. Although such a method privileges transferable understandings of form over analysis of particular historical content, it still speaks to this content by seeking “to understand how the nature and the meanings produced are wholly dependent on the form of the text in both production and reception” (Chapman 2012, 44). However, this approach also means that although *Digital Games as History* attempts to establish an understanding of form in which analysis of content can be grounded, it does not generally seek to provide analysis of this content in itself (which is often better provided by historians with expertise in the period or theme which the game represents). The book is therefore mainly concerned with content in its relation to the functioning or pressures of the formal structures of games and/or its use to give these formal operations particular meaning (and under the broad remit that this content is in some way historical). As such, the historical worlds that particular digital historical games produce are not the focus here as much as the interplay between rules, agency and representation that sustains them.

As Jordano puts it, “Public history uses a wide variety of genres, which are different from those of the academic discipline – a fact that shapes the content ... If we can identify and reflect upon this generic range, the whole phenomenon, including the means by which publics develop their sense of the past, can be appreciated more fully” (2000, 153). This has two implications. First, that a formal approach to games must account for their variety, explaining the structures and characteristics that are a part of all historical

games and yet also mapping variations within these and their effect on the history produced. Second, Jordanova's argument implies that it is also useful to identify the differences between historical forms. Rosenstone writes of historical film, "Like written history, it utilizes traces of that past, but its rules of engagements with them are structured by the demands of the medium and the practices it has evolved" (2006, 161). Similarly, analysing the form of digital historical games must involve working to determine their particular 'rules of engagement'. Such an approach must therefore remain mindful of the ways in which games work in comparison to other forms, particularly their unique or unusual functions and characteristics. For this reason, *Digital Games as History* forwards an analytical framework designed specifically for the analysis of digital historical games.

The analytical framework presented herein therefore aims to provide concrete and practical formal concepts and categorisations particularly appropriate to the analysis of digital historical games and concentrates on explaining the elements that have a significant role in historical meaning-making in terms of both the developer-historian's production and the playful reception/construction of players. The framework is therefore based around five categories designed to represent the core formal structures of digital historical games: *simulation style and epistemology*; *time*; *space*; *narrative*; *affordances*. Under each of these structural categories are situated a number of proposed further sub-categories for considering the components of, and variations within, these formal structures. This approach explores the representational and historiographical implications of these formal structures and their variations, as well as the combined offers of historical practice that full 'game structures' (i.e. particular combinations of variation within these five categories) can make to players. Breaking down digital historical games into these distinct but overlapping formal structures in this way has two aims. First, to create an understanding of what role each formal structure and its possible variations play in creating historical representations and opportunities for player's to engage in historical practice. Second, to allow for both the framework and the conclusions drawn from its application to speak to, and be applied to, any digital historical game regardless of the specific combination of these structures that that game may use, even if these combinations are in some way new or unusual. With the same purpose in mind, many of the categories are designed to attempt to map out the boundaries of variation in formal structures, while still allowing a space between these boundaries for more unusual hybrids.

A move of this kind, towards focusing on the particularities of the game form, does not, however, mean that we have to relinquish all of our existing historical theory, which is often both transferable and important. Particularly given that often, as shall become apparent, certain formal structures and their variations are predisposed to taking particular epistemological or theoretical perspectives on the past. As such, the analytical framework contained herein weaves historical theory and analysis with game-focused

research, as well as a number of other influences (particularly Gibsonian ecological psychology). Many approaches can of course be taken to digital games and game studies has previously seen debates as to whether games can or should be understood as narratives (see, for example, Eskelinen 2004; Frasca 2003; Pearce 2005; Juul 2005). However, given that history is both narrative and a narrative practice, the idea that *historical* digital games are in some way working *as* and/or *in relation to* narrative is too useful a perspective to be excluded. The approach herein is therefore grounded in what Ryan calls a ‘functional ludo-narrativism’ (2006, 203) and is designed to account for both the narrative representation of history common to all historical forms and the aspects of action and agency that are unique to the game form, as well as for the interplays between these components. As Kapell and Elliott put it, “for narratologists the point is about the story while for ludologists the ‘play’s the thing’. In digital games that begin from within a historical narrative, however, the thing is the *play* within the *narrative*” (2013, 19).

It should be noted that the focus of the formal approach within this book is also more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*. This is not an argument for how to make games better history or more suitable for other areas such as education or heritage but a description of the ways in which digital historical games represent the past and what they offer by doing so. This said, the work here undoubtedly has implications for those wishing to produce or use historical games for other purposes, after all a broader understanding of the form has implications for its use in all contexts. However, this is not what this book concentrates on. Instead, *Digital Games as History* is interested in the formal limitations and possibilities of digital historical games, particularly in regard to the way they already exist and are experienced by players in popular culture – their everyday use without supplementation through ‘official’ channels. The following chapters therefore concentrate (although not exclusively) on the role and opportunities already offered by these games, rather than advocating or explaining their adaptation for use in formal educational or heritage settings. As such, whereas the analytical framework and conclusions about the form are still very much applicable to more atypical serious or educational games or virtual historical environments of other kinds, the focus here is on examining the form by looking at the broad variety of popular commercial digital historical games and the kinds of offers of historical practice that they already make to their players.

Privileging the consideration of form, as done herein, seeks to go beyond criticism of digital historical games on the basis of judgements of accuracy or of considering content without considering its relationship to form. We cannot simply expect digital historical games to always function in alignment with narratives constructed in other forms, because they operate differently and therefore represent the past and offer engagements with history according to their own rules of engagement. We must therefore look instead at *how* digital historical games represent the past in their own way

and *what* kind of offers of engagements with history they make to players by doing so. Hayden White proposes the term ‘historiophoty’ to describe the study of “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (1988, 1193) – i.e. the study of historical film. This can be compared to historiography, “which is the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse” (1988, 1193). In a sense then, this book is an attempt to think seriously and systematically about what we might term ‘historioludicity’ – the representation of history and our thought about it, again often in visual images (as well as text) but also through rules and opportunities for action and thus, *ludic* discourse.

Book Structure

As noted earlier, this book seeks to answer three questions in order to explore the nature and possibilities of digital games as a historical form. How can we approach digital historical games as scholars interested in them? How do they represent the past? What opportunities do digital historical games offer players in terms of actively engaging with history? Answers to these questions are sought, in turn, by the pursuit of three specific aims of equal importance, around which the book is organised: First, *to offer a framework for the analysis of historical digital games*. Second, in the deployment of this framework, *to describe the nature of historical representation in digital games* and third, *to describe digital games’ potential use as systems for ‘historying’*.

Although this will begin to be explained more fully in the next chapter, it is important to note even at this point the particular need for this third aim. Games differ from many other historical forms because, alongside being capable of sustaining historical representations, they also invite the audience to *actively* take part in history and can therefore offer players access to particular kinds of historical *practice* (that is to say opportunities for *doing* history). This is one of the most exciting facets of the form and an important focus of this book. In order to prevent confusion, we can separate history on the one hand as a representation, from history on the other hand as an active process or practice, by using Denning’s notion of ‘historying’. As he explains, “‘History’ – the past transformed into words or paint or dance or music or play – is our noun. ‘Historying’ is our verb-noun. Historying is the unclosed action of making histories. History, the noun, is closed, shaped, a product. Historying is process, never done, dialectical and dialogic” (Denning 2007, 102). By these definitions, digital games can offer both history and historying to their audiences. These two aspects of historical games inform, influence and entwine one another. It is also this capacity to offer opportunities for historying to players that leads me to add to the notion of the developer-historian that of the potential for *player-historians*. Although this might seem even more radical than the former term, again this will hopefully appear less so over the forthcoming chapters. However,

at this point it is enough to simply say that both history and historying are important to understanding the form of digital historical games and that this informs the structure of the book.

Part one of the book, 'Digital Games as History' (comprised of the current chapter and Chapter 2) introduces some basic arguments about digital historical games. Following on from the current introductory chapter (which has started to explore why we should study digital historical games and how we might go about doing so), Chapter 2 introduces concepts focused on the interactive nature of history in the digital historical game form, examining both the increase in agency for audiences this entails and some of the tensions that this can produce. Part two, comprised of Chapters 3 to 6, focuses on the nature of 'Digital Games as Historical Representations'. This is explored through the lens of the core formal structural categories and sub-categories of variation within them, and the affect that these have on the histories that games present. Chapter 3 therefore explores *simulation styles*, stylistic variations in the ludic aesthetics of historical description through which digital historical games represent the past and the *epistemologies* that these imply. Chapter 4 considers both of the interlinked structural categories of *time* and *space* in digital historical games, examining both the general implications of representing historical time and space in the digital game form, as well as the significance of the different temporal and spatial structures that these games use. Given that narrative is such an important issue to history (and thus history in games), the following two chapters are dedicated to this topic. Chapter 5 introduces a model designed to be suitable for the analysis and explanation of narrative in digital historical games, whereas Chapter 6 examines the implications that varying narrative structures have for the history represented in these games and the opportunities that they present to players.

The third section of the book, comprised of Chapters 7 to 9, draws on these previous conclusions to look at 'Digital Games as Systems for Historying' – some of the offers of structured access to types of historical practice that particular full 'game structures' (i.e. particular combinations of variations in the aforementioned core formal structures) can make to players. Chapter 7 advocates the use of the ecological approach (thus introducing the final core category of the analytical framework, *affordances*) and uses this to explain three of these offers of historical practice – heritage experiences, reenactment, and narrative historying – that digital historical games are able to make and also explores how they do so. Chapters 8 and 9 look respectively at these offers of reenactment and narrative historying in greater detail and situate these game-based practices in relation to existing epistemological and historiographical discourses surrounding these activities in other forms and arenas of cultural practice. Finally, part four (comprised of Chapter 10), examines the overall conclusions and broader implications that we can draw about 'Digital Games as a Historical Form,' and their role in popular culture, from these arguments about how we should approach

these games, how they represent the past and their potential use as systems for historying.

As this structure implies, the framework for analysing digital historical games is mainly presented in Chapters 3 to 7, in parts two and three of the book, with each chapter explaining one or more of the aforementioned five core formal structures (*simulation style and epistemology; time; space; narrative: affordances*). However, it should also be noted that the framework is also presented within, and informs, all areas of the book to some degree. For example, further concepts, such as the *(hi)story-play-space* (Chapter 2) and *actualised reenactment* (Chapter 8), should also be viewed as part of this approach to digital historical games.

Exploring the Realm of Digital Historical Games

Donnelly and Norton write in their book *Doing History*, “we should stop judging other historical practices by the standards of academic history, and instead acknowledge that each form of historical representation has its own methodology, its own forms, codes and conventions, and its own cultural value” (2011, 155). To do so allows us to seriously study forms such as digital games. However, this also points to the necessity for such studies if we are to understand what the multifaceted thing we call ‘history’ is in all its variety of possibilities and limitations and in all of the areas of culture in which it is received and practiced. As De Groot notes, we are in the relative infancy of mapping out an understanding of the uses of the past beyond the academy and their effects, partly because “Understanding the multivalent ways that popular cultural texts construct a historical consciousness – presenting a model *for* ‘history’ as much as a narrative *of* history – is a complex business” (2014, 603). Harlan argues that such a map, what he calls (without being exclusive) ‘The Territory of the Historian’, should seek to include the ‘realms’ of each form of historical representation and “should, first of all, identify these realms or provinces and describe the powers, the limitations and the responsibilities peculiar to each of them. Second, it should describe the codes and conventions that govern representation and evaluation in each realm” (2007, 122).

At its heart, this book is an attempt to add the realm of digital historical games to this map by seeking to describe precisely these possibilities, limitations, responsibilities, codes and conventions of the form. It is my hope that in doing so it makes the workings of one of the ways that many of us may already be utilising, thinking about, understanding and engaging with the past at least a little clearer. Digital historical games often relate to our older historical discourses and produce meaning in familiar ways. However, they also have their own language and ways of arguing, their own ludic aesthetics of historical description, their own way of working *ludically* to both produce historical representations and to allow us as players to engage with history. It is probably this interactive quality that springs to mind foremost

for many of us when we start thinking about digital games. As such, this must also be our first point of departure when exploring *historical* digital games and it is this that we now move on to begin to look at in Chapter 2.

Notes

1. Readers should, however, be aware of the limitations of such a term. In reality, a number of people are generally involved in the production of a particular game. However, as the plural sometimes makes it more awkward to differentiate if what is being referred to is all those that make historical games or alternatively all of those that make a *particular* game, I use the term as noted above in order to provide the most consistent general clarity.
2. For those interested, the group can currently be found on Facebook, although I plan for it to move beyond this platform in the near future.

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2 Interacting with Digital Games as History

To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world.

—Eco (1994, 87)

There are many facets to digital games. However, perhaps the feature most concentrated on is their interactivity. Like many concepts in the cross-disciplinary game studies field, interactivity is a much-debated term. This said, much of the work in game studies can trace its ancestry to Murray's early explanation, one that is certainly suitable to the examination of historical games. Digital games are "procedural", by which we mean the computer's "defining ability to execute a series of rules" (Murray 1997, 71). These "procedural environments are appealing to us not just because they exhibit rule-generated behaviour but because we can induce the behaviour" (Murray 1997, 74) and they are therefore "participatory". These two qualities are generally what is meant by interaction, i.e. digital games are interactive because they adapt *their* screen-based presentations according to *our* decisions. Naturally then, this dynamic is also extremely important to history in the game form. As such, this chapter will first examine interaction with historical games through the lenses of player agency and the *(hi)story-play-space*, and second through the tensions and concurrent practices that exist in relation to this. In both cases this is in an effort to understand how meaning is produced through interaction and thus, how games function as history.

Interacting with Games as History: Agency

Remaining conscious of the fact that players have agency must be at the centre of our understanding of historical games. Whereas again competing definitions of agency also exist, it is sufficient for our purposes to understand this as "the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player's intention" (Mateas 2004, 21). We can also use 'agency' as a term to refer to the opportunities for the player to take these actions, as structured by the game rules and hardware.

Games as Reading and Doing

Digital games invite us to engage in a variety of activities. Amongst others, these can include reading, watching, creating, and engaging in a number of different challenges of skill and perception. To some degree, these different aspects of games can be broadly divided. For example, Juul argues in his seminal book *Half-Real* (2005), that games can be understood as comprised of both *fiction* and *rules*. In accordance with this line of thinking, we can also roughly divide the variety of activities that a game invites players to partake in into two groups:

- The first of these are those that involve the consumption of representations. For our purposes we can call these activities, in the broadest sense, *reading*. These *reading* activities in games are of course familiar to us because of their similarities to activities involving other more conventional forms of history, such as books, novels, documentaries, films and even museum exhibitions.
- The second group of activities in games are those that involve interacting with a game's rules. Though of course arguments can be made for the active nature of reading activities too, generally when we talk of *interactivity* we seek to imply a greater level of active involvement on the part of a user or audience. As such, we can, following Galloway (2006, 105), refer to this interaction with game rules as *doing*.

Although I am aware of the shortcomings of such a dichotomy, it is useful here because it emphasises digital games' relation to the consumption of representations *and* the more active processes of playing. Both of these kinds of activities are important to the functioning of games as history. The *doing* of games can be purely ludic, that is to say for our purposes that players can play a game paying little attention to the representation it produces.¹ However, this *doing* still also generally has the possibility of affecting the representation in some way. An obvious example of this is that when a player wins a game they also often in doing so (and however inadvertently) create a romance (adventure) story for their player-character. The character, like the player, overcomes some kind of adversity to emerge triumphant. By comparison, if a player loses the game they generally create a story of tragedy for this character, in which the character suffers some kind of downfall.

Many scholars have focused on this feature of games in their work. Aarseth (1997) famously argues that games, alongside some other media, can be understood as 'cybertext'. These texts are those that must be actively produced by their audience, a role that Aarseth termed "ergodic" and defined as the "non-trivial effort [that] is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997, 1). This, he argues, means that these cybertexts therefore integrate their reader more than traditional texts. It is easy to see then that Aarseth's ideas therefore relate to both *doing* and *reading*.

Ergodic traversal then refers to activities such as the “physical, cognitive process of producing the digital game, rather than the reflexive process of negotiating a meaning” (Apperley 2010, 11) that we would associate with more traditional forms such as books. These ergodic activities are *configurative*, i.e. they decide *some* aspects of the representation that are produced. Simply, in games this means that the representation is always partly decided by the playful *doing* of players, as well as the designing activities of developers.

This also means that in games the audience’s own playful *doing* can affect their own *reading*, because their gameplay can affect what occurs within and what is present within, the game representation that they might read. For example, if we play a game such as *Assassin’s Creed*, whereby we have a lot of spatial agency in an open-world and a modest amount of narrative agency, we may decide not to visit a location or choose to avoid particular missions. By making choices in our gameplay we therefore configure a narrative that excludes these particular game spaces or events in favour of others.

It is useful to separate between *reading* and *doing* when looking at historical games. This helps us to divide the activities conventionally associated with older historical forms, such as books and film, from those that the game form adds, and which are often more unusual or unique. Most importantly, this also allows us to focus on the notion that games can be both historical representations for *reading* and systems for *doing* history (historying), the core argument of this book. However, many theorists have suggested that gameplay should be viewed as a combination of, and a shifting between, the representational and ludic aspects. For example, Carr argues that whereas it is possible to separate between these aspects of games, “the emergence of the game, through play, involves a weaving together of these facets” (2007, 225). Similarly, Manovich argues that new media frequently involves regular switching between activities. “The oscillation between illusionary segments and interactive segments forces the user to switch between different mental sets – different kinds of cognitive activity” (Manovich 2001, 210). So too, as Apperley succinctly explains, Bogost (2006), “argues that digital game players’ [*sic*] migrate easily between the two systems of interactivity – the ergodic traversal and the orthodox negotiation of audience interactivity – to engage both their configurative and critical faculties in the production of meaning” (2010a, 14). It is this that is at the heart of what makes games such an interesting form of history. Whilst it is difficult to make detailed claims about player activities without empirical data, we can at least say that it is possible to interact with games as both representations and as rules, they invite both *reading* and *doing*, and that each of these activities has the potential to affect the other. Furthermore, it is clear that if *games* can function as *history* then this is necessarily related to both of these aspects. And if these activities can affect one another, then they must also affect the history that is produced through play.

The (Hi)Story-Play-Space

This combination of activities also means that games have a rather unusual story-telling structure in comparison to most other historical media. Because games allow *doing* as well as *reading*, they have an inherent narrative multiplicity. Most decisions or challenges that a game faces us with will entail at least two possible gameplay outcomes. In a game with a representational aspect, it is likely that these gameplay outcomes will also represent different narrative events that are entered (or not entered) into the narrative sequence depending on our gameplay. So, in WWII FPS *Call of Duty 2*, for example, we might run our player-character into a room only to be confronted with enemies. In this case we are faced with different options. We might duck behind cover and wait for other soldiers, our NPC (non-player character) allies, to deal with the enemy soldiers. On the other hand we might decide to quickly fire our weapon, attempting to kill the enemies and deal with the immediate threat. In each case our gameplay decisions create a different narrative sequence. One sequence could be interpreted as a well-trained soldier who enters a room and relies on his and his comrades' training to get him out of a sticky situation. Another sequence could be seen as a narrative sequence about a soldier who, against the odds, tries and succeeds in defeating his enemies. Yet another sequence could see a soldier foolishly trying to defeat his enemies and yet failing and being killed. Regular gamers encounter these decisions and outcomes so often that they are probably unlikely to always pay attention to the fact that what they produce is also a fictional narrative sequence. These sequences are also often largely insignificant. Furthermore, often what appears to be a single moment of gameplay is made up of many small decisions and reactions of this kind. Nonetheless, what is important to note is that *playful doing also produces narrative*. In a single game there are generally thousands of such decisions and in each case the game must be ready to respond with different gameplay and representational outcomes, of varying relative value and consequence. So what does it mean for history to be represented in this way?

In historical narrative terms, this narrative dynamic, of *doing* affecting representation, amounts to the player being given *access to configurative-production within the story space*. This somewhat complex phrase perhaps requires unpacking. First, a story space is something found in any history. It is "the world of the once real past ... as imagined (i.e., fictively constructed) by the historian and which the history consumer is invited to visit through the history" (Munslow 2007b, 18). In most histories, historians are the only ones who *produce* within this story space, with audiences normally restricted to *receiving*. Another way to say this, using the terminology we have been using, is to say that the common idea of history is that it involves historians *doing* and audiences *reading*. There are of course various theories as to how active this audience reception should be seen as, but it is generally agreed that there is at least some kind of difference between *production (doing)* and *reception (reading)*. Accordingly, we can broadly say that in most historical forms,

such as books, novels, films and television programmes, the historian is the only one who has a *productive* role in the story space. However, in historical games, players also have access to *production* in the story space because players also have access to *doing* and as already discussed, this *doing* can affect the narratives that are created.

Digital games, in a way quite unlike conventional historical forms, open up the story space for shared authorship. That is to say that the historical narrative produced in these games is always produced by the actions of both the developer-historian *and* the player. The former determines the nature and components of the story space and the latter determines which narratives are eventually told within it, by configuring them within the limitations established by these components. Through play, historical narratives can be simultaneously emergently produced *and* received by players within a more open digital manifestation of the historian's traditional story space, which therefore becomes something I believe to be more fittingly termed as a *(hi)story-play-space*.² Whenever we play a historical game we are simultaneously creating a historical narrative. Importantly, this doesn't mean that we necessarily *read* this historical narrative (and whether individual players do or do not is an empirical question). Nonetheless, playing historical games always involves the production of historical narrative by players in some way.

Consequently, playing in these *(hi)story-play-spaces* means occupying a larger role in the process of historical narration, in comparison to most other forms of history. The player is both narrator and audience. In historical games, *doing* also means *writing*. This significant increase in agency means the audience potentially having access to many narrative structures and decisions, for example, emplotment; duration; frequency; order; the introduction of tropes; the assignation of primacy to particular narrative outcomes (goals) or pieces of evidence; ethical and ideological choices; agent intentionality and characterisation; focalisation and a whole wealth of other narrative elements. Players, whether through choice or through simply what their gameplay skill allows, configure the story space and produce particular narratives. How much influence the player's *configurative-production* has in the *(hi)story-play-space* is dependent on the structures of the particular game (and this is discussed in greater detail throughout), but this occurs in *all* historical videogames to a greater or lesser extent. Importantly, such a process can therefore mean the production of vastly divergent historical narratives within the same story space.

Subjectivity and Resonance

This increase in agency means that exactly what historical narrative will be produced is uncertain until play takes place and variations therefore occur between different players and different instances of play. Indeed, one of the defining principles of play is that it is "*uncertain*: the course of which cannot

be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative" (Cailliois 2001, 9). In the *historical* game it therefore makes sense that this uncertainty and latitude for innovation would extend into historical narrative. This potential for variation in *doing* is also of course matched by variations in *reading*. It is normal for different perceptions, interpretations and understandings to be displayed by different people when faced with the same representation. This double subjectivity (in both *reading* and *doing*) means that, as Carr reminds us in her excellent meta-analysis of debates surrounding the *Civilization* series, we must remain particularly focused on the fact that "play is expressive, and that the realization of the game's myriad offers during play involves selectivity on the part of the user. The player's own (complex and culturally situated) subjectivity is a variable within the system through which the meaning of a game is produced" (2007, 232).

Apperley nuances this consideration of meaning as created by *reading* and *doing* players, by using the concept of *resonance*. "The notion of resonance describes the outcomes of players' configurations that have a particular bearing on a local situation, or context" (Apperley 2010, 134). This local context can literally be the location of play, but this also refers to the cultural and social context in which play takes place, which is at least partly dependent on the player and their perceptions, understandings, beliefs and experiences. The game, by comparison to the *local* context in which it is played, is *global* in the sense that it is a (generally) far-reaching mass-produced and replicable digital product.³ So, *resonance* is the relation of the representation, produced by the *global* game and the player's play, to the *local* context in which this play occurs. In a sense this is not a new idea to literary and historical theory. Scholars such as Ricoeur have long claimed that meaning is generated through some sort of 'hermeneutical arc', that is to say meaning emerges in the meeting of the structures of the text (that stand independent of the reader) with the reader's own life experiences (1981, 164). Where games differ is that they are also concerned with action and the structures of the text itself are manipulated by this action.

Accordingly, because the player's *doing* configures the representation and their *reading* determines the perceived relation of this representation to the local context, resonance relies on both types of activity. *Resonance* describes the sensation of interpreting the representation of the game as relating to something other than only the game's rules, as referring to something not entirely contained within the game itself and of the everyday world in which we live. In this way, gameplay can establish resonance between "the virtual (and global) world of the digital game and the real (and localized) culture of use" (Apperley 2010, 22). Apperley continues, "The resonance may be established through the veracity of the games' simulation, or by way of a congruence of the experience portrayed in the game, and the lived experience of the player" (2010, 22). Given the aforementioned subjectivity of players, this veracity and congruency can be on the basis of any number of

broad cultural themes (for example, love, power, death), identities (such as, nationality, ethnicity, gender) or any other references to the ‘real world’ as the player sees it. In historical games, however, it seems that one of the criteria for establishing ‘veracity’ or ‘congruency’ might be the evaluation of the game representation’s alignment with evidence or other historical narratives that the player is aware of.

Historical Resonance

Accordingly, in historical videogames *resonance* between the game and the local context might be established on the basis of the player’s specifically *historical* understanding, gleaned from their lived cultural experience, including their engagement with historiography in different forms (e.g. books, documentaries, films). Thus, what I term *historical resonance*, is the establishment of a link between a game’s historical representation and the larger historical discourse, as the player understands it. *Historical resonance* can be as simple as knowledge of the setting as historical (relating to the past). However, as suggested by the practices of online communities (Apperley 2007), some players also bring more complex understandings to these games. Most important to this dynamic is that “Some aspect of the game must be sufficiently ‘real’ to resonate in everyday life” (Apperley 2010, 22). So, *historical resonance* is the recognition of the game as in some way sufficiently real (referential) in its relation to the past as it is understood by the player, and therefore relating to their local context and constituting a shared history (with the global, as represented by the game).

In a seeming effort to appeal to audiences, mainstream games often deal in well-known histories (e.g. D-Day), probably in order to produce this *historical resonance* with the local contexts of their players. And this may be more likely to work. Wertsch (1998, 73–108), using studies of high school and university students, argues that historical narrative serves as a cultural tool that aids our comprehension and retention of information about the past. Too little narrative understanding in the first place and we will struggle to engage with new information about the past. Thus, by presenting historical representations related to histories that many players are likely to have some kind of narrative understanding of, these games may find it easier to establish and maintain *historical resonance*. Indeed, some histories resonate so readily that they are often used to give audiences an idea of the large-scale mythology of fantasy worlds too (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007, 203).

It must also be noted that framing something as history in certain ways within popular culture can carry a particular authority and invoke notions of authenticity (Chapman and Linderth 2015; Chapman 2014a). This might also make the establishment of a sense of the ‘sufficiently real’, which *resonance* relies upon, easier. Furthermore, the sheer amount of historical referents (e.g. historical processes, artefacts, facts, architecture, characters) in the typical historical game also increases the likelihood that

players will find at least some component of the game historically resonant. As explored in the next chapter, this authority and invocation of ‘reality’ has mixed qualities.

Interacting with Games as History: Tensions

As noted, the establishment of resonance, although probably a complex process, certainly relies on both the player’s *reading* and their *doing* (their *configurative-production* in the *(hi)story-play-space*). Despite these obvious increases in audience agency, and the more hyperbolic claims often made, digital games are not completely open narrative devices. There are generally fairly strict controls and limitations on what players can do. Nor, however, is the reverse true and using ideas such as *resonance* should not fool us into thinking that reception is a one-way process (particularly in games), with players as cultural dupes, simply receiving embedded messages. Instead we should understand meaning in games as emerging through tensions between different aspects – representation and play, rules and agency, local and global, player and developer. Although the subjective nature of interacting with games means it is difficult to provide an exhaustive account, it is important to briefly explore some common tensions that are particularly important to historical games. For the sake of convenience these are grouped into three categories: Narrative Tensions; Control, Agency and Configurative Resonance; History vs. Game.

Narrative Tensions

(Hi)story-play-spaces always have limits. These limits, which prevent players doing whatever they like, are what make the player’s role one of *configurative-production*. Players’ production is generally *configurative* because it normally involves the arrangement of existing elements rather than the free introduction of anything. Players decide *some* aspects of the produced representation but never all. As noted, in any form the historian forms a story space, “the authored model of what, how, when, why and to whom things happened in the past, which the reader/consumer enters into when they read, view or ‘experience’ the past, constituted as history” (Munslow 2007b, 6). Though we always have interpretative agency when experiencing these story spaces, it is also difficult to deny that the historian’s process of forming the story space also eliminates some possible contents and meanings from the text.⁴ The construction of the *(hi)story-play-space* by the developer-historian works similarly, except that it also involves the elimination of other possible *actions* from the text and the meanings and contents these actions might introduce. The varying nature of *(hi)story-play-space* narrative structures is explored in detail in Chapters 5 and 6, and these are significant to the different opportunities offered by different historical games. Nonetheless, all *(hi)story-play-spaces* have limits and thus representation always emerges

from the tension between what the player is allowed to do and what they choose to do (or at least attempt).

Players can often choose not to include particular content in the historical narrative that they create through play, but they cannot remove the *possibility* of its inclusion, its existence in the *(hi)story-play-space*.⁵ Nor can they enter new content (e.g. historical evidence or other elements) whenever they wish. Of course even choosing *not* to include a particular historical element may in fact still make it significant in the produced historical narrative. For example, a player choosing not to research horseback riding in *Sid Meier's Civilization* could make the technology very significant to the produced historical narrative, if they are bested by another civilisation because that civilisation *does* choose this. In all history story spaces the contents are at least partially *storied*, that is to say that they are somewhat sequenced (Munslow 2007b, 31), and this is also true of *(hi)story-play-spaces*. For instance, because games always contain rules, causality is also always somewhat predetermined. Even in historical strategy games such as *Civilization*, which typically feature vast arrays of multi-combinable historical elements, the developers have decided which of these can be interplayed, in what order and what the consequences of these combinations are. In addition to these limitations, players cannot generally extend the possible spatial or temporal scope of the *(hi)story-play-space* either, although they might be able to end the game earlier than these temporal limits or choose not to visit a particular area during their playthrough.

'Modding'

However, some players flout these restrictions by 'modding' (modifying the game software itself), moving beyond the typical player's role and even closer to the developer-historian's. Mods for historical games differ, but they often add historical agents and factions, refine unit appearances, add new historical environments, time-frames/periods and processes, or make other changes to gameplay (such as making enemy artificial intelligence more effective). Modders change the possible configurations of the game by altering the *(hi)story-play-space* itself, creating new contents, boundaries and narrative restrictions/possibilities and engaging in the kind of decisions that, even in the inclusive realm of the historical games, are normally under the sole control of the developer-historian. Alongside alterations for game-play's sake, mods for historical games generally seem to be motivated by two concerns. First, the desire to correct perceived inaccuracies or insufficient nuance in the game's historical representation. In this case, although the game has a *historical resonance* for the modder, there are still elements within this broader trend that they find dissonant and worthy of correction. For instance, on the website *Mod Database*, the notes for *Divide et Impera* (a popular *Rome: Total War II* mod) list that the mod adds "Realistic army sizes in scale representing the army numbers of the period" and also "Formations behavior simulating the way they worked in real life".

Second, mods often seem to be motivated by dissatisfaction with the content/story decisions of developer-historians, i.e. the modder feels that something important to the history has been left out. For example, as one modder of *Forgotten Hope 2* (a mod that converts *Battlefield 2* – a game set in the 21st century – to a WWII setting) puts it, “by adhering to historical accuracy we can educate others (and ourselves!) about the less popular aspects of World War 2” (Crabtree 2013, 204). These mods generally add units and factions, but they can also add other aspects, such as events, technologies, large-scale historical systems (e.g. economics), or any other aspect of history that the modders consider important. For example, modders of historical racing game *Grand Prix Legends* have been adding further seasons (the original game dealt only with the 1967 season), cars and tracks to the game since its release in 1998 (and continue to do so). In some cases modders may feel that the games industry has ignored important histories on a larger scale and thus produce mods to rectify this, such as designing mods depicting the Korean or Vietnam wars or the various conflicts in Finland during WWII (Crabtree 2013). As this indicates, modding is therefore often very much tied to concerns surrounding collective memory and this seems to be a motivating factor for some modders. For example, the modder of *Forgotten Hope 2* states that the mod was important because by “keeping the memory of WWII alive we can prevent history from repeating itself” (Crabtree 2013, 204).

Mods are often based on impressive amounts of detailed historical knowledge and there is often also a substantial weight of historical meta-discourse focused on them in the forums of player communities. Mods seem to be an important part of the player cultures that surround historical games and a good example of the game form’s enfranchisement of popular audiences into historical practice. These player cultures are much more productively folkish (in the sense of their appropriation of, and ground-up involvement in, history) than the authoritarian technologies and power structures that surround printed-history easily allow for. Furthermore, the construction and popularity of these mods indicate that historical games’ relation to wider historiography is often considered significant enough to revise, evidence of both enthusiastic and historically engaged audiences, and games’ engagement with the larger historical discourse. Modding and its associated practices move the player-audience even closer to the traditional historian-producer’s role. Modders breach the restrictions of the *(hi)story-play-space*, filling it with other evidence, content, causal links and narrative they consider significant, drawn from the larger cultural mass of history. Given this, and the concern with accuracy, content and story, modders can therefore be seen as a new wave of popular history revisionists, albeit working in a digital-ludic form (Chapman 2013a, 317). However, for most players, configuration within the boundaries of a structurally finite *(hi)story-play-space* is their typical engagement with historical games.

Narrative and Challenge

In a *(hi)story-play-space*, a player's narrative agency is often not only determined by what is *possible* but also by what they are *capable* of doing. Challenge and skill levels differ between games and players respectively. As such, often we may be forced into particular narrative outcomes because the challenge of achieving another is too great for our skill. Returning to the *Call of Duty 2* example, running our player-character into a room of enemies may actually offer us neither the option of hiding or shooting, only the death of our player-character. This might be due to lack of skill or simply because it is a tactical impossibility. The point is that we do not always have choice over representation in historical games, because they are also systems of challenge. This tension is important because it is one of the expressive tools of developer-historians, allowing them to offer agency while still making the production of some narrative outcomes more likely. Historical games reward narrative outcomes they wish to promote and punish actions that conflict with this interpretation. By establishing rules and win conditions (with concurrent narrative outcomes), developer-historian's preferred meanings can still be strongly produced, despite the multiplicity of game narratives and player agency. Accordingly, although there are things that are not possible to do in *(hi)story-play-spaces* because the narrative structure does not include them, there are also others which we are simply *encouraged* not to do by difficult challenges.⁶

Some players, such as those that set themselves or others historical game-play goals (Apperley 2007), privilege the representational aspect of play and thus may make decisions focused on this (see *configurative resonance* below). Furthermore, the difficulty of challenges can change significantly between gameplay moments and this, as well as the fact that players are likely to become better at games they play regularly, means that a player's ability to negotiate a game's challenges probably vary over time. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that challenge, and the threat of disrupting the gameplay experience that failure generally implies, means that historical game players probably most often make decisions on the concerns of *strategy* rather than *representation*. Choosing on the basis of strategic pressure does not stop narrative being produced in these moments (or stop us from reflecting on this narrative after play). However, this pressure does mean that certain kinds of narrative are more likely to be produced, although these narratives do vary between games. For example, strategically sensible play in *Civilization* is likely to result in the production of a counterfactual narrative, dissonant in at least some way from the (implied) player's local understanding of what actually happened. By contrast, confronting the challenges of *Call of Duty* in the encouraged way tends to produce a narrative resonant with the (implied) player's sense of WWII as constituted of heroic acts. This said, the separation between concentrating on good strategy or the historical representation is not necessarily absolute and players can sometimes, for example, use the representation for clues about the ludic aspect (Juul 2005, 176).

It is even sometimes possible to turn to other forms of history for help with the challenges of a game (see for example Taylor 2003, para. 9).⁷ Nonetheless, challenge and the threat of failure is very important in historical games, because it makes certain narratives more likely to occur and shows us the underlying logics of the game's historical claims that are irrefutable through game actions, giving clarity to the developer-historian's arguments and the limits of the system. Challenge is therefore important because it is at the core of developer-historian expression in historical games.

Control/Agency and Configurative Resonance

It seems then that meaning is often generated in the tension between player agency and the controlling narrative structures/challenges of games. These tensions have also generated significant debates within game studies. For example, Galloway (2006, 85–106) points to this disciplinary aspect to argue that games should not be critiqued on the basis of their ideological representations but rather their status as allegories for the 'societies of control' (Deleuze 1992) in which we live. As Apperley explains it, Galloway's informatics critique relies on the notion that,

choices, movements, actions and configurations have little meaning outside of the context of individual incidents of game-play; because they are permitted, allowed, and enabled through code ... The game is a singularity, that may merely be unfolded in multiple ways designed in order to offer choice and interactivity, but because each choice is built into the game, it already exists as inert code that the player merely enacts. (2010a, 133–34)

This perspective obviously creates problems for historical games. Galloway uses *Civilization* as his example, arguing that it cannot be history because of this control and the reductionist take on the past that the algorithms that support this control require. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Chapman 2013a), this is part of history as a representational practice in *any* form. Content/story decisions and common metonymic practices (e.g. synecdoche) naturally reduce. The narrative process, not unlike algorithm, organises and simplifies the complexity of something else (the past) in an effort to make it understandable and of course to exert control over meaning. These criticisms do not, therefore, stop games being history.

This informatics critique is also problematic because it means that "the analysis of play remains deliberately in an entirely self-contained domain governed by code" (Apperley 2010, 134), i.e. the overt focus on the game excludes the everyday practices of players. Other debates have sprung from similar concerns. Notably, Sicart (2011) argues against the viewing of games as procedural objects (a perspective most closely associated with Bogost 2007) because he believes this overemphasises the idea that meaning is

contained in the game simply waiting to be unfolded and that this overlooks the role of the player and the varying nature of play. Apperley (2010) offers a middle path by pointing to the creative margin between control and agency in which players adapt, make choices and express themselves. “This space is established through the rules of the game, and the coded limits of the gamespace, but within these established boundaries it has no other limitations” (Apperley 2010, 144). Apperley explains this margin as ‘counterplay’ – play running counter to control. Counterplay implies the importance of ideas such as *resonance* and that understanding digital games can require moving beyond hermeneutic approaches that conceive of games as isolated and discrete artefacts, to instead also consider the role of local, everyday life in digital gameplay (Apperley 2010). Though counterplay emphasises the variation between players and localities, Apperley outlines some common counterplay practices, moments where players not only play the game how it is meant to be played, according to the rules, but where the game itself is being played with. This includes exploits (players exploiting bugs or flaws), modding and perhaps most importantly for historical games, *configurative resonance/dissonance*.

Configurative Resonance/Dissonance

“Configurative resonance, or dissonance, involves the player deliberately configuring, and/or performing actions in the game – out of all the possible potential configurations and performances – in order to create specific resonances” (Apperley 2010, 135). An example of this can be found in my recent playthrough of open-world game *Sleeping Dogs*. In a particular moment in this game, I found myself driving a considerable distance in order to replace the bloodstained and battered car I was driving, before attending the wedding of another character. I did this despite knowing this offered no ludic advantage and that NPCs (non-player characters) wouldn’t notice my damaged car. This is an example of *configurative resonance*. I actively produced this particular configuration in order to maintain a particular diegetic resonance that arriving in that car would have disrupted for me. Similarly, when playing FPS I generally make an effort not to shoot allies, even if the ‘friendly fire’ setting means it cannot do them harm and it therefore has no ludic significance. I do this simply because that action generally doesn’t make diegetic sense for my character and so would disrupt the resonance for me.⁸ *Configurative resonance* can also be motivated by concerns beyond only the diegetic. For example, Apperley describes a situation he witnessed in which a Venezuelan player would not give his player-character a red beret (a symbol of the Chávistas – supporters of Chávez) because he didn’t want trouble from other customers in the internet café (2010a, 135–136). In this case the player configured the game in order to avoid a particular resonance with the local environment.

Configurative resonance is an extremely important concept to historical games. First, it shows us that players can use games as tools in order to produce particular historical representations. Second, it allows us to see that not only does *doing* affect *reading* in games (because it determines the representation), but that *reading* can also affect this *doing*. History can be something that motivates *configurative resonance*. Players might try to make the representation of the game line-up with their historical interests, or try to create particular historical resonances. Similarly, players may try to use *configurative resonance* to reconcile perceived dissonances between a game's representation and their local (personal) historical understanding. The opposite process to this, *configurative dissonance*, also has relevance to historical games. This is particularly the case in games like *Civilization* or *Making History*, whereby some of the potential gratification lies in the opportunities for transgression through creating counterfactual historical narratives (see Chapter 9 for more on counterfactual historying). In these games, players often purposely create a *dissonance* between their understanding of what *did* happen (the historical 'record') and the game's representation, by using it to create a representation of what *did not* happen.

Importantly, players indulging *configurative resonance* or *dissonance* may or may not do so in tension with the game's inherent gameplay objectives. This always depends on both the particular game's structure and the player's particular desired resonance/dissonance. However, as we shall see, games such as those in the *Civilization*, *Total War*, or *Making History* series, allow room for players to configure these kinds of resonances in their relatively open narrative/rule structures. Sometimes trying to configure a particular historical resonance can lead us to make tactically sound decisions and help us to achieve the game's objectives. This may be particularly the case if the desired resonance is based on similar historiographical sources to those that factored into the developer's creation of the game's rules/objectives. For instance, Atkins argues that *Civilization* rewards players for basic historical knowledge, making it "possible to play the game intuitively and with little monitoring of the plusses and minuses that effect data" (2005, 20).

However, *configurative resonance* can also involve making decisions to achieve extra-telic goals (i.e. goals drawn from outside the game) that are not in alignment with, or even in conflict with, the game's intrinsic (auto-telic) goals. Sometimes these extra-telic goals may be drawn from history and thus involve efforts to produce particular *historical resonances*. For example, Apperley notes that players of *Europa Universalis II* sometimes set each other historical challenges, such as only colonising countries that were actually colonised by their chosen nation (Apperley 2007, 4). Alternatively, sometimes players set each other counterfactual challenges, such as "retaining control of Zanzibar if playing as Oman" (Apperley 2007, 4) (in reality the colony was lost to the British Empire). Nonetheless, the joy of such challenges is probably at least partly situated in their relationship to accepted historical narratives. We can also indulge in *configurative resonance* in

simpler game-play moments. For instance, making decisions by roleplaying as a historical player-character. Motivations for *configurative resonance* are highly variable, being dependent on different game structures, themes and the resonance these have with the local understandings of different players. However, we can at least suggest some of the ways in which players might configure historical games' representations in order to produce/maintain particular historical resonances/dissonances.

Possible Configurative Responses to Historical Resonance

Basic Historical Resonance*

Game/Global ----- Player/local

* Recognition by player of game as 'sufficiently real' and in some way relating to a local context (i.e. a shared history).

If this basic *historical resonance* is established, then these are some of the ways in which it might motivate configuration:

- 1 If the player is satisfied with the resonant relationship they can seek to accentuate/maintain it (often, depending on game-structure, by simply aligning with ludic pressures that encourage the reproduction of this resonant representation).
- 2 OR players can purposely create dissonance between their locally situated understanding and the global (the game's representation), ensuring the representation diverges from history, as they understand it. When done by resisting the game's pressure to recreate the accepted history, this can be understood as *active counter-history*.
- 3 If the player finds elements of the game's historical representation potentially dissonant, they can seek to reconcile these elements with their local perception of the history (e.g. by making gameplay choices that exclude them from the narrative). This may mean relinquishing the games inherent (autotelic) goals in favour of their own (extra-telic) goals, or even creating mods (digital-ludic revisionism).
- 4 OR players can try to maintain this dissonance between the local and the global. When the player is cued to do so by a game with an inherently dissonant ludic structure that encourages divergence from commonly known history by frequently structuring this as the most efficient strategy (such as in *Civilization*), this can be understood as *passive counter-history*.
- 5 OR they can simply explore and question these perceived limitations through particular testing configurations (i.e. testing the nature and boundaries of the representation).

These options are some configurative responses that players might make to a game if cued by historical resonance, doubtless there are more. However,

some of these responses are only likely if the player configures with the representational aspect (history) somewhat in mind. Yet, the majority of players, in the majority of game-play moments, probably primarily attend to the ludic aspect (i.e. strategy). Accordingly, empirical research on the frequency of these player practices is needed. However, clearly these are still *possibilities* offered by historical games and some of these practices, for example, modding and goal setting, do certainly occur (Apperley 2007, 2013; Crabtree 2013). Players' engagements with games can also span long periods across multiple sessions and play is an adaptive process. As such, it is possible for players to have multiple concerns and play in many different ways between, or during, play sessions, changing between deciding on the grounds of *historical resonance* in one moment and then strategy in the next. It also seems logical that in moments where the gameplay choice is insignificant in terms of its ludic consequences, or where we select between multiple elements of equal ludic value, that decisions are more likely to be motivated by the desire to produce resonant representations (*configurative resonance*). For instance, selecting clothes for our player-characters. When these clothes are a purely aesthetic choice we will probably just choose clothes that resonate with us, or in a historical game perhaps those we consider to be most accurate/authentic. Given this, *configurative resonance* also seems more likely to occur when we do not yet know the ludic significance of game elements or choices. As Carr notes of uninformed play of *Civilization*, "In such cases, the assessment of a variable might be informed by personal, extra-gamic connotations or associations" (2007, 228). Perhaps then, novice players are more likely to engage in *configurative resonance* than expert players who are generally more aware of the gameplay value of their decisions.

Configurative resonance is not necessary for us to benefit from a historical game. Players can still experience a game's arguments through only following its directions for strategic play. In this case only basic *historical resonance* is required (the understanding of the game as relating to history). However, more complex historical play does seem to rely on *historical resonance* motivating some gameplay actions. In these moments, through play, the global historical game becomes negotiated by the local context. This is a somewhat unsurprising dynamic given that we see this in other forms of representational play too. As Anchor notes, "the plaything – the doll that becomes a child, the broom that becomes a horse, the finger that becomes a pistol – forms the link between the pure subjectivity of the player and the concrete world that surrounds him" (1978, 92).

As noted, *configurative resonance* shows that sometimes when we interact with historical games as *history*, we can use our *reading* to influence our *doing*. Of course we always do this in the sense that we seek information from the game in order to meet its challenges. However, what *configurative resonance* emphasises is that it is possible to do this for other concerns, such as trying to produce historical representations we find desirable. Furthermore,

the possibility of *configurative resonance* refutes critiques about control such as Galloway's. As Apperley notes, "The fact that the inputs and outputs are all contained in the games' algorithm is of limited relevance if the subsequent production is able to make a meaningful connection, or disjunction, with a players' own experience of everyday life" (2010a, 145).

History vs. Game

Alongside tensions between narrative/gameplay structure and player skills and desires, historical games are also characterised by tensions between history as content/practice on the one hand and games as representations/entertainment on the other. These tensions are partially culturally constructed by perceptions of what 'games' and 'history' are/should be and partially inherent to the formal tensions of games. As indicated in Chapter 1, discussions about the tensions between popular culture and 'official' history are hardly new (see, for example, Lowenthal 1998 and De Groot 2009 for more on this). Similarly, the relationship between history and specific popular forms, such as film and television, are large, and often contentious, areas of research (see Landy 2001; Rosenstone 2006; Sobchak 1996). As such, there is little point in here simply rehashing general debates about the apparent disharmony between entertainment products and history as a serious practice. However, other aspects of these tensions are more unique to the game form and thus are important to explore.

Linear History vs. Open Games

The most obvious of these clashes between form and content is found in the tension between the common perception of history as comprised of linear retellings and the open multiplicity of the narratives often found in games. This partly springs from the notion that history is something that can only be done properly in book form, whereas, as we have seen, scholars such as De Groot (2009), Munslow (2007b), White (1999) and Rosenstone (2006) argue that history extends far beyond the confines of only one form. Similarly, many of these scholars, as well as many other scholars influenced in some way by the linguistic turn or other postmodernist ideas, also point to the idea that it is often desirable for historical narrative to forgo authoritative linearity in favour of more complex and even contradictory narrative structures. Nonetheless, it is perhaps not too much to say that the synonymy of history with the linear retellings associated with the book remains dominant. Indeed this assumption somewhat underpins Galloway's critique, which is based on a comparison between games and the standards and practices of the book form and lacks recognition of the flaws that these (and all) historical forms share (Chapman 2013a).

These potential critiques of games as history and the appropriation of history in popular culture, revolve around the issue of whom history is for and

who has the right to *do* it, i.e. to represent the past according to their own means and concerns. Games exacerbate these issues by handing history over to unconventional historians (game developers), who in turn share this authorship with a popular audience, allowing them to *do* history. This, it is argued herein, is the precise value of the form, but it is easy to see how this dynamic plays to existing debates. Of course historical games do sometimes present problematic representations, no doubt in part because they are entertainment products. These range from simple inaccuracies to widespread exclusionary historical representations (particularly in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity). However, these concerns are hardly exclusive to the game form and sadly even professional historiography is often far too hegemonic. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how concerns about anachronism and counterfactualism might have more specific validity. In games it is difficult to know if what players choose to do will be what historians think the agents of the past did and events in historical games may happen differently, at different times, or even not at all, in comparison to the 'official' history, depending on the player's actions. However, as discussed in Chapter 9, counterfactualism, anachronism and the loss of the historian's authority, do not necessarily indicate a lack of useful *discourse*. Furthermore, these issues also depend on the choices of developer-historians in production. For example, as aforementioned, games often reward players for actions that they consider to be historically factual and/or punish actions that conflict with this. Developers also often use fictional, though *historically typical*, settings and characters within a larger frame of actual historical events.⁹ Clashes between player agency and the historical record can also then be dealt with by placing gameplay within representations of historical events so large that a single agent could not change the broad trend, leaving players to deal with smaller local events/challenges that this broader trend subjects them to. Finally, as again discussed in Chapter 9, many games make no claims to rigorous chronology and/or embrace this anachronism as a game feature (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007, 205).

The Limits of Play in Historical Games

Tensions in historical games can also often be found in the perception of clashes between the serious emotive content that is often a part of history and the perceived nature of games as a form of representation. Games often seem to generate controversy by including themes perceived to be inappropriate for play. These controversies tend to be rooted in two concerns (Chapman and Linderroth 2015). First, themes that are placed into games gain a double meaning through this process of *ludification* (i.e. as a part of the game they gain rule-based properties). The concern seems to be that the theme might become trivialised if the player treats the representation as only a game element, attending only to the abilities it grants or the challenges it presents and therefore treating the theme less respectfully than it is

perceived to demand. Second, concerns also seem to surround the issue of *playable positions*, i.e. if a game “casts at least some of the players in the role of the generally perceived historical antagonist and thus allows the players to re-enact historical episodes of exploitation, cruelty and abuse through their in-game actions” (Chapman and Linderroth 2015, 140). Games that do so run the risk of generating controversy.

These concerns do seem to influence the history that is produced in games. For example, whereas WWII is a frequent theme for videogames, the Holocaust is almost never mentioned and elements associated with it (Nazi ideology, organisations, symbols, leaders and particular military units) are frequently excluded, particularly in games where players can play as Nazi forces, i.e. where Nazis are a *playable position* (Chapman and Linderroth 2015). Previous research also indicates a similar case in the representation of WWI in games (Chapman 2014a). It seems that only a third of these games (20/60) engage with the kind of imagery (particularly the soldier in the trenches) that typically characterises WWI popular memory. Perhaps this can be accounted for by the serious yet contested nature of WWI memory, which is often subject to debates about the morality and validity of the war. This means that, alongside accusations of trivialisation, the *playable positions* become even more problematic. After all the morality of these positions in a memory which is contested, and which tends to position all soldiers as victims, means there is no clearly moral or heroic role for players. As such, the experiences of soldiers in the trenches are generally excluded in favour of game structures/representations that focus on other aspects of WWI.

Some developers do include these kinds of sensitive historical topics and negotiate the potential for controversy by ‘framing’ (Goffman 1986) them in particular ways. For example, framing games as documentaries, art or education (Chapman and Linderroth 2015) or as wargames and memorials (Chapman 2014a) seems to lessen the risks associated with including controversial historical content. So too, utilizing cartoon/comic book aesthetics, or adding a science fiction/fantasy layer to the fiction, can sometimes seem to have a similar effect (Chapman 2014a). In this way, these tensions between form and content have been a catalyst in the production of games’ language of historical representation and in the cultural discourse surrounding their production and play.

Games and/as History

Despite their unconventional offers of agency, it seems clear that history in games still emerges from tension. This is hardly unusual, as described in Chapter 1, history is always partly determined by the forms in which it is constructed, disseminated and received, and it is this notion that makes investigating the nature and possibilities of digital games as a historical form so pertinent. If we accept that each form exerts its own pressure on historical content, it also seems more productive to understand each as subject

to different rules of engagement, rather than simply ‘better’ or ‘worse’ (as normally determined by simplistic comparisons with the book form). However, as noted, in games this tension extends beyond content and form and into the direct relationship with audiences. In any form historical narrative is never entirely passive and narrativist perspectives have long emphasised *reading* as a process of meaning *creation* as well as reception (see Munslow 2007b, Chapter 3). However, clearly digital games go beyond even these theoretical perspectives. The audience agency that they offer allows not only the interpretation of representation but also the manipulation of it. This access to *doing*, this book argues, allows digital games to work not only as representations of the past but also as systems for *history-ing*, granting access to historical practices. However, as noted, there are still boundaries to player’s agency. These boundaries might seem antithetical to the nature of historical practice as we commonly conceive of it in the work of professional historians or reenactors, but these kinds of tensions are actually characteristic of historical practice regardless of form.

As aforementioned, Wertsch (1998, 73–108) has argued that narrative is a cultural tool that aids us in the comprehension and retention of historical information. However, Wertsch also argues that these narratives are also controlling and often produce tensions with what we might want to say about the past (particularly in the light of other narratives) which we might often struggle to resolve. In Wertsch’s terms there is always an irreducible tension between a cultural tool, in this case historical narrative, and an agent’s use of it. In a sense then, the controlling relationship of games with players is not alien to history at all and is similar to that which traditional historical narratives often attempt to establish with readers (Chapman 2013a). The only difference being that the reception of the narrative and the active use of this narrative by the agent (player) can happen almost at the same time, within one session of gameplay. Furthermore, sometimes when we engage in *configurative resonance* we are struggling to resolve precisely these tensions, swapping the control of the game’s goals for the control of an outside historical narrative that we know and try to produce.

Moving deeper into production, we can also identify similar tensions in the work of professional historians. First, historians do not exist in a cultural vacuum and are also affected by narratives (cultural tools) that they deploy. However, even beyond this, historical writing is always a process of tension. As Munslow notes, “The story space clearly references a part of the once real world, but in that reference the historian chooses to invoke who *said* what, who *did* what, assumes there are mechanisms that will explain to us why they did it, what *agencies* and *structures* operate(d), what events were *significant* and which were not” (2007b, 18). The story space is therefore made up of both partially preformed elements (like evidence and other narratives) and a series of epistemological, ideological and aesthetic subjective interpretations and *decisions*. This is the reason that different historians produce different historical narratives even while utilising similar evidence

and historiography. In this way, as noted, historical narrative is *fictive*, neither entirely fiction nor entirely truth, a partly fictional creative endeavor and yet still very much created in thrall to the evidence of real events. Historians have an ethical duty to data and generally a desire to be taken seriously and, as noted in Chapter 1, facts are a necessary (although not sufficient) part of our understandings of the past.¹⁰ Furthermore, if White's (1973) arguments in his seminal *Metahistory* are indeed correct, history is also written partially in thrall to a number of literary structures in terms of mode, emplotment, ideology, argumentation, ideology etc. It seems then that even professional history can be characterised by a tension between the historian's agency on the one hand and structures such as evidence and historiography on the other. This therefore bears some similarities to the tension between player agency and the limits of the *(hi)story-play-space*. Extending this similarity are the 'algorithms' of professional history (e.g. methodological and epistemological approaches, sociocultural pressures), controlling rules for 'good' history that limit the creative interpretative agency of the historian (Chapman 2013a).

Thus, it can be argued that historical writing and historical gameplay are similar in a number of ways. Both involve a relationship between *reading* and *doing*, both are configurative – they are partly about the arrangement and manipulation of pre-existing parts – and yet both can also involve creative agency and support the production of varying and multiple narratives. Furthermore, as the historian's construction of the story space is at least partly motivated by a sense of historical resonance (sense of the 'sufficiently real') between global historical evidence and their local understanding, perhaps *configurative resonance* can even be said to be a part of academic practice too. Of course playing historical games and writing professional history also differ in many characteristics, practices and the nature of the agency they entail. However, it is useful to see that even professional history(ing) is characterised by narrative tension and that it is here, as in games, where meaning often emerges. Rather than preventing games being history, these kinds of tensions, a feature of both traditional story spaces and *(hi)story-play-spaces*, emphasise the status of games as systems for historical practice, for *historying*. As shall become apparent, these tensions in historical games are important. For example, both game-based re-enactment and counterfactual history rely on tensions between skill/agency and challenge/narrative.

Historical Games and/as Reading, Doing, Writing, Discussing

Historical games are unusual because they allow us to both *read* their representations and to manipulate these representations through structured *doing*. They are simultaneously both historical representations and systems for *historying*. As discussed, this relationship between *reading* and *doing* can be complex. However, it does mean that playing historical games can also be understood as a process of *writing* historical narratives in a relationship

of shared authorship with developer-historians. Importantly, this shared authorship and the discussed tensions it introduces means that games are also a particularly discursive form of history.

When we play historical games, we can test various configurations (historical narratives) within, and against, the rules of the *(hi)story-play-space* set in place by the developer-historian and which outline their arguments about the past. Historical games allow us to experiment through our inputs, which always receive some kind of tangible *authorial response* from the game. Thus, gameplay can be a dynamic historical feedback loop, an active historical discourse between the player and developer-historian that emerges through play. Historical games can allow us to gain insight into the consequences that our interpretations of history have, according to the developer-historian's particular *(hi)story-play-space*. Thus, the *reading* and *doing* relationship of historical games allows a kind of *writing* through *discussion*, the *discursive* production of historical narrative through the dynamic relationship between developer-historian and player, by way of the game.

As explored, although strategy is doubtlessly the pressing concern in most gameplay moments, choices in the *(hi)story-play-space* can be made on the basis of a variety of local and personal motivations, including understandings of the past. This ability to be expressive of wider concerns, beyond simply the logic of the rule system, emphasises that historical gameplay is also determined by, in tension with, situated in, and perhaps even affects, larger cultural systems such as collective memory and historiography. In the *(hi)story-play-space*, the narrative is only ever partially finished, awaiting our active participation. At its best, when we are playing the right historical videogame, in the right way, we are not just receiving a representation or simply performing the actions of a game, we are simultaneously *doing* and *reading* history, blurring the boundaries between production and reception and shifting into *historying*. In this way, it is always the *reading* and *doing* of both player and developer-historian within a shared *(hi)story-play-space* that produces historical narratives in games.

Summary

This chapter discussed both the unusual audience agency that historical games offer and the tensions that regulate this. It was argued that historical gameplay involves both *reading* and *doing* and that these dual activities mean that historical narrative production in games always involves shared authorship between developer-historian and player, making these games what I termed *(hi)story-play-spaces*. Whilst this narrative may not necessarily be *read* by all players, nonetheless, the playing of historical games always produces a historical narrative. This emphasises the need for an acknowledgement of the role of the player, with historical narrative and meaning produced by both *locally* situated players and *global* games, and the *historical resonance* established between them. This led us to further tensions

of historical games, such as those between narrative/gameplay structures and player agency/skill. As well as looking at modding, *configurative resonance* (whereby players make gameplay decisions in order to produce particular representations that resonate with their local context) was discussed. This included describing some of the possible ways in which players can respond to historical games through this practice (i.e. possible configurative responses to historical resonance). Further tensions were also explored in the relationship between history as content and game as form. Acknowledging that history is always a process characterised by tension, illustrated that these tensions do not inherently exclude games from being history and indicated the offering of *historying*, alongside historical representation, in historical games. As such, it was finally argued that the nature of the *(hi) story-play-space* means that historical games can offer multiple activities surrounding *reading* and *doing*, such as *writing* and *discussing* history.

Notes

1. Also, we can argue that many games do not even contain representations (e.g. Tetris). However, all historical games must by their very definition contain some kind of representation. How else could they make meaning about the past?
2. I include the '(hi)' in this term not merely as an affectation but as a means to indicate that, though here we are concerned with historical representation specifically, all representational digital games feature a similar story space dynamic.
3. Furthermore, it is global in the sense that the game can be considered 'objectively' as a discrete unit, i.e. it can at least appear to be analysed as a thing, an object, separated from a local context, something often attempted in game studies.
4. So, for example, it would probably be very difficult to interpret a history book that clearly argued that World War II largely determined the events of the second half of the 20th century, as actually arguing the opposite (at least without significant misreadings) – that World War II had no effects whatsoever on the events that followed it.
5. Arguable exceptions to this are the menu options which precede play (e.g. in Civilization we can choose what kind of geographical features make up the map or whether the game will include barbarians), but there is also case to be made for these menus to also be considered as a part of the *(hi)story-play-space*.
6. There are also often points where these types of narrative tensions can appear to converge. There may be moments when we are unsure if an action is impossible (i.e. the narrative structure does not support it), the action is possible but we are encouraged not to take it, or if it is indeed the developer-historian's desired course of action for us but we are not yet skilled enough (or our player-character empowered enough) to take it.
7. Indeed, this idea seems to also be accepted by some gamers. For example, a recent guide on the *Pocket Tactics* website tried to give players historical information about WWI in order to help them win *Commander: The Great War*, stating, "Going into *Commander* without a working knowledge of the historical context is a handicap you don't need to suffer" (Faraday 2014, para. 2).

8. In this way, player-characters can function like the masks of *commedia dell'arte* (which place limits on the improvisation of the actors), partially prescribing the limits of coherent diegetic actions for players (Jenkins 2004, 125).
9. For example, in the *Brothers in Arms* series generally all characters below the rank of lieutenant are fictional.
10. This is why, despite the claims of opponents, narrativist/postmodernist history does not justify and has “nothing to do with, for example, ‘telling lies about Hitler’, which is entirely a matter of false data and spurious inferences” (Munslow 2007b, 39).

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Part II

Digital Games as Historical Representations

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3 Simulation Styles and Epistemologies

The code determines the rules of the game (the way it operates). And if the rules promote a particular way of looking at the world – if they make an argument in code for a particular worldview ... then we need to understand which rules, which games, best embody the historical epistemologies we wish to teach.

—Kee and Graham (2014, 275)

In this chapter we will examine the stylistic variations in the *ludic aesthetics of historical description* of digital historical games (the ways in which they represent the past). We will also explore how these variations are linked to particular epistemological choices. Though digital games are complex objects, I outline two distinct categories of *simulation style*, in which, or between which, most historical games can be placed.¹ This allows us to ask fundamental questions about particular *(hi)story-play-spaces*. Will they try to make us feel like we *witness* the past and act within it, or will they attempt to enable us to understand and participate in their argument *about* the past? Will the games *ludic aesthetics of historical description* operate more through the audio-visual aspect or through rules? How does the game make meaning about the past and how does this relate to our player position? The herein proposed *realist* and *conceptual* categories of simulation style are designed to ‘bookend’ the spectrum of historical representation in digital games and help us organise answers to these questions.

Other scholars have also outlined broad divisions in historical games. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007), exploring the ways in which historical games deal with the tension between technological and commercial advances and the need for historical explanation, point to two design approaches. “The first limited historical scope ... [and] ... focus on very specific battles, units or moments of history, in order to avoid complex retellings of history ... The second tactic involves deliberately exploiting the idea of counterfactualism in history games” (MacCallum Stewart and Parsler 2007, 205). Similarly, Uricchio’s (2005) seminal piece about historical games also makes a useful division.

One sort ... is specific in the sense that it deals with a particular historical event – a race, a battle – allowing the player to engage in a speculative or “what if” encounter with a particular past. In these games, efforts are usually taken to maximize the accuracy of historical detail, allowing the setting and conditions to constrain and shape game play. At the other extreme are games that deal with historical process in a somewhat abstracted or structural manner.

(Uricchio 2005, 328)

These useful approaches offer an important start to thinking about different historical focuses, historical specificity and narrative agency, topics that will be explored in greater detail in later chapters. However, these approaches are also concerned mainly with the content that is represented, whereas here we are more concerned with narrowing our focus in order to look at the style of representation itself, the *ludic aesthetics of historical description* and the epistemological choices these entail.²

Attempts to explore historical game epistemologies have also been made. Clyde, Hopkins and Wilkinson (2012) argue that a ‘gamic mode’ of history, based upon a “constructionist” (Munslow 2007b) epistemology, is needed for games to become more scholarly and produce reasonably justifiable truths. Antley (2012) disagrees, contending that Clyde *et al.* are too preoccupied with making games reproduce the conventions of history books and argues instead that games, given the increase in audience agency they entail, introduce new epistemologies. This agency, he argues, is the source of the anxiety that motivates the desire for a ‘gamic mode’. Clyde *et al.*’s (2012) ideas are also problematic because many of the epistemological ‘problems’ of games are also found in other historical forms, including books (Chapman 2013a). However, older understandings of epistemology can still be useful. Munslow’s (1997; 2007b) three genres of historical epistemology: *reconstructionist* (a concern only with facts), *constructionist* (a concern with facts as selected, arranged and explained according to theory) and *deconstructionist* (a concern with the way the history itself is written), can be used to help us understand games. First, this is because these games are not culturally isolated. Digital games can be understood as a composite form, being comprised of multiple media forms and types of activity (Linderoth 2015). It is then perhaps unsurprising that digital historical games are not only constructed in relation to other histories but also often borrow liberally from the tropes/techniques of other forms. This means that they also often inherit epistemological assumptions. Second, as Munslow makes clear in his description of contemporary television history programmes as *reconstructionist* (2007b, 12), these epistemological genres were never intended to describe only history produced in books.

The important thing in using these epistemological categories is that they are used *descriptively*, to try to explain some of the workings of historical games as they are, rather than *prescriptively* to outline what historical games

should be and in order bring them closer to the professional history found in books, as Clyde *et al.* (2012) attempt. Indeed, Munslow (1997; 2007b) does not offer these epistemological genres as a prescription for more objective history but to outline the different choices through which history is constructed and to explore how different histories acknowledge subjectivity and make *claims* to objectivity. Thus, whereas Antley (2012) is quite right to point to the idea that games may well give us cause to rethink epistemologies, we can still use older epistemological understandings descriptively, to point to similar choices and claims, while preserving the notion that in some ways games might differ.

The Realist Simulation Style

Examples include: *Brothers in Arms* series, *IL-2 Sturmovik* series, historical games in the *Call of Duty* series, *L.A. Noire*, *Red Orchestra* series, historical games in the *Medal of Honor* series, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Mafia* series, *Grand Prix Legends*, *Assassin's Creed* series.

When we speak of a *realist simulation*, we do not refer to the game's historical accuracy. Some games that use *realist simulation* styles, such as *Assassin's Creed* (see Figure 3.1), also contain fantasy elements. Furthermore, in 2002 the best example of the *realist* style in a historical FPS would probably have been *Medal of Honor: Frontline*, a game whose graphical achievements have been far surpassed in the time since. Nevertheless, these games are still *realist* because of the way in which they represent the past and the general claims that this involves. Thus, when we talk of a *realist simulation*, we are referring to its stylistic approach to representation rather than evaluating its historical content. First, *realist simulations*:

- Generally work by aiming and/or claiming to *show* the past 'how it was', i.e. as it appeared to historical agents of the time.

This Rankean task is of course impossible. We cannot recreate every detail of the past as it appeared, nor generally even find comprehensive criteria that would allow us to judge this. Nonetheless, this is the approach of this style of simulation; the implicit claim that the past is being *shown* in a way that relates to notions of authenticity.

- Realist historical simulations are most obviously characterised by their high-degree of visual specificity.

Generally environments, objects, characters and effects are visually detailed and show a degree of fidelity to the physical evidence of the past and the everyday world. Audio-visual elements commonly feature little overt metaphorisation, and the concern is with producing a representation of the past that imitates direct human experience. Simply, *realist* historical simulations



Figure 3.1 Screenshot of *Assassin's Creed II*, an example of *realist simulation style*.

are characterised by a 'realistic' audio-visual style that aims to be convincing and encourage audiences in what Coleridge (1817) termed their 'suspension of disbelief'.

- This is also achieved by using stylistic techniques for visual 'realism' drawn from a long cultural history of representation.

In particular, the familiar audio-visual codes and tropes of Western cinematic realism are often used. The desire to create visually believable fictive worlds, and the sharing of some techniques to do so, means that this is a good starting point to understand the *realist* approach. However, games also differ in some key ways. In particular, the concentration on graphics makes their representations extremely dependent on good design and technological advances. For example, virtual characters can lack impact in comparison to real actors or worse trigger an "uncanny valley" (Masahiro 2012) response of revulsion in audiences. Of course, games also differ in that they have rules for interaction.

- The rule-governed behaviours ascribed to objects/environments and characters in *realist simulations* will often try to *show* the past as it is claimed to have appeared to agents and to align with the everyday logics of the world in which we live.

Nonetheless, again these are still representations and have strict limitations. Whilst many of these behaviours in *realist simulations* are for purely aesthetic purposes (e.g. a fence might appear to splinter if we hit it with a sword), often the logic that guides these behaviours is much more firmly rooted in

gameplay. For example, often new players to a *realist* game might be unsure what object/environment behaviours, and thus actions, are possible because the logic of the ‘real world’ is insufficient to understand the representation (Linderoth and Bennerstedt 2007).³ This is because, “In the game design process, the game designer must select which aspects of the fictional world to actually implement in the game rules” (Juul 2005, 163), a form of story/content decisions and emplotment that is perhaps unique to the game form. Games, films and books, however *realist* in their approach, cannot accurately reflect reality, only represent it as it can be represented within the constraints of the chosen form and style. Given this, and the often costly and time-consuming nature of constructing *realist simulations*:

- **An inverse relationship between the realist detail and fidelity of a simulation and the *scope* of its historical representation is often observable.**

This is changing as financial investments in games increase and the tools to build them advance (which probably explains the increase in open-world *realist* games over the past decade). Nonetheless, generally *realist simulations* have a relatively narrow focus on events. For example, most WWII *realist simulations* only depict the experiences of infantry, tank crews and pilots in frontline combat, excluding experiences between these moments, the home front, or the causes, grand strategies and political complexities of the war.⁴ The relatively resource intensive nature of constructing *realist simulations* and perhaps more importantly, the effort to show the world as it appeared to historical agents, means that *these* simulations are:

- **Frequently tied to the diegetic level of the agent (at least in gameplay moments) and therefore tend to focus on small groups or individuals.**

In these games we generally play as a small group of characters or an individual. A similar approach is also found in mainstream historical films (which have a similar *realist* audio-visual style), whereby “individuals (one, two or a small group) are at the centre of the historical process” (Rosenstone 2007, 15–16). As Rosenstone continues to note of film, it is through these characters eyes and lives that we see the larger events of the past and this also tends to be the case in these *realist games* (as evident in the first-person and third-person perspectives that these games often favour). This approach has restrictions that the *conceptual simulation* is not hindered by. However, it is also very important to digital games’ potential function as historical reenactment (see Chapters 7 and 8). Furthermore, this focus on the experience of small groups of agents in *realist simulations* can mean a predilection for history that is in some sense social, particularly when combined with the frequent tendency in digital historical games to (as noted in Chapter 2) focus on historically typical characters that hold no influence on the broad trend of events in order to deal with the ‘problems’ of agency. This focus

can therefore in some cases be seen (although, as discussed in Chapter 6, this also depends on narrative structure and characterisation) to constitute what E.P. Thompson (1966) termed “history from below”, examining events and historical life from the perspective of relatively ordinary people rather than, for example, political leaders.⁵

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the *realist simulation* is that:

- The *aesthetics of historical description* mainly operate through the *audio-visual aspect*.

It is impossible to completely separate the audio-visual aspect from rules and gameplay and these elements are always important.⁶ As noted, rule-governed behaviours are still a part of this *realist simulation* aesthetic and it is the agency of gameplay that allows players to explore the simulation. However, it is also fair to say that in *realist simulations* it is in the audio-visual aspect whereby most of the data is found and the historical representation constructed. This is important to emphasise because it differs from the focus of the *ludic aesthetics of historical description* of *conceptual simulations* and, combined with the characteristics described above, provides a number of potential benefits. For example, *realist simulations* are generally:

- Relatively easy for audiences to interpret.

The lack of metaphorisation makes at least some information about what is going on immediately apparent, because the optical similarity between the image and what it stands for means that the link between the representation and the represented is often easily established.⁷ For instance, even if we do not recognise the uniforms of American and German soldiers when seeing games like *Brothers in Arms* or *Call of Duty*, the audio-visual style allows us to quickly grasp that these are historical soldiers from opposing forces fighting one another. This emphasis on the audio-visual aspect and predilection for visual specificity also means that *realist simulations*:

- Can easily engage with existing realist visual discourses and tropes from, for instance, film or television.

An interesting example of these exchanges with other forms of popular culture is Steven Spielberg’s creation (in collaboration with *Dreamworks Interactive*) of WWII game *Medal of Honor*. Spielberg, in an effort to reject Hollywood’s glamorised representations of WWII, borrowed the aesthetic style of his *Saving Private Ryan* (then in post-production) that had aimed to imitate colour footage of the 1940s rather than the old Hollywood Technicolor epics (Rath 2012). Later entries into the *Medal of Honor* series continued this trend and also borrowed further from the film (particularly in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* and *Medal of Honor: Frontline*’s Normandy

landings levels). Indeed, as Rath points out, this visual style has also become general shorthand for ‘authentic’ combat in both film and games, despite many of these having contemporary or futuristic settings. As well as visual discourses and tropes, *realist simulations* also share with historical film and television a tendency for:

- **Heavy and detailed visual data loads.**

As Rosenstone notes, “One does not need to be an expert to discover this – all one need do is attempt to render into words everything that might appear in a single shot from a movie” (1995, 28). Similarly, creating a simulation with a *realist* style entails including numerous detailed historical environments and objects, which are often either virtual replicas of the physical evidence of the past or designed to be historically typical, i.e. designed in a style that is seemingly contemporary to the setting. Thus, developing a WWII *realist simulation*, like *Brothers in Arms* (see Figure 3.2), means creating uniforms, weapons, vehicles, character models, architecture, building contents such as tables, crockery, books, chairs, paintings, wallpaper, clocks, outside features such as fencing, flora, agricultural tools, bicycles, roads, billboards, lampposts, animals and weather, to name but a few. Simply, a daunting list of referential objects must generally be created to maintain the fictive world of the *realist simulation*. Thus, *realist simulations* also possess film’s “plenitude of visual details, an excessive particularity compared to the verbal version, a plenitude aptly called by certain aestheticians visual ‘over-specification’ (*uberstimmtheit*)” (Chatman 1980, 126).



Figure 3.2 Screenshot of a typical moment of *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*. Even in this single instance the *realist simulation* is constructed from numerous represented historical objects and environmental features.

As described in Chapters 7 and 8, this over-specification is very important to these games' ability to function as reenactment and heritage experiences. Even before we consider the extra cutscenes, dialogue, documents, photographs and videos that are often included in such games, it is apparent that *realist simulations* can have an impressive density of visual data beyond that which it is easily possible to convey in words, even if they may not fare so well in terms of other forms of historical information. Furthermore:

- **In the digital game, this over-specification is often compounded by the player's 'spatial' agency (the movement of the player-character) and control over the virtual gaze (camera).**

This gives the player some freedom in the examination and exploration of this historical data that the fixed perspectives of film cannot always offer. As discussed in Chapter 7, combining this *realist* style with particular spatial and narrative structures can also somewhat answers criticisms levelled at film as involving too much narrative pressure to allow visual information to be comprehended.

Realist Simulations as Reconstructionist Epistemology

Although other formal structures of a game can complicate this relationship, *realist simulations* have an implicit inclination towards a *reconstructionist* epistemological approach. This is evident in their authoritative audio-visual representation's encouragement of players to suspend their disbelief and the general aim and claim to *show* the past 'how it was'. *Reconstructionist* histories are the closest to conventional notions of empirical history.

- **"As an epistemological choice, reconstructionist historians believe they gain true knowledge through the primacy of referentiality and delivering its inherent story as *the true narrative*" (Munslow 2007b, 11).**

This emphasis on the capturing of *the* (rather than *a*) story is often also apparent in the promotional materials of *realist simulation* games. For instance, NTSC boxart for *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* states that players can "Experience *the* uncensored story of the Normandy invasion" (my emphasis) and "Real soldiers. Authentic battlefields. True combat". Similarly, a demonstration of the game at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in 2004 (available in *Road to Hill 30*) sees President of Gearbox Software Randy Pitchford state, "This is Normandy in 1944. This is what it actually looked like" (cited in Rejack 2007, 419).⁸ WWII FPS *Day of Defeat: Source*'s NTSC box art declares that it is "the closest thing to being enlisted in the European Theater of war, circa 1944". The PAL packaging for *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* invites players to enter both the "digitally accurate reproduction of Normandy 1944" and "the chaos of D-Day June 1944" – somehow out of the admitted historical chaos comes the claimed clarity of a reproduction

that goes beyond the implied failings of older methods and is ‘digitally accurate’. Similarly WWI FPS *Verdun*’s promotional pages (on digital-distribution platform *Steam*) state that players will “experience true trench warfare” and “authentic WWI atmosphere” on “historically accurate battlefields” and will use “authentic weapons” modelled “from real world examples and photos”. This kind of promotion based on *reconstructionist* epistemological claims is common to *realist simulation* historical games and not only designed to emphasise the authenticity of the simulation and its claims to *the* story but also to minimise the role of the developer-historian in the creation of it. This is also characteristic of the *reconstructionist* epistemology.

- **“Reconstructionists maintain that history exists independently of the historian and that discovering the past is an objective process, uncontaminated by ideology” (Booth 2005, 9).**

In these histories, the historian’s role in meaning-creation is claimed to be minimal, little more than mediating the (recoverable) past, little altering or shaping it, merely referentially reconstructing it in the present. We can see this hiding of the developer-historian’s role and voice in the visually specific, convincing and coherent, fictive worlds of *realist simulations*, which intrinsically claim to present the world of the past as it appeared to agents. Thus, inevitably the developer-historian’s voice is hidden because its presence could only disrupt this diegesis and their interpretative role is also hidden through the visual specificity. This creates what Barthes (1981) called a ‘transparency effect’, directly linking the text (in this case the game) to the referent and therefore hiding how this is discursively constituted by the author (in this case the developer-historian). This minimising of the developer-historian’s role is also evident in the promotional claims about authenticity noted above and the common practice of supporting these claims by including selected primary sources, such as photographs (particularly on box art), video and documents, in order to emphasise the objective nature of the construction of the simulation. As Allison (2010), drawing from (Kane 1982), notes, use of these elements as a strategy of authentication is particularly common in WWII games.

Indeed, an exemplary case of this is again found in the media releases and box art of *Brothers in Arms*, which use photographs of locations in Normandy during 1944, spliced with the virtual recreations of these locations in the game. This is further reinforced by the Ubisoft website for the game which proclaims, “Unprecedented authenticity: Historically accurate and detailed battlefields, events and equipment re-created from Army Signal Corps photos, aerial reconnaissance imagery and eyewitness accounts”. These kinds of claims to authenticity also hint at the implicit claim that underlies *realist simulations*: that the developer-historian’s role is no more than the careful reproduction (rather than creative construction and interpretation) of the seemingly completely recoverable past. This minimising of the historian’s role in favour of emphasising a sense of authenticity is also something that

has proved useful when these kinds of games have come under fire for their treatment of controversial content (Chapman and Linderöth 2015; Chapman 2014a). All this, both emphasises the *reconstructionist* epistemology the *realist simulation* implies and highlights a further characteristic of this epistemology.

- **Reconstructionist histories carry an inherent “effect of reality” (Barthes 1989, 141) and subsume their own status as *representation*.**

This refers to the textual device found in all history (as well as *any* film or literature) that invokes ‘reality’ (as opposed to representation) in a non-reflexive way and with an authoritarian tone, as *realist-reconstructionist* games generally do. This aspect is clearly apparent in the emphasis on visual fidelity, the aim to show the past as it appeared to agents and the claims as to the unmediated nature of *the* past. In short, it is at the very core of the definition of the *realist simulation*. This effect of reality might be even more problematic in games because they are entwined with a popular discourse about the accuracy, authenticity and seductive potential of digital simulation. This is added to by frequently hyperbolic claims resting on problematic terms such as ‘immersion’.⁹ Furthermore, there are other aspects of these kinds of games, such as the interactive 3D representations of historical space (Schut 2007, 228–229) or player’s actions rendering results that they expect (Sommerseth 2007) that might also reinforce perceptions of realism and objectivity. As Rejack notes, epistemological positions that emphasise truth are also manifest in historical games like *Brothers in Arms* in the similar “reality effect” (Black 2002) that “has been produced by film culture, which asserts that visual documentation is tantamount to reality” (Rejack 2007, endnote 2). It is unclear if this is disturbed by the move to computer-generated imagery (CGI), but Rejack argues that, “the legitimacy offered by CGI technology arises out of the ability of recorded media to produce a reality effect – if we see it, it must be real” (2007, endnote 2). This is hardly a new debate for history. As Molyneaux notes in his examination of visual representation in archaeology, “use of naturalistic imagery implies a direct relationship between the representation and the world, transparent and without interpretative obstacles” (1997, 2). Furthermore, technological developments have long been wedded to notions of increased historical objectivity. For example, as many scholars have pointed out, though perhaps Susan Sontag (1977) most famously, although photographs are generally understood to be objective depictions and therefore authoritarian, they still involve selection and therefore represent a particular perspective, like written texts. If these issues are still apparent even in the more direct representation of photographs, then they are certainly still a concern within the designed worlds of games.

Nonetheless, such reality effects also mean that these kinds of histories have an undeniable popular appeal and as Munslow notes, “the reconstructionist approach has become the culturally acceptable way of producing past reality” (2007b, 12). Certainly, the biggest selling historical games tend to be *realist-reconstructionist* (e.g. *Call of Duty*, *L.A. Noire*,

Red Dead Redemption, *Assassin's Creed*). The popularity of *reconstructionist* history is unsurprising, after all the authoritarian promise of a look at how it really was, at *the* story, at how the historical world appeared to those who lived there, has an undeniable attraction. So too, the preference for reporting on specific historical characters and events, instead of more multiplicitous narrative engagements with complex thematic or theoretical issues, also makes these histories very accessible. As such, *realist-reconstructionist* historical games clearly offer something in terms of popular engagement. Furthermore, their easy-to-interpret, engaging historical worlds are like those of cinema, full of compelling colour, movement and drama, which also has value, as Rosenstone (2006) has long argued in relation to film. And as shall become apparent, it is the opportunities offered by the rich audio-visual aspect of the simulation style that allows some of these games to present accessible opportunities for historical reenactment in popular culture.

This said, many would argue that the *reconstructionist* approach is a rather out-dated and naive epistemological position, which relatively few historians today occupy. The *realist-reconstructionist* historical game clearly has potential benefits and is particularly engaging. However, as described, it can also simultaneously give the sense that whatever meaning is mediated and negotiated through the simulation, has a level of authenticity that troublingly ignores the actual relationship between the past and history. *Reconstructionist* histories struggle to present alternatives, ambiguity or uncertainty, all key aspects of historical discourse, because the history then loses coherency as *the* story, *the* truth. As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6, *realist simulations* often also compound this by overtly restricting player agency through utilising particular confining narrative structures. However, even before narrative structure, *realist simulation* historical games already have these epistemological problems (and thus lean towards reconstructionist history) because of their visual specificity. As Westin (2014) notes of archaeological visualisations, this kind of specificity often results in the hiding of uncertainty, concealing both the process of construction and the sense of the frequent ambiguity of the past-present relationship. These kinds of epistemological issues are in no way restricted to the game form. However, in *realist simulations* the audio-visual aspect is particularly important in the process of transcoding the often problematic epistemological algorithms for 'good' history into digital-ludic ones.

The Conceptual Simulation Style

Examples include: *Civilization* series, *Making History* series, *Europa Universalis* series, *To End All Wars*, *Victoria* series, *Memoir '44 Online*, *Crusader Kings* series, *Legion*, *Battle of the Bulge*, *Pike and Shot*, (Slitherine's) *Commander* series, *Timeline*.

Conceptual simulations stand opposite to *realist simulations* at the other end of a spectrum of representational style. Unlike *realist simulations*:

- *Conceptual simulations tell us about the past without purporting to show it as it appeared.*

That is to say that *conceptual simulations* do not work through visual specificity as *realist simulations* do. Instead they are:

- **Much less visually ‘literal’ simulations characterised by abstract audio-visual representations.**

These abstractions typically include maps of varying simplicity, containing units or buildings that (as their often unrealistic scales indicate) are akin to board game pieces (see Figure 3.3) and in some *conceptual simulations* (such as *Battle of the Bulge*) units are represented using only a remediation of cardboard tokens. Typically, these elements are supplemented by menus, symbols, charts, tables and text (see Figure 3.3) and are present only to provide functional gameplay information and to indicate what historical concepts/existents gameplay refers to, in order to establish a link to the player’s historical understanding. As such:

- **There is generally little to be learnt from direct observation of the appearance and aesthetic behaviours of objects, environments and characters.**

This is to say that, unlike *realist simulations*, we may not immediately recognise exactly what is being simulated in *conceptual simulations*.¹⁰ Such



Figure 3.3 Screenshot of *Sid Meier's Civilization V*, an example of *conceptual simulation style*.

games expect a higher level of interpretation (and basic historical understanding) to function as history, given this thicker layer of metaphor and the representation being so spread across multiple semiotic channels. We have to take action to really ‘see’ the representation; it is only here that *conceptual simulations* begins their true explanation. Accordingly

- Despite the relative visual simplicity of *conceptual simulations*, the rules are often very complicated and the representation is therefore built mainly through *procedural rhetoric*.

Procedural rhetoric is a concept developed by Bogost (2007) to describe the persuasive/expressive aspect of games that functions through rules, challenge and opportunities for action. As Bogost describes it, “*procedural rhetoric* is the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively ... its arguments are made ... through the authorship of *rules* of behaviour” (2007, 28–29). In this way, game developers can use virtual game processes to represent real-world processes and systems (such as those frequently explored in historical study) and argue for how they work. For example, in flash game *September 12th* players look down on a stereotypical depiction of a Middle Eastern town and are given a crosshair in order to aim and drop bombs on terrorists. However, players quickly find that it is almost impossible not to hit civilians as well as terrorists (due to the bomb’s explosive radius). Civilian casualties lead to other civilians changing into terrorists. The message is clear; using war to combat terrorism is ineffective, as the human cost will only radicalise more of a populace. This argument becomes apparent through the rules, challenges and affordances of the game; it is *procedural rhetoric*. It is of course possible to make the opposite argument in a game too, that these kinds of attacks are an effective form of counterterrorism, for instance by making the player’s attacks more precise and effective.

Procedural rhetoric is also found in historical games. For example, WWII RTS game *Company of Heroes 2* offended many Russian players with what they felt was a selective, hyperbolic and stereotypical depiction of Soviet forces as a brutal ‘horde’ ruled by cruel officers (Campbell 2013). This representation is found not only in cutscenes (non-interactive animated or video sections) but also in the *procedural rhetoric* that becomes apparent through gameplay.¹¹ For instance,

Company of Heroes 2 uses a mechanic that allows the player to deploy soldiers using ‘cheap’ conscripts, as opposed to building them at your base. This useful boost is balanced cleverly, by invoking ‘Order 227’. Any retreat during this phase carries a reasonably high chance that your forces will be executed by the high command.

(Campbell 2013)

Not all *procedural rhetoric* is as obviously ‘hardwired’ into game rules as this. For example, although historical strategy games may not ask players to target indigenous peoples, often there are tactical advantages to doing so. These games, however inadvertently, have the potential to produce a *procedural rhetoric* about colonialism.¹² All historical games create meaning about the past through their rules, pressures and challenges and the values that the various historical elements are therefore ascribed. However, this *procedural rhetoric* is particularly significant in *conceptual simulations* because this is their main form of representation and argumentation. Thus, although often the historical object, character, concept or process are represented very basically in the visual sense through text or symbols (or even not seen at all), the ludic traits that it has within the rules of the game are often very noticeable indeed and it is these that the player must learn to perceive in order to play well.

For example, in *Civilization V* our civilisation can settle an area with horses and ‘research’ animal husbandry, archery and the wheel. Represented only by simple symbols, still the rule changes these technologies bring are significant; we can now train chariot archers. These units, again despite their audio-visual simplicity, argue the historical possibilities that chariots offered. They move quickly through open terrain but slower through forests or hills and are more effective than basic infantry units but weak against spearmen. This development can also be combined with other discoveries that open up other affordances (e.g. researching horseback riding and chivalry allows the building of horseman and knights – each with their own rules). Meanings about the past here are mainly argued through the rules rather than the audio-visual aspect. This is a simplistic and small example. However, given that *conceptual simulations* are often filled with hundreds of these interplayable objects, environments and processes, the *procedural rhetoric* of these games can actually be relatively dense and complex. Although the audio-visual aspect is still important (at the very least it has a role in establishing what the rules refer to), it is clear that in the *conceptual simulation*:

- The *aesthetics of historical description* mostly operate through the *ludic aspect*.

It is here in the rules, challenge and affordances, which pressure, respond to, enable, and constrain, us, where most of the data is found, and the representation constructed, in *conceptual simulations*. *Procedural rhetoric* in historical games works as a ludic kind of metonym, standing in for the absent past and the original mode of information of the evidence, fulfilling the same role and yet working quite differently than the words of history books.

- *Conceptual simulations* can easily contain heavy and complex ludic information loads.

Relinquishing the demands of the *realist simulation* for audio-visual realism allows for a certain freedom in the complexity of rules and the inclusion of

more varied and numerous historical content. In the *realist simulation*, adding historical content generally involves creating time-consuming and detailed visual assets (often complex 3D models). This exerts pressure to be economic in the deployment of these resources, for example, not featuring too many different types of environment. However, *conceptual simulations* can more readily include large amounts of historical referents and concepts through relatively simpler symbols, maps, menus, charts and text and working this new content into the rule system. Such simulations often therefore feature significant amounts of historical referents/concepts and a concurrent complexity of interaction.

- **This enables these types of simulations to often explore ideas and create arguments about complex and large scale historical processes, systems and action.**

This relates to another benefit offered by the *conceptual simulations* abandonment of audio-visual realism and with it the representation of the past as it is claimed to have appeared to historical agents.

- ***Conceptual simulations* are free to abstract to a macro scope that no human agent could possibly experience, but at which historical narratives traditionally operate.**

This entails a shift from the diegetic level of the *historical agent* towards the diegetic level of the *historian*. Such games typically look down on large-scale historical movements, moving readily between events, people, systems and places, a characteristic generally associated with more traditional modes of history, in particular the (similarly abstract) conventional histories found in books. This turn is also apparent in the lack of concern for diegesis in the *conceptual* elements (buttons, symbols, menus, charts, text etc.) that typically litter the screen in these games. As Dillon (2008) argues, in genres such as FPS there is an offering of immediacy in the transparency of the medium, which encourages players to look ‘through’ the screen. By comparison in strategy games (the most exemplarily *conceptual* of game genres), “there is an emphasis on hypermediation, or an awareness of the medium, as the player is constantly looking at the screen and its interface to negotiate the gameplay” (Dillon 2008, 131). The interference of these non-diegetic elements with the fictive world is no problem at the diegetic level at which *conceptual simulations* operate, especially given the complex game-play and procedural arguments about the past that they enable. This shift to the historian’s diegetic level means that

- ***Conceptual simulations* are able to operate from the perspective of conventional historical discourse relatively easily.**

This is evident in the characteristics shared between this simulation style and the typical history found in books. Operating at this level of discourse *conceptual simulations* are:

- 1 Free to skip through time and space at the developer-historian's (or sometimes player's) will.

Games that utilise the *conceptual* style don't have to have a 'real-time' relationship between player, game and history and represented spaces have no need to be tightly defined, linear or wedded to restrictions entailed by the conventions for the 'realistic' 3D depiction of space (see Chapter 4 for more on time and space in digital historical games). Anachronism is a typical narrative technique in conventional histories, with historians commonly making comparisons through time by using analepsis and prolepsis and making other choices about order, frequency and duration in their books (Munslow 2007b, 51–59). Space is also invoked in a similarly open manner, with historical narratives typically moving between different historical places as needed. This means that, as in conventional history, in *conceptual simulations*:

- 2 Historical elements can be included and arranged on the basis of their relative historical values, as decided by the argument the developer-historian is trying to make, rather than the demands of realism.

Relinquishing realism allows the structure, and for practices such as emplotment, to be based on the historian's ascribed meanings rather than the concerns of realism, such as linear spatial or chronological relations. Thus, as in most contemporary history books, the past is represented as the historian wishes to explain it rather than as it was assumed to have appeared to the agents that lived it. Similarly, this also means that *conceptual simulations* are:

- 3 Able to deal with concepts, theories and processes that do not have a tangible physical presence (to imitate) much more easily than the realist simulation.

Conceptual simulations can easily represent large-scale economic, cultural, political or ideological systems through the same kind of abstraction found in history books: charts, tables, text, maps and of course in the case of these games, rules. These kinds of systems are not always easily represented in the *realist* style as they may have little or no physical presence that could easily represent the whole system audio-visually and diegetically at the level of small groups of agents. *Conceptual simulations* also find this representation of diverse and large-scale systems easier because the affordances (opportunities for action) available to the player do not have to have a diegetic explanation as the abilities of a player-character/historical agent, as is common in *realist simulations*. This ability to easily engage large-scale, intangible and abstract historical processes and concepts also allows engagement with historical theories relating to them. This means that, in comparison to *realist simulations*, the *conceptual simulation* is generally:

4 Able to make more complex and far reaching arguments

As should now be apparent, *conceptual simulations* are not only (or even necessarily) a simulation of the past itself but a *simulation of discourse about this past*. There is a shift here to more considering *why* things in the past happened rather than recounting *what* is claimed to have happened.

- Thus, relinquishing the demands of realism allows the *conceptual simulation* to work *similarly* to most modern-day professional history books by creating representation through discourse rather than only a simple (apparent) retelling.

Conceptual simulations' move towards the historian's diegetic level allows more of a focus on arguments and theories (i.e. discourse) about the past, something generally currently considered desirable in history. These simulations generally don't create "evocations of the past through powerful images, colorful characters, and moving words" (Rosenstone 1988, 1174) like *realist simulations* or the historical films that Rosenstone here describes. However, it should be now apparent that by operating abstractedly and at the historian's diegetic level in a way familiar to conventional historical discourse, they are more than capable of making arguments of a complexity and type more associated with the book than the screen. Accordingly, *conceptual simulations*:

- Sidestep classic criticisms of visual history as having "discursive weakness" (Jarvie 1978, 378).

This discursive quality is apparent in both the multitude of historical elements that are easily included and the generally complex networks of rules, challenge and affordances that bind them. This also leads us to an important point. *Conceptual simulations*, arguably, make most use of the unique qualities of games as a form for historical representation.

- *Conceptual simulations* communicate through the 'natural' language of the digital game, *procedural rhetoric*, by arguing through rules, challenge and affordances.

This also allows these games to draw heavily on the relatively long history of historical board gaming. Indeed some contemporary digital historical games can be understood as remediations of older types of historical games, such as tabletop wargames (Deterding 2010).¹³

Conceptual Simulations as Constructionist Epistemology

The *reconstructionist* and *constructionist* approaches are based upon similar epistemologies. However, there is an important difference: "Where these

models diverge is with respect to acceptance of *a priori* knowledge, particularly theory” (Booth 2005, 10).

- “The constructionist’s story space is a rich intellectual as well as a referential environment in which social theory and concept are freely used to assemble (though the aim may be to re-assemble) the past” (Munslow 2007b, 18).

In historical study, theoretical approaches can be understood as focusing on outlining and applying what White calls “the laws of historical dynamics” (1990, 142). Given the concentration of the *conceptual simulation* style on *procedural rhetoric* and therefore *rules*, it is unsurprising that these games generally also function as *constructionist* histories and are infused with theory (even if only of a popular or simplistic nature). Every time developers create a rule that governs a game, they also create an underlying argument about how the world of the past worked. In *conceptual simulations*, the rulesets, like and as theory, work across multiple events in the history, creating a representation weaved of underpinning theoretical rules rather than linear narratives of seemingly unique historical instances (which is generally the basis of *reconstructionist* history). Given the amount and complexity of rules in the typical *conceptual simulation* and the shift to the scope of the historian’s diegetic level, there is therefore generally a *constructionist* emphasis on theory as the way to explain the past. This relationship is also unsurprising because these game rules are probably constructed somewhat in relation to developer-historian’s historical understandings, which are at least partially situated in the everyday overarching theoretical logics we apply to history. After all, these logics are only *rules for* the past.

This concern with causal complexity and theoretical underpinnings probably explains why *conceptual simulation* series, such as *Civilization*, generally engender more academic interest than their *realist* counterparts. As theory-laden histories quite unlike *realist-reconstructionist* games, *conceptual-constructionist* games offer more than a recounting (the *what*) of events and offer a thematic explanation of the past (the *why*). Whilst theory is seen as speculation that “infuses predestined meaning” (Elton 1991, 15) into history by more conservative *reconstructionists*, it is at the core of much of contemporary professional academic history. Indeed, *constructionists* claim the fundamentality of theory to understanding the past because it is a critical tool that “provides frameworks and principles for selecting evidence and thus steers practitioners away from contradictions in their explanations” (Booth 2005, 10). As discussed in Chapters 7 and 9, *conceptual simulation* games offer players access to historical practice by functioning as systems that allow players to construct historical narratives. They structure this production in order to ensure the coherency of these narratives despite the player’s potential relative lack of historical expertise. Thus the rules in *conceptual simulations* work as theory by arguing the historical dynamics of the

past but also by providing the governing logics that ensure the produced explanations about the past are rarely contradictory no matter who plays.

Conceptual simulations are well suited to *constructionist* representation because, as the argument goes, the purpose of theory is that it “brings to the fore interrelations between the components of human experiences at given times and in so doing enriches historical accounts” (Booth 2005, 10). The *conceptual simulation’s* ability to: work at a discursive level beyond historical human experience; emplot on the basis of relative historical values rather than the demands of realism; represent what cannot always be easily represented visually in a *realist* style; jump through time and space; and engage through a ludic (and thus causal) complexity, makes this a rather natural fit. Indeed, it is difficult to see how else *constructionist* history could easily be produced in the digital game form other than through a *conceptual simulation*.

- “The constructionist story space is also a richly referential milieu but one in which theory and abstraction are used to invoke or summon up ‘what it all means’” (Munslow 2010, 156).

These games, while eschewing the kind of referencing found in professional historiography, generally include a vast array of historical referents that link to the larger historical discourse. They also engage both with theory and, as noted, abstraction. Indeed, how could they not? As Booth notes, “identifying historical patterns invariably involves some form of abstract thinking and connections to theoretical explanations and interpretations” (2005, 10). Representing such theoretical thinking is most efficiently achievable by a move away from the demands of realism to an abstraction, such as the words of the history book or the concentration on *procedural rhetoric* of the *conceptual simulation*. This abstraction is also often found in the focus on the generic repeatable quality of historical instances and the shift to the scale of the historian’s diegetic level. Again this is characteristic of the *constructionist* approach.

- “Constructionists ... tend to study collective behavior and are willing to hazard generalizations” (Guttmann 2005, 396).

As I have argued elsewhere (Chapman 2013c), games with *conceptual simulations* generally tend to deal in collective behaviour and action. This is in part due to the freedom introduced by the shift to the historian’s diegetic level and the relinquishing of the concern with showing the past as it appeared to small groups or individual agents. This also highlights the *constructionist* leanings of *conceptual simulations* as this epistemology is, as Munslow puts it, about “hypothesising about the causes of regularities in the past and explaining them, rather than operating at the level of individual historical actors” (2007b, 13). Accordingly, these games are unlike more traditional epistemologies (such as the *reconstructionist* approach), in which history is understood to be mainly, “stories of lives, combinations of

individual lives or happenings, all seemingly individual and unrepeatable" (Postan 1971, 62). Instead, in *conceptual* games generally the stories of the past are highly repeatable generalisations of collective action, structured by the rules that function as theoretical laws of history.

- The *constructionist* approach does at least acknowledge "the intellectual commitments of the author-historian to their particular story space vision for the past" (Munslow 2007b, 18).

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is in the title of the most famous *conceptual simulation* game, *Sid Meier's Civilization*. Similarly, in interviews with developer-historians who make *conceptual simulations* there is often a sense of their role in decision-making in the construction of the representation, frequently detailing why they choose certain aspects of the past and why they interpret the past in particular ways and/or reform game systems in line with this. For example, *Civilization IV*'s lead designer, Soren Johnson, discusses some design decisions in the game's handbook, including changes to the 'tech tree', a sort of flowchart designed to show players different technologies they can choose for their civilisation to research and the benefits and connections between these, according to the game's argument. He explains that they changed this because previously "too often the tree mapped out only what did happen instead of what could have happened ... Playing a game of *Civilization* should inspire the imagination to consider the alternative paths history could have taken, and the new, more open tech tree explores many of these possibilities" (Johnson 2005). Here there is a sense of *Civilization* as an evolving and changing representation in line with the developer's thoughts and concerns, and a sense that there are multiple possible ways of representing the past, something Johnson confirms when he states, "There are a thousand ways to make a game about all of civilization – we only get to make one of them" (Johnson 2005). Similarly, this sense of presence is echoed by the fact that in these *conceptual* games the player's authorial role is not hidden either, they generally have no player-character to function as a diegetic explanation for their intervention into, and perspective on, the historical world.

By comparison, generally in discourse surrounding *realist simulation* games (games in which, as aforementioned, the developer-historian's creative role is implicitly hidden), it is often argued to be only changes in technology (rather than historical understandings and concurrent mechanics) that allows the evolution of the representation. For example, as Randy Pitchford, President of Gearbox Software, puts it when talking about the latest installment in the *Brothers in Arms* franchise, *Hell's Highway*, "[it] makes everything we've ever done look like it was built in the stone ages" (De Weerd 2008). Of course these quotes are somewhat selective, and different developers have different concerns, but they do indicate the general concerns and discourse associated with each simulation style and its epistemological

leanings. However, despite the greater acknowledgements of the historian's/ player's role in the construction of the history in the *conceptual simulation/ constructionist history*, they are still ultimately grounded in a fairly realist and authoritarian epistemology.

- **“reconstructionism and constructionism are evidence-based, objectivist-inspired models in which historians aspire to build accurate, independent and truthful reconstructions of the past” (Booth 2005, 10).**

These empirical claims and aims obviously carry a certain authority and yet, like all approaches to history, the *constructionist* approach has weaknesses. For example, theory has a universalising and reductive tendency, based in the assertion of historical laws, that can exclude a sense of the relativism of human experience, entail a loss of the minutiae of individual historical experiences and fail to account for contingency. Whilst of course these kinds of epistemological debates remain controversial within the history discipline, it is easy to see how it could be argued that an excess of authority in these games' representations could be problematic. Particularly given that this is also arguably a formal issue, as games can struggle to represent uncertainty within gameplay too. Generally rules have to be coherent and comprehensive in order to be fun. Theory is only rules for understanding/ organising the past, in historical games it is also rules for playing with it. As such, a strong unflinching and comprehensive model of causal logic in both gameplay and historical explanation can dominate these games. As such, whereas *conceptual-constructionist* games relinquish the authoritarian visual specificity of *realist-reconstructionist* games, the emphasis on *procedural rhetoric* and the mostly unquestionable (through play) theoretical logics that underpin this, can still be deeply authoritarian. Accordingly, *conceptual-constructionist simulations* still operate partly through a 'reality effect', even if this is less immediately apparent, being subsumed in the ludic aspect. This can be seen to once again align *conceptual simulations* with *constructionist* histories, which sometimes also face criticism for remaining largely authoritarian, being unreflexive and upholding a too firm emphasis on the recoverability of the past.

- **Subsequently, despite being a rich discursive space the *constructionist* history still does not really address issues surrounding the subjective nature of *narrative representation*.**

Simulation Styles and Epistemology

The *realist* and *conceptual* styles of simulation clearly offer very different ways to represent the past within the umbrella term of 'digital historical games'. These categories, which explore the different *ludic aesthetics of historical description*, are not intended to be entirely mutually exclusive and

should be seen as exemplifying the opposite ends of a spectrum of representation in historical games rather than representing a complete and distinct ontology. Many historical games therefore lie somewhere between these categories, mixing elements of both *realist* and *conceptual* style. For example, in the games of the popular *Total War* series, gameplay oscillates between a ‘campaign map’ typical of grand strategy games (the quintessential example of a *conceptual simulation* style) and an RTS (real-time strategy) element when battles take place (see Figure 3.4). Whereas the top-down view and concentration on supplementary menus, symbols, charts and text of RTS are *conceptual* elements, the typical visual specificity and detail are *realist* qualities (although of a different scale than is typical). Thus, not only can a single game shift between the two styles, but also certain genres, such as RTS, can combine *realist* and *conceptual* elements into a single moment of gameplay.¹⁴ Similarly, some games use cartoonish graphics, relinquishing visual specificity in favour of the shorthand for invoking particular stereotypes or tropes that this abstraction allows, while still using the perspectives, scale, focus and emphasis on audio-visual rhetoric and retelling, of the *realist* style. Such games also fall somewhere between *conceptual* and *realist* on the stylistic spectrum, making meaning about the past by utilising both.

Furthermore, even games that exemplify these simulation styles generally still have concessions to the opposing category. As noted, *procedural rhetoric* is still a part of *realist simulations* and the audio-visual aspect plays a role in *conceptual simulations*, these aspects just aren’t the respective rhetorical gestalts. Often compromises must also be made for the sake of gameplay or because of the limitations of the form. For instance, even historical FPS, generally exemplars of the *realist* style, include *conceptual* HUDs (the heads-up display overlaid on the first-person perspective), elements that are non-diegetic to the world of the historical characters that the game represents. These give the player information representing that which was available to the original agents but which cannot be represented less abstractedly in a *realist* representation. For example, crosshairs substitute for the lack of proprioception; health bars, red filters and/or blood splatters



Figure 3.4 Screenshots of *Total War: Rome II* comparing the purely *conceptual simulation* style campaign map mode (left) with the RTS battle mode, which mixes both *realist* and *conceptual* elements (right).

replaces the sensation of pain and the sensing of danger from beyond the current viewpoint; ammo counters replace the weight of magazines; and compasses/arrows, highlighting, or text point out objectives or important objects. Each of these conceptual elements aids gameplay and/or represent aspects of the original historical experience that are impossible to represent more directly through the *realist* style.¹⁵

The *realist* and *conceptual* analytical categories help us to explore different styles of representation (the *ludic aesthetics of historical description*) in historical games. However, these examples emphasise that these categories only map out the boundaries of the spectrum and aim to make the space between somewhat clearer. There is clearly room for the development of further hybridised sub-categories in between. The same can therefore be said for the epistemological approaches that these styles imply and it is of course possible for a game to, for example, concentrate on retelling in one moment and in the next turn to theory. Nonetheless, there are clearly still tangible relations between the styles of historical representation that digital historical games use and the epistemologies that we find in other forms of history. Despite the changes to the ludic form of representation, these epistemological approaches seem to have remained largely intact.

Both the *reconstructionist* and *constructionist* approaches occlude much discussion about form or representation and rest on a claimed direct correspondence between reference and representation. This authoritarian tone can result in histories becoming fixed or innate in popular culture, complete with narrative *decisions* presented to an audience often unaware of them. However, as shall be explored throughout, though particularly in Chapter 9, other qualities of digital games can disrupt these epistemologies. This means that at points we will discuss qualities of games that can be characterised as postmodern and that align with Munslow's third epistemological genre, the *deconstructionist* approach. This is characterised by its concern with pointing to the subjective nature of historical representation itself. This has been left aside in this chapter simply because there are few, if any, historical games that appear to be *constructed* using this approach.¹⁶ This is probably because of the challenges of doing so (particularly in a form that emphasises the absolutism of rules) and the intrinsic loss of authority (and thus loss of claims to a very popularly marketable authenticity) that this epistemology entails. However, it should be noted that there may be qualities of the process of learning to play that intrinsically align with this perspective (see 'Play and Deconstruction', Chapter 10 of Chapman 2013b, 250–58).

Finally, it is important to note that despite the fact that choices about epistemology are clearly somehow made in the construction of historical games, we cannot know how conscious these are. Indeed, for many developer-historians (and perhaps professional historians) these choices probably emerge through the borrowing of cultural codes and styles of historical representation. So, for instance, a developer creating a game might search

for a style he deems to be most ‘authentic’, borrowing this eventually from *Saving Private Ryan*. In this case the game would probably inherit at least some of the film’s particular epistemology, the claimed relationship between, historian, audience, history and past. Similarly, developer-historians could start with an idea about what they want to represent and how accurate they want to/can be about it (epistemology) or some general notion of what mechanics and/or aesthetic they wish to use. As such, without empirical data, it is pragmatic to see simulation and epistemology as complexly over-determinate. Particularly given that ‘developer-historian’ is really a term to describe whole groups of people, all with their own motivations and understandings. Regardless, whether these are, as Poblocki puts it describing *Civilization*, “unconscious manifestations of cultural claims” (2002, 164) or not, every historical representation contains an implicit epistemological approach to the past. Examining simulation styles and their epistemological leanings is thus the first step in understanding how historical games function as historical representations and what historical practices they allow players to engage with. However, these understandings are also dependent on the other structures, such as time, space, narrative and affordances, with which these simulations are combined and which we will now move on to look at in more detail.

Summary

This chapter examined stylistic variations in the *ludic aesthetics of historical description* in digital historical games. This was done by proposing two categories of simulation style, the *realist* and *conceptual*. *Realist simulations* were characterised by their aim to *show* the past as it appeared to agents, visual specificity, their concentration on the audio-visual aspect and their ties to representation at the level of historical agents. Advantages offered by this simulation style included their ease of interpretation, engagement with visual discourses and high visual data loads potentially compounded by players’ spatial agency. The *reconstructionist* epistemological approach was explained and it was argued that this is implied in the *realist simulation* style’s, emphasis on *the* story and authenticity, hiding of the developer-historian’s role and ‘effect of reality’.

Conceptual simulations were characterised as those that aim to *tell* us about the past without purporting to *show* it. It was explained that these simulations generally have abstract audio-visual representations and must therefore rely on procedural rhetoric (a concept which was also explained), with their aesthetics of historical description therefore functioning mainly through the ludic aspect. *Conceptual simulations* were consequently characterised as being capable of relatively heavy and complex ludic information loads. It was also described how this is combined with *conceptual simulations’* operation at the diegetic level of the historian (i.e. of conventional history), making them able to deal discursively with large scale and complex historical systems. This shift in level was argued to be evident in their free movement

through time and space, emplotment of historical elements according to the values they are ascribed within the historian's argument, and ability to deal with processes and systems that are not tangible at the level of individual historical agents. This, it was argued, allows conceptual simulations to function as simulations of discourse about (rather than simulations of) the past.

It was also proposed that this simulation style implies a *constructionist* epistemology, evident in the complex rulesets and concurrent concern with theory, focus on collective action and the occasional acknowledgement of the developer-historian's role. However, it was also explained that the *constructionist* approach still emphasises authority and similar epistemological assumptions to the *reconstructionist* approach and that these assumptions may be problematic. Finally, a description of the frequent mixing of these simulation styles and epistemological approaches argued that these categories should be understood as bookending the spectrum of historical representation in games, within which there are possibilities for multiple game structures and historical approaches.

Notes

1. In some theoretical perspectives, all history can be understood as simulation as, "simulation ... is perhaps the best translation of the Greek mimesis" (Genette 1990, 15). However, in game studies the term is generally used to refer to an interactive or procedural representation. When looking at historical games, which naturally relate to both understandings, the difference becomes less important.
2. Although the *conceptual simulation* style might seem similar to Uricchio's *abstracted/structural* category, the differences can be seen with the example of WWII grand strategy game *Making History*. This game is *conceptual* because of its abstract visual style and concentration on procedural rhetoric and yet *specific* because it explores WWII and allows a speculative encounter with a particular past. Thus, the game is *conceptual* in simulation style and yet *specific* in historical focus and approach.
3. Linderöth and Bennerstedt (2007) use the example of virtual corridors and doors. Whereas in reality we would assume we could walk through these things (unless the doors were locked), they found that in games players would not automatically assume this was the case, understanding that often some of these objects/environments are purely aesthetic. Instead the players actively sought out information about the logic of the game's rules, i.e. whether these things could be traversed.
4. Of course, another possible factor is that the downtime between combat is perceived as too boring for players to include. However, other recent games have also shown that some players enjoy explorable areas or cinematic moments with little or no challenges. One can imagine the dramatic quality, for example, of a brief interlude in a WWII FPS between training and combat that allowed players to explore a mess hall filled with paratroopers nervously awaiting news of their impending drop into Normandy.
5. For example, Allison (2010) argues that WWII FPS echo the celebrated perspectives in other WWII representations by focusing on the experiences of enlisted men rather than the strategy or broader view of, for example, generals.
6. It is for this reason that we speak of the *ludic* aesthetics of historical description.

7. In semiotic theory these images are referred to as ‘iconic’, signs that “reproduce the conditions of perception in the receiver” (Eco cited in Hall 2002, 305). As Hall argues, these kind of “denotative visual signs probably give rise to less ‘misunderstandings’” (2002, 305).
8. See Salvati and Bullinger (2013) for a deeper analysis of how these claims of authenticity are presented, and selectively constructed, in WWII games.
9. Most notably, the term’s use to indicate an involvement in fiction is often unhelpfully conflated with the concept of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1988), a concept that can be used in relation to the performance of different tasks, with or without a fictional aspect.
10. Although we can often still be prompted by box-art, advertisements or cutscenes that function in the realist mode.
11. Indeed these procedural depictions are taken seriously enough that the Russian Military History Society are currently developing a government-funded game following the beginnings of Russian air power during World War 1 (Birnbaum 2013), in order to give more positive representations of Russian military history.
12. This is particularly problematic because such games generally don’t depict the humanitarian consequences of this colonialism. Somewhat ironically, our research suggests that this may be because topics such as genocide and slavery are considered inappropriate for play (Chapman and Linderorth 2015).
13. There is also an argument to be made that board games can be considered a type of *conceptual simulation*. However, given the variation in board games it is clear that further subcategories would also be needed for this conclusion to be fully and usefully applied.
14. Caribbean strategy and exploration games *Sid Meier’s Pirates!* and *Port Royale 3* also constitute examples of historical games that both oscillate between representational styles and mix *conceptual* and *realist* elements.
15. The *Assassin’s Creed* series makes much out of its diegetic explanations for these conceptual elements by using two layers of diegesis, one at the level of historical characters and another at the level of contemporary characters. This latter layer sees the contemporary player-character enter the historical world through a kind of science-fiction genetic time machine.
16. The possible rare exceptions to this are found in the *Assassin’s Creed* series (particularly *IV*, *Liberation* and *Unity*) the storylines of which involve a fictional games development company called Abstergo Entertainment. Players of these games are cast both as developers working for the company (constructing historical games) and as players playing their products. This allows these games to sometimes reflect upon the kind of pressures – both commercial and ideological – placed on the construction of historical games (and popular history more generally) and thus for these games to point to their own process of representation, making them, arguably, *deconstructionist* histories.

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4 Time and Space

Time is a game played beautifully by children.

—Heraclitus (2003, 51)

Historical narratives can be understood as attempts to harness both time and space into an assimilable form. Every form, be it book, film, comic or documentary, has its own particular possibilities and pressures and thus, its own way of handling time and space. When we look at these relationships in games, we are examining a series of related narrative and ludic features that are generally most relevant in terms of how they constrain or enable players. This chapter will outline two common temporal structures (*real/realist time* and *discrete time*) and spatial structures (*narrative garden* and *narrative canvas*) of historical games that are distinguished on the basis of their differing attempts to both manage players' interactions and represent historical time and space. This chapter will also examine the issue of *tense*, *space as power* and *off-screen space* in historical games.

Time in Historical Games

Time is always of concern to those interested in history because “history is the representation of change over time, and as a form of narrative it enables temporal creatures like us to create meaning” (Munslow 2007b, 16). However, time can also be represented and utilised in different ways. As such, in all historical forms an “extremely important dimension of historical narration ... is the way in which the historian constitutes and constructs time” (Munslow 2007b, 50). This is also important to understanding digital historical games. To look analytically at time in digital historical games is always in some way to consider the relationship between *player*; *game/representation*; *past*. However, temporal structures also differ between games. In his seminal *Half Real*, Juul (2005, 141–56) proposes the categories of *play time* (the time spent by the player) and *fictional time* (the time that is represented to have passed in the fictional world of the game). However, the referential nature of historical games means that *fictional time* must become *fictive time* and that we must add a third category: *past time*. This gives us three categories to organise our analysis, meaning that outlining different

temporal structures in historical games is concerned with examining the different possible relationships between *play time*, *fictive time* and *past time*.

Real/Realist Time Structure

Generally in game culture, *real-time* is understood to apply to digital games in which *play time* isn't structurally segmented and instead continues in one flow unless players pause or turn off the game. However, when we look at history in games we are essentially concerned with representation and the relationship between *play time* and *fictive time* is therefore also important. Given this, the most obvious example of a *real-time* relationship is the 1:1 ratio between these categories, as commonly found in first or third person historical action games. In games that use this ratio, the length of our *play time* is portrayed to be the same as the length of the represented time (the *fictive time*). So if we play for five minutes, then it is implied that we are generally meant to assume that five minutes of *fictive time* has also passed for the characters of the game. This is the most basic and obvious meaning of *real-time*.

This 1:1 temporal relationship is partly constructed by the tight match between the actions of the player and the subsequent represented actions of the player-character (or changes in the game state). So when I press a button in a game like *Call of Duty* or *Ryse: Son of Rome*, I expect my player-character's gun to fire or sword to swing without any perceptible delay and the environment or characters to react immediately to impacts. I expect my control of the character to be in what feels like 'real-time', i.e. 1 *play time*: 1 *fictive time*.¹ Murray argues that this tight visceral match between player action and onscreen action can be compelling and it therefore "requires very little imaginative effort to enter such a world because the sense of agency is so direct" (1997, 146). In *realist simulations*, this can therefore be understood as part of the aim to show the past as it is claimed to have appeared to agents. This implies that in historical games there is also a third category of *past time*, as the represented actions of the game characters also relate to actions taken by historical agents in the past. In a *realist simulation*, given the aims and epistemological approach discussed in Chapter 3, the ideal ratio, or that which it would wish to convince us of, would be 1 *play time*: 1 *fictive time*: 1 *past time*.

Consideration of the latter category can actually be rather irrelevant, at least at the level of the individual historical agent that *realist simulations* favour. We rarely have enough data to know, for example, what was done minute-to-minute or second-to-second in the past. We can only hope to perceive the larger-scale temporal collapses or anachronisms for which we have dates and times. Usually the only way we can know the time of the past is *as* the construct we call history. As such, determining that a 1:1:1 relationship is occurring in a historical game is generally problematic. If we know the length of a particular historical battle, it is feasible that this could match both *play time* (the time the player spends playing) and *fictive time* (the time that is represented to pass for the characters). At this basic level a

1:1:1 relationship could be said to be occurring. However, going beyond this level of detail would be difficult. Each event that occurred during the battle would have to happen at the right time as dictated by sufficient historical evidence. Even choosing the level of detail in prescribing this action (e.g. by unit or soldier, minute or second?) would in itself amount to a necessary creative story/content decision, as would deciding what constituted the start or finish of the battle in the past. Even in this ideal scenario, as in any historical narrative, the historian must make decisions about how they will constitute and construct time by deciding on the inclusion, emplotment, frequency, repetition, order and duration of the past events with which they deal. However, games also introduce a further problem. Whereas, if given enough data, a 1:1:1 temporal relationship might be theoretically possible to construct in a film, player agency makes this difficult (if not impossible) in a game because players also make decisions about temporal features alongside developer-historians. Ensuring a player did everything at the correct historical time in a game would eradicate agency and eventually prevent it from being a game at all. Furthermore, games are not simply abstract theoretical objects, they exist in a culture of commercial interests and very few players would probably wish to play a game where the vast majority of their time is spent standing guard, sleeping, waiting, digging fox holes and battles last for days of *play time*. Thus, even where this relationship is possible, we cannot expect popular audiences to have the same desire as say reenactment enthusiasts for a *real-time* historical experience (despite the historical insights this might glean).

As such, in games, as in all forms of history, concentrating on creative uses of *fictive time*, in order to create meaning about the past, is generally more useful than attempting to create pure (1:1:1) real-time. It is the creative manipulation of ratios, for instance, that allows historians to concentrate on the events that they consider to be most significant, in their creation of story spaces (or indeed *(hi)story-play-spaces*). For example, in many historical FPS, the claim to some kind of real-time relationship continues until cutscenes (often documentary style montages) intersect play and inform us, through the conventions we regularly accept from cinema, of the passing of time and/or space between 'scenes'. This use of conventional narrative techniques is necessary if the developer-historian wants to depict the experience of more than one specific event, place or time, at least at the level of the individual agent that *realist simulations* favour. Similarly, often effects such as slow motion are used in *real-time* games. Not only, as in cinema, to elicit particular emotional engagements from audiences, but also to give players extra time to deal with challenges.

The potential problem in real-time games arises from the fact that attempting to convince audiences that what they are seeing between these moments is actually 1:1:1 could again give a problematic authority to the game's representation. In reality, even in these instances, like all history, games are really concerned with producing meaning about the past by constituting and constructing time through narrative. It is always *fictive time* that negotiates the

relationship between the time of the player and the time of the past. It is this that allows historical games' events to somewhat parallel the events of say a historical battle, telling its *story* and representation while still allowing for the realities of gameplay, the form of games one and representation. Due to this use of *fictive time*, the real-time structure in historical games should be more accurately understood as *realist time*. However, it is also fair to say that in many historical games some of the most unique or exciting moments are when the game gives us a sense, however erroneous, that it falls into 1:1:1. Furthermore, there is perhaps a case to be made that in the smallest moments of play that represent very typical and oft-repeated historical actions this might be the case (these are 'ideal types' of events – see Chapter 8 for more on this). For example, we can guess that the match between pressing the controller trigger, seeing the gun fire, and the bullet impact, are probably somewhat equivalent to that which the original historical agents experienced. Subsequently, whilst a true 1:1:1 relationship is impossible to sustain (or often even evaluate), it is probably meaningfully possible in an extremely local and typical sense.

In these moments, a game attempts to maintain some structural similarities to the temporality of the perceptual information in the original historical environment, something significant to the potential of historical games to function as reenactment (see Chapters 7 and 8). *Realist time* structures entail particular types of challenge that are important to this particular function and to the analysis of digital historical games more broadly. Games with these structures force us to react to the challenges of opponents and the environment under the temporal pressure that the potentially constantly changing game state entails. As Atkins notes, "the imperative to act 'in time', as well as in space, is an established weapon in the designers' armoury of challenges, often providing an adrenaline-fuelled reminder of the material body of the player" (2007, 242). This not only represents the imperative to act in time that may have existed in historical situations but also forces players to make reactive historically themed decisions or to develop particular skills, the kinds of activities often claimed to be the pedagogical basis of historical reenactment or roleplay. Subsequently, many of the arguments that historical games make through challenges (about some of the stresses and skills of tactical command, for example) rely on this temporal structure. As Taylor puts it, "People act in time. A good narrative can convey some sense of the ways in which environment, the press of time, and the uncertainty [*sic*] of outcomes affected decisions" (2003, para. 12). He adds that real-time games also have particular potential in this regard, "More than any historical work, these games make the player reflect on what it means to understand time's role in historical action" (Taylor 2003, para. 12). Whilst Taylor probably goes too far in claiming that games make players reflect more than any historical work (this is unclear without studying players), his broader point, however, is well made. Clearly *realist time* games are able to easily make such arguments about the role and pressures of time in historical events. However, this is also possible, although in a different way, through other temporal structures.

Discrete Time Structure

Given that *realist time* offers both opportunities and problems, it is too simplistic to see this as simply superior to other temporal structures in historical games. We do not generally dismiss the words of the book because they do not always function in the real-time often found in cinema. In comparison to the mostly continuous flow of *realist time*, some games break time into discrete sections. Zagal *et al.* call this ‘temporal segmentation’, explaining that this refers to “limiting, synchronizing, and/or coordinating player activity over time” (2008, 178). The most obvious example of discrete temporal structures is the turn-based game. These games use what Zagal *et al.* call ‘temporal co-ordination’ (the other approach being ‘temporal resource’), which has the effect of “forcing the players to co-ordinate their actions so that individual players cannot simultaneously affect the state of the game” (2008, 178). This turn-based discrete temporal structure is common in board games (e.g. *chess* or *Monopoly*). It is also common in historical games, particularly in strategy games. As noted, the epistemological uncertainty and creative use of *fictive time* in real-time historical games means that it is actually more appropriate to label them as using *realist time*. However, games that use *discrete-time* often have even more fluid *fictive time*. An obvious example of this is that in turn-based games *fictive time* is generally ‘paused’ while *play time* yet continues. Such games easily include extreme ratios between *play time* (which remains at 1) and *fictive time* and *past time*. As such, like *realist time*, *discrete* temporal structures also have a particular meaning for the constitution and construction of historical time in games.

As noted, temporal elements, such as the duration, frequency and order of the narratorial voice’s focus on historical events, are key narrative elements that the historian decides. For example, duration “is the sum of ‘real time’ elapsed in the content/story and the total of discourse time (space allocated to it in the history text) taken up in presenting it” (Munslow 2007b, 56). Generally historians control this, but in historical games this is also affectable by the player (particularly alongside more open narrative structures). For example, there is often no limit to the turn time that a player may take in a turn-based game. This is not the equivalent of simply pausing in reading a history book (or pausing a *realist time* game) because players in these moments, where they are exploring and considering the information and possible actions, are still described as *playing* the game. Despite the delay in *fictive time* (in the sense that the fictive world is paused), the historical narrative is still being built by the player in negotiation with the game. Thus, in games, *discourse time* is the same as *play time* and in these turn-based games the player has control over this (and therefore also its ratio with *fictive time* and *past time*). Similarly, the availability of the decisions to be made and actions to be taken, and how long the effects of these take to manifest in the representation, is generally dependent on players’ previous actions and achievements (such as gathering resources). Each of these examples has the ability to effect the amount of *discourse time* allocated to a historical event

or process, meaning that some elements may be given more or less time and focus in narration, and highlighted as more or less significant, by some players than others. This makes duration much more malleable and uncertain than in conventional forms.

By managing the gameplay experience through time as done in turn-based games, the developer-historian hands the player some control of temporal narrative features, without being able to guide them through the use of temporal pressure (i.e. the necessity to act ‘in time’). Developer-historians recognise this. *Civilization* creator Sid Meier describes in an interview how the *real-time* structure used in early builds was quickly deemed too passive (Schreier 2013). Meier and his team then changed the game to a turn-based structure and in doing so “They gave more control to the player and changed up the pacing: now, instead of waiting for the world to change, players could change the world. Time wouldn’t progress until players made their decisions” (Schreier 2013). When the player does make decisions about what should happen in such games then the game carries it out, generally requiring relatively little input after this point. However, there is also generally a delay, in the sense that these actions may not actually occur until the player ends their turn, but also in that it is common not to experience the results (the changes in the game state) that these decisions bring about for many turns.²

This lengthening of time before the game responds with the desired outcome of the player’s action is often meaningful. For instance, this can be used to make an argument about the amount of time, work and resources that a society or person invested, according to the developer-historian’s model, in order to discover, build or research whatever historical referent the player has chosen. The turn-based structure is frequently used to clearly quantify this argument (e.g. 100 turns to build a castle) and generally this is relative to the resources that the player’s historical collective already has, nuancing this argument further. Kee and Graham (using Aarseth *et al.* 2003 typology) note the mimetic quality of this use of temporal structure by comparing *Civilization* to *Caesar IV*. In the latter game a “brand-new Coliseum can instantly be placed within a city (time is ‘Arbitrary’), whereas in *Civilization IV* time is ‘Mimetic’ (imitated), so it takes a number of turns, reflecting something of the actual cost in time, to build a Coliseum” (Kee and Graham 2014, 277). In this way, the turn system can be used to represent the nature and complexity of historical objects and processes, their relation to existing societal, technological and cultural infrastructures, and to make broad arguments about the interrelations between time, resources and power, all through the tangible pressures of rules and gameplay. Importantly, this ‘number of turns system’ also returns control over some temporal narrative elements to the developer-historian. Although they cannot control *play time*, they can still exert control over *fictive time* (and its relation to *past time*) and use this to make meaning about the past. This allows developer-historians to make arguments about historical time without forcing players to invest real time as a resource to explain this.

Whilst the player's control means the temporal ratio in such games is fluid, generally *fictive time* passes much quicker than *play time*, something evident in the thousands of years depicted to pass in a game of *Civilization* or the decades in a game of *Making History*. However, in deciding some aspects of this *fictive time* to *play time* relationship, the developer also has a significant control, deciding the temporal scale and scope of the game, the length of historical time that a turn is represented as the equivalent of (whether in years, months, days or minutes) and the ultimate temporal boundaries of the representation. The relationship between *fictive time* and *past time* is also dependent on both the player and the developer-historian. As well as making decisions about the temporal meaning of a turn, developer-historians create temporal structures that determine what can and cannot be done by players within the *fictive time*. Although this varies between games, what this means is that something that took a certain amount of time in the past can be depicted to take less/more time in the *fictive time* of the game, depending on the actions of players. For example, in *Making History* we might find that WWII breaks out in 1939, but because we play skillfully we defeat Germany by 1943, two years earlier than in reality. Alternatively, the war might take longer if we make poor decisions. Often in *Civilization* we will make technological, ideological or scientific discoveries far before they occurred in reality, provided we are skillful enough to have the resources to do so. In these cases, *fictive time* has been constituted by both the player's gameplay decisions and the developer-historian's design decisions. Instead of using *fictive time* as a direct reflection of *past time* (i.e. by showing time as an experience in itself), *fictive time* is used to make arguments about what it was that resulted in *past time* occurring as it did in the first place.³ Whilst the relationship between *play time*, *fictive time* and *past time* will never align (as in most historical narratives), even in the smallest moments of play, it is not important for it to do so. Instead the temporal relationship in these kinds of games is *discursive*.

As such, the temporal relations of these games most heartily emphasise the approach of the *conceptual* simulation and its move to the conventional historian's diegetic level. As Metz writes, "one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme" (1974, 18). These games take full advantage of this function of historical narrative in their efforts to create historical meaning and allow the developer-historian and player to move easily through historical time in order to make meaning – pointing to, exploring or constructing, connections or disconnections between objects, cultures, people, events, or locations, of the past, even when separated by many years. Such games allow for meaningful analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (flashforward). These too are key elements of the ways in which historians use order (Munslow 2007b, 55). Eskelinen notes this discursive shift, "turn-based strategy games such as *Civilization* seem to favour causal relations over temporal ones" (2004, 40). This temporal structure also has the advantage of more obviously highlighting the shift to

constituted and constructed narrative time that history *always* necessitates and yet which histories such as *realist time* games often try to hide.

The *discrete* temporal structure also offers advantages in the interactions it encourages. As Sid Meier notes, “Time is a critical element in games, and one of the characteristics of *Civilization* is you have as much time as you want to think about things” (Crair 2011, 2). Although the challenges of the game still offer a ludic pressure, there is no temporal imperative.⁴ This is significant because it allows these games to include large amounts of information in extensive menu-like interfaces, with the player given as much time as they require in order to peruse this information and the possible consequences and meanings of their decisions. In turn, this allows representations with complex and large-scale historical information and systems and thus an engagement with historical theory. This is also important to the opportunities these games create for players to build historical narratives (as discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 9). Providing a *(hi)story-play-space* with this temporal structure gives players opportunities to think in terms of temporalities during play, considering possible gameplay futures and the possibility of alternate pasts, perhaps even engaging in historical reflection, and of course the necessary time to understand complexity is an important condition for learning. This space for consideration seems to have been exactly Meier’s aim and he states: “I want the player to be living in the future of the game, to be thinking what’s going to happen next ... The game is really happening in their head, as opposed to on the screen” (Crair 2011, 2). Such games allow players time to implement long-term or complex strategies and goals, and to consider possible options, rather than simply quickly reacting to real-time threats. Similarly, the kind of time for consideration that this temporal structure offers also seems to provide good conditions for *configurative resonance*. Whether these opportunities are taken up really depends on individual players, but there is some evidence of at least some players indulging in this kind of engagement, both inside and outside formal education, in precisely these kinds of games (Apperley 2007, 2013; Squire 2004; Taylor 2003).

Tense in Historical Games

Tense is somewhat complicated in historical games. Although a concern with the past would seem to indicate a firm past tense, confusingly, historical film, for example, often engages the past by utilising the present tense (Rosenstone 2006, 16). Historical games also present their virtual events in the present tense to some degree. “On the personal computer or console, history has always been presented as live event, has always been marked with a sense of urgency as it unfolds through play, and has never been a static text in which the player can make no meaningful intervention” (Atkins 2005, 6). Generally games using the *realist simulation* style (particularly those that also use *realist time*) have a strong sense of present tense. These games

are thus similar to mainstream historical films (what Rosenstone describes as ‘dramatic features’), from which they often draw stylistic inspiration. “Portraying the world in the present tense, the dramatic feature plunges you into the midst of history, attempting to destroy the distance between you and the past and to obliterate – at least while you are watching – your ability to think about what you are seeing” (Rosenstone 2006, 16). This, as described in the previous chapter, is the aim of the *realist-reconstructionist* simulative style and epistemology, a focus on representing the past to the player as it is claimed to have appeared to historical agents and thus finding its authority in the same destruction of distance. The sense of present, tangible action and challenge that the *realist time* structure offers emphasises this feeling of present tense and makes it difficult to think about what we are seeing. This begins to hint at the idea that some opportunities for interacting with history in games can also be more mechanistic than traditionally discursive, something important to some games’ function as reenactment through challenge (as discussed further in Chapters 7 and 8). However, it also means that such games encourage us to react to challenges rather than think about history. Thus although these games are designed to resonate with our historical understanding, they also conversely encourage us to momentarily forget the past tense of this relationship.

Whilst this present tense might offer possibilities in terms of audience engagement, it also runs the risk of further reinforcing the reality effect of these representations. The use of present tense also means the loss of some of the narrative tropes we use to talk about the past without totally subsuming its ‘pastness’. Both these possibilities for engagement and this authority are probably partly why this present tense is so widespread in mainstream film, television and games. However, whilst *realist simulation* games generally have this emphasis on the present tense, this rarely remains so for the entire experience of the game. As noted, often these games contain extra-ludic and extra-diegetic elements (outside the gameplay and dramatic narrative respectively), such as primary and secondary sources in their menus. In these, there is an obvious change to the consciously historical past tense – akin to a documentary or the typical history book. Sometimes, however, efforts may be made to keep this extra information diegetic. For example, in *Brothers in Arms: Hell’s Highway* these kinds of sources are presented to the player as ‘recon reports’. Similarly, *Assassin’s Creed* utilises its science-fiction narrative layer to explain the reports on historical objects as coming from the historian in the contemporary team supporting the historical hero. In these moments, tense becomes less clear, shifting from one moment of gameplay to the next, with players dealing with sources about/from the past and yet the representation and gameplay also involving the maintenance of a sense of present tense.

There is also potentially a shift during cutscenes. These are generally presented in the present tense. However, we also often step outside our character and are no longer an active member of the *emergent* historical world. It can

therefore be argued that these scenes allow a more conscious acknowledgment of the historical past tense. Furthermore, the relaxation of ludic pressure in these moments means that the distracting effect of challenge on our ability to think about what we are seeing is negligible.⁵ It is also common for *realist* games to shift tense by using analepsis or prolepsis (flashback and flash forward). For example, this is a large part of the narrative of the *Brothers in Arms* series and Cold War thriller FPS *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. This narrative structure allows for greater variety between levels (as it easily explains significant jumps in time and space, even in *realist* simulations) and also helps to negotiate discrepancies between the implied memories of the historical character and the player that plays as them. These moments are not only past tense in the sense that they relate to history, but in that they also relate to the history of the game's fictive world and its characters, muddling the tense further. And yet, always in gameplay moments in the *realist* simulation and time historical game, we are, often exhilaratingly, involved in a paradoxically present tense *historical* experience.

Conceptual simulation games also often maintain some sense of both present and past tense. Again, this is partially contributed to by included primary or secondary sources. For example, the historical descriptions typical to the included information resources in strategy games (the most famous of which is *Civilization's* 'civlopedia') often function in a conventional past tense. In addition to this, the shift to the diegetic level of the historian rather than historical agent (and thus the lack of the sense of lived historical experiences) also entails a shift to traditional and explicit narrative past tense. Perhaps most importantly, such games also often cultivate a sort of 'knowing' past tense. Much of their historical joy lies in the encouragement of players to create dissonance between what is understood to *have* happened and what during gameplay *could* happen and in turn what *could have* happened (see Chapters 7 and 9 for more on games as counterfactual history). Similarly, players who set each other extra-telic goals (those not explicitly set by the game itself) sometimes do this on the basis of a similar relation between what did happen and what could happen in the game and/or could have happened in the past (see Apperley 2007). In allowing the freedom for players to create these narratives, these games highlight that the present moment is the site of past representation, as Rosenstone (2006, 19) argues that oppositional or innovative historical films do. But it is also this tension between the game's discourse about the past and the player's intervention and historical understanding of the 'real' past in the present, that is both supported by and creates this 'knowingness', which infuses this past tense with an irony perhaps best described as postmodern. As postmodernist historian Munslow argues, "Self-conscious playing (ludic history) with the timing of the text to defamiliarise the reception of the past is always permissible and is to be encouraged" (2007b, 108). In this 'knowingness', games that allow players intervention into timing in this way arguably achieve this playful defamiliarisation.

Space in Historical Games

As Mostern puts it, “At least in principle, historians also recognise that history unfolds through space ... [however] it is fair to say that we have found it more cumbersome, and perhaps less important, to trace spatial relations than to trace temporal relations” (2010, para. 3). This is changing somewhat with the advent of digital technologies (such as geographical information systems) and the decline of theories of cultural exceptionalism in favour of theories that are more spatially focused. Historical games also frequently align with this trend. Indeed, “The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation” (Aarseth 2007, 154). Most gameplay (digital or otherwise) is in some regard about spatial relations. In digital games this means negotiating real space in response to, and to gain particular responses from, screen-based spatial representations. These virtual ‘spaces’ often both structure our gameplay and help define its meaning, as Juul notes, “space is a special issue between rules and fiction” (2005, 188).⁶ Historical games entwine both space and historical narrative (which can be understood as a representation of time). This is an important feature of historical games because “Historians in particular should consider it impossible to teach without explicit, sustained and sophisticated reference to space and place” (Mostern 2010, para. 6).⁷

‘Space’ is often an important part of the challenges of digital games. Whether in terms of negotiating the controls and the traversal of a complex 3D environment, or simply learning to perceive the role of space as a tactical resource, gameplay generally makes understanding a game’s spatial representation a pressing concern. These environments are also often filled with “evocative narrative elements” (Nitsche 2008, 3) that present the game world as a fictional space where certain events may happen or already have happened. Often these functions of spatial representation are interrelated. For example, Mateas (2004) describes how *Quake*’s “creepy industrial mazes” (2004, 26) can function as a ‘proto-plot’, working both as an engaging representation and attempting to cue the player into realising the affordances of the game. Combining the tropes of the FPS and Hollywood horror movie, the game hints that NPC’s are likely to be aggressive, gameplay combative and that we should move forward cautiously. As Jenkins puts it, “The heavy-handed exposition that opens many games serves a useful function in orienting spectators to the core premises so that they are less likely to make stupid and costly errors as they first enter into the game world” (2004, 126).

Both the challenging and representational qualities of virtual space are similarly important to history in the game form. Space determines what historical narratives the game can support by structuring what can be done by players and by functioning as a means of storytelling for developers. Space can be used to both “evoke pre-existing narrative associations” and “provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted” (Jenkins

2004, 123). In historical games, this generally means attempting to evoke a player's historical understanding, invoke the larger historical discourse and providing a *challenging* 'space' for players to exercise their (narrative) agency in relation to. Jenkins also notes that spatial stories can be used to both "embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene" or "provide resources for emergent narratives" (2004, 123). It is in the emphasis on each of these purposes that we can start to make a distinction in spatial structures in digital historical games between what I term space as *narrative gardens* and space as *narrative canvas*.

Narrative Gardens Spatial Structure

In games that utilise the *narrative gardens* spatial structure, the role of space in the historical narrative is more heavily oriented towards embedding information. Due to its emphasis on players experiencing a largely fixed historical space as an aesthetic experience, *realist simulations* naturally favour this structure. In *narrative gardens*, space and narrative are deeply and inextricably linked. In fact, because what we experience in games is not space at all but simply manipulable representations of space, space in these games (as well as having other functions) *is* narrative, or at least a part of it.⁸ In a sense, this relationship is apparent in the long held arguments that narrative has a spatial quality. "Stories can plot events into lines, create hierarchies, unite beginnings and ends to form circles, or tie knots and design labyrinths" (Potteiger and Purinton 1998, 7). This is perhaps unsurprising given that it can be argued that language itself (particularly when dealing with abstraction) is rooted in spatial metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

An emphasis on embedding narrative elements is part of what allows developers to tell specific (hi)stories. As Jenkins (2004) notes, embedded narrative elements constitute what Don Carson, a show designer for Walt Disney Imagineering, calls "environmental storytelling" (Carson 2000). In the simulated environments of Disneyland "the story element is infused into the physical space a guest walks or rides through. In many respects, it is the physical space that does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell" (Carson 2000, 1).⁹ *Narrative gardens* historical games use spatial representation in the same way. This environmental storytelling relates both to the fixed historical narrative that the developers want to communicate and the one that we create through play. For instance, in a WWII FPS, like *Brothers in Arms* or *Call of Duty*, we might happen upon a deserted village with bullet holes and scorch marks on the scenery, vehicles on fire and corpses strewn around. This kind of "staged area" (Carson 2000, 2) might add to our understanding of the type of events that constitute the larger narrative of D-Day, but it might also cue us into being wary because combat has recently taken place and there may be enemies nearby. Our understanding of the larger historical narrative and the potential constraints on our actions at the smaller gameplay level (which also create the

larger arguments) is prompted through the same *mise-en-scène*. Sometimes this storytelling may be more specific or complex than this and explain to us sequences of action that have occurred in the game world. In these games, the player is invited to function as a detective trying to piece together the sequence from the environmental clues.

Digital games that emphasise environmental storytelling utilise the *narrative gardens* spatial structure. Lamm explains the similarities between gardens and virtual reality (VR), thusly:

Gardens can be seen as an organized sequence of staged situations. The designer has created a condition where the protagonist is taken along paths through sceneries and settings to please and surprise. Gardens are experienced spatially which ultimately means we can walk around in them. It is a three-dimensional frame that although it does not offer a strict linear narrative (telling that ...) has a narrating expression (telling about ...). (2002, 216)

Both gardens and *narrative gardens* games are a type of designed aesthetic experience and yet in each we also have some agency. In these games, we are guided through a series of staged situations by spatial restrictions or narrative/gameplay objectives. In both formal gardens and often in virtual 'spaces', "there is no random collection of elements that combined gives an expression but rather a meticulously arranged composition with carefully planned *sequences* of elements with particular meaning" (Lamm 2002, 215, my emphasis). However, whereas formal gardens are narrative because they tell us the story of ideal place (Lamm 2002, 216), historical games are narrative because they tell us stories of past spaces.

The amount of agency we experience within *narrative gardens* differs between games. In some historical games, particularly first or third person shooters (and sometimes action-adventure games), the space is arranged as a linear series of fairly tightly defined *narrative gardens*. This use of *narrative gardens* cleaves most closely to the narrative structure of history books or mainstream historical film. This gives the developer-historian most control over spatial storytelling and ensures that the player is confronted with all of the spatial elements and events of the history in a particular emplotment as they progress forward, spatially narrating the environmental narrative that the developer-historian has fixed into their path. This also means that these games find it easiest to appropriate narrative conventions from more traditional forms. For example, as Krzywinska puts it, "limiting and directing the movement of the player character is essential to the creation of pleasurable effects such as fear and suspense" (2006, 79). However, even in these tightly defined paths, we still have local agency. We determine our player-character's movements backward or forward through the spaces and their use and exploration of the immediate space (subject to pressure from challenges). Nonetheless, these kinds of *narrative gardens* reinforce the *reconstructionist*

epistemology associated with the *realist simulation* style most heavily. If the game is presenting *the* story, then spatial deviations from the larger spatial/narrative pattern are generally to be avoided, as they detract from this authority and run the risk of incoherency.

In other historical games, *narrative gardens* can be very different. For example, gameplay in open-world historical games, such as the *Assassin's Creed* series, *The Saboteur*, *Mafia* series and *Red Dead Redemption*, typically takes place in one or two very large *narrative gardens* within which we have a lot of spatial freedom (see Figure 4.1). This is still an environment for storytelling. However, it is much more dedicated to providing a general spatial experience that makes a broad argument about how the world of the past was by allowing players to freely explore it, producing their own spatial narratives in conjunction with the environmental challenges of enemies and terrain. This is quite different than the storytelling of the linear type that, as noted, instead scripts a specific story of events by sequencing a series of discrete *narrative gardens*. However, sequenced stories can still be told by developer-historians in these open-world digital historical games by implementing extra environmental pressures in particular areas and utilising other constraining narrative structures, such as objectives and *framing narrative* (see Chapters 5 and 6). These often provide 'missions' than players can select and that then somewhat organise their spatial experience by directing them to particular areas. Similarly, large-scale sequencing is also often achieved by making areas of the map inaccessible until the player completes certain objectives and experiences certain narrative events, or until their player-character obtains the correct empowerment through equipment or the development of skills.



Figure 4.1 Screenshot of the city of Florence in *Assassin's Creed II*. As this is an open-world game, we are generally free to roam around this (and the other cities that make up the game's *narrative garden* structure) freely.

What each of these types of *narrative gardens* indicates is that in historical games spatial agency also has a narrative quality. Broadly speaking, more spatial freedom for players, as in open-world *narrative gardens*, means more of a role for them in the construction of the produced historical narrative, as they can determine the journeys that are taken by the player-character and/or the spaces in which events occur. By comparison, linear *narrative gardens* allow for more control over the produced historical narrative to reside in the developer's hands, having epistemological and historiographical implications, as noted. However, the historical spaces are designed to constitute a narrative experience in each type and the emphasis is mainly on the *discovery* of stories. It is this that separates *narrative gardens* from the *space as canvas* structure.

Space as Canvas Structure

As discussed, *narrative gardens* have advantages in terms of storytelling. However, these games also have disadvantages. Spaces that are too detailed or predetermined make the creation of fresh stories more difficult (Jenkins 2004; Lynch 1960). By comparison, in digital historical games that use the *space as canvas* spatial structure, the emphasis is on virtual space as a resource in which, and from which, players can craft historical narratives. If the first spatial structure is a garden through which we wander experiencing the implicit narrative expressions, then games that use the *space as canvas* structure are patches of unkempt grassland containing the basic resources for a garden, but awaiting a gardener (the player) to formalise and decide its exact spatial narrative expression with the various tools that are provided.

Here space is a partially filled canvas awaiting the player to complete it by inscribing their own representation upon it and we are not so much narrative travellers in virtual space as we are authors of it. The most common example of this in historical games is the map-like spatial representations of strategy games.¹⁰ The vast map-like spaces of a game like *Civilization*, for example, initially relatively empty of human history, lead us to the understanding that this is not a map to be followed, but instead annotated with players' inscriptions about, and upon, representations of historical space. There is an obvious harmony between a shift to the historian's diegetic level (looking down upon the world, moving easily through time and space) and giving players the means to use space as a discursive narrative resource when creating historical narratives through play. And, indeed, most digital historical games that use the *space as canvas* spatial structure also utilise *conceptual simulations*. This allows the player's moulding of space to occur quickly and efficiently at a large-scale without wasting time on attempting diegetic explanations for the player's power.

Typically in games that use this *space as canvas* structure, a narrative discourse is spun about historical cities, monuments and encampments being built and razed; resources being found and exploited; wilderness being cleared; important trade routes created and blockaded; fronts of warfare,

encampments and fortifications established and defeated; explorers seeking out other cultures and lands; armies being raised, garrisoned, stretched and scattered; and military, cultural and economic empires forged and lost. All of these themes have an intrinsically spatial aspect and these historical narratives are created by players on the spatial canvas of the game, often by making long-lasting (or even permanent) changes to it. These narratives are created through a discursive process in conjunction with the developer-historian, who decides elements of the procedural rhetoric, what it is possible for players to do and the presence of environmental pressures, such as non-player characters or factions (NPCs), resources and objectives. As such, even these *space as canvas* historical games can have an authority and sense of authenticity, although, unlike the typically *realist narrative gardens* structure, this is more through the emphasis on procedural exposition of spatial arguments *about* the past rather than spatial representation *of* the past. However, the emphasis in these games is still firmly on player choices and their role in deciding the historical narrative that unfolds within, and utilises, the spatial representation.

Although the spatial representation in historical games with the *space as canvas* structure may start relatively blank, gameplay means the growth and change of this in a way that can be compared to a city. “Cities themselves also have a rich, emergent folk narrative of their own – a messy, unplanned story of ad-hoc expansion, a stark contrast to the highly controlled schema of narrative spaces” (Pearce 2007, 200).¹¹ The spatial narratives arising from gameplay in these games are generally similarly messy stories of expansion, the unfocused result of multiple competing factors (both in terms of the shared authorship of the space by developer-historian and player, and in terms of the player’s competition and negotiation with the challenges of the game, such as NPCs). Like the city, the space of the game becomes not only thematically historical, but also a spatial historical narrative, a landscape that documents the forces at play and the changes that have been made to it over time. In historical games which use the *space as canvas* structure, the spatial representation is both a visual record and component of the historical narratives that the player is invited to create through playfully negotiating the challenges of the game, inscribing simple narrative expressions upon the map to lie alongside, and within, that which is pre-inscribed by the developer. It would require familiarity and an exploratory expertise with the particular game for this spatial historical narrative to be re-told by an observer. Nonetheless, as with most game narratives, the main point is not in the promise of a retelling that will probably never take place, but in the active process of discursive writing through play.

Space as Power

Most types of games are not only played in space but also explicitly use space as a resource that players compete to control. This is obviously the

case in many board games and sports, for instance. Although space in digital games is really only a manipulable representation of space, the principle remains much the same. Given that designers generally aim to make themes in some way resonant with gameplay, “The core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces” (Jenkins 2004, 122). Historical games are therefore predisposed towards particular kinds of historical narratives and themes because of the preoccupation with space in gameplay.

Most obviously, there is an obsession with travel stories, quests and epic journeys. Indeed, “Games fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero’s odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives” (Jenkins 2004, 122). These kind of stories are particularly common in historical shooter and action-adventure games whereby the player’s travel through linear *narrative gardens* serves as both a mark of, and reward for, their skill and progress, linking space and power. This dynamic is obvious in WWII FPS, which tend towards what Zagal *et al.* (2008, 178) call spatial and challenge segmentation. Space becomes a reward for the completion of challenges and the games therefore focus on the frontline experience of WWII combat, which at its most basic was about the taking of land and driving back of enemies, moving the frontline gradually forward. Of course, in doing so, these games also simplify warfare to this travel story dynamic, potentially excluding other important aspects. Space is also related to notions of power at the local level in these games because it is a tactical resource. As Juul puts it describing historical FPS *Battlefield 1942*, “the topography of the island not only cues the player into imagining an island, it also provides cover and hides information ... The shape of the island determines choke points, which points are easily defended or very vulnerable, and more generally which strategies will work for either side on this map” (2005, 188–89).

Historical strategy games, which generally utilise the *space as canvas* structure, also have an obsession with space, although slightly differently. As noted, many of the kinds of narratives that commonly occur through play in these games are overtly spatial. Generally in these games, as in their board and wargame predecessors, the concentration is on expansion and the advantages in resources that this offers. Here the emphasis is not on traversing the space as a progressive journey but instead in some way owning, changing or controlling it. The frequently relatively blank, and often natural, canvas-type spaces of these games often therefore invoke the colonialist notion of *terra nullius*, the empty land awaiting possession (Douglas 2002). Furthermore, we are generally encouraged to remove the indigenous peoples that do occupy this space in order to fully write our historical narrative upon it. This ties to the wider cultural discourse of indigenous people as somehow before history, with history only beginning when we cultivate the land, whereas these people (and their digital representations) are seen as *of* the land (Ingold 2000, 134–35). These ideas are also apparent in the

very name of the '4X' genre of strategy games, which stands for *eXplore*, *eXpand*, *eXploit* and *eXterminate*. Extermination is not always physically violent and in some of these games this can be achieved by forms of cultural, economic or technological subjugation that seek to imitate less overt forms of imperialism. However, even in these cases, there is still generally a gradual eradication of the host's culture, taking cultural, and literal, space in the process. Similarly to shooter and action games, space therefore also becomes a mark of progress and linked to power in these strategy games.

This focus on space as a competitive resource means that generally in historical games space tends to be very much linked only to conflict, domination and power. Travel stories are, at their core, about the mastery of space, overcoming conflict and environmental obstacles, and generally focus on 'great men' that are, at least partly, marked as remarkable precisely by their journey. Similarly, the focus on expansion in the game mechanics of strategy games results in histories obsessed with colonialism, imperialism, warfare and other forms of domination.¹² And yet, as noted, because games often have problems explicitly including controversial content (Chapman and Linderth 2015) and given the typically macro perspectives of strategy games (which the *conceptual* simulation allows), these games rarely show the human cost of such processes. In most historical games, the tactical or strategic resources that space provides are its main function in gameplay. As such, space is not only an experience but also a means to claim more space and a mark of power.

Inevitably this plays a role in constraining and determining the histories that are, and can be, easily made in games. This can mean, for example, an exclusion of the role of space in other less overtly competitive, less extreme, historical experiences, such as in the everyday processes of domestic or agricultural life. The conception of space only as it relates to power in the 'top down' history of 'great men', politics, empire and warfare is nothing new to popular history, nor sadly to professional history. However, in the latter, the gradual rise of social and cultural history since the 1960s has meant a partial escape from this, an acknowledgement of other perspectives on, and in, the past. However, it would appear that the formal pressures that games exert on historical content through their concentration on space as a competitive resource might make a similar sea change more difficult in historical games, even apart from commercial and popular pressures.

This said, different game structures also negotiate space in different ways. Historical open-world action-adventure games generally have less of an emphasis on space as power. Whilst in competitive moments (e.g. during missions) space may be a tactical resource, typically much of the experience of these open-world games is spent freely travelling through, or roaming around, the map rather than engaged in competitive gameplay. The focus is therefore generally on the exploration, rather than ownership, of space. Of course given certain historical settings and characters, such as the frontier history of *Red Dead Revolver* or the colonial American history of *Assassin's*

Creed III, this exploration can become associated with notions of power and for example, colonialist expansion, once more. However, this is not intrinsic to the gameplay in the same way as in FPS and strategy games but instead emerges from the chosen historical context.¹³ Furthermore, these historical open-world games are also generally more likely to include everyday spaces in their representations (as discussed in Chapter 7).

There is also an argument to be made that the emphasis on space as a resource in historical games can also have advantages. For example, Mostern notes a positive example of spatial history:

a 1959 classroom exercise in which history students marked a blank United States map, including only river systems and lakes, with the locations where they expected cities, railroads and highways to arise. They discussed their reasoning, and finally compared their hypotheses with a map that included the actual historical information. (2010, para. 5)

Playing strategy games is often rather like this exercise. If we are to succeed in these games, generally we also have to learn the utility of natural spaces. In *Civilization*, for example, city placement in relation to natural resources is enormously important to strategic play and the game series' procedural rhetoric therefore answers Mostern's call for an emphasis on "the relationship between natural resources and settlement patterns" (2010, para. 25). These games also offer direct feedback as to the consequences of the spatial patterns we deploy. Which, while undoubtedly lacking the contextual nuance of classroom discussion, offer a similarly discursive engagement with the idea of historical space. However, unlike the classroom exercise, these games often don't provide a comparative map of what actually did happen alongside those that emerge through play. They are perhaps then open to the same critique that Mostern (2010, para. 14) aims at Fernandez-Armesto's *The World: A History* (2007), in that they explore issues of space without historicising them or locating their elements within a corporeal geospatial world. Nonetheless, historical strategy games like *Civilization*, as Squire and Jenkins (2003) note, do clearly engage ideas of environmental determinism, the idea that historical power relations have been shaped by location and access to natural resources, arguments most famously made by Jared Diamond (1997).¹⁴ Thus, whilst the selective focus on warfare and colonial and imperial expansion is potentially troubling, this is at least partially positioned as spatially determined rather than because of some kind of cultural superiority.¹⁵ However, in doing so, what these games risk, as environmentally deterministic histories always do, is suppressing how colonial and imperial expansion was also ideologically enabled. Nonetheless, through the trial and error of multiple playthroughs, such games at least allow us to explore *spatial variation*. And it is this that, as Mostern argues, "helps to explain the range of human lifeways, the capacity of peoples, goods and ideas to

move from place to place, the terms by which peoples have encountered one another, and how rulers governed populations” (2010, para. 6).

Off-Screen Space

As I have argued elsewhere (Chapman 2014b; 2014c), virtual space that is only hinted at or that is excluded in a given moment of gameplay can also be very important to historical representation in games. In *realist simulation* games, such as FPS, this off-screen space plays a number of important roles (Chapman 2014b). It can be used in order to cue us into imagining fictional spaces beyond, although related to, what is depicted on the screen, implying larger fictive worlds than can possibly be represented on screen. The movement of gunfire, planes and allies, for example, seemingly between these on and off-screen spaces, implies a wider historical world and therefore situates the events of the game in a larger historical narrative. Off-screen space is also important to the challenges of historical games, challenges that work to create arguments about the historical experiences, processes and challenges of the past. For example, first-person perspectives in games restrict our view, presenting only a portion of the virtual environment at once. This works as an information rule, making much information about the environment (and thus game state) unavailable without player action. Similarly, terrain often blocks our view, also creating off-screen space where enemies can hide or shield themselves. Off-screen space is thus an important part of the core challenges and mechanics of such games. The gathering of information, use of cover, flanking and the special properties of explosives (e.g. not needing a line of sight), for example, are all related to off-screen space. Furthermore, these games often force players to act without information, making arguments about the uncertainty of war and the challenges facing commanders.

Similarly, in *conceptual* simulations such as historical strategy games, off-screen space also plays an important role (Chapman 2014c). The ‘fog of war’ mechanic common to such games (that prevents players from seeing areas of the map properly unless they have units nearby) also functions as an information rule (through creating off-screen space) and serves to emphasise the uncertainty of historical strategy and the need for information, whether through espionage, reconnaissance or diplomacy. Off-screen space can also be important to the implied epistemological claims of a game, with a seeming lack of this space creating a sense of completeness and arguing for the scale and scope of its historical representation. This type of space also often has a role in procedural rhetoric. For example, arguably *Civilization*’s implication of off-screen space only in the North and South emphasises the game’s concentration on the history of the world as a series of movements between East and West, echoing its focus on both colonialism and environmental determinism. Off-screen space is also important in strategy games for implying smaller historical spaces that cannot be represented but are a relevant part of the discourse. In both types of games discussed here, it

is therefore apparent that historical representation can also be reliant on spaces that are *not* shown in a (or indeed perhaps any) gameplay moment as well as those that are.

Time and Space in Historical Games

As with simulation styles, the herein described temporal and spatial structures are intended to explore the range of historical representation in games and serve as a beginning point for analysis, without being completely comprehensive or exclusive. Whilst the *realist time* and *discrete time* temporal structures are the two most common temporal patterns found in historical games, there are no doubt other sub-categories, hybridisations and variations. Perhaps most notably, many open-world games, such as *Assassin's Creed* or *Red Dead Redemption*, utilise very fluid *realist time* structures, with some moments (such as combat) playing out as ideal type of situations in seemingly 1:1:1 and yet others featuring significant compression (such as the relatively quick day/night cycles). Similarly, games of the *Total War* series oscillate between turn-based (*discrete*) grand strategy moments and more fluid *realist-time* RTS moments. Furthermore, some RTS games, as well as some grand strategy games (such as *Crusader Kings*), use a temporal structure that lies somewhere between *discrete* and *realist-time* structures, with a continuous flow of historical time unless the player pauses this in order to consider or select actions that will be implemented when the flow is continued.¹⁶ In these games, players face some of the challenges of *realist time*, in the sense that other players (or NPCS) can act at the same time as them, and yet they also have control over temporal elements similar to that found in the *discrete* structure.

Similarly, nor are the described spatial structures completely exclusive. *Narrative gardens* can also contain smaller elements that can be used as a resource by players in their construction of historical narratives through play. For example, terrain that can be used as cover, in combination with the challenges of the game, determines the spatial narratives that can unfold. Other instances fall even closer to the *space as canvas* structure, in that *narrative gardens* sometimes allow us to mark the space with the narrative of our play by, for instance, blowing up scenery or leaving bullet holes in it. Similarly, *space as canvas* games have small narrative components embedded into their space, in the sense that these constrain the narratives that can be produced. We cannot generally, for example, have a seafaring nation without a coastline. Open-world games also in some sense combine these structures. Though their spatial representations are *narrative gardens*, they also function as a *canvas* upon which the players can emergently write the travel story of their character's explorations. The point of these temporal or spatial structures is not to be exclusive. Instead this is to give us a sense of the different focuses and emphases of historical representation in games in order to highlight the need for formal analysis and to point to the fact that

games are capable of working in a variety of ways, both as historical representations and as systems for structuring historical action.

As Aarseth notes, “the topology of even the most ‘open’ computer generated landscapes makes them quite different from real space, and controlled in ways that are not inherent in the original physical objects they are meant to represent” (2007, 47). This is because games do not present space, but manipulable spatial representations designed to structure play and to become narrative when combined with player actions. This means that this virtual space has some interesting narrative qualities. Most obviously, there is a close relationship between the boundaries of the story space and the boundaries of the virtual space. Many story/content decisions about these are one and the same. Though cutscenes, the suggestion of off-screen space or the complex abstract menu systems of *conceptual simulations* can disrupt this relationship, generally what is contained in the story of the game is what is contained in the virtual space.

Although it is useful to separate temporal and spatial structures and issues for the purposes of analysis of particular historical games, this is not actually so clear a division. If games, in their focus on space as a competitive resource, tend to include historical space and if these spatial representations function as narrative or narrative resources (an essentially temporal practice), then space and time are clearly entwined in the production and use of the *(hi)story-play-space*. For instance, as noted, spatial structures can constitute a form of narrative emplotment that determines the significance of events in their *temporal* relation to each other. The shape of the space of the game therefore also functions as the macro narrative structure (e.g. ending a game by returning to the space in which we started can be understood as a ring composition). Plot points, constraints and events are also regularly embedded into particular parts of the *space* of games. By determining our game movements, these spaces also begin to structure our narrative movements and agency. This means that developers use both temporal *and* spatial structures in order to exert temporal control over the narrative (and thus, historical space and time), despite player agency. As Lamm explains in relation to gardens, space for users has a temporal framework and “The spatial sequencing of elements can be regarded as equivalent to a time structure in narrative” (2002, 216).

This is perhaps unsurprising if narrative is indeed always an attempt to harness time into an assimilable form and space can be understood (alongside, and in relation to, its gameplay functions) as narrative in games. Furthermore, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have pointed to, we regularly use spatial metaphors to talk about less grounded and more abstract concepts, such as *time*, in everyday language. In these historical games, virtual *space* is used to represent and control both historical time *and* space. Virtual spaces are filled with the visual manifestations of the historian’s decisions about the story-space, including those about what in the narrative is left to us to configure. Similarly, temporal structures also limit and determine what can be

done in this virtual space, most obviously in the forces that challenge us and pressure us (normally in the form of NPCs) to use space in particular ways. In historical games, space and time are therefore somewhat inseparable, as both, through play, control and determine time (history), and thus become singularly historical narrative. Like all histories, the game form is an attempt to harness human experience (which is spatio-temporal) within narrative. If indeed narrative can be understood as the harnessing of time and within games 'space' is also a narrative expression, then the relationship between space and time in historical digital games is perhaps clearer than in other narrative forms. *(Hi)story-play-spaces* can therefore be understood as akin to Bakhtin's chronotopes (whereby spatial and temporal indicators are fused into a whole) because "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

Ultimately, the exact constitution of historical space and time into narrative in historical games is dependent on the tension between player-action and the developer-historian's implementation of spatial and temporal structures that differ between games (and instances of play). It is precisely these variations that make the outlining of spatial and temporal categories important despite their fusion into a whole (historical narrative) through play. This relationship to control, agency and ultimately narrative, also means that these temporal and spatial structures are also manifestations of the game's epistemological approach. For instance, very spatially linear games enforce a narrative structure that has an obvious *reconstructionist* concentration on telling *the* story and preventing players deviating from this where possible. In this way, a spatial depiction of 1944 Normandy can also be a kind of visual epistemological map. So too, the *constructionist* epistemology is apparent in the spaces of strategy games, which are less concerned with the representation of real space and the telling of specific histories than with providing an abstract *conceptual* space in which to explore theory as an explanatory framework for the past. Thus space becomes simply a canvas for this, while simultaneously functioning as another variable of such frameworks, rather than an experience in itself. This, combined with the incentive to expand, means that games like *Civilization*, as Fogu (2009, 121) also argues, transform time into space.

Summary

This chapter described two temporal and two spatial structures common to historical games, arguing that these structures are important to how a game engages with the past, its style of discourse and to how it structures opportunities for the player to interact with history. First, I proposed that we understand time in historical games as a relationship between *player*; *game/representation*; *past*, leading me to suggest the categories of play time (the time of the player) – fictive time (the narrative time of the game) – past time

(the timeline of events in the past as they are understood to have occurred from evidence) for analysing time in digital historical games. The two most common temporal structures in digital historical games were outlined, explained and termed *realist time* and *discrete time*. How each of these structures functions in terms of historical representation, and in terms of historical gameplay and challenge, was also explored. The notion of *tense* in historical games was also discussed, in particular noting how the interactive nature of the form complicates this issue in comparison to more conventional forms. Two common spatial structures that I termed *narrative gardens* and *space as canvas* were also outlined, as was their differing relations to the function of historical narrative in games. Following this, the role of *space as power* was discussed, particularly emphasizing the formal pressure that the concentration of games on space as a competitive resource places on the constitution of the historical content, which has both benefits and weaknesses. This was followed by a discussion of the role of *off-screen space* in terms of challenge, epistemology and representation in historical games. Finally, the relationship that space's narrative qualities, and thus control over time, implies in digital historical games was also discussed, emphasising how historical time and space are folded and interlinked in these games.

Notes

1. There is of course a slight paradox here. The real-time relationship also means that the temporal relationship between player input and game response isn't always consistent, because it is context-specific. So an enemy soldier should react to a bullet immediately *unless* they are at long range and should therefore take a little longer.
2. There are some small exceptions to this. For instance, in Civilization units move as soon as we implement our decisions about where they should go. This is closer to a *real-time* relation to the player but certainly not to the past that the game tries to represent and is ultimately insignificant (except for how easily it allows conceptual historical arguments to be made).
3. This is probably part of why these games make the effort to constantly reference the relation of their turns to *past time* using historical dates. It is this that gives context to the kind of frequent anachronistic emplotments that emerge through gameplay and in which much of the fun of these historical representations resides.
4. This said, generally a play-through of one of these games is so long, and we have so many small choices to make, that one decision is only rarely likely to lose us the game. Thus, there is arguably a relaxation in *ludic* pressure too.
5. Though as Klevjer (2002) points out, cutscenes can still have a strategic quality and players may be attentive for clues about upcoming challenges contained within them.
6. For example, *Half Life 2: Deathmatch* modification *1378km* caused controversy by simply changing the setting of the game to the border between East and West Germany.

7. If historians really have stumbled in reference to spatial relations, perhaps this is only because of the primacy attributed to the history book. Murray (1997, 29) argues that work such as Tolstoy's sweeping panoramic battle descriptions in *War and Peace*, strained at the suitability of literature as a form to represent space, hinting at the possibilities that cinema would eventually introduce. Films and games are less innately troubled by these formal limitations in terms of space.
8. Although part of the authority of *realist simulation* games emerges from their attempts to convince us that they are in fact space and not narrative.
9. Indeed, digital games often make use of the major elements of theme park creation: spatial narrative, experience design, the illusion of authenticity and immersion (Pearce 2007, 201).
10. However, engagement with history through this spatial structure is also often found in the crafting games (the most famous of which is *Minecraft*) that have recently become a very popular genre. These games are generally not designed to be historical in theme (though there are some exceptions such as *Life is Feudal* and *Reign of Kings*). However, some players and organisations utilise them for historical purposes, using the space as a canvas to build copies of historical objects, landscapes or buildings, for example.
11. Here Pearce draws from Mumford (1961) and Brand (1994).
12. For instance, there has been significant discussion about the relationship of the popular *Civilization* series to colonial themes and history (see, for example, Poblocki 2002; Lammes 2003; Mir and Owens 2013; Douglas 2002).
13. Another notable exception due to historical context is found in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, which, in an attempt to represent the Los Angeles gang warfare of the 1990s, encourages players to take ownership of portions of the map for their gang.
14. These arguments are most obvious in strategy games that start in early (e.g. Neolithic or Bronze Age) history, such as *Age of Empires* or *Civilization*. However, they are also often present in strategy games starting in later eras too, where, for example, having coastal or mountainous borders or possession of coal or iron mines can be important spatial resources.
15. This is also apparent in the fact that these kinds of games also often allow us to choose cultures that were historically colonised as our faction and instead make them colonisers.
16. In such games, players can also often adjust the ratio of *realist-time*, being allowed to slow or speed up the flow of historical time.

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5 Narrative in Games

Categorising for Analysis

A narrative is like a room on whose walls a number of false doors have been painted; while within the narrative, we have many apparent choices of exit, but when the author leads us to one particular door, we know it is the right one because it opens.

—Updike (2009)

Although there is a perceived history of ludological and narratological interests being sometimes positioned at odds in game studies (Arsenault 2014), looking at history in games means taking a perspective intrinsically concerned with the relationship between both gameplay and representation. Given that history is a practice entwined with narrative, having an understanding of narrative in games is essential to the study of historical games. As such, this chapter aims to provide clear explanations of different functioning elements of narrative in (historical) games by utilising the concepts of *framing narrative* (discrete *narrative fragments* not changeable by gameplay) and *ludonarrative* (the narrative that emerges through a player's play). The chapter also suggests the idea that *ludonarrative* should be understood as comprised of both *lexia* (the elements that can be combined into a narrative) and *framing controls* (the rules and pressures which limit and determine these combinations), as well as player agency. Finally, also suggesting the categories of *deterministic*, *open* and *open-ontological* story structure, the chapter provides descriptions of the three most common *ludo-framing narrative* arrangements.

This chapter does not claim to be the only way that narrative in games can be understood or analysed or that all players play with narrative in mind. Players can easily often play without particular concern for representation. However, whether they acknowledge this or not, players always produce a narrative when playing a historical game. As such, the narrative model introduced herein seeks to address the formal structures and conditions under which this production occurs, particularly focusing on the balance of narrative agency between developer-historian and player. Thus, the focus of this chapter departs from the more book-form focused '*what* does the narrative say to us?' and moves towards, '*how* does it say this?' and most importantly '*what* can *we*, as players, *do* to it?'. As such, the focus here

is not so much on the semantic contents of individual games as much as the syntactic structuring of this (historical) content.

It can be argued that games are a complex mix of both mimesis and diegesis. Whilst, as discussed in Chapter 4, games encourage us to experience their visual fictional events in the present tense (mimesis), we also form a diegesis through play and the game may also have diegesis in the form of cutscenes or stories that we are told about the past of the mimetic world it shows us. We experience and partake in a mimetic construct, but in doing so we decide/reveal a narrative. Thus, we can leave a game as we might a film, with a fully formed narrative. However, unlike the film, we can also leave with the memory of our actions and an acknowledgement of their role in the narrative that was created. Using the classical model of mimesis/diegesis means that the narrativity of games “hinges on the virtual diegetic narrativity of a retelling that may never take place” (Ryan 2001, para. 31). Although this acknowledges the importance of the generated events to this narrative, it does not seem sufficient to describe the possibility of a narrative experience *during* play, instead focusing on the potentiality of passive retrospection. Indeed, Ryan stops just short of arguing this when she later argues that, “the greater our urge to tell stories about games, the stronger the suggestion that we *experienced the game narratively*” (2006 193).¹ As such, whilst retelling is doubtlessly indicative of the possibility of *narrativity* (and a meta-discourse can doubtlessly be very useful in relation to historical games), it doesn’t account for playful *narration*. As aforementioned, one of the unique essences of historical games is in the active process of *discursively writing* through play itself.

As such, for historical games Klevjer’s (2002) turn to Genette’s (1980) narratological interpretation of diegesis as a fictional world created by discourse seems most pertinent. “This *diegesis* is not a method of presentation, but a level in discourse. Narration, as a mode of discourse, is the act of creating this *diegesis*. This narration may be a patchwork of dramatic and diegetic methods of presentation” (Klevjer 2002, 198). This better aligns with an understanding of the narrative of historical games as an active historical *discourse* between player and developer-historian, with play functioning as a form of shared historical *narration*. As Klevjer argues, the problem of more traditional narrative models is that they are often located in the perspective of the spectator, whereas in games we are also an actor.

As an actor in a play, *enacting* the events, your way of relating to the narrative would be very different. Also, a play may only be scripted on a general level, so that you would have to improvise the details. But still, as long as there is some kind of script limiting the range of events, the dramatic narrative would be a part of a narrative situation, establishing a *diegesis* in which certain events may take place. Actors do indeed act, do configure mimetic events, but they also interpret the symbolic action of an *implied author*.

(Klevjer 2002, 198)

Historical narrative in games can be understood as functioning similarly, emerging between the ‘script’ set into the structures of the game by the developer-historian and the player’s choices and skill. In fact, in games, like theatre, we are not only controlled by the voice of the implied author present in the *framing narrative* and mise en scène of the fictional world but also by a directorial voice providing instructions about what should, and can, be done. Except in games this is done through the tangible presence of rules that allow, restrict, punish and reward us in lieu of the developer-historian’s actual presence. This understanding of diegesis allows us to account for its shared creation through an active and discursive process of narration within the *(hi)story-play-space*, in which players simultaneously interpret *and* act in a narrative experience. Game-based historical narrative can therefore be conceived as a patchwork of multiple parts, with the fixed *framed narrative* and *framing controls* providing the script and the *ludonarrative* emerging in relation to this from the player’s decisions and skill. Thus, Updike’s idea in the epigraph of this chapter, that narrative is made up of many *apparent* choices of exit but only one real door, may be correct for some forms. However, games differ because narrative here also emerges from not only *apparent* choices of exit but also *actual* choices. There can be many right (and ‘wrong’) narrative doors that can potentially open.

Framing Narrative and Ludonarrative

A ‘*framing*’ or ‘*framed*’ narrative is a literary concept whereby a first narrative layer is presented to contextualise and guide audiences into a (normally more pronounced) second narrative layer. The term seems to be first used in reference to games by Klevjer (2002) and in opposition to *ludonarrative* by Bissell (2010, 37). Both note that the most obvious example of framed narrative is cutscenes because they “take control away from the gamer” (Bissell 2010, 37). I suggest that we develop these ideas by understanding *framing narrative* as comprised from *framing narrative fragments*; discrete, directing, self-contained and often contextually non-specific, pre-scripted, fully formed sections of *narrative* that emplot and structure the events of the game’s narrative. *Framing narrative fragments*, by my definition, are sections of narrative that are defined and written solely by the developer. The *ludonarrative*, by comparison, is what can be understood as “emergent narrative” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 383) produced by the player’s actions, filling the undecided gaps between the *narrative fragments* of the *framing narrative*. Using Bissell’s example, if in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* the *framing narrative* is the requirement “for you and a computer-controlled character partner to crawl and sneak your way through the irradiated farmlands of Chernobyl in order to assassinate an arms dealer. The ludonarrative, meanwhile, is the actual (and, as it happens, pretty thrilling) process of getting there” (2010, 37). The *framing narrative* subjects us to a heavy authorial authority, often emplots the sequence of events and is usually not dependent on the

actions of gameplay beyond our ability to get to each *narrative fragment* and beyond (though, as discussed below, this differs slightly in *open story structures*). By comparison, the formation of the *ludonarrative* is an active collaboration between developer and player. Clumsily put, *framing narratives* are the element of games that leans towards more conventional narrative structures and *ludonarratives* are the newer, uncertain and audience-led elements. Thus, “one is fixed, the other is fluid and yet they are intended, however notionally, to work together” (Bissell 2010, 37). Most obviously by *framing narrative* contextualising the emergent events of the *ludonarrative*.

There are a number of ways in which *framing narrative* manifests, such as pre-scripted events, cutscenes or set pieces. However, as Bissell’s *Call of Duty* example hints at, perhaps chief amongst these, given the nature of games, are the *narrative fragments* that I suggest we term ‘*framing goals*’. Often explained and introduced through cutscenes, dialogue or text, these tend to signify the beginning and end of both narrative and play sections, serving both as gameplay objectives and plot points/narrative outcomes. In more linear games, *framing goals* generally define the only positive narrative outcome and players must both encounter and achieve this or cease their gameplay and narrative progress. If, for instance, in a linear WWII game we are given the goal of going to receive orders from a nearby (NPC) lieutenant and we must stand within ‘earshot’ of him listening to his speech about our situation and next objective before we can progress, then we receive a *narrative fragment*. We still experience some agency, but without receiving the fully formed and unchangeable *narrative fragment* of his speech we reach a narrative dead end. *Framing goals* may be possible to reorder, or even ignore, in games where the *ludonarrative* can more substantially affect the *framing narrative*, but they always in some way define a possible course of action and outcome. They are *fragments* of a narrative that might be, dependent on player skill and/or choice. *Framing goals*, and the cutscenes, events and/or text and dialogue that contextualise them, frame the *ludonarrative* by offering a broad emplotment and thus, narrative direction, defining (alongside other forms of *mise-en-scène*) desirable narrative outcomes and often functioning as a doorway to the next narrative section or a climactic narrative endpoint.

Ludonarrative: Agency, Lexia and Framing Controls

Although the *ludonarrative* is spun emergently from the decisions of the player, it is far from completely freeform and it is still formed in collaboration with the developer-historian. I therefore propose that *ludonarrative* should be understood as comprised of two structural elements other than player agency. First, ‘*lexia*’, by which I mean the most basic narrative elements that the player is invited to arrange into particular combinations to produce the *ludonarrative*, and second, ‘*framing controls*’, by which I mean the means by which the developer exerts pressure on this process,

determining the limits of these combinations and the possible actions involved in doing so.² Another way of explaining this, using perspectives previously applied to film (Altman 1999) and WWII games (Allison 2010), would be to say that *lexia* are the basic components of the *semantics* of the particular game, whereas *framing controls* are *syntactical* in function, allowing the developer to retain some control over the constitutive relationships between these semantics despite player agency.

Lexia

Lexia should therefore be understood as the most basic *narratively charged units* that players can combine with other *lexia* to produce *ludonarrative*. The difference between *lexia* and the *narrative fragments* of the *framing narrative* is roughly akin to the difference between an actor's use of a prop, gesture or line (*lexia*) and being subject to a sequence of events in the script (*narrative fragments*). In games, *lexia* are therefore combinable ludic representations of agents, objects, social structures, architecture, processes, actions and concepts. Each is essentially something that affords players particular actions in relation to a particular representation and the construction of the *ludonarrative* that is formed through the player combining these *lexia* in particular ways in their gameplay. Typically in modern digital games, there are vast amounts of *lexia*. These may be as simple as the environment or elements of the scenery that can simply be observed by players and therefore become a visual part of the *ludonarrative*. *Realist* games are typically filled with huge numbers of these kinds of *lexia* (that we might term 'aesthetic *lexia*'). However, some *lexia* can also afford players more complex actions too.³

In either case, player choices about *lexia* are undoubtedly influenced by their perceived tactical utility in gameplay. Sometimes, however, players are offered choices between multiple *lexia* of equal ludic value (or that can be supplemented with player skill). For instance, in the *Bioshock* series, praised for its expressive combat system, we have multiple weapons and multiple 'plasmids' (powers such as telekinesis or the ability to fire electricity). These combat *lexia* are fairly well balanced in their relative utility. Furthermore, ammunition for these weapons and plasmids is limited and must be supplemented with purchases (using the limited resource of represented currency). As such, players are not expected to use all these *lexia* in each incidence of combat or even throughout the entire game. Different players may therefore come away from *Bioshock* having used or favoured different combat *lexia* combinations to the *exclusion* of others. The game system therefore supports multiple different *ludonarratives* of combat according to each player's choices and skill, while still allowing players to progress. As such, the presence of a *lexia* as a narratively significant (selected) element in any particular *ludonarrative* is often by no means guaranteed and many may remain as no more than part of the environment, being *lexia* only in our observation or consideration of them. Whereas these combat *ludonarratives* of *Bioshock*

are perhaps not particularly meaningful, in a historical game they might be because (as the existence of military history indicates) exploring how warfare occurred in the past is often regarded as a worthy line of inquiry. Furthermore, *lexia* can represent many systems other than combat.

Lexia are always player-affectable elements of the representation (even if only by their audio-visual inclusion). As described above, mandatorily receiving objectives in a speech from an officer is a *framing narrative fragment*. By comparison, contextual dialogue of our soldiers under fire is *lexia* because the nature of this dialogue is probably dependent on our game actions and because we could exclude these *lexia* or experience different *lexia* (without halting our narrative progression) by moving out of ‘earshot’. As this example shows, *lexia* can be virtually manifested in a number of ways. They might be detailed interactive 3D objects (for example, enemies or orderable/controllable team-members/vehicles in WWII FPS), snatches of dialogue or, as in strategy games, simple menu options that represent particular historical existents or concepts by altering the game state and thus narrative. *Civilization*’s technology-tree (the map of technologies, their effects, relations and some of their possible combinations – see Figure 5.1) is an excellent visual example of the ways in which *lexia* can be combined, even creating access to further *lexia* for the construction of the *ludonarrative*. In some games, such as the immensely popular crafting genre, of which *Minecraft* is the most well-known example, we can even create new *lexia* by combining multiple smaller ones. Many *lexia* therefore affect the formation of the *ludonarrative* not only by their mere inclusion but also by the changes they bring to the game state,



Figure 5.1 Screenshot of the technology tree in *Sid Meier's Civilization V*.

both positive and negative, or by what actions they afford the player in their acquisition of them. As follows, these are not entirely fixed representational elements and must be contextualised in player-action and in their relation to other *lexia*. Firing a gun into a fence in *Call of Duty* produces a very different meaning than firing it at a *lexia* such as a German soldier. *Lexia*, through their emergent *use* in play, can affect the formation and meaning of the representation itself, they are not only parts of it in the simplest aesthetic sense.

In a game like *Brothers in Arms*, the architecture, landscape and objects of the environment, the characters (such as our team members), the weapons, vehicles and the enemies, are all *lexia* that we combine through our narratively charged play, producing particular historical narratives. However, some of these *lexia* will be more under our control than others. Whereas a bazooka on the ground awaits our intervention to change the game state, an enemy tank can act independently of us, and yet it is still an effectible *lexia* through both our observation of it and our use of the bazooka upon it. Thus, whilst the historical *ludonarrative* is determined by our combinations of *lexia*, this is done in line with particular restraints to our agency that I propose we term *framing controls* and which are designed to make particular *ludonarrative* outcomes more likely than others.

Framing Controls

Developers must decide the relations between different *lexia* and their relationship with the active player. It is these decisions that make *lexia* functioning *narratively charged units* available for configuration. This allows games to offer flexible, interactively complex and reactive representations that can support multiple (and often usefully comparable) possible narratives and yet which still allow the communication of data and the presentation of the developer's arguments. This is made possible through structuring *framing controls* that allow the narrative control of developers to extend into the *ludonarrative* and determine the narratives it is possible or probable to produce through play, despite the player's agency in the arrangement of *lexia*. *Framing controls* are the syntactical structures that govern the usage of *lexia*, determining the possible constitutive relationships between a game's semantics. These controls prevent the *ludonarrative* from becoming completely incoherent and/or becoming non-complicit with the intended *framing narrative*, ensuring that possible combinations of *lexia* maintain some kind of coherency to this (or other narratives) and daily realities. However, it is important to note that the primary purpose of *framing controls* in many cases is to ensure logical and satisfying gameplay and these are therefore often firstly gameplay structures. Ways of preventing narrative incoherence have often probably been generated in response to the demands of gameplay (rather than the reverse). Still, these gameplay mechanics also generally function as narrative *framing controls* when combined with representations.

The simple rules that govern our interactions with digital games are the most obvious examples of *framing controls*.⁴ The guns and gunfire of *Brothers in Arms* and *Call of Duty* are *lexia* that can be introduced into the narrative by player action. However, these games' rules – that in order to fire our player-character must have ammo and a gun or must pick these up (and the rules for doing so) – are *framing controls*. So too are the rules that govern the ways in which particular gun and gunfire *lexia* can be differently combined with other *lexia* (such as fences and enemy soldiers) in order to produce meaning. The *framing controls* are therefore designed to structure the introduction of these elements into the gameplay narrative and reflect the everyday realities of historical processes and the developer-historian's arguments. The room for player improvisation in the *ludonarrative* therefore depends on the *framing controls* of the particular game that facilitate the narrative voice of the author. This 'script' is manifest in a whole manner of ways through the restrictions on objects, temporal pressures, contextual gameplay events, focalisation, space and a number of other elements.

Structuring the *ludonarrative* through spatial representation is a fairly evident example of *framing controls*. Space relates to *framing narrative*. As discussed in Chapter 4, it can be a core part of emplotment and narrative structure (particularly in games with *narrative garden* structures), represent the limitations of the story space and define our interactive limits. And yet virtual space also offers agency in its possibilities for manipulation. Our exploration and usage of it are part of what creates the *ludonarrative*. It is a *framing control* that structures agency, negotiating between developer-historian control and player agency. In action and shooter games, narrative is manifest as a virtual space that functions as a *framing control* by, for example, restricting and guiding our spatial and narrative agency, being difficult to traverse and offering challenges of 'spatial' performativity. However, in strategy games, the *ludonarrative* is structured more through the use of temporal controls (e.g. the cost in turns of producing different things, as also described in Chapter 4) and other rules (e.g. the 'fog of war', relative unit values, causal relations, rules of resource management). In this case, rather than in virtual landscapes, these elements often find a visual representation in menus, which generally feature some form of casual linearity that structures the *lexia* contained within. In both these game types, however, spatial representation provides a landscape that exerts some pressure on our decisions and offers particular tactical utility.

Indeed, the challenges introduced by enemies and space, for example, and the resources (e.g. allies/units, abilities, weapons and production resources) offered to deal with them, exert pressure on players and, in doing so, make the production of certain *ludonarratives* more likely than others. These elements are therefore important *framing controls*. Returning to our *Bio-shock* example, whilst we have lots of choice in combat, some of our chosen combat *ludonarratives* may result only in failure and negative narrative

outcomes because of these pressures. Some weapons/plasmids may not be suitable for certain situations and some players may prove unsuccessful in their ability to wield them to victory. Thus, the relative values the developers give to the *lexia*, in relation to the challenges they present players with, function as *framing controls*, restricting the likelihood of the production of particular *ludonarratives*. In a sense, these *framing controls* are more flexible than fixed rules because they are also often dependent on player skill, but they still function to structure the *ludonarrative*, making the production of particular narratives more likely than others.

The presence of at least some *framing narrative* is usual in games. We generally at least have some implied or explicit objectives – *framing goals*. However, by using *framing controls*, such as, challenge, space and interactive structures like menus and other rules, developers can maintain a strong story influence despite the player agency inherent to the *ludonarrative* and without using numerous larger preformed *framing narrative fragments* such as cutscenes, pre-scripted events or lengthy dialogue exchanges. As such, *ludonarrative* is formed from three parts, a mass of possible *lexia*, which are chosen by the player (agency), within the confines of the possible/probable combinations determined by the *framing controls*.

Game Narrative Categories

The relationship between the *framing narrative* and the components of the *ludonarrative* (agency, *lexia* and *framing controls*) is important to the overall narrative structure of games and the role of players in the *(hi)story-play-space*, determining what can be either *created* or *discovered* through play. This *ludo-framing narrative* relationship is particularly significant in reference to historical videogames because “the meaning of the past does not lie in the absolute significance of a single event but how that event is fitted into an appropriate story narrative” (Munslow 2007b, 38). As such, it is useful to categorise the three main types of narrative structure (*ludo-framing narrative* relationships) that are commonly found in historical games and that organise the *(hi)story-play-space*.

Ryan (2001) proposes the split of exploratory and ontological in narrative digital media. “In the exploratory mode the user is free to move around the database, but this activity does not make history nor does it alter the plot ... In the ontological mode, by contrast, the decisions of the user send the history of the virtual world on different forking paths” (2001, para. 14). Although these modes are a useful starting point, the presence of some kind of uncertainty, decision-making, and therefore *ludonarrative*, in all of what we would typically call digital *games* places the vast majority of them within Ryan’s ontological mode. This means that we need further categorical distinctions to aid our analysis of narrative in this form. For this reason, I propose the three game-specific categories of story structure, *deterministic*; *open*; and *open-ontological*.⁵

Deterministic Story Structures

In *deterministic story structures*, the *framing narrative* is privileged in the construction of the overall game narrative, which is therefore linear. This is a common structure in historical games and examples are often found in the single-player campaigns of shooters (e.g. *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, *Sniper Elite* and *Brothers in Arms*), flight simulators (e.g. *IL-2 Sturmovik: Birds of Prey*, *Damage Inc: Pacific Squadron WWII*) and even some strategy games (e.g. *Age of Empires III* and *Company of Heroes*). In such games, the vast amount of the larger narrative decisions (e.g. emplotment and story/content) remain closed to the player. The story is a linear sequence with largely fixed emplotment. Player narrative agency exists only in the local, normally spatial and combative, decisions of the *ludonarrative*. For instance, I can choose not to visit the inside of a building, excluding it from the narrative (but not the *(hi)story-play-space*) as anything more than a suggested existent in the fictive world. Similarly, I may be able to exclude the use of particular tactics, in favour of others, from the combative narrative I produce through play. In some cases I may also be able to ignore bonus objectives applied to the core gameplay situations. However, these kinds of *ludonarrative* decisions do not significantly alter the broader narrative trajectory and structure, which remains closed. Instead there is a strong fixed *framing narrative* that makes regular interventions into gameplay and is deterministic because it provides conditions that given them, nothing else can happen, as well as serving as the immutable consequence of these conditions. As such, in these games, strong and regular *framing goals*, cutscenes, linear spaces and pre-scripted events are common. Players are forced toward and through these regular *narrative fragments* if the story is to continue, with choice generally limited to progress or failure (or simply halting). These *narrative fragments* consistently frame the events and the direction and conceptual spaces of the *ludonarrative*. Although not necessarily so, *framing controls* and the historical focus can also often be fairly tight, with solutions to the game's challenges sometimes relatively limited and significantly interactive *lexia* (i.e. those that can be used beyond a simple aesthetic function) relatively similar or few (but still often offering a good degree of expression in player performance in their combination). These relative limitations ensure the *ludonarrative's* coherence with, and movement toward, the strong *framing narrative* and mean that though players can still form different *ludonarratives*, these may often show less variation in comparison to other story structures. The *deterministic story structure* emphasises offering players narrative *discovery* over narrative *creation* (and therefore also favours linear *narrative gardens*). This means that the story structure can sometimes be troubled by unresolved tension between the strict emplotment of linear narratives and the natural agency of gameplay. Despite this, the *deterministic story structure* can be characterised rather well as what Ryan terms a "narratively organised system for playing" (2006, 200).

Open-Ontological Story Structures

By comparison, *open-ontological story structures* have very weak *framing narratives* and instead dramatically privilege the *ludonarrative* in the construction of the overall game narrative. Examples of this structure are mainly found in strategy game series such as *Making History*, *Civilization*, and the various series from Paradox Interactive (e.g. *Europa Universalis*, *Crusader Kings* and *Hearts of Iron*). However, this story structure is also found in survival sandbox games (for example, in medieval game *Reign of Kings*). Examples of this story structure beyond historical games would also include games such as *The Sims* and *SimCity*. Emplotment in such games is fluid, uncertain and player-led, as are some story/content decisions (though elements not chosen by players to be part of the narrative do remain part of the larger *(hi)story-play-space*). Narrative agency for players is typically vast in *open-ontological story structures* and much of the significant narrative decisions (what is included, when and how) are available to players by combining *lexia* into particular configurations. In these games, *framing narrative* normally only intervenes during play in the form of *framing goals*. These are often relatively few and may be implied rather than explicit, leaving further creative room for the player to decide the narrative. Other than this, *framing narrative* is likely only to ‘book-end’ the *ludonarrative*, providing *narrative fragments* leading into play and describing final narrative outcomes (both typically in the form of text, dialogue or cutscenes). The *ludonarrative* therefore generally continues uninterrupted as the major source of narrative production. Developer narrative influence is concentrated in *framing controls*, which are often complex and focused on exerting pressure through the challenges of the environment and NPCs and the relative ludic (and thus historical) value and combinative possibilities of *lexia*. Often, even these *framing controls* are likely to be partially open and adjustable by players (e.g. players might be given pre-game options about the environment, available resources and fog of war). The *open-ontological story structure*, with its mass of *lexia* (as it must contain to sustain interesting narrative play), is therefore filled with narrative possibilities and emphasises vast multiplicity. As such, players have considerable agency in the construction of the narrative and in ways in which to achieve objectives. Although of course, as noted above, most digital games constitute ontological narrative structures to some degree, this particular category emphasises, highlights and exaggerates the player’s role in narrative, taking the ontological interaction as its core essence, centring the *ludonarrative* as the main site for long-term narrative production. Games of this type emphasise historical narrative *creation* over historical narrative *discovery* and therefore have the potential to be used as what Ryan describes as a “ludically organised system for storytelling” (2006, 200).

Open Story Structures

Games with *open story structures* sit somewhere between the extremes of the *deterministic* (strong focus on *framing narrative*) and *open-ontological*

(strong focus on *ludonarrative*) categories. *Open story structure* games are defined by the presence of a significant *framing narrative* that is nonetheless still subject to decisions made in the *ludonarrative*. In such games, the player's actions have some influence over the arrangement of the *narrative fragments* of the *framing narrative*. This can be through determining their order, choosing between competing fragments (sometimes without even being aware of doing so), or even through ignoring particular fragments entirely. In each case, this means players having a role in the determination of the *framing narrative* itself through the *ludonarrative* choices that they make.⁶ The *framing narrative* of *open story structure* games can be much bigger than the actual narrative finally chosen, often including many *narrative fragments* that are never actually selected for inclusion into the diegesis. Examples of this narrative structure can be found in games with branching narratives wherein choices between competing *framing narrative fragments* are determined by players, such as in mythical history game *Jade Empire* and games in the alternate history series *Fallout* (or less historically but perhaps more famously, the *Mass Effect* series). These are games that offer players choices that lead to the exclusion of some *narrative fragments* in favour of others. These might be as small as single lines or conversations in dialogue exchanges, or as large as full missions or entire narrative strands (including alternate endings). Many free-roaming open-world games, such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *L.A. Noire*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *The Saboteur*, also constitute this narrative structure (again emphasizing the relation between space and narrative). In such games, players can make emplotment decisions by deciding the order, sequence and timing in which they experience missions/events (in themselves often constituted of, and constituting, fixed *narrative fragments*), or even by ignoring some missions/events entirely and therefore making story/content decisions (typical in games with 'side' missions). Many of the *framed narrative fragments* in such games may be sensibly combinable in any order and may affect the inclusion of future fragments (even including the climactic narrative outcome).⁷ Text adventure games, such as historical naval adventure *Choice of Broadsides*, can also be seen as *open story structures*.

In *open story structure* games, player's *ludonarrative* choices determine the presence and/or emplotment of both *framing narrative fragments* and the *ludonarrative* opportunities that these might provide. So, for example, if we ignore a mission in such a game, we might not only miss the *framing narrative fragments* (e.g. dialogue, cutscenes, *framing goals*) that contextualise and structure the gameplay but also the opportunity to build the *ludonarrative* through the gameplay in this section. *Open story structure* games still have a strong framing narrative presence that regularly intersects game-play and provides a general narrative trend. However, through the actions of the *ludonarrative* the player can affect particular pieces of this *framing narrative*, allowing for players to enjoy some larger narrative agency while still being subject to a potentially richly dramatised *framing*

narrative representation (unlike the *open-ontological story structure*). In the *open story structure*, we must still surrender our agency, however, we are given some choices as to what we surrender it to. Choices we can make in relation to the resonance and diegetic clues we find in other *narrative fragments* and the *ludonarrative*. Whilst these games often do not contain the vast array of narrative possibilities of the *open-ontological* structure, they often allow for the crafting of multiple larger narratives from the different narrative fragments. They also have advantages, such as allowing for the skills of professional writers to be deployed without us entirely losing our actualised role in the larger story space. Such games balance both the *creation* and *discovery* of narrative.

Games and Narrative

Again it should be noted that more unusual games may fall somewhere between these proposed categories and that many games include multiple story structures within their different modes. For example, whereas the single player modes of many games are *deterministic story structures*, their multiplayer component might be understood as closer to the *open-ontological* or *open story structures*. Similarly, whereas in a game such as *Empire: Total War* the introductory campaign, designed to function as a sort of tutorial, features regularly intervening *framing narrative fragments* and *framing goals* and thus can be understood as *deterministic*, the main gameplay mode of the game, the ‘grand campaign’, does not have these features and so is an *open-ontological story structure*. Nonetheless, these categories are useful to specifically describe the different relationships between *framing narrative*, *ludonarrative* and player in different games and different game modes. Given that history is a practice bound up with narrative, exploring the nature of narrative representation in games in concrete terms, and yet still accounting for the shared authorship characteristic of games, is deeply important to understanding history in games. Thus, the aim here has been to offer such an explanation by providing conceptual tools for the analysis of historical games. However, this explanation also raises a number of issues concerned even more specifically with the role of *historical* narrative in games and it is these kinds of issues that we must turn to in the next chapter, while simultaneously further clarifying the model of game narrativity proposed here.

Summary

In this chapter we have explored the narrative structure of games, arguing, following Klevjer (2002), that games should be understood as both diegetic and mimetic, supporting the aforementioned perspective that game narrative arises as a discursive interaction between developer and player. This interaction was explored further by borrowing (and refining) the concepts of

framing narrative and *ludonarrative* from Bissell (2010) and arguing that game narratives are dependent on the interaction between these elements. *Framing narrative* was defined as constructed from what I termed *framing narrative fragments*; discrete, directing and self contained non-changeable sections of *narrative* that emplot and structure the events of the game's narrative. I also introduced the concept of *framing goals* as a key type of *framing narrative fragment* in games, describing how these function both as gameplay objectives and plot points/narrative outcomes. The concept of *ludonarrative* was similarly nuanced by offering two further structural categories that (alongside player agency) construct this. The first of these, *lexia*, were described as the basic *narratively charged units* (e.g. objects, processes, scenery) that the player is invited to arrange into particular combinations in order to produce the *ludonarrative*. The second of these structures, which I termed *framing controls* (e.g. rules, spatial representation and challenges), were described as the syntactical means by which the developer exerts pressure on this process, determining the limits of the combinations of *lexia* and the likelihood of particular *ludonarratives* being produced (allowing these to remain coherent with wider *framing narratives*). I also proposed three categories of game narrative that aim to describe the most common *ludo-framing narrative* interplays found in (historical) games. *Deterministic story structure* games were described as those that heavily privilege a fixed *framing narrative* and emphasise narrative *discovery*. *Open-ontological* games were outlined as those in which the *ludonarrative* is the main source of overall narrative production (with the developer's intervention being mainly restricted to *framing controls*) and which therefore emphasise narrative *creation*. *Open story structure* games were described as occupying a position between these extremes, containing a significant *framing narrative* and yet allowing players to influence the order, emplotment and story/content of this through their *ludonarrative* choices. This final story structure was therefore described as balancing both narrative *creation* and *discovery*.

Notes

1. Another problem here is that often our urge to tell stories about games has little to do with the fictional component. Telling anecdotes of our own victories or of unusual gameplay occurrences is something most players will be familiar with. Diegetic retellings do occur, however, and fan forums for historical strategy games often maintain sections for this (Apperley 2007).
2. *Lexia*, as I conceive them, bear some limited similarity to what Aarseth would broadly call 'textons' (1997, 62). However, my particular development, definition and use of the *lexia* concept, being inspired by Barthes (1973, 13), specifically acknowledges narrative and is therefore designed to be particularly suited to looking at *history* in games. It should also be noted that Ryan (2001) seems to use the terms 'lexia' and 'textual fragments' interchangeably in her description of hypertext. However, the use of '*lexia*' in the specifically game-focused narrative model presented herein is very different and *framing narrative fragments* and *lexia* are therefore importantly entirely distinct from one another.

3. Of course sometimes the distinction is unclear. Consider, for example, the case of scenery that players can take cover behind. This has both an aesthetic and gameplay function. Furthermore, even *aesthetic lexia* can give tactical information; burning vehicles could hint at the presence of enemies for instance. Similarly, players might also observe *aesthetic lexia* in an attempt to determine whether they offer any affordances.
4. As described in Chapter 4, even something as simple as the first-person or third-person camera perspective can function as a *framing control* that structures the (hi)story, adding to the challenges of such games by hiding information and determining the particular ways in which the *ludonarrative* can be constructed (e.g. the *lexia* than can be visually present in a single moment).
5. I label these ‘story structures’ because they relate to decisions that normally occur in production. However, the game *narrative* will eventually be actively produced through these structures.
6. In the terms of the Russian formalists we would say that in such games players have a role in determining not only the *sjuzhet* (how the story is told) but also the *fabula* (what is in the story and the chronological order in which the events are supposed to have occurred). For more on the relationship between *fabula* *framing narrative* and *sjuzhet*/*ludonarrative* see Chapman (2013b, 129–130).
7. Some games also utilise *sjuzhet* puzzles (what Ryan 2001 terms a ‘jigsaw’ narrative arrangement). Here narrative fragments can be experienced in any order without disturbing the *fabula*, which the player must re-piece from the jumbled *sjuzhet* they choose, and thus the framing narrative and *fabula* are not necessarily contiguous. For example, see *Halo 3: ODST*.

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6 Historical Narrative in Digital Games

In *Civilization*, the player dreamed up an entirely new world every time he played, as he experimented with different strategies.

—Crair (2011, 2)

Although many historical games feature fictionalised events or storylines in their *framing narrative* and unpredictable *ludonarratives*, they can still produce strong and authoritative histories that tap into existing, and often dominant, narratives, cultural memories and ideas. In a game like *Brothers in Arms*, the specific *framing narrative* is fictionalised (though positioned as a compression/reordering of events that actually occurred). However, the wider narrative produces what is normally popularly considered to be *the* story of WWII, the victory of good over evil, as determined by heroic (normally British and American) forces in Western Europe. The game uses a linear *framing narrative* that, though fictional, engages particular signposts of memory and the player's overcoming of challenges within the *ludonarrative* allows this progression to unfold, metonymically echoing this common popular interpretation. By comparison, a game such as *Civilization* explains dominant ideas about what resulted in 'civilisation' through the complex interplays of its rules and the themes and theory that these engage, utilising very little *framing narrative*. Each game constructs history though each does so very differently according to its narrative structure. As such, this chapter will discuss both historical *ludonarrative* and *framing narrative* and their interplays and implications in different game narrative structures. Furthermore, the chapter will explore some of the further tensions between historical narrative as it is generally understood and the digital game as a form of representation. In both cases this allows us to explore some of the most important aspects of historical narrative in games.

Historical Ludonarrative

Like all historical representations, *lexia* (as defined in the previous chapter, a core component of *ludonarrative*) are referential, interpreted and creative constructions. This process of representation, while being comprised of

similar decisions to those in other forms, has an additional layer in games. *Developer*-historians must also decide how the *lexia* can be *used* by an active player in relation to other *lexia*, as *narratively charged units* and in relation to the tropes, formal, cultural and commercial pressures of gameplay and design. The syntactical *framing controls* (e.g. rules and challenges) that structure these interactions seek to ensure that the produced *ludonarratives* refer to particular historical narratives, discourses and outcomes and make systemic arguments about the effectiveness of particular historical courses of action, despite their inherent variability. It is these *framing controls*, along with the audio-visual aspect, that become the developer-historian's metonym and tropes, this that they use to explain the past and its relation to us (both as player and player-character), while yet preserving an active role for us in the *(hi)story-play-space*. Producing multiple *ludonarratives* through different combinations of *lexia* allows players to explore the values ascribed by the developer-historian to these *lexia* and to the *framing controls* that structure their use and thus to the historical referents and arguments that both of these *ludonarrative* components represent. *Ludonarrative* is therefore very important to the function of games as history. However, this process differs between distinct game narrative structures.

Historical Ludonarrative in Deterministic/Open Story Structure Games

The majority of historical games that feature significant *framing narrative* (i.e. that use *deterministic* or *open story structures*) are *realist* action games (e.g. FPS, such as *Brothers in Arms* and *Verdun*, or third-person action-adventure games, such as *Ryse: Son of Rome* and *Mafia*). In these games, the player's significant agency in manipulating the spatial representation, by moving their player-character around the virtual space, is generally the most significant element in the construction of the *ludonarrative*. Indeed, spatial agency is important to *ludonarrative* in many game types. This holds influence over which *lexia* (and thus pieces of historical data) are included in the *ludonarrative* and often means that the *ludonarrative* has a particular focus, such as the writing of explorative travel stories and tales of conquest (e.g. in open world games and RTS). This spatial agency is also at the core of the combative gameplay of action games. The complex controls for movement are a significant part of the challenges of these action games and also mean that it is here where much of the variation, uncertainty and expressive potential of the *ludonarrative* exists.¹ As such, as Bissell puts it of science-fiction action game *Gears of War*, "The real story of the game grows out of its combat, as virtually every *Gears* encounter has been designed to take place in environments that allows multiple "stories" to dynamically emerge. Whereas the framed story of *Gears* creates an attachment to the characters, the combat is what keeps you playing" (2011a, 40). The same is also true of many historical action games and typically the historical *ludonarrative* will mostly be constructed through this type of activity, in which players spend

the majority of their time with such games. This focus on spatial agency/challenge often results in relatively narrowly focused histories particularly concerned with spatially focused material action in the past (e.g. combat and exploration) rather than, for example, political, cultural, or intellectual history.

In *deterministic story structure* historical games, players are restricted to *ludonarratives* that cannot affect the broader construction of the historical (*framing*) narrative. In these games, *ludonarrative* moments are therefore isolated to particular encounters, which are normally predetermined in their nature, order and frequency in order to make them coherent with the fixed *framing narrative*. Although spatial agency is generally important, the complexity of making *realist simulations* (common to such games) often means a relatively limited set of significantly interactive *lexia* beyond this. Nonetheless, the specific *ludonarrative* of these encounters (e.g. duration, degree of success, particular movements, included *lexia*, other actions taken) is still determined by player agency, within the limits of the *framing controls*. Encountering a tank placed in our path in *Brothers in Arms*, means narrative outcomes broadly within the range of succumbing to the challenge that the tank entails (death/losing) or destroying (or evading) the tank and progressing (survival/winning). However, how we deal with the tank is up to us, within the confines of the encounter and broader system. We might shoot it ourselves with a bazooka; command a bazooka team to manoeuvre into a flanking position and do so; distract the tank with one team and move close enough to use grenades on the crew; try to simply move past it; or, given the presence of the allied tank *lexia*, order our own armour to destroy it. As such, even in games with strong *framing narratives*, there is still always variation in the possible historical *ludonarratives*, and thus historical arguments, that can be produced/experienced.

Action games generally involve much *ludonarrative* repetition (e.g. pick up ammo, reload gun with ammo, shoot enemy). Repetition can help to maintain a game's referentiality by preventing underrepresentation, allow players to perfect particular skills and reinforce particular arguments about the past. It is also a common technique in historical narratives in more conventional forms, wherein significant processes, themes and motifs are often repeated for effect (for more on this see Munslow 2007b, 57–58). However, many of the repetitions in historical (particularly action) games are clearly also obvious or superficial. As such, we must remain critical about the breadth of historical experience that is really communicated. Yet these criticisms are hardly form-specific. For instance, historical films such as *We Were Soldiers* and *Black Hawk Down* also have a focus on action that denies or restricts more complex historical contextualisation and ideological and thematic discourse. As Dixon puts it, “The very absence of motivation and characterisation is what makes *Black Hawk Down* so disturbing” (2003, 76). The same could probably be said of many historical wargames.

It is therefore probably fair to say that often the process of playfully constructing the *ludonarrative* is more important than the resulting historical *ludonarrative* itself (as described in the next chapter, it is our simple reactions to challenges that allow some games to act as reenactment). This said, sometimes, when emergently combined in particular ways, these individual mechanistic components can create more dramatic and meaningful *ludonarratives* too. A good example can be found in a *ludonarrative* I inadvertently produced when playing *Brothers in Arms*. Flanked by the enemy, with little ammunition and with my squad suppressed by enemy fire, I knew through experience that I was close to defeat and my player-character's death. In a last ditch attempt, I made the desperate decision to assault the enemy ahead, as doing so might block the line of sight from the enemy squad on our left. I ordered my team to charge using grenades and the last of the ammunition for our assault weapons. Despite the incoming fire we made it to the enemy position with only one casualty. After vicious close quarters fighting, the position was ours and we turned our attention to the other enemy squad who, now outmanoeuvred, quickly fell. A desperate decision had paid off and I managed to save both my squads. Here the game goes beyond a mechanistic description of WWII combat processes and instead taps into a significant strand of cultural memory by structuring the production of a *ludonarrative* of desperate heroism. Though events of this type were obviously historically unusual (which is what makes them remarkable) these narratives are privileged and heavily reproduced in popular culture. For example, this trope of the desperate last ditch defence/assault is found in popular war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *Enemy at the Gates*, *Platoon*, *Zulu* and *We Were Soldiers*. Similarly, the larger historical narratives of WWII that are often privileged in US and European cultural memory (e.g. Battle of the Bulge, Battle of Britain and the Dunkirk evacuation) are infused with this same trope.

Action game *Max Payne 3* explicitly nods towards the resonant satisfaction of emergently reproducing tropes drawn from other media by giving the player a 'like in the movies' award when they produce *ludonarratives* that echo the types of action sequences seen in, for example, Hong Kong action films (e.g. dodging bullets in a slow motion dive while firing two pistols to deadly effect). In historical games, when our emergent historical *ludonarratives* go beyond this and resonate with stories and tropes that we are familiar with as a part cultural memory, we are offered satisfaction through the reconstruction of our own implied cultural and historicised identity. In historical games, we can therefore sometimes establish resonance not only *through* the larger historical discourse but also by actually *(re)performing it*. *Ludonarrative* of historical games can offer opportunities for reenactment (as is discussed in the next two chapters), not only *of* the past but also of history itself, the stories we tell *about* the past. This is something almost unique to games and might well offer something in terms of engagement. Furthermore, this shows that even in a *deterministic story structure* action game

where the *ludonarrative* may be rather restricted and mechanistic, the result can also be more than its parts taken individually might initially indicate. Such games can therefore still allow for the production of *ludonarratives* that engage the kind of historical discourse that is (at least popularly) considered meaningful. As Rosenstone (2006) argues, it is important that new forms of history can be shown to engage with larger historical discourses if we are to justify their use as history.

It is also important to point out that the produced *ludonarrative* in the example drawn from *Brothers in Arms* might have been different if I hadn't made initial mistakes (e.g. poor spatial tactics, overuse of suppressing fire, failure to track enemy movements) or had then dealt with these problems differently. The system was perfectly capable of producing a *ludonarrative* wherein my squad and I were outflanked and killed. Indeed, experience shows that the system balances against charging as a tactic and yet it is still possible to be successful given the correct circumstances, timing and skill. As follows, games can not only produce different historical *ludonarratives* but can also actually make arguments through *framing controls* about the likelihood of each occurring in the past given certain historical conditions. As such, though players actually ultimately create the *ludonarratives* about, for example, the nature of WWII combat, they are also led through the discovery of an experiential historical discourse by the arguments found in the different values assigned to *lexia* and the possibility of different courses of action in accordance with the *framing controls*.

As noted, most historical games with strong *framing narrative* are *realist* action games, in which *ludonarratives* emerge primarily through spatial performativity and action. However, some games that fall into these narrative categories also feature other forms of gameplay. In RTS, for example, which, as aforementioned, contain significant *conceptual simulation* elements, it is common to also have significant *ludonarrative* decisions that are less focused on negotiating spatial representations (e.g. unit production and research). Similarly, in 2D puzzle games, such as WWI game *Valiant Hearts*, the complexity of spatial performances are often less than in 3D action games, though the game might instead involve spatial puzzles of perception. Many *open story structure* games, whilst often including *realist* action gameplay, also include another layer of narrative play. In such games, as described in the previous chapter, our play can intervene into the *framing narrative*, determining which *fragments* will be a part of the historical narrative and which *ludonarrative* encounters we will experience, by making choices in response to the historical characters' dialogue and actions, making ethical or moral choices, or simply choosing between missions and/or narrative outcomes. Some historical games, such as text adventures like *Choice of Broadsides*, only have this layer of narrative play, forgoing more action-oriented gameplay entirely.

Given that *open story structure* games have this further layer of narrative play beyond the spatial, they can more easily include historical concerns less

focused on material action and can therefore more freely include ideological, cultural, intellectual and political themes as a part of gameplay. Furthermore, these games can also step outside of the absolutism necessary to the win/loss dynamic of competitive gameplay, dealing instead in narrative ambiguity and uncertainty – both important qualities for self-reflexive histories. However, this narrative play of the *open story structure*, by allowing players' choices to affect each level of the historical narrative and importantly, by representing these choices as those of a historical agent (the player-character), tends to highlight the importance of the actions of individuals agents or small groups, rather than larger structures, in its interpretations of historical causality (and so also introduces its own formal pressures). Indeed, a similar argument can also be made of the spatially focused play of *realist* action games, i.e. in the quest for a fair and satisfying play experience, they can overly highlight personal action/skill as the catalyst for historical outcomes and therefore omit the role of contingency and larger structures.

Historical Ludonarrative in Open-Ontological Story Structures

Open-ontological story structure games grant players a vast amount of agency over the historical narrative as the *ludonarrative* is the only significant source of this. Some *realist* games, such as survival game *Reign of Kings* or multiplayer historical FPS (such as the *Red Orchestra* series), utilise this narrative structure. However, most *open-ontological story structure* games are strategy games that utilise the *conceptual simulation* style. The lesser visual demands of this on development allow these games to more easily feature large sets of significantly interactive *lexia*. Furthermore, combined with the shift to the diegetic level of the historian, these *lexia* are able to include themes and historical existents that either don't have a tangible physical presence and/or exist only at the level of collective action or concerns. Thus, in historical strategy games (by far the most common example of the *open-ontological story structure*), we are often faced with gameplay involving a broad variety of historical topics. Such games can therefore often involve making decisions about industry, technology/research, the spread of ideas, education, urban and agricultural development, domestic and international economics, culture, religion, politics, diplomacy, military infrastructure and strategy, the development of dynasties and rules for succession, morality, ethics and ideology, as well as potentially many more themes and areas of interest. This embrasure of the potential of the *open-ontological story structure* entails a particular freedom and thus, possible complexity, in players' deployment of these differing elements, particularly as they do not have to be coherent with a larger fixed historical *framing narrative* (other than wider established historical narratives, with which, as discussed in the next chapter, such games often have an ambiguous relationship). For example, in *Civilization IV* we might produce a historical *ludonarrative* of a highly militarised despotic society with a police state, which sustains itself

through conquest, slavery and a perpetual draft. By comparison, we might also construct a peaceful, highly technologically developed civilisation with universal suffrage, free speech, emancipation, a free market and religious freedom, as well as many other possibilities (see Figure 6.1). The challenge of these historical games therefore rests not on spatial performativity in relation to binary outcomes but on understanding and balancing multiple complex historical systems with multiple possible *ludonarrative* possibilities and outcomes.

Although in these games we can also explore the values ascribed to *lexia* (and their historical referents) and the contained arguments about the likelihood of particular outcomes given certain historical conditions, here this is done through unpicking a particularly large and tangled web of *framing control* interrelations. Thus, whilst many of the arguments may be relatively simplistic taken alone (e.g. discoveries in iron work allowed the development of machinery), these arguments are actually embedded in further complex procedural historical systems (e.g. machinery allowed the invention of the printing press, allowing the widespread dissemination of knowledge and thus advances in economics, industrialisation, science and scientific theory). These smaller examples are taken from *Civilization IV*'s tech tree, the flowchart that shows players different technologies they can choose for their civilisation to research and the benefits and connections between



Figure 6.1 Screenshot of the 'civics' options in *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*, some of the means by which we choose the historical society that we wish to construct in the game.

these technologies. However, even these examples are again set into larger gameplay systems that have the potential to make *ludonarrative* arguments about the importance of these technological and intellectual developments to periods of relative economic, cultural and industrial prosperity in history (and of course to themes such as empire, colonialism and globalisation).² *Open-ontological* games often contain many such arguments touching upon a variety of historical themes and existents.

Given this, perhaps such games provide evidence to support Ayers' (1999) claim that history is well suited to digital technologies. Whilst Ayers invokes historical games in connection with immersive (*realist*) simulation, it is actually his ideas about historical hypertext that these *conceptual simulation open-ontological* historical games, with their complex and multiple webs of connections, seem to speak most closely to. For Ayers, historical hypertexts will offer new ways of making arguments through layered, branching and interweaving narratives with multiple possibilities and simultaneous elaborate links between many elements. All this seems to describe historical strategy games, games that most fully embrace this *open-ontological story structure* emphasis on *ludonarrative*, particularly given that Ayers also notes that these hypertextual histories could use "maps as organizing structures, as portals into the narrative, rather than merely as illustrations" (1999, para. 17). Although the historical content of such games may not always be complex, certainly the narrative presentation is. Thus, whilst these games perhaps sometimes fail to answer Ayers' call to *describe* complexity, they certainly answer his calls to *embody* it and to offer a new aesthetic of historical narrative.

The counterpoint to this is that, precisely because of this complexity, such texts may be pedagogically inefficient and calls to include games such as *Civilization* in educational curricula should be treated cautiously if replacing proven pedagogies. The history in games like *Civilization* "requires the writing and rewriting or play and replay of its audience to be truly explored" (Chapman 2010, 470). Furthermore, unlike board games, where we would normally read the rules or have them explained to us before we play, digital games are relatively 'black boxed', closed constructions that require us to engage in play in order to determine cause and effect relationships (Antley 2012).³ This said, *conceptual* games do often offer a lot of integrated supplementary text in order to explain the values and historical context of the many contained *lexia*. This is perhaps because the abstraction essentially excludes a layer of visual information and physical logic in comparison to *realist simulations*, where such textual additions threaten to disrupt diegesis anyway. Furthermore, 'black boxing' may not necessarily be antithetical to good history. A lack of information might force us to draw on other resources, such as our historical understanding, in order to figure out likely gameplay values and relationships. So too, if (as argued in the next chapter) games can function as a form of reenactment, black boxing may also be useful because it is unrealistic to assume that historical agents always had

access to full information about the possibilities or consequences of their actions. Digital games can arguably therefore be seen to demonstrate the law of unintended consequences (Taylor 2003, para. 10).

Whilst *open-ontological story structures* dramatically privilege player agency in the construction of historical narrative, this is still heavily structured through the syntactical *framing controls* and the concurrent cause and effect relationships these ensure. This means that, though the lack of *framing narrative* prevents the telling of specific historical narratives by developer-historians, these games are still capable of producing particular coherent arguments that hold a discursive relationship to wider historiography and generally have a particular thematic, epistemological and ideological foundation of some kind. As described, many of these controls are temporal (e.g. delays in turns and/or real time in the completion of processes) and resource based (e.g. requirements as to the resources that must be acquired before certain actions can be taken) in these kinds of games. However, as in most games, the challenges presented by non-player characters or factions are also particularly important *framing controls*. The menu systems common to the strategy games that occupy the vast majority of the *open-ontological* category are also important *framing controls*. These allow the *ludonarrative* to have some sequential structuring and provide larger explanations of historical causality, without falling back on *framing narrative*. The most obvious example of this is again found in the tech trees common to historical strategy games, which serve as a visual map of the *framing control* relations between the various historical technology *lexia*. Although we have choice as to what we research in these menus and can take different paths through it, even ignoring some (or even the majority) of the technologies, there is still a broad linearity to these trees and competitive pressure from other factions to use them in certain ways. This makes particular claims about historical progression, creating a linear history of empowerment that is materialist and, more specifically, technologically determinist and which therefore relates to other theories of historical development linked to these ideas (e.g. Marxist history).

As this indicates, the emphasis on *framing controls* rather than *framing narrative* in *open-ontological* games, combined with the consistency of rules required by all games, makes for particularly theoretical histories with an emphasis on structuralist interpretations of the past. Uricchio also supports this by noting that “less specifically situated games tend to be more evidently structured by unspoken historical principle (or better, ideology), rendering them closer to structuralist notions of history” (2005, 328). History in these games is not built of fixed *framing narrative fragments* that tell us specific stories of the past, but of a web of underlying rules for the past which function as systems of explanation and causality and are transferable between different historical (*ludo*)narratives and topics. Structuring the possible *ludonarratives*, and thus history, through theory about, and laws/rules for, the historical process means that *open-ontological* games tend to lean towards what White

(1973, 16–17) terms ‘mechanistic’ forms of historical explanation, something also apparent in their frequent concentration on collective and systemic, rather than individual, action.⁴ These games are therefore generally structuralist history. Furthermore, given this, the diegetic level, variability in *lexia* and the vast time scales that these generally *conceptual simulation* games allow, *open-ontological* games sometimes therefore argue for macro long-term change in a way reminiscent of the *longue durée* of the *Annales School* of history, which primarily emphasises the role of long-term historical structures rather than events. As such, whilst *open-ontological* games embrace the ludic most heartily and forgo the kinds of narrative structure conventionally associated with history, they can still be used to make strong and complex (and perhaps even intellectually weighty) arguments, at least in comparison to much popular history. And as relatively lacking in perceived auteurs as games culture perhaps is in comparison to other media, those designers that have normally come closest, such as Sid Meier (*Civilization*; *Pirates!*), Peter Molyneux (*Black and White*; *Populous*) and Will Wright (*The Sims*; *SimCity*; *Spore*), are those that utilise this *open-ontological* narrative structure and are known precisely for games with a seemingly contradictory emphasis on both relatively extreme emergence and yet often strong procedural rhetoric.

The propensity for emergent multiplicity of *open-ontological story structures* not only often allows players to concentrate on the elements of the past that interest or resonate with them (perhaps offering something in terms of engagement), it also means that such games are generally designed to be played repeatedly rather than completed. Juul (2005, 166–67) calls this an “incoherent world game”. Here, “the space in which the game is played becomes larger than the space of the world in which it is played. The entire game becomes a superset of world space, and a series of fictional world spaces ... are created and deleted during the course of the game” (Juul 2005, 167).⁵ This repetition not only remedies some of Antley’s (2012) concerns about the black boxing nature of these games but also creates opportunities for multiple historical *ludonarratives* to be compared and contrasted. As Taylor puts it, historical games that “are designed to be tried over and over again, give the interactor a vehicle to test the range of possibilities about how a decision at one point in time could affect a wide range of possible outcomes in the future” (2003, para. 10). Such games therefore make meaning by allowing multiple narratives that, though bound by the same basic theoretical model, allow for (and even emphasise) the possibility of difference, rather than offering a conclusive and encompassing account of events. Thus, *open-ontological story structures* are particularly discursive in the sense that they best emphasise the shared authorship of history in games, the back and forth palpable relationship between players’ probing inputs and the systems procedural responses in the developer-historian’s absence. However, these games are also discursive in the sense that they are capable of producing differing *ludonarratives* that have a discursive relation to one another, while being bound within a common field of logic and reference.

This discursive quality shifts the history to the historian's diegetic level and is in turn (most frequently in conjunction with the *conceptual simulation style*) supported by this shift (allowing, for example, for the comparative anachronism or anapopism common to modern narrative histories). *Open-ontological story structure* games are not so much fixed histories of the past as on-going theoretical discussions *about* the past – though still manifest through narratives, albeit multiple, and even competing, historical *ludonarratives*. *Open-ontological* games give players the opportunity to playfully (re)write history and by doing so to see what the developer-historian argues the significant elements/decisions in the production of particular outcomes are/were. These narrative dynamics are therefore deeply important not only to these games' function as systems of historical representation but also as systems *for* narrative and counterfactual *historiographing*, functions which are described in greater detail in Chapters 7 and 9.

Historical Framing Narrative

As discussed, *ludonarratives* are a deeply important part of history in games. It is here where players will probably spend most of their time, much of the historical narrative will be created and here in which games embrace their more unique formal qualities of argumentation and offerings of historical practice. Whilst historical *framing narrative* can also be very valuable in games, particularly as it aligns more closely to more conventional forms of historical narrative, much of what we can say about it has already been well discussed in relation to other visual media. For example, scholars such as Rosenstone (1995; 2006), Toplin (1996; 2010), Hughes-Warrington (2006), Sorlin (1980; 2001) and Elliott (2010) have discussed the significance, limitations and potential of history on film in impressive depth. Similarly, the broader role of narrative in (or rather *as*) history has been explored by theorists such as Munslow (2007b), White (1973; 1990), Jenkins (1991) and Ankersmit (1983). Although these debates often apply to *framing narrative* in games, it seems more fruitful to explore this issue in the way it relates to the unique qualities of historical games, that is to say in its important contextualising relationship with the historical *ludonarrative* that arises from gameplay.

Framing Narrative in Deterministic/Open Story Structure Games

Framing goals, the most frequent form of *framing narrative* intervention into gameplay, often exist in layers in *deterministic* and *open story structure* games. Whilst a larger set generally provides a broader narrative employment for the mission/level (e.g. 'survive the battle of Carentan'), a smaller subset often structures the scene-by-scene production of the historical *ludonarrative* (e.g. 'outflank and destroy the enemy machine gun emplacement ahead'). The *realist simulations* common to these *deterministic* or *open*

story structure games, and the concurrent focus at the diegetic level of historical agents, generally means diegetic explanations for the introduction of these goals are included. Thus, *framing narrative fragments* involving NPCs often explain the situation, the character's motivation and their upcoming role, through cutscenes and/or dialogue. Furthermore, sometimes (particularly in the subset layer) goals are presented as the player-character's logical or emotional reaction to the situation. Accordingly, goals can be an important form of historical explanation in these games and they often engage each of Munslow's (2007b, 59–65) categories of historical characterisation, the semantic mimetic (representation of the agent as a person who existed in time and space), non-mimetic (their use by the historian as a carrier or representative of an idea, theme or other literary motif) and cognitive mimetic (the character's sense of their situation and knowledge of themselves). Notably, these characterisations are frequently less important in the often *conceptual open-ontological* historical games and their general concern with abstraction and collective action.⁶ Nonetheless, *framing narrative*, even as *framing goals*, can clearly sometimes have a significant role in communicating the developer-historian's ideas about historical characterisation, agent intentionality and the argued theory of agency, i.e. the significance of individual actions and realisations in the causal relations of past events.

In *deterministic story structure* games, as well as introducing these *framing goals*, *framing narrative fragments* are used to move the narrative forward, explain jumps in time and space between scenes and to further explain the historical setting and characters. *Framing narrative* is also important because it allows for historical themes that are difficult to include in the spatial action that *realist* games tend to focus on in their *ludonarratives* (e.g. racing, combat, exploration) and therefore allows for more complex verbal exposition. For example, in *Brothers in Arms* swapping to *framing narrative* allows players to see the player-character's reactions to events and also gives time to concentrate on the squad's relationships and dialogue. This also allows appropriate scenarios (e.g. resting or recreation) for these conversations to occur in, but which have no obvious spatial game-play value. The swap to these film-like perspectives also allows the game to deal in ambiguity, something that drama, as Rosenstone notes (2006, 43–4), finds easy but written history can struggle with, as can the clear rules that satisfying and fair competitive spatial gameplay relies upon.

Framing narrative fragments are also often used to contextualise and provide resolution by detailing the larger outcomes or consequences of player/player-character action. Again then, *framing narrative* is important to constructing causality and to the rhetorical predispositions of these *determinist* historical games. As White (1973) famously pointed out, the placement of a historical event in a sequence determines its genre of emplotment. In *deterministic story structures*, events in the *framing narrative* must be reached and experienced if the story is to continue and thus are depicted as the only *correct resolution* of the challenges of the *ludonarrative* the player overcomes

and the only natural path for history to take. This obviously somewhat restricts the possibility for alternative imaginings or narratives. Furthermore, this can banish a sense of contingency and also means that there is a propensity for using the *framing narrative* to confirm (and echo) the experience of gameplay/player-character actions in an inevitable romance (adventure) emplotment. History therefore becomes the triumph of the hero over the world of experience and of good over evil (White 1973, 8–9). Some games do instead use *framing narratives* as a deliberate contrast to *ludonarrative* success (*Spec Ops: The Line* is a sophisticated example). However, this is also open to critique,

The games industry ... has learned that irony is a no-lose gambit, a ... strategy whose simultaneous affirmation/negation structure can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment – thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in.

(Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003, 277)

This propensity for romance emplotments also becomes more problematic when we consider that in most historical games these heroes are overwhelmingly white, Western, males and thus that this can often reinforce a problematic conservative teleological grand narrative of history, both in form and content, as the inevitable linear triumph and progression of these social groups. This can sometimes simultaneously (and even conversely) engage Carlyle's (1841) problematic ideas that history was correctly unfolded by the victories of 'great men' (however, this emphasis on the role of the individual varies between games; see footnote).⁷ Even beyond these issues, these teleological leanings of *deterministic story structures* are problematic. Teleology in history eradicates contingency in the past thus, "*what was contingent in the present seems inevitable in hindsight ...* Teleology legitimizes the present as the only possible (thus inevitable) result of the cumulative events that constitute history ... a single path is forged that ignores branches of possibilities" (Apperley 2013, 189). The strict linearity and authority of the *framing narrative of deterministic story structures* naturally tends to emphasise such understandings of history.

Open story structures function similarly to these *deterministic story structures* but differ in that, as aforementioned, players can also choose between multiple *framing goals* and *framing narrative fragments* (and concurrent sections of gameplay). The theory of causality remains similarly predetermined, as the structuring logic is still determined by the developer-historian.⁸ However, this agency over *framing narrative* does give players some choice in story/content, order and frequency (what, when and how often) and importantly over emplotment genre, allowing for more nuanced and multiple *framing narratives* and depictions of the role of past action. In such games, *framing narrative* can more easily offer the possibility of

say romance or tragedy (the fall of the protagonist/player and the shaking of the world he inhabits, to paraphrase White [1973, 8–9]), without necessarily halting the narrative itself. This is possible because in *open story structure* historical games, such as *L.A. Noire*, choices between *framing narrative fragments* can constitute significant gameplay in and of themselves.⁹ This narrative layer of gameplay allows for entire narrative strands to be resolved without necessarily relying on the more spatially focused competitive action gameplay in which *deterministic realist simulation* gameplay is generally locked and that, as a competitive activity, generally rests on a clear binary of win/progress/history continues or lose/halt/history stops. This narrative gameplay layer means that these historical games can utilise more ambiguity and multiplicity than *deterministic* games and engage historical emplotments such as tragedy, comedy and satire with relative ease. Importantly, these can be determined by player action and thus such games allow a broader range of meaning to be made about the role of past action through gameplay itself. Furthermore, as players can choose a number of broader possible historical narratives like this for their player-character, they have a role in determining and exploring historical agent intentionality and characterisation.

In both *deterministic* and *open story structures*, the presence of *framing narrative* allows for dramatic storytelling that is free to utilise the narrative techniques and possibilities of other forms of history, such as historical novels, historical film, or even professional historiography.¹⁰ For example, narratives that rely on particular pacing and definitive emplotments to invoke say fear or suspense can be easily included in *framing narrative* without the fear of disruption by player agency. Pinchbeck (2008) provides evidence that strong story games have more effect on player recall of game events and characters, with players of the strong story game in his study failing to remember names but remembering motives and recalling using homodiegetic (rather than technical or mechanistic) context and language. Thus, “a strong plot may not only act as a reward scheme but aid in orientation and postexperience affect” (Pinchbeck 2008, 6). Obviously both audience engagement and recall are important to the dissemination of history. Such games, in their multimodal positioning of *ludonarrative* against strong *framing narrative*, also seem best placed to harness the claimed benefits of ‘trans-media’ (see Jenkins 2006; Wilson 2004; Warren, Wakefield and Mills 2013) whereby, “stories can be told across media in such a way as to take advantage of what each medium does best” (Davidson 2008, 14).

As described in Chapter 3, epistemology is a particularly pertinent issue when considering simulation style, however, narrative structure also has a role to play in this regard. *Deterministic story structures*, with their fixed *framing narrative* that players must conform to, have an obvious harmony with the *reconstructionist* epistemology’s authoritarian concern with presenting the story. The tight *framing controls* (e.g. linear spaces and limited significantly interactive *lexia*) typical to this story structure ensure that the

ludonarrative does not become easily dissonant with either the *framing narrative* or the sources or narratives each are based upon. By combining this with a significant local (normally complex spatial) agency for players, the games still generally maintain a gratifying creative margin for players to (re)construct their arguments. However, *deterministic* games, such as *Brothers in Arms* and *Medal of Honor*, generally tell the kind of specific, authoritarian and satisfying *reconstructionist* stories that are clearly favoured in popular culture. This means that these games offer only one broader narrative path. As Rosenstone puts it, historical films that do this “compress the past into a closed world by telling a single, linear story with, essentially, a single interpretation. Such a narrative strategy obviously denies historical alternatives, does away with complexities of motivation or causation, and banishes all subtlety from the world of history” (1995, 22). *Deterministic story structure* games can be seen as similarly reductionist and problematic. As such, as aforementioned, *deterministic story structures* are inherently teleological, positioning history as inevitable progress towards a specific goal, each fragment of *framing narrative* functioning as the only possible path, the *only correct telos*, for the player to achieve and through which history can progress.

This said, the presence of *framing narrative* itself does not necessarily mean a *reconstructionist* epistemology. *Open story structure* games can allow for varying (e.g. *L.A. Noire*, *Red Dead Redemption*) and even competing (e.g. *Fallout*, *Jade Empire*, *Choice of Broadsides*) *framing narratives* that run against interpretations of historical processes as linear. The sacrificing of claims of authoritarian authenticity (which have a particular utility in popular culture) that this can entail is perhaps partly why *open story structures* are relatively rare in historical games. However, whilst *framing narrative fragments* might differ, they are generally bound by a shared logic. Furthermore, because the formation of the *framing narrative* is *chosen* by players, who generally play the role of historical agents, these games often concentrate on the role of character agency and intentionality as a strong underlying theory of causality. This of course again risks producing a ‘great man’ perspective. However, alongside the greater thematic diversity these games allow, it also means that *open story structures* can sometimes be seen to shift closer to the theoretical concerns of *constructionist* epistemologies, arguing for the nature of the historical process rather than simply recounting the events of the past.¹¹ Accordingly, narrative structure can soften the *reconstructionist* bent of the *realist simulation style* common to such games. The reverse process is found in games such as *Age of Empires III* or *Company of Heroes*, which, despite utilising partially *conceptual-constructionist* simulation styles, sometimes operate with a *determinist* and thus *reconstructionist*, narrative epistemology. What these examples emphasise is that the multimodality of digital games allows for multiple, and even competing, historical epistemologies to be in simultaneous operation in the same game.

Framing Narrative in Open-Ontological Games

Open-ontological story structure games (e.g. *Civilization*, *Making History* and *Crusader Kings*) are obviously still somewhat ‘framed’ by historical evidence, discourse and formal pressures. However, they also privilege *ludonarrative* so dramatically that any strong *framing narrative* would become quickly incoherent. Such games obviously therefore find it difficult to tell histories of specific sequences of events (something often perceived as intrinsic to history). Similarly, because narrative cannot be tightly pre-scripted, dramatic pacing and other linear narrative techniques are extremely difficult to implement, leading to criticism, such as designer Warren Spector’s, that emergent narrative “ends up with a relative lack of direction and emotional resonance” (McNamara 2004). This said, as artists and scholars such as Brecht (1964) have argued, *pathos* might be antithetical to critical and reflective thought, qualities that are generally seen as desirable in historical study.¹² Furthermore, these *open-ontological story structure* games allow for more complex forms of historical discourse precisely by relinquishing *framing narrative*.

This said, though highly privileging historical *ludonarrative*, the (hi)story-play-spaces of *open-ontological* games generally still have some limited *framing narrative*. Historical strategy games, for instance, often have *framing narrative fragments* that ‘bookend’ gameplay. For example, the introduction animation for *Civilization IV*, depicting the formation of the Earth and evolution of man, attempts (along with menu aesthetics, box-art and trailers) to establish a historical resonance with players by suturing the game’s events into a grand historical narrative (and epistemological tradition). Importantly, this also introduces the player to the overarching *framing goal* (“To build a legacy that would stand the test of time. A civilization”) and thus the historical themes that the *framing controls* ensure are a part of the *ludonarrative*: progression (a specific cultural metanarrative of civilisation), expansion and power. *Framing narrative fragments* are also often used to provide historical context about preceding events or factions (for example, see Figure 6.2). Thus, in *Making History: The Great War* the beginning *framing narrative fragment* explains our chosen nation’s recent history, social, industrial and political structure, diplomatic status and the historical aims of our allies and enemies in the years before WWI and preceding those which gameplay starts in. Similarly, *framing narrative fragments* are also often used to conclude gameplay and to demonstrate the ultimate outcome of the player-produced *ludonarrative* and achieved *framing goal*. These are therefore often multiple. For example, games in the *Civilization* series famously offer at least four or five possible victory conditions (e.g. domination; cultural; scientific/technological; economic; diplomatic) and concurrent *framing narrative fragments*, in any one game. *Making History* allows players to choose, before they play, whether *framing goals* will apply to a particular nation, ideology, or alliance. These therefore invite players to choose some of the broad plotment, focus, ideology and themes that

will be included in, and exert pressure upon, the historical *ludonarrative*. In either case, the *framing narrative* provides a cohesive resolution to the events of the *ludonarrative* and unifies the potentially divergent themes and concerns of this narrative by providing an argument for what constitutes the climax of the emplotment of the type of history that it overall describes, according to the developer-historian. These endings, as story/content decisions, mark what is considered most relevant, and beyond them irrelevant, to the history. Given the *conceptual* shift to the historian's diegetic level, the vast thematic and spatio-temporal scale this enables and the ludic concentration on competitive expansion typical to these games, these endings can, at their worst, be seen to invoke a sort of Fukuyama-esque (1992) argument about the 'end of history' as linked to cultural homogeneity, power and conceptions of civilisation/nationhood.

On the other hand, the multiplicity of these endings, and the general lack of *framing narrative* before them, still allows for the possibility of multiple histories arranged around different themes. Thus, the formal structure says something important about the possibility for multiple pasts, and perspectives on the past, and thus about the nature of history itself, even if bound in content by particular cultural understandings and narratives and being ultimately, like all competitive games, in some way focused on power. This makes *open-ontological* games quite unlike *deterministic* games, which can only portray one set combination of broader events that leads to power because the larger victory is created through the player's alignment with the fixed *framing narrative*. *Open-ontological* games also typically offer larger agency and variety in emplotments (and thus historical meaning). For example, using White's (1973) basic emplotment categories, *Civilization's* possible *framing narrative* endings could, depending on interpretation, be seen as romance (the player/civilisation heroically triumphs), tragedy (the player fails to win or alternatively wins by violent rather than peaceful means) or comedy (a harmonic resolution between the social and the natural – in this case a science victory).¹³ Furthermore, these larger emplotments exist alongside the numerous smaller narrative strands with variable emplotments that are possible within the open and flexible *ludonarrative*, even while being bound within the *framing controls* and thus the limits (laws) of the mechanistic argumentation. These are resolved or counterpointed with the themes of the overall possible historical narratives by the final signification of the ending *framing narrative fragments*. As all this indicates, even the small amounts of *framing narrative* in *open-ontological* games can still be an important part of the historical narrative, particularly in its role in contextualising the produced historical *ludonarratives* and solidifying the unification of this around particular core historical themes.

Some *open-ontological* games, despite still offering a large variety of possible historical *ludonarratives*, use *framing goals* specifically to encourage us to reproduce *ludonarratives* that align with the historical record and in particular the events that the developer-historian considers to be most significant

to this. For example, when playing *Empire: Total War* as the British faction, the *framing goals* ask us to capture the parts of the world actually controlled by 1750 or 1799 (depending on mode) by these dates in the game (see Figure 6.2). However, it is important to note that there is generally less of an emphasis on *framing goals* in *open-ontological* historical games than in other types of digital game. For example, in WWI grand strategy game *Aggression: Reign Over Europe*, *framing goals* of this sort are soft, with players offered bonuses for aligning with the historical record without it being a requirement. Some games go even further. For example, *Civilization* games usually don't explicitly mention victory conditions, even in *Civilization Revolution 2*'s tutorial. Nor does *Making History: The Great War*. Instead both games leave interested players to search out this information in supporting documentation. Furthermore, some games, such as *Crusader Kings II*, have no explicit *framing goals* of this kind at all, instead only having a losing condition (in this case that sees the game end if the player's character has no viable heir when they die). In some *open-ontological* games, historical events are triggered at certain dates (offering a conservative characterisation of the inevitability of certain historical events) or by certain combinations of decisions of players and/or NPC actions (instead emphasizing collective agency and contingency). Either way, these events sometimes offer us subsets of *framing goals* (or simply act as *framing controls* to make particular courses of action more likely). However, these too can generally be ignored in these games and often only really function as secondary texts to provide historical information. Furthermore, because *framing goals* are often different for different historical factions in strategy games, they are often not zero-sum (and thus not strictly competitive). This reflects the confusing web of intentionality and motivations in history, but it importantly also introduces a further multiplicity to the goal structures of these *open-ontological* games.

The *ludonarrative* freedom, complexity and multiplicity in *open-ontological* games generally allows players to pursue multiple ways to



Figure 6.2 Screenshot of the menu in *Empire: Total War* that both provides the *framing goals* for the single-player campaign and offers a beginning *framing narrative fragment* that establishes the historical context for the chosen faction.

achieve what *framing goals* are included. However, this freedom, combined with the relative lack of emphasis on, and/or variety of, *framing goals* in *open-ontological* games, importantly also allows room for, and encourages, players to experiment with the *ludonarrative* and to pursue their own (extratelic) goals instead of, or alongside, these *framing goals*. In *Civilization*, for example, players could aim to imitate the achievements of an existing ‘civilisation’; build a particular wonder or all the wonders in the game; discover all the technologies; see how long their civilisation can survive; theorise about the future by playing into it; create an ethical civilisation or a world they would want to live in; create perceived ironic narratives (such as a completely non-aggressive Mongol civilisation); discover all of the game world; peacefully create a culturally homogenous world, or any other kind of extratelic goal they might come up with. Players have the freedom to attempt any short or long-term goal that creates some sort of resonance, dissonance, or sense of challenge for them and that at least appears to be possible given the allowed actions, included *lexia* and themes of the system. *Open-ontological* games can therefore offer satisfaction and historical narratives beyond a simple prescribed win/loss dynamic and allow us to indulge our curiosity, all the while receiving the game’s arguments in response. As Atkins puts it of *Civilization*, these games offer “the possibility of departing at any time from the tyranny of competitive play to engage in an exploration of the limits and possibilities of the underlying game model” (2005, 16). And of course it is in these limits and possibilities where games (particularly *conceptual* games) make their arguments about the past.

This freedom in choosing goals is often further compounded by the opportunity to remove *framing goals* entirely. So, for example, in *Civilization*, *Making History* and *Total War* we are free to ignore victory conditions by choosing to continue playing beyond the point at which these would normally end play and the historical narrative.¹⁴ Doing so can be seen to deny the kind of climactic catharsis that Brecht (1964) argues make audiences complacent and less critical. In historical games, removing endings can be seen to position history as an open-ended process, denying the teleological pressure that narrative closure exerts over the past, making emplotment an uncertain and potentially unfinished player led process that denies a final genre, and thus ultimate meaning, for the past. This simultaneous emphasis on uncertainty and denial of narrative authority seems to engage *deconstructionist* notions of history. Most importantly to the function of these games as systems for *historying* (see chapters 7 and 9), it offers the freedom to function as an experimental historical narrative playground, often subject only to our own satisfaction with particular historical events as narrative conclusions or our eventual disinterest.

Obviously, whether these offers are taken up depends on the motivations, interest and importantly *skill* of individual players. To novices, the tactical utility of particular courses of action (and thus particular *ludonarratives*) may be unclear and they might therefore select according to the representation or at least feel the pressure of *framing goals* on their *historical ludonarrative*

creation less. Conversely, novice players may often be unable to produce the *ludonarratives* they wish to see. Players can also use this freedom simply to tinker with the game's rules purely mechanistically or to replace the autotelic goals with goals that are simply more difficult, completely ignoring the representational aspect. However, as aforementioned, there is some evidence that players in some online communities do utilise these opportunities to pursue and share their own historical (either referential or counterfactual) goals (Apperley 2007). In any case, this loosening of some of the competitive elements of gameplay and freedom for players to pursue their own goals is very important to how *open-ontological* games represent the past and also how they offer access to *historying* (and is further discussed in Chapter 9).

Whilst *open-ontological* historical games often put less of an *explicit* emphasis on *framing goals*, there are still always some *implicit* goals. Games encourage us to think in particular ways and part of their representational argumentation is found in punishing us if we make decisions that do not align with their underlying logics. There are always tactics that the system favours and that will therefore grant us more power to achieve our goals. In historical strategy games, for instance, tactics are generally predicated on expansion, domination and technological/cultural progression. This is even apparent in game titles (e.g. *Empire: Total War*) and, as noted, genre names (e.g. 4X games: explore, expand, exploit, exterminate). Here the framing historical context can imply gameplay goals, particularly when dealing with specific periods and characters. For example, players playing *Crusader Kings II* as William the Conqueror might know of the power that his successful invasion of England granted him. Players might therefore press for these advantages by making this their goal, something that the *framing controls* might also support. Historical games always have a hovering layer of wider historical discourse and memory that, whilst relying both on players' historical understanding/implementation and the developer-historian's imbrication into the *framing controls*, can frame gameplay in ways that are less apparent than in explicit *framing goals*. This layer of epistemology, theory, reference and official/popular history constitute the rules/*framing controls* within which history is always 'played'. However, games make this always-present tension between agency and rules in the processes of *historying* particularly explicit.

Historical Narrative vs. the Game Form

As we began to discuss in Chapter 2, there are aspects of both what are conventionally taken to be 'history' and 'games' that are often difficult to reconcile. As Uricchio puts it, "The burden of history weighs heavily upon both the construction of the subject-player and the environment that defines and constrains the player's possibilities" (2005, 334). However, the reverse is also true, the demands of gameplay also exert pressure on history as a narrative practice. These tensions can influence the ideological, theoretical and epistemological perspectives that a historical game engages. Like any

form of history, there is the potential for clashes between content formed and understood through other forms, and the conventions and limits of the form in which this content is newly presented. Every historical form cannot therefore be suitable for every type of historical narrative, tensions perhaps exacerbated by the particular cultural history of digital games, with many conventions having been developed in response to the significant demands of late capitalism. Whilst historical games are a diverse genre and thus so too are their narrative tensions, some are particularly commonplace.

Narrative Layering

Most obviously, as hinted at in Chapter 2, there is a tension between the common understanding of historical narrative as fixed and the unpredictable nature of *ludonarrative*. Developer-historians sometimes wish to recount existing ‘official’ histories or to make meaning about the past by compressing multiple historical accounts into one linear account (as film makers frequently do). Either way, if a *specific* narrative is to be told, *framing narrative* or strict *framing controls* must be used to resolve the fixed nature of this with the unpredictability of playful *ludonarrative*. However, players must still be granted satisfying agency. Narrative layering (Gish 2010), whereby multiple historical narrative strands exist atop/within one another, can resolve these tensions. Generally the specific historical narrative is recounted through *framing narrative* and through *framing controls* (e.g. tight spatial representation/structure, pre-scripted events), with other more flexible narrative layers that structure the *ludonarrative* existing within this.¹⁵ For example, in forthcoming historical game *Titanic: Honor and Glory*, the larger specific historical narrative is not effectible by the player. As the game’s website puts it, “the player cannot change history”, at some point the ship will sink. However, alongside recounting the sinking of the Titanic, the game must sustain interesting gameplay through agency, challenge, uncertainty and the possibility of some kind of victory despite the larger emplotment of tragedy. Thus, another narrative layer, a fictionalised crime mystery *ludonarrative* where the player must clear the accused player-character’s name through finding clues and solving puzzles, exists within this larger historical narrative.¹⁶ Both these layers of historical narrative appear to work through both *framing* and *ludonarrative*. For example, the story of the sinking of the *Titanic* can be communicated in the *framing narrative* (character dialogue and *framing goals*) and the *ludonarrative* (as the *framing controls* alter as the ship sinks). Similarly, the mystery gameplay layer is mainly *ludonarrative* and yet is undoubtedly also structured in some way through *framing narrative fragments* and *framing goals*.

The interrelations between narrative layers can be important to the overall produced history. For example, Gish (2010) explains how WWII entries in the *Call of Duty* series contextualise and conceptualise the war in triplicate. The first layer is “that of the Second World War in its totality,

an occurrence that is portrayed as a closed event only during the opening cinematics of the individual games” (Gish 2010, 170). This is very common in WWII games and tends to involve a move to the historian’s diegetic level by utilising a documentary style (e.g. photographs, video and voice-overs). This layer establishes a relation to the larger historical discourse, locating the games events in ‘real’ history by attempting to provoke historical resonance with players, and in its closed *framing narrative* nature establishes the *reconstructionist* authority which the (likely realist) simulation style and (likely *deterministic*) narrative structure will probably reinforce. Thus, this layer is closed both in game terms, as we cannot affect it, and in historical terms, with a rigid empirical epistemology. This layer is also often established through sources and intertextual references in marketing (trailers, demos, advertisements, box-art), extras (photographs, documents, limited edition postcards, DVDs) and by framing game events within significant dates (e.g. “6th of June, 1944”).

The second layer of WWII games, which occurs mainly through *framing narrative* cutscenes but also *framing controls* (e.g. prescribed events) and some *lexia* (e.g. contextual dialogue), is generally more narrowly focused on the game’s local historical characters and events and it is therefore here where most characterisation takes place. Thus, in *Brothers in Arms*:

Each successive chapter begins with the name of the mission and the date projected onto a dark screen, over which [the player-character] Baker’s voice narrates. Through this device we learn bits and pieces of Baker’s past ... the advice that Baker’s father (a veteran of World War I) gave him before departing for France. After Baker’s narration, each chapter begins with a brief scene in which the members of the squad discuss what has been happening, their lives at home, their feelings about Germans, and so on.

(Rejack 2007, 415)

This layer is also important to the themes, tone and the contextualisation of the *framing goals*. It “simultaneously provide[s] the player with a spatio-temporal localization for the coming military encounter, and a personalization of the conflict’s stakes and meanings” (Gish 2010, 170). This, like the first layer, is also linear, “No matter what actions are performed during game play, the foundational narrative history of World War II and the localized, personalized narratives of the games’ cut scenes remain unchanged” (Gish 2010, 172). Given the popularly perceived sanctity of established WWII narratives, this narrative structure seems an obvious choice for developers, allowing them to offer a fixed historical narrative in the first two layers whilst still allowing for satisfying player agency in the third final *ludonarrative* focused layer that emerges from gameplay.

Interplays between layers can be important. In these WWII games, the second layer negotiates between the larger fixed narrative of the war and

the third *ludonarrative* layer, and the concurrent shift between diegetic levels (and often tense). It “shuttles the player from the grand narrative of World War II to the individual narrative of personal player experience, buffering this transition through appeals to on-the-ground realism and individuated, personalized knowledge of wartime” (Gish 2010, 171). Furthermore, layers are bound through *framing goals* and prescribed events. For example, “As the player navigates the game space of the individual level, particular historical narrative events occur (e.g., the Battle of Stalingrad) concomitantly with the construction of a personal narrative of the player’s individual experience negotiating the level” (Gish 2010, 171). Accordingly, player experiences are linked to the larger historical discourse through suturing them within two *specific* historical narrative layers, as well as through the procedural rhetoric of the more unpredictable third layer itself. Gish (2010) argues that layering histories in this manner exposes the multiple narratives present within the construction of history. In the case of *Call of Duty*, he argues that this emphasises the diversity of approaches to telling/playing historical conflict (e.g. national, personal), despite the emphasis on reductionist jingoistic narratives. If this is truly the case, then perhaps narrative layering offers the much-needed possibility of epistemological nuance to these generally *deterministic*, *realist*, and thus highly *reconstructionist*, games.

Importantly, even though the second and third layers are often heavily fictionalised, they are still generally historical in some regards and can make meaning about the past. Despite frequent compression (e.g. order and frequency changes), these layers often deal with the kinds of characters, events and themes that are generally considered a typical part of the history (including restricting the player to historically typical/possible actions through *framing controls*, e.g. procedural rhetoric). For example, it is easy to imagine learning about class in the early 20th century by talking to the different characters of *Titanic: Honor and Glory*, even if they and our player-character’s motivations to do so are fictionalised. In fact historical fiction can construct and communicate varied arguments about the past precisely because it has an “intergeneric hybridity and flexibility” (De Groot 2010, 2), at least partly due to relinquishing the hindrance of detailed sequential accounts. Historical games frequently also engage fantasy/supernatural/science fiction themes in some of their layers (e.g. *Assassin’s Creed*), probably partly because this provides diegetic explanations for (normally empowering) gameplay affordances. However, even these narrative layers can sometimes make metaphorical meaning about the past and still often exist within, or encompass, a more directly referential historical narrative layer.

History vs. Gameplay

As discussed, the earlier example of my desperate charge in *Brothers in Arms* tapped into privileged heroic historical narratives. However, these kinds of narratives probably occur more often in the game than evidence would suggest they did in reality because compromises must often be made

to empower and excite players. Most digital games are *agon* (competitive) games, wherein “equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner’s triumph” (Caillouis 2001, 14). Whilst digital games differ in that players may be granted advantages their virtual opponents are not, they must still balance between offering satisfying challenge and not being so difficult as to be perceived to be unfair and not fun. However, the same cannot be said for historical conflict/competition. This tension is well explained by the rulebook for tabletop historical wargame *Hail Caesar*. Although this provides army lists with point values that (whilst still reflecting general historical military practices) allow players to balance armies for tournaments, the designer also adds that he prefers to build armies in line with the historical record because “No ancient general ever mustered an army on this basis. A fair and even fight against a randomly determined enemy was probably the last thing on Caesar’s mind when he advanced upon the Gauls” (Priestley 2011, 175). Indeed, contrary to notions of fair play, real historical commanders understandably generally sought to outnumber enemy forces and to gain information about them before battle without revealing information about their own forces. Here the tensions between gameplay and history are apparent. Similar tensions are also often present in *digital* historical games.

For example, in some specific scenarios, strategy game *Imperialism* starts in 1820 rather than 1815, seemingly so that France (weakened by defeat at Waterloo) is balanced with the other European powers. Here balancing gameplay exerts pressure over the story/content of the historical narrative. Similarly, as Mir and Owens (2013) argue, “The inclusion of disease in [*Sid Meier’s*] *Colonization* would certainly be more ‘accurate’ historically speaking, but such a mechanic would limit a player’s control and possible choices and might worsen player experience” (Mir and Owens 2013, 98). Thus, an aspect generally considered an important part of the history of the colonisation of the Americas is excluded. Similarly, often historical detail is erased in order to allow players to understand gameplay systems by utilising their contemporary understanding. For instance, Sidney Godolphin, initial leader of the British faction in *Empire Total War*, is referred to as ‘Prime Minister’ despite the role not formally existing at this point and him being either First Lord of the Treasury or Lord High Treasurer during the depicted period. However, doing so allows the interface and systems of the game to be consistent and less confusing.

Further tensions exist between the concentration of gameplay on winning and losing and the ambiguity of lived historical experience. Outcomes of conflict in reality are generally complex and nuanced on the grand scale and of course many of those that survive conflict likely do not particularly think of themselves as victors on an individual scale (though *players* are generally supposed to). Tensions, however, are most apparent in the treatment of death. Player-characters are generally only killed through a failure in player skill, in direct contrast to the frequently random violence of real

warfare. These failures are still important to a game's historical arguments. However, save systems mean that players get to learn from these mistakes, unlike their historical counterparts. This means that though death is a constant presence in such games, it is only ever really invoked as a premature narrative end, a temporary disruption of the supposed flow of historical events. The only *correct* way for this teleological history to be constructed is through survival/victory. As Allison puts it, "In first-person shooters like *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*, the triumph of the Allies is assured, over and over and over again" (2010, 191). This reflects a celebration of victory culture and Allied (particularly US) victory in a contemporary era where American military intervention is viewed with increasing scepticism (Allison 2010, 192). The pressures and conventions of gameplay result in the reinforcement of particular perspectives on the past and make more nuanced critical narrative engagements difficult.

However, some historical games do forgo some of the typical demands of gameplay in favour of historical representation and their use as systems for *historying*. It is common in historical grand strategy games, for example, for factions to have vastly different starting resources, unbalancing gameplay but better representing history. For example, whilst *Making History* lets us play as Poland in 1939, it is seemingly impossible to win or survive much past this point. This imbalance makes clear arguments as to why Poland could not avoid or repel Nazi Germany in WWII, through enforcing the production of particular *ludonarratives*. Similarly, as reviewer Faraday (2014) notes, the Entente faction suffers in WWI strategy game *Commander: The Great War* because the starting geography prevents allies from directly supporting one another on the different fronts, something not an issue for encircled Germany and Austria-Hungary. Again, although this unbalances gameplay in comparison to most digital games, it better reflects the challenges faced by commanders of the time.

It is perhaps easier for grand strategy games to unbalance gameplay in this way because they are generally not really mainstream games and (as even a glance at forums for these games indicates) much of the core audience have a strong interest in history. However, this is a more dangerous strategy when aiming at more mainstream audiences who might be interested in games that only *happen* to be historical and are therefore more likely to be frustrated by imbalance. For instance, some players of the *Rome: Total War* series have dubbed the square infantry formation the 'noob box', attempting to socially police gameplay by indicating that only novice players would use a tactic perceived to be unfair and not fun. This is despite the fact that this is a recognised formation from the classical era and was used by the Romans (Plutarch 1916, 23.3). Some remedies go further than this. For instance, though some mods are created to increase a game's perceived accuracy, some are implemented to remove or change elements considered imbalanced, often despite historical evidence for these elements. Similarly, in WWII board game *Memoir '44* and digital version *Memoir '44 Online*,

scenarios are often extremely unbalanced in an effort to reflect the historical realities of the represented battles through encouraging the production of particular *ludonarratives*. Convention amongst many players is to therefore remedy this by playing scenarios twice, creating two narrative strands and effectively granting the player that loses the best the ultimate victory.

Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

These kinds of tensions, between the expectations of games as systems for play and as systems for the communication or generation of historical narrative, can be understood as what designer Clint Hocking describes as *ludo-narrative dissonance* “a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story” (Hocking 2007, para. 4).¹⁷ As well as in terms of narrative structure and balance, clashes between game-play and story can also be thematic and tonal. This is clear in the predilection of many games toward adventurous romance emplotments though many histories are conventionally understood through other emplotments. However, it is also apparent in smaller moments. For instance, whilst the *framing narrative* of *Brothers in Arms* (as contemporary WWII film and TV drama also tend to) dwells on the horror, loss and sadness of war and rejects more overt glorification, the *ludonarrative* of the series rarely manages to invoke these themes and even clashes with them. In *Brother's in Arms: Hell's Highway*, for example, the camera goes into slow motion and zooms in (fracturing the first-person perspective) when players achieve a headshot or use explosive weapons to blow up a group of enemies, allowing them to better see the gory effects of their actions. Encouraging players to revel in the violence of their gameplay prowess makes the *ludonarrative* jarringly and significantly dissonant with the moral rhetoric and themes of the *framing narrative*. It is precisely the fear of this kind of *ludo-narrative dissonance* that fuels disagreements about the limits of play (as discussed in Chapter 2).

This said, it is also possible to see how, when using the right content and when handled carefully, these kind of ruptures in *diegesis* between *framing* and *ludonarratives* could be purposely used in order to inspire critical reflection on gameplay actions and the history that they represent. For example, players who successfully complete WWI game *Warfare 1917* are greeted with newspaper headlines that read “public unsure going to war justified” and “returning servicemen given no care after many suffer cases of extreme shell shock” alongside “BRITISH ARMY LED TO GLORIOUS VICTORY”. Educational WWI game *Trench Warfare* goes further and features a *framing narrative* that continually questions the players victories, informing them of the later loss of their small territorial gains, and features an impossible final mission after which players are informed that “There was no way this battle was ever going to be a success” and that ordering the men to retry it would merely mean “sending them to their deaths”. These games break

the romance (adventure) emplotment that games tend to favour because it resonates with the player experience of overcoming challenges. Instead, they favour the memory of WWI as a tragedy or dark satire, precisely by purposefully using *ludo-narrative dissonance* to echo the tensions that are still rife in WWI cultural memory.¹⁸ As this suggests, it may well be that these kinds of tensions actually have a role to play in the development of a game-based language of historical representation.

Playing Historical Narrative

Exploring historical narrative in games points to intricate negotiations between history; form; commercial, popular and games culture; developer-historians and players; and also to complex interplays between multiple narrative elements and layers. Game-based narrative can both allow for new innovative kinds of representation and reinforce older problematic conventions. However, this also depends on the significant variations between game narrative structures. Just as every form cannot tell every history in the same way, neither can every game. However, as in every form, the final variability is found in the audience. This is doubly so in games, where players both determine and interpret the historical narrative.

Thus, whereas some players could interpret a win using nuclear weapons in *Sid Meier's Civilization* as a pure victory (romance emplotment), others might instead see it as a critique of collective historical human interactions or an account of the sad necessities of conflict (tragedy) or as a questioning of the very possibility and idea of 'civilisation' (satire). Similarly, the potential for produced *ludonarratives* to deviate from historical narratives known to the player means there is often the possibility of satire becoming the primary frame of interpretation. And, although many players may take little notice of historical representation at all, some players use games as a focus to discuss history, some are willing to sacrifice the balance expected of games in favour of history and some even modify games, or play mods that unbalance these games, for the sake of historical accuracy. This speaks to the importance of the divergent perceptions and motivations players bring to historical games and the narratives it is possible to produce through play. This is an important point. What historical games emphasise most firmly is an unusual level of involvement in history for audiences. The narrative element of this allows us to conceive of games as historical narrative, or at least as historical narrative *producing*, even if this is formed in a discursive relationship between player and developer-historian. This allows for much of our existing historical theory to be applied to games. However, by using this as our only analytical lens, there are also things that remain unsaid. As such, in the next section of the book we will move from considering games only as historical representations and look also at the offers of access to historical practices that they make, i.e. their function as systems *for* historying.

Summary

This chapter explored narrative in historical games. Looking at the role of *ludonarrative* in games with significant *framing narrative* (*deterministic* and *open story structures*) allowed us to describe the focus of many games on material spatial historical action and yet acknowledge the opportunities for emergent dramatic storytelling through cultural reenactment this can allow. However, this also pointed to how, by comparison, the narrative play offered by *open story structures* allows an engagement with a broader variety of historical themes within gameplay. By examining *ludonarrative* in *open-ontological story structures*, we explored the thematic diversity and multiplicity in the kind of hypertextual complexity such games allow and examined the strengths and weaknesses of the ‘black boxing’ this digital complexity implies. The propensity of this *open-ontological* structure for mechanistic argumentation and structuralist understandings of history, because of its focus on *ludonarrative*, was also explored, as was the particularly discursive quality of these games’ narratives.

Moving on to discuss *framing narrative* in *deterministic* and *open story structure* games allowed us to examine the importance of *framing narrative* to characterisation and the sometimes problematic predilection of some of these games for romance (adventure) emplotments. However, this section also described how *open story structure* games find it easier to engage a variety of emplotments. Further discussion explained how *framing narrative* allows both narrative structures to utilise the benefits and techniques of dramatic storytelling and examined some of the epistemological implications of these narrative structures. Looking at *framing narrative* in *open-ontological story structure* games revealed how even small ‘bookending’ fragments can be important. However, importantly, this section also pointed to how such games often de-emphasise explicit *framing goals*, having particular historiographical and epistemological implications and allowing players to better pursue their own goals. The chapter also examined tensions between the conventions of historical narratives and the game form, exploring how the perceived linearity of historical narrative is often resolved through complex narrative layering, examining clashes between gameplay balance and historical narrative and showing how *ludo-narrative* dissonance, whilst potentially problematic, can also be used rhetorically. To conclude, I reiterated the importance of player interpretation and action, stressing that we must now go beyond narrative analysis as we move into the next section.

Notes

1. Particularly when this is combined with other systems such as orderable allies (as in *Brothers in Arms*).
2. Furthermore, even the tech tree alone rapidly becomes more complex. For instance, in *Civilization IV*, developing an attack submarine requires rocketry, radio, combustion and uranium. However, even combustion requires at least ten other technologies.

3. This said, some board games also contain unpredictable random or ‘mystery’ events.
4. For an excellent discussion of the relationship of this kind of game structure to the debates about structuralist understandings of history within the discipline see Glitz (2010).
5. Of course saving and reloading means that even linear games have a somewhat spiral-like quality (Myers 2005, 1).
6. Although these forms of characterisation are less central to meaning making in *open-ontological* games, exceptions exist. For example, *Civilization*’s great persons are used as carriers of ideas and themes and are (arguably) depicted as persons who existed in time and space.
7. As implied in Chapter 3, this depends on the particular game and characters can often be portrayed as subject to, rather than determinant of, the larger movements of history in *realist* games. Thus, as De Groot notes, whereas “Can one man truly make a difference?” was the tag line for *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, “with the assumption, of course, that they can” (De Groot 2009, 134), by comparison, *Call of Duty* is less individualistic, offering the tag line “no one fights alone” and putting more of an emphasis “on teamwork and a developing sense of alliance” (De Groot 2009, 136). This latter depiction draws from some contemporary war films in that it is rooted in the notion of the ordinary soldier surviving history rather than influencing it.
8. For example, if player does X action this results in Y fragment, which explains the causal link between these events. However, if the player does the opposite then this might result in Z fragment with a different outcome, but one still bound by the shared logic about what the opposite action and fragment would have meant.
9. Although we can’t know for certain without empirical research, it seems likely that these choices will be made with a variety of possible motivations. Players might, for instance, make the decision that they think will produce the narrative outcome they hope for, do what they think would be in character for their player-character, choose to experiment, or choose whichever option they think will offer the most tactical utility.
10. For more on the possibilities of historical novels see De Groot (2010). For historical film see Rosenstone (2006) and for the narrative elements of professional historiography see Munslow (2007b).
11. Something often reinforced by the alternate or fantasy history settings and characters of such games.
12. However, the argument could also be made that the lack of scripted drama also moves the tone towards the historian’s diegetic level, with its own problems of exerting authority.
13. The missing emplotment here is satire. It is difficult to see how *open-ontological* historical games could structure this and still offer satisfying gameplay. Satire relies on the futility of human affairs, something seemingly antithetical to player agency. However, perhaps a loss could be interpreted thusly under certain conditions.
14. Indeed, there have been recent reports of a ten-year-long game of *Civilization II* (Jordison 2012)!
15. In *open story structures* this often involves having a mandatory sequence of main missions, with players given agency only over side-quest/subplot *framing narrative fragments*.

16. Historical game *Pompeii: mala tempora currunt* functions similarly, having a larger specific layer dealing with the eruption of Vesuvius and a fictional *ludonarrative* concerned with a mystery. Mystery narratives harmonise the motivations of player and player-character (with both needing to uncover information about the environment) and allow players to face challenges without the need to travel beyond the environment or significantly change the status of this environment or its inhabitants, minimizing the potential for clashes with the larger historical narrative.
17. Hocking actually uses the term '*ludonarrative dissonance*', however, I am using '*ludo-narrative dissonance*' to prevent confusion and for a better fit with my proposed model of game narrative.
18. For example, recent centenary commemorations resulted in a number of newspaper articles in the UK contesting the legacy of the war (e.g. see Glenton 2013; Milne 2014; Beevor 2014; Hunt 2014; Hastings 2013; Evans 2013; BBC 2013, 2014).

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Part III

Digital Games as Systems for Historying

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7 Affording Heritage Experiences, Reenactment and Narrative History

The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or for ill. The verb *to afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun *affordance* is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.

—Gibson (1986, 127)

While remaining mindful of the role of interaction in this, so far we have mainly explored digital games as historical representations. However, one of the most important things about historical games is that they can also function as systems for history. In other words, games, as well as being a form of media, can offer structured access to types of historical practice. Exploring this requires adding an action-focused theory to the analytical framework so far described. Ecological psychology provides such an approach, helping us to understand how digital historical games describe, and allow us to explore, past action by offering opportunities for present action. The ecological approach stems from the ideas of Eleanor and James Gibson, in particular the latter's book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1986). The core of this theory is found in the concept of *affordances*. Linderoth, who has developed the application of the approach to games (Linderoth and Bennerstedt 2007; Linderoth 2012b; Linderoth 2013), describes the ecological approach as designed “to address the reciprocal relation between humans and the environment ... [which] *offers* the individual different ways of acting. These offers are called affordances” (2013, 3–4).¹ Whilst some affordances can be utilised by the majority of a species, there can also be individual differences between members. So whilst a chair affords sitting down for most humans, this might not be the case for someone with disabilities or for an infant. Affordances are based upon a number of factors, including training, and “Humans, at least, must learn to use affordances” (Gibson and Pick 2000, 16).

We can analyse affordances from many perspectives and gameplay typically affords many things (for example, social affordances such as laughing together). In the case of videogames, we can understand the input device, software and screen as things that are part of the environment of the player

and that afford them particular actions. For example, in the most mundane sense, buttons afford pressing and screens afford picture viewing. More specifically, digital games afford players actions that can affect the perceptual information (e.g. images and sounds) that the screen produces. This leads us to the question of what games afford players as, and in relation to, *history*.

In the first sense, the ecological approach is relevant because historical games are inherently concerned with historical affordances and describe these through action, offering a kind of intrinsically ecological history (Chapman 2013c). That is to say that games, as particularly interactive media, are especially concerned with what the relationships of the past *afforded* (what could or could not be *done*) rather than simply what things or events *were*, at least in their gameplay. Representations of these historical affordances, in turn, must offer players new gameplay affordances, which yet must generally in some way say something about the claimed nature of the original relationship. This is the very essence of procedural rhetoric. As such, the affordances of games are of course determined by the desire of developers to make an enjoyable game, the limitations of the technology and the other cultural and commercial pressures and conventions of digital games. However, in historical games these affordances are also likely to be partially determined by their referential status, i.e. evidence, the developer-historian's understanding, interpretation and ideology, and epistemological and story/content decisions (Chapman 2013c). In the simplest sense, this means that in *Brothers in Arms* we are afforded actions that produce information that represents our player-character running, jumping, crouching and shooting a pistol but not floating, flying or being able to blow up a tank with only a pistol. Even in a game like *Civilization*, where we don't have a significant player-character and our perspective is free to move through space unhindered, the actions afforded the historical agents depicted within (and thus the player) are partly determined referentially. For example, "cavalry can move further, faster than infantry but cannot cross deep water as ships can" (Chapman 2013c, 63). Thus in historical games we can potentially learn what, and often how (e.g. intrinsic abilities, training, tool use), actions were afforded particular historical agents or groups, and the use or necessity of these actions, by what is afforded us as players (Chapman 2013c).

However, ecological psychology also connects to historical games in at least three other ways. Games can structure affordances that are in some way similar:

- 1 To those of other heritage environments (e.g. museums)
- 2 To the environments of the past (e.g. those experienced by historical agents)
- 3 To the practices of others engaged in history (e.g. historians)

Each of these connections between games and the affordances of history, in the sense of its production, reception and lived experience, can be explored

by looking respectively at the role of digital games as heritage, reenactment and (counterfactual) narrative history.

Digital Games as Heritage Experience

As Prentice argues, “Museums, like many other heritage attractions, are essentially experiential products, quite literally *constructions to facilitate experience* ... museums are about facilitating feelings and knowledge based upon personal observation or contact by their visitors” (1996, 169). Such a description also seems to speak to the nature of some historical games, also experiential historical products where feelings and knowledge about history that are produced rely on personal observations and interactions. As Hess (2007) notes, it would therefore seem that some games have the ability to function as a kind of museum. This museum quality is most obvious in games with *realist simulation styles*, which typically contain numerous virtual representations of historical objects that specify some of the same affordances as the original objects because they present similar perceptual information. However, whilst museums can have the actual material of the past, games are limited to virtual recreations. This probably entails a loss of the ‘aura’ (Benjamin 1968, 220) of the object, something that might be important to popular engagement (see Chapter 8 for more on these aspects of digital construction). However, though of course dependent on the technology and skill of designers, good recreations can retain much of the visual information, and thus pedagogical potential, of the original historical object. Indeed, clearly museums also frequently work on the basis of this assumption, often containing their own kind of virtuality (half-realness) in the form of contemporary replicas of historical objects. As such, the most obvious affordance of digital games is that, like museums, they can offer the observation of historical objects. Furthermore, these games also give us an exploratory agency somewhat parallel to the museum experience, and which goes beyond more passive historical media (such as cinema), by allowing us to manipulate the spatial representation and adjust our perspective on these objects. The amount of ludic pressure exerted on this agency differs between games and gameplay moments. However, clearly games and/as museums can offer information about the past by affording the exploration and observation of historical materials or representations thereof.

The arrangement of objects and spatial representations in digital historical games is a subject that is perhaps worthy of further study. Research has shown that the space of a museum itself can influence visitor behaviour and structure the impressions and perceptions of an exhibit through a spatial discourse (Wineman and Peponis 2010). And that, because of the need for visitors to orient themselves in each space, the placement of an exhibited object in a space can even be more important to drawing visitor attention than the nature or perceived importance of the object itself (Tröndle 2014). The affordances of actually moving through a museum or manipulating

a screen-based spatial representation obviously often significantly differ. However, there are similarities and exploring whether similar effects are also observable in play of digital historical games might offer further insight into their possibilities as museums and heritage sites, as well as into the development of historical games for education.

However, *realist simulation* games, in their aim and claim to show the past as it appeared to agents, in fact often go beyond museums. Such games generally seek to represent entire historical environments. This moves them closer to other kinds of heritage sites, such as castles, stately homes, recreated Bronze Age villages (and other kinds of open-air museum), in which efforts are often made to situate objects consistently in an environmental context, broadly spatiotemporally arranged. Such efforts seek to return a layer of visual data in comparison to museums, where this is instead typically supplemented by text. For example, whilst visitors seeing a butter churn or a plough in a museum exhibit space might struggle to understand the purpose of these objects or their everyday relation to the people of the past or each other, placing these items respectively in a kitchen near to milk, butter and other foodstuffs or in a stable near a saddle offers further information through a spatial and temporal context. Although these are simplistic examples, divorcing the material of the past from its original context does involve withholding a layer of information. By comparison, games, like these kinds of heritage sites, instead often offer a full environmental gestalt. Such scenes are probably important to our (including even historians') imagery of the different spaces of the past and the roles and importance of different kinds of material culture. There is, however, a downside to this *realist* spatio-temporal emplotment of objects and environment, in that it involves the loss of some of the rhetorical freedom that museum exhibits have in creating meaning about the past through thematic sequencing and/or anachronism and anachronism. In museums, items from wholly different times or places can be placed together in order to draw comparisons or show change over time. Furthermore, museums can also provide information through supplementary explanation, rather than only the snapshots of spatial and temporal existence found in *realist* representations. Although *realist* games can do the same, care must be taken not to overtly disrupt the diegesis of the fictional historical world. However, games of course also have the ability to contextualise objects and processes through the procedural rhetoric of interaction.

Games also add to their function as heritage sites by functioning as a form of 'living history'. In living history, actors, either employed by heritage sites or simply amateur enthusiasts, perform interpretations of the clothing, language, use of tools and other practices, of the past. The aim is generally conceived to be to provide a historical experience that is deemed as in some way uniquely authentic for either the participant or the audiences for whom they perform (Handler and Saxton 1988). Games can also function through a form of living history because their detailed heritage environments are often filled with a bustle of historical activity in the form of NPCs who

further explain the past by providing represented networks of cultural and socio-material activity. The often serious business of heritage and the playful nature of games might appear to be at odds, however, as Bruner (1994, 410–11) argues, in practice heritage and living history sites also often have a playful quality that frequently privileges entertainment and enjoyment alongside the discovery of historical fact. This said, NPCs certainly cannot provide the interactive nuance that live actors offer. We can currently generally only select pre-set questions rather than simply asking anything, for example. However, NPCs do offer the advantage of being able to be depicted as performing unsafe or unpleasant historical actions. Furthermore they can easily be designed as historically accurate in their physical appearance (e.g. shorter, poor dental hygiene), though this advantage is rarely fully utilised (see Chapter 8 for more on this). Regardless, ultimately what this combined living history and heritage quality of *realist simulations* offers is

a sense of how common objects appeared when they were part of people's lives and in daily use. Period clothing confines, emphasises, and expresses the body at rest and in motion. Tools, utensils, weapons, furniture are not items on display, but objects that people use and misuse, objects that can help to define livelihoods, professions, identities and destinies.

(Rosenstone 2006, 47)

Although Rosenstone actually talks of film here, we can see that this applies equally to some kinds of games and in fact games add to this capability in at least two interlinked ways. First, the agency we often have over the spatial representation allows us the ability to explore in greater detail and according to our own interests and curiosity. Second, depending on the game's *framing controls*, games can actually allow us to become a *participant* in these represented cultural and socio-material networks and related practices, becoming not only the audience to a kind of living history but also actors within it. Furthermore, this can be enjoyed in the kind of large scale and detailed historical environments that games, at least in comparison to other forms of heritage and living history, easily allow the creation and maintenance of and access to.

This leads us to an important point. Though any *realist simulation* games are capable of offering access to heritage experiences in the way described, certain game structures favour this function. For example, whilst the *realist simulations* of WWII FPS like *Brothers in Arms* and *Medal of Honor* have a heritage quality, their linear level design, narrow focus and relatively high narrative and ludic pressure are often less favourable to this aspect. By comparison, open-world *realist* historical games, such as the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Red Dead Redemption* and *L.A. Noire*, seem to be the kind of game structures that best emphasise this living history function. Partly this is due to their sheer size, their offering of relatively massive historical

spaces filled with objects and characters, but this is also due to the more varied focus that this allows. Such games generally have a more comprehensive historical scope than focusing solely on warfare and frequently include populated everyday spaces (unlike in wargames where, when included, these spaces are generally mostly abandoned). Open-world games, in their efforts to offer an interesting and seemingly authentic historical space to explore, often include representations of varied aspects of historical life, e.g. agricultural, economic, religious, domestic and political.

This also partly addresses the under-representation of women in history, which, as Schut (2007) rightly points out, is a problem in historical games. However, the very fact that women are only really included when spheres such as domestic and agricultural life are present in itself points to a problematic historical narrative that the mainstream games industry seems to often subscribe to, namely that women were not also part of, affected by, and even integral to, systems of historical politics, economics and warfare. This is often further compounded by the fact that though women are frequently included in open-world games, they are rarely playable as player-characters and thus are relegated to being subject *to* history rather than subjects *in* history.² Despite these problems, this widening of the historical focus to include varied spheres of historical life does provide a more complex and multifaceted historical representation, a move toward the broadened perspectives on the past that social, cultural and gender history have encouraged since the 1960s and 1970s.

Open world games also function best as heritage and living history because of their gameplay focus on spatial representation and, in particular, the agency players are generally granted over this, usually allowing players to move about the historical world as they see fit. Sometimes player-characters are granted forms of empowerment that allow even more freedom to explore. For example, in *Assassin's Creed* or *The Saboteur* it is relatively easy to get a sense (arguably, often missing in more conventional heritage experiences) of the larger distribution of the historical cities or landscape because the player-characters are able to climb. In either case, spatial agency allows players to investigate the historical environment and to indulge their curiosity. Open-world games are also well suited to offering heritage experiences because they generally include the regular relaxation of ludic and/or *framing narrative* pressure. Films can be criticised because they generally don't allow us time to dwell on their visual data and detail, "Pressure from the narrative component is too great. Events move too fast" (Chatman 1980, 126). By comparison, in open-world games, which generally also have *open story structures*, we can normally choose when we wish to be faced with developments in the *framing narrative* and importantly, when we wish to face difficult challenges, i.e. we can choose when to undertake tasks and missions. This leaves us free to decide when, and for how long, we wish to instead freely explore and investigate the open living history heritage environment.

Accordingly, like (and as) heritage experiences, open world games afford us the free, yet structured, exploration of numerous historical environments, objects and living history characters, according to our interests. No matter how fictional, or even fantastical, the *framing narrative* of these games may be (e.g. *Assassin's Creed*), their value does not necessarily rely on this aspect, because their environments offer an additional function as heritage. The technologies that allow these for these detailed open historical worlds to be affordably built are still, relatively speaking, new.³ However, historical games already afford heritage experiences of settings as varied as the American frontier in 1911 (*Red Dead Redemption*), 1947 Los Angeles (*L.A. Noire*), Nazi occupied Paris (*The Saboteur*) or even something as simple as an empty American family home in 1995 (*Gone Home*). Indeed, in the *Assassin's Creed* series alone, players are offered the exploration of heritage environments representing the Holy Land during the Third Crusade, Renaissance Italy, America during the War of Independence and Seven Years War, the Golden Age of Piracy Caribbean, Paris during the French Revolution and Victorian era London.

Of course, like all heritage sites, levels of research and accuracy differ between games. However, even when objects are not exact recreations, they are still often stylistically typical of the period and so still contain data. And most of these games can generally at least give some sense of some of the components, presence and purpose of the material, environments and practices of historical life. As Taylor puts it, "Museums and historical re-creations have their limits as historical representations, but they have the ability to give some texture to the past in ways a written text often cannot" (2003, para. 15). Games also offer an advantage in that players are likely to spend longer with their representations and more frequently encounter the historical elements within them, in comparison to typical visits to traditional heritage sites. Furthermore, the environments of games can also be adapted during play in order to represent the effects of longer-term processes, something more difficult to do in conventional heritage experiences.

This said, as well as the authoritarian reality effects of such environments already discussed in Chapter 3, games' function as heritage also introduces new issues. Hess (2007) argues that significant changes might occur when public memory is performed in private spaces through games. This is particularly the case given that normally museums construct a sense of community through their inherently social character (Wineman and Peponis 2010) and sociality (e.g. companionship, conversations) can make a significant difference to the reception of exhibited objects (Tröndle *et al.* 2012). By comparison, games are often played alone in private spaces. However, this ultimately depends on game structure and some game types can foster deep collaboration. Many heritage sites have been recreated by players of *Minecraft*, for example, with even the British Museum set to have an in-game recreation complete with exhibits (see Miller 2014).

The enticing historical environments, objects and living history performances/activities, and thus heritage experiences, offered by digital

historical games may yet prove to be a significant aspect of popular engagement with history, particularly given their immense popularity. Furthermore, developments in technology, allowing for even more comprehensive and detailed representations in the future, may add to this role. As noted, these games combine visual data and agency in a way that affords many of the characteristics of other heritage experiences. However, to point only to this leaves out a core part of gameplay: challenge. Spatial agency in *realist* simulations grants access to *historying* by offering players similar affordances to those offered to heritage visitors by heritage environments. However, challenge can allow access to *historying* by offering players similar affordances to those offered to historical agents by environments of the past. In these cases we can partake in a form of reenactment.

Digital Games as Reenactment

In a sense, heritage activities are always a form of reenactment. Though much of our attunement to the available affordances is likely to be different, we still seek to learn about the past by exposing ourselves to some of the same perceptual information as those in the past experienced in their environment. However, we also commonly take reenactment to mean something that goes beyond this observation and into some kind of active practice. It is from this perspective that games become most relevant. Understandings of reenactment are often grounded in some notion of the possibility of empathy with historical agents. In its academic form, this discourse originated most notably from the work of Collingwood (1946), who, in his *Idea of History*, argued for the importance of the reenactment of the thoughts of historical agents to the historian's craft. Indeed, Collingwood (1946; 1999) considered history to be the study of mind. Although Collingwood rejected dualism (D'Oro and Connelly 2015), it is fair to say that this approach focuses more on the motivations for action of rational historical agents rather than on embodied action and perception itself, an important part of popular reenactment practices. Some kind of empathy undoubtedly has a place in both professional practice and popular engagement and can be intellectually provocative.⁴ However, it also has risks. A focus on empathetic identification runs the risk of overshadowing the importance of this being ultimately anchored in the transmission of knowledge (Berger 2007). Furthermore, the epistemology of empathy itself must be treated with caution. As Cook puts it,

There is much danger in the assumption that because *we* experience these phenomena in certain ways, this is the experience of our predecessors. This danger of psychointellectual projection is of course universal in the historians' trade, with or without the context of reenactment, but the very intensity of experience associated with the latter can exacerbate the temptation to equate our responses with those of the people we study. (2004, 492)

Historians have long argued the inevitably present-minded element of historical study (see for example, Carr 1961). However, as Cook argues, the problems that this can introduce have the potential to be exacerbated in reenactment. In ecological terms, the problem is that what we think and feel about a situation is partly down to our attunement to the affordances of our particular environment, affordances that are partially determined by socio-cultural forces that are subject to change throughout history. For example, researcher Monica Mattfeld (n.d.) acknowledges the usefulness of reenactment for gaining practical, physical and somatic insights into the experience of 17th and 18th century horsemanship from which dressage is descended. However, she recounts the problems with reenactment of affect by showing that her fear of falling and injury during dressage does not align with the historical sources because for 17th and 18th century gentlemen this kind of fear appears to have been vastly subordinate to a fear of the ridicule and dishonour that falling might bring. Of course, these gentlemen could have been minimising their fear of falling and displaying their concern with proper behaviour because this was expected. But this is exactly the point, we cannot evaluate such a thing because we cannot precisely know what it was like to think and feel like an early modern gentleman. As Ronsheim writes in his critique of living history, “Those beliefs and attitudes, conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational that provided a foundation for institutions, governed conduct and controlled behaviour cannot mean to us what they meant to those who lived them” (1974, 62).

Nonetheless, analyses grounded in notions of empathy have made important contributions to the idea of games as a form of reenactment (see, for example, Rejack 2007). So too, other scholars have discussed games as a form of reenactment as part of their exploration of broader issues, particularly examining these games through the lenses of authenticity and ideology (Smicker 2010) and their relation to other forms of popular history (De Groot 2006). However, it is possible to add to these analyses by looking closer at the stuff of gameplay itself, action, skill and challenge, and examining precisely how this can function as reenactment. Ecological analysis allows us to evaluate reenactment experiences in a different way, concerned with the individual experience of play and with an analysis rooted more in ideas about the reenactment of challenge, skill, action and perception than in the reenactment of consciousness. This allows a concentration on more tangible and *historically consistent* affordances by focusing on the active reenactment of *exploratory* historical challenges that digital games encourage. This both offers support for Reed’s claim that ecological psychology “offers the possibility of genuine cross-cultural and cross-temporal comparisons” (1996, 188) and also avoids some of the epistemological problems of using empathy as a theoretical lens, including its insufficiency to describe the full experience of gameplay.

Exploratory/Performatory Challenges

It is important to note that ecological psychology does not see perception and learning as a process of *enrichment* but instead a process of *differentiation*. As such, we do not develop expertise by adding to mental schemata but by becoming increasingly attuned to the information in our environment and being able to make finer distinctions in it (Gibson and Pick 2000). In ecological psychology, the eye is not understood as simply a camera so much as a search engine, constantly searching to differentiate information that is useful from that which is not in determining the actions our environment affords us. As such, “We use some affordances in a situation in order for other affordances to emerge. Thus, the environment can be said to have affordances for gaining other affordances. We not only adapt the environment [e.g. by using tools]; we also reveal information about affordances through action” (Linderoth 2013, 6). Actions can therefore be broadly broken down into two categories: *exploratory* (what possibilities for action you can perceive) and *performatory* (what actions you can do) (Reed 1996, 80–2).⁵ “The *exploratory* aspect of actions is to yield knowledge about the affordances of the specific situation. The *performatory* aspect of action is about realizing [utilising] affordances that are already discovered” (Gibson and Pick 2000, 21).

Linderoth (2013) notes that games can therefore be broadly divided into those that challenge the *exploratory* aspect of action or those that challenge the *performatory* aspect of action. Games with an emphasis on *exploratory challenges* are those games wherein the challenge lies in knowing what action to take, but performing the action itself is relatively easy. The most obvious example of this is found in board games. The challenge of *chess* lies in determining which action amongst the myriad of possibilities offers the most competitive advantage. However, actually moving the chess piece is easy for most people. By comparison, games with an emphasis on *performatory challenges* are those wherein the actions the player is supposed to take are generally clear, but taking these actions can be challenging. Obvious examples of this are found in sport. In high jump the challenge does not lie in knowing what action to take (jump the highest) but in *performing* the action better than one’s competitors. As Linderoth (2013) notes, we can easily see the difference between these types of game if we consider the role of coaches in professional competition. Whereas it is acceptable for a football coach to shout out advice to players during the course of a game, it would be considered cheating if a chess coach did so. In the football game the coach’s advice doesn’t offer an unfair advantage because the game is more focused on *performatory challenges*. However, to offer such advice in a chess match would be to eradicate the challenge completely because it would help with the main focus of the game on *exploratory challenges*. Games frequently contain both *exploratory* and *performatory* challenges, but there is generally more of an emphasis on one or the other.

Reenacting Exploratory Historical Challenges

It is important to be specific about what kind of historical challenges can be reenacted in digital games. Although we may be able to reenact *exploratory historical challenges*, we generally cannot reenact *performatory historical challenges*. Manipulating a controller (or keyboard and mouse) is nothing like, for example, running, carrying or jumping. As such, playing a WWII FPS like *Brothers in Arms* does not test our physical strength, we cannot face the *performatory challenges* of running to cover, walking long distances, carrying heavy gear or digging a foxhole, challenges that real WWII soldiers faced. Digital games might be able to make us aware, through their representations, of the *existence* of *performatory historical challenges* that faced historical agents, however, they cannot allow us to actually reenact these challenges and learn to deal with them. The degree of abstraction between the *performatory* actions of the player and the historical agent/player character is just generally too large. Although the character in *Assassin's Creed* climbs buildings by leaping, swinging and grabbing, players simply press a thumbstick forward and hold down some buttons. The game cannot then teach us of the bodily skills and strength necessary to *perform* this affordance. However, we could perhaps make the argument that the game teaches us to perceive what kind of architectural features might best afford climbing, the *exploratory* aspect of the affordance.

This is the key point, digital historical games can allow us to reenact *exploratory challenges* that faced historical agents (those based on knowing what the best action to take in a given situation was) because looking at information on a screen is somewhat similar to looking at information in the original historical environment. Gibson hints at this possibility when discussing film, stating that "It aims to produce in the viewer the awareness of a train of events, and of the causal structure of these events" (1986, 301). Both games and films can structure information that has some of the invariant properties of another environment (and it is this that also enables the possibility of them functioning as heritage experiences). In part, this is because, "The field of view of the camera is analogous to the combined field of view of the eyes in the head in the sense that both fields are bound by occluding edges" (Gibson 1986, 297). Gibson also argues that "Films for training and education can profit by having the camera occupy the point of observation of the learner" (1986, 298). As such, it seems that first-person perspectives are probably best suited to reenactment. However, Gibson also points to the core difference in the perceptual awareness offered by film, "The beholder is helpless to intervene. He can find out nothing for himself. He feels himself moving and looking around in a certain fashion, attending now to this and now to that, but at the will of the film maker. He has visual kinesthesia and visual self-awareness, but it is passive, not active" (1986, 295). This is of course not the case in most digital games, where we have precisely this kind of agency.

Let us turn to an example. *Realist simulation* games produce information, in the form of light from the luminous screen, that is structurally similar to the information that reached historical agents in the original context and specified a gun, tank or enemy soldier. Furthermore, these games generally seek to *maintain* this similarity (e.g. through *realist time* structures and often first-person perspectives) so that, for example, firing a gun (whether as the gamer or the soldier) produces structurally *similar* visual information. All this means that *realist simulation* games can structure information that has some of the invariant properties of the original historical environment and that the gamer and the historical agent therefore have part of their visual field in common. This commonality allows for the possibility of the player to reenact *exploratory historical challenges* that were part of some of the practices of the original historical agent, because these challenges rely only on differentiating visual information. To take a simple and obvious example we can look at combat in typical *realist* WWII action games.

Gamers are not confronted with the same *performatory challenges* of WWII combat because firing a gun or running and crouching, as the WWII soldier had to, is very different from handling a controller. However, learning to be effective in combat in these kinds of games entails learning to differentiate some similar (mainly visual) information to that which the historical agent had to learn to differentiate and thus reenacting some similar *exploratory challenges*. For instance, the player might have to learn to differentiate *some similar* perceptual information to the WWII soldier if they are to learn:

- 1 To perceive a viable and tactically sound shot (e.g. no cover in the way, within range).
- 2 The need (and when) to compensate for distance, movement and the flight time of 'bullets' (e.g. 'leading' a target, increased bullet-spread or drop over distance).
- 3 When the environment best affords actions such as reloading or movement (e.g. perceiving potential threats).
- 4 To perceive the affordances of terrain, particularly cover and concurrent lines of sight (extremely important for tactical movement, particularly flanking).
- 5 To distinguish between enemies and allies.⁶
- 6 To recognise particular unit types and the significance of particular numerical strengths of enemies and what kind of threat each entails.⁷
- 7 To perceive the appropriateness and necessity of each of the depicted historical weapons (tools) when faced with particular enemies and situations.
- 8 To perceive the viability and usefulness of particular tactics and manoeuvres in particular situations.

The soldier and the gamer pick up information that specifies very different affordances respectively (e.g. failure for the former could be lethal). And

yet, for both there is the necessity to differentiate some similar information in relation to these different affordances because, as the game is referential, the *exploratory challenges* involved in both scenarios are similar and some of the visual information is shared. Accordingly, in instances where some of the distinctions in perceptual information involved in gameplay actions and the assumed historical actions of the agent align, games can function as a form of reenactment.

As such, when playing a WWII plane simulator game such as *IL2 Sturmovik* (particularly when playing on the harder difficulties and in a first-person perspective), we also have to face some similar kinds of *exploratory challenges* to those that faced pilots. So, for example, we must learn to *perceive* what extremity of movement each plane can make without stalling and/or spinning and when (and by how much) to lead our targets with our aim to compensate for their/our movement, as well as face many similar *exploratory challenges* to those listed above (e.g. distinguish between allies and enemies). We, like the pilot or the soldier, must overcome *exploratory challenges* by becoming better at differentiating visual information similar to that which they did. We can therefore be said to be reenacting by attempting these historical *exploratory challenges*. These are of course the most obvious exploratory challenges in these kinds of games, but a deeper analysis of a single game might reveal more, depending on the gameplay situation and indeed, the particular game structure. Not all games will require players to face all these challenges and some games will involve even more complicated *exploratory challenges*. For example, in *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41–45*, players who wish to most effectively combat enemy armoured vehicles must learn the correct range and projectile trajectory angles to maximise penetration over deflection.

Taken as a whole, WWII action games, with their focus on ‘spatial’ performance, are generally mainly concentrated on *performatory challenges*. However, as implied, there are also important *exploratory challenges* that are a part of this gameplay and which can offer reenactment. The differences in the *performatory challenges* that historical agent and player face, however, does undoubtedly also introduce dissonances. As such, the most suitable challenges for reenactment through digital games are those that in the original historical context were also mainly, or almost entirely, *exploratory challenges*. A good example of this is the tactical command we are afforded in *Brothers in Arms*. In this game series, we are given command of two or more squads of men. Using these units to cover each other and suppress and outflank the enemy is a core part of the gameplay and indeed of actual WWII combat. Indeed, so important is this to gameplay that the box of the first game in the series contained a poster detailing this core WWII tactic, known as the ‘Four Fs’ (find, fix, flank, finish). This kind of challenge works best as reenactment because in the original historical context the challenge was also mainly *exploratory*. The challenge of tactical command did not generally lie in the shouting of an order itself but in *knowing which order to shout*. As such, this game mechanic is particularly suitable for reenactment

in games because the abstraction of the *performatory* aspect doesn't really matter and both the game mechanic and the original historical action are mainly *exploratory challenges*. Importantly, the digital game therefore seems to produce the least amount of dissonance when representing these kinds of *exploratory challenges* and is therefore currently most suited to this kind of reenactment.

What this example also emphasises is the potential usefulness of the ecological emphasis on action, rather than empathy, when considering reenactment. A game cannot realistically hope to allow players to truly reenact the humanistic aspects of WWII leadership, we cannot know the stress, guilt and fear that might have been part of this activity, except as second-hand knowledge. However, we can, however loosely, reenact some of the mechanistic aspects of this leadership, those involving skill, perception and challenge, and thus gain a greater understanding of *some* of the challenges of WWII command. Thus, by reenacting through digital games, we can learn to differentiate some of the information and thus even *perceive* some of the affordances, that were useful to historical agents, despite the fact we cannot always learn how to *utilise* these historical actions through performatory action.

Digital Games and Reenactment

Using the ecological approach as a theoretical lens allows us to analyse reenactment on the basis of tangible skill, action and challenge. Digital games, in particular, offer the reenactment of historical *exploratory challenges*. We can term this game-based reenactment, in order to distinguish it from other kinds, as *digital-ludic reenactment*. Although empathy is always somewhat a part of the study of the past, it is also often problematic because of its reliance on variable social and cultural affordances. By comparison, the additional layer of reenactment offered by digital games is grounded in tangible, simple, visual challenges of perception that are similar for most humans and can therefore potentially allow us to learn to differentiate information in ways that are similar to historical agents. As such, reenacting through digital games can help us to understand historical challenges, the skills needed to overcome them and the relevant information to these processes. However, it cannot allow us to know how the people of the past felt or thought about the challenges they faced, at least through reenactment. Here games are like other media.

It is true that the kind of information we can learn from these gameplay processes is generally available from other sources. We could learn about squad tactics, for example, by watching WWII films or reading military history books. However, "Critically, games require players to learn to read the game space under what Dewey might call 'the threat of extinction'. The game is quite literally over for the player who fails to 'read'" (Squire 2006, 22). Games differ from other media because they generally force players to

negotiate these *exploratory historical challenges* and to learn to perceive the relevant historical information in order to progress. Similar skills of perception are all made *necessary* to attain by the inherently challenging nature of games and the referential represented environmental pressures they include (e.g. enemies that shoot and flank us, allies we must not shoot, technology such as tanks and machine guns). Players are *forced* to act in historically meaningful ways in order to be successful and must learn to perceive the information that the game argues was important to the systems and processes it represents and which it argues resemble the initial context of information.

This said, reenactment or living history is never an epistemologically perfect process and there are always problems with trying to access the past in this way (see Handler and Saxton 1988). Even *digital-ludic reenactment*, though offering a kind of reenactment grounded in relatively stable and tangible concerns, is still ultimately an interpretative practice. Alignments with evidence will vary and of course the transcoding of the stuff of history into computer graphics and code has its own influence. Furthermore, when *exploratory historical challenges* are difficult enough as to threaten to make gameplay less fun for implied players lacking particular training, developers may include (sometimes optional) perceptual aids. These might include, for example, icons showing us who are friends or foes and their placement and status (e.g. 'suppressed'), the highlighting of important environmental features, or maps giving us real-time tactical information. This kind of information was of course unavailable to historical agents in this form and thus features such as this can disrupt the reenactment of *exploratory challenges*. Games are also generally inherently fair and so players will (at least in linear games with less emergent encounters) often have the appropriate tools available in the environment to deal with pressures (for example, when confronted with a tank there will generally always be a bazooka nearby), something that historical agents could not rely upon. And of course, failure to attune to the affordances that enable us to deal with these pressures often have vastly different consequences for players than historical agents.

Whilst the examples here are all kinds of *realist* action game, it is theoretically possible that other kinds of games could also function as reenactment. For example, an argument could be made that some strategy games offer moments of reenactment, as there are strategic, statistical or logistical *exploratory challenges* that players face that probably faced leaders in the past. These problems are also often presented using similar kinds of visual information to the presumed original historical context, in the form of maps, statistics and text. However, just as frequently, particularly when utilising elements of a *conceptual simulation style*, visual information is converted into a different mode than that which it would have been originally experienced in. These kinds of multiple abstractions, the sheer load of information and the difficulty of knowing what kind of information leaders

would have had access to makes an ecological analysis of these games much more difficult than comparing the perceptual fields of the historical agent and the player of a *realist* action game. Furthermore, many aspects of the *exploratory challenges* facing these historical leaders are missing. Players of strategy games often have access to far more information (and sometimes even time) than it is feasible to assume historical leaders had. Also, in games this information is quantified and synthesised to work together and is correct, consistent and frequently (if not instantly) updated in ways unlikely to have been experienced by historical agents. It is also probably fair to say that players are granted far too much power for it to represent the experience of any single historical agent, having control over every element of their chosen collective and rarely having to, for example, politically, legally or culturally negotiate, or struggle with flawed bureaucratic systems, in order to take action. Given these caveats, it seems difficult to outline strategy games as offering reenactment, though they of course still offer much information about the *systems* rather than *experiences* of the past by functioning as discursive narrative systems. Although similar kinds of game structures might be able to offer reenactment if functioning with a very particular and reduced scope on smaller processes, it seems that for the moment at least *realist* simulation, *realist* time, action games seem to offer the most firm opportunities for reenactment, at least in a tangible ecological sense.

Even in these games, however, there are still questions to be asked about the value of the information to be gleaned from this reenactment. And it is true that there is generally a focus on the *exploratory challenges* of combat, which might seem a little restrictive to those interested in other forms of history beyond the military. However, the purpose of the argument contained herein is not to point to the value of the content of individual games but to demonstrate that playing digital games can function as a form of reenactment. Furthermore, it seems possible that the reenactment of many other more varied *exploratory historical challenges* might be possible to include in digital games. It is perfectly feasible that the offers made by games in this regard will continue to expand and include other kinds of past activity. Even in military focused games, it is easy to see how reenactment could also include the *exploratory challenges* of say, foraging, navigation, managing supplies and scouting. Furthermore, within the vast diversity of what we might term historical games there may well be other kinds of *exploratory challenge* reenactment already on offer. Regardless, the fact that games are already offering reenactment of any kind to millions of players is significant simply for the potential shift in popular interactions with history this might imply. Furthermore, in *digital-ludic reenactment*, players do not (unlike most reenactors) need to be very knowledgeable about the period they reenact because the games' systems structure and confine their actions. This *structured access* to types of historical practice that have previously been in some way exclusive is perhaps the most important facet of digital games and is also characteristic of a third type of *historying* that digital games can offer.

Games as (Counterfactual) Narrative Historying

In the collected volume on historical games *Playing with the Past*, I argued (by analysing the *Civilization* series) that games can also offer limited access to kinds of historical practice, kinds of historying, that are normally associated with historians (Chapman 2013c). In essence the argument is thus: games that allow large levels of narrative agency (such as *open ontological*, and even some *open story structure*, games) allow audiences to actually *write* historical narratives, however, they still provide a structure that ensures the coherency of these narratives and that subsidises our potential inexperience or lack of expertise. Such games can function as cultural tools that extend our affordances by supplementing some of the *exploratory challenges* of *writing* history and thus granting us some of the affordances normally associated with historians or others with expertise in writing history. *(Hi)story-play-spaces*, like all story spaces, are

made up of selected evidence, arguments that are found convincing, interpretation, theory, understandings of causation, epistemological assumptions, biases, preferences, resonances and what is imagined ... this is essentially linked to the historian's historical understanding and knowledge, which can often take years to develop.

(Chapman 2013c, 67)

Where *(hi)story-play-spaces* differ from story spaces in other forms is that, despite many of the above elements already being in place, the final narrative that emerges is still created by players, within the particular confines determined by these elements. As Wertsch argues in relation to historical narrative, “mediated action always involves an irreducible tension between a cultural tool and an agent's use of it” (1998, 98). Games actualise this process within a tangible software structure. Players often have significant narrative agency and yet this is bound within a complex web of *framing controls* and selected *lexia* that provides boundaries to the story space and functions as structures of theory, ideology and argumentation. These games therefore leave us free to *write* historical narratives and yet they also subsidise our potential inexperience or lack of expertise by structuring our agency, responding to and exerting pressure on our choices, telling us of the possible consequences of particular actions, making arguments for the nature of the past. Thus, despite the narrative agency players are granted, much of the groundwork for the history is already present within the structures of the *(hi)story-play-space*. As such,

the player is equipped with the knowledge tools of underlying theory work, methodology, pre-selected evidence, ideology, epistemology and a theory and network of causal relationships (perhaps best indicated by the tech tree). Many of these tools and choices are commonly the

reserve of those who are experts in differentiating this information: historians.

(Chapman 2013c, 68)

In short, these games therefore function as simulated explorative-discourse systems for the writing of history in collaboration. Player's potential lack of expertise is supplemented because they are offered *structured* opportunities to write historical narratives and engage in basic forms of historical investigation. Players are thus afforded "*limited* engagement in the expert practice of the historian" (Chapman 2013c, 68). In these games, there is often information to be gained, but there is also often opportunities to implement knowledge and indulge intellectual curiosity and to actively question the representation by writing/rewriting it within a structured system.

Perhaps the best example of this structured extension of affordances, and one of the most important aspects of digital games' offerings of narrative *historying*, is the opportunities for counterfactual *historying* that this often creates. This will be discussed in greater detail in the Chapter 9 and for now it is enough to say that counterfactual history is a type of history that seeks greater understanding by considering alternate scenarios to those of the past as we understand it. It thus revolves around questions of 'what if?' What if Germany and their allies has won WWI? What if America has ended up as a mostly French colony?

When a historian considers a counterfactual scenario, they construct it against their existing knowledge of what did happen but also against their understanding of the variables that could affect such a scenario according to their historical understanding ... *Civilization* [and other games with similar structures] provides a system whereby these variables and their causal links are already accounted for and yet in which multiple stories can be told by players.

(Chapman 2013c, 68)

This means that some games, particularly strategy games such as *Civilization*, *Making History* and *Crusader Kings*, are *structured (hi)story-play-spaces* that allow players to easily experiment by writing counterfactual history through play. These spaces provide us with ready-made structures within which to perform these experiments, preventing them quickly becoming overwhelming or incoherent, while still allowing us significant narrative agency. In these games, we can divert the timeline, create scenarios we want to see and the game will react to it through its *framing controls*, allowing us to experiment with alternate pasts, to engage in counterfactual *historying*, despite having a minimum of historical knowledge and historian's skills. This has the potential to work as a 'springboard' for our own historical thinking and understanding. Digital games allow *popular* access to practices such as counterfactual *historying*, which, as Atkins argues, is something that was previously only available to "the tabletop wargamer or board-game

player restricted to exercising her or his intervention in the past according to massive and intimidating rules sets, or to the professional historian who possessed enough knowledge of the variables within the historical record to construct a plausible counterfactual narrative (2005, 8)”.

Of course this is not to say that all games are of equal sophistication in this regard and different games offer different opportunities of differing historical complexity and knowledge. However, it seems that where game developers feel that their own exploratory skills to construct these systems for counterfactual *historying* might be lacking, they often draw from histories written in other forms or even consult with historians. Furthermore, developers have the advantage of being large groups, who can all contribute their knowledge to one historical representation. Although the utility of this function of digital games also depends on how this sophistication compares to the historical skills of the player, some of the resulting games can even be useful tools for professional historians, as described in Chapter 9.

As Klevjer puts it, games are narrative systems wherein “my own actions speak to me in a voice which is not mine” (2002, 196). As such, historical games can not only give us the opportunity to actually *write* historical narratives, they also structure this process by limiting it and providing feedback on the historical narratives (counterfactual or otherwise) that we produce. In this way, digital games can allow practices such as experimentally writing counterfactual historical narratives to become available in popular culture, without players having to go through the training and practice to become knowledgeable in historical content and theory and skilled in methods (normal requirements to usefully perform these practices). In this way, some games can function as cultural tools, “extending the player some of the affordances of discourse that are normally the reserve of the historian ... by providing a structured causal network of selected and interpreted evidence, thus creating a shared virtual story space that still allows the player to playfully configure historical narratives and counterfactual scenarios” (Chapman 2013c, 69). Digital games of this sort offer audiences a significant shift from receiving history towards actively engaging in narrative *historying*.

Affording Historying

The ecological approach adds to our framework for analysing historical games and deals in some of the issues that applying historical narrative theory can sometimes leave unsaid. This approach allows us to see how digital games can function as *historying* alongside, and entwined with, their role as historical representations. Approaching historical games in this manner can enable us to see beyond simpler binary distinctions (such as rules/fiction, history/games and narrative/play) to look at action as a category at the core of both games and history, in terms of both past action and present practice. The ecological approach also points to the advantage of visual forms of historical representation. Gibson argues that

image makers can arouse in us an awareness of what they have seen, of what they have noticed, what they recall, expect, or imagine, and they do so *without converting the information into a different mode*. The description puts the optical invariants into words. The depiction, however, captures and displays them in an optic array, where they are more or less the same as they would be in the case of direct perception. (1986, 262)

The function of games as historical reenactment and heritage relies heavily on this dynamic. And yet, digital games, as what Linderöth (2015) terms a ‘composite form’, are a highly variable and multimodal form of history. Clearly some games or game elements, particularly in those games with *conceptual simulations*, involve descriptions through different modes, such as words or numbers. Similarly, as we have seen, whilst some game rules can be seen to *maintain* optical invariance, some game rules themselves can also be seen to function to convert optical invariants and affordances. As such, narrative historying in games, although indeed often involving the loss of visual information (particularly in the use of *conceptual simulations*), also works precisely through the benefits that abstractions such as text, numbers and rules allow in terms of making-meaning about the past, therefore taking a more discursive approach similar to written history in some regards (as the shift to the historian’s diegetic level seems to imply).

However, representing past action through structuring present ones, as historical games do, can also often involve presenting information about the past without converting it into a different mode (though the use of textual primary sources to construct the representation can admittedly complicate this). Perhaps the focus on action, even when it does involve conversion, allows games to offer a tentative answer to some of the issues of conventional history. McCall points to this when he notes that games could potentially offer a remedy to the problem that “Too often, text is used to represent aspects of the past that were fundamentally non-textual, such as agriculture, crowd dynamics, battles, and family life” (2012, 13). As such, there may be an argument to be made that “using (even different) actions to represent action infers a somewhat lesser degree of abstraction than using spoken or written language. This means that the video game as a form may be better suited to some kinds of historical representation than written history (and of course vice versa)” (Chapman 2013c, 70).

Certainly, the action focused nature of digital historical games is particularly important because it allows players to actually test their perception against the affordances of the system, which function as the arguments of the developer-historian. Furthermore, as argued herein, this focus on action is precisely what allows, in combination with other structures, digital games to extend the affordances of their players in such a way that grants them opportunities to engage in particular kinds of historical practice, types of historying, that normally require particular effort, resources or training to access. This structured invitation to practice, alongside the discursive nature

of representation in digital games and their function as centres for other types of historical activity (such as metadiscourse, research and modding), is what allows us to be able to talk of the possibility of the *player-historian*, a role at once very different from that of the professional historian and yet similar in that it also emphasises history as an active and performative process.

Here we have looked at three types of historical practice, games as heritage experience, reenactment and as (counterfactual) narrative *historying*. In the next two chapters we will contextualise the exact form in which some of these practices occur in games, by situating them within existing discourses concerning their pursuit by more conventional means. As such, the next two chapters will respectively look at *digital-ludic reenactment* in comparison to traditional reenactment practices and the function of games as narrative *historying* in relation to existing discussions about counterfactual practices.

Summary

This chapter advocated the ecological approach for analysing digital historical games. The chapter thus made the argument that games can structure interactive information that is similar to other heritage environments, the environments of the past and to the practices of others engaged in history and can therefore afford heritage experiences, reenacting and *writing* (often counterfactual) history (i.e. affording narrative *historying*), respectively. Games' potential function as heritage sites, through their structuring of similar visual data and allowances for us to manipulate their spatial representations in ways that imitate our agency in these sites, was also described. Furthermore, it was noted how, in the effort to create full historical environments, digital games can offer a number of benefits, such as living history performances, which are further added to by the participatory nature of games. This section also described which game structures are best suited to this heritage function. Turning to a discussion of reenactment, it was noted that games open up for a type of structured *digital-ludic reenactment* beyond empathy that we can identify using the ecological approach. Specifically, because games can structure and maintain similarities in the perceptual fields of gamers and agents, they can allow us to reenact *historical exploratory challenges*. This was explained by describing reenactment in WWII action games. It was also argued that games can function as a cultural tool to offer access to a third type of *historying* by allowing us to *write* history while subsidising our potential inexperience or lack of expertise. These games, it was proposed, extend our affordances and allow us to engage in practices such as counterfactual *historying*, while structuring the variables, causal links, content and theory needed for this. The chapter concluded by noting that it is the variable possibilities for image making, abstractions (such as text, numbers and rules) and action found in digital historical games that allows them to offer popular access to historical practices that normally require particular effort, resources or training to access.

Notes

1. It should be noted that the theory applies to all animals as well as humans.
2. However, at least these decisions no longer go unnoticed. For example, a recent decision by Ubisoft to exclude playable female characters from *Assassin's Creed Unity* provoked considerable controversy (see Narcisse 2014).
3. However, more simplistic open world games have been around for much longer. For example, see David Braben and Ian Bell's 1984 science-fiction game *Elite*.
4. As Taylor puts it, "Historians look to the past and try to understand the past as it was unfolding. What did an historical actor know at the time, what were factors that shaped his/her decision, what decisions could have been made and what would have been the consequences of those decisions?" (2003, para. 12).
5. As Linderöth (2013) explains, some affordances can only be *utilised* by experts even if they can be *perceived* by others who do not have the skill to act upon them. Conversely, sometimes experts may be able to *perceive* affordances that non-experts cannot.
6. The historical challenges of this is also recognised by game developers. *Brothers in Arms* 'authentic' difficulty removes perceptual aids (such as suppression indicators). This reflects combat problems commonly held as the origin of heraldry. Indeed, Medieval RPG *Mount and Blade* also captures this by turning off perceptual aids on higher difficulties and forcing reliance on historically contemporary perceptual aids such as heraldry.
7. The loss of unit indicators in *Brothers in Arms* authentic mode also reflects this historical challenge.

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8 Digital Games as Historical Reenactment

Step into the Boots of a Soldier. Hit the dirt and get prone, rip grenades from your chest and hurl them at your enemies. See and feel the blast of nearby explosions ... Live the Life of an Enlisted Man.

—Description of *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* on the Ubisoft website

Reenactment “blends the experience of the historical artefact such as is experienced in museums with individual revelation” (De Groot 2009, 103). Whilst both the heritage and reenactment functions of games are only possible because games can create similarities in the perceptual fields of historical agents and players, reenactment also relies on the fact that games’ interactive environments allow players to face particular *exploratory challenges*. As such, the heritage function of digital historical games relies mainly on qualities also shared by other visual historical forms or other types of virtual environment and can therefore already be explored through the relatively rich broader literature on virtual heritage (for example see Champion 2011; 2014; Ch’ng 2009; Kalay *et al.* 2008; Rua and Alvito 2011). However, the reenactment function of digital historical games relies much more heavily on form-specific qualities (particularly interaction *and* challenge). As such, in this chapter we will concentrate on the specific possibilities and limitations of reenactment through digital games and the relationship of this to more conventional reenactment practices and discourses.

The last chapter moved beyond the analysis of the individual structures that produce historical representations in games in favour of a more holistic viewpoint that examines some of the most significant opportunities for interacting with history that combined game structures can offer. However, it is also important to be specific about exactly what combinations of the structures (described in Chapters 3 to 6) best afford these different types of historying. In terms of reenactment, the *realist simulation style* is obviously best suited to constructing similarities in the perceptual field of player and historical agent by narrowing the comparative modes of information between past and present (in comparison to the *conceptual simulation*) and allowing for visual overspecification. Though the homodiegetic presence of players is always important to reenactment, in particular, first-person perspectives offer the greatest similarities in perceptual fields, including

representing some of the natural restrictions on exploratory action. And, as described in the last chapter, Gibson notes the importance of visual forms for training and education occupying the point of view of the learner. *Realist time* structures allow the most accurate and consistent maintenance of these perceptual similarities, including placing pressure on players to attain the necessary exploratory skills (though the possibility of pausing or switching off games obviously produces dissonance with the original historical environment). The concentration on embedding information in the *space as narrative garden* structure obviously also best resonates with the aim of creating environmental similarities. However, the specifics beyond this are of less importance, reenactment can be supported in both linear spaces (as in the single player components of many WWII games) and open spaces (as is in multiplayer modes of these games or, for example, historical plane simulation games). Similarly, broader narrative structure is flexible, with reenactment just as possible in the *open-ontological* structure of multiplayer historical action games as in the *deterministic story structures* that also often feature in these games. However, the presence of *framing narrative* can offer some related effects (as discussed below) and obviously the specificity and degree of control offered by *framing goals* and *framing controls* determines what it is possible to reenact or is likely to be reenacted.

This game structure (*realist simulation*, *realist time*, *space as narrative gardens* and preferably, though not necessarily, first-person perspective) is found in a variety of digital historical games, WWII FPS (e.g. *Brothers in Arms*, *World War II Online*, *Red Orchestra*), flying games (e.g. *War Thunder*, *IL2- Sturmovik*), tank simulator games (e.g. *Steel Armor: Blaze of War*) and marine combat games (e.g. *Silent Hunter 5*) – all of which have the potential for *exploratory challenge* reenactment. As these examples indicate, the historical mechanics of modern combat resolve easiest with the conventions of action gameplay and this probably partly accounts for the popularity of WWII as a setting. This makes analysing reenactment opportunities in digital games easiest to explore in these games. However, *reenactment* can theoretically occur in digital games set in any period or area of historical life, as long as the challenge is exploratory and based on similarities in perceptual information. For example, controversial digital historical game *JFK: Reloaded* even asks players to reenact the claimed events of John F. Kennedy's assassination in order to test theories surrounding the shooting.

Types and Benefits of Reenactment: Actualised and Empathic

'Reenactment' can be used to describe a broad variety of cultural practices, from "theatrical and 'living history' performances to museum exhibits, television, film, travelogues, and historiography" (Agnew 2004, 327), "technical reconstructions and 'nostalgia' toys (e.g. tin figures, dioramas and architectural models) to literature ... photography, video games ... pageants, parades" (Agnew 2007, 300). Pilgrimages and memorial walks, the



Figure 8.1 Screenshot of *War Thunder*, a WWII flying game with a suitable structure for reenactment.

use of medieval instruments (De Groot 2009) and musicians retouring their seminal albums (De Groot 2011) can all be considered reenactment. Whatever its possibilities or problems, reenactment seems to be a diverse and important part of how we connect to the past and has started to provoke significant academic interest.¹ Academic understandings tend to emphasise reenactment as “The action of reinscribing the past through a particularised set of bodily actions – a reperformance, or reanimation” (De Groot 2009, 103) and “The quest for immediacy, the search for a past which is palpably and visibly present” (Samuel 1994, 175). However, in popular discourse ‘reenactment’ generally refers to the (mostly amateur) groups who create period clothing and other historical materials and/or use these in the (re) performance of combat and other historical activities. This type of reenactment, with its relatively long history, will herein be described as ‘traditional reenactment’.² This is therefore distinguished from reenactment through digital games, which, as noted in the previous chapter, will be referred to as ‘digital-ludic reenactment’ (the ‘ludic’ here distinguishing this from other forms of virtual reenactment).

Reenactment, in both traditional and digital-ludic form, reinscribes history with a sense of action that the pages of the history book can find difficult and which offers something in terms of popular engagement. However, proponents also argue that as “a body-based discourse in which the past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience” (Agnew 2004, 329) reenactment also offers different kinds of knowledge than conventional history. Although we must resist creating a false dichotomy between mind and body (and reading and writing history are still actions), certainly

there is something differently active about the tangible historical challenges found in digital-ludic and traditional practices that separates them from the reenactment of only thought or affect. I suggest that we term this layer of activity that attempts to understand and master (through a concern with embodied perception and action) some of the challenges that faced those in the past ‘actualised reenactment’. This, as hinted at in the previous chapter, is more epistemologically stable in the ecological sense and functions through the sharing of information between perceptual fields and environmental features that have some universal properties for most humans and are therefore at least somewhat independent of changing cultural and social affordances. Whilst reenactment based on notions of empathy (i.e. reenacting thought or affect) revolves around the questions of cultural difference and *meaning*, actualised reenactment revolves around the issue of physical and environmental similarity and *action*. Although both traditional and digital-ludic reenactment may also create opportunities for reenactment concerned with empathy and this may well offer something of value (see Rejack 2007 in the case of the latter), they also offer a layer of *actualised* reenactment. It is this that most separates these activities from other forms of historical media and practice.

Actualised reenactment rests on the idea that a trainee American soldier in 1942 and a modern WWII reenactor are likely to experience some similar physical sensations and challenges when they first pick up and aim a rifle, or that for both the trainee officer and the player of *Brothers in Arms*, some limited aspects of the *exploratory challenges* of learning tactical command are similar. These moments are never perfect reconstructions of the experiences of historical agents, but they do share some of their characteristics and therefore function somewhat akin to Weber’s (1949) ‘ideal types’. As Outhwaite explains:

When we construct an ideal type, whether purely of a person’s character or of a course of action, we are not thinking of the particular experience or characteristics of the individual in question, but rather of giving an interpretation in terms of typical patterns of events which could occur ‘again and again’ in the lives of different individuals. (1975, 91–2)

Similarly, actualised reenactment is the performance of actions that have some perceivably common characteristics with those *typically* performed in the past. As Weber describes it, “an ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view” according to which “*concrete individual* phenomena ... are arranged into a unified analytical construct” (1949, 90). Similarly, in digital-ludic and traditional reenactment we generally don’t reenact the unique actions of a specific historical agent, but instead reenact as a historically generic character performing actions that were oft-repeated and thus shared some common characteristics (as well as

potentially sharing some characteristics with their reenactment once more in the present). As such, these ideal types of events, although adequate for actualised reenactment, are methodological constructs, a “utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality” (Weber 1949, 90), that cannot capture the entirety of past events, ignoring unique instances and the unique responses of agents (and therefore also involving the construction of an ideal agent).

Ecological analysis does not enable us to make these reenactment events complete, but it does better enable us to identify characteristics that are likely to be shared or dissonant with the past. Whilst physical and perceptual challenges of ideal types of events may be shared between agent and reenactor, meanings ascribed to them by way of cultural and social affordances are likely to differ and actualised reenactment must therefore be constantly unpicked from the empathic layer. For example, when the WWII soldier first picked up his gun he may have felt patriotic pride and accomplishment that the reenactor may not. Similarly, the officer’s knowledge that he and his men’s lives might rely on his use of flanking tactics probably changes the experience in comparison to the player. Grounding the idea of reenactment in ecological analysis allows us to acknowledge these empathic discrepancies and yet highlight that ideal type of events can be constructed that can also offer a potentially useful practical layer of shared characteristics that can be similarly experienced by most humans. Acknowledging this layer of actualised reenactment as based on ideal types of event admits their unrealistic isolation, limitations and the risk of reducing history only to a series of processes and actions. And yet this also offers an understanding of reenactment with a firmer epistemological grounding than empathy.

Whilst it is useful to separate the actualised layer of the reenactment activity from claims about empathic (or intellectual) reenactment for the purposes of analysis, we must be cautious in doing so. Separating the socio-cultural element of action can be controversial and we must be careful of the political dangers of overly universalising human experience. And yet, as Agnew notes, “If reenactment is to gain legitimacy as a historical genre it will thus be necessary to do for reenactment what has been done for other forms of history writing ... This will involve disambiguating experience and understanding and determining the extent to which affect can indeed be considered evidentiary” (2007, 309). The concept of actualised reenactment attempts this by separating empathic reenactment (without denying that it may have other uses) from the more ecologically viable and epistemologically clear layer of reenactment grounded in tangible action and shared challenge. Whilst empathic *and* actualised reenactment can both be a part of traditional and digital-ludic practices, they are distinct in their epistemological bases and the form, correspondence and relation to historical evidence that they display and claim to rely upon (and thus the affordances of the past and history that they engage). Identifying these differing layers is therefore important to understanding reenactment.

This notion that it is tangible action and challenge in which reenactment seems to be most promising is also recognised by Agnew, who states that reenactment's "proper domain is the technical – bridge building, celestial navigation, or ship fothering (repairing the hull with a sail), for example – problems that can be solved by testing ... Its mode is agglomerative – discrete pieces of information are gleaned and corroborated through firsthand experience" (2004, 330). Importantly, the actualised layer is also distinct because it is not reliant on roleplay. We do not have to imagine ourselves to be the historical agent, as we do with empathic reenactment, instead we need only experience a similar environment, actions and forms of challenge. The actualised layer of reenactment therefore requires only basic historical resonance to be useful. However, empathy is often mentioned as an important part of the experience of reenactment by participants and this sentiment is also echoed in discourse surrounding digital historical games. For example, former British Army Captain Patrick Hennessey states, "I know soldiers who learned more about the second world war [*sic*] from playing games than they did at school and this caused them to think about that conflict, and by extension their own jobs, in a different and healthy way" (Hennessey and Sicart 2010). This shows the perception of games as having critical empathic reenactment qualities, but also how in digital games, like in traditional reenactment which Agnew here describes, this tends to tell "us more about the present self than the collective past" (2004, 335). Actualised reenactment might similarly inspire reflections on the present self and also cannot really tell us how it felt to be in the past. However, it can tell us of the challenges of the past, collective in the sense that these are ideal types experienced many times, by many people and likely with some shared similar characteristics in their most basic physical aspects. Furthermore, actualised reenactment asks us to develop historical skills in order to deal with these challenges.

Comparing Traditional and Digital-Ludic Reenactment

The construction of environments designed to share perceptual information and affordances between historical agents and modern participants and structure opportunities to learn about past actions through taking present ones, is obviously the chief similarity between traditional and digital-ludic reenactment. In both we engage other characters/participants playing a similar role, being (in appearance and action) aligned with the commonly accepted historical context. In both we experience representations of the material of the past from which we can learn. Furthermore, though we can somewhat isolate actualised reenactment activities, both digital-ludic and traditional reenactment are tied to a number of cultural constructs not intrinsic to the activity itself. Each, as in the living history sites that Bruner here describes, "enact an ideology, recreate an origin myth, keep history alive, attach tourists to a mythical collective consciousness, and commodify the past" (1994, 411).

Differences between digital-ludic and traditional reenactment particularly revolve around the use or exclusion of perceptual information argued to be similar to that found in the original historical environment. For example, whilst both can offer visual representations of the physical evidence of the past and the noise of explosions or gunfire, in traditional reenactment we can also feel the uniform and how it impedes our movements, smell gunpowder, sense the choking presence of smoke and feel the weight of our weapons, sensations unavailable to players. Players also have additional sensory information, such as the visual information beyond the screen and the sensation of using a control pad, shared with neither historical agent nor traditional reenactor. However, players can also receive historical perceptual information unavailable to traditional reenactors, such as seeing the effects of weapons on enemies and environments and sometimes experiencing larger, more specific, more varied or more comprehensive historical environments.

Whereas traditional reenactors can learn by actually physically interacting with historical materials, players of course cannot. As a reenactor interviewed by Johnson (2015) explains, “the thing is, you learn about the period just by wearing the costumes, they really shape your movement ... if you make the costumes how they actually made them, they work like clothes, not like costumes” (2015, 198). This shows that at least *some* reenactors understand the potential of tangible action (what I have termed actualised reenactment). However, they also often seem to be quite aware of its limitations. As Johnson notes, this reenactor does not claim to have felt she was transported into the past (as some reenactors do), instead “she suggested costumes can be worn as a learning aid, not a time travel device” (2015, 198). Nor did she “assert that costumes carry links to all aspects of the past, but rather connects them specifically with clothing and movement: with material and embodied culture” (Johnson 2015, 198). This example also highlights that traditional and digital-ludic reenactment offer actualised reenactment through different perceptual information and challenges, and thus often offer different knowledge. As described in the previous chapter, we generally cannot reenact *performatory challenges* of the past through digital games. However, in traditional reenactment we can. For example, struggling to manoeuvre on a muddy field or walk a long march while carrying kit, wearing historical clothes and wielding heavy weapons. As such, an important difference here is that actualised reenactment in traditional reenactment generally works through the reenactment of *performatory challenges*, whereas in digital-ludic reenactment it functions through the reenactment of *exploratory challenges*.³ This is not absolute and digital-ludic reenactment has, for example, a historical performatory aspect in the temporal pressure it places on our actions. Similarly, traditional reenactment can involve some historical *exploratory challenges*, such as learning to correctly identify other friendly and enemy units. However, it is clear that actualised reenactment in each tends to emerge differently. This means that digital-ludic reenactment

can also give us access to the reenactment of *exploratory challenges* that traditional reenactment generally does not, such as learning to negotiate bullet physics or tactical command against a competitive enemy. These kind of historical *exploratory challenges* can be included in games because of reduced logistical problems and safety concerns in comparison to traditional reenactment, but also because of fundamental differences in the purposes and structure of the activities that must be further explored.

Uncertainty, Challenge and Agency

‘Scripted’ battles are popularly understood to be reenactment “in the strictest sense; the battles are planned out beforehand so that the companies and regiments make the same actions that were taken in the original battles” (‘Historical Reenactment’, *Wikipedia*). This “invokes the genuine narrative, the historically documented progress of events as sanctioned by authority” (Hart 2007, 120). However, the lack of choice and room for alternative courses of action this entails also often removes a layer of challenge. By comparison, digital-ludic reenactment is generally a pressured competitive activity and therefore has uncertainty as to its outcome. Even when not scripted, traditional reenactment is not generally a competitive activity like a game. Thus, while still perfectly capable of *depicting*, for example, historical conflict, it cannot allow the actualised *reenactment* by participants of some challenges (such as tactical challenges) that are dependent on this competitive uncertainty.

As such, in traditional reenactment the actualised reenactment element is often restricted to individual *performatory challenges* that have little effect on the event as a whole, whereas digital-ludic reenactment is free to offer actualised reenactment through *exploratory challenges* that can change the course and outcome of a whole event. This is obviously more the case in single-player games dedicated to the experience of only one real participant. And these, as Gish notes, can also risk (generally in order to make players feel powerful) “foregrounding singular acts of violence as the sole catalyst of military victory and the impetus for historical progression” (2010, 173), thereby privileging tales of individual heroism. However, even in multi-player games where the outcome of the activity is dependent on multiple participants, there is still uncertainty and cooperative room for us to significantly influence the course of events. There are still group challenges (of coordination, for example) in traditional reenactment. However, generally the *actualised* layer of traditional reenactment is restricted to individual challenges of strength and endurance. By comparison, the pressure of competitive uncertainty of outcome in digital-ludic reenactment allows the reenactment of challenges to do with the outcome of collective competitive (although localised) historical processes.

This emphasis on competitive uncertainty does however make it less likely (though not impossible) for historical games to represent more predictable

historical processes that traditional reenactment often does engage (such as dancing or cooking, for example) and perhaps somewhat accounts for the emphasis on war in digital-ludic reenactment. This inherent uncertainty can also make it difficult for games to precisely represent a specific historical narrative in the way that traditional reenactment can. However, uncertainty of outcome, and thus the threat of failure, is also an important part of how games make arguments about what was possible or likely in the original historical situation. Charging across open ground towards a machine gun in *Brothers in Arms*, for example, will rarely, if ever, result in victory and is a mostly non-negotiable *framing control*. Players are therefore continually and consistently met with feedback that forces the participant to differentiate historically relevant information, to perform in historically useful ways. In other words, participants are continually informed about the claimed ‘authenticity’ of particular behaviours because the continuation of the reenactment depends on them. This concern with authentic behaviour is no doubt also socially enforced in traditional reenactment and a product of the restrictions that historical material culture places on participants, though is probably not as severe nor as consistent and continually responsive (i.e. procedural).

Both types of reenactment are clearly dominated by rules, despite digital-ludic reenactment’s inherent uncertainties. Even when forgoing the performance of specific historical narratives in favour of a concentration on the *experience* of reenacting historical activities, as in the reality history television shows that De Groot here describes, traditional reenactment presents the past as “lived experience, something messy and dirty and painful ... But it still presents history as a ‘fixed’ thing, as something inflexible ... as something with rules that could not be broken. The subject undergoing history is not permitted to dissent or interrogate their chosen role” (De Groot 2006, 403–404). This is also the case in digital-ludic reenactment. The competitive uncertainty of *ludonarrative* outcome can present some of the tension between contingency and causality that is inherent to the fragmentary process of lived experience and can therefore work against teleological understandings of history. However, as noted in Chapter 6, this depends on the presence of *framing narrative* and also whether failure is framed merely as a narrative misstep that prematurely ends the history (thereby through the pressures of the form and the cultural conventions of the themes generally chosen, such as WWII, infusing this outcome with a deep sense that this is not how things are *supposed* to be), particularly the case in games with *deterministic story structures*. In both digital-ludic and traditional reenactment, there is then clearly a dominating logic suited to creating ideal types and yet which cannot properly account for individual experiences that fall outside these parameters and restrains opportunities for dissent or interrogation by participants. In games these rules are generally more inescapable and unbreakable than the negotiation available in the social rules (though perhaps not material ‘rules’) of traditional reenactment. Which structure

is more historically useful probably depends on the particular historical content reenacted. Nonetheless, it is clear that, though in different ways, both forms of reenactment regulate the body in order to enforce notions of authenticity and therefore engrain particular (normally reconstructionist) epistemologies into their practices. In both cases we agree to be bound by certain rules both for and of history and yet in each we are also granted agency in our reenactment – making it an inherently personal experience.

Digital Construction

It is perhaps fair to say that traditional reenactment opportunities other than battles are often less scripted. However, battles are by far the most common type of central activity for these groups. Herein we are concerned with the *forms* of reenactment, in particular digital historical games, and therefore don't wish to stray into examining the individual historical *content* of these activities too much. However, it is useful to briefly point to the fact that, as I have argued elsewhere previously (Chapman 2013b, 199–201), a particular focus on, and approach to, representing warfare is common to both traditional and digital-ludic reenactment. In both cases, warfare is represented very selectively (focusing mainly on actual combat), is depoliticised and is depicted as unrealistically gendered (often ignoring the role of women as victims, soldiers and in supporting organisations and industries). In traditional reenactment, war is also highly sanitised, with more convincing representations of violence made difficult due to logistical and safety concerns but also because, having often placed much effort and time into preparing clothing and equipment and travelling to events, traditional reenactors are often unwilling to 'die' (at least at the beginning of events). These are not problems in digital-ludic reenactment, as there are no safety and fewer logistical concerns, many of the characters are generally NPCs and even in multiplayer modes the system for determining who dies is not open to social negotiation. As such, the effects of violence are free to be represented in gory detail and often are.

However, games also present their own problems. For example, the highly commercial nature of the games industry seems to often restrain more radical representations of historical war – though the growth in the indie (independent) sector has already signalled changes in this regard (see, for example, *This War of Mine*, a game where players play as civilians trying to survive a setting inspired by the Siege of Sarajevo, rather than as soldiers). However, the selective and normative depictions of warfare also seem to be due precisely to the possibility for more violent depictions that digital construction allows and which often result in a leaning towards particular depoliticised representations. This means that more complex characterisation of enemies is generally left aside. In WWII games, for example, this is done through what can most favourably be described as a Goldhagen-esque (1996) characterisation, but more realistically as a simple construction of

American and British soldiers as good, Russian soldiers as brutal but brave, German soldiers as all evil Nazis and Japanese soldiers as a uniformly fanatical and cruel horde. Thus, enemies are depicted as simply evil, stripped of complex and varying identities and their political and socio-cultural context in order to make them worthy of the violence that the player is asked to visit upon them. Similarly, this depoliticisation of war and justification of violence is also often achieved through *framing narratives* that concentrate exclusively on themes of comradeship. “As such, frequently in-game rhetoric strongly suggests that it is not the player’s country they are fighting to defend, it is their troop, or their friends” (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007, 206).

This issue hints at the importance of considering the role of digital construction in digital-ludic reenactment. In 1999, Ayers imagined that one-day computers would be able to create simulated historical worlds more satisfying in some dimensions (the accuracy of scale, clothing, building styles, language and food are his examples) than the analogue simulations of traditional historical reenactment. More than 15 years later this seems be true, at least in some regards. Digital construction allows for huge and detailed historical environments filled with representations of expensive and difficult to maintain hardware (e.g. tanks and planes) and large numbers of characters. Comparatively, traditional groups “are rarely capable of bringing together enough reenactors, especially cavalymen, to even approximate the number of troops indicated by the historical sources” (Hart 2007, 108). This capacity for representations of material culture, people, geography and architecture is generally seen to be important to reenactment because the practice is entwined with the notion that the “accumulation of historical details adds up to something like an authentic recreation of the past, or, more precisely, allows participants and audiences in the present to feel that they have re-enacted the past” (Liebersohn 2007, 448).

Digital construction also enables digital games to avoid some further issues of traditional reenactment. For example, Horwitz describes a battlefield walk with an American Civil War reenactor who laments the inauthenticity of other reenactors’ appearances: “Poor cut. Wrong trouser color. And way too much blubber. The whole unit needs liposuction ... A real Confederate would eventually have cut that hair to keep the lice under Control” (Horwitz 1998, 141). Similarly, the World War Axis Reenactment Society (WARS) state on their website that “Members will not be accepted with long hair, pony tails and full beards. This is due to WARS trying to portray German soldiers of the period” (De Groot 2006, 395). In games, historical characters can simply be designed to reflect what is considered to be authentic in appearance, dress and (with NPCs at least) behaviour. Despite this, often these possibilities are ignored in favour of contemporary hegemonic characterisations, with the effects of disease and malnutrition rarely depicted, modern beauty standards replacing historical ones and ethnic and cultural complexity and diversity ignored (the European Middle Ages for instance

are generally presented as totally white). The possibilities of digital character construction do, however, also mean that games can avoid those moments in film in which the “dissonance between the recognisable star cloaked in the recognisably historical fractures the fragile mimesis” (De Groot 2009, 110). Games, by comparison, are free to use actor’s talents and simply replace their faces (without time-consuming and further dissonance-risking prosthetics), as the developers of *Call of Duty: World at War* chose to do with Kiefer Sutherland and Gary Oldman, who both play characters in the game.

Whilst games can more easily include any historical character, object or environment, this process of representation still means the loss of, for example, texture, surface sensation and weight in a way that the historical material or replicas of traditional reenactment don’t necessarily entail. Furthermore, because virtual objects had no existence in the past, they cannot have what Benjamin (1968, 220) described as an ‘aura’, that is to say a sense of their “presence in time and space ... the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (1968, 220), which, as noted in the previous chapter, might offer something in terms of popular engagement. And yet, “what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object” (Benjamin 1968, 221). This lack of aura, as well as perhaps therefore leaving more potential room for critical reflection, also means that digital-ludic reenactment avoids some of the problems of traditional reenactment. For example, the drive “to *own* the authentic item ... has created a cottage-industry feeding-frenzy” (Hart 2007, 118) and can lead to the illegal digging of heritage sites. However, other issues are more familiar. Hart, for example, notes “the potential for the acquisitive mores of consumer culture to interfere with an authentic appearance” (Hart 2007, 118) in traditional reenactment. Consumerist driven ‘feature creep’ in games often similarly means, in the effort to empower players and distinguish the game from its competitors and predecessors, that player-characters (and thus players) are equipped with, or offered access to, an unrealistic amount of historical weapons and equipment.

As traditional reenactors often make their own historical clothing and other materials, they often end up using both primary and secondary sources (in the form of documents and artefacts) and “pursuing historiographic research ... and learning about material culture (and what else besides?) in the process” (Johnson 2015, 198–199). However, the generally premade characters and objects of digital-ludic reenactment mean that (other than for modders) this kind of research is unlikely to be a part of the practice. Furthermore, some of the experiential insights gleaned by traditional reenactors through finally using this produced material culture also remain elusive. In a sense, body politics are always intrinsic to reenactment, wearing historical clothes and moving in military formations or taking part in other collective military processes, for example, has the ability to say something about historical social control of the body. Submission to the rules, in both digital-ludic and traditional reenactment, is both a submission to an

historical epistemology and a submission to the (historically and contemporarily) politically established confines of the history. Whilst these confining rules in historical gameplay therefore mean that the regulation of the body is also important in digital-ludic reenactment, this doesn't offer the same insights as physically engaging with material culture. For example, the actual wearing of a corset can provide particular insights into historical gender, as Johnson here describes:

Sitting down, the tightness of my corset squeezes my ribcage, digging into my shoulder blades, forbidding me to slouch. My shoulders, accustomed to hunching over a computer, are forced to mimic the metal rods of my undergarments, straight and strong ... Stomach in, shoulders back, fabric and steel combine to sculpt my body into a supposedly more feminine form. (2015, 199)

Digital representations of material culture cannot offer this kind of experience. Furthermore, in the case of games, it should be remembered that construction is not only digital but also ludic and that this can influence the representation. For example, although outflanked German soldiers in *Brothers in Arms* often attempt to flee, American soldiers under our command seemingly always stand their ground. This characterisation may be partly ideological, but it is also probably due to concerns about player frustration through sudden disempowerment. Technology and commercial pressures therefore also limit the digital representation of the complexities of human behaviour and appearance. As noted, virtual characters or avatars cannot offer the nuance of emergent interactive performance that a real person can. This of course also points to a core difference between traditional and digital-ludic reenactment: whereas the former is generally a communal activity, the latter is frequently performed alone.

Reenactment Communities

Although traditional reenactment is also concerned with individual revelation, it is very much a community practice. This allows the reenactment of large-scale historical events, such as battles, but is also important because, as discussed, reenactment is about "skill acquisition – particularly through group learning and sharing of techniques" (Johnson 2015, 197). Traditional reenactors "begin as novices ... undergo trials, acquire skills and experience, and are finally inducted into a community of dedicated reenactors" (Agnew 2004, 331). These communities provide networks for the sharing and production of historical knowledge, through interpersonal interactions, organised lectures, online forum groups and message boards, or newsletters and journals. For example, *The Sealed Knot's* journal, *Orders of the Day*, and *Ermine Street Guard's* (a UK Roman reenactment group) journal, *Exercitus*, are published regularly and can contain logistical information on upcoming events, group policy, advice on reenactment, articles on historical

topics (sometimes with footnotes and bibliographies) and historical book and film reviews. As this indicates, community discourse is both an intellectual exchange and a form of regulation of both history and contemporary practice. Though this varies between communities, part of this is the construction of what Agnew (2004) calls 'a hierarchy of the genuine'. She explains: "whereas the 'farb' [derogatory term for novice] is liable to wear handknitted chain mail and fight with a plastic sword, the hardcore reenactor will go to extreme measures to ensure that his uniform and equipment conform to the requisite standards and that his body is sufficiently chastened" (Agnew 2004, 331). Thus, the body is often regulated both by historical material culture and the community discourse that surrounds its use. The communal production and sharing of knowledge and the collective regulation of the body are both at the core of the central narrative of reenactment, which Agnew argues is "one of conversion from ignorance to knowledge, individualism to sociability, resistance to compliance, and present to past" (2004, 330).

In a sense, digital-ludic reenactment is always collaborative because historical games are discursive, players interact with the responsive rules that the developer-historians leave in the stead of their actual presence. However, digital-ludic reenactment is generally actually performed alone, at least in single-player games. In multiplayer games, such as *Red Orchestra*, digital-ludic reenactment is created by the competitive interactions between multiple participants. However, these transient collaborations are not *communities* in the same sense as in traditional reenactment and are not consciously performed with reenactment as the aim, this simply being a potentially useful by-product. There are, however, exceptions and some players do organise themselves in ways that have similarities with traditional reenactment societies. For example, De Groot describes how in *Battlefield 1942*,

Gamers arrange themselves into regiments, communities, with the same fervour and attention to detail of the re-enactment community. Regiments practice weekly, talk tactics; there is a sense of involvement and ownership ... These organisations are taken extremely seriously, and deploy tropes learned from the games and from the rhetoric of war films, again folding back into postmodern historical experience. (2006, 408)

Clearly there are parallels here. Similarly, modders working on modifying historical games often collaboratively deploy their technical skills, offer up free labour, engage in collective authorship and historical research and police notions of authenticity in a way that resembles traditional reenactment groups (Crabtree 2013). "Like traditional reenactment groups, modding is facilitated through rich networks guided by a strong sense of creative spirit, personal achievement, authorship, and at times an obsessive desire for the authentic" (Crabtree 2013, 207).

There are, however, also players who actually seek to organise the actual reenactment activity itself through the conscious regulation of participants in their performance of history. ‘Tactical realism’ clans or units are organisations of players who seek to play military games as realistically as possible. For example, the *506th Infantry Regiment Realism Unit* website explains the aim of the unit as “utilizing real to life tactics, techniques, protocol, and communication” (2015). These clans, as some traditional reenactment groups do, often imitate military command structures, complete with ranks, chains of command and possibilities for promotion. Players can even be given guidelines for addressing superior officers. For example, the *7th Cavalry Gaming* clan website includes in its ‘general orders’ section the pledge that “I will observe military courtesy at all times and will address, either by rank or sir, those members with superior rank” (2015). In-game voice chat is also often regulated in other ways, such as banning unrelated chatter or enforcing the use of military terminology.

Realism clans dedicated to the playing of historical games seek to ensure that players perform in ways that are considered historically authentic and, like traditional reenactors, frequently position this as a type of memorialisation by dedicating their practice to the memory of historical soldiers. In a thread on (the makers of *Red Orchestra*) *Tripwire Interactive*’s forums offering advice on starting realism clans/units and listing ones already in existence, user ‘Nyu’ explains that “the main idea of a realism clan/unit is to roleplay as a soldier of the unit you’re in of that time period in History” (posted on 10th of January 2006). Again, communication is generally regulated and command structures are based on the period, or even actual unit, that the realism unit reenacts. Here too, as in traditional reenactment, the central narrative is one of conversion from ignorance to knowledge (and therefore present to past) through sociality.

There is therefore often an emphasis on informing new recruits about the historical regiments, events and broader period, and training courses are also often offered in order to pass on skills and knowledge. For example, the *29th Infantry Division* realism unit (which claims to have over 300 members) expects all new members to pass its basic combat training program, after which members are assigned a squad leader and can take advanced training courses and specialise in particular weaponry and roles. Basic combat training is aimed at teaching new recruits the drills and tactics expected of them but also “behavioral concepts as well as military structure and terms, and more importantly, discipline” (*29th Infantry Division* realism unit cadet’s handbook 2015). As this hints at, there is also frequently an emphasis on the reenactment of ethical and moral codes perceived to be associated with the historical soldier identity. *SFSS* (claimed to be one of the oldest WWII gaming clans on the internet) arrange their clan values under the headings of ‘honor’, ‘courage’ and ‘commitment’, whilst the *506th* quote ten principles of success from the memoirs of Major Richard Winters (a WWII veteran and the central character in HBO’s *Band of Brothers*), the first of which is “Strive to be a leader of character, competence and courage”

(Winters 2011, 293). As such, these groups pursue not only a practical reenactment of the role of historical soldiers but also a cultural one.

This said, it is the regulation of the body on the virtual battlefield through social means that is the core purpose of these communities. Generally speaking, gamer culture is often stratified, with expert players placed above inexperienced ones, ‘noob’ (meaning newbie or novice) being a common insult in gamer discourse. In historical games, which naturally entail submitting the body to rules for good play that these games also generally argue are synonymous with good history, this kind of discourse (though sometimes inadvertently) might function similarly to the hierarchy of authenticity in traditional reenactment. However, realism clans also go beyond this by seeking to consciously regulate the behavior of players, supplementing the inherent control of the digital historical game in order to ensure what they consider to be the most authentic historical experience. For example, the *506th*’s website states that “When in-game, members are expected to act as if they are on a foreign battlefield or in a domestic training environment” (2015). This is partly achieved through the regulation of speech and collaborative usage only of military tactics and formations deemed to be authentic but also through the individual performances of historical soldiers expected of players. For example, the *82nd Airborne Clan* has fairly typical regulations that state that “running around wildly without cause and not using sights” will not be looked upon favourably and ask players not to “jump to avoid enemy fire or use the ‘jump shooting’ method”, “throw grenades over building or into areas where you have not seen, heard or been told of an enemy position”, “jump from unrealistic heights” or “stand on ledges or objects that make you appear to be floating on air” (2015). These behaviours may be allowed by the historical game system, but these clans seek to prevent perceived inauthenticity by socially narrowing the allowable in-game actions. Thus, in both traditional reenactment and in these realism communities, authenticity is produced not only by the regulation of the body through the stuff of reenactment (the worn and utilised historical materials in the former and the hardware and software of the latter) but also through the supplementation of softer and perhaps more negotiable, though perhaps no less important, social rules.

Both kinds of reenactment community also have a complicated relationship to roleplay, mixing historical and present identities in a fluid manner. Thompson (2004) describes how common it is for traditional reenactors to be out of first-person historical character during events, with shifts in and out of character treated unproblematically. For example, Thompson describes multiple instances of reenactors using authentic accents, language and treating captured prisoners with disdain in one moment and then in the next chatting to the ‘enemy’ about their partners, films they have seen and describing the events of the battle from the perspective of the reenactor. Realism clans seem to be similar in this. Whilst guidelines ensure the authenticity of performances in some regards (e.g. the use of correct military

terminology), there seems to be little expectation on players to theatrically perform a historical persona through voice chat beyond this.

As Hart puts it “Wavering, always, in his or her immersion into a period character, through this reflexive process the reenactor communicates with his or her Civil War self only by virtue of his or her present-day role as the omniscient narrator” (2007, 120). Similarly, Rejack (2007) notes how a reviewer’s description of combat in *Call of Duty 3* reads like a battle memoir, “Bullets and grenades whiz through the air while bombs explode all around, leaving soldiers to scramble for whatever cover they can find ... The bodies of your fallen comrades are strewn about the battlefield – a stark reminder that unless you want to join them, you need to keep moving” (Thomas 2006). And yet that this also “points to the combination of detachment and engagement that reenactment usually entails. At one moment the ‘soldiers’ are nondescript, and in the next ‘they’ turns to ‘you’, the switch to second person inaugurating an identification with the formerly unsympathetic mass” (Rejack 2007, 413). As such, both these forms of reenactment see a complex and selective kind of performance grounded in the reflections of the detached reenactor identity and yet also combined with a particular regulation of performance in line with the perceived past. This may be partly because the nature of the activities actually makes first-person theatrical roleplay difficult. The sociality of reenactment communities means that often, as Thompson (2004) found, reenactors simply wish to enjoy each others company and that there may be multiple ideas about when reenactors should be roleplaying (e.g. Just in battle or throughout the entire event?). In digital games, the very technology and activity structure can make roleplay difficult. As Linderöth concludes in his empirical account of *World of Warcraft*’s roleplaying guilds, “Even the players that want to be immersed have to struggle in order to gain this sensation ... the way technology structures the game experience is a constant hindrance for role-playing” (2012a, 490). Furthermore, in-game player-characters can never offer the subtlety of interaction of real people and digital games cannot generally offer the breadth of social historical experiences (drinking, eating, singing, dancing etc.) that are often a part of traditional reenactment.

Despite these difficulties, in both forms of reenactment there seems to be a sense that, even without full and consistent dramatic roleplay, there is another layer to the activity that is still worthwhile. Thus, it seems that participants also have a sense of value beyond more empathic practices, a sense somewhat akin to the notion of the actualised layer of reenactment. Certainly, given the millions of players that play these digital-ludic reenactment games, realism units/clans, and even modding communities, are in the minority. Nonetheless, these organisations demonstrate that games can also serve as a hub for some of the kinds of historical practice and discourse also found in traditional reenactment communities. Perhaps most importantly, what these realism clans demonstrate is recognition by some players that their play can indeed serve as a form of reenactment. To return

to the explanation of the practice offered by user Nyu, “One definition of a realism clan/unit is a ‘Virtual Reenactment Group’” (posted on 10th of January 2006).

Framing Narrative

Single-player games that allow digital-ludic reenactment often have strong *framing narratives*. The scripting of traditional reenactment according to historical narratives means that this also often has a loose kind of *framing narrative*. However, this is generally not used to frame the activity with the same specificity or drama as the kind of stories told through the *framing narrative fragments* (generally text and cutscenes) of digital historical games. Complex historical knowledge is not necessary for digital-ludic reenactment to occur. However, *framing narratives* might still be useful to contextualise and enrich the reenactment activity for players. Furthermore, *framing narratives* allow games to appropriate the techniques and tropes of historical cinema in order to do so. For example, Rosenstone here describes the opening to American Civil War film *Glory*,

With quasi-religious, heroic music swelling on the soundtrack, we are first presented with panoramic shots, then move closer in on a tent encampment of soldiers somewhere in a green, hilly countryside. A red sun sinks behind the trees and the light is fading. A Sergeant smoking ... hands out mail, a baseball game is in progress, soldiers lounge about wearing only parts of their ... uniform, then we begin to hear the words spoken by our still unseen hero. ... [who] intones sentiments.

(Rosenstone 2006, 41)

With small changes in sequencing and to the recreational activities of the soldiers, Rosenstone could just as easily be describing the opening scenes to *Brother's in Arms: Hell's Highway*. These kinds of sequences “do not comprise a literal construction of the past, but are a kind of generic construction ... where specifics speak for more general realities” (Rosenstone 2006, 42). They therefore have the efficiency of communication often required in popular culture. In traditional reenactment, participants often dedicate time and effort to researching the period that they reenact. However, players might play a game simply for its ludic qualities and have relatively little interest in the historical aspect. As such, the aim becomes to pass on as much historical information and context as possible without overly disrupting the play experience. These cutscenes also allow the developers to condense the recorded doubts, fears and considerations of historical agents into brief moments in the way in which Rosenstone (2006, 43) notes mainstream historical cinema can. This, particularly when combined with the compression of multiple agents' experiences into single characters, could be seen to help

replace the research of historical accounts that traditional reenactors are probably more likely to perform.

Both Burgoyne (2007) and Rosenstone (2006) argue that film (and thus we can assume, cutscenes) constitutes a form of historical reenactment, but there are clearly also differences between this and the more active practices of digital-ludic and traditional reenactment. However, in combination with digital-ludic reenactment in games, this *framing narrative* layer, as well as allowing for reflection on the events of gameplay, can be seen to link this personal gameplay to the larger historical narrative (as described in Chapter 6). Furthermore, if film truly “personalizes, dramatizes and emotionalizes the past ... gives us history as triumph, anguish, joy, despair, adventure, suffering, and heroism” (Rosenstone 2006, 47), then *framing narrative* might reinscribe digital-ludic reenactment with a sense of some of the humanistic aspects of history that gameplay, as aforementioned, actively or inadvertently often ignores.

The particular combination of the game structure that best allows for digital-ludic reenactment (*realist simulation, realist time, space as narrative gardens*) with a strong *framing narrative* means these games very much echo Rosenstone’s (2006) category of mainstream historical film. Westwell summarises this as those films having a tendency to “use the present tense, display a meticulous care in the reconstruction of surface detail, focus on individuals or small groups, privilege emotion, drama, and feeling ... and be shaped by a narrative form which has a strong moral flavour” (2007, 584). This similarity leads to a high degree of borrowing from this type of cinema and might therefore partly explain why digital-ludic reenactment is often framed within similar metanarratives and themes (e.g. brotherhood, war, national identity, the sacredness of memory, warriorhood, ‘righteous’ violence). In this way, players often engage in a kind of cultural reenactment that goes beyond the remit of (while remaining connected to) the past and into a larger cultural domain. Of course, we can only ever approach the past through the present and thus this is a part of all history (including academic history that often utilises these types of ideological and emotional engagements). However, the populist approach, prevalence, appeal, reconstructionist epistemology, authoritarian nature of the typically *deterministic story structures* and particularly the frequent focus on WWII – which is regularly used as “a public interpretive template for a host of conflicts” (Finney 2002, 1) – means we should still be wary of this in these digital-ludic reenactment games. Particularly given that these kinds of games can be seen to function as part of the military-entertainment complex, legitimising American military action and working as propaganda for recruitment (Lenoir 2000).

Reenactment as Work

‘Work’ and ‘play’ often describe the same activities performed under different conditions or, in Goffman’s (1986) terms, within different ‘frames’. For

professional players, playing football might be framed as work. Whilst we associate games with fun, given that work can be defined “a physical or mental effort or activity directed towards the production or accomplishment of something” (*Reader’s Digest Universal Dictionary* 1987, 1724), games also often contain something that can be described as a work element. This has not gone unnoticed (see Dubbels 2012; Pulsipher 2009) and in some games is rather obvious. The *Football Manager* series essentially entails manipulating spreadsheet-like statistical databases. Improving characters’ skills in RPGs often involves repetitive and unchallenging tasks (‘grinding’). As Conway puts it, “I wonder if I can distinguish in my own mind between play and labour in such instances” (2012, 29). This similarity opens up to a Marxist critique. Stephenson, for example, argues that *Civilization II* tries to turn the player into a worker and “shows that leisure in a capitalist democracy is often organized along the same lines as work” (1999, para. 15). Conway (2012) also frames the loss of the opportunity for meaningful winning and losing in many modern games as the culmination of the misappropriation of play as labour by capitalism. However, some scholars argue that player practices can also offer resistance (Galloway 2006; De Peuter and Dyer-Witherford 2009). As Leorke puts it, we can also “frame videogames and gaming culture as a sight of contestation, resistance and ‘counter-mobilisation’ by players against the game industry’s ethos of ‘play as work’” (2012, 173).

Traditional reenactment, though playful, also has a work element. Agnew argues that reenactment is fun because “It indulges the twin passions of work and play, which are generally divorced from each other” (2004, 327). Traditional reenactment is therefore culture “out of institutional bounds, in some ways ordered but also part of a leisure-time activity” (De Groot 2006, 394). Digital-ludic reenactment functions similarly, existing in the tension between control and agency. In both forms of reenactment, we play for leisure and yet there is also non-trivial effort, a challenge, a stake, a preferred outcome that, while generally not as serious as our livelihoods, we are still prepared to work towards in a way not required of us by films or books (though these can of course be a different kind of work). It is therefore partly this work element that allows games to offer reenactment.

Suffering and Reenactment

What this work element implies is that our attachment to particular outcomes means we are often willing to endure mild forms of suffering, making ourselves uncomfortable, strained or tired, to achieve these outcomes. In traditional reenactment there is a perception that it is through this sometimes-painful effort to overcome challenge that satisfaction and historical revelation often emerges. As Agnew notes, reenactment

licenses dressing up, pretending and improvising, casting oneself as the protagonist of one’s own research, and getting others to play along. Of course, it also calls for discomfort and enforced self-growth. But, like

the cold nose atop the counterpane, which Melville says measures the warmth of the bed, the pain only sharpens the pleasure ... suffering also makes for a better story. (2004, 327)

As Agnew argues, this seems to relate to Burke's notion of the 'sublime', that when pain or danger "press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (Burke 1833, 45). This is evident in the thrills and/or physical challenges of rollercoasters, rock climbing and mountain biking. Part of the attraction of these activities is what Agnew argues of reenactment, the idea that "What arises from such sublimity, however, is mastery: skills are acquired and manual tasks accomplished, fears and aversions overcome, and the body and mind brought into a state of regulation" (Agnew 2004, 330).

Similarly, whilst games are generally associated with fun, most players (or sports spectators) know that they can also be stressful, frustrating, scary and anger inducing. Wolfenstein writes, "It is in large part the depth of frustration blended with the persistence that many gamers approach these moments with that has lead me to frame the experiences of playing a game like Super Meat Boy [a particularly difficult platformer game] as a form of self-inflicted suffering" (2012, 40). And yet this suffering is also often part of the attraction and/or rhetoric of the gameplay experience. For instance, Bissell describes *Dead Rising*, a game where it is possible to lose six or seven hours of progress in a single mistake: "That does not sound like much fun, I know, and it wasn't much fun, truth be told. So what was it? Absorbing. Upsetting. Tense. Scary. Everything, in other words, a zombie game should be" (2011c). Similarly, Bill Clinton recently noted in an interview: "Anybody that's ever been, like me, hooked on a video game knows, you got to have good simulation to keep yourself in a constant state of anxiety" (*The Daily Show*, September 20, 2012). As Conway puts it, "discomfort is a vital yet oft-overlooked attribute of playing games. Players need suffering, they need tension if they are to build towards the sheer cathartic *jouissance* (Barthes 1975) of winning" (2012, 29). This relationship is even apparent in the etymology of *agony*. This is derived from the Ancient Greek *agon*, meaning a contest or struggle (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 1966, 20), which Caillois (2001) uses to describe competitive games in his seminal categorisation of play.

Suffering (or at least the threat thereof) seems therefore to be important to both traditional reenactment and to games, in which of course digital-ludic reenactment takes place. In both cases, reenactment occurs by achieving mastery over the potential discomforts of challenge, whether the tests of strength or endurance of traditional reenactment or the ludic frustrations and pressures of digital-ludic reenactment. Interestingly, in both cases, this suffering has also become linked to an epistemological discourse about authenticity. In traditional reenactment, this is linked to the interpretative nature of reenactment that means that all reenactors are "universally

authorized to testify by the weight of their own experiences. This gives rise to competing interpretations but not a means of adjudicating between them" (Agnew 2004, 331). Thus, in this crisis of authority, "extremity assumes paramount importance. As the intensification of experience, it creates a hierarchy of legitimacy: the most intense manifestation of suffering is most authorized to occupy the voice of history ... and sets ... [the reenactor] apart from the present" (Agnew 2004, 331). Similarly, discourse surrounding digital-ludic reenactment games is imbued with the sense that the more difficult a game is, the more it makes its players suffer, the more authentic the historical experience is. For example, the reviewer for *Xbox World Australia* writes that *Brothers in Arms* is "definitely a more realistic depiction of World War Two infantry combat than some other recent releases, and this is both a good and bad thing ... Realism has its place to be sure, but the punishing difficulty and sluggish movement may deter FPS fans" (Kinloch n.d.). Similarly, *IGN's* reviewer notes frustration at the "punishment" of the difficulty of the game, adding, however, "I respect that the difficulty level is in keeping with the overall authenticity of the game and I'll also allow that the extreme danger of the battlefield makes your successes all the more satisfying" (Butts 2005, 2). Here authenticity is linked both to suffering and the particular satisfaction of the sublime. Similarly, in reviews for *Red Orchestra: 41–45 Ostfront* on *Metacritic*, three interlinked themes dominate: the game's realism or authenticity, its 'punishing' difficulty and the satisfaction this offers. As the reviewer for *Play.tm* puts it, "The stern difficulty level might upset some players, as might the lack of 'safe' features such as crosshairs and medical packs. However, if you really want your World War FPS' to be real, like, *really* real, then *Red Orchestra* is just about your best bet" (Macarthy 2006).⁴

Increases in difficulty/suffering may sometimes enrich the *representation* of further dangers or challenges of the historical environment by their inclusion, but do not necessarily mean that this is achieved through actual *reenactment* opportunities. For example, reviews of *Red Orchestra* often note the authenticity of having no crosshair (making it difficult to shoot from the hip and forcing players to swap to the gun's iron sights). However, a crosshair is one of the many features of FPS that supplements the loss of perceptual information available to historical agents that is not available to players (in this case more nuanced motor control, greater proprioception and depth perception). As games therefore introduce their own challenges that did not face agents, sometimes discarding mechanics in favour of difficulty actually introduces new dissonances, losses of perceptual information and abstractions. We cannot therefore *assume* that increases in difficulty necessarily mean more authentic reenactment, because the degrees of *performatory abstraction* are so great (which is why claims about digital-ludic reenactment must generally be isolated to *exploratory challenges*). This is further confused by differences in long-term social, cultural and physical pressures on players and agents. These might have prepared historical agents to better face particular challenges. Similarly, the conditions, stresses and

dangers that agents faced that reenactors do not might also have the reverse effect. As such, training and preparation might mean agents and players find similar tasks to be of different difficulty, further muddying the relationship between difficulty/suffering and authenticity in reenactment. Even reenactor's or player's perceptions of historical challenges and experiences as unusual, extreme and beyond typical requirements likely differ from the more normative perspectives of historical agents. For example, "does a reenactor's fear of the futtock shroud – a precipitous section of tall-ship rigging – correlate to the common fears of sailors?" (Agnew 2004, 331). The larger historical context beyond the immediate technical aspect can change the framing of such events dramatically.

As such, we must be cautious of simply conflating increases in difficulty with the epistemological promises of direct experience that reenactment entails and this relationship cannot be taken as self-evident. However, there are some cases where the addition of extra challenges can be seen to enrich the reenactment from an ecological perspective. For example, the more developed ballistic physics of *World War II Online: Battleground Europe* and *Red Orchestra 2* (requiring players to account for bullet drop, angle and spin for maximum accuracy and effect) introduces historical *exploratory challenges*. Similarly, sometimes removing perceptual affordances or aids does also actually reintroduce challenges common to the original environment. For example, the maintenance of first-person perspective in cover or tanks in some games (whereas others allow a swap to third-person in these moments) or the removal of suppression markers over enemies in *Brothers in Arms*' most difficult setting (unsurprisingly named 'authentic mode') restrict perceptual information and make it more difficult to judge enemies' potential reactions, making combat more unpredictable.

Regardless, the validity of this discourse about suffering and authenticity (that the more one is faced with difficulties and therefore suffers the closer one comes to the past) is probably less interesting than finding its presence in discourses surrounding both traditional and digital-ludic reenactment. Perhaps this emerges from wider cultural notions grounded in strong totalising metanarratives of progression that therefore risk viewing the past as simply universally primitive and unpleasant places to have lived. As such, the perception becomes that historical experiences must be in some way difficult or unpleasant, in comparison to contemporary experience, in order to be authentic. Whilst modernity has indeed brought many advances that improve quality of life and some points or events in history were undoubtedly unpleasant to live through, this unidirectional progressive conception of historical life is also too linear, reductionist and banishes nuance from the historical process. It also collapses the multiplicity and variety of lived experiences, including the different social roles one could occupy in the past. However, as reality television reenactment shows make clear, the difficulty and suffering of past lives is a popular narrative. In *Surviving the Iron Age*, for example, (in which participants lived like Iron Age Britons for seven weeks) the "inability

to withstand the privations of the past put viewing figures through the roof" (De Groot 2006, 401). Again these narratives ignore that historical agents, knowing nothing else, would have framed their experiences differently and furthermore would often have possessed skills that could improve their conditions in comparison to the attempts of modern participants. Instead, breaks between past and present are emphasised in order to be used in two ways. "In the first, and least psychologically satisfying, case, the program simply illustrates the hardship and impoverishment of life in ancient times, inviting sympathy for those condemned to live in the past, but contributing to a smug feeling of well-being at having the good fortune to enjoy supermarkets and hot baths" (Cook 2004, 493). Arguably, this is also often the case with digital-ludic reenactment. Here the sense of the sublime is found in tonal contradictions. On the one hand these reconstructionist-realist games argue the authenticity of their depictions of the war experience and invite us to take part, and yet on the other hand they also often suggest (though the tone differs between games) how glad we should be that these acts are virtual, voluntary and safe and engaged with from the warm sofa of contemporary life.

Indeed, the very act of gaming offers the sublime in its controlled production of conflict and stress. Thus, it also relates to the second of the popular break narratives that Cook identifies wherein "there is an initial crisis in which participants break down before the *shock of the old*. This is followed by an extended period of acclimatization as they adjust to their changed way of life. It culminates in a final recognition that despite the manifold comforts of modernity, certain things of value have been lost" (2004, 493). Digital-ludic reenactment often produces a similar narrative. Firstly because players are initially put under stress but gradually learn to master the historical gameplay environment. But also because this gameplay experience resonates so well with *bildungsroman* (coming of age) stories that the *framing narratives* of these games tend to be stories of this kind about the player-character (e.g. *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* and *Call of Duty: World at War*). This is also particularly the case because war narratives are obviously frequently *bildungsroman* stories and historical games are frequently war stories. These games therefore engage this second break narrative by emphasising the shock and gradual acclimatisation of both player-character and player. However, war is often simultaneously framed by gameplay as something adventurous or glorious and, as aforementioned, these games tend to concentrate on the bonds between soldiers rather than the wider political context. As such, they also often argue that these experiences, despite their trials, offered certain things of value that have been lost. In reality television series, these lost things are usually "the intimate pleasures of an organic community or the existential rewards of manual labor or some combination of the two" (Cook 2004, 493) and the themes of bonds formed between bands of brothers engaged in honest and heroic frontline soldiering often found in digital-ludic reenactment games also seem to resonate somewhat with this.

As noted, these kind of comparisons between present and past are fraught with problems. They often only really serve to let us know where in time we assume we would prefer to live (Cook 2004). However, they do seem to be an intrinsic part of reenactment. As De Groot puts it, the space reenactment opens up “between then and now is as interesting as the experiences of then – in fact, the notion of historical difference, or perhaps historical comparison, is crucial to the appeal” (2006, 401). Cook argues that these breaks might at least be useful in stimulating questions and that hanging “an account of the past off the vagaries of the modern experience” might, in doing so, denaturalise the present, “a crucial preliminary to any critical social inquiry. If followed up with more rigorous forms of investigation, it can lead to significant insights into the present as well as the past” (2004, 493–4). This is what Spiro, in reference to good anthropological practice (which is linked to the epistemological justifications of reenactment), refers to as the effort to “make the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (1990, 48). Digital-ludic reenactment is perhaps less likely to achieve this because of the relative lack of conscious metadiscourse dedicated to this investigation (in comparison to traditional reenactment). Nonetheless, regardless of epistemological value, the very similarity to the discourses and practices of other forms of reenactment, and the willingness of participants to undergo discomfort in the search for satisfaction, recognition, authority and/or authenticity, speaks not only to the possibility for games to function as reenactment but also to the usefulness of analysing them through this lens.

Digital Games and/as Historical Reenactment

Whilst we must be somewhat conservative in our claims, digital-ludic reenactment does seem to bear some similarities to traditional reenactment in terms of both practice and discourse. In traditional reenactment, participation is characterised by “the breakdown of traditionally distinct categories” (Agnew 2004, 327). In particular, reenactment is associated with the possibility for reenactors to become actively and practically engaged in history, to practice *historying* and thus, in doing so, to become a kind of historian. Similarly, constructing digital-ludic reenactment experiences is one of the ways in which developers can become developer-historians. However, participating in these experiences and their surrounding practices also allows players to become reenactors and thus this structured access also offers them the possibility of becoming player-historians. Perhaps most importantly, both traditional and digital-ludic reenactment are capable of offering a more epistemologically stable layer of reenactment beyond empathy (that I have proposed we term ‘actualised reenactment’) and grounded in the reenactment of tangible challenge and related processes. Nonetheless, we must be cautious of the autoptic authority of these practices and remain mindful of their unrealistic isolation and limitations as representations.

As digital games are now such a large part of popular culture, digital-ludic reenactment means potentially opening up reenactment to millions of participants. Importantly, it does so in a less expensive, logistically complex and time-consuming way than traditional reenactment. Digital-ludic reenactment requires only what, for many, is now fairly everyday equipment (i.e. console, television and game) and doesn't require, for example, the acquisition of gunpowder licences or for participants to travel to events. It could also open up reenactment to people with disabilities that make traditional reenactment difficult. Furthermore, games can offer access to the reenactment of *exploratory challenges* of historical activities that are generally inaccessible even to most traditional reenactors, such as driving a tank or flying a plane.⁵ The highly structured nature of digital-ludic reenactment might restrict more creative forms of investigation by participants. However, as aforementioned, the narrowing of possible actions by *framing controls*, generally to what the game considers to be historically authentic behaviour (punishing players who stray), also means that little knowledge about a period is required in order to reenact it, because the experience is structured. However, participation does still require certain skills and even learning to manipulate a first-person perspective can be difficult.

Furthermore, digital-ludic reenactment cannot necessarily offer everything, such as physical engagement with material culture and an emphasis on communities of knowledge, that traditional reenactment can and should not therefore be viewed as a *replacement*. Each type enriches popular history in its own way. Each offers different but overlapping experiences that fill in the perceptual gaps of the other and interplays between them might therefore prove to be fruitful. More broadly speaking, newer digital technologies, such as motion control and augmented and virtual reality, also offer possibilities for fusion between reenactment types. Indeed, simple examples of this already exist. For instance, the Royal Armouries in Leeds, UK, allows visitors to use deactivated WWI and WWII weapons with (compressed air) haptics and attached to shooting range simulators. These allow the reenactment of both *exploratory* and *performatory* challenges. If the current wave of virtual reality succeeds in the way its proponents claim, the reenactment of *performatory challenges* in digital-ludic reenactment may also become more common.

Currently, however, digital-ludic reenactment is generally restricted to *exploratory challenges* and in this regard could benefit from a widening and diversification. Though similarities between conflict and competition mean that games naturally resonate with representing historical combat, as noted, it seems feasible that the *exploratory challenges* of other activities could be reenacted, such as foraging, navigation, scouting and (if based on the virtual reproduction of similar sources and quantities of information available to agents of the time) the challenges of managing personal or collective logistics. And amongst the thousands of digital historical games available, there may well already be examples of these activities. Regardless, even in their current

form, digital-ludic reenactment games may prove to be important. Not only do these games open up reenactment to a broader audience, but their typically *realist* structures also offer a counterpoint of individual experience to the scale and abstraction of the (mainly strategy) games discussed in the next chapter. Digital-ludic reenactment games reinscribe history with a sense of the human experience that a concern with the larger systems and movements of history can sometimes forget. Furthermore, these games also often have useful facets beyond only their reenactment function. They are still historical representations capable of offering information and arguments in a number of ways, including of course dramatic storytelling. So too, their ludic aspect can have potential in other regards. For example, players of these games can encounter historical decisions (such as ethical dilemmas) that present arguments for the pressing factors involved in these situations, even if they cannot really let players know how it felt for agents to face these decisions.

Changes in player practices could probably increase the value of digital-ludic reenactment. However, placing these expectations on popular audiences is perhaps unrealistic and unfair. Nonetheless, for the most historically enthusiastic players, Johnson's advice to traditional reenactors to channel their efforts and excitement into "methodological rigour and self-reflexive, constructive criticality" (2015, 203) would seem to be just as useful. Such discussions, however, first require an acknowledgement that games can even constitute reenactment. As argued herein, their offering of historical insight through body-based discourse and experience (however limited), and engagement of similar discourses, would seem to indicate that this is the case.

Agnew claims that reenactment's "broad appeal, its implicit charge to democratize historical knowledge, and its capacity to find new and inventive modes of historical representation suggest that it also has a contribution to make to academic historiography" (2004, 335). Similarly, Cook adds that "Academic historians interested in communicating with a nonspecialist audience would be well served to see what can be done to make the genre [reenactment] as interesting, rich, and responsible as it can be" (2004, 489). If this is truly the case, perhaps the broad appeal of digital-ludic reenactment might also have something to offer academic history. Already, however, digital games seem to lend new support to Cook's assertion that "For the foreseeable future, reenactment is here to stay as a form of public history" (2004, 489). Digital-ludic reenactment raises new questions about digital games as history. It also allows older questions, such as those concerning "reenactment's place within the history industry, the academy, and society at large" (Agnew 2004, 329), to be considered anew. And it is these kinds of questions that this and the previous chapter have tried to explore by examining the possibility of digital-ludic reenactment and comparing it to the role, practices and discourses of other forms of reenactment. As De Groot puts it, "Re-enactment has, almost by stealth, permeated the historical imaginary ... Thus, we should be obliged to audit the practice, whether or

not we value it” (De Groot 2011, 589). And such audits might do well to now also consider digital historical games. The kind of large-scale offers of reenactment already being made by the games industry might prove to have significant implications for popular engagement with history.

Summary

This chapter explored the nature of ‘digital-ludic reenactment’ and its relation to the practices and discourses of more conventional forms of reenactment (‘traditional reenactment’). The chapter firstly described the game structures best suited to this function. Ecological analysis and the notion of the ‘ideal type’ were then used to argue for the existence of a layer of ‘actualised reenactment’, distinct from the empathic layer, in both digital-ludic and traditional reenactment. The chapter also offered a deeper comparison of digital-ludic reenactment to traditional reenactment. This first noted that each offers this actualised reenactment primarily through different challenges (*exploratory challenges* in the former and *performatory challenges* in the latter). Furthermore, it was explained that whilst digital-ludic reenactment has a competitive uncertainty not found in its frequently scripted traditional counterpart, both activities are still dominated by rules that regulate the body in order to ensure ‘authenticity’. The advantages of digital construction (and the concurrent loss of the opportunities to produce and engage with material culture) were also discussed. Similarly, the relative lack of communities of knowledge and practice in digital-ludic reenactment was noted. However, exceptions to this in game culture were also explored, focusing in particular on the regulation of the body through social rules, and the complex relationship to roleplay, common to both traditional reenactment communities and realism clans. The frequent contextualisation of digital-ludic reenactment through dramatic *framing narratives* that appropriate the language of cinema was also considered, as was the presence of a work element in both traditional and digital-ludic reenactment. Discourses linking suffering and authenticity were also found to surround both types of reenactment. This link was argued to vary in its epistemological value in games and to relate to popular narratives of breaks between past and present found in reenactment in other forms. The final section of the chapter discussed the possible future of digital-ludic reenactment and its opening up of reenactment to large audiences through its relative accessibility.

Notes

1. In addition to the other works cited herein, see Agnew and Lamb (2009); Brewer 2010; Handler and Saxton 1988; McCalman and Pickering 2010.
2. In its modern form, reenactments of the American Civil War were performed by veterans only a few years after the end of the conflict (Hart 2007). During (2007) argues that the roots of the modern practice are actually found in the

shift in the conception of the relationship between past and present in the 18th century. Furthermore, far before this, famous battles were often publicly reenacted in amphitheatres in ancient Rome.

3. The differences between what is offered in these practices are also important because they indicate that, in either form, reenactment participants' experiences are in fact limited and limiting simulations and can never be, as is sometimes claimed, full and direct reconstruction.
4. Publishers also emphasise this link in their marketing. For example, the *Ubisoft* website declares of *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood*, "More challenging and dynamic combat ... take *authentic* military action to the next level" (my emphasis).
5. With the addition of particular hardware (e.g. joystick and rudder pedals), flying games might theoretically even be able to offer opportunities to reenact some *performatory challenges* of the past. Though these peripherals can be expensive, they cost little in comparison to the maintenance of an actual plane or the acquiring of a pilot's license.

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9 Digital Games as (Counterfactual) Narrative Historiography

An engagement with history may not enable us to anticipate the future, but it should make the past less predictable

—Thomas and Adams (1999, 9–10)

By looking at formal structures, rather than the historical content of individual games, we have explored and identified some broader characteristics, categories for analysis and affordances of digital historical games. Chapter 7 argued that some games, by providing particular substitutive structures, can function as tools to extend players opportunities to engage in narrative historiography. As described in Chapter 2, *(hi)story-play-spaces* always accentuate the audience's role in narration and all digital historical games therefore allow players to (re)write historical narratives to some degree. However, particular combinations of the structural categories discussed in Chapters 3 to 6 best create these opportunities. In particular, the *open-ontological story space*, described in Chapter 6 as emphasising narrative *creation* over narrative *discovery*, offers the most *ludonarrative* agency to players. These narratives are still structured by the *framing controls* that players must negotiate and which contain the developer-historian's arguments about the processes and existents of the past (producing *ludonarratives* of failure can therefore be important to historical explanation in these games). However, because *open-ontological* games have an emphasis on *ludonarrative* flexibility and multiplicity, allow us multiple ways to achieve goals and space to pursue our own (partly by minimising *framing goals*), they provide good conditions for historical experimentation within the model of history that the game provides. These games therefore offer a structured narrative freedom to players. *Conceptual simulations* also seem best suited for narrative historiography because (as described in Chapter 3) they involve a shift to the historian's diegetic level at which this conventionally takes place. This, alongside the visual abstraction, allows the most freedom to engage with broader theoretical perspectives and themes and allows for the easy inclusion of large amounts of interactive *lexia*, even able to represent intangible non-material and/or collective aspects of the past. This is best compounded by the open



Figure 9.1 Screenshot of *Crusader Kings II*, a game with a structure that offers significant opportunities for narrative (in particular counterfactual) historiography.

space as canvas structure, which both functions as a narrative resource and provides a good informational overview. Similarly, the longer-term histories allowed by the ratios of *discrete time* structures, which also give players time to consider different narrative options, seem best suited to the narrative historiography function. The *conceptual simulation*, combined with these spatial and temporal structures, allows for meaningful anachronism and anachronism in play, comparisons through historical time and space (as frequently performed by historians in more conventional forms).

Whilst alternate history games, such as the *Fallout* series, can offer counterfactual *history* (see Cutterham 2013; November 2013), they do not necessarily offer counterfactual *historiography* to players. Generally, *open story structure* games can offer narrative historiography by asking players to choose between competing narrative fragments, often functioning somewhat similarly to a ‘choose your own adventure’ novel. However, it is strategy games that function through the above described ideal structural combination for narrative historiography (*conceptual simulation*, *space as canvas*, *discrete time*, *open-ontological story structure*), such as the *Making History*, *Civilization*, *Total War*, *Europa Universalis* and *Crusader Kings* (see Figure 9.1) series, that offer the most intricate and flexible narrative process. These games offer considerable opportunities for discursive narrative play, allowing counterfactual comparisons and narrative experiments to become broadly available beyond only historians, who typically have the expertise to build these alternative scenarios. Players are offered the possibility of becoming *player-historians*, experiencing freedom to engage in historical practices and yet doing so in a structured story space in which much of the groundwork is

already complete. However, these games also feature significant tensions in their tendency for counterfactual history, their intrinsically structuralist approach to history and their enfranchisement of players into the construction of historical narrative. These tensions connect with a number of existing historiographical, methodological, ideological and epistemological debates. These connections must be explored if we are to further understand these games, the particular practices that they offer popular access to and the perspectives these are imbued with.

Counterfactual History

As noted in Chapter 7, experimentation with counterfactuals is an important kind of narrative history that digital games offer. Counterfactual history aims to understand what did happen by theorising about what did not, asking, for example, what if British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had continued his appeasement policy beyond Hitler's invasion of Poland (see Figure 9.2)? Or, what if the Cold War had become open warfare? These kinds of questions have popular appeal. However, there is also an argument to be made that counterfactuals are always in some way part of history because our ideas about what did happen are always constructed in opposition to an idea of what did not. This is obvious in lived experience, regret, for example, always requires imagining alternate courses of action and/or outcomes. As Ferguson puts it in his seminal edited volume of counterfactual histories *Virtual History*,

the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of the way in which we learn. Because decisions about the future are – usually – based upon weighing up the potential consequences of alternative courses of action, it makes sense to compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done. (1997, 2)

Whilst this kind of counterfactual reasoning is quite natural in academic disciplines such as economics and philosophy when considering causality, it is often less favoured by historians (McCloskey 1987) and counterfactual history has often been criticised. E.H. Carr labelled it as a “parlour game” and “red herring” (1961, 127–8) and E.P. Thompson as “Geschichtswissenschaftschlopff, unhistorical shit” (1978, 300), whilst Richard Evans, in his *Altered Pasts* (2014), offers a more sophisticated and extended critique that points to some of the problems of the practice. However, as Cowley puts it, “That these scenarios have entertainment value is undeniable, but their purpose is also to provoke” (2001, xvii). As such, there are also many historians who produce and/or argue for the validity of counterfactual history, not as an end unto itself but as a way to better understand what actually did happen (e.g. see Black 2008; Cowley 1999; 2001; 2003; Ferguson 1998; Hawthorn 1991; Roberts 2004). For instance, Fogel's (1964)

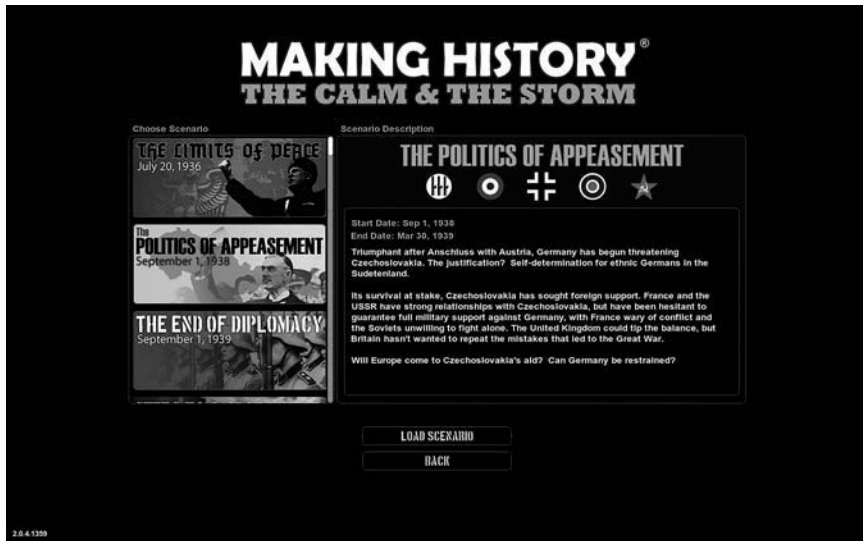


Figure 9.2 Screenshot of *Making History: The Calm and the Storm*. This WWII grand strategy game encourages us to play with precisely this counterfactual narrative of continued appeasement.

groundbreaking counterfactual argued the lack of significance of the railways to the 19th century United States precisely by imagining the country without them. As Ferguson notes, the core purpose of this exercise is not really to imagine America without railways “but to test a hypothesis about the role of railways in economic growth” (1997, 18). Furthermore, Tetlock and Belkin argue that “counterfactual reasoning is unavoidable in any field in which researchers want to draw cause-effect conclusions but cannot perform controlled experiments in which they randomly assign ‘subjects’ to treatment conditions that differ only in the presence or absence of the hypothesized cause” (1996, 6). Counterfactuals therefore seem particularly important to disciplines such as history. Ferguson agrees, emphasising that it is a logical necessity when evaluating causality to imagine how things might have been different had our supposed cause been absent. Put simply, “To understand how it actually was, we therefore need to understand *how it actually wasn’t* – but how to contemporaries it might have been” (Ferguson 1997, 87).

Counterfactual Historiography in Games

Both myself (Chapman 2013a) and others (e.g. Atkins 2005; Kee and Bachynski 2009; Kapell and Elliott 2013; Squire 2004; Taylor 2003) have argued that games like *Civilization* can be seen to constitute history. Testa, however, argues that they cannot, in part because he sees their propensity for counterfactualism as having “profound anti-historical consequences” (2014, 265). *Civilization* is therefore problematic because, “the player can

choose the Iroquois and lead this “civilization” to build the Colosseum and defeat the Ancient Egyptians and the English Empire in order to attain the complete hegemony over a two continents planet and, eventually, set off to outer space” (Testa 2014, 265). However, Testa’s mistake is to assume that history means only the retellings of ‘event history’, when of course, as the interest since at least the 1960s in the structures that might underpin the historical process indicates, history is also concerned with offering explanations as to *why* these things happened. History is generally understood to be both empirical *and* analytical and is often organised by theme as much as by accepted sequences of historical events. As I explained in Chapter 3, *conceptual simulation* games inherently emphasise discourse over retellings and furthermore, as I argued in Chapter 6, *open-ontological games* are fundamentally structuralist histories. What games like *Civilization* therefore offer are not simple retellings of *what* happened but arguments as to *why* these things happened. What kinds of resources and technologies allowed the building of a colosseum? What political or societal benefits did this offer? What kinds of (economic, socio-cultural, environmental and technological) structures have been involved in the establishment of empires and other forms of hegemony? *Civilization’s* answers to these questions might sometimes be simplistic, but this does not stop them being historical in that they offer and relate to particular perspectives on the past.

Counterfactual history (which Testa simply labels as “false”) has an inherent concern with causality. As discussed, the point of these histories is not the alternate histories produced but what these say about the actual past. This is particularly the case in *Civilization*, which (unlike more specific strategy games) uses the counterfactual only to bring out its structuralist arguments about the conditions that allowed, for example, the imperialist expansion of certain cultures. Although of course the Iroquois did not do these mentioned things, *Civilization* does not actually stray too far from established theories and narratives about why Europeans did many of them, even in these counterfactual moments. This is because the player must still somewhat echo and negotiate the structuralist foundations of these theories and narratives in order to achieve these outcomes. Thus, these games can *refer* to actual events without having to actually *recount* them. Allowing the player to do this with the Iroquois also allows for the game to at least reject, however superficially, notions of European exceptionalism used to justify their subjugation in the first place. This example from *Civilization* can also only really be considered dangerously anti-historical if we position players as cultural dupes and without any external cultural resources to draw from. Players need only to understand that they do not live in a world dominated by a Native American hegemony capable of travel to outer space in order to understand that their *chosen* actions are not a literal recounting of the past. And players of *Civilization* are likely to construct narratives like this many times, using multiple civilisations. It therefore seems unlikely that this kind of counterfactual narrative would be very problematic for most players’ historical understanding.

What we begin to touch upon with this example is one of the core themes of this chapter, the possibility that “the ludic capacity of historical video games allows for an in-depth understanding not just of facts, dates, people, or events, but also of the complex discourse of contingency, conditions, and circumstances, which underpins a genuine understanding of history” (Kapell and Elliott 2013, 13). These games often function similarly to Fogel’s counterfactual in that the values of historical *lexia* frequently become apparent through their presence or absence in the player’s chosen narrative. Creating an English civilisation without gunpowder in *Civilization* is unlikely to allow us to recreate the imperialist expansion that was historical reality, pointing to the importance of this development to military and colonial power. Even this basic example demonstrates that historical argumentation in these games functions through both opportunities for playful counterfactualism and the restraints that the pressures of *framing controls* place on this process. Thus, to achieve our goals we generally must adjust our play in relation to the foundational causal logic of these arguments. Consequently, counterfactual *historiying* through play might not require conscious historical acknowledgement beyond only a recognition of the *lexia*’s reference to a larger shared historiography (basic historical resonance). These games might struggle to provide timelines for historical *lexia*, however, they always demonstrate their meaning and interrelations according to their particular historical model. Anachronism here is not ahistorical – it is *conceptual* – and discursively comparative.

The limits established by *framing controls* also mean that (despite the predilection for counterfactuals in these games) there are still often broadly factual instances (hence the placing of ‘counterfactual’ in parentheses in the title above). Players even sometimes share extra-telic goals and create mods aimed at reproducing full dominant or factual narratives, or exploring the possibility for these in the game system (Apperley 2007; 2013). The structuralist character of *framing controls* means that even *ludonarratives* crafted on the basis of purely strategic concerns will generally be a mix of counterfactualism with some underlying factuality. Furthermore, even the most far-fetched counterfactuals must generally be anchored in some kind of broad factuality to remain meaningful and we might often find ourselves striving for this kind of resonance. For example, I recently attempted in *Civilization* to create a Mongol Empire through (relatively) peaceful cultural dissemination rather than military conquest. And yet I still found myself seeking land with horses and researching horse-related technologies, even though this offered mainly military advantages, because the historical Mongol culture lost much of its meaningful identity for me without horsemanship. The ironic satisfaction of the *ludonarrative* relied on establishing both a factual resonance and a counterfactual dissonance. Some cultural identities and historical patterns of behaviour can also be impossible to deviate from, being written into the *framing controls*. For example, in the *Attila* expansion for *Rome: Total War II*, players that play as the Huns are unable to settle cities

as the other cultures in the game can and must instead play as nomads. This fixity can also be said of other historical structures and conditions. Players of *Europa Universalis II* playing as the Incas are unlikely to be able to achieve the same goals as Western powers (or even survive European expansion) because of the inherent inequality of resources and infrastructure (Apperley 2013). These kinds of factors must be taken into account by (good) players. As such, it is not only possible but also generally necessary to produce *ludonarratives* with at least some kind of alignment with factual or dominant narratives, despite opportunities for counterfactual historiying. Playing these games is always in some way related to, and restricted by, facts about the past. Unsurprising given that they are histories and therefore in some way referential.

Ludonarratives in these games might be counterhistorical (against other historical narratives) or counterfactual (against established sequences of evidence), but they are rarely ahistorical. This is because everything is linked through the syntactical ludic logic of the *framing controls* that function to make causal arguments about the relations between historical *lexia*. Thus, narrative historiying in these games, though encouraging a playful and often counterfactual historical discourse between game/developer-historian and player, is rarely truly chaotic. This complex tension between agency/uncertainty and rules/structure is an important facet of these historical games and precisely what allows them to offer popular access to (counterfactual) narrative historiying and yet to still offer their own historical procedural rhetoric while doing so. Digital games such as *Making History*, *Crusader Kings* and *Civilization* therefore seem capable of offering both complex representations and opportunities for historical practice in popular culture. The enthusiastic metadiscourse found in forums and mods shows that many players value these historical qualities. However, such games might also have uses for experts. For example, Ferguson argues in his *The War of the World* (2006b) that confronting Hitler in 1938 would have offered significant advantages. However, he reconsidered this argument after playing *Making History: The Calm and the Storm*, running his counterfactual and finding that this Churchillian strategy placed Britain in a weakened position unless particular agreements were in place with France first. “The Calm & the Storm made it clear that lining up an anti-German coalition in 1938 might have been harder than I’d assumed” (Ferguson 2006a, 2). In essence, the game helped him, someone with expertise in WWII history, to think about the conflict in new ways.¹ As Ferguson himself puts it, “I found that my scenarios weren’t as robust as I thought. And that’s really exciting, because normally counterfactuals happen in my head ... Now they can happen on the screen” (Thompson 2007, para. 7).

This does not mean that games supersede the ‘problems’ of representation (which history faces in all forms) and are inherently more accurate or comprehensive. Nor, as Ferguson adds, are Muzzy Lane (the *Making History* developers) claiming so. Games should be treated as another form of history

with its own strengths and weaknesses and with varying degrees of quality between games. However, games like *Making History*, of which Ferguson claims “the parallel pasts the game conjures up have an undoubted intellectual value” (2006a, 3), seem to lend weight to the possibility for historical complexity in their detail, intricacy and challenge. Thompson, a reporter for *Wired*, writing about Ferguson’s experiences, argues that this is because “Games are a superb vehicle for thinking deeply about complex systems. After you’ve spent months pondering the intricacies of the weapons markets in *Eve Online*, or the mysteries of troop placement in *Company of Heroes*, you develop a Mandlebrotian appreciation of chaos dynamics” (2007, para. 8). Furthermore, if, as the argument goes, “History is merely the sum of millions of human decisions” (Cowley 2003, xvii), there does seem to be a particularly fitting alignment to exploring history through a form that so heavily privileges decision-making. This is not to say that these perspectives are necessarily the nature of the past (and indeed, as discussed below, structuralist understandings would seem to disagree and their manifestation in these games provides a counterpoint). However, these are certainly recognisable perspectives on history that are also obviously related to counterfactual history’s explorations of causality through the consideration of possible pasts and that games are particularly formally suited to engage.

The repetition inherent to these games might also be advantageous to historical concerns. As Glitz argues, players of *Civilization* are “memorably confronted with generalisations about historical real-life objects and their interrelationships, confronted with these not just once, in fact, but far more often than they would during the reading of non-ludic alternate history fictions” (2010, 177). Similarly, the gameplay convention of saving, i.e. saving a game-state that can be later returned to, offers advantages by allowing players to repeat a series of events with different choices, strategies or focus, seeing if it is possible to change the outcome or if the rules of the game make this inevitable given the situation (thus drawing out what the game’s arguments about the past are). This makes digital games capable of an introspective counterhistory, a *self-reflexive* process that explores the nature and limitations of the game’s own representation and our related choices in its construction, as well as the argued possibilities of the past. Games like *Making History* and *Crusader Kings* compound this by allowing players to swap position to explore the same events from the point of view of a different historical faction or to better create counterfactual scenarios. For example, by playing *Making History*, I was able to explore the scenario of the US facing a larger and more powerful Soviet Union in the Cold War, by initially playing as the Soviet Union, bringing more territory under its control at the end of WWII (due to earlier decisions that softened the German invasion of the USSR) and then saving and swapping positions to play as the US.

Ferguson has gone on to advise the inclusion of games into the UK secondary history curriculum when working as a consultant to government

(Vasagar 2010) and to work with Muzzy Lane on further iterations of *Making History*. Whilst including complex counterfactual games of this kind into secondary education might be problematic, clearly there are at least grounds to consider them seriously as a significant form of popular culture. Indeed, it is relatively easy to find support for these kinds of game-structures, support which generally focuses in some way on their capacity for narrative historiying and particularly counterfactualism (e.g. see Apperley 2007; 2013; Atkins 2005; Squire 2004; 2006; Taylor 2003). However, despite similarities in game-structure, the possibilities and perspectives that these games present can also vary significantly.

Differences in Counterfactual Historiying Games: Events and Structures

The aforementioned differences between playing as the Huns in *Rome: Total War II* or the Incas in *Europa Universalis II*, in comparison to playing as the Iroquois or Mongols in *Civilization*, indicates that, despite similarities in game structure, differences in *framing controls* between these narrative historiying games can be significant. This also means a different specificity of content. Whilst all of these games are historical, in that they are concerned with structures of history and their relation to historical events in some regard, the breadth of their focus differs. *Civilization* argues broadly of the historical process. Even by the standards of *conceptual open-ontological* games, it is abstract in the sense that deals in broad, long-term and claimed universalising structuralist arguments. This makes it one of the games that, as noted in Chapter 6, emphasise an approach somewhat akin to the *longue durée* approach of the early *Annales School* of history (though perhaps with more of an emphasis on diplomacy and war). This *longue durée* approach is partly due to the game's larger temporal scope (from the prehistoric to the future) but also to other factors, such as the emphasis on environmental determinism in its balanced gameplay and, importantly, the almost total rejection of 'event history'. Most strategy games tend to include some emphasis on historical materialism. This is a structuralist perspective (initially emerging from Marxism) that, while still including the possibility of short-term effects from the cultural (e.g. social, political and religious) institutions of a superstructure and thus even the effect of historical agents, emphasises base material (particularly economic and technological) structures as the main determinant of historical progress. However, the most extreme embrasure of these ideas is found in the most abstract games, such as *Civilization*, which seems to align with Braudel's conception of historical materialism, wherein even superstructures remains relatively unchanging (or change slowly) and constrain agency over long periods (the *longue durée*).² Although we can choose, for example, different ideologies and religions in *Civilization*, ultimately these all relate to the same, mostly fixed, structures, only generally varying slowly over (historical) time in the statistical bonuses that they offer to the

preexisting rulesets that still structure the history and our intervention into it (and can be seen therefore to represent enduring social realities).

It is possible, however, to play particular scenarios or download mods in which the game deals in more specific events, such as WWII. Although still relating to the broad structuralist logics, generally this involves the tightening of the *framing controls* (and other structures) in order to emphasise issues and conditions considered most relevant to that particular conflict. For example, AI behaviours may be tightened to ensure their relation to the chosen interpretation or sequence of events, temporal ratios and limitations might be narrowed, starting conditions for factions made unequal – to reflect each faction's particular cultural and geopolitical history at the game's start date, and *framing narrative fragments* may be more specific, partly in order to explain these conditions. In strategy series like *Making History* or *Hearts of Iron*, these kinds of design decisions are standard because these games are focused on specific events or periods and are intrinsically concerned with this higher *ludonarrative* specificity. These games do not argue as broadly or abstractedly about the structures of *the* historical process. Their *conceptual simulations* and concentration on *framing controls* as the primary form of meaning-making still makes them structuralist histories. However, their slight tightening of the *(hi)story-play-space* nonetheless reduces the emphasis of the *longue durée* approach, favoured by games like *Civilization*, of prioritising long-term structures over events. Instead these games focus on how particular, and often short-term, structures have related to particular historical events and both allow for, and are more concerned with, the effects of changes in the superstructure. By having their gameplay relate more specifically to particular shorter-term events in this way, these games are also able to look more at the divergences produced by particular *decisions* in these events.³

Broader reaching structuralist arguments, (as the *Annales School* argues and *Civilization* offers), can be valuable and certainly “nonspecific simulations provoke a wider range of interrogations, encouraging a more abstract, theoretical engagement of historical process” (Uricchio 2005, 330). However, tightened *(hi)story-play-space* games like *Making History*, more narrowly focused on particular events, themes and/or particular periods, seem to offer more advanced and useful opportunities for counterfactual *historiying*. As Evans puts it, “long-range counterfactual speculations are unconvincing and unnecessary for the historian because they elide too many links in the proposed causative chain after the initial altered event” (2014, 174). Games like *Civilization* therefore fail to meet what Tetlock and Belkin call the ‘minimal rewrite rule’, which aims to eliminate the most far fetched of scenarios (and presumably isolate variables as far as possible) by advising the specification of antecedents that require altering as few of the historical facts across reasonable lengths of history. Thus, whilst games like *Civilization* are still histories that use opportunities for narrative *historiying* to make their arguments, the value of the counterfactual in these games is as a

retorical technique to draw out these arguments rather than an end unto itself. As Ferguson puts it, in these games players may quickly learn, for example, “that it is prudent to build up one’s economic capabilities before embarking on a war. But this is a universal truth, as valid for Julius Caesar as for Benito Mussolini” (2006a, 1). However, as Ferguson continues to point out, such games can’t tell us much about the specifics of the events of 1939 to 1945, for example, whereas games like *Making History* or *Hearts of Iron* can.

Good (Counterfactual) Narrative Historiography: Player Responsibilities

These variations mean that ostensibly similar game structures can deal in quite different kinds of historical knowledge. Although in this book we are primarily concerned with form, this points to the importance of variations in the relationships between formal structures and content. Being less bound by existing geopolitical inequities and historical conditions also potentially makes games such as *Civilization* more accessible because they can easily include gameplay conventions such as equal starting conditions. Such games are also more flexible, requiring players to have only limited knowledge to appreciate their broad causal arguments. By comparison, the deeper and more detailed *counterfactual* potential of games like *Making History* relies much more on players’ existing knowledge of events like WWII.⁴ The structuralist arguments of these games don’t necessarily rely on this knowledge of specific historical narratives (only a sense of period) and the usefulness of the counterfactual isn’t only restricted to larger narratives (and thus broader knowledge). As noted, comparative anachronism and anachronism is partly how these games (and many histories) make arguments about individual historical *lexia* and their relations. However, it is fair to say that the full utility of the counterfactual aspect does require previous knowledge. As Bogost (2007) points out, games that connect their abstract models to more specific events (what Bogost calls “the particulars of lived history”), “open a simulation gap for the player to interrogate: the player learns by meditating on what is different in the game’s representation of Egypt or Russia compared with the historical (and geographical) record” (2007, 255). As Bogost adds, games can often provide much factual information to underline these differences. However, whilst isolatable facts are easy to provide in supporting text, including full narratives to contextualise all of the possible counterfactual narratives would typically be an enormous task and would probably disrupt the flow of gameplay. As such, it is difficult to deny that to fully realise the benefits of counterfactual history some previous historical knowledge is often required. As Atkins puts it, “To be able to judge one’s own achievements against historical achievements one has to know something of history, at least in vague terms” (2005, 19). As such, whilst these games supplement much of the required expertise for performing counterfactual historiography, they

also place certain historiographical expectations upon the player. Historian Antony Beevor has criticised Ferguson's desire to introduce counterfactual games to the British history curriculum for precisely this reason, arguing that "To be perfectly honest there's more than enough you need to learn about the basic structure before you start playing counterfactual" (Vasagar 2010, para. 20).

This said, it is also possible that to look at these games as cultural products in isolation does them a disservice, when they are obviously part of (and often based on) a web of popularly available historical metadiscourse and practices that audiences may well be invested in. Furthermore, the requirement of prior knowledge isn't entirely form-specific (though the unpredictable narratives of games make this admittedly more difficult) and counterfactual history always requires some previous knowledge of what is deviated from. As Owens (2012) argues of Scott-Card's alternate history novel *Pastwatch*, whilst generally counterfactuals might be very good for prompting us to explore causal models of history, they are not necessarily particularly good for teaching us about the actual history that they relate to. However, nor is this problem entirely isolated to counterfactual history. In a sense, all history relies on metadiscourse and a wider knowledge of historiography is always a boon to critical reading. This problem of placing historiographical expectations on audiences also depends on the particular examined content. As the success of WWII counterfactual novels, such as Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (1993), Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) and C.J. Sansom's *Dominion* (2012), implies, some histories are prominent enough in cultural memory for counterfactual versions to be easily popularly appreciated.

There are also aspects of historical games culture that might help with this problem of requiring prior knowledge to make full use of these games. Many of these counterfactual games are surrounded by metadiscursive online communities (often encouraged by developers and publishers) in a way perhaps more unusual for other forms. This may be because games require us to actually implement, rather than only receive, counterfactuals and in doing so provide an impetus to seek other resources, such as online communities based on the discussion of practice. These communities, through forums, blogs, messageboards and mods, often discuss topics (such as authenticity, the historical logic and limitations of the games and their relation to the histories from which they deviate), set each other historical challenges and discuss potential or existing mods (e.g. see Apperley 2007; 2013).⁵ These games may not be able to provide all of the information necessary for the kind of dialogue upon which the more complex aspects of their counterfactual possibilities rely upon. However, it seems possible that through the combined operations of gameplay and surrounding online cultural practices, some players will encounter useful activities and resources, and the games can therefore be seen to encourage "reflection on historic rigor by providing a platform for dialogue around plausibility" (Apperley

2013, 190). Looking at games only as counterfactual *texts* does run the risk of ignoring their role as centres for counterfactual (and other kinds of historical) *activity* in popular culture. What this discussion highlights is the need in historical game studies for empirical and ethnographic research on players and their practices, alongside critical analysis of the games themselves, if the field is to further develop.

In a sense, it is also unfair to criticise these games for failing to provide something that they never intended or claimed to – with their focus clearly being on causality rather than reiterating the historical record. Furthermore, assuming a level of audience knowledge in order to pursue this kind of exploration of causality is common in academic counterfactuals and other types of history. It therefore seems unfair to hold games to a higher standard. Nonetheless, it is clear that these games' function as counterfactual history is not entirely self-contained and that they do place expectations on players. Whilst much of the expertise needed for counterfactual historiying can be formally supplemented, there are still historiographical expectations that are more problematic. This tension arguably entails a slight shift in the onus of responsibility on to audiences, in comparison to many other forms of popular culture, a shift that is also reflected in other aspects of the counterfactual practices that these games offer.

As noted in Chapter 7, some of the advocated methodologies for narrative historiying are present in the very structure of digital games. For instance, digital games generally inherently meet Tetlock and Belkin's (1996) requirements for logical, theoretical and statistical *consistency* in counterfactual history. As Glitz explains in relation to *Civilization*, "However crude, empirically unsupported, or even politically objectionable its concrete generalizations may be, their mathematical codification in the game as rules, concepts, and object-defining qualities does guarantee that every historical narrative constructed in and through the playing process is entirely consistent with them" (2010, 170). Games without some kind of consistency in their rule-sets are generally not considered fun to play and thus the developer-historian generally inherently performs this methodological requirement in production. However, the same is not necessarily true of Ferguson's primary methodological requirement for counterfactual historiying, that "We should consider as plausible or probable *only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered*" (1998, 86). As Glitz (2010) also notes, *Civilization* struggles to provide this because of its focus on long-term structures that tend to de-emphasise short-term human agency. Not all structural factors are problematic in this regard, as Ferguson's requirement does not entirely ignore the role of material (and other) conditions exerting pressure upon this agency (as attestable in his endorsement of a game like *Making History* wherein the rules represent these conditions and restrain possible courses of action). Furthermore, in more specific games, such as *Making History*, that reject the *longue durée* approach, focus more on historical decisions in relation to particular

events and generally have the advantage of beginning at points in history wherein many of these other factors, though still relevant, have been further mastered by (rather than being determinant of) human agency, Ferguson's methodological requirement is not immediately discounted. However, nor is it guaranteed. The inherent agency and complex narrative multiplicity involved in these games means that we can often take numerous sequential diversions from known facts and take courses of action not seriously considered by historical agents. Thus, if as little of the known facts as possible are to be altered in order to match Tetlock and Belkin's 'minimal rewrite' rule and only courses of action actually considered by contemporaries are to be pursued in order to match Ferguson's, then the methodological responsibility to do so lies with the player.

These requirements cannot be hardcoded into these games without dramatically restricting the agency and comprehensive scope that they offer. Thus, whilst these games can supplement some of the requirements for counterfactual *historiying*, including even some methodological requirements (e.g. theoretical, logical and statistical consistency), they cannot provide everything. Like so much in historical games, best practice is a *shared* responsibility between developer-historian and player-historian. This may therefore require *dual*, or perhaps *multiple, methodologies*, those for developer-historians who construct the system for counterfactual *historiying* and those for the player-historians that utilise it (and perhaps yet others that relate to other styles and purposes of historical play).

Of course, counterfactual *historiying* can still be useful without these methodologies in place (and, as noted, counterfactualism can still be important at a more local level to meaning-making through comparisons). It is also a little unfair to expect the public to meet academic standards, though perhaps some particularly enthusiastic players already do. As such, we may have to rethink critiques and methods drawn not only from other forms but also from other realms of cultural practice. Furthermore, "One could argue, of course, that counterfactual history is still too novel a sub-discipline to have arrived at a representative methodological consensus and ... Ferguson's plausibility criterion for counterfactual histories is not universally agreed upon among their advocates" (Glitz 2010, 169). Nonetheless, it is important to note that it seems, even in these enfranchising game structures, that the most skilled historical eye can best utilise these digital-ludic historical tools. At the very least, the form raises new questions about what, and for whom, the methodological standards for good historical gameplay should be.

(Counterfactual) Narrative Historiying Games: Ideology, Historiography and Epistemology

The possibilities for narrative *historiying* in these games seem to make significant connection with calls for hypertextual history, which Ayers describes as those histories that can "offer new ways of making arguments

and associations ... offer layered or branching or interweaving narratives” (1999, para. 15). Furthermore, given the inherently discursive nature of narrative formation in these games, and the metadiscursive cultural practices that surround them, they connect to notions of hypertextuality because they similarly “permit us to embed narratives in shared networks of communication so that references, connections, and commentaries grow and change” (Ayers 1999, para. 15). Ayers suggests that hypertextual history might offer a new aesthetics of historical narrative and certainly it seems that such an argument could be made for games that offer narrative historiying. However, these new aesthetics and dynamics also often produce new formal tensions that nonetheless tap into older historiographical debates.

Structure vs. Agency

As already hinted at, there are inherent tensions in a form wherein history emerges from the space between agency on the one hand and *framing controls* (which represent historical theories, structures and laws) on the other. As Poblocki emphasises, this “interactivity dilemma, that is the question how much and which parts of the game can be influenced by players, and, conversely, which ones cannot, resembles greatly the heated nineteenth century debate on the relation between free will and necessity in history” (2002, 167). Similarly, these tensions, as Glitz (2010) notes, also touch upon historiographical debates that pitch the ‘covering law’ model of history against the concern with the intention of human action found in idealist approaches to history. As noted, the emphasis on *framing controls* (rules and pressures) as the primary form of meaning-making (alongside the *conceptual simulation* shift to the larger focus of the historian’s diegetic level) creates pressure to deemphasise human agency in favour of an Althusserian anti-humanist emphasis on large structures as the determining force in the historical process. However, as we have seen, some games, such as *Making History* or *Hearts of Iron*, while still concerned with base material structures, reject the more extreme implications of this predisposition by also focusing on the role and importance of short-term structures (the superstructure – the socio-cultural and political) to particular historical events and in relation to these material structures. This allows for a consideration of the importance of particular *decisions* and *chosen courses of action*. Furthermore, the notion of the complete primacy of structures over agency cannot stand without tension in a form that also intrinsically emphasises the latter. Again, as in Chapter 2, by way of a similar debate in history, we return to the notion of the tension between control and agency.

This tension between structures/*framing controls* and historical/player agency makes it possible to position these games, as De Groot (2009) does, as conceptualising historical development as something partly based on decisions and allowing for different historical timelines, but within an “overarching move towards progress” (2009, 142). This duality might

offer advantages. As Evans warns, counterfactual history often attaches too much importance to individual historical agents and therefore overemphasises the derivation of large events from small ones, betraying “a naïve belief in the extra-historical powers of great or at least powerful men” (2014, 36), a belief that dominated much of historiographical discourse in the 19th century and earlier 20th century. Such speculations “put enormous imaginary power into the hands of individual politicians, giving them retrospectively the means to defy or overturn the massive historical forces with which they were confronted” (Evans 2014, 32). UK Labour politician and historian Tristram Hunt adds (and Evans agrees) that this tendency often serves right-wing ideologies: “It is no surprise that progressives rarely involve themselves [in counterfactual history], since implicit in it is the contention that social structures and economic conditions do not matter. Man is, we are told, a creature free of almost all historical constraints, able to make decisions on his own volition” (2004, para. 9). Although a valid critique of counterfactual history, this is also perhaps a little too clear-cut. Ferguson, for example, though a proponent of counterfactual history (and associated with conservative views, working, for example, as an adviser to US Republican presidential candidate John McCain), also warns caution in overemphasizing the role of the decisions of ‘great men’, arguing that these explanations are often reductionist. He states that this “may have sometimes been the case; but it has to be demonstrated rather than simply assumed, or the explanations are simply not plausible – and the counterfactual outcomes on which they rest collapse” (Ferguson 1998, 13). Furthermore, as Ferguson’s descriptions of his experiences with *Making History* imply, he also seems quite aware of the constraints on action that larger historical conditions can mean.

This criticism, of an overemphasis on human agency and in particular the decisions of ‘great men’, is also generally harder to level at counterfactual history in games because here agency is always determined and restrained by rules (representing various aspects of the base material structure or superstructure), as well as by the ‘actions’ of other represented agents or collectives (i.e. NPCs or players). And yet, within these *framing controls* we also experience agency that allows us to have a role in determining the nature and outcome of the historical narrative and, in certain cases, to explore what different decisions might have meant in the past. However, this is agency with an important caveat in the *conceptual simulation* strategy games we are mainly concerned with. Though it is tempting, given the fact that we are generally concerned with individual players, to assign these games as concerned mainly with individual agency in the past (and thus ‘great men’), this is not actually so simple. These games rarely try to convince us that we only play as one character overseeing the course of history (and this would make little sense given the unrealistically extreme power and information available to the player). Instead, these games tend to function through a flexible and frequently shifting characterisation of the player position, enabled by the *conceptual simulation’s* move to the historian’s diegetic

level, away from that of individual agents. In one moment we might well explore the decisions or courses of action of an individual (e.g. a wartime leader), however, in the next we might move on to those of a collective (e.g. a parliament, committee, culture etc.), then on to explore the possible effects of different structures, themes or objects (e.g. the restraints/possibilities of an ideology, policy, institution, cultural practice, environmental resource, technology). And the counterfactual can rest on our playing of any or all of these positions.

This kind of characterisation, unsurprising in the shift to the historians diegetic level, actually has similarities to that found in conventional history, wherein, as Munslow argues, ‘characters’ can be a person but also other existents such as a “class, race, idea, gender, nation, animal or a period of time” (2007b, 61). Similarly, conventional histories function through both mimetic characterisation (a depiction of the character as existing in historical space and time) and non-mimetic characterisation (wherein the character also functions as a textual feature of meaning creation, carrying an idea or representing a theme, demonstrating their/its significance to historical change) (Munslow 2007b). So too do these games, with the former type of characterisation being found in the character’s (whatever it may be) presence as a *lexia* and the latter in the interactivity this *lexia* implies due to the *framing controls* that apply to it. As such, counterfactual historiying in games, while driven by the individual agency of the player, does not rest solely on the exploration of the decisions of individuals in the past but also explorations, through play, of collective action, structures, themes, ideas and objects. Furthermore, as these are always restrained by the larger structural causal logics of the rules and the particular game state, even when individual historical agency is represented, this is always represented as restrained by particular material, and even social, conditions. For example, if we make too many bad or unpopular decisions in *Making History*, then factions within our nation may form coalitions, eventually even resulting in a loss of power.

This shifting characterisation and the emphasis both on structures (rules/*framing controls*) and agency, allows these games to not only offer one argument as to the factors in historical change but also to account for the links between many, again making contact with Ayers’ description of the historical hypertext by being able to show “how a single event ramified into multiple realms, or how various strands of causation culminated in a particular event” (1999, para. 17). Moreover, in the tension between agency and structure, these games demonstrate, as aforementioned, the law of unintended consequences (describing the tension between agency and complex systems), something advocated by the American National Council for History Education as an important ‘habit of the historical mind’ (Taylor 2003).

Though one of the explorable factors in some of these games is the *possibility* of human, or even individual, agency, the agency of the player is really more akin to that of the historian, free to compare, experiment and consider

different factors by shifting between them and implementing them within the boundaries of the structuralist *framing controls*. However, a critique can also be levelled at this shifting characterisation. The intrinsic complexity of offering multiple interlinked causal factors can make their boundaries unclear and as such it can be difficult to ascertain what a particular game's argument as to the drivers of historical change in a particular instance is claimed to be, at least without careful analysis. There is then a danger of the player's individual sense of agency overshadowing or undermining the game's rhetoric, in favour of a 'great man' type understanding. As such, we must add another responsibility to the role of the player-historian, who, in order to engage in best practice, must remain mindful and constantly ask *who* or *what* they play as in each instance and how the affordances of this representation might relate to the past as a lived experience.

Binding human (and particularly individual) agency as only one factor amongst many that exist within structural limitations allows these games to often escape some of the criticisms leveled at counterfactual history. However, these structuralist leanings also risk functioning (particularly given the scale, scope and kind of themes allowed by the *conceptual* shift to the historian's diegetic level and the de-emphasising of humanistic aspects) as a metanarrative, "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephens and McCallum 1998, 6). Contemporary historical and critical theory has become increasingly wary of such narratives, particularly when involving the kind of themes these games often engage.

Teleological Tensions

Civilization, for example, has been discussed a great deal in this light. Lammes (2003) notes that the game's code actually pushes players into dominant postcolonial structures. As Douglas puts it, the game's "ultimate effect is to reinforce the pattern of interaction between the colonizing power and the aboriginal" (2002, 15). Furthermore, Whelchel (2007) argues that cultures in these kinds of games are given particular characteristics that are teleologically defined. Similarly, Dillon (2008) notes that even games which are nominally about the historical indigenous experience, such as *Age of Empires III: The War Chiefs*, tend to use the same gameplay mechanics, with a rhetorical basis in modern European political and economic thought. The *framing controls* therefore sometimes structure and encourage historical *ludonarratives* that can be seen to attempt to justify historical patterns of abuse by reiterating the idea that following Western historical metanarratives is the true path to progress or 'civilization', with the *telos* being the contemporary West. As Poblocki argues of *Civilization*, "the fetish-object of Meier's fantasies is the ultimate empire, the state that resembles most the end product of all human advancement, namely the United States of America" (2002, 167).

Despite narrative agency, there is therefore still a risk of problematic teleological perspectives being weaved into these narrative historiying games. Unlike teleology in *deterministic story structure* games (discussed in Chapter 6), in these *open-ontological story structure* games this is mainly found in how the *framing controls* structure the arrangement and interactions of *lexia*, rather than in the very presence of *framing narrative*. For example, this teleology is perhaps most apparent in the menu systems, particularly the various technology trees, found in strategy games. As Fogu puts it, “no matter the playfulness and sense of freedom experienced by its players... [Civilization]... contains an indisputable ideological kernel, which identifies it as a quintessentially Western-American creation. It projects an image of the civilizing process characterized by technological determinism and progress” (2009, 117). Implied players of these games who wish to do well are therefore often encouraged to align with the games’ structuralist logics to produce *ludonarratives* that reconstruct their own Western identities and cultural memory (and sometimes the imagined future that springs forth from this). And arguably, because such ideologies can be hidden under an agency which appears to emancipate both history and player, they are perhaps more insidious.

This said, the particular way in which these narratives are framed also has a role to play. As noted, the outcomes of these games can be interpreted as different emplotments according to varying gameplay events/outcomes, the game’s rhetoric and the player’s interpretations. Structuralist interpretations of history also vary in their ideology and it is particularly when linked to, for example, culturally specific totalising metanarratives of (normally Western) supremacy and progress that these approaches becomes particularly problematic teleologies. Such interpretations can, for example, also be used critically. As Adorno puts it in his *Negative Dialectics*, “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (1973, 320). Furthermore, despite the underpinning structuralist logics, large scale and scope of these games, which run the risk of structuring *ludonarrative* production through the more problematic metanarrative lenses, some aspects of these games, such as narrative multiplicity and the possibility of multiple possible pasts (especially when positioned in relation to particular events and decisions involving them), can also work precisely against these kinds of ideologies. Indeed, these qualities of counterfactual history are generally upheld as important precisely because they work against excessively deterministic history.

As historian Richard Lebow argues, we have a tendency for a kind of ‘hindsight bias’, where “After an event has taken place, people readjust their estimates of the probability of that happening ... That makes history appear more pre-ordained than it really is” (Honan 1998, para. 11).⁶ This is unsurprising given the narrative format of history, the ordering function of which has a tendency towards a sense of inevitability (Ferguson 1998; Visconti 2011; Apperley 2013). It is therefore easy to slip into teleological

determinism, which ignores the fact that to those in “the past the future was a field of plural possibilities ... [and] ... legitimizes the present as the only possible (thus inevitable) result of the cumulative events that constitute history ... by focusing on the chain of events, a single path is forged that ignores branches of possibilities” (Apperley 2013, 189). This eradicates a sense that the past was (and thus the present is) dependent on a multitude of factors, i.e. *contingency*, what Lebow describes as the idea “that there are many realistic possibilities for what actually happens” (Honan 1998, para. 11). Counterfactuals work against teleological notions by highlighting “that small accidents or split-second decisions are as likely to have major repercussions as large ones” (Cowley 2001, xii) and how “a single change can take a stable situation and sent it spiraling all to hell, or vice versa” (Thompson 2007, para. 8). Counterfactual history inherently therefore “challenges the tendency of the multiple contingencies of the past being homogenized into a singularity in hindsight” (Apperley 2013, 189). Indeed, Ferguson (1997) argues that counterfactual history allows for the imbrication of a kind of chaos theory into history, finding a middle path between the excesses of determinism and idealism by allowing for both causality *and* contingency to be considered.

Counterfactual digital games seem to particularly echo this, having a concern with rules/structure and yet also a complex narrative multiplicity, which offers a sense of historical contingency through the fact that each historical narrative generated through play is probably rarely (if ever) exactly the same. Play is inherently unpredictable and in these *open-ontological* games, where *ludonarrative* is the only source of narrative, so too is history. This somewhat rejects teleology while still, through *framing controls*, providing a meaningful analytical story space, partly ordered by evidence and theory, that seeks to prevent counterfactuals slipping into arbitrariness, represent the pressures that exist on action and of course supplement our potential lack of counterfactual expertise. This narrative flexibility and sense of contingency is also often compounded by the fact that, as discussed in Chapter 6, *framing goals* are frequently limited or removable in *open-ontological* games, further weakening the *telos* that these kinds of determinist metanarratives rely upon. Furthermore, playing such games is an inherently reflexive process. When playing them we must, like the counterfactual historian, constantly consider alternatives and seek to predict causality, in order to decide what the best or possible course of action is/was. Whilst expertise with the system probably dampens this effect somewhat, it is difficult to imagine a form better inherently suited to emphasising the unpredictability and uncertainty of lived experience than games. Ferguson hints at this anti-teleological suitability when he states that “The past – like real-life chess, or indeed any other game ... does not have a predetermined end ... There is no plot, no inevitable ‘perfect order’; only endings, since multiple events unfold simultaneously” (1997, 68), adding later elsewhere, “History is more like a game than it is a novel, because you don’t know, when you’re in it, what the end is going to be” (Vasagar 2010). Games like

Making History, *Crusader Kings*, *Hearts of Iron*, and even the less focused *Civilization*, therefore inherently emphasise that whilst “For historians, as the maxim goes, the dominos fall backward”, counterfactual history is an “attempt to make them fall forward” (Cowley 2001, xiv).

Thus, as Apperley (2013) argues, the opportunities for counterfactualism in these games can also deconstruct teleological paradigms, question certainties and expose the arbitrary dimensions of official history, undermining the sense of fate and the inevitability of historical events used by dominant groups to justify present hegemonies and the related crimes of the past. Counterfactual games implicitly reject this determinism through their narrative flexibility and sometimes explicitly by allowing, for example, the construction of cathartic narratives that disavow European dominance as normative.⁷ And even Whelchel (2007) and Lammes (2003) offer caveats to their critiques of *Civilization*. Whelchel notes that the emphasis on contingency and counterfactual history works against the teleological aspects, particularly the opportunities to subvert colonial narratives by having oppressed cultures becoming dominant, something that Squire (2004) found to be an important motivating factor for some students from oppressed minorities. Lammes (2003) agrees, arguing that *Civilization* at least offers us opportunities to twist and parody, potentially subverting the ideology of colonialism.

This potential for complex multiplicity, a sense of contingency and the possibility of subverting dominant narratives has led some to argue that games like *Civilization* (Stephenson 1999) and *Europa Universalis* (Apperley 2013) actually *create* opportunities for *critical* play and engagements with history. The online communities surrounding these games, with their discussions of plausibility, evaluation of counterfactuals (after action reports) and even digital-ludic revisionism (mods), would certainly seem to support this idea. These would seem to represent the very discourse that counterfactual history is claimed to inspire and which, as a presence in popular culture, is, arguably, actually fairly radical history(ing). At the very least, it seems that the *ludonarrative* multiplicity and uncertainty inherent to these kinds of digital games has the possibility to work against both the excesses of overly deterministic perspectives and the teleological metanarrative strands that exist in some of these games’ own narrative structures. Thus, “the historiography of the games is therefore made complex by their very format” (De Groot 2009, 142).

Epistemological Tensions

This points to another inherent tension in these games for narrative historiying. Whilst I have discussed this at length elsewhere (see Chapman 2013b, 233–49), it is worth briefly exploring the issue here as it speaks to a broader point. The extreme invitation to audiences to participate in the discursive production of narrative in these *open-ontological* games, as well as the multiplicity of these narratives, aligns with some of the ideas of postmodern,

experimental or expressive history. This means that these games can run somewhat contrary to the *constructionist* leanings of their *conceptual simulations* and structuralist approach to history. This inclusive emergent narrative multiplicity can therefore be seen to question prevailing paradigms not only in the sense of dominant historical narratives but also historical epistemologies and communication models. As Uricchio argues, there is a remarkable coherence between these games and the aims of postmodernist history, which he defines as “the exploration of narrative convention and implication, or ways of enabling the subject to construct personal histories, or even the creation of speculative histories” (2005, 332). The very narrative structure of these games demonstrates irreverence not only for fact (found in all counterfactual histories) but also historiographical convention. As such, “history in the Rankean sense ... is subverted by an insistence on history as a multivalent process subject to many different possibilities, interpretations, and outcomes” (Uricchio 2005, 328). By these games granting audiences such significant narrative agency, history also becomes emancipated, through the questioning of historical narrative (and the past) as fixed and linear. Thus, despite emphasising particular ideologies in their chosen historical content and structures, these games allow “the reader/player to experience the fluidity of the process of meaning creation, contrary to strictly structured communication models” (Chapman 2010, 470).

As such, digital games might therefore be important because they question the nature of history as a practice itself, not only particular historical perspectives and ideologies. Through their multiplicity and the offering of narrative *historying* to audiences, games emphasise the idea of history as an active constructed discourse rather than as an immutable text and make significant connections to the ideas of postmodernist theorists such as Munslow (2007b; 2010), Rosenstone (1995; 2006) and White (1990; 1999) as to what might constitute and be possible in new kinds of expressionist or experimental history. Of course, the value and problems of postmodernism and other related perspectives are still heavily debated (see, for example, Jenkins 2000; Latour 2004; Zagorin 1999). However, it seems that the inherent formal predilection of games for pointing to the flexible and partly subjective nature of historical construction and to the possibility of multiple pasts and for multiple narrative interpretations of the past (all by including audiences into kinds of *historying*), might be useful. Even if only to reign in the excessive sense of authority and certainty that many of us would agree can be, and often has been, damaging (both in popular and professional history), in favour of an increased openness to multiple ideas, narratives and perspectives. An openness that, at its best, tends to somewhat infuse the critical approaches that we, as historians, often value.

Of course this openness does not necessarily mean that we disregard those aspects of history, such as evidence, theory and method, that define and structure our practice. Similarly, narrative *historying* games also have aspects that relate to more conventional epistemologies. The process of constructing these games bears basic similarities to the normal process of constructing a history

(Chapman 2013a). However flawed we might consider a particular game's historical representations to be, developer-historians are still informed by evidence and/or other histories they encounter, they make story/content decisions about what is relevant, they interpret, deploy theories, make arguments and convey facts in the form of events, dates, statistics and visual data. As described, these narrative historiying games also lean towards more conventional *constructionist* epistemologies in their *conceptual* simulations and in their structuralist approach to history by way of *framing controls*, which have an authoritarian aspect that cannot be fully escaped (at least without modding or some kind of exploit). Thus, although not dealing in *narrative* absolutes, they certainly deal in fixed causal logics. As Chapters 2 and 6 indicated, it is not so simple as to say that anything can be done in a (*hi*)*story-play-space* and the weight of reference is partly what determines this space and the possibilities it offers players. Thus, Uricchio argues, these historical games have a complex relationship to poststructuralist and postmodernist ideas because, whilst their narrative multiplicity emphasises historical possibility and their playful agency emphasises reflexivity and subjectivity, their structuralist elements, based on organising principles, "are contradictions, sites of stubborn adherence to the historiographic status quo" and "work against the apparent freedom celebrated by the games themselves" (2005, 336).

As such, whilst these games can resist some of the conventions of historiography and some dominant narratives or interpretations, they remain authoritative in regard to their *own* theoretical perspectives and do not explore how these structures might also be social constructions (and given the requirement for rules to be consistent, constantly questioning, deconstructing and changing these rules would be difficult). And yet, as should now be apparent, there is also a contradictory creative margin in these (*hi*)*story-play-spaces*, wherein history is still free to unfold in many different ways and players are free to construct different historical narratives, run experiments and experience multiple perspectives and concerns. Thus, Fogu seems right to argue of *Civilization* that it "embodies a postmodern vision of history in its operation and play, rather than in the texts or subtexts it produces, as its critics charge" (2009, 119). Although *produced* as *constructionist* historical representations, the very fact that these games afford narrative historiying to players means that they have trouble maintaining this epistemological coherency in *reception*. Thus, they function through a kind of epistemological *duality*, offering different, and even competing, epistemological perspectives in their representations and functions respectively.

The Complex Dualities of Narrative Historiying through Games

These epistemological contradictions might allow for the enfranchisement of audiences and the healthy sense of multiplicity that postmodernism called for, while also avoiding the problematic sense of arbitrariness that more extreme

forms of relativism can introduce. This duality is perhaps unsurprising in a form that seems to be primarily characterised by tension. These narrative historiying games are games that “suggest the chaos of history while inviting the player to inscribe order onto a world envisaged in a 3D map” (De Groot 2009, 142). Games that have the tensions between gameplay and narrative (described in Chapter 6), the duality of shared authorship and that emphasise both agency and rules. Games that emphasise both universalising structures and the significance of particular events in the historical process. As discussed, there is also tension between the offering of supplemented access to normally exclusive narrative historiying practices and the responsibilities of methodology, knowledge and critical awareness that this places on audiences. This also introduces a further tension between these games’ potential as histories and their expected role as entertainment. Perhaps though, this may not be the problem it seems if, as Pihlainen argues, “The problems with history’s engagement with the world today ... reside in the all-too-meagre capacities attributed to readers by the rest of us, especially by historians who have the talent for engaging in experimental forms (2008, 37–8)”. Certainly, Apperley’s (2007; 2013) research would seem to indicate that for some enthusiastic players, entertainment and history(ing) are not necessarily at odds.

Narrative historiying games evidently highlight old historiographical tensions and introduce new ones. Perhaps though, this refusal to offer final resolution to such tensions introduces a kind of formal *complexity*. This would seem to be the case in their mediation between, and inclusion of, seemingly opposing historiographical positions, even though generally done simply because each has a utility to gameplay. For example, these games’ occupation of the middle ground between the determinism of structuralist approaches and the overemphasis on individual agency of much (particularly counterfactual) history, explores the role of individuals and collectives, institutions and societal structures (and allows players to act more as historian than as represented historical agents). Meanwhile, the boundaries of historical decisions are still depicted as determined and tempered by larger structures, through the rules and pressures of the game state.⁸ Although the leanings of this can vary in different games, these games for narrative historiying do nonetheless therefore seem to emphasise a causal complexity that touches upon significant historical theories. For example, in the tensions between agency and structure, and in the examination of multiple causes and their interrelations through the flexible shifting characterisation of the player position, these games often seem to occupy the more complex mediating perspective between holism (emphasis on structure) and individualism (emphasis on agency) in terms of the issue of historical societies (superstructures) on which they often focus.⁹ This is a position that Lloyd describes as methodological structurism and in which:

society exists in a dual sense as agential people and the institutional structures that constrain people, which are the products of people collectively ... the structure ... is produced, reproduced, and

transformed through human thought and action which over time it enables and constrains. Society is both a structure and a historical structuring process of structurally oriented (rather than individually oriented) action.

(Lloyd 1993, 55)

These socio-cultural concerns are also generally anchored in an inherent concern with larger environmental and material tensions in these games. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere (Chapman 2013c), such games also offer an explanation similar to Reed's that "The force behind many of the transformations comes from the tension between individuals discovering facts about their relationship to their environment and culturally selected patterns of properties" (Reed 1996, 188). Thus, broadly speaking, as Poblocki (2002) notes of *Civilization*, these games seem to argue Plekhanov's perspective that "Owing to the specific qualities of their minds and characters, influential individuals can change the *individual features of events and some of their particular consequences*, but they cannot change their general *trend*, which is determined by other forces" (Plekhanov 1961, para. 6). As such, in their inherent structural and agential duality and their narrative multiplicity, these games seem to answer Evans' call for a middle ground that does not completely reject determinism in favour of agency, but that points to "how chance and contingency operate in a context that constrains the extent to which they can have an impact" (2014, 60). Perhaps, in doing so, they also curb the political excesses of these positions while still having their own political discourse in the specifics of their procedural rhetoric.

These dualities can offer something in terms of historiographical debates. The (structuralist) 'covering law' model of history has often been accused of being "relatively insensitive to the problems of actual historiographical practice" (Ankersmit 1994, 55) and ignoring that history is an interpretative, as well as explanatory, practice. However, Glitz, in his analysis of *Civilization*, argues that both these understandings are conversely present in these games and that they might therefore "entail a major reassessment of the relationship between individual descriptions or explanations on the one hand and the historical narrative as a unified structure on the other, a reassessment, in other words, that might well resuscitate the old debate about covering laws in history" (Glitz 2010, 171). In their inherent formal tensions, these games also argue the complexity not only of the past itself but also of history as a practice. This is something particularly apparent in their epistemological duality, emphasising both the traditional empirical-analytical (however basically) and yet also the postmodern. This duality might have advantages. As Engelen writes of historical film:

Films making unsteady claims about their relation to history usually don't interest historians, but maybe they should. Not for the histories they tell, but for what they tell about history ... This kind of film does

not (necessarily) create an understanding of the past but it does mirror the uncertainties at the core of current historiography and philosophy of history. (2007, 561)

So too, by positioning history as something authoritarian, definitive, factual and rule-bound with strict limits and yet also as something enfranchising, multiple, flexible and open to interpretation and experimentation, these games refuse to hide these important historiographical tensions. Perhaps even this is not the departure that it seems, as the linearity and verticality of even the professional historian's process (and the discourse through which these ideas are developed in historiography) is easily overemphasised. Certainly, these games for narrative historying make apparent the potential for digital games to function as complex multi-faceted histories. Whilst, in production, particular perspectives on history (both as past and practice) may be imbued in the system, the very act of play often offers contradictions to these perspectives. And yet it is often in these very contradictions that games can emphasise a complexity that, while introducing different challenges and requirements for considering the relation between form and historical content anew, allows them to offer interesting perspectives and perhaps most importantly, once again asserts that digital games can function as history.

Summary

This chapter looked deeper at narrative historying through games, first by describing the game structures best suited to this function. Arguments for counterfactual history, the main form of narrative historying offered by such games, were then explored. The chapter also detailed this function in games, emphasising that these games have a structuralist approach to history that concentrates on *why* things happened over retelling *what* happened by using a mix of both factuality and counterfactuality. This section also explored the characteristics of the form suitable to counterfactual practice and the potential benefits of such games, perhaps even for professional historians. The differing emphases on specific historical events, and thus the varying structuralist approaches found in narrative historying games, were also considered. The chapter also discussed the new responsibilities that these games, despite accessibly structuring narrative historying, place on players. The following section explored some of the ideological, epistemological and historiographical tensions that narrative historying through games can entail. In particular, tensions between structure and agency in both form and the presentation of historical content, the risk of the production of teleological metanarratives and the simultaneous emphasis on uncertainty and contingency were discussed. Similarly, tensions between empirical-analytical construction in these games and the postmodernist qualities they often emphasise in reception were also explored, thereby arguing that they operate through an

epistemological duality. In relation to this, the final section explored how the complexity introduced by such dualities means that these games can engage complicated positions in historiographical debate, pointing to the complexity of history as a practice in itself and to their own possibility of functioning as a historical form.

Notes

1. Ferguson says that the game also helped him realise the potentially isolating problems of unilateral action during the conflict (even for Germany) (Ferguson 2006a, 2–3) and (in a later interview) that “a German-Japanese invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 would have posed major problems for Stalin” (Parrino 2010, n.p.).
2. Braudel is even similarly concerned with ‘civilisation’ as his main subject. For example, and for more on his approach, see his three volume *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century* (1981; 1982; 1984) or his *A History of Civilizations* (1993).
3. Counterfactual games with a broad period focus and yet where certain specific historical events will (or are likely to) occur, such as *Total War* or *Crusader Kings*, arguably fall somewhere between these two historical approaches.
4. The *Making History* series tries to remedy this by offering scenarios that finish by detailing the historical reality and also by providing educational supplements for teachers that are also designed to highlight these differences.
5. For example, members of 2K’s forums recently had an extremely involved and complex discussion about how to sensitively implement an Inuit civilization in *Civilization* and what kind of mechanics this might need in order to produce an authentic representation.
6. This is also supported by research in cognitive psychology into the effect of ‘outcome knowledge’ (Fischhoff 2003; Winman, Juslin and Björkman 1998).
7. Sometimes these kind of narratives are even encouraged. For example, *The Warpath* campaign expansion for *Empire: Total War* asks players to conquer large parts of the US while playing as Native American factions in the 18th and 19th century.
8. The structuralist aspects in themselves also offer a particular complexity as popular history because this type of history, as this type of history is typically only concerned with ‘event history’.
9. This is particularly the case in those games, such as *Making History*, that feature tightened (*hi*)story-play-spaces and more narrowly focus on particular events, themes and/or particular periods.

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Part IV

Digital Games as a Historical Form

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10 Conclusions

Gaming history is not a crass attempt to make the subject relevant to today's kids. Rather it's an attempt to revitalize history with the kind of technology that kids have pioneered. And why not? After all, the Game Boy generation is growing up. And, as they seek a deeper understanding of the world we live in, they may not turn first to the bookshelves. They may demand to play – or rather replay – the great game of history for themselves.

—Ferguson (2006a, 3)

This book has argued for the serious consideration of the nature and possibilities of digital games as a historical form, a pressing concern given their significant presence and usage in popular culture. Regardless of our individual preferences in the academy, history, as Samuel puts it in his seminal *Theatres of Memory*, is “a social form of knowledge; the work in any given instance, of a thousand different hands” (1994, 8). Due to this, history is weaved into the very fabric of everyday life, it has a presence, is decided and is utilised in an enormous variety of spheres of activity and ever-changing discourses. Increasingly in recent years, this has included history being both offered and played with through digital games. History now exists not only in the thousands of different hands of developer-historians but also the thousands of different hands of players, where it is daily reconfigured to suit their interests, needs and strategies. In a relatively quiet, unacknowledged and often seemingly unintentional way, history in digital games, like historical film before it, has developed a widespread appeal and usage that professional historiography has generally struggled to achieve, even when actually desired.

It is not enough, however, to simply acknowledge this popularity. Instead, it seems prudent for this observation to motivate our interests in looking at *how* digital historical games represent the past and what possibilities and limitations they entail. This book has attempted to address precisely these questions, mostly ignoring the historical content of individual games (which as historians, or scholars engaged in other types of critical study, we are generally already well versed in the analysis of), in favour of exploring digital games as a historical *form*. More specifically, this book has had three core aims. First, to offer a *framework for the analysis of historical*

digital games by focusing on the examination of five core formal structures (*simulation and epistemology; time; space; narrative; affordances*), as well as by offering subcategories to describe variations in these structures. Second, in doing so, the book has tried to *describe the nature of historical representation in digital games*, both in terms of the general implications of the game form for historical representation and in terms of the differing effects on the history presented implied by structural variations between games. Third, the book has aimed to *describe digital games' potential use as systems for 'historying'*, i.e. the historical practices that digital games can offer players structured access to and the practical, epistemological and historiographical implications of them doing so. Thus, broadly speaking, to borrow Landy's (2001, vii) phrasing concerning historical film, *Digital Games as History* has attempted to find a critical language for addressing the ways in which history is invoked, and historical practices offered, in digital games. And to deploy this critical language in the hope of better understanding digital games as a historical form.

These three aims, to *provide a framework for analysing historical digital games; to describe the nature of historical representation in digital games; and to describe digital games' potential use as systems for 'historying'*, essentially run throughout all parts of the book in some regard. However, their consideration was particularly emphasised in certain sections. The first section (Chapters 1 and 2) introduced basic concepts and arguments about digital games as history. Chapter 1, serving as an introduction, argued why digital historical games warrant examination in the first place, as well as describing the structure and theoretical foundations of the book. Chapter 2 concentrated on the interactive nature of history in the game form, introducing the concepts of the *(hi)story-play-space* and *historical resonance* to describe the shared authorship of historical narrative by player and developer-historian in games. As well as exploring tensions that can arise between the perceived nature of history and the game form, the chapter also discussed various types of narrative tensions that historical games can produce, looking at modding and challenge and suggesting some of the particular ways in which *historical resonance* can motivate players to configure historical representations. The chapter concluded by arguing that these tensions begin to hint at games' potential for offering access to historical practice, i.e. their potential use as systems for *historying*.

The second section of the book, comprised of Chapters 3 to 6, narrowed the focus to specifically consider how digital games function as historical representations, by dedicating each chapter to one or more of the aforementioned proposed core categories of formal structure. Chapter 3, therefore, explored *simulation styles and epistemology* by proposing the two categories of *realist* and *conceptual simulation* as the opposing ends of a spectrum of simulation style in digital historical games. The chapter examined the different ways each style both approaches and represents the past and described the *reconstructionist* and *constructionist* historical

epistemologies that they tend to imply. Chapter 4 considered both *time* and *space* in historical games, describing the two most common temporal (*realist time* and *discrete time*) and spatial structures (*narrative gardens* and *space as canvas*) found in historical games and their implications for how games engage the past and allow players to interact with history. The chapter also used the categories of *play time*; *fictive time*; and *past time* in order to point to differences between temporal structures and discussed the complications to *tense* that digital historical games introduce. The role of *space as power* and *off-screen space* was also discussed before the chapter concluded by examining the relationship between time and space in digital historical games and thus the folding and interlinking of historical time and space. Chapter 5 introduced a model designed to be suitable for the analysis of narrative in digital historical games. Emphasising the discursive nature of narrative production in these games, the chapter borrowed the concepts of *framing narrative* and *ludonarrative* and refined them by adding a number of sub-categories. Thus, *framing narrative* was described as comprised of *narrative fragments* and *framing goals*, whilst *ludonarrative* was described as comprised of agency, *lexia* and the syntactical *framing controls* that structure the use of these *lexia*. Chapter 5 also introduced three categories of narrative structure (ludo-framing narrative interplays) most commonly found in digital historical games: *deterministic story structures*; *open story structures*; and *open-ontological story structures*, and described the differing emphasis on narrative *discovery* or *creation* these tend to entail. Chapter 6 examined the implications that these narrative structures have for the history presented in digital historical games. This included discussing focus, theme, engagement with other forms of historical storytelling, discursive narrative multiplicity and the types of historical argumentation, epistemology, emplotment and theoretical approaches that these story structures tend to imply. As well as examining *framing narrative* and the important relative lack of emphasis on *framing goals* often found in *open-ontological story structures*, the chapter returned to similar concerns as those discussed in Chapter 2, examining tensions between historical narrative conventions and the game form in greater detail by looking at the use of *narrative layering*, the problems of balancing gameplay in relation to historical narrative and the implications of *ludo-narrative dissonance* in digital historical games.

The third section of the book moved beyond only considering games as historical representations to also consider their role as systems for *history-ing*, their offers of structured access to types of historical practice. This was done by looking at the affordances that particular combinations of formal structures, what we can term full or combined ‘game structures’, can entail. Chapter 7 therefore advocated the use of the ecological approach and the concept of *affordances* by utilising this to identify three of these offers of historical practice that digital historical games are able to make – heritage experiences, reenactment, and *writing* (often counterfactual) history

(i.e. narrative historying) – and explained how they do so. Thus, the chapter concluded, digital games afford popular access to historical practices that normally require particular effort, resources or training to access. Chapter 8 described the combined game structures best suited to this offering of (what was termed) *digital-ludic reenactment* and also introduced the concept of *actualised reenactment*, using the ecological approach to delineate this as distinct from the empathic layer that is often also a part of reenactment practices. The chapter also considered the implications of *digital-ludic reenactment* by comparing it to traditional reenactment practices in terms of challenge, structure, narrative, accessibility and surrounding discourses and communities. Chapter 9 examined narrative historying through digital games by similarly describing the combined game structures best suited to this function. The chapter also discussed counterfactual history (the main form of narrative historying on offer) and the formal characteristics of games suitable to this kind of practice. Variations in the structuralist approaches to history found in narrative historying games were explored, as were the responsibilities for best historical practice that these games place on audiences (despite their offering of structured access to this practice). The chapter also explored some of the ideological, epistemological and historiographical tensions and dualities, and thus productive complexities, that narrative historying through games can entail.

Analytical Framework

As noted in the introduction, and as this summary indicates, the framework for analysing digital historical games has therefore mainly been forwarded in Chapters 3–7. Each of these Chapters represents one or more of the five core categories of formal structures, *simulation style and epistemology; time; space; narrative; affordances*, that make up the framework and under which a number of proposed further sub-categories for considering variations in these structures have been situated. However, the framework has also been supported throughout – for example, by exploring basic ideas about interacting with history through games in Chapter 2 and by concepts such as the *(hi)story-play-space* and *actualised reenactment*, introduced in this chapter and Chapter 8 respectively. The aim of this framework is to provide concrete formal concepts and categorisations of core structures particularly appropriate to the analysis of digital historical games (though many of these may be appropriate to looking at other forms of representation in games or non-digital historical games as well). By breaking down digital historical games into individual structures in this way, the aim is that the approach can be easily reapplied to any digital historical game, despite their operation through any varied combination of these structures. I hope that this demonstrates a practical approach to digital historical game analysis that concentrates on the elements that have a real role in meaning making, in terms of both the developer-historian's production and the playful reception/construction of players.

Whilst this framework is designed to cover what I believe to be the most important fundamental formal structures of digital historical games, clearly there is room for further additions. Additions might be made, for example, to aid the analysis of particular historical content in digital historical games, in terms of both period (e.g. Classical history or the history of the Middle Ages) or theme (e.g. economic history, gender history, the history of ideas), or to focus on other surrounding aspects of historical games, such as marketing elements like advertising and box-art or the hardware on which these games are played. Furthermore, as noted, further empirical research into player experiences and uses of these games is also needed. However, the aim of the analytical framework as it stands is to begin to provide a formal critical language and approach for the analysis of digital historical games. This seems to be a worthwhile pursuit because, as scholars such as Alun Munslow and Robert Rosenstone have now long argued, history is not divorceable from the forms in which it is created and engaged. Forms that ultimately have a role in determining the very nature of its content and dissemination.

Historical Representation in Games

This said, the construction of such a framework is not an end unto itself, nor the sole aim of this book. Examining individual core formal structures and characteristics of games and their potential effects has allowed us to point to what each structure of games (and variations of this structure) might mean for history. Thus, *Digital Games as History* has sought to examine how these formal structures and characteristics contribute to the creation of representations, arguments and opportunities for historical action. In short, we have begun to build a larger picture of how digital games represent the past (and offer access to historical practice by functioning as systems for *historying*). However, building this picture has not only explored *how* digital games produce representations but also *what kinds* of representations they tend to produce. These representations can vary rather a lot between games and, as we have seen, digital games are as capable of producing dramatic action-focused historical narratives focused on individual perspectives, as they are of providing large-scale structuralist representations concerned with forms of collective action and which echo the conventional historian's perspective. Often this investigation has pointed to how games represent the past very differently to other historical forms, particularly in their rather extreme playful inclusion of audiences into the manipulation and construction of the history. However, in another sense, the representations that these games both produce and engage are also often very familiar, despite often being framed anew.

As discussed throughout, games offer historical narratives and use evidence (particularly, though by no means solely, in terms of material culture). They engage and deploy recognisable historical epistemologies, theories, debates, types of argumentation and narrative conventions. Not only do

they engage these aspects of history, but they are also capable of doing so in a relatively complex and nuanced manner for what is an unapologetically popular form (as the discussion of games for narrative history in Chapter 9, for example, indicates). Sometimes this historiographical complexity and nuance is due to the tensions and requirements that the form naturally entails and which, perhaps often inadvertently, mean offering and engaging multiple discourses and perspectives. Sometimes this is because of the aspects of the game that naturally resonate with historical representation (such as an inherent concern with causality, for example). However, this complexity is also often because digital games are informed by, and entwined within, the larger historical discourse, both through their creation by developer-historians and through the activities of their players. Thus, whilst the purpose herein has been to detail digital games' functions as historical representations, to provide a picture of how and in what ways they engage the past, this has also had the effect of reinforcing the notion that they can in fact function as historical representations (something most likely apparent to the players already using them as a hub for varying types of historical activity and discourse).

Games certainly work very differently to written history or even historical film, but they are just as capable, in their own way, of functioning as a historical form. And this is the case whether they embrace the concept of historical (often cinematic) realism or multiple concepts weaved into a discursive system, as the focus of their simulation style and epistemological approach, representations of historical time and space and narrative structure. This is perhaps unsurprising. Cannadine argues, for example, that both university academics and those who produce historical media "are engaged in similar and complementary enterprises if not always in shared or identical tasks" (2006, 3). He also points to some of these similarities and many of these seem to bear some relation to the development of digital historical games. For example,

grappling with the complexities of historical evidence ... struggling with the competing claims of narrative and analysis, of telling stories and of explaining change; fretting about word limits [or in this case the technological limitations of the hardware], permissions, deadlines and editorial pressures; and worrying about whether the targeted audience will ever be reached or roused.

(Cannadine 2006, 3)

All of these seem to be a part of making history in games, just as in other media. To some degree, as work on historical film over the past few decades has also often argued, whilst forms, motivations, skill, sophistication and approaches might differ, ultimately anyone engaged in producing representations of the past bears some similarities in their work. This is one of the reasons that I believe 'developer-historian' to be an appropriate description for those who make history through games.

Like other forms, the videogame brings us no nearer to the complete recovery of the past (though they may often give a seductive impression of doing so). Digital games are no more or less inherently accurate a form of historical representation than any other. However, they do allow us the exploration and creation of particular representations of the past through an engagement with actual playful processes, as well as more traditional modes of representation. These are representations in which the developer-historian's causal nexus, upon which the game based historical narrative rests, sits at the fingertips of the player, entwined as procedural processes that produce emergent narrative representations of the past through interaction. Digital historical games therefore create new opportunities, particularly for making arguments about past action through present ones. They are well suited to particular types of historical explanation and the representation of particular concepts and historical processes. Games undoubtedly often introduce new problems and possibilities of representation and many of these have been discussed throughout. However, they also seem to just as frequently resonate with the history produced in other forms. Often these two aspects also combine to cast a new light, at least in the arena of popular culture, on older historiographical debates. However, digital historical games can also lead us to reconsider some issues entirely, particularly in terms of the traditionally conceived role of audiences and the relationship between production and reception.

Games as Systems for Historying: Enfranchisement

History might be a great game as Ferguson suggests. Clearly, however, great games can also be history, accessible, exciting history that often creates representations in new ways as well as invoking older ones. As noted, games can be and produce historical narrative. They are perfectly capable of meaning-making, sustaining arguments and creating discourse about the past. However, it is also no accident that some of the representational operations of the games described herein are more akin to historiographical processes and actions, the *doing* of history. It is in their offers of access to types of historical practice, their potential use as systems for *historying*, that games differ most dramatically from most other historical forms. Whether through offering access to interactive heritage experiences, reenactment, or narrative historying (as described in Chapters 7 to 9) or whatever other types of historical practice they might yet prove to allow, games are clearly not only media for historical representation but also systems for structuring historical action. These two aspects of digital historical games are entwined and inform one another, as the concept of the *(hi)story-play-space* (Chapter 2) and the complex workings of historical narrative in digital games (Chapters 5 and 6) also imply. Importantly, all these opportunities for historying involve the audience in some way and thus perhaps the most important contribution of digital historical games is their potentially vast popular enfranchisement.

Enfranchisement can be understood as a “mode of theorising access to the past which attempts to somehow allow the ordinary citizen democratic access to the institutions and discourses of their history” (De Groot 2009, 60). This idea is often associated with reenactment because “Reenactment’s emancipatory gesture is to allow participants to select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present” (Agnew 2004, 328). Similarly, De Groot notes that reenactment “offers enfranchisement, a complexity of historical interaction which is missing in much academic or ‘official’ history” (2009, 106). He also suggests that reenactment prefigures historical media like reality TV history and digital games because of this complexity of interaction, “It enfranchises the audience, whilst also subjecting them to a viewed history, history as a performance and story (and a story with particular narrative rules overseeing events)” (De Groot 2006, 394). This notion of a complexity of historical interaction also hints at the idea that informs the structuring of this book, namely that digital games are both historical representations (stories) and systems for structuring historical action (performance overseen by particular narrative rules). Indeed, as De Groot notes in his analysis of *Medal of Honor*, “Essential to the experience of the game is this balance between enfranchisement and narrative” (2006, 406). It is this complexity that gives rise to the tensions in historical games, tensions that are at the heart of the form and which have been discussed throughout. For example, the back and forth discursive relation between player and developer-historian by way of the game’s offered interactions, the tensions between player agency on the one hand and submission to the regulation of rules for gameplay and history on the other. Games, therefore, as we have seen, can go further than reenactment because they allow players to become reenactment *participants* and yet to remain simultaneously as audiences for stories (and heritage experiences). Furthermore, they also offer players opportunities to use them as systems for narrative historying. Indeed, the kind of games best suited to this narrative historying (discussed in Chapter 9) shift the balance even further towards enfranchisement, in their narrative multiplicity and opening up of the *(hi)story-play-space*.

Given that commercial interests also have a significant defining role in the construction of digital historical games, whether games go so far as to be seen to truly meet De Groot’s definition of enfranchisement as democratic access perhaps remains to be seen. However, as the arguments herein imply, digital historical games certainly seem to imply a shift in this direction of some sort. Historical games enfranchise by offering everyday popular access to active types of engagements with historical practice that were previously rare, overwhelming, exclusive or simply unavailable. These games, as popular products, are offering *historying* to millions of players. As described, digital games allow reenactment and heritage to be experienced in a less logistically complex and expensive way, a way that requires no travel, is relatively cheap and requires no specialist equipment. However, most importantly, as emphasised in Chapters 7 to 9, digital historical games

are also enfranchising because the access they offer to historical practices such as reenactment and narrative history is *structured*. By providing a coherent structure to these activities, which yet still allows agency, they can supplement some of the training or skills normally required to engage in practices such as counterfactual history.

Lowenthal (2007, 209) argues that recent changes in our perception and understanding of the past has made history bigger, more substantial and more inclusive in its offering of multiple perspectives than ever before. However, he adds that this has also entailed history losing coherence, causal continuity and contextual clarity, thus “The new chaotic past is too chaotic to comprehend, those unschooled ever less able to absorb it ... Our collective legacy grows more bewildering than enlightening” (Lowenthal 2007, 209). Perhaps here games also have something to offer. They offer us engagement with history in accessibly coherent and consistent rule structures. And yet, through the concern with action and the emergent unpredictability of an inherently ludic form, they can also often emphasise the potentially chaotic multiplicity that characterises the new history that Lowenthal describes (and the past that it represents). As such, perhaps the new form of games is also enfranchising by being well suited to offering audiences a middle ground that somewhat balances an accessibly coherent and casually continuous structure on the one hand, without denying some of the concerns of this new history on the other. And yet, this notion must also be tempered somewhat because the form of digital historical games cannot stand independent from the larger historical discourse from which it is partially constructed. As such, while the form may offer solutions, its historical content often suffers from the same problems. For example, Lowenthal (2007, 209) also argues that the incomprehensibility of the new vast history has led to a disproportionate concentration on the very old and the very recent. The conceptual simulation style certainly offers opportunities to account for the time between (such as in *Civilization*) and some games series (such as *Assassin’s Creed*) depict a number of different periods. However, it is also fair to say that digital historical games also suffer somewhat from a disproportionate and bloated concentration on WWII and other modern conflicts, which can be at least partially accounted for by trends in popular discourse and thus, consumer tastes.

Nonetheless, the moves the form makes towards enfranchisement do seem to have the potential to be important. And this is not only in terms of offering access to historical practice but also the discursive nature of representation in the game form. Modding communities, realism clans and other historically minded player communities often involve complex discursive exchanges between historiography, developers and players. These therefore seem to indicate – to paraphrase Schama’s (2006, 28) description of the public access and engagement offered by online resources – the possibility of a community of historical knowledge and practice in place of simply *a* profession. However, even beyond these more specialist player communities,

the playing of any historical game means enfranchisement into its historical discourse, as well as the larger historical discourse that relates to this. Some games emphasise this aspect to a greater degree and more meaningfully than others, particularly, as described in Chapters 6 and 9, *open-ontological story structure* games. However, as explained in Chapter 2, this is a part of all digital historical games to some degree. In games, history is always produced through a discursive relationship between the player and the rules that the developer-historian places in the stead of their actual presence, and thus is always partially determined by the interests, curiosity, needs and chosen strategies of these players. For example, a game's argumentation can only work insofar as a player actually encounters or chooses it, at least in games with multiple possibilities in this regard. As such, although it is possible to separate these for the purposes of analysis, it must also be pointed out that not only do these processes of discursive representation and any offers of history function together in play but also both are part of the digital historical game form's possibilities for enfranchisement. Games offer the possibility of enfranchising players both into (at the very least their) historical discourse and into historical practice, often by fusing the two.

Digital Games and History Today

As these possibilities point to, the form of games is interlinked with, and often symptomatic of, larger changes in the practice, perception and dissemination of history. For example, it is certainly possible to trace increases in enfranchisement to (at the very least) museums, cinema and reenactment. However, it is through the rise of recent patterns of consumption, such as local history, genealogy, antique collecting and in particular, the rise of digital history (e.g. increasing access to archives, encyclopedias, community discourse), that history has become particularly enfranchising (De Groot 2009). As Ramos Pinto and Taithe put it, "The last twenty years have seen an unprecedented democratization of history ... History has become a pervasive cultural commodity, widely and eagerly consumed in the form of heritage, education and entertainment, even explicitly as an aid to the construction of new forms of identity" (2015, 1). Digital historical games are part of this trend of enfranchisement, both by being part of these kinds of patterns of cultural consumption and by being enabled and disseminated by digital technologies.

However, this commodification of history can obviously also entail its own problems. Indeed, even enfranchisement itself might be problematic if it risks, as Ramos Pinto and Taithe (2015, 8) suggest it might, the compartmentalisation or balkanisation of history – questioning whiggish grand narratives, yet only often serving to separate identities without actually diluting social barriers. However, in the case of games, enfranchisement is not so much about the diversification of historical topic or theme (though hopefully this will also happen), as about the inclusion

of popular audiences into the processes of construction (inclusion into *historying*). As such, as argued in Chapter 9, games have a complex relationship to grand narratives, often encouraging their reproduction and yet frequently, even simultaneously, questioning some of their theoretical foundation through the multiplicity of the form itself. Furthermore, Johnson (2015) argues that moving beyond only the written history to include somatic or performative engagements with the past is important to granting the means to create history beyond a white, male elite. This seems to be a different formal approach to diluting social barriers, to which games might be important (at least *offering* this kind of widespread enfranchisement beyond official channels by emphasising precisely these qualities of somatic and performative popular engagements). At the very least, the issues and questions raised by these arguments reinforce the need to take digital historical games seriously, particularly if Ramos Pinto and Taithe are right when they argue that “engaging with the new producers and consumers of history (especially its consumer-producers) is for us the battlefield in which to counter the problems arising from the commodification of history and the welcomed demise of the ivory tower” (2015, 12). Few forms of history emphasise the role of the consumer-producer in the way that the enfranchisement (into both narrative discourse and practice) offered by digital historical games seems to. Games also point to another shift in perception that relates to these issues. Whilst the ultimate legacy of postmodernist perspectives on the perceptions and practice of history is still debated, it is probably fair to say that most historians have moved away from the notion of history as a purely empirical pursuit. As noted, games make contact with these ideas to varying degrees, often functioning at least partly through empirical epistemologies and rarely relinquishing the concern with emphasising their own ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’. Yet games still seem to somewhat relate to these shifts in the perception of history. This is first as part of the democratisation of perspectives that the serious consideration of popular forms of history and historical activity beyond the academy has entailed. However, this is also in their formal qualities as enfranchising historical representations and systems for historying. These qualities seem to intrinsically point to the kind of notions that postmodernist history has sought to forward. That history is (or at least can be) “a discursive practice that enables present minded people(s) to go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs” (Jenkins 1991, 81) and that perhaps “we can never really know the past, but can only continually *play with, reconfigure*, and try to *make meaning* out of the traces it has left behind” (Rosenstone 2006, 164, my emphasis). How we, as historians, respond to the popularization of these perspectives (however subliminally) by enfranchising forms such as games remains to be seen. And games, in a sense, speak to these perspectives twice over in both their cultural position (as popular history) and in their formal implications, as

“Populism and postmodernism both produce multitudes, a diversity of meaning” (De Groot 2006, 410). However, inevitably “History as an area of scholarly inquiry will have to respond to this ‘virtual’, hyperreal or performative turn as it did to the cultural or to the linguistic (which in many ways has foregrounded contemporary worries about the malleability of history-as-text)” (De Groot 2006, 411–12). Digital historical games particularly require such a response, if only for their vast popularity, and it is my hope that here we can strike a critical balance. A balance between examining the differences and opportunities that the form of games introduces to history, without getting caught up in the simplified rhetoric of progression too often applied to new technologies (which expects them to overcome all previous problems, to do everything and to introduce no new flaws in doing so). It is also my hope that *Digital Games as History* has struck such a balance.

An Addition Rather Than a Replacement

This book is not therefore an argument for digital games to replace older historical forms. Instead, this is an argument that echoes Rosenstone’s perspective on historical film: “[it] doesn’t do away with the old forms of history – it adds to the language in which the past can speak” (2006, 6). Like all historical forms, games have their own possibilities and variations between individual games are indeed significant, as the analytical framework contained herein indicates. However, the form also entails particular restrictions, problems and responsibilities. As discussed throughout, and by other scholars too (see for example Schut 2007), games limit historical narratives in new ways. They have their own formal predispositions towards particular themes and understandings of history and (as the ‘limits of play’ discussed in Chapter 2 indicates) can even sometimes find it difficult to depict certain kinds of content. Furthermore, whilst games enfranchise audiences into discourse and practice in an accessibly structured way, they also ask things of these audiences. As argued, particularly in Chapters 8 and 9, the practices and discourses of players can change the value and/or nature of the opportunities for historying that games create. Often best practice is still dependent on *shared* responsibilities between developer-historians and player-historians. Chapter 9, for example, argued that offers of narrative historying also entail critical and methodological responsibilities for players wishing to best take advantage of these offers. Similarly, though a useful analytical division to make, ultimately, in practice, the separation between the revelations produced by empathic reenactment and actualised reenactment lies with the reenactor. Additionally, the body of work by theorists such as Hayden White (see Pihlainen 2008) and Keith Jenkins (see Hughes-Warrington 2015, 170–7) seems to suggest that the moves towards the emancipation of the audience in postmodernist history are desirable precisely because they force

audiences to make choices, thereby potentially increasing their ethical or ideological responsibility. The demands that challenge and strategy place on player choice in games no doubt confuses this somewhat. However, if indeed some games do entail such a shift in their inclusion of audiences, and given both the notion of *configurative resonance* discussed in Chapter 2 and work that points to the potential ethical complexity of gameplay (see for example, Sicart 2009), such a thing might be a factor in some moments of historical gameplay also.

All of these responsibilities hint at the idea that players must sometimes bring something to the game from outside in order to engage in best practice, something that the game cannot necessarily provide and that they have likely honed elsewhere through their engagement with the larger historical discourse in other forms. This, alongside the narrative and representational tensions and limitations introduced by games, means that they cannot be seen as simply a replacement for other forms of history. Nor is it simply a question of the medium becoming sufficiently complex to eventually supersede these other forms. Instead, games should be viewed as part of a wider and enriched transmedia historiography that they are both dependent on and contribute to. As Rosenstone writes, in terms of “intellectual density, or theoretical insight, film will always be less complex than written history. Yet its moving images and soundscapes will create experiential and emotional complexities unknown upon the printed page” (2006, 159). So too, games are less suited to some types of historical representation and argumentation than books or film and might never reach the particular complexities of written history. However, they also offer things that books and film cannot, things that revolve around audience action in one way or another, such as playful, structured and active engagements with history and historying. Thus whether book, film or game, “the form derived for engaging with ... [the chosen past] ... can only have the ontological status of being just another *formal* locus of appreciation, understanding, pleasure, ethical decisions, economic purchase, doubt, denial and/or acceptance” (Munslow 2010, 204). We must therefore be cautious not to assign an obliterative importance to digital historical games, while still allowing them to remain an exciting development *alongside* our other forms. Not because it engages with the past better or worse, but because it does so differently” to “Not because they engage with the past better or worse but because they do so differently. As Ryan puts it, “there are plot types and character types that are best for the novel, others are best for oral storytelling, and yet others are best for the stage or the cinema. The question, then, is to decide which types of stories are suitable for digital media” (Ryan 2001, para. 11). As such, our task, as scholars interested in historical games, becomes once again to work to determine their ‘rules of engagement’ “*with the traces of the past, rules of engagement that come out of the possibilities and practices of the medium in which they work*” (Rosenstone 2006, 159). And it is precisely beginning to map out these rules of engagement for the form of historical games that this book has sought to achieve.

Digital Games as History

Where now, however, should such a task take us? As historians, we are generally reticent, whether rightly or not, to make claims or predictions as to what the future might hold. However, there are some issues surrounding digital historical games and some facets of the form that might prove useful for us to address. In terms of the future of the field of historical game studies, certainly more empirical work on player experiences and practices, alongside continuing work on the form itself, would be a useful addition. For instance, this book has argued that games offer opportunities for historying and that this says something significant about games as a historical form. Future studies of players themselves could add to this by revealing how many players take these opportunities up and in what ways, or where the distinctions between these opportunities and other types of play might lie. Such studies might also seek to further examine the nature of historical knowledge transfer from games, what players learn, what they discuss and believe, how they make sense of the history in games or how they use historical games to make sense of history in other forms. And of course why and how players modify historical games also offers opportunities for greater examination, particularly given the popularity of, and creative approaches within, this aspect of games culture. There are also many other potential areas of investigation to be explored. Questions could all be fruitfully asked about: how we should conceive of other conventional narrative features (such as historian's voice or focalization) in this new form; the effect of the particular workings of the game industry and technologies (such as widely used game engines) on historical representation; the role of cultural (and prosthetic) memory in games/games culture; the breadth of digital-ludic reenactment opportunities offered by games; as well as no doubt many more topics. Similarly, whilst it is also important to examine digital historical games on their own terms, the relationship between these games and non-digital games and play (such as board games or live action role-play) might also provide further interesting comparisons and contextualisation. This was a fruitful approach in Chapter 8, for example, which compared digital-ludic reenactment with traditional reenactment practices.

Although this book has concentrated on digital historical games through the lens of their existence as a part of popular culture, the temptation of course is to take the broader positive conclusions about the form itself and use them to recommend the inclusion of games into future educational curricula. However, I believe we should be cautious in this regard. There is quite a jump between lauding these games as a potentially positive development in popular culture and using them to replace existing and proven methods and content in formal education. Commercial digital historical games are understandably not designed for such a task and are sometimes ill suited to the restrictions of educational environments (for example, the average length of lessons) and their pedagogical *efficiency* must be taken into account and

requires careful empirical evaluation. Whilst opening up access to types of historying, and often obviously being engaging, digital historical games can still require relatively significant investments of time and effort from players in order to properly understand their gameplay and the history that this creates. As such, despite the frequently instinctive turn to the digital for solutions, which permeates so much of contemporary educational discourse, if games are to be included, non-digital games might often prove to be more appropriate for history education. Such games are relatively easy to design to fit the restrictions and aims of educational environments, as well as being relatively accessible and inexpensive. Besides which, the desire to push digital historical games into curricula can sometimes rather miss the point. There seems to be little need to encourage people to play digital games and, as noted, digital historical games are already (however inadvertently) enormously popular. The most pertinent issue therefore seems to be to encourage people to play historical games *critically*. As such, if these games are to affect historical education in any way, then perhaps it should not first be by being as a method to deliver content but by giving students some sense of how they might reflect on the ways in which games offer arguments and present content differently than other forms of history (such as an idea, however simplified, of procedural rhetoric, for example). After all, as Harlan puts it, “if we want our students to develop historical imaginations that are morally sustaining and politically relevant, we must teach them to be thoughtful, reflective and resourceful readers of *all* the forms in which their society represents the past to itself” (2007, 121). This, however, currently seems fairly unlikely given that (in the UK at least) teaching critical consideration of even the older popular forms (e.g. novels, film, television), in which most students will actually receive history for the rest of their lives after their formal education, has failed to gain much traction.

This returns us to the function and role of digital historical games in popular culture. Here, as Gish concludes, “History, in a very real sense, has become a participatory enterprise; videogames are but one element of a growing digital media network that allows players and users to write and reconstruct history on their own terms, in ways that are personally meaningful and individually relevant” (2010, 177). But what does the future hold for these games? Well, this is mostly in the hands of industry, the commercial demands that partly define it and the seemingly ever-creative developer-historians who work to engage, use and rework the past through games. Of course predicting this future is difficult, as Murray argues, “can we imagine the future of electronic narrative any more easily than Gutenberg’s contemporaries could have imagined *War and Peace* or than the Parisian novelty seekers of 1895 could have imagined *High Noon*?” (1997, 66–7). However, it does seem that some current trends might prove to be significant. In such a technology driven industry, hardware innovations such as VR, augmented reality and increased processing power may entail some changes or additions to the depiction of the past in games (though of course in terms of VR at the very least, history also warns us against

overselling the capacity of such innovations to revolutionise). However, cultural changes in the perception, design and distribution of games may also be influential. Most notably, the fact that games are increasingly taken seriously as a form of culture might drive and sustain the notion that they can be history in the way it arguably has with film and television before. Furthermore, the growth of digital games, as both an industry and pastime, may mean that for some people games overtake television, film or books to become their primary form of engagement with history (and indeed for some this might already be the case). So too, the increasing growth of the indie sector (in line with lowered costs for games design and increasingly accessible distribution possibilities) may offer a diversification of ways in which the past is engaged through games, both in terms of gameplay and in terms of topic, perspectives and theme – potentially offering its own type of enfranchisement (for example, see Figure 10.1). We may also see increasing collaboration between industry and the academy. Indeed, some scholars are already turning their hands to historical games design as part of research projects (see for example *Czechoslovakia* 38–89). So too, the reverse pattern also holds possibilities and historians with expertise in particular periods are now often employed as consultants by developers in order to help, for example, with period details. Uricchio (2005, 336), however, argues that this relationship could go further and that historians could help beyond this by helping to embed particular historiographic epistemologies in games in order to further address history's complexity and relevance. Again, perhaps the indie scene and related developments will offer more opportunities for experimental collaboration of this sort.



Figure 10.1 Screenshot of *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, an indie game based on a traditional story of the Iñupiat people and made in collaboration with Alaska Native storytellers and elders.

As explored throughout this book, games have many formal qualities suited to history. However, it is also possible that they will yet prove to provide solutions to some of the problems perceived to trouble the intersection of academic and popular history. For example, Lowenthal argues that “Popular media further narrows the past by privileging actions over reflection, empathetic bonding over critical distance, discrete events over continuity, individual over collective experience, kaleidoscopic imprint over patterned palimpsest” (2007, 210). The focus on action may make all games guilty of the first criticism to some degree and certainly all of these critiques seem to often apply to the kind of games that allow for reenactment (such as *Brothers in Arms*). However, this is not at all the case in the kind of strategy games (such as *Making History*, *Civilization* and *Europa Universalis*) that emphasise narrative historying. These games, in their *conceptual* shift to the conventional historian’s diegetic level, narrative structure and concurrent structuralist approach to history, tend to precisely emphasise the qualities (critical distance, continuity, collective action and patterned palimpsest) that Lowenthal upholds as desirable.¹ Similarly, while generally being more positive about popular forms of history, Cannadine calls for television history to move beyond concentrating only on the 20th century (in particular the two world wars and the Nazis) to take a “longer or broader view of the past”, to try to provide “context or analysis or perspective or proportion” and to move from linear narrative to be “more experimental, and to try other modes of exposition and presentation” (2006, 4). Again it seems that these narrative historying games have already done precisely that. As these examples suggest, perhaps it will be in games where we finally see some kind of consistent synthesis between the aims and desires of academic historians and contemporary popular audiences.

Whilst the notion of games providing a suitable bridge between academic and popular history might seem strange at first, it could be that the form is particularly well suited to such work in the contemporary cultural climate. This becomes evident if we look at three elements of the relationship between these types of history. Firstly, Rigney (while being careful not to assert the primacy of academic work over other types of history) wonders how the academic historian’s knowledge and expertise can be brought into circulation “in a world where so much emphasis is placed on the do-it-yourself, perform-it-yourself, approach to the past?” (2007, 158). Perhaps here games could again offer something akin to a middle ground, encouraging this kind of audience agency and yet also always positioning this in tension with constraining rules that still make arguments about the past and which we have seen are capable of reproducing recognisable historiographical discourse. Indeed, Jenkins argues that “[b]etween the Scylla and Charybdis, on the one hand, of authorised history and, on the other, post-modern pastlessness, a space exists for the desirable outcome of as many people(s) as possible to make their own histories such that they can have real effects (a real say) in the world” (1991, 80). Again, offers of enfranchisement into both *structured* practice and into historical discourse, both

emerging from the tension between player's agency and their submission to rules for history, mean that games seem to emphasise the possibility of just such a space through their very form. Secondly, Hayden White (1978; 1999) has long suggested that academic history's relative decline in popular culture can be attributed to its failure to engage readers because, as Pihlainen puts it, "The format of the nineteenth-century realist novel holds little appeal for contemporary readers (or, to say it more bluntly: history also fails to entertain)" (2008, 29). This is of course something that is less of an issue for the game form. This brings us to our third point, "Where, he [White] lamented, were the works which matched the moods of twentieth-century life and sensibility" (Rosenstone 2006, 3). By comparison, Murray argues that the desire to move beyond linear formats we have seen in other types of literature and film is precisely in "an effort to give expression to the characteristically twentieth-century perception of life composed of parallel possibilities" (1997, 37). This perception, although less well reflected in the form of academic history, again is an inherent part of the narrative structure of games (to varying degrees).

As such, as we move into the 21st century, digital historical games seem a well placed historical form to echo the particular moods of contemporary culture. The form is participatory and enfranchises audiences (do-it-yourself, perform-it-yourself history), is obviously frequently entertaining and also inherently offers this sense of narrative multiplicity (the sense of parallel possibilities). And yet, games still also seem quite capable of simultaneously providing some of the things that history as an academic discipline is unwilling (and often quite rightly so) to give up, still having the capacity to utilise evidence, to make particular arguments and to engage particular historiographical discourses. A move towards alternative forms, done in the right way, doesn't have to be an attempt to replace or eradicate older or more conventional forms of history. As Rosenstone eloquently puts it, we simply also "want our deep interest in and caring for the past to be expressed in forms congenial to both a contemporary sensibility and to intellectual systems consonant with our own era" (2006, 3). Conversely, if anything, one of the aims of such a move should be to ensure the survival of older or more conventional forms of history in popular culture by enabling them to exist in a productive relationship of exchange with newer forms, in a broader landscape of history made all the richer for it.

Of course, whether such a thing is possible (or ultimately desirable) remains to be seen and the future is as contingent as the past (or present) that it will attempt to describe. However, certainly, as Rosenstone continues to point out, to leave popular forms such as visual media, "out of the equation when we think of the meaning of the past is to condemn ourselves to ignore the way a huge segment of the population has come to understand the events and people that comprise history" (2006, 4). Understanding the formal predilections and possibilities of such forms, and developing critical approaches to do so, therefore seems to be important. This of course

brings us back to the core aim of this book: to examine the possibilities and limitations of games as a historical form. In doing so, we have pointed to the often-significant differences in the ways that individual games can represent the past, but also examined the ways in which the digital historical game form both constrains and invigorates these representations. We have explored how these representations can often be surprisingly complex and engage familiar debates, theories and approaches. And we have pointed to how the transformation of the historical story space into a *(hi)story-play-space* allows for popular audiences to actively take part in history, even offering accessibly-structured access to historical practice itself – types of *historiying*.

Hopefully these conclusions make the terms *developer-historian* and *player-historian* seem less outlandish suggestions than they may have seemed when first mentioned at the beginning of this book. Indeed, the very idea of games as history is not the break it may first seem if indeed the past has always been, as Samuel puts it, “a plaything of the present” (1994, 429). Given the thousands of available digital historical games and their millions of players, there must be other players who play games like *Civilization* or *Making History* and feel that they meaningfully construct and explore history in doing so. Or indeed, who sit down, as I did, with a game like *Medal of Honor* and stand up excitedly half an hour later feeling as though they had just experienced history in a new way.

I hope that this book has begun to help us understand something about why those players might feel so.

Note

1. They possess the latter quality because their very narrative structure echoes this notion of the patterned palimpsest. These games encourage us to playfully write history in tension with argument-making rules and then to start again and rewrite it within the same structure, utilising what is learned from the former playthrough.

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