

**Actual history doesn't take place: Digital Gaming,
Accuracy and Authenticity.**

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Actual history doesn't take place: Digital Gaming, Accuracy and Authenticity

Abstract: This paper investigates university students' perceptions of how playing historical videogames has affected their understanding of the past. We were especially interested in how participants thought about space and place in historical computer games and how their playing of such games affected their broader engagement with history. We administered an online survey to students at two UK higher education institutions. The survey adopted a user-centred approach that provided a multiview of students' perceptions of their experiences of historical videogaming. Rather than focusing on the historical "accuracy" of games, we adopted a more processual understanding of games and their users, focusing analysis on how active engagement in gameplay affects perceptions of historical time and sense of place. In particular, we sought to understand respondents' views on the relative importance of perceived accuracy and sense of authenticity in historical videogames, especially insofar as they relate to gamers' attempts to construct their own stories by playing in the past.

Keywords: history; design; historical games, place; user-centred research; authenticity; accuracy

Short description: This paper examines university students' perceptions of how playing historical videogames has affected their understanding of the past. It focuses on how active engagement in gameplay affects perceptions of historical time and sense of place, in particular the relative importance of accuracy and authenticity.

Introduction

Digital historical games are immensely popular and are a significant element in the broader interest in history among the general public. Increasingly, videogames are one of the primary means by which a wide range of audiences develop interest in and knowledge about the past (Kapell & Elliott, 2013; Chapman, 2016). This paper explores users' experiences and perceptions of videogame play when playing games set in the past. Our research questions address the relationship between space and place, accuracy and authenticity, and their impact on understandings of history.

Although there is no agreed definition of "historical" videogames, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007) argue that "setting" is the key defining feature. "Setting" refers to the situation of a game at "a clear point in real-world history" which has to have "a manifest effect" on the game experience (p. 204). However, such an umbrella definition does not take account of the wide spectrum of games that deal with the historical past and explicitly excludes those that "deal with historical process in a somewhat abstracted or structural manner" (Uricchio, 2005, p. 204). Uricchio (2005) makes the important point that historical videogames do not so much represent the past as they simulate it. Such simulations enable gamers to work actively through shifting historical scenarios rather than passively consuming them. Historical videogames therefore can be meaningfully configured and involve layers of negotiation by the players, providing opportunities for individuals to exercise agency in historical contexts (Chapman, 2012; more generally, see Charles, 2009; Stang, 2019). McCall (2016) usefully summarizes: a variety of games can be termed historical; such games can be distinguished by a more specific or more abstract relationship to particular historical events; they can also be distinguished by the extent to which their core gameplay models historical processes.

Scholars have taken a variety of approaches to studying and conceptualizing the relationship between videogames and history. An earlier focus on the “accuracy” (or lack thereof) of historical videogames has, in the past decade, given way to more multifaceted analysis that recognizes such games as constituting a distinct genre with its own discursive and structural conventions. Rather than viewing historical videogames as deficient in relation to the “true” knowledge about the past that is present in academic monographs and articles, a growing body of literature is exploring the varying ways in which videogames represents history and even constructs such knowledge for gamers (Chapman, 2013; Durga et al., 2011; Fogu, 2009; Kapell & Elliott, 2013). More recent approaches to historical videogames have suggested that they provide opportunities for understanding how players experience historical content and explore “discourse about the past through play” (Chapman, 2012).

The dominant analytical paradigm at present is to use well-established historical and cultural studies approaches to examine how – and, to a lesser extent, why – the past is represented in videogames (Burgess, 2007; Höglund, 2008; Schut, 2007; Šisler, 2008). More specifically, researchers have increasingly adopted approaches that acknowledge the importance of understanding the *form* of videogames and their “integral role in the production and reception of historical meaning, rather than solely, or even primarily, on the *content* of specific products as historical narratives” (Chapman, 2012). This focus on form contrasts with approaches to videogames that prioritize issues of “accuracy”, which can misrepresent the contingent (contested and provisional) nature of historical knowledge. The straightforward idea that historical accuracy - in terms of time and place - depends on presenting things “as they really were”, is a well-worn debate within the historical disciplines and has also been addressed in Media Studies (De Groot, 2016; Boldt, 2014; Tosh, 2009; Rösen, 2005; Jenkins, 1995; Southgate, 1996). Coplestone has pointed out that for creators and consumers of cultural heritage videogames, accuracy is “relational, subjective and contingent on the parties involved, media form used and purpose of the account” (2017, p. 417). More generally, the affective turn has heightened awareness of the

perspectives of those engaged in “doing history” (e.g. historical re-enactors), approaches which underpin this article’s focus on the importance of gamers’ experiences to their perceptions of the past (Agnew, 2007; Brædder et al., 2017).

Chapman (2012) notes that the interactive elements of gameplay enable gamers to configure their experiences through constructing their own historical narratives. Analyses of user experiences of and interactions with videogames are sometimes explicitly framed as diametrically opposed to more formalist analyses of games and privilege the experience and agency of the player/s (Behrenshausen, 2013; Nacke and Drachen, 2011; Coplestone, 2017). The user-centred approach to exploring videogames, has been criticized as overly reductive due to the fact that it can downplay the role of structure as an “enabling background”, and can construe the player as the only source of novelty within the game and consequently ignore “the complex arrays of additional bodies and forces whose activities just as actively constitute the situation” (Behrenshausen, 2013, pp. 878-880).

While recognizing the importance formal elements of games, we focus our analysis on user experiences and perceptions in response to game structures. We understand that historical videogames evoke “a player’s historical understanding, invoke the larger historical discourse and [provide] a challenging space for the players to exercise their (narrative) agency” (Chapman, 2016, p. 101; on gameplay narratives and agency generally, see Domsch, 2013). McCall’s work (2016; 2011) on history teaching and videogames similarly emphasizes the role of choice in differentiating historical videogames from other media.

Gameplay can replicate (in an approximate sense) some of the decisions of historical actors and this can be a powerful learning tool. The replayability of such games is an important element in choice-making processes because this leads players to make different decisions and to explore different outcomes, enabling them to experience historical contingency at first hand (McCall, 2016, p. 525). The challenges

that historical games present in terms of limitations on resources and actions, and the presence of obstacles and antagonists means that they “can illustrate the systemic context of people in the past, the complicated physical and even ideological milieus in which agents in the past found themselves” (McCall, 2016, p. 524). Copplestone (2017, p.434) suggests that historic (in her case, specifically cultural-heritage) videogames structure “knowledge and interactions with the past” because they offer a set of affordances (agency, player interaction, systems) that open up new ways of crafting and participating in the past. Drawing on these insights, we are interested in the interrelationship between gamers' perceptions of the past, their feelings about the accuracy or authenticity of game environments, and their experiences of game play.

Analyzing User Experience In Historical Games

User experience research in games design has a history in product development, both physical and digital, and looks to gain insights from the users of the products, games or services (Kuniavsky, 2003). Now more commonly called UX design, these user insights inform the development and/or improvement of the product. There is a variety of research on user perspectives from the field of games studies, including experiences of different groups of users playing together online, community cultures and life online (Gray, 2012; Nardi et al., 2008; Taylor, 2002). Boyle et al.'s (2016) review of empirical research on the impact of gaming found the most frequently reported results of playing games for entertainment were affective, including: behavioural change, perceptual, cognitive and physiological outcomes. Drawing on such work, we seek to analyze gamers' *perceptions* of their experiences of historical videogames.

In historical games, videogame designers engage in a process of research and occasionally employ historical consultants. In the process, they make explicit - and implicit - decisions about how to present

history (Dow, 2013). As a result, games can direct gamers towards very specific interpretations and understandings of the past (Brown, 2013) and, particularly in the case of strategy games (for a definition of “strategy” games, see Dor, 2018), encourage the reproduction and/or disruption of colonialist ideologies (Chapman, Foka and Westin, 2017). However, such pathways are often restricted and can reinforce hegemonic interpretations, a tendency that is often obscured by the fact that scenarios in (historical) games necessarily incorporate a degree of choice into the player experience (McCall, 2016). Furthermore, despite the appearance of agency, historical scenarios in games are often actually quite tightly constrained and channel gamers towards certain courses of action and/or interpretive schemata (see Stang, 2019, for “the illusion of agency” in videogames more generally). We want to find how players' perceptions of these historic scenarios affect their understandings of history and their experiences of gaming.

Historical videogames implicitly - and sometimes explicitly - position themselves within historical and historiographical debates and there is a growing body of work (see Chapman, Foka and Westin, 2017 for references) on the various means by which games construct individual and collective knowledge about the past. While these views are important, we focused our research empirically on the users of the games. However, relatively few studies have explored players' experiences of historical games. Copplestone (2017) is a notable exception. Drawing on analyses of 156 interviews with players, game designers and developers, and cultural-heritage professionals, her study explored the theme of accuracy in cultural-heritage videogames, finding that “there can be tension between the traditional formations of history within cultural-heritage environments” and “remediating this into the videogame form” (Copplestone, 2017, p. 435). Players who are familiar with the media form find that it offers a platform to “challenge how concepts of accuracy were formed and applied” (Copplestone, 2017, p. 416). Our study builds on the work of Copplestone on accuracy to add further “much-needed” (Chapman, Foka and Westin, 2017) data to facilitate understanding of inter-related patterns of user experience and perception.

Our Approach and Method

We are influenced by the user-centred approach used in product design and UX design (Scapin et al., 2012), which informs the work of many game designers and developers. In what follows, we report the findings of a research project that analyzed how young gamers from two universities in the UK engage with historical videogames, addressing in particular how gaming impacted on their understandings of historical time and place. We were particularly interested in comprehending how the users' understandings of temporality and spatiality affected their perceptions of history. Conceptualisations of these terms are discussed below.

Approaches to videogames that are inspired by literary and cultural studies have focused on narrative structuring, often concerning themselves with the analysis of temporal aspects of narrativity (Chapman, 2016; Ip, 2010a), with explicit suggestions about the need to consider the “temporal” when seeking to understand interactivity in gaming narratives (Ip, 2010b). Carter (2015) argues that acknowledging a game's temporality is vital to understanding the relationship between player experiences, culture and game design. This is because videogames present time in ways that differ from the “real world” time of the player, for example when saved games or checkpoints are reloaded. Time can be conceived from the viewpoint of the player, in terms of relative progress within the game, and from chronological time within the game itself, while it can be represented either in linear or non-linear ways (Hitchens, 2006). The “objective” progression of time within the game and in the real world both feed into and sometimes operate in tension with “subjective time”, that is, how players experience time within games (Juul, 2004; Zagal and Mateas, 2010). User experience of time is generated by the relationship between play time and event time within the game, and the tasks and choices with which players are presented (Juul, 2004). Zagal and Mateas (2010) suggest that the adoption of a relationist view of time brings experiential

concerns to the fore and helps to overcome the potential tension between phenomenological (experiential) and structural (descriptive) accounts of time.

Spatiality was also vital to our research design. In the physical world, the inhabitation of a space by people (actors) and their social interactions makes it into a place (here we draw on Cresswell, 2015, from geography; Tuan, 1977, from architecture; for a contrasting conceptualisation of the relationship between space and place, see de Certeau, 1998). The same is true of the digital worlds of historical videogames. Aarseth (2007, p. 154) contends that spatiality is the fundamental defining feature of digital games in that they are “essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation”. These “spaces” often structure “gameplay and help define its meaning” (Chapman, 2016, p. 100). Spatial and temporal structures are described by Chapman (2016, p. 112) as inseparable “as both, through play, control and determine time (history), and thus become singular historical narrative.” For example, one of the games developers interviewed by Copplestone (2017, p. 424) described their approach to accuracy and the creation of a spatial narrative within the game as balancing between “what we know about the past and what is made possible or impossible by games”. It is the interplay between what we “know” and what is “possible” (by game design or in the participants' gameplay experiences) that we explore in this study. We propose that users' perceptions of the narratives that are presented and constructed through gameplay scenarios set in “past” time/s and space/s, can be used as a means of exploring their engagement with and understanding of history.

We adopted an empirical approach to explore users' experiences and perceptions of historical gameplay, through a digital questionnaire. We aimed to examine how understanding of and engagement with history is structured through playing videogames by address the following research questions:

1. How does playing videogames affect individuals' understandings of history?
2. How do individual's experiences of space and place within video- game environments affect their understandings of history?
3. What role do individual's perceptions of games' accuracy and authenticity play in their understandings of history?

In addressing these questions, we were influenced by the way our participants described their experiences of gameplay as something that puts them in charge of leading the narrative within a historical context, at the same time allowing alternative outcomes to “real history” to take place. Unlike the fixed narratives of historical vehicles (e.g. novels or films), the subjective nature of historical games means that participants in our survey were aware that games are not *actual history*. They understood that different historical interpretations are possible in games and recognised the alternative perspectives offered by the game environment and the gameplay process (due to context, choice, intention, accident). Sense of place and identification with historical actors were powerful drivers for engagement with history.

Our Participants

An anonymous digital questionnaire was emailed through the virtual learning environments of the departments of the investigators. The questionnaire was sent to around 500 undergraduate and postgraduate students at the two institutions involved. Institutional ethical approval was gained, and consent was given by participants who filled in the digital questionnaire. All responses were anonymous. There were 60 responses to the questionnaire. Of these, 25% were female and 75% were male. Questions about game played most frequently and favorite game provided contextual background information that enabled us to compare to responses on historic gaming. *Grand Theft Auto* was the most popular of the games played most often (see Figure 1), followed by *FIFA*, *Skyrim* and *Assassin's Creed*. 36 different game titles were mentioned in responses to this question, of which 6 were historical. These included the

Total War series, *Europa Universalis* and, notably, *Assassin's Creed*. 89% of those questioned said that they had played a historical game.



Figure 1. Wordle of *Game which you play the most* question response.

Respondents who stated that they had played a historical computer game were asked to complete a series of follow-up questions. These questions addressed their conceptualizations of the past in games that they considered to be “historical”. We were especially interested to encourage respondents to consider how their perceptions of accuracy and authenticity affected their engagement with and understanding of

history. We used open ended questions to allow the participants to give their views on the terms “accuracy” and “authenticity”, rather than providing our own definitions. The following sections draw on participants’ open responses to the survey questions and are organised into the following three sections: *Historical (In)accuracy And The Ludic Imperative*; *Authenticity: A Sense Of The Past*; and *“I Feel The Particular Emotions Of The Character”*: *Experiencing The Past Through Play*.

Historical (In)accuracy And The Ludic Imperative

Copplestone (2017, p. 417) defines accuracy as something that is “tangible, measurable, knowable and absolute”. One of the participants in her survey elaborates: “when they make it look how it was and make it appear to happen when it did” (2017, p. 428). Chapman (2016) refers to the “value” of accuracy within historical gaming: if something is perceived as more accurate, then it is more valuable. Our baseline results confirm these contentions, with the majority of participants (71%) responding that it is important that the gameplay environment is historically accurate. Open responses to the follow-up “why” question suggested that for something to be accurate it had to have “existed”, “actually happened”, been “real”, or “reflected the time” in some way. One participant thought this was particularly important in games that are historical: “A game can't really be historical if it does not represent the environment to some degree of accuracy [...], otherwise it might as well all be a work of fiction.” Here accuracy is seen as an essential quality of historical games, opposed to fictionalized depictions of the past. Some respondents focused on the ability of accurate games to impart historical information to the audience. Accuracy was thus one of the (perhaps the *main*) defining characteristics of historical games, with the potential to add value to the gaming experience.

O'Neil and Feenstra (2016) suggest that historical scenarios in computer games are not always seen as trustworthy. Our study suggests that this is indeed the case, but that respondents do not necessarily see this as a detriment because they acknowledge the ludic parameters and mechanical play that constrain gamers' freedom of action within the game. Some respondents reflected explicitly on the interplay between fact and fiction in game design with one stating that the game is "based on the historical novel [...], with characters you can play are based on real people from feudal China". A clear distinction was drawn in several cases between games that were presented as taking place in the past (which apparently made them "historical") and their degree (or lack) of accuracy. One participant suggested, "although the main story itself isn't historical, it talks about historical events"; and "although the historical events in the game aren't factually accurate, they still take place in periods of history". Another thought "It is set in a real time period in the past [...]. However, it is obviously not to be taken accurately". These responses reveal respondents' awareness of the potential tension between the historical settings in which games take place, which are considered accurate, and the in-game experience, which they judged lacking in accuracy. Importance was also attached to the role of accuracy in supporting immersive and engaging gameplay: "it's good to feel like you are really there!" Alternatively, one participant suggested "if there's a choice to be made between gameplay and accuracy, I'd rather they went for gameplay". In this case, historical accuracy is subordinated to gameplay, underlining the view that the importance of accuracy lies in its ability to enhance the gaming experience (Chapman, 2016) and the potential of the two to operate in tension with one another.

The tension between gaming and historical accuracy was not necessarily seen as problematic. For some, although games were "obviously" historically inaccurate and, according to two respondents only "loosely-based" on events from history, they could provide players with insights into the past because specific details reflect past reality. One participant told us: "The scenery shows the type of architecture that was used during the time, the clothing of characters also reflects the period of history they are in.

Some of the events that happened in history are reflected.” Partial accuracy does not seem - in itself - to have undermined engagement with history and in some cases augmented it.

Historical inaccuracies were therefore seen as a necessary corollary of the ludic imperative that underpins games. In reflecting on the issue of accuracy, respondents recognized that they were engaging in environments that had been constructed specifically for the purpose of gameplay. Studies have pointed out the importance of “counterfactual play” in historical video games (Chapman, 2016; McCall, 2016; Coplestone, 2017), whereby players can try out a range of different scenarios and in the process learn about the consequences of different actions and reactions. Some respondents reflected on the intersection of gameplay and history more explicitly. One such participant suggested, “It is set in Ancient Rome and contains a lot of real historical characters and events from the past, even if your actions may cause events to play out differently to how they actually occurred.” Here we see a clear reflection of points made by Chapman (2016) and McCall (2011) about the value of counterfactual play. For another respondent it was the chance to affect the course of history that was particularly attractive, through re-shaping “actual history”.

In general, respondents thought that perceived accuracy was an important element in their engagement with historical games (otherwise they would not recognise such games as “historical” in the first place). Some participants were well aware of the potential tension between the desire for accuracy and the gaming experience, and were willing to make a trade-off if historical inaccuracies improved gameplay. Importantly, in some cases, such inaccuracies were judged to have the potential to facilitate engagement with the processes of history, if not the facts. Our study thus provides empirical support for suggestions that historical games are spaces in which gamers can participate actively in and shape history.

An additional factor in personalizing the gamers' experience was the extent to which it related to respondents' pre-existing historical knowledge (cf. Chapman, 2016; Coplestone, 2017). The extent to which games include "realistic" historical elements structured respondents' perceptions and experiences of playing in the simulated past. The presence of historical actors in what were often described as accurate or realistic historical scenarios was emphasized strongly and consistently by a number of respondents, one, for example, noting: "The 'barbarian' tribes all existed". Many more respondents went further, reflecting on some of the perceived shortcomings of historical games in terms of their accuracy, stating: "They try to accurately reconstruct the cities of the time period although I think they under-exaggerate the amount of poverty." Some respondents demonstrated a more developed awareness that historical games are interpretations of the past, rather than purely being constructed out of facts, proposing: "The game is a take on a historical point of view". Participants judged the historicity (or otherwise) of games in relation to their (pre-existing) knowledge of events, people or processes from the past. For some respondents, history is the starting point from which interpretive processes that underpin the game's narrative and design process proceed.

Accuracy, prior knowledge of history, game mechanics and gameplay were viewed as operating in conjunction in responses to the question *Why do you consider this game historical?* One respondent suggested "Settings are historically accurate initially, but as soon as the game is played, one can use familiar frameworks of history and mechanics built into the game to understand how historical figures, institutions and kingdoms interacted." The accuracy of the game environment was perceived as being an important starting point, but the subsequent interplay of the gaming process and the participants' knowledge of history was the driver for engagement and deepened historical understanding. Prior knowledge was judged to give an advantage during gameplay within a historically accurate scenario. The

apparently fixed qualities of the game (accuracy) and the player (prior knowledge) are a baseline from which the dual processes of gameplay and historical understanding proceed.

Authenticity: A Sense Of The Past

Research into videogaming has suggested that gamer engagement is not solely dependent on notions of accuracy, but rather on a broader range of ludic, social and psychological factors. Player immersion in gameworlds does not necessarily depend on the fidelity of graphics and sound within the virtual environment (i.e. “accuracy”), but on “the degree to which games satisfy [...] the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness” (Przybylski, Rigby and Ryan, 2010, p. 162). These needs can be met through authentic gameplay when there is an association between the authenticity of the virtual environment and player motivation (Loup et al., 2016). For a number of respondents to our survey, successful historical games were characterized by the extent to which they cultivated a sense of authenticity rather than their judgement of the accuracy of the representation of the past. Fless et al., (2016) suggest that “authenticity is not an absolute” and its socially constructed nature means that the way authenticity is experienced will shift according to changing context. Authenticity is not an inherent characteristic of an individual, an object, or a place, but emerges from the interplay of individuals and groups with one another in specific contexts (Hampp and Schwan, 2014); it is as concerned as much with perception as with “fact” (Umbach and Humphrey, 2018). Authenticity certainly had a significant role to play in our respondents’ perceptions, with 67% of participants stating that it is important that the environments of historical games are authentic.

Our participants judged that games were “authentic” when they had environments, actors or events that gave the player the *feeling* of what *really happened*. While there was evidence of some overlap between

participants' understandings of "accuracy" and "authenticity", with one respondent suggesting that "the scenery shows the type of architecture that was used during the time [...] Some of the events that happened in history are reflected", the latter was consistently connected to an improved gaming experience. One participant noted how authentic gaming experiences were better generated in authentic places. Other participants articulated that sense of place was related to their perception of the authenticity of the game and that this was important to their enjoyment; they said: "If I am to be expected to believe in the events taking place in a game, then the environment those events are set in must be as authentic as possible."

Our research suggests that participants' feelings of authenticity were related to the games' ability to generate a sense of place in the past. The following respondent notes how the designers of the game had created a convincing feeling of place, while acknowledging the constraints of a gaming environment: "The game designers had done everything possible to capture the feel of crusader Jerusalem despite the limitations of not being able to build the entire city within the game." Rickly-Boyd's (2013, p. 681) acknowledgement of the significance of "performativity of authenticity and place" is useful because it suggests that a sense of existential authenticity can be bound up with performance in a particular space (potentially making a place). Cultivating a gamer's sense of place helped to generate emotional engagement with the game: "For me a game is authentic if it makes me feel like I am in a particular place". We have already seen how active engagement in the process of historical play within accurate settings was a powerful driver for gamer engagement, but some gamers report that the cultivation of a feeling of authentic historical place has a further affective impact, deepening their investment in the game.

“I Feel The Particular Emotions Of The Character”: Experiencing The Past Through Play

The ability to engage in historical play within authentic places seems to have been a powerful driver for engagement for some gamers. While acknowledging that games may not depict things exactly as they were in the past, scenarios with which players were confronted were in some cases judged to be more important than accuracy. One participant suggested that “while it may not be historically accurate in terms of time and events (the more physical elements),” it is “historical in terms of placing the player in a scenario where one would have to deal with different factions, groups and people” that reflects “decisions that had to be made at the time.” This suggests that, as argued by a number of scholars (Chapman, 2016; McCall, 2016; Coplestone, 2016), authenticity is generated through performance (i.e. historical, counterfactual play) within the game environment as much as it is through the objective “accuracy” of that environment. However, a number of responses to our survey suggest that gamers engage in considerably more than an abstract process of counterfactual play. Rather, as argued at the end of the last section, it is not just play that has the potential to generate affective responses, but a sense of historic place. It is also clear that identification with characters was an important driver for emotional investment in the game, with one participant stating: “I feel the particular emotions of the character”.

Particularly interesting in this regard was the position that certain respondents adopted in relation to gameplay, demonstrating their personal engagement with and ownership of the character (or dynasty, kingdom, country, empire, or other kind of polity) with which they were playing. There was sometimes a sense that the player progresses through history with their chosen polity, augmented by the “reality” of some of the events that are encountered. On some occasions, this was articulated in quite personalized language, one respondent suggested “You go back in time and play as one of your ancestors and live life as they did”, by engaging with “real events”. While part of an attempt to generate distance between the respondent and the characters with which they were playing, use of the second person also indicates that

“realistic” historical games have the potential to engage players more fully. Engaging directly in authentic historical processes, by playing as a historical character enables players to play in a personalized manner, positioning themselves as historical actors within the gameplay environment. The experience of playing “as if” you are part of real events is underpinned by affective engagement or the “emotioneering” (Freeman, 2004) of the game’s design. As our participants told us that they felt more connected to the past through actively experiencing and engaging in the gameplay, emotions felt in the physical world presumably motivate engagement with the gameworld (Isbister, 2006) and affect perceptions of the past within the game.

Conclusion: Does “Actual History” Take Place?

Studies of the narrative and ludic elements of games and gameplay have suggested that historical “accuracy” is particularly highly valued by those who play historical games, because it improves their experience of playing the game. Chapman (2016) noted that accuracy is valued in historical games and many of our respondents certainly seem to have shared this view, although not uncritically. Here our findings diverge from those of O’Neil & Feenstra (2016), whose respondents did not see the video game as a “legitimate source of knowledge”. Our study sought to move beyond approaches to the study of historical videogames that focus on their accuracy (or lack of it) by adopting a more processual approach to analysing games and their use - as well as how games and gamers - construct their own stories about the past and what it entails.

Unsurprisingly, respondents to our survey were not consistent in their views of historical video games. Although there was a diversity of perspectives, our respondents recognized that some elements of games were accurate and others were not, while they often acknowledged that the game scenario might originate

in the past but that there were fictional elements too. Respondents demonstrated an acute awareness of the constraints that are placed on attempts to attain historical accuracy and authenticity by ludic imperatives, as well as an understanding that an excessive focus on reproducing reality could undermine gameplay. They displayed a nuanced appreciation of the impact of the game (form, content, ludic mechanics, even marketing) and gameplay on their understandings of the past, but also on its interplay with “history”.

Awareness that ludic elements were frequently a limiting factor on accuracy was accompanied by minimal disquiet. Some participants in Copplestone’s (2017) study perceived that while games provided them with an opportunity to exercise agency, this had the potential to undermine the game’s accuracy. A general trend within the responses to our survey was the perception that accurate historical representation enhanced gameplay. Our respondents recognized that gameplay was central to their experience, but that “more realistic” environments led to better play. Accuracy (or at least the perception of it) thus had the potential to make the overall experience more engaging. But such engagement extended beyond gameplay, to incorporate the degree of conformity to gamers’ pre-existing historical knowledge and a recognition of the value of counterfactual play in facilitating engagement with historical processes.

Beyond considerations of pure accuracy, a number of respondents reflected on the importance of authenticity for their engagement in historical games. Research has demonstrated that heightened perceptions of authenticity result in an increased level of curiosity and engagement in learning (Bunce, 2016). It is therefore interesting that players’ perceptions of authenticity help to determine the extent to which they perceive themselves as exerting narrative agency in relation to the past within the game; that is, the extent to which they are making their own histories or constructing their own historical narratives (Chapman, 2016; Domsch, 2013). Our survey suggests that gamers’ sense of authenticity is connected as much to the kinds of contexts in which gamers are placed within games (in terms both of historical places

and scenarios) and to the informed, active choices that they have to make within such contexts as it is to the perceived accuracy of the reconstructed digital environment.

The meaning of history is itself highly contested in the public sphere and in academia. It is not surprising, therefore, that student gamers who responded to our survey have a wide variety of views on this topic. Respondents saw neither accuracy (especially) or authenticity (partially) as absolutes, demonstrating what Copplestone (2017, p. 433) referred to as “a significant departure from understandings of history as authoritative and direct accounts of a recoverable past, thus shifting more towards a deconstructionist understanding/way of playing”. Both accuracy and authenticity were, broadly conceived, viewed as promoting engagement in gameplay. However, while representations of past spaces in videogames may (or may not) be viewed by gamers as objectively “accurate”, their sense of being engaged in an “authentic” historical ludic situation is partly dependent on some level of perceived representational accuracy.

In addition to analysis of ludic and narrative elements of gameplay, qualitative inquiry and qualitative surveys of users, it would be useful to see more research conducted into the perspectives of the producers and consumers of historical videogames. An important area for future work would be to explore the relationship between the marketing of games and user perceptions of past and place, drawing on user experience approaches, such as visual ethnographic methods. Some of our respondents made passing reference to the ways in which games development companies underlined the “accuracy” of historical reconstruction in games within marketing materials. In addition, exploration of spaces curated by gamers themselves, such as online discussion fora, could potentially reveal much about such communities’ perceptions of the importance of accuracy in historical games.

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