

History reloaded: perspectives on historical based games

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Abstract

Historical based games are popular among gamers. We can find them embedded in different game genres, ranging from Real Time Strategy to First Person Shooters and some Role Playing Games. But, what kind of historical knowledge do these games convey? Are they driving players to historical reasoning or are just the same game mechanics dressed up with historical clothes? History is usually depicted as being a complex subject and games can take an important role in promoting problem solving skills. But if commercial games often only take historical accuracy to some point, does this mean that they cannot be explored as valid learning strategies in history education? This paper will briefly overview these concerns and reflects on some relations between historical understanding and games.

Keywords: historical based games; history education; historical understanding; educational game design.

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1. Introduction

"Rule your kingdom through four centuries of bloody medieval war" (*Medieval Total War*, 2006), "March at the head of your Legions to victory" (*Great Battles of Rome*, 2006); "... travel to America as Christopher Columbus and light the spark that will kindle 300 years of heated battles for land, riches and freedom. (*American Conquest*, 2003); "Dominate 6,000 years of history from the Ancient Age to the Information Age" (*Rise of Nations*, 2003). When more and more games appear marketed as "historical games" we cannot stop thinking about the possibility of using these products to promote historical reasoning.

In addressing the relation between games and history, is easy to imagine a room full of players learning world history as they play *Civilization*, or developing diplomatic and tactical skills in *Europa Universalis* or other franchise with a historical background. However, once we start deconstructing this portrait, we find some important questions that are fundamental to understand the relation between games and historical reasoning.

With respect to commercial games, the first question that probably comes into our mind is that games as the aforementioned weren't specifically design to foster historical reasoning.

Exploring "what happens when Civilization III, a complex computer game developed in entertainment

contexts enters formal learning environments", Squire asserts that "learners can assume the position of a political leader in a Central American country, learning about economics, history, politics, sociology, and culture in the process. Getting students to adopt such alternative perspectives is a core facet of learning to think historically" and "players are encouraged to find links between economic, political, geographical, and historical structures as they construct viable strategies for their civilization to flourish by manipulating variables such as tax rates, luxury spending, form of government, or scientific research and observing the results" [Squire 2004:55, 56]. In another study developed by Egenfeldt-Nielsen he noted that some students "won't connect the game experience with the broader idea of understanding history".

So, can we understand history if we play it?

2. Playing with history

History is usually presented as being a complex subject, not suitable to be reduced to a mere memorization of dates, events or personalities. Historical reasoning involves a conceptual framework of procedural and declarative knowledge grounded in concepts like "historical empathy", "historical significance" or "historical explanation" [Lee 1994].

If we are talking about historical based games, does this mean that we can "play with history", altering arbitrarily history outcomes and perusing imaginary scenarios and "what if" questions? Postmodern views of history seem to propose this "deconstructionist" approach to historical knowledge and games are potentially good tools to make it happen. As players we can always turn upside down the "Reconquista" outcome (*Portugal 1111 – A conquista de Soure*, 2004) or make the Allies loose the Second World War (*Call of Duty*, 2003), just to see what happens. But is this history? Or better, do we learn history from playing these scenarios?

The proposal that games can be more effective on "operational thinking" [Gee 2003] as they permit a trial and error strategy, could be very useful for history understanding. In the same way, the exercise of counterfactual theories would be a good asset for learning history while playing, as those scenarios serve well to illustrate some objections to deterministic theories of history. The question "what if?" has a good working platform in games. There are a few examples that, to some extent, use this approach like the game *Making History* [www.making-history.com]. These games allow players to question historical inevitability while comparing the game played to history as we know. It should be stressed that this counterfactual

history should not imply any form of revisionism, but an intellectual (and didactic) exercise that has proven to be very fruitful in history teaching.

Games that allow representations of the past, also raise other questions, focusing on the “historical mediation”. If games can become “systems of historical representation” are questions addressed by some authors [Lee 1994; Uricchio 2005]. If the intent is that games tell history “as it once was” games won’t be necessary. Unquestionable narratives or “grand narratives” will achieve this purpose perfectly. But historical knowledge has moved beyond that point. On the other hand it would be very easy to hear critics claiming that the “reality” of the game isn’t evidence, or that “that reality didn’t ever exist” not because it’s “virtual”, but because history can never let us see the “real past”. It seems that making an “historical game” would benefice history detractors as they easily pointed out the artificial “reconstruction” of the past.

To some extent a game can be a “representation” of history in the same way that narratives are, and if the “objectivity” of history is questioned, it was already questioned in other mediums. The central question here is the postmodern epistemological debate, that affects equally the research and teaching of history and is centred, roughly, on the nature of reality perception and even on the possibility of knowing objectively what “reality” is. It is a wide debate that we’ve just pointed briefly, as it may have strong implications on the relations between history, learning and games.

Another issue that arises of this concern is to understand what kind of implicit historiographic approach games convey and to what extent they promote historical bias.

Chris Crawford, the well know game designer, in an interview made by historian Sue Peabody in 1997, was asked if computer games lend themselves better to certain kinds of history. He answered, “Absolutely!” and then added:

“A computer game, like any history, can be used to emphasize some aspect of history. For example, I designed a game some years back that I called Guns & Butter, in which I presented the thesis that technological development arises automatically from economic growth. Most histories of technology have a “great man” flavour to them, so I presented the alternative view that new technologies arise automatically as soon as an economy is large enough to utilize them. (By the way, would this be termed a Marxist view of technological history?) I won’t claim that this thesis is necessarily correct, but it certainly offered a different view of historical processes” [Peabody 1997].

The possibility of embed ideological options in games is a concern addressed by different authors. Probably the most acknowledge case is the one of *Civilization*. Poblocki in his 2002 paper entitled “Becoming-state. The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier’s Civilization”, referred *Civilization* as being an offspring of the “clash of civilizations” that reinforces

the well-established narratives of cultural imperialism [Poblocki 2002:174].

To evaluate how “historical bias” influences game play and determines the player’s perception of history we must refer to Diane Carr’s article “The trouble with Civilization” where she concludes:

“Western entertainment, art and literature are rife with instances of chauvinistic marginalisation, and biased simplifications of history. It is possible to locate such dynamics in the rules of Civilization, as Lammes, Poblocki and others, including Douglas, have done. Yet it is one thing to show that Civ accommodates these patterns as rules, and another to conclude that it follows that Civ propagates these patterns as ideology or effect (as in ‘an effect of play on the player’). [...] The player’s own (complex and culturally situated) subjectivity is a variable within the system through which the meaning of a game is produced” [Carr 2005].

Playing with history involves addressing these methodological concerns and reflecting about the nature of history.

3. Does history matter?

Historical accuracy is often referred by some game designers as being some kind of burden that limits games creativity.

“A game that is too true-to-life (and, hence, is likely to require specialist knowledge) will disappoint is players. Let’s take an example: Most people’s idea of pirates comes from swashbuckling Errol Flynn movies, J. M. Barrie’s (or even Disney’s) Peter Pan, and the Muppets’ Treasure Island. If you’re designing a game based on piracy on the high seas, then exact historical detail isn’t going to be what they expect – a game based on venereal disease, scurvy, maggot-infested food that has to be eaten in the dark so the crew can’t see what they are eating, starvation, brutality, and the “consequences” of dark and lonely nights on a female-free boat won’t make a particularly interesting (or even tasteful) game. [...] if you’d stuck to the historically accurate literature, you wouldn’t use the Jolly Ranger (pure mythology) or the Black Spot (invented by Robert Louis Stevenson, author of Treasure Island)” [Rollings & Adams 2003:23, 24]

Historical representations promoted in most commercial games arguably qualify them as “historical” to the eyes of some professional historians. Still, even if the goal of these commercial historical games is clearly not to turn the player into an historian apprentice “they provide similar opportunities for deeply situated learning. Rise of Nations and Civilization III offer rich interactive environment in which to explore counterfactual historical claims and help players to understand the operation of complex historical modelling.” [Shaffer et al. 2005:110].

In *Simulation, History and Games*, William Urrichio [2005] addressed this question and argued that “at a moment of shifting historical paradigms, the games’ thin (‘childlike’) historical detail and their focus on process as play are not necessarily the main source of their problems”. Richard Van Eck also mentioned that “one of the biggest misconceptions among educators is that if a game is missing content or has inaccurate content, it cannot be used responsibly for DGBL (Digital Game Based Learning). However, educators can use these teachable moments to create cognitive disequilibrium (through instructional strategies and activities) by presenting or designing activities by which students discover information that conflicts with the game and the student’s knowledge.” [van Eck 2006:24] More than stressing the factual content, games can help students developing a toolkit for history education.

4. Historical based game design: opportunities and challenges

Designing a game is a team work project. Considerations about the importance given to historical accuracy and compromises on adapting game play to specific views of history should have this in mind.

At first view, research for historical detailed gaming scenarios may be seen as the most important aspect of designing a historical based game. But one of the challenges of designing historical based games is to accommodate historical reasoning within game play.

This doesn’t mean that the player has to make an obvious connection like “now I am thinking historically”, but this should happen naturally, as the player needs to progress within the game.

This concern is of much importance if the game is planned to be use in educational settings. If, as Egenfledt-Nielsen refers in relation to his study, “students are only interested in performing well in the game as a play experience and if the teacher cannot justify the instruction in relation to game play it [the instruction] seems irrelevant. (...) the initial use of computer games as a way to increase the relevance of a given topic may backfire if not carefully managed. To avoid the play frame from backfiring we should make sure that the computer game is built so knowledge of scientific concepts will improve game play” [Egenfledt-Nielsen 2005:245].

Also, games are often referred as being able to portrait complex scenarios. Being history a complex domain of knowledge we could suppose an easy application of game based strategies. But to what extent can we complexify a game and still make it engaging? Historians and game designers should be able to make compromises so that historical understanding and engaging game play be achieved. Is this possible? Referring to *Civilization III* Squire concludes that “One of the primary reasons that *Civilization III* is so engaging to so many players is that it is so complex and difficult to learn” [Squire 2004:403]. But this is a two face coin. Players that are

not ready to this learning curve will not invest their time in these games. Is this a genre gap? Do historical based games must be RTS or turn base games? Although this genre is normally connected to historical based games there are examples of other genres claiming historical backgrounds. The *NeverWinter Nights* mod, “*Revolution*” developed by the MIT Education Arcade can be one of those examples [www.educationarcade.org].

The relation between games genres or games rule systems and historical representation is one of the questions open for discussion.

Some authors argue that historiographic approaches that “convey ‘history of progress’ will coexist better with *Civilization* – type games. On the other hand, the *Annales*-school epistemological approach, with its emphasis on ‘deep history’, would seem to correspond well with ‘virtual worlds’-type games (*Roma Victor* - Red Bedlam, 2006), and other massively-multiplayer online environments” [Kee & Graham 2007].

Urrichio argued that “we might think of the rule systems that characterize various brands of History as constituting the potential rule systems for game play.” [Urrichio 2005: 337]. If so, does this mean that historical based game designers should know what is implied in some historical approaches?

As also noted by Squire “we are only beginning to understand how these games are interpreted and understood by their players” [Squire 2006:22]. Still, the same author commented the relationship between “world history learning” and *Civilization III*, arguing that: “*Civilization III* players encounter history not as a grand narrative but as the product of several dynamic interrelated forces. Students might learn about the role of horses or the interplay between economics and foreign policy.” [Squire & Jenkins 2003:14] Does this mean that “god like” game play used in games like *Civilization*, stressing more on the systemic overview than on characters, will be adopted by those who have a structural conception of history, tending to see history as some kind of incremental and sequential process? But still, what are the differences between this game play approach and one like an role-playing-game?

Having in mind the game “*Revolution*” Squire and Jenkins conclude that “if *Civilization III* emphasizes large-scale and long-term historical change, *Revolution* stresses short-term historical events and individual agency within constrained contexts. [Squire & Jenkins 2003:18]

Another issue that arise in this context is the question of “game goals”, usually pointed as one of the first steps in designing a game. [Crawford 1982].

To establish a game goal it is necessary to clearly define what the player should achieve, play or learn. If we apply this principle, in a broad sense, to history understanding, there is at least one main question to be answered: what does a student learn from history? Or what does history teach? This question highlights methodological and epistemological questions about historical teaching models and the place of history

itself not only in educational curricula but also in society.

So, one of the first steps in designing a historical game is to define, or at least agree upon its goal. This must take into account the message or messages the game will convey more than the operational concepts

In some games it is possible to see historical content to appear as a background, but not fully integrate in game play. This type of approach could represent an undersized appropriation of historical potential within games. In relation to this, Geoff King (2007) gleaned that “far more players devote attention to issues relating to game play than to the specific historical or geopolitical context in which the game is set.

Another interesting aspect of developing historical based games is the social aspect of the gaming experience. As Squire points, “historical strategy games such as *Civilization III* sell millions of copies and game “hobbyists” spend thousands of hours playing games, developing strategies, mastering arcane historical facts, critiquing game play, creating game scenarios, and arguing for the historical accuracy or inaccuracy of scenarios in gaming communities...”

Although this “social aspect of the gaming experience” can be achieved in different ways, this is in agreement with the latest trend of multiplayer games

5. Conclusion and future work

Through games, history can be “played”, “replayed” or even “made”. “History reloaded” sought to reflect on some design questions and assumptions behind historical-based or historical-themed games.

Acknowledging that history is often out of the main focus of commercial game designers, that embedding historiographical interpretations in games is a challenge and that there are different types of historical reasoning that can be enhanced by games, we tried to briefly review some of the possibilities of designing games that would foster historical reasoning. The definition of “clear game goals”, the relation between different historiographical approaches and games rule systems are pointed as important aspects to consider when designing historical based games to foster historical reasoning.

Our ongoing research will focus on some of these questions and will seek to propose some guidelines based on case studies that will take place in formal educational settings.

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