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# Unboxing AGE OF EMPIRES

## Paratexts and the Experience of Historical Strategy Games

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RICHARD COLE

### UNBOXING THE PAST

In 2016, an unboxing video posted by the YouTube channel Retro Tech Museum took as its focus Microsoft's iconic 1997 real-time historical strategy game *AGE OF EMPIRES*.<sup>1</sup> By repurposing the internet phenomenon of unboxing products, where consumers upload a video of themselves unboxing and/or demonstrating often high-end contemporary gadgets, the video provides an interesting retrospective on the nature of early video games. The unboxing of *AGE OF EMPIRES* was, like many video games of the 1990s, a ritual experience. From the A4-sized game box complete with historically stylized cover art, in-game screenshots, and technical requirements, to the game manual, printed technology tree foldout, and CD-ROM cases, *AGE OF EMPIRES* offered numerous ways to anticipate and explore its gameworld ahead of installation. This unboxing, and in particular the materiality of its partitioned contents, remains unique in the history of video game packaging, which has since transitioned away from large-scale containers to DVD formats and, more recently, digital download keys and online distribution platforms. The ability to browse, purchase, and play a game, often at the click of

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1 See Retro Tech Museum: "Unboxing Microsoft—Age of Empires," March 22, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BipAsZTEmGM>

a button via a single service, is a far cry from the medium's commercial origins.

Unboxing videos actualize products in an increasingly virtual world. They rely on revelatory, descriptive, and performative methods to generate interest in the product and unboxing process, as well as the host channel itself. By adapting these recurring methods for a classic game, Retro Tech Museum's unboxing of *AGE OF EMPIRES* offers a retrospective on how early game developers marketed their digital products, in particular how they used paratexts to engage audiences and disclose the workings of the game ahead of play. The initial packaging for *AGE OF EMPIRES* offered a step-change in the design of historical games, adapting the iconography of historical fictions set in antiquity (in particular the focus on historical figures and maps), and merging this with the peripherals of tabletop gaming and the technical communication guides from home computing to create something distinct.<sup>2</sup> This combination established the potential for playful exploration, not only of the game's rules and systems outside of digital space, but also the historical content and concepts that it adopts. Scholars have considered how in-game paratexts, deployed during loading transitions, can help to extend the gameworld beyond its technical confines.<sup>3</sup> With the paratexts for *AGE OF EMPIRES*, we see not only an extension of the gameworld—with units, icons, and rules fully documented in the game's manual and technology tree foldout—but also insight into the way in which early historical video games managed the player's transition from reality to the virtual, along with the transactions that accompany such paratextual navigation.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, we will consider what contribution the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* made to the gaming experience, how they could be exploited by

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2 For an overview of the cover art of historical fictions set in antiquity, see Cole, Richard: *Fiction and the Historical Frame*, PhD Dissertation, University of Bristol 2019, pp. 94-107.

3 See Harpold, Terry: "Screw the Grue: Mediality, Metalepsis, Recapture," in: Whalen, Zach/Taylor, Laurie (eds.), *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press 2008, pp. 91-108.

4 Genette raised the issue of paratextual 'transaction,' which has since been taken up by framing theorists interested in the metacommunicative; here, I apply the latter approach; see Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, pp. 104-105.

players, and how, through sustained usage, such items have been subsumed into the virtual worlds of more recent games. Retro Tech's video is a part of this trend, whereby earlier material paratexts are being revisited, revised, and reformatted for the digital age. This re-examining is part of a broader cultural move to integrate and harmonize the experience of play. It is also, however, a nostalgic reflection on the speed of technological change. AGE OF EMPIRES, as one fan commented on Retro Tech's video, was their "favorite game of all time," which they played "back when there was no cdkey" and access to games was "via dial-up connection."<sup>5</sup> This nostalgia, at least in part, explains why several major studios have recently released remastered versions of their historical strategy titles.<sup>6</sup> By incorporating the experience of early paratexts into new and remastered titles, studios have acknowledged their impact and guaranteed their place in the wholly digital worlds of contemporary strategy games.

Before we look at how the paratext has changed the text, let us first expand upon the relationship between paratexts and audiences. Developments in the theory of paratexts have revealed their potential beyond those originally sketched by Genette, with media scholars considering the framing effects of paratexts around a range of fictional experiences, including the way in which they can perform worldbuilding functions.<sup>7</sup> By focusing on video

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5 See Retro Tech Museum: "Unboxing Microsoft."

6 For example, Xbox Game Studios have recently released several Definitive Editions of their AGE OF EMPIRES series, while Sega recently published a remastered version of ROME: TOTAL WAR (2004/2021).

7 For these developments, see in particular Stanitzek, Georg: "Texts and Paratexts in Media," in: *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (2005), pp. 27-42; Wolf, Werner/Bernhart, Walter: *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006; Birke, Dorothee/Christ, Birte: "Paratext and Digitized Narrative: Mapping the Field," in: *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013), pp. 65-87; Mahlkecht, Johannes: "The Textual Paratext. The Cinematic Motto and its Visual Presentation on the Screen," in: *Word and Image* 27, no. 1 (2011), pp. 77-89; Batchelor, Kathryn: *Translation and Paratexts*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2018; for the worldbuilding functions of paratexts, see Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, And Other Media Paratexts*, New York: NYU Press 2010; for earlier forays into paratexts and video games, see e.g. Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007;

game iterations of Genettean peritexts (the developer-produced manual and technology tree foldout for AGE OF EMPIRES, which despite their material separation from the gameworld, facilitate the introductory and authorizing functions of the peritext, namely to “present and comment on the text,”<sup>8</sup> as Genette puts it), I aim to further unpack the nature of paratexts in video games by considering their imaginative, historiographical, and action-orientated possibilities, as well as player responses to these.<sup>9</sup> For the imaginative, I explore how the manual’s use of cover art, screenshots, and behind-the-scenes sketches act as a bridge between the production of historical experiences, the historical imagination of the player, and the gameworld. In doing so, the manual primes the player to be strategic. For the historiographical, I am interested in how the manual and technology tree shed light on the game’s mechanics. As a result, these paratexts construct spaces to explore the idea of historical progression, cultural relationships, and technological development at the same time as revealing the developers’ approach to these issues. This enables the manual and technology tree to have a practical as well as conceptual function. For action-orientated possibilities, I will detail how the manual and technology tree offer players the possibility to hone their technical understanding and mastery of the game, while also developing their appreciation of its historical simulation. These functions mean that the manual and technology tree take on a real-time consultative role that complements the real-time action of the strategy game.

The self-contained nature of the game’s paratexts suggests they are less peripherals and more a central part of the experience. The manual establishes the parameters of play, while the technology tree encourages players to

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Mukherjee, Souvik: “Videogames as ‘Minor Literature:’ Reading Videogame Stories through Paratexts,” in: *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, Vol. 23 (2006), pp. 60-75; Rockenberger, Annika: “Video Game Framings,” in: Desrochers, Nadine/Apollon, Daniel (eds.), *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Culture*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global 2014, pp. 252-286.

8 G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 345.

9 On player responses, I am picking up on a hitherto somewhat ‘neglected’ aspect of historical video game studies, as noted in a recent book review by Cromwell, Jennifer: “Review: Classical Antiquity in Video Games: Playing with the Ancient Past,” July 8, 2020; <https://www.manchestergamestudies.org/blog/2019/8/20/lclassical-antiquity>

formulate tactics that can then be applied to campaigns and historical scenarios. This type of interactive potential exists both before and during play. It has also left a lasting impression. Players, like the fan who responded to Retro Tech Museum's video, have commented on the way in which the game's paratexts evoke their experience of AGE OF EMPIRES, demonstrating the reflective and mnemonic power of gaming paratexts. I, therefore, conclude the chapter by considering how subsequent historical strategy games—including the DEFINITIVE EDITION of AGE OF EMPIRES (2018) and other installments in the series—incorporate these functionalities into their marketing materials, as well as the game itself. In doing so, these games remove the need for material paratexts while preserving the core functions they performed.

## IMAGINATION

The purpose of a game manual is to introduce the player to the game and its controls ahead of play, while also providing a flavor of the type of gameplay on offer. The 1997 manual for AGE OF EMPIRES achieves this and more, contributing significantly to the game's imaginative setup. Upon reading the manual, players learn that the game is a real-time historical strategy game that covers “the rise of the first great civilisations over the 12,000 years that followed the last Ice Age” and that the goal is to “build your tribe into a mighty civilisation” through resource-gathering, base-building, and military skill.<sup>10</sup> The manual goes on to embellish this theme using no less than ten different types of paratextual discourse, from cover art and tutorials to images of in-game units as pre-rendered wireframe constructs. A complex paratextual artifact, the manual demonstrates how the developers of historical strategy games, from the genre's earliest iterations, set about generating unique ephemera different from those produced by other forms of historical fiction. These paratexts, in turn, require a more nuanced approach than the

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10 Microsoft Corporation: *Age of Empires: An Epic Game of Empire Building and Conquest*, Game Manual, Ireland: Microsoft 1997, p. 2; all future references are to this edition of the manual.

text-centered, interpretive one offered by paratextual scholars and framing theorists.<sup>11</sup> Imagination, I suggest, is one such avenue.<sup>12</sup>

Let us take a closer look at how the manual repurposes traditional methods of paratextual address. To begin with, the manual is presented in the form of a historical novel (albeit a short one), and thus keys into a long-standing method for representing history in fiction.<sup>13</sup> Both the game box and the manual share the same illustrative cover art (Figure 1). In the image, and against a backdrop of soldiers fighting over land and sea for control of the ancient world, three male figures embody the cultures of Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. In adopting the style of historical fiction, the cover art then adapts this by supplying a layered perspective that models the way in which players will interact with the past in-game. Only through taking control of one of the key civilizations will the player be able to micromanage the action taking place in the background, and in turn, build (or destroy) the empires depicted. This premise is performed literally, with some of the units and buildings directly inspired by or echoing those found in-game. It is important to note, however, that these assets are captured at a higher resolution than the early graphics could render. In combining clearly defined assets with the idea of the ancient world captured in the larger-than-life figures and aesthetics of the backdrop, the cover art suggests a wider context within which the game can be played, whether or not that context is evident in the game itself. To put it

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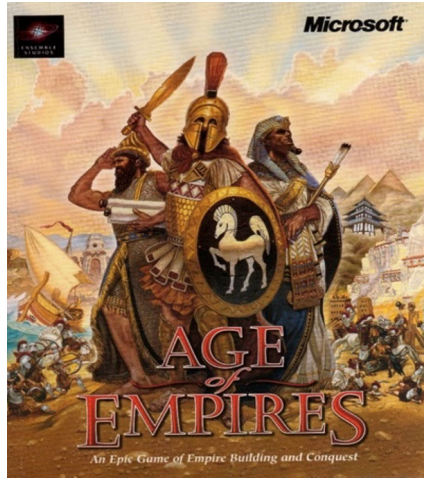
11 See, for example, G. Genette: *Paratexts*; MacLachlan, Gale L./Reid, Ian: *Framing and Interpretation*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press 1994.

12 In offering imagination as a function, along with those explored below (the historiographic, participatory, integrative, and mnemonic, I hope to expand on the sixteen potential paratextual functions recently explored by A. Rockenberger: "Video Game Framings."

13 On this point, see Lukács, György: *The Historical Novel*, Mitchell, London: Merlin Press 1962; see also De Groot, Jerome: *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*, London: Routledge 2016; De Groot, Jerome: *The Historical Novel*, London: Routledge 2009; for a discussion of cover art in historical fiction, see R. Cole: *Fiction and the Historical Frame*, p. 94-107; Burge, Amy: "Do Knights Still Rescue in Distress? Reimagining Medieval in Mills & Boon Historical Romance," in: Cooper, Katherine/Short, Emma (eds.), *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, pp. 96-114.

another way, while the cover art does not depict precisely what the game offers, it powerfully evokes how it could be played if the player takes on board its imaginative cues.

*Figure 1: AGE OF EMPIRES cover art from the 1997 release of the game*



Source: Microsoft/Ensemble Studios 1997;  
Screenshot by R. Cole

The LGR review for the game noted that “an epic game deserves an epic cover illustration.”<sup>14</sup> As the reviewer goes on to note, AGE OF EMPIRES does not disappoint, with “incredible” cover art that “lets you know right off the bat that this is going to be historically intense.”<sup>15</sup> While the manual goes on to outline the game’s historical offering, this is already implicit in the cover art, as well as the tagline that follows the title: “An epic game of empire building and conquest.” The artwork forgoes the earlier periods playable in the game in favor of recognizable monuments (the Egyptian pyramids,

14 See LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires—PC Game Review,” February 6, 2015; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evp0dI\\_2Jjc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evp0dI_2Jjc)

15 Ibid.; this review also showed that there were different versions of the manual, some of which contained further historical information on each civilisation.



Grecian triremes), historical shorthands (the use of ‘Empire’ in the title), and combat scenes. This grounds the game in historical *doxa*, while also helping to capture the realism that underpins its mechanics.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, the cover art unpacks some of the game’s more ambitious, if not always entirely successful, themes.

The Mesopotamian figure carries scrolls, suggesting learning and culture, while behind the stoic features of the Egyptian pharaoh, it is possible to discern a tower of Far Eastern origins. The cover art speaks to more than just the combat elements of the game. It encapsulates the differences and connections of the ancient world, hinting at the melting pot of the ancient Mediterranean and beyond, highlighting the civilizations that brought about systemic change. While there is a notable lack of female characters, likely due to the demographics of the industry and the game’s anticipated audience, the cover art grants the player a panorama of antiquity.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the cover art speaks to the title of the game, of its attempt to reconstruct an age of expansion and collapse. The contents page continues with this theme, introducing the player to the game through a digitally rendered image (taken from the in-game loading sequence) that speaks to how audiences typically access the civilizations warring on the cover: namely, through artifacts and bones. This hints at what might befall the player if they lose, while also introducing historiographical ideas that center on the nature of evidence and how one might use this to reconstruct the past. Thanks to the image and chapters listed (“Exploring the

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16 To note, this applies to most of the game’s mechanics; as I explore below under ‘Participation,’ it is possible for players to cheat, thus undermining the game’s historical realism.

17 This was addressed in later installments, whether in-game as in *AGE OF EMPIRES II* (1999), where players fielded both male and female villagers, as well as in the legacy cover art for *AGE OF MYTHOLOGY* (2002) and *AGE OF EMPIRES III: DEFINITIVE EDITION* (2020), as demonstrated on the *AGE OF EMPIRES* website homepage, see <https://www.ageofempires.com/>; the credits in the 1997 *AGE OF EMPIRES* manual reveal that the overwhelming makeup of Ensemble Studios was male, while Nick Yee demonstrates that at least some historical strategy games continue to appeal more to male players than female; Yee, Nick: “Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre,” in: *Quantic Foundry*, January 19, 2017; <https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/>

map,” “Building your civilisation,” “Engaging in combat”), the manual makes it apparent that such reconstructions can come about through gameplay.<sup>18</sup> The introductory cover art thus establishes multiple ways into the game’s source material, making use of arresting visuals and established historical tropes, and pairing these with the unique offering of video games.

From here, the novelistic comparisons segue into tabletop gaming analogies. The manual, it becomes clear, has been printed to imitate torn and weathered parchment. The implication is that the manual, while apart from the game, is also *a part* of the game, a relic of the AGE OF EMPIRES. At the same time, its purpose is to explain everything from how to play to the victory conditions for a game. As such, the manual offers a recursive means of expressing the conditions of engagement, in that it outlines the game procedures as if from within the game itself. The metareferential relationship between the AGE OF EMPIRES manual and gameworld extends beyond the material and carries over into the content of the manual itself.<sup>19</sup> The player is presented with a commentary that, on the one hand, bears close resemblance to the prefaces of self-aware historical novels, such as Gore Vidal’s 1964 novel *Julian*, and the rulebooks of tabletop games, for instance the board-game *Risk*, in that it introduces the game’s historical setting and the rationale behind certain representational strategies, while also detailing its underlying rules. On the other hand, the manual refers directly, from its privileged position beyond the confines of the gameworld, to the nature of that world, whether as data on a CD that requires installation, a space to explore historical content and concepts, or as an environment constructed on the basis of sketches, graphical models, and interfaces. While the paratextual discourses that mirror those found in novels and tabletop games are perhaps less likely to elicit metareferential commentary and subsequent self-reflection in the player due to their familiarity, the latter examples certainly have potential in the way that they draw attention to the medial artifact and educate players in how to approach the game.<sup>20</sup> Wolf has explored how metareference may

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18 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 1.

19 For a full discussion of metareference, see Wolf, Werner: “Metareference Across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions,” in: Wolf, Werner et al. (eds.), *Metareference Across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009, pp. ix-85.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

“work as a gratifying intellectual stimulus for recipients who are capable of responding to it and who are thus given insights into the structure, aesthetic, and other facets of the work under consideration and at the same time are invited to quasi cooperate in its production.”<sup>21</sup> Video games are, of course, different from other media, not only in their participatory mode, but also because metareference emerges more out of necessity and the practicalities of play than as a result of artistic experimentation.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the player of *AGE OF EMPIRES* is encouraged by the manual to realize the potential of the simulation contained on the CD, to test the limits of the virtual by bringing the past to life through such tools.

Drawing explicit attention to *AGE OF EMPIRES* as a game is hardly surprising when one considers that the manual is, in part, a technical support manual. However, it is precisely the adaptative combination of existing paratextual formats that makes the game manual interesting. The use of cover art alongside notes on how to skip the opening animations shows how the manual simultaneously frames the game’s reconstruction of history, while also commenting on how to go about using it. Screenshots of the in-game user interface further this approach, offering a direct example of what players will experience in-game, while at the same time drawing attention to each aspect of this interface in order to break down its construction and offer players a means to make best use of its functionality.<sup>23</sup> Such examples show how early gaming paratexts managed the division between reality and virtual worlds, between ideas (a user interface for a historical simulation), controls (how to manage the simulation), and their application (the act of play). Unlike book paratexts, which typically frame their text either in situ or at a habitual distance (e.g., an online interview), or film paratexts, which are either market-orientated or part of the filmed sequence, early gaming paratexts operated across spatial domains, helping to extend the experience of the game-world. I mean this not only in the sense outlined above but also in the way that they bridged the different elements that constituted the game. Thus the manual for *AGE OF EMPIRES* refers the player multiple times to the “Technology Tree Foldout” as a place to discover the “special attributes of each

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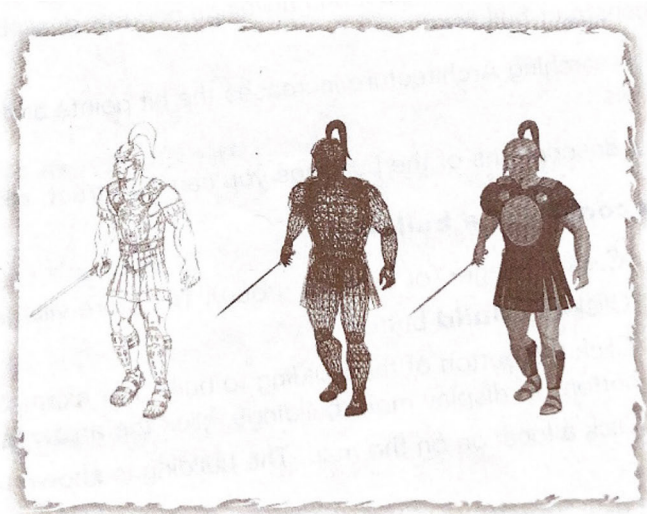
21 Ibid., pp. 67-68.

22 See Freedgood, Elaine: “Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, the Colonial Effect,” in: *New Literary History* 41(2) (2010), pp. 393-411, here 399.

23 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 14.

civilisation,” as well as how in-game scores are tallied, which in certain circumstances determines the victory conditions for a match.<sup>24</sup> The manual further informs the player that the technology trees of each civilization can be found on the “Docs folder on the Age of Empires disc.”<sup>25</sup> This folder, in addition, contains historical information covering topics such as “Religion,” “Agricultural revolution,” and “Boats and sea travel,” as well as detailed unit and building information, articles on gameplay mechanics, and a bibliography to bolster the game’s historical credentials and encourage trust.<sup>26</sup> More than just a guide to the game, the manual thus acts as a guide to the broader paratextual features of AGE OF EMPIRES, offering the player scope to delve further into the underlying structures that make up the gameworld, as well as the historiography that underpins this.

*Figure 2: ‘Making of’ detail from page 24 of the AGE OF EMPIRES manual from the 1997 release of the game*



Source: Microsoft/Ensemble Studios 1997; Scan by R. Cole

24 See *ibid.*, p. 8 as well as p. 7 and p. 25.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

26 See LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

The game manual functions like the entryway/exitway paratexts of other media, framing the player's entry to an interrelated system of items that determine the parameters of play, and easing their exit with a page dedicated to the designers and developers of the gameworld in the form of credits. It also, however, functions in a manner similar to those paratexts (Genette terms them epitexts) usually found at a remove from the text, ones which provide context and critical commentary in a more "indirect" way than the peritext.<sup>27</sup> The 'making of' images that offer insight into the game's developmental processes are a good example of this.

Today, such sketches would be found in a marketing video used to drum up interest about upcoming titles. In the manual, however, they offer a comparative insight into the work behind the scenes to shape both the gameworld, and its arrangement of historical ideas. The opening infographic, for instance, distills the game's approach to historical progression through recourse to a linear series of columns and pediments that evolve from simple timber construction to the elaborate Ionic style familiar from ancient Greek temples.<sup>28</sup> Some of these graphics can be found on the left of the technology tree (Figure 3) as well as in-game when a player selects to progress to the next 'age.' There are further sketches of the "Wonders" for each civilization, which the developers deploy as an example of the pinnacle of each civilization, as well as military figures and siege units (Figure 2), demonstrating the level of detail and control that players can look forward to in-game.<sup>29</sup> Some of the 'making of' images even include editorial notes, with one sketch of a town center annotated with the following: "add skins/paved walkway ... add more bowls."<sup>30</sup> The manual includes everything from the minutiae of development to experimental concept art and fully realized military spectacles. In addition, the player is presented with in-game screenshots of the loading screen and campaign menus, which translate the 'making of' images into actual gameplay experience.<sup>31</sup> When combined with cover art and tutorials that offer hints and tips for exploring the game's terrain and the very units and buildings introduced via formative sketches, these paratextual discourses

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27 G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 346.

28 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 2.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7 and pp. 17-19.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-13.

connect the game's production of historical experience to its realization of this same experience. In doing so, the manual benchmarks the developers' interaction with (and deployment of) the historical imagination, alongside the player's own historical imagination. Scholars use various terms to describe the complex processes by which the past is realized and experienced both collectively and personally, from "historical consciousness" and "historical psychology" to the "historical imaginary."<sup>32</sup> What these terms capture is the "imaginative sympathy" required to bring the past into being in the present, which triggers "self-knowledge [and] self-discovery."<sup>33</sup> By reading the manual, the players begin relating their experiences to the game's historiographical approach. More, they are able to explore its reconstruction of the past through a sympathetic understanding of the virtual past presented *and* its inception. Such insight, whether or not players are familiar with historical strategy games, positions them intuitively to make informed gameplay decisions.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

As we have seen, the manual performs a significant amount of the historical framing around the game, encouraging specific forms of reminiscence. This can be seen in the cover art, the graphics that detail the artifacts of empire, and the 'found document' feel of the manual. Many of these initial themes are expanded on in-game. For instance, the user interface contains an

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- 32 For historical consciousness, see White, Hayden V.: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1973, pp. 1-2; Wyke, Maria: *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History*, New York: Routledge 1997, p.13; Roberts, David et al.: *The Modern German Historical Novel. Paradigms, Problems, Perspectives*, New York: Berg 1991, p.1; for historical psychology, see De Groot, Jerome: *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis 2016, p. 207; for the historical imaginary, see J. De Groot: *Remaking History*, p. 2 and pp. 152-153.
- 33 See Hopkins, David: *Conversing with Antiquity: English Poets and the Classics, from Shakespeare to Pope*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 32-33, who develops this through reference to Hume and Collingwood.

architectural ‘frieze’ at the bottom of the screen that evolves across each ‘age’ in much the same way as the pediments evolve in the manual. There are, however, several other methods by which the manual situates the game historically. These include the titles of campaigns and in-game victory conditions, the mechanics of resource gathering, and the modes of diplomatic engagement. I will cover each of these before considering how the technology tree expands on such methods.

The manual defines the game’s campaigns as follows: “a predesigned series of related scenarios that chronicle the rise of one of the mighty civilizations of antiquity.”<sup>34</sup> Titles such as “Ascent of Egypt Learning Campaign,” “Glory of Greece,” and “Yamato Empire of the Rising Sun” determine the context for each of these campaigns and situate them within a triumphal understanding of history. Only the “Voices of Babylon” campaign hints at the more nuanced picture that emerges from the titles and scenarios of the individual missions in each campaign. The “Voices of Babylon” campaign suggests a dialogue, and in fact offers narratives of rise and fall and rise again (under the player’s control). Similarly, the missions for the other campaigns explore the complex narrative legacy that makes up the apparent ‘rise’ of a civilization. The “Glory of Greece” campaign, for example, offers insight into the mythological history of the Trojan War, the internal conflicts between Athens and Sparta during the Peloponnesian War, and the conquests of Alexander the Great. In doing so, the campaign pays tribute to ancient epic (e.g., Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), as well as Greek historiography (e.g., the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Arrian), while also combining these different types of account in the form of a linear, playable chronology. The titles of these campaigns reveal an unresolvable tension at the heart of the game, which revolves around how to define, catalog, and make playable the game’s 12,000 years of history. The same tension exists in the game’s victory conditions. While the game mechanics favor conquest as the primary means to achieve victory (gameplay largely involves constructing military buildings and upgrading military units), conflict is, in fact, only one of six possible victory conditions. Apart from the time limit condition, all other victory conditions embed historiographical ideas that flesh out the game’s depiction of historical progress. Wonders, for example, are buildings “that have become icons for their civilization” and which grant victory if they

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34 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 10.

stand for 2000 years.<sup>35</sup> In alluding to the wonders of the ancient world and their historiographical significance, the game, in turn, reifies the idea of these constructions, turning them into literal icons of victory. The score system, meanwhile, encompasses the “lasting legacy of architecture, literature, language, ideas, and technological innovation that influences those that followed.”<sup>36</sup> Artifacts and ruins, moreover, “bring prestige to the civilisation that controls them,” and confer victory the longer the player holds all of them. Even the ethically questionable conquest mechanic delivers a commentary on history. Players, the manual tells us, “do not need to destroy trade vessels, transport vessels, fishing vessels, Artifacts, Ruins, or walls.”<sup>37</sup> While this makes a conquest victory easier, it is also a side note on the survival of certain aspects of civilizations beyond their ‘fall.’ The campaign titles and victory conditions chart possible modes of play, offering a top-down approach to understanding historical progress that ramifies the more the player engages with the components of the game.

Being a historical strategy game, the manual has to balance its introduction to in-game mechanics (e.g., resource gathering) with the historical thinking behind them. This balance is often weighted in favor of the game mechanics, with the manual listing the types of resources available, as well as how to go about collecting using ‘villagers.’ However, there are moments when this type of descriptive account gives way to historiographical engagement. For instance, the player is told that the “Gold” resource “represents all types of precious metals, including gold, silver, bronze, and copper.”<sup>38</sup> In defining this mechanic, the manual goes on to show, in the chapter “Engaging in combat,” how it facilitates the historical idea of tribute between states, especially vassal states. Meanwhile, the use of other headings such as “Diplomacy,” “Allied Victory,” and “Converting enemy units” in the same chapter demonstrates the ways in which the game embeds ancient inter-state relations on a macro as well as micro-level. Contextualizing the game mechanics not only defines how the developers have codified historical development in the form of victory conditions, resource gathering, and intercultural

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35 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 21.



relations, but it also adds a historical dimension, further supported by in-game notes, to the player's enactment and real-time exploration of these mechanics.

Figure 3: Detail from the technology tree foldout from the 1997 release of *AGE OF EMPIRES*



Source: Microsoft/Ensemble Studios 1997; Screenshot by R. Cole

“Technology was the underlying dynamic for the rise of civilization throughout the period covered by *AGE OF EMPIRES*.”<sup>39</sup> This opening line in the chapter on “Researching technology” is followed by a series of examples, including how Egypt and Mesopotamia “mastered irrigation,” how the Hittites “mastered metalworking,” and how the Greeks expanded due to “trade, mining, and a culture that encouraged and rewarded original thought.”<sup>40</sup> In a recent chapter on the game, Alexander Flegler noted that “the term ‘technology’ ... is used in a very loose sense in *AGE OF EMPIRES* (as in most strategy

39 Ibid., p. 25.

40 Ibid.

games), as technologies that can be developed and unlocked by the player also include social and religious developments.<sup>41</sup> The game fuses these developments in the form of the technology tree, which, as the manual notes, “shows all of the technology paths you can pursue in Age of Empires ... depend[ing] on the civilisation you are playing.”<sup>42</sup> Where the game manual offers narrative explanation, the technology tree provides a concise example of the way in which the game regulates its historical contents and concepts. Players are, in turn, invited to investigate and consider how to make best use of these standards in-game.

Taking inspiration in part from character inventories in historical novels and itemized unit cards in tabletop games, the technology tree (Figure 3) offers a comprehensive breakdown of the game’s historical elements and integral mechanics.<sup>43</sup> By orienting the player and determining the type of gameplay available, the technology tree facilitates tactical planning. This is achieved through an overview of in-game icons for every building, unit, and technology, including the requirements for each. It is important to stress that the technology tree was not available in-game in the original 1997 release and that without this paratext, it is not clear which building might offer which technology or how to go about consolidating economic or military strength. As fans have reflected in forums, the best way to comprehend how the different buildings and units of their burgeoning empire might perform, change, or develop over time was to consult the paper copy.<sup>44</sup> The technology tree pieced together what was much harder to grasp in-game, and therefore enabled the player to plan ahead. This can be understood generally, but also in a culturally specific manner, with the technology tree attempting to account for the historical context of each culture. The “Civilization Attributes” section on the reverse challenges players to consider the best tactics when they cannot, for example, field archers as the Greeks, or siege equipment when

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41 Flegler, Alexander: “The Complexities and Nuances of Portraying History in Age of Empires,” in: Rollinger, Christian (ed.), *Classical Antiquity in Video Games: Playing with the Ancient World*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 205-216, here p. 207.

42 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 25.

43 For an overview of character inventories in historical novels, see R. Cole: *Fiction and the Historical Frame*, pp. 130-145.

44 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/tech-tree-availability-in-menu/67029/7>

playing as the Phoenicians, as well as how they might go about defeating civilizations that lack certain technologies. Whether this is as successful as in later installments in the AGE OF EMPIRES series, where cultures have their own tailored units, is debatable. However, the approach taken by the developers in the original game, especially when considering the fact that each civilization had a different ‘look,’ demonstrated an ambition to simulate difference and empower players to develop their own affinities, strategies, and counters within the context of the game.

More than just a practical tool, the technology tree frames historical, economic, and religious developments in an authentic, if not entirely accurate, manner.<sup>45</sup> In their discussion of the historical video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), set in the American West, Donald and Reid connect authenticity with cultural memory and suggest that for developers (and players) “it is less about getting the past completely accurate and more about getting the feeling of period and timeline correct.”<sup>46</sup> Some unit names in the AGE OF EMPIRES technology tree are certainly questionable, as is the sense of historical progress born out of military investment and cultural supremacy. However, as fans of AGE OF EMPIRES have suggested, the technology tree uses the build-up of ages as a way to understand the overwhelming complexity of history in one infographic.<sup>47</sup> The map-like quality of the technology tree allows it to incorporate the topographies of ancient civilizations, which are then indexed by the manual’s explanation of each ‘age,’ along with the in-game historical notes that accompany campaign scenarios. The technology tree thus allows a move from the historiographically general to the historically specific in-game. This takes place at a narrative level, with each campaign scenario limiting the technologies available based on the time period covered, and also at the level of design. From the manual’s sketches of resource mining to the final icons in the technology tree, the player is presented with condensed graphics that encapsulate ideas and their potential for

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45 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” pp. 206-209.

46 Donald, Iain/Andrew Reid: “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*” in: *Media Education Journal*, (66) (2020), pp, 17.

47 This insight came about during an interview with the creative director of Friday Sundae Studio; see Cole, Richard: “Introducing Friday Sundae,” *VROracle*, 16 March, 2021; <http://www.vroracle.co.uk/article/7/>

exploration in real-time strategy. Thus, ancient religion is contained in the idea of the “Priest” unit, who can heal other units and convert enemies, as well as supplementary technologies including “Polytheism” (which can be upgraded to “Monotheism”) and “Afterlife.” These technologies have a respective impact on gameplay. “Monotheism” enables priests to convert buildings and enemy priests, while “Afterlife” increases conversion range. They also attempt to align with the sweeping changes that took place in the ancient world, with the former hinting at the immense socio-cultural impact of monotheistic religions and the latter modeling the impact of ancient mystery cults and the theologies of emerging religions.

The technology tree offers branching possibilities for play, much like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel. In this, it is similar to other technology trees in non-historical strategy games.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, it embeds historical potentials as the foundation of the game’s ludic experience. While scholars, as Flegler points out, have critiqued games like AGE OF EMPIRES and CIVILIZATION for the way their technology trees can be interpreted as “teleologic or deterministic,” this is not the only means of conceptualizing the types of narrative structure on offer.<sup>49</sup> For Flegler, the preconditions in the technology tree are “not necessarily trying to convey that events *had* to happen that way in history, just that they *did* end up doing so”, and are thus an attempt by the developers to represent historical contingencies.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the experience of players cannot be forgotten. Flegler points out how player experience can challenge the “linear . . . culture-optimistic conception of history” presented by the game’s mechanics in a variety of ways, including losing or indeed choosing not to progress to the next age for strategic reasons.<sup>51</sup> Chapman has gone a step further and argued that an ideological critique of such structures in historical games has to confront the same organizing principles at work in historiography itself, while de Groot has pointed out how the randomness and replayability of historical strategy games outweigh any baked-in determinism. It is, therefore, perhaps more fruitful to consider the latency in paratexts such as the AGE OF EMPIRES technology tree, a latency fed by the participation of players who can just as easily reinvigorate the

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48 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” pp. 207-208.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, p. 2010-213.

ideas of progress, imperial expansion, and military dependency embedded in the technology tree as challenge them.<sup>52</sup>

The technology tree has both a pragmatic, tactical-orientated effect, in that the player can make use of its “Attributes” pages to determine the best way to play a civilization, but also a paradigmatic one. It acts as a game-inspired substitute for complex historical processes, offering a set of assumptions, values, and practices that model a historically-aligned engagement with the past as represented in games. In revealing the mechanics of the game alongside the way in which these systems distill historical ideas and events, the technology tree opens up the possibility for players to reflect on the potential organization and mutability of historical content and historiographical concepts in video games. Coupled with the manual’s top-down campaign titles, victory conditions, and narrative descriptions of historical scenarios, the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* provide a historical experience that combines popular and lesser-known historiography with interactive, behind-the-scenes insight into historical components and the making of game-based historical representations. Far from being a trivial substitute for historical engagement, these paratexts have contributed to formative experiences. Adam Chapman, a scholar of digital games, prefaced his monograph on the subject with a retrospective on *AGE OF EMPIRES*, which, in 1998, enabled him to discuss the “importance of technology in history.”<sup>53</sup>

## PARTICIPATION

Gaming paratexts exist in that space between the player and interactive play. Such a division, as we will see, has become increasingly hard to mark.<sup>54</sup> With the material paratexts of the 1997 edition of *AGE OF EMPIRES*, however, this

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52 See J. De Groot: *Consuming History*, pp. 157-158 and Chapman, Adam: “Is Sid Meier’s *Civilization History*?” in: *Rethinking History* 17(3) (2013), pp. 312-332.

53 Chapman, Adam: *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, New York: Routledge 2016, p. 4-5.

54 M. Consalvo: *Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, pp. 21-22 explores how this has been the case for a while, and may even be integral to digital media, though this is partly disputed by A. Rockenberger “Video Game Framings,” who argues that distinctions are possible, and, in fact, vital.

spatial arrangement is much easier to determine. This has enabled us to consider the ways in which the manual and technology tree frame access to the game and its source material. The question remains, though, as to how these paratexts might be used by the player to achieve a specific outcome, as well as how they might be repurposed country to expectation in ways that inform the experience. Let us now consider how the “embedded narratives” provided by the developers in the manual and technology tree can become catalysts for action, preparing and shaping the “emergent narratives”<sup>55</sup> produced by the player during play.

The technology tree equips the player to make informed decisions about which units to field against others. The “Unit Attributes” page details the special abilities of units, including generic examples such as how cavalry will be effective against infantry, as well as less obvious ones, such as how chariots are resistant to conversion. These mechanics gain additional complexity when the benefits of each civilization are also in play. As the manual notes, “if a world has extensive seas, choose to play a civilisation with advantages in ship building or speed . . . If you are competing with the Persians, prepare for eventual clash with War Elephants.”<sup>56</sup> The player can make use of these suggestions, along with the mechanics from the technology tree, to craft their own strategy guide, which is likely to produce better results than trial and error alone. Whether or not the player uses this strategic potential for a quick victory or a challenge (e.g., fielding units against their counters), the manual and technology tree empower players to take advantage of the cultural and military affordances of ancient civilizations, to consider why these led to certain outcomes as detailed in the game’s campaigns (e.g., Athens’ empire, built on its navel strength). As each campaign is about more than just the units fielded, the technology tree further facilitates decision-making around other aspects of empire building. Thus, players can use the technology tree to set their economic as well as military agenda for each game, perhaps focusing on resource gathering and technological advancement in order to make it to the next ‘age’ ahead of the AI. As Flegler writes,

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55 Salen, Katie/Zimmerman, Eric: *Rules of Play*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003, p. 383; A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” pp. 205-206 also draws on this terminology to discuss the different narrative experiences at work when playing AGE OF EMPIRES.

56 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 8.

the balancing act of when to advance through the ‘ages’ has been considered by players to be “a meaningful part of the game system where individual decisions can mean victory or defeat.”<sup>57</sup> The technology tree is not an end in itself, a graph that all players will learn by rote to apply in every situation. Indeed, its options are, like those in history, contingent on external factors. The player, especially at higher difficulty levels or when playing against experienced players, will require a flexible approach that only the technology tree can offer. Not only that, but they will also need to appreciate the finer practicalities of the game, as listed on the “Hot Keys” page of the technology tree. Here, the player can learn which hotkeys will offer an advantage in the heat of battle. YouTube streamers of the series rely on the game’s shortcuts to micromanage units and buildings, to gain the strategic benefits only available through mastery of its controls.<sup>58</sup> While it is certainly possible to learn and adapt simply by playing the game, the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* can be thought of as an early example of the hints and tips often deployed in contemporary games during loading screens, including historical games such as *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* where such tips offer both practical as well as educational information. The technology tree foldout demonstrates that another level of mastery can be obtained, so long as the player takes advantage of certain rules listed on its pages. These rules range from the game’s scoring system to civilization bonuses, technological options, and input mechanisms. The developers thus made possible a mode of play that relied on the study, consultation, memorization, and subsequent appreciation of the game’s underlying mechanics as revealed by its paratexts. By making use of these paratexts, players, in turn, have participated in the historical structures that they generate, while also shaping such structures according to their playstyle.

*AGE OF EMPIRES* offered a further means for players to explore ideas and opportunities based on the game’s format. In the manual, players are told that “the scenario builder lets you create randomly generated or custom maps,” while the “campaign editor lets you create your own campaigns by

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57 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” p. 213.

58 See, for example, *AOE Tips: “5 Tips on Economy Micromanagement”*, April 25, 2021; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oA8\\_63sCB4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oA8_63sCB4), a video devoted to breaking down micromanagement in the *AGE OF EMPIRES: DEFINITIVE EDITION*, which cites Hotkeys as one of the key areas to master; micromanagement became even more important in later instalments as further grouping keys were released.

combining scenarios into a custom campaign that you can distribute to other players.”<sup>59</sup> The manual directs players to the “Help” section on the game disk for further information about using the editor, which in turn could be consulted when attempting to configure the game’s constituent parts, including player settings and the full roster of unit options. The LGR YouTube review for the 1997 game expressed how “fantastic” this innovation was, which let players “create anything you saw in the main campaigns and allow you to test scenarios [...] without requiring any external programs.” This functionality was so useful as to make “third party expansions to the game that added a slew of new scenarios and campaigns,” redundant.<sup>60</sup> The editor takes the idea of the manual’s ‘making of’ sketches to their logical conclusion, placing the game’s environment at the mercy of the player, enabling them to generate everything from historically-inspired battles to maps that put the AI at a disadvantage, and share these with other players. The game’s paratexts are a call to use the full functionality provided, even where this may run counter to the game’s historical framings or victory conditions. This is true of both the campaign/scenario editor, but also other functions, such as the “Enable Cheating” option listed in the manual, which “determines whether players can use the cheat codes.”<sup>61</sup> These codes bypassed the game’s rules and added an element of parody to its setting, spawning everything from additional resources to the “laser wielding nuke trooper that will cut through anything ancient Egypt had to offer.”<sup>62</sup> As the LGR reviewer goes on to say, “unrealistic—yes—did I care—not one bit.”<sup>63</sup> In terms of undermining victory conditions, the technology tree score system suggests ways in which players might set themselves challenges. While virtually all contemporary games set challenges for the player in the form of in-game achievements, these early paratexts are not prescriptive. Rather, they break down the mechanics that underpin possible in-game achievements by listing the scores players could aim for by pursuing, for instance, religious supremacy in a campaign. The freedoms within AGE OF EMPIRES are perhaps best summarized by Flegler

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59 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 16.

60 LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

61 Microsoft Corporation: *Age of Empires: An Epic Game of Empire Building and Conquest*, p. 13.

62 LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

63 Ibid.



when he notes that “it is quite legitimate to set oneself the goal of cutting down all forests and cultivating the entire map with fields instead of defeating the opponents.”<sup>64</sup> The game’s paratexts showed players how they could tailor their experience, finetuning the level of historical realism as well as the type of play they might wish to pursue.

The 1997 paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* charted an interactive, immersive experience that is about more than just the player and a computer simulation. The game’s paratexts are sites of playful engagement with the content and concepts of the game. They foster ludonarrative opportunities and give rise to creative engagements. Their potential to continually structure and redirect the experience of the game suggests that rather than being adjacent to the experience, they are fragmented parts of the experience that have, over time, been brought together.

## INTEGRATION

Inspiring players to take action is a core part of the manual and technology tree for *AGE OF EMPIRES*. It is hardly surprising, then, to note that later games co-opted such paratexts into their digital spaces and marketing drives. Subsequent installments such as *AGE OF EMPIRES II: THE AGE OF KINGS* (1999) and *AGE OF MYTHOLOGY* (2002) continued to offer a game box, manual, and technology tree but went on to supplement these with access to the technology tree in-game. The 2018 *DEFINITIVE EDITION* of *AGE OF EMPIRES*, meanwhile, dispensed entirely with material packaging. For the first time ever, and likely in response to calls for this very feature on the *AGE OF EMPIRES* forums, players could access the technology tree of their chosen civilization within a campaign.<sup>65</sup> The *DEFINITIVE EDITION* also made important changes to the introductory sequence and home screen. The cover art, which we explored at the start of this chapter, forms the basis of both the introductory sequence and the main menu, only this time, the visuals are rendered graphically. This marks a departure from the 1997 game, which led with a graphically rendered combat scene also found on the technology tree. More than

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64 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” p. 213.

65 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/will-aoe-de-have-the-tree-of-technologies/27519>

20 years on, the AGE OF EMPIRES cover art remains central to the memory and experience of the game, which tallies with Jonathan Gray's argument that paratexts not only package texts but help to "create [...] and continue them."<sup>66</sup> This legacy can also be traced in the box art for other historical games, in particular, *TOTAL WAR: ROME II* (2013) and *ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY* (2018), which use the same techniques of a superimposed figure against a compound background of classically inspired, combat-orientated imagery. The AGE OF EMPIRES cover art can also be found on the Definitive Edition website, alongside every civilization's technology tree.<sup>67</sup> The website acts as a repository for the game's paratexts, including the earlier "Help" folder, hosting screenshots, tech support, and historical context. This information has not only been updated but also embellished.<sup>68</sup> The updates are mostly confined to the visuals and the historical notes, with the technology tree itself only undergoing minor changes. In terms of the website embellishments, there are now interactive, multimedia learning opportunities tied to the history of each civilization, as well as live forums and a 'before-after' image slider that draws comparisons between the original game and the Definitive Edition.<sup>69</sup> The website, while still separate to the base game, draws together the fragmented paratexts of the 1997 release, retaining their benefits while merging them with more recent paratextual innovations, such as the "Age Up!" video series that documents the "awe-inspiring stories behind the civilizations in AGE OF EMPIRES."<sup>70</sup> Many of these adornments can also be found on the distribution platform Steam, which makes available thousands of reviews to read alongside more traditional paratexts. While players do not have to engage with any of these paratexts, whether the early iterations or indeed those released today, the fact that they are now integral to contemporary games, including their marketing and point of sale strategies,

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66 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, p. 10, and also pp. 2-7.

67 See <https://www.ageofempires.com/games/aoe/> and <https://www.ageofempires.com/aoetechtree>

68 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o95T\\_Hn0ncw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o95T_Hn0ncw). Players are aware that history changes and that this was written in 1997.

69 See <https://www.ageofempires.com/history> and <https://www.ageofempires.com/games/aoe/>

70 See Age of Empires: "Age Up Episode 12—The Man in the High City", June 5, 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uNuphW-kC8>

demonstrates how, over time and through use, they have moved from periphery to center.<sup>71</sup> Mia Consalvo pointed out in 2007 that, for certain games, at least in theory, “the paratext and the text are now functioning as an interrelated unit.”<sup>72</sup> The wholesale adoption of this dynamic has since resulted in a change to the essential composition of the gameplay experience.

Beyond the series, we can see evidence of this trend in the way that paratexts such as the technology tree are now habitual in historical strategy games, whether real-time, turn-based, or role-playing. For instance, the TOTAL WAR series (2004-) included in-game overviews of all buildings and units in *ROME: TOTAL WAR* (2004), as well as a wholly interactive technology tree and comprehensive online encyclopedia for *TOTAL WAR: ROME II*. The recent *TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY* (2020), meanwhile, split the functions of the technology tree into multiple game mechanics. Thus, players are able to micromanage the divine will of the gods by investing in certain paths. Separately, they can oversee the issuing of royal decrees, which cost time and resources but deliver powerful in-game benefits. Managing technology trees is now a prerequisite of historical strategy games, with players having to master a layered experience of games-within-games, relying on extensive micromanagement skills to build their empire.<sup>73</sup> This is particularly true of historical role-playing games like *ASSASSIN’S CREED ODYSSEY*, where players must micromanage their armor stats, abilities, and the mercenary system, as well as their ship’s attributes, side quests, and plot-orientated assassinations.

To help players digest this, historical games now typically deploy short in-game tutorials. These build on the learning campaign and scenario

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71 See J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately* for this point generally, as well as p. 205 specifically where he notes that ‘for some, in other words, the outskirts *are* the centre, a point that I return to below when thinking about paratexts and nostalgia.

72 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007, p. 22.

73 See, for example, Soraya for an overview of the “highly individuated levels of selection [and] extreme personalization and asset micromanagement” that make up the interactive menus of the stealth game *METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN* (2015); Murray, Soraya: “Landscapes of Empire in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*,” in: *Critical Inquiry* 45(1) (2018), pp. 168-198, here p. 185.

instructions that AGE OF EMPIRES provided for each campaign by animating and combining them with many of the strategic and tactical suggestions contained in the manual and technology tree. In TOTAL WAR: ATILLA (2015), for example, the campaign advisor opens each campaign by explaining the game's historical context, making strategic suggestions for the player to consider, and drawing attention to the unique nature and benefits of the civilization under discussion. These tutorials also present an overview of the user interface and suggest how to go about achieving the victory conditions of a campaign.

In addition to in-game tutorials, most contemporary AAA games release trailers ahead of publication that feature behind-the-scenes development and deliver gameplay previews. While a short trailer was released for AGE OF EMPIRES, this had limited circulation.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, it only sketched the possibilities of the game. For contemporary titles, it is not unexpected to have extensive video commentary that offers the same benefits distilled in the AGE OF EMPIRES manual and technology tree. For example, the “Age Up” series attached to the Definitive Edition of AGE OF EMPIRES, as well as the “Guide To” series released ahead of the Remastered edition of ROME: TOTAL WAR (2021), both cover in detail the historiography behind their respective games.<sup>75</sup> Other trailers, such as those for ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY, look at the game's artwork, style, and gameplay possibilities, outlining the ways in which players can interact with the gameworld.

## PARATEXTS AND MEMORY

With the paratexts for AGE OF EMPIRES, players could imagine and anticipate the world of the game. Now, a good deal of that work is done for players online using a single point of access service. While helping to cut down on the material produced, this development is not always seen as a universal good. As Gavin Lane recently wrote for *Nintendolife*, “nowadays, there's

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74 See Khalbrae: “Age of Empires Official Trailer (1997, Ensemble/Microsoft),” July 7, 2015; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_RS-uFGJB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_RS-uFGJB8), along with the comments section.

75 For example, see Age of Empires: “Age Up Episode 12—The Man in the High City”, June 5, 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uNuphW-kC8>

little practical need for a printed manual; all relevant info is communicated through in-game tutorials, cutscenes and menus. Still, sometimes we long for a little leaflet to flick through.<sup>76</sup> The poll at the end of the article, which asked readers whether they genuinely missed game manuals, shows that out of 1,595 votes, 78% agreed with the statement. This is supported by the qualitative statements below the piece, with users reflecting that they “miss the manuals because [they] miss the ‘complete package’ feel that games used to have [...] or any amount of extra effort that heightened the presence of the object as a thing to have.” Others stated their preference for “a nice hardback full of development art and discussion.”<sup>77</sup> Threads on Reddit offer much the same analysis, with fans reminiscing about how game manuals initiated and enhanced the gaming experience. Whether they were read on the way back from purchasing a game, or, as one user noted, in the bathroom, the use of these paratexts extended from the informative to the formative.<sup>78</sup> Lane expresses this best when he notes that “the concept of the instruction manual is tied up inextricably with those glorious moments of anticipation—the time when you’re on the cusp of a new experience when anything feels possible.”<sup>79</sup> Online guides written by players, as well as streaming videos, attempt to confer similar gaming capital, but forum discussions reveal a deep nostalgia for developer produced materialities—for the (perhaps less obvious) transactions they enabled.<sup>80</sup> While some companies are tuning into this nostalgia (the classically themed dungeon crawler HADES, released in 2020,

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76 See Lane, Gavin: “Talking Point: Do You Miss Instruction Manuals?” in: *Nintendolife*, 27 April, 2021; [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking\\_point\\_do\\_you\\_miss\\_instruction\\_manuals](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking_point_do_you_miss_instruction_manuals)

77 See the comments section on [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking\\_point\\_do\\_you\\_miss\\_instruction\\_manuals](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking_point_do_you_miss_instruction_manuals)

78 See [https://www.reddit.com/r/PS4/comments/3jmn8e/why\\_did\\_video\\_games\\_stopped\\_including\\_instruction/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PS4/comments/3jmn8e/why_did_video_games_stopped_including_instruction/) and [https://www.reddit.com/r/ps2/comments/hil072/game\\_manuals\\_were\\_so\\_much\\_better\\_back\\_in\\_the\\_day](https://www.reddit.com/r/ps2/comments/hil072/game_manuals_were_so_much_better_back_in_the_day)

79 G. Lane: “Talking Point.”

80 For a discussion of the dynamics and origins of ‘gaming capital’, see M. Consalvo: *Cheating*, pp. 2-5.

came with an art book as well as a download code for its soundtrack), these physical releases are the exception rather than the norm.<sup>81</sup>

Traditional gaming paratexts gave players the chance to pause play and consider the game from a different perspective. This type of slow, offline, materially-informed play continues to be advocated for on forums for historical strategy games, even when such games come complete with in-game manuals and encyclopaedias.<sup>82</sup> Consalvo has argued that “whether we admit it or not, we have learned how to play games, how to judge games, and how to think about games and ourselves as gamers in part through [paratexts].”<sup>83</sup> We can see this on the AGE OF EMPIRES forums, where fans of the Definitive Editions have demonstrated how important the technology tree is to learning the game, but also how digital availability does not always offer strategic benefit because access, at least in an unmodded game, is limited to certain menus.<sup>84</sup> As one fan wryly notes, “back in the day, you could consult the paper manual that came with the game.”<sup>85</sup> That same fan created a separate thread devoted to the question of whether the developers should include within the game a digital scan of the original box, technology tree, and manual in the form of an immersive archive that captured the experience of consulting these paratexts. This, it is suggested, “would help honor the original game and ground it to the original game in a way that bridges that divide or gap in a much more tangible/palpable way than, say, reusing sounds.”<sup>86</sup> Tom

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81 Gray, Kate: “Hades Gets Physical Release, Plus Soundtrack Download and Art Book, Available to Pre-Order Now,” in: *Nintendolife*, 23 February, 2021; [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/02/hades\\_gets\\_physical\\_release\\_plus\\_soundtrack\\_download\\_and\\_art\\_book\\_availble\\_to\\_preorder\\_now](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/02/hades_gets_physical_release_plus_soundtrack_download_and_art_book_availble_to_preorder_now); see also the comments section on [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking\\_point\\_do\\_you\\_miss\\_instruction\\_manuals](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking_point_do_you_miss_instruction_manuals) where one user expressly states that they bought HADES (2020) “immediately” after finding out it had an art book.

82 See <https://forums.totalwar.com/discussion/89461/total-war-encyclopedia-offline-version> for a discussion where fans ask for an offline version of the ROME TOTAL WAR encyclopaedia.

83 M. Consalvo: *Cheating*, p. 8.

84 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/tech-tree-availability-in-menu/67029/7>

85 Ibid.

86 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/suggestion-digital-scans-of-original-box-manual-viewable-in-game/67112>

Apperley has shown how user-generated content can help to establish a “a better perspective on the player’s experience of the game.”<sup>87</sup> In our case, this extends to the paratextual experience of AGE OF EMPIRES, which is now as much about the history of the game as it is the history within the game.

The paratexts for the 1997 edition of AGE OF EMPIRES reveal how such artifacts carry over experience. Their effects extend well beyond initial framings for the player, and demonstrate the utility of thinking about multimedia paratexts, as Gray suggested, in terms of “overflow” and “convergence,” as opposed to the more limited “airlock” image proposed by Genette.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, these paratexts speak to the rapid and seemingly unstoppable march towards the virtual. “By this point, we seem so far away from the original game, both in time and in the evolution of the game. That’s not a bad thing; it’s just the way it is.”<sup>89</sup> This comment, which develops the thread on creating a digital archive of the AGE OF EMPIRES paratexts, draws attention to the seismic events that have taken place since its release. The LGR review similarly comments on how much has changed, demonstrating this visually through recourse to the game’s paratexts, including its box, manual, and technology tree. Hosted on YouTube, which now accounts for a sizable portion of user-generated framings, this review reflects on how “AGE OF EMPIRES is still a landmark game, both personally and in terms of RTS titles at large, and as such it has my utmost respect.”<sup>90</sup> In concluding the video, the reviewer offers an apt parting metaphor for the game’s impact: “even if it is somewhat cracked and broken like so many pieces of Greek pottery [...] I can’t help but love the crap out of it.”<sup>91</sup>

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87 Apperley, Tom: “Counterfactual Communities: Strategy Games, Paratexts and the Player’s Experience of History,” in: *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-22, here p. 3.

88 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, pp. 40-41 and p. 118.

89 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/suggestion-digital-scans-of-original-box-manual-viewable-in-game/67112>

90 LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

91 Ibid.

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