

## Balancing education and engagement: A suggested co-design process for historical game development

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In the past several decades, history-based video games have become increasingly popular, sophisticated and economically successful. Games like the *Assassin's Creed* series or Sid Meier's *Civilization* are eagerly played by millions. *History Respawned* and similar YouTube channels feature playthroughs with running commentary by professional historians that garner thousands of views, while sites like *Play the Past* host essays that dissect the intersection of cultural heritage and games for a public audience.<sup>1</sup> Academics and educators have taken notice. There is a large and growing body of literature that tackles the challenges of teaching history with and through commercial video games, where historical accuracy has often been sacrificed for the sake of entertainment.<sup>2</sup> This paper discusses the co-authors' recent digital humanities collaboration to develop a balanced educational historical game, called *The Migrants' Chronicles*, and suggests a series of best practices for a collaborative co-design process for historical game development.



*The Migrants' Chronicles* is a digital history game aimed at middle grade students (11-14 years old) in which players actively learn about migration history. Like the classic text-based game *Oregon Trail*, *The Migrants' Chronicles* allows players to confront the difficult choices

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Whitaker, "History Respawned," accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/c/HistoryRespawned>; "Play the Past," accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.playthepast.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Kee et al., "Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming," *The Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (2009): 303–26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/can.0.0164>; Matthew Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, eds., *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Kevin Kee, ed., *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.12544152.0001.001>.

historical migrants had to navigate in order to successfully leave their homes, travel long distances, and arrive safely in a new country, but updated to reflect the latest advances in technology, game design, and pedagogical strategies. The first installment is set in 1892 and traces the historical journeys of Luxembourgers to the United States in the late nineteenth-century.



### **Pedagogical Concept**

The game serves to activate the students as part of a teaching unit on the topic of migration. The general learning objectives of the lesson include the students' ability to name reasons for emigration in 1892, to describe the migration process as an intercultural experience, and to compare historical and contemporary migration movements. The game fulfills two goals with this approach: First, it aims to create cognitive empathy with the migrants of the 19th century by adopting a migrant's perspective in a world characterized by hardship and the need to make decisions.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it is supposed to pose example situations that raise further questions - for example, about the differences between Luxembourg and the USA, or about historical events, cultural trends, or technological inventions.

In order to achieve these goals, the game focuses on concrete historical situations, such as the arrival of the migrants on Ellis Island, during which the difficulties of immigration to the USA can be demonstrated. At Ellis Island, immigrants navigated issues such as citizenship, national borders, language barriers, currencies, cultural and gender identity, or economic inequality. These situations are translated into gaming mechanisms that make hardship

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Kidd, "Gaming for Affect: Museum Online Games and the Embrace of Empathy," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 4, no. 3 (Oct 2015), 414–32, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs.4.3.414\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs.4.3.414_1).

tangible and force decisions, but also allow insights into a context that requires further explanation. These mechanisms include, among others, a resource system that allows time-critical decisions to be made, a dialogue system that contextualizes these decisions, and an exportable diary that informs the follow-up of the game experience in class.

Key to the success of our project has been assembling a transdisciplinary international and multilingual collaboration between humanities scholars, game designers, cognitive psychologists, and students. Two ‘best practices’ have emerged from our process, which we think would benefit others as a model for historical game development: Successfully translating historical situations into gameplay requires 1) a clear guiding principle, and 2) a fundamental collaborative approach to making the game.

### **Guiding Principle: Authenticity over Accuracy**

*In order to create an engaging and balanced historical game, developers should embrace authenticity (recreating conditions that historical actors would plausibly have encountered) over accuracy (exactly capturing every attested historical detail).<sup>4</sup> A player must be able to make non-trivial decisions with unsure outcomes in order to play a game; if the outcome is completely predictable, it is no longer a game. For example, in our historical period, most migrants booked a pre-planned travel route paid in advance from an agent, but in our game the player makes decisions about type and direction of travel at each stage of the journey in order to better understand the differences between our world and that of the late nineteenth-century (see map image).*



<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah McCall, “Playing with the Past: History and Video Games (and Why It Might Matter),” *Journal of Geek Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 29–48.

Since the agency of the individual is important for both good history and good game design, it is sometimes necessary to change aspects of the historical record in order to teach a more humane history through the game. A loss in terms of accuracy can often be a win in terms of learning outcomes.

### **Collaborative Mode of Production**

*To balance playability and historical authenticity, the production of the game follows an iterative process of true collaboration that involves continual co-design at all stages of the project.* This is in stark contrast to the usual development process for such projects, where either a game development studio has an idea for a project and hires historical advisors as consultants, or a historian / educator has an idea and hires a game studio to build an educational game to their specifications. A successful balanced historical game is best created by an interdisciplinary team respecting the expertise that different members bring to the table.

This includes also the target group of the game itself. The inclusive development process of the game makes it necessary that each version of the game is being tested by a group of pupils. Their feedback is taken into account in the further development. Our project is intended for middle grade students in Luxembourg and the USA and designed with classroom use in mind, which has informed many decisions about the shape of the project:

- An active learning pedagogical approach, positioning the teacher as a guide for joint experience, rather than a one-way transmitter of information as in the traditional classroom.
- An awareness of sensitive content, shaping which historically attested experiences are addressed and with what levels of appropriate care (e.g. suicide or assault).
- Localization and language translation — both as relates to users in Luxembourgish or English, and playable characters, who crossed borders and had to grapple with unfamiliar languages.