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Inauthentic Accuracy: Digital History in Videogames and the GamerGate Scandal

by

O'Grady Peter Gareis

Under the Direction of Alex Sayf Cummings, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In August 2014, a major scandal impacted the videogame industry and gaming journalism, which would become known as #GamerGate. Gaming journalists, specifically those identified as “feminists,” faced mass harassment from self-identified gamers. Four years later, the developer Creative Assembly would be the target of another wave of harassment for an update to their historical game *Total War: Rome II*, in which women became playable characters. This project explores the link between toxicity in gaming culture and Western historical concepts in historical video games, as well as how gaming culture in online discussion of Historical Strategy has changed since the initial GamerGate scandal.

INDEX WORDS: GamerGate, Games Studies, Videogames, Historical Strategy, Controversy, Gaming Culture

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2023

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank those who believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself, Thank you to my wife Melissa, my parents, Peter and Mert Gareis, and Tracie Provost, for supporting me through months and months of work.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RTS	Real Time Strategy
FPS	First Person Shooter
DLC	Downloadable Content
Mod	Modification
Civ	Civilization

INTRODUCTION

The 2014 GamerGate controversy saw a mass wave of harassment targeting left-leaning feminist game journalists and developers, with the controversy eventually spreading to the wider gaming industry. Study of the GamerGate controversy has been extensive, and the overall narrative of the scandal is very confusing owing to the sheer scale of the harassment. However, it is not widely covered how GamerGate bled into the realm of popular history and impacted historical content within Historical Strategy games.

Comparatively, Historical Strategy games have often taken a back seat to more popular videogame forms and often catered to a specific audience; those either studying history or with an interest in historical content and, since Historical Strategy often centers around war and military history, these games often attract a largely male audience. Efforts within the gaming industry to introduce new players to Historical Strategy, and to gaming more generally, have been met with severe resistance from the largely male playerbase. The primary series of games used for this study is the *Total War* series, a popular series of Historical Strategy games designed by Creative Assembly. Though *Total War* is not the only popular historical game, it plays a central role in the discussion of this project, whereas other games are simply tangential. Additionally, the *Age of Empires* series, *Civilization*, and *Rise of Nations* play a role in discussing historical mechanics, their strengths, and their issues. There are also numerous other games within the genre that do not feature here but merit study and discussion, such as *Hearts of Iron*, *Europe Universalis*, and other such titles.

This project will address how a male-focused and meritocratic gaming culture interacts with popular interpretations of history, specifically Historical Strategy videogames such as those of the *Total War* series and *Age of Empires*. The exclusionary nature of the gaming world, in

terms of racism, misogyny, and homophobia, has developed from a largely masculine and Eurocentric historical focus in games, with a focus on “great leaders” of history, leading to the suppression or outright erasure of marginalized people from these digital spaces. This stems from an emphasis on a gaming as a meritocracy and exclusion within digital gaming, as exemplified in GamerGate, which created a distinct lack of reflection on how ideology impacts interpretations of history.¹

A critical concept for this study is the very identity of “gamers.” Professor and Queer Game Studies scholar Adrienne Shaw discusses the use of the term “gamer culture” and approaches it from a cultural studies perspective to discuss how videogames and their players are researched and studied, and how the term “gamer” can limit games studies. Shaw argues that many studies only look at videogames and “gaming culture” from the perspective of a very limited number of people who identify as “gamers.” That the terms “gamer” and “gamer culture” often have a narrow definition is a central theme of this project, as it is this narrow definition that has the greatest impact in discussions of gaming spaces.²

The opening chapter of this project will concern the design philosophy of *Total War* and Historical Strategy games more generally, as well as the general historiography of Historical Strategy gaming some of the genre’s major scholars. Many of these studies cover the design structure of Historical Strategy games and their potential to impact “popular perceptions of the past”³ as well as their ability to act as an introduction to historical narratives. Additionally, this

¹ John Majewski, “What Do Players Learn from Videogames?: Historical Analysis and Sid Meier’s *Civilization*,” *The Public Historian* 43, no.1 (2021), 65; Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 7-9.

² Adrienne Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2010), 403-404, 416-417.

³ Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016) 13-14.

chapter will cover Eurocentric design choices within Historical Strategy games and how that leads to the erasure of marginalized groups within historical narratives.⁴

The second chapter will discuss the events surrounding the scandal of GamerGate and the general toxicity of gaming culture that became public knowledge around this time. This chapter will additionally cover smaller controversies that focus specifically on the Historical Strategy genre of gaming, such as the 2018 controversy over women in *Total War: Rome II* mentioned earlier. Additionally, discussion and reactions to said controversies and game design from sites such as Reddit will inform how the general playerbase has perceived women and other groups in games such as *Total War*. For example, comments on the social media site Reddit reflect a general disdain for the presence of women in *Total War: Rome II*. These sentiments range from a belief that the presence of women did not “fit the history”⁵ to players actively choosing to place female characters in positions where they would get killed. Discussion in these threads often grew hostile very quickly, indicating an intense resistance to the inclusion of women. Here I hope to cover the exclusive and discriminatory nature of gaming culture and how that has impacted the development of historical gaming and popular ideas of history.⁶

The third and final chapter will cover changes within gaming culture and Historical Strategy since the days of GamerGate. Specifically, this chapter concerns how the industry has attempted to change its design of Historical Strategy games to be more inclusive and story-

⁴ Majewski, “What Do Players Learn from Videogames?,” 65.

⁵ “A Brief Overview of Great Women in Positions of Military Command in the Ancient World,” Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/totalwar/comments/9j3cuj/a_brief_overview_of_great_women_in_positions_of/; “Was thinking of buying this game...” accessed July 23, 2022.

⁶ Steam Community Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524712530793/?ctp=2>, accessed July 23, 2022.

driven, rather than purely military. It will also address, briefly, a growing movement of Queer gaming Scholars who aim to subvert common design tropes within the gaming industry and pushback against GamerGate rhetoric. Additionally, this movement also argues that perceived changes within gaming culture towards inclusivity represent only one side of the narrative and that GamerGate and its themes are still widely prevalent.⁷

Much of the material used in my analysis are actual posts and reviews on online forums and social media from players of these games, particularly from the gaming service Steam and the social media site Reddit, where players will frequently discuss features, updates, and issues of games in online discussion forums. Additionally, I use the games themselves to present the design tropes of Historical Strategy and how those tropes have shifted from the first *Total War* games in the early 2000's to and into 2022.

⁷ Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda Phillips, "Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)," *Game Studies* 18, no.3 (December 2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

1 CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL STRATEGY GAMES AND SIMULATED HISTORY

Historical Strategy games act as a form of popular history, using a mix of perceived realism and selective historical authenticity to attract players. The major draw of Historical Strategy is the simulation of history and the opportunity to play through history or alter it, allowing players to explore different historical realities. A major title in this genre is the *Total War* series, a mix of turn-based and RTS or “Real Time Strategy” gameplay, that allows players to take control of historical kingdoms and directly command armies in battle.⁸



Figure 1: Screenshot of *Medieval II: Total War*.

This screenshot shows player character as England during their “turn” featuring available building options for London, other cities on the map, finances, and other information.

⁸Jacqueline Burgess and Christian Jones, “Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity in Video Games,” *Games and Culture* 17, no.5 (July 1, 2022): 817; RTS or “Real Time Strategy” is a gaming genre where every player participates simultaneously in “real time”, while “turn-based” strategy games work similarly to a board game where each player takes a turn and moves to the next. *Total War* utilizes both formats: the player manages characters, armies, territory and cities during their “turn” on the main map but switches to a “real time” format when fighting battles and controls soldiers directly.



*Figure 2: Screenshot of RTS or "Real Time Strategy" gameplay
The player controls each unit of soldiers directly and commands their army at the same time as their opponent.*

Despite its name, the *Total War* series places major emphasis on diplomatic relations, civic development, economic issues, and military defense as well as military expansion. The player spends less time in combat than they do in the main overworld, managing various cities, political parties, and relations with other powers. Rather than scripted events that represent an accurate past, gameplay events rely entirely on the decisions of the player and the various computer-controlled factions across the game's world. The "history" presented in the game emphasizes the creation of various systems and relationships that impact decisions and responses.⁹

The series has shifted over two decades from a game focusing purely on combat and the movement of military units to an increasingly complex simulation of historical time periods. The

⁹ Jeremiah McCall, "Playing with the past: history and video games (and why it might matter)," Jgeekstudies.org, *Journal of Geek Studies*, April 22, 2019, <https://jgeekstudies.org/2019/04/22/playing-with-the-past-history-and-video-games-and-why-it-might-matter/>.

main overworld has gained more and more layers as the series has progressed. With *Total War: Attila*, published in 2015, the series brought these complicated mechanics to their peak, as the player had to contend with climate change, fluctuating environments, disease, cultural conflict, invasions, and many other factors, rendering the strategic layer far more critical than the combat.¹⁰ The historical titles in the series have attempted to present a more realistic interpretation of history that forces players to carefully maneuver and adapt their strategies, whereas the older titles rewarded players for aggressive expansion.

Historical Strategy uniquely offers players a chance to explore the cause and effect of historical decisions, by allowing players to experiment with various outcomes by changing historical events.¹¹ This allows players to explore history without getting bogged down by determinist narratives and understand the past as something that often hinged on a single decision or event.¹² Authenticity or, rather, the concept of authenticity is a major selling point of the genre, wherein the developer aims to create a historical space that fits the expectations of the playerbase, rather the focusing on perfect historical accuracy. The marketing for such games has often claimed a close relationship with the past, promising players an experience very close to the past itself. However, these games do not prioritize accuracy or timing of historical events as highly, as the history of the game is dictated by the player and the world.¹³

¹⁰ *Total War: Attila*, Developed by Creative Assembly (Published by SEGA, 2015).

¹¹ Martin Wainright, *Virtual History: How Videogames Portray the Past* (London: Routledge, 2019), 211, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315157351>.

¹² Paul Christensen and Dominic Machado, "Video Games and Classical Antiquity," *The Classical World* 104, no.4 (2010): 108, [10.1353/clw.2010.a406986](https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2010.a406986).

¹³ Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman, *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld, Transcript: Verlag: TH Koln-University of Technology, Arts, and Sciences, 2020), 14.

However, Historical Strategy often reinforces what media studies scholar Kevin Schut refers to as “standard Western histories” in its presentation of historical events.¹⁴ The end goal in every game emphasizes domination and empire-building, creating a “superior” nation via conquest and aggressive power. The genre features “linear development” in history, presenting an idea that civilization advances in a singular direction and that the culture that advances in this manner the quickest wins. This concept is prevalent through the series, but is more apparent in earlier titles, which often place specific factions or nations in the game as main characters in a sense.¹⁵

For example, an early entry into the *Total War* series, the 2004 game *Rome: Total War*, placed the Roman Empire as its main character in effect, rendering other factions in the game’s world as mere side characters. The game presents the rise of Rome as an inevitability, granting the Roman factions the most diverse and powerful roster of military units and rendering other factions all but completely ineffective at fighting Rome’s expansion. Though later titles have placed more emphasis on authenticity and alternate histories in their interpretations, the emphasis on specific historical nations as main characters and destined victors still prevails through the series.¹⁶

The *Age of Empires* series also follows a similar trend, in which European civilizations or “civs” are granted a much heavier focus than African, Asian, or Native American peoples.¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Kevin Schut, “Strategic Simulations and our Past,” *Games and Culture* 2, no.3 (July 1, 2007): 220; Nan Enstad, *Cigarettes Inc: An Intimate History of Corporate Capitalism*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 5-8.

¹⁵ Kevin Schut, “Strategic Simulations and our Past,” 220-221.

¹⁶ *Rome: Total War*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2004).

¹⁷ The *Age of Empires* online community often shortens civilizations to “civs” when discussing playable factions, which I will use here.

original release of *Age of Empires II* in 1999 featured 13 total playable civilizations, of which 6 were non-European.¹⁸ Though this is not a dreadful ratio, the majority of single-player campaigns focused on European civilizations over any other region, a trend which only worsened with the first expansion to the game released a year later, *Age of Empires II: The Conquerors*. Since 2013, the game has received expansions that place more focus on non-Western history and narratives, with the originally fan-made *Forgotten* expansion adding more representation for Native American, African, and South Asian peoples. Recent expansions to the game, *African Kingdoms* (2015), *Rise of the Rajas* (2016), and *The Last Khans* (2019), incorporated both new non-European civs and campaigns to the game. These additions to the game, referred to as expansions or “DLCs”, maintain a high level of popularity with players.¹⁹

However, there is still some discourse over perceived eurocentrism within discussion threads by users on Steam and online forums that talk about the franchise. One user on Steam, a platform for buying and discussing games, commented that the largely European focus of the game’s playable civs left a “sour feeling.”²⁰ Another user on official forums commented that the franchise’s fourth installment should avoid a largely Eurocentric roster of civilizations. Another user on Reddit expressed some anger with the addition of Sicilians and Burgundians in the *Dawn*

¹⁸ *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Developed by Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, and Wicked Witch (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2019); the original *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* was released in 1999, developed by Ensemble Studios and published by Microsoft, it is often shortened to “Age of Kings” or simply “AoK” in discussion. An expansion was released in the year 2000 by the name of *Age of Empires: The Conquerors*, often shortened to “Conquerors” or “AoC”. These were the last official additions to the game until the 2013 High-Definition re-release and the current *Definitive Edition*, released in 2019.

¹⁹ DLC stands for “Downloadable Content” and is used to refer to smaller additions to a larger game. Often these or sold for a much lower price than the original or “base” game; Though initially unofficial, *The Forgotten* expansion became part of the official game in 2013 with the HD Edition and remains part of the current Definitive Edition that I cite in this thesis; <https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/3145179089264254038/>.

²⁰ “Less-eurocentrism please,” Steam Community Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition,” <https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/3145179089264254038/>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

of the *Dukes* expansion, citing frustration over adding more European civs to the game. In each of these threads, the discussion often became heated.²¹

As Jeremiah McCall notes, Historical Strategy games, such as the *Total War* and *Age of Empires* series, and games in general present a unique medium for historical interpretation due to their interactive nature. Player choices and actions have real meaning to the overall story of the game and directly impact various outcomes. This is most prevalent in the Historical Strategy genre as it allows players to understand, to some degree, why people acted the way they did. A key example McCall mentions involves the game *Hegemony: Philip of Macedon*, wherein the player takes control of the titular Macedonian King as he conquers Greece and the Balkans. McCall noted the game's ability to frustrate his students and how that frustration allowed them to connect with Philip's perception of his enemies as "Belligerent tribes."²²

McCall's work on historical games centers around a concept of historical videogames as a form of public history, wherein player actions are either part of the historical narrative or do not change it. An example of this trend comes from *Age of Empires II* where players may be able to accomplish certain bonus objectives while playing a single player "campaign" centered around a historical figure, such as Genghis Khan. Often these objectives are either related to events that occurred or reference actions that were not taken or that were unsuccessful. Whether or not these

²¹ "Please do not have 50% Euro civs in this game like in AoE2," Age of Empires forums, <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/please-do-not-have-50-euro-civs-in-this-game-like-in-aoe2/176448/61?page=4>, Accessed February 3, 2023; "Age of Eurocentrism 2: Definitive Edition," Age of Empires 2 Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/aoe2/comments/ke2ww2/age_of_eurocentrism_2_definitive_edition/, Accessed February 6, 2023; A "thread" denotes a specific post or series of posts within in online forum, usually with a central "original" post that poses an opinion or question that users then comment on.

²² Jeremiah McCall, "Problem Spaces, Part 2: The History Class," *Play the Past*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.playthepast.org/?p=2660>

secondary goals are accomplished, the ending cinematic (a short, narrated film played at the end of a mission) usually presents a history where accurate historical narrative took place.²³

Adam Chapman, a major figure in historical game studies, describes the impact of simulated historical settings on players and the methods in which digital simulations stimulate popular interest in the historical. He also notes the common rejection of the “popular” in historical study, with many referring to professional, academic methodologies as true history. One of Chapman’s primary works, 2016’s *Digital Games as History*, presents the argument that despite the negative perceptions of popular history, modern media such as videogames are perfectly capable of generating greater interaction and discourse with the past.²⁴

Both Chapman and historian John Majewski, along with McCall, discuss the use of certain games, such as *Sid Meier’s Civilization*, in the realm of learning history as well as in broader analysis of the impact of historical games on their players and communities. However, where Chapman and McCall focus on the medium of videogames itself, Majewski addresses the community of players directly via Reddit and YouTube discussions of *Civilization*. Majewski’s analysis of the community surrounding *Civilization* found that the player-base prioritizes gaming over history. The majority of players focus on improving their ability in the game itself, ignoring most of the historical aspects of play, which in Majewski’s words “blurs the line between counterfactual and fantasy.”²⁵ Despite this, Majewski finds that there is a deep appreciation for

²³ Jeremiah McCall, “Playing with the Past: history and videogames (and why it might matter),” *Journal of Geek Studies* 6, no. 1 (April 22, 2019), 30 <https://jgeekstudies.org/2019/04/22/playing-with-the-past-history-and-video-games-and-why-it-might-matter/>; “cinematic” here is used as a noun and is a common term in strategy gaming for a short film describing historical events, provided the player “won” the respective scenario.

²⁴ Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4, 5, 271.

²⁵ Majewski, “What Do Players Learn from Videogames,” 65.

the historical aspects of the game and a common compulsion among the playerbase to critique its presentation of historical systems and cultures.²⁶

Historical Strategy games, such as those of the *Total War* series and the *Civilization* series, often carry the appeal of alternate histories. For example, *Total War: Rome II* allows the player to take control of the Celtic Iceni tribe in its “Grand Campaign” game mode in Britain and expand to rival Rome itself. Additionally smaller, more contained campaign settings allow the player to act as the Arverni in ancient Gaul and successfully resist Caesar’s invasion of the region or take control of Hannibal Barca and make Carthage the victor in the Second Punic War. Furthermore, this emphasis on rewriting history lets the player command little-known or relatively minor factions in certain time periods and make them major powers. The player, rather than playing as Rome or Carthage, can play as the Iberian Lusitani tribe and overwhelm the campaign’s two main factions or mastermind a Germanic invasion of Rome during the third century crisis.²⁷

Those Historical Strategy games that focus on an RTS style of play, such as *Age of Empires II*, focus less on alternate histories and instead emphasize player skill with game mechanics, but still place a strong emphasis on historical presentation in the design of its civilizations. *Age of Empires II* emphasizes the tactical level of play, rather than the overall strategic layer or focus on setting in *Total War*. However, the game takes much of its inspiration from historical context and allows players to relive historical events through its own campaigns, which feature figures such as Joan of Arc, Saladin, and Edward I of England. The campaigns in

²⁶ Jeremiah McCall, “Playing with the past,” 29-32; Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, “Introduction: what is historical Game studies?,” *The Journal of Theory and Practice* 21, no.3 (2017): 358-360; Majewski, “What Do Players Learn from Videogames,” 62-63, 79-80.

²⁷ *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2013).

Age of Empires II both allow the player to experience historical events from a certain perspective, such as the French during the Hundred Years War, and act as showcases for whichever civilization is played in such campaigns.²⁸

However, the ability to engage in alternate histories allows players a level of freedom outside the set rules or objectives of the game. Cultural studies scholar Souvik Mukherjee addresses the idea that individual players are fully able to ignore the main objectives and mechanics of the game to play out alternate historical narratives. Players can opt to play a game of resisting imperial powers or focus on a story or narrative theme. *Total War: Attila* centers its gameplay around the figure of Attila the Hun and presents the primary objective for all factions as “survive.”²⁹ While combat and expansion are still major parts of the gameplay, this additional theme allows the player to focus more on a self-contained, player-focused narrative than pure military expansionism in the game. Additionally, Mukherjee notes how games such as *Age of Empires* present “hybridized” maps that run counter to clean separations and hard borders that colonial powers usually express with power relations.³⁰ However, these alternate paths are limited by the very design of Historical Strategy games, which still emphasize expansion and subjugation even when the player is attempting to create new or alternate histories and narratives in the game.³¹

²⁸ *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Developed by Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, and Wicked Witch, (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2019); the original *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* was released in 1999, developed by Ensemble Studios and published by Microsoft.

²⁹ *Total War: Attila*, Developed by Creative Assembly (Published by SEGA, 2015).

³⁰ Souvik Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism,” *Games and Culture* 13 no.5 (February 9, 2016): 509.

³¹ Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern,” 509, 518.

Many Historical Strategy games, as well as many games that use real world history or cultures as a base, follow a principle referred to by Professor of Communication Sun-ha Hong as “real enough,” in which the goal is not to perfectly mirror or represent the past, but to make an interpretation “real enough” as to be believable.³² In this sense, perfect historical accuracy is avoided in place of an interpretation of history that would be familiar to players and drawing from popular ideas of history. Hong refers to this as a “pragmatic pillaging of historical, mythical, and ritual elements.”³³ Historical interpretations in gaming often follow this concept to build an idea of the past that is not necessarily historically accurate but is immersive and authentic for the player.³⁴

Further, Felix Zimmermann discusses a distinction between “accuracy” and “authenticity” in the gaming industry, wherein a game may not necessarily be accurate to the past but presents a seemingly authentic and immersive experience for the player.³⁵ Jacqueline Burgess and Christian Jones note that games that follow the concept of authenticity focus less on factual accuracy and more the “feel and experience” the game provides the player.³⁶ Burgess and Jones also discuss this distinction in their work on the *Assassin’s Creed* game series and its portrayal of historical settings and individuals in a story-based game. Often the goal for many games, both Historical Strategy and other genres, is not perfect historical accuracy but the

³² Sun-Ha Hong, “When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games’ Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual,” *Games and Culture* 10, no. 1, (November 9, 2014): 35-36.

³³ Hong, “When Life Mattered,” 36.

³⁴ Hong, “When Life Mattered,” 43.

³⁵ Felix Zimmermann, “Approaching the Authenticities of Late Modernity,” in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, eds. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann (Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2020), 9-15.

³⁶ Burgess and Jones, “Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy,” 820.

creation of a space that produces “a historical experience that feels factual and generates immersive gameplay.”³⁷

Burgess and Jones go into depth on the concept of authenticity in historical gaming, noting that the idea leans toward what the player expects from history rather than what is accurate. They note a Western trend in the depiction of cultures and civilizations in many games. For example, many non-Western cultures are often reduced to “buildings and structures,” which is seen in games such as *Age of Empires II*, wherein different cultures are given different looking buildings but the same European models for many soldiers.³⁸

Historical Strategy operates under a “western-centric” version of history, including a heavy focus on conquest and military expansion, as well as on what Schut calls the “Great White (dead) Men.”³⁹ Additionally, Historical Strategy follows a systematic style of game design, both in terms of game mechanics as well as their presentation of histories as linear paths of development built around stages of development. Ideologies and “ethnocentric assumptions” find themselves built into virtual spaces, resulting in distorted historical presentations focused on Western historical themes and narratives and depictions of non-European cultures following a westernized track of “development and conquest.”⁴⁰ This trend results in many Historical Strategy games focusing on territorial expansion and “aggressive power” over other pieces of

³⁷ Burgess and Jones, “Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy,” 820.

³⁸ Burgess and Jones, “Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy,” 818-820; *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Forgotten Empires.

³⁹ Schut, “Strategic Simulations and our Past,” 220.

⁴⁰ Schut, “Strategic Simulations and our Past,” 215, 225.

history.⁴¹ The primary of focus often centers purely on politics, warfare, and economic expansion, leaving other accounts or perspectives out of the gaming narrative.

Souvik Mukherjee argues that the genre as whole tends to emphasize binary modes of thought and design, either rendering hybridity or variety in history secondary or ignoring it entirely. Mukherjee notes the colonial themes of Historical Strategy games and historical presentation in digital history. He discusses not only how Historical Strategy games are imbued with colonial themes but also how they can indirectly lead to a questioning of colonialism. For example, in the 2009 game *Empire Total War*, though there are severe inaccuracies in the presentation of the Indian factions, it does grant the player the ability to resist colonialism and play a campaign wherein European powers never gain hegemony over India. Players have the freedom to engage with the game's version of history as they desire but are limited by the design and limitations of the game's system.⁴²

Jeremiah McCall notes that historical gaming spaces, no matter how "open-ended they might appear," are closed systems with limited mechanics, objectives, and presentation. Additionally, games that focus on historical simulation are teleological in their focus, as gameplay elements only factor into "whether the player achieves their goals." Each game imposes limits and functions under a system of rules, which is purely designed to help the player achieve the goals the game sets. In the end, historical games focus on player entertainment over perfect authenticity or accuracy, and therefore must remove certain aspects of history or possible routes the player may take. McCall uses the example of nationalists in *Europa Universalis III*, which function similarly to the generic "rebels" faction of many earlier *Total War* titles, such as

⁴¹ Schut, "Strategic Simulations and our Past," 221.

⁴² Mukherjee, "Playing Subaltern," 505-506, 509, 518.

the original *Rome: Total War*, and are meant to represent minor factions, bandits, and slave revolts. The “rebels” do not have the functionality of a proper faction in the game and can only ever be hostile to the player, and thus their agency is severely limited.⁴³

Many studies have discussed how these games design their spaces and how players generally interact with and perceive these spaces. In addition to the impact historical gaming has on its playerbase, it is important to note the commercial side of game development and its role in influencing how games build their historical worlds. In his discussion of historical video games as problem spaces, Jeremiah McCall discusses common tropes and issues of game design. Games require clear rules or objectives whereas reality obscures such goals and rules. Goals set out by each game present a specific set of challenges the player must overcome, with certain tools and resources available for the player to use to achieve said goals. McCall uses the term “problem space” to refer to the design of the game, namely its available tools and constraints on historical reality. Critically, certain themes or historical mechanics are left out of certain games as each game has its own focus and problems to solve. As an example, McCall notes that nationalist rebels in *Europa Universalis III* may take over a region but will not function as an official state or faction. This is because rebel factions functioning as a full faction in game does not fit the designer’s desired problem space. The same can be said for rebels in the *Total War* series and “Barbarians” in games such as *Civilization VI* and *Rise of Nations*. The complexity of a nationalist revolt or independent people and groups fighting larger kingdoms and empires does not fit with the more streamlined historical design of such games.⁴⁴

⁴³ Jeremiah McCall, “Historical Simulations as Problem Spaces: Some Guidelines for Criticism,” *Play the Past*, (March 21, 2012), <http://www.playthepast.org/?p=2594>; *Rome: Total War*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2004).

⁴⁴ McCall, “Historical Simulations as Problem Spaces.”

What has been missed in the study of historical gaming is the gaming culture surrounding the genre. The Historical Strategy sphere has a dedicated player base, from history buffs to professional players to casual gamers. However, despite the popularity of historical gaming and extensive writing on the toxicity of gaming culture, relatively little study has been done on the culture around Historical Strategy. Majewski briefly mentions certain themes in *Civilization*, such as the portrayal of European technology as a benefit for indigenous cultures but does not address where this perception stems from or how deeply it is rooted in the player-base.⁴⁵

How and why developers choose to model their space directly impacts how players perceive history and interact with historical media on a day-to-day basis. The *Total War* series, with its emphasis on military expansion, combat, and imperialism, builds a historical narrative wherein aggressive military commanders are the drivers of historical events. Similarly, *Age of Empires*, though it features a much more dynamic take on territorial control, places emphasis on aggression and military might. Even *Civilization*, which has moved away from some of its less favorable stereotypes and opened more possibilities for player-led storytelling, still features highly colonialist tropes in its design, such as the subjugation of generic “barbarian” tribes as a part of any early game.⁴⁶

Ideology is coded into gaming spaces and technology such that certain facets and narrative of history get normalized. An emphasis on conflict and “great leaders” of history over lives of average people or various groups within certain “Great Empires” and places has led to a meritocratic perspective of history and therefore of digital histories also. Players are almost

⁴⁵ Majewski, “What Do Players Learn from Videogames?,” 80.

⁴⁶ *Age of Empires Definitive Edition*, Forgotten Empires; *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI*, Developed by Firaxis Games and Aspyr (Published by 2K and Aspyr, 2016).

incentivized to commit war crimes and acts of violence in order to “win” the game, actions which rarely have major consequences and often are designed to be the most expedient course of action. Alex Adams notes that in *Rebel Inc.*, a game that emphasizes nation building and combat, the act of running over a “corrupt” politician with a tank is treated with similar moral “neutrality” as building a library, as both actions push the player closer to “winning.” No cultural or political discussion is present, and every issue is solved with increasing applications of modern technology and military force. The insurgency is simply a mindless entity that needs to be destroyed, with no real motive or agenda other than destruction for its own sake.⁴⁷

Similarly, choosing to “exterminate” the population of settlement in *Medieval Total War II* has next to no impact on gameplay, other than to potentially raise a general’s reputation for inspiring fear, and is often the most effective method to keep public order in check while expanding. There is next to nothing in the way of real consequences or ripple effects of “extermination” or execution of prisoners of war, simply the click of a button and move to the next turn. Diversity ends at soldier designs and city models on the campaign map, with settlement populations represented as a number that can be raised or lowered with player actions, further distancing the player from any morality on the part of their actions.⁴⁸

The player must put all effort into “winning” the game by any means necessary. Historical Strategy offers an experience designed to reflect warfare, but “stripped of danger,” allowing players to “vicariously enjoy imperial conquest” while believing their actions lead to something good. For example, many titles within the genre encourage the murder of civilians in

⁴⁷ Alex Adams, “Rebel Inc., Colonialism Simulator,” *First Person Scholar*, (July 27, 2022), <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/rebel-inc-colonialism-simulator/>; *Rebel Inc.*, Developed by Ndemec Creations (Published by Ndemec Creations, 2021).

⁴⁸ *Medieval II: Total War*, Developed by Creative Assembly, (Published by SEGA, 2006).

order to reduce an opponent's ability to field military troops or maintain an economy. Civilian deaths, already muted in many games, are not even a part of some later titles, despite the fact that some player actions directly involve civilian casualties. For example, in *Total War: Rome II*, the only number the player has to worry about when sacking or razing a city is how much money their soldiers can loot or how much it will cost to rebuild destroyed buildings. Civilian death is not calculated or acknowledged in any way.⁴⁹

The primary issue with how Historical Strategy games present their history is that they further an idea that there is a “right story” to be told with historical games.⁵⁰ The genre highly emphasizes the military aspect of history without discussing the implications of subjugation or warfare on people as a whole or providing any sort of negative consequences to rapid expansion aside from small penalties that either fade over time or can be rendered ineffective by pre-planning. Cultural and social issues are borderline nonexistent or appear as slight differences in architecture or as a “cultural differences” penalty for settlements that can be resolved with money and military intervention. Women, people of color, and LGBTQ people are reduced to secondary roles, background characters and retainers, or even just as “traits” that can randomly appear for certain characters. Militarized imperialism is presented as an inevitable way forward for “civilized” nations to the detriment of others, who are relegated to be “losers” and removed from the historical narrative.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Alex Adams, “*Rebel Inc.*, Colonialism Simulator,” <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/rebel-inc-colonialism-simulator/>; *Rome II: Total War*, Developed by Creative Assembly (Published by SEGA, 2013).

⁵⁰ Ruberg and Phillips, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

⁵¹ Ruberg and Phillips, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg ; Hanna Brady, “Building a Queer Mythology,” In *Queer Games Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 65.



Figure 3: Settlement Capture

The player has several options after capturing a settlement. The extermination option often makes for the most efficient option for expansion as it prevents the player from getting bogged down in riots and rebellions.



Figure 4: Settlement Management

The Settlement Management screen shows the population, the requirements to “upgrade” a settlement and available construction. No information on population distribution or diversity is presented.

Sivasailam Thiagajaran, who wrote a brief article on simulations, notes that the idea that simulations of any kind accurately reflect reality is a myth. Simulations, including those presented in historical video games, reflect a person or entities' model or idea of reality. In the case of historical video games, the simulations reflect a general idea of how history worked as opposed to any accurate presentation of historical reality.⁵²

Overall, Historical Strategy games offer players a space to engage with and interact with historical settings and, in the case of *Total War*, participate in a simulated world system of historical politics, commerce, and diplomacy that extends well beyond the military aspects the series generally promotes. The streamlined nature of Historical Strategy games allows players to interact with and understand historical settings much more easily and more effectively. However, the limitations of each game's design and "western-centric" approaches to history and territorial expansion result in severe weaknesses in historical presentation.

⁵² Sivasailam Thigarajan, "The Myths and Realities of Simulations in Performance Technology," *Educational Technology* 38, no. 5, (1998): 35.

2 CHAPTER 2: GAMERGATE AND EXCLUSION IN HISTORICAL STRATEGY

Historical Strategy's heavy focus on Eurocentric histories and cultural stereotypes has a decided negative impact on marginalized communities within gaming. Nothing exemplifies this impact more than the GamerGate controversy which spanned from 2014-2015 and saw a wave of mass harassment toward gaming journalists and inclusivity in gaming. The overall story of the GamerGate scandal is extremely long and confusing and is only told in broad strokes here.

In 2014, a major scandal broke out within the realm of games journalism. Game developer and journalist Zoe Quinn found herself the subject of a vitriolic harassment campaign following the release of her game *Depression Quest*. The campaign, begun by Quinn's ex-partner Eron Gjoni, was ostensibly centered around ethics in gaming journalism, as Gjoni and many soon-to-be GamerGaters accused Quinn of sleeping with other journalists and developers in order to get her game published. What began as targeted harassment centered on Quinn soon exploded into a massive scandal that saw waves of largely white, male "gamers" attacking and decrying the growth of "SJW" (i.e. "social justice warrior") ideas in gaming. Women were the primary focus of the movement, with feminism itself as one of the primary targets of criticism. However, GamerGate's heavy focus on "woke" culture and "identity politics" also led them to target people of color and the LGBTQ community, with some vowing resistance to what was called a "gay, multicultural jerkoff session."⁵³

⁵³ Andrea Braithwaite, "It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? GamerGaters and Geek Masculinity," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (October 2016): 1-2, 7; Rachel Kowert, "Dark Participation in Games," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (November 2020): 1-2; Allum Bokhari, "Gamergate: A Year in Review," Breitbart, Breitbart News, September 15, 2015, <https://www.breitbart.com/the-media/2015/09/15/gamergate-a-year-in-review/>; David O. Dowling, Christopher Goetz, and Daniel Lathrop, "One Year of #GamerGate: The Shared Twitter Link as Emblem of Masculinist Gamer Identity," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 8 (2019): 993; The term "SJW" or Social Justice Warrior was a term used to insult those who hold generally liberal or progressive views, the term became widespread during the GamerGate controversy and is still used today.

Preceding the backlash that followed Zoe Quinn, media critic Anita Sarkeesian found herself a target of harassment after she posted an introductory video to a planned video series called “Tropes vs Women in Video Games.”⁵⁴ In the video she discussed the merits of gaming while also noting misogynistic and sexist tendencies many games promote and that were a major part of gaming culture. Sarkeesian received a flood of support for her planned video series, but also saw a wave of vicious attacks, including death and rape threats and even doxxing her parents’ family home. The harassment targeting Sarkeesian would then evolve into the GamerGate controversy that fully formed with the attacks on Zoe Quinn.⁵⁵

As the scandal picked up steam the term “GamerGate,” coined by actor Adam Baldwin, was applied to the growing wave of online protest, which then became associated with the movement through its lifespan. The common refrain was that largely leftist political elements had infiltrated gaming and had tarnished gaming as a whole.⁵⁶ However, what became more obvious as the scandal went on was the simple fact that women, queer people, and people of color were the primary focus of harassment. Despite the claim of defending “ethics,” the motive behind the campaign was to defend gaming as a male space.⁵⁷

Those associated with GamerGate often outed their grievances on Twitter, using the site to target journalists and perceived “SJWs” directly. However, GamerGaters also based

⁵⁴ Ian Sher and Erin Carson, “GamerGate to Trump: How video game culture blew everything up,” *CNET*, Red Ventures, November 27, 2017, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/gamergate-donald-trump-american-nazis-how-video-game-culture-blew-everything-up/>.

⁵⁵ Sher and Carson, “GamerGate to Trump,” <https://www.cnet.com/culture/gamergate-donald-trump-american-nazis-how-video-game-culture-blew-everything-up/>; “doxxing” means to search for and publish private or personally identifying information, namely addresses, names, or other information, usually with malicious intent.

⁵⁶ Bokhari, “Gamergate: A Year in Review.”

⁵⁷ Dowling, Goetz, and Lathrop, “One Year of #GamerGate,” 983.

themselves in other online message and forum sites, such as Reddit, 4chan and 8chan. 4chan and 8chan, which are anonymous message boards where users' identities can remain hidden, acted as "staging grounds" for the protesters, while the main events played out on Twitter and Reddit more publicly.⁵⁸ The subreddit r/kotakuinaction still acts as a haven for much of the sentiment reflected in GamerGate, with the subreddit bearing the subtitle as "the almost-official GamerGate subreddit!" Along with some on Twitter, r/kotakuinaction still features discussions of gaming journalism, much it of critical of journalists and larger game developers.⁵⁹

A quick look at key figures involved in the scandal shows the decidedly right-wing lean the movement had, despite attempts at framing the scandal as merely focused on journalism. Gavin McInnes, founder of the right-wing militia group the Proud Boys, actively supported the movement and praised the movement's efforts in combatting "SJW's" and "cultural marxism."⁶⁰ Editor of *Breitbart* Milo Yiannopoulos also supported the movement, referring to Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn as examples of "quantum superstate feminism." Most figures in the movement decried what they referred to as SJW's or the feminist agenda in videogames, citing "political correctness" as a major concern for the movement.⁶¹

Harassment toward women and others in gaming was not a new development at the time of GamerGate. Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw note that the "inherent masculinity" of the

⁵⁸ Michael Salter, "From geek masculinity to Gamergate: the technological rationality of online abuse," *Crime, Media, Culture* 14, no.2 (2018): 254.

⁵⁹ A subreddit is smaller section of the greater social media sit Reddit. The site is broken down into specific "subs" that a user can follow or ignore at will, allowing them to tailor their experience on the site.

⁶⁰ Bokhari, "Gamergate: A Year in Review."

⁶¹ Milo Yiannopoulos, "The UN wants to Censor the entire internet to save Feminists' feelings," *Breitbart*, *Breitbart News*, September 25, 2015 <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2015/09/25/u-n-womens-group-calls-for-web-censorship/>.

internet and increasing numbers of women in gaming have been subjects of discussion for years.⁶² They also note previous incidents involving feminists and women in gaming journalism, such as Kathy Sierra, who received a wave of death threats in 2008 for merely being a part of the video game industry. However, the issue largely remained unnoticed until the GamerGate scandal, in which it was self-identified gamers themselves making the issue public.⁶³

Though the harassment was not surprising, the sheer scale and organization of the movement and the volume of targeted vitriol leveled at game journalists and feminist journalism was shocking to some. Anyone marked with the label “SJW” (Social Justice Warrior) or “feminist” was subject to ruthless personal attacks and death threats by a massive and seemingly organized movement, which Torill Mortensen notes utilized strategies from right-wing politics to stoke fear of “cultural Marxism” and leftism in gaming.⁶⁴ The claim from many GamerGaters was that “politically correct” games and gaming journalism was a direct attack on free speech and the art of developing videogames. In fact, free speech, along with ethics, became the bedrock of the GamerGate argument against feminism, with the sites supporting the movement arguing that every topic should be available for discussion and that the political correctness of the time reflected an attempt to censor the voices of the gaming community. The true scale of GamerGate is nearly impossible to discern despite the very public nature of it. However, the gaming culture

⁶² Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no.1 (2015): 209.

⁶³ Chess and Shaw, “Conspiracy of Fishes,” 209-211.

⁶⁴ Chess and Shaw, “Conspiracy of Fishes,” 210; Torill Elvira Mortensen, “Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate,” *Games and Culture* 13, no.8 (2018): 788.

surrounding the scandal has long been a subject of academic study, as noted by Chess and Shaw.⁶⁵

A second scandal, beginning in 2018 and centered around the game *Total War: Rome II*, had a similar impact and tone to the vitriol of GamerGate and its campaign. This second, more focused bout of outrage, came after a patch (or update) to the game allowed women to be playable as generals, leaders, and politicians, whereas before they were only secondary characters. The update was meant to be an authentic representation of women in the various cultures the game portrays, with varying chances for women to appear as characters depending on culture. Highly patriarchal societies such as those of Carthage, Rome, and Greece had a 0% chance for women to appear as generals or politicians, while the Kingdom of Kush, in what is now modern-day Ethiopia, was the only major exception with a 50% chance. All others fell in between the two extremes. Despite this, a screenshot of the game was circulated that depicted a player as Egypt with only women as selectable generals. This seemed very unlikely given the chances for women to appear and some believed the player had purposely crafted this situation by manipulating the game's mechanics.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Chess and Shaw, "Conspiracy of Fishes," 209-211. Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no.8 (2018): 788-789.

⁶⁶ Jordan Lukomski, "'Accuracy' vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games," NYMG, October 5, 2018, <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17807>; Total War (@totalwar), "yo," Twitter, September 25, 2018 <https://twitter.com/totalwar/status/1044548704777252864/photo/1>, Accessed June 13, 2023; "Ha, the update is pc! Gotta make at least ½ the generals women!," Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Screenshots, <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1472589135>, Accessed February 3, 2023; Richard Scott-Jones, "Total War: Rome 2's female general controversy is fake," PCGamesn, September 25, 2018, <https://www.pcgamesn.com/total-war-rome-ii/rome-ii-female-generals>.



*Figure 5: Alleged Total War: Rome II Screenshot of all female selection of generals
This image circulated on Reddit and Steam and helped inflame outrage.*

Comments on discussion pages on the gaming platform Steam argued ferociously about the update, with many claiming their dislike was based on historical accuracy, while others targeted feminism and “woke” culture. One user decried the game as “clogged up with woke SJW [censored curse word].”⁶⁷ Another blamed feminism more generally for the state of the game, and even went as far to say that “feminism has destroyed gaming” in their rant against the update.⁶⁸ In a similar vein to GamerGate's emphasis on “ethics,” players argued that the update was historically inaccurate and that the inclusion of women broke their “immersive experience.” One player on the Steam forums even argued that the update was an attempt by Creative

⁶⁷ “Women Generals,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524714389223/#c1735465524714395689>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

⁶⁸ Women Soldiers?,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/3108018050522811353/?ctp=2#c3108018050533542883>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

Assembly (CA) at “rewriting history” and hoped that a fan-made overhaul to the game would “mod these silly things out.”⁶⁹

Some commenters claimed the source of outrage was around poor community management and dismissiveness on the part of CA. A thread on Total War Center, a website dedicated to discussions and fan-made modifications to *Total War* games, referred to controversy as the “mod out or not play controversy” after a Community Manager for Creative Assembly responded to complaints by saying that users could “mod out” the new update or “not play.” The community responded negatively to the comment, citing the move as a “middle finger” to players. Along with the general outrage over the remark, users claimed that they were being “censored and purged” by the Steam forums.⁷⁰ Many negative reviews left by players after the update directly referred to this interaction as the reason for their anger, but many of these same reviews also referred to leftism and criticized SJW culture.⁷¹

Critically, it should be noted that most of the negative reviews came six months after the initial update and correspond with Creative Assembly’s response to the controversy. This lends some credence to arguments that the controversy was in part due to poor communication on the

⁶⁹ Lukowski, ““Accuracy” vs Inclusivity”; “ANGRY and not politically correct, sorry,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1697169163412623832/?ctp=5#c1696043806564484810>, Accessed February 3, 2023; a “mod,” short for modification, refers to unofficial tweaks or changes made to a game by fans. Many games have active modding communities that create homemade mods as simple as changing the colors on a units clothing to complete overhauls and reworks of game mechanics and designs. The mod referred to in the comment is called DeI or “Divide et Impera,” a major overhaul mod for *Total War: Rome II* that emphasizes realism and drastically overhauls the Game’s population and military supply mechanics to make the game more complex.

⁷⁰ ““You can either mode them out or just not play.”” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524716098830/>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

⁷¹ Seax, Steam *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition* Reviews, <https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198058264810/recommended/214950/>, Accessed February 3, 2023; RHINO 1-1 | LEAD_SLED, Steam *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition* Reviews, <https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561197961250054/recommended/214950/>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

part of CA. However, the multitude of anti-feminist and anti-leftist rhetoric in these reviews and discussions shows a particular ideology that goes beyond protesting a company. The level of vitriol found in these reviews and discussions shows toxicity on the level of GamerGate. Players killed off female generals intentionally and called for mods to remove women entirely. Other users voiced a greater form of politically driven revisionism and hysteria propagated by the “Liberal progressive movement” and “Western feminism” in similar callouts to GamerGate supposed resistance to “cultural Marxism.”⁷²

The game found itself “review bombed” en masse by irate players, decrying the supposed “virtue signaling” of Creative Assembly, and it became a large enough issue for media sites to notice.⁷³ Several websites dedicated to gaming journalism, including Kotaku, responded to the update and referred to the scandal as contrived by gamers themselves.⁷⁴ The screenshot featuring a roster of all women generals was described by RepublicOfPlay, a content creator for *Total War* on YouTube, as “extremely unlikely,” while also criticizing Creative Assembly’s response to the controversy and SJW influences in gaming. RepublicOfPlay also compared the scandal to a

⁷² Julia Alexander, “Total War: Rome 2 dev says it won’t remove female generals from the game,” *Polygon*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/9/26/17902302/total-war-rome-2-developer-response-female-generals-historical-accuracy>; “Was thinking of buying this game...,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524712530793/?ctp=2>, Accessed June 23, 2022; Nuclear War, “Females Removed,” Steam *Total War: Attila* Workshop, <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=497664762>, Accessed June 23, 2022; “So female generals...,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1698293068433895118/?ctp=7>, Accessed June 23, 2022; Rictus Mind, Steam *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition* Reviews, <https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198026571294/recommended/214950/>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

⁷³ Joey Brimborn, Steam *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition* Reviews, <https://steamcommunity.com/id/DarealystMakaveli/recommended/214950/>, Accessed February 3, 2023.

⁷⁴ Lukomski, ““Accuracy” vs Inclusivity,” <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17807>; Alexander, “Total War: Rome 2 dev says it won’t remove female generals from the game,” <https://www.polygon.com/2018/9/26/17902302/total-war-rome-2-developer-response-female-generals-historical-accuracy>.

similar backlash faced by another developer, Electronic Arts, after a trailer for the game *Battlefield V* featured a woman participating in a battle set during the Second World War.⁷⁵

Interestingly, though media and players focused on this controversy around women in *Total War: Rome II*, there was an earlier backlash in 2014 during the GamerGate era after Creative Assembly released their “Daughters of Mars” DLC to the game, which added in units of women as soldiers. This was a minor incident compared to 2018 update, but reviews and discussion can be found disparaging the inclusion of women as soldiers and blaming political correctness. Commenters refer to the models of the female soldiers as ugly or hard to look at, even though the models are based on the male soldier models and have very little variety in appearance. One commenter sarcastically notes “Western feminism at it again, changing facts of history for the better – amirite?”⁷⁶

Both GamerGate and the subsequent 2018 scandal with *Total War: Rome II* show a trend within gaming culture to defend gaming generally as a space for white men and masculinity in general. The term “gamer,” as noted by Adrienne Shaw and Andrea Braithwaite, does not necessarily cover a wide range of people. The stereotypical “Gamer” often refers solely to the “socially inept young White male,” and articles that argue the term “gamer” represents a more

⁷⁵ RepublicOfPlay, “Rome 2 is Getting Review Bombed on Steam,” September 23, 2018, YouTube video, 0:14 to 0:50, 1:27, 3:30, <https://youtu.be/vIB5ByyXvHU>; “So...women warriors now!,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/35221031515596884/?ctp=2>, Accessed June 23, 2022 ; Nathan Grayson, “*Total War* Games Gets Review Bombed On Steam Over Women Generals [Update],” Kotaku, September 24, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/total-war-game-gets-review-bombed-on-steam-over-women-g-1829283785>; Lukomski, “Accuracy vs Inclusivity,” <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17807>.

⁷⁶ “So...women warriors now!,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/35221031515596884/?ctp=2>; “Why do women in Rome2 look so horrible?,” Total War Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/totalwar/comments/971ehs/why_do_women_in_rome2_look_so_horrible/

diverse group of people often do so in a manner that only reinforces the stereotype.⁷⁷ Shaw notes that articles will point out that women play videogames but do not conform to the stereotypes around “traditional gamer culture,” in effect challenging the narrow definition of “gamer” while directly reinforcing the stereotype around “gamer culture.” Shaw states “New definitions of game culture are never used to question the constructed past of video game culture’s insularity, maleness, and youthfulness.”⁷⁸

Gaming culture’s “insularity” and “maleness” apply to historical gaming as well, with developers often building their games around Eurocentric and male-focused narratives. War, conquest, and military experience are the main emphasis, with male figures are characterized as central to historical narrative and European factions or peoples taking precedent over others.⁷⁹ *Rome: Total War* and its successor *Total War: Rome II* are prime examples of this trend. A quick look at the Roman factions compared to others shows that far more time and nuance went into designing Rome as a pseudo main character while giving other factions the bare minimum of needed design. For example, the faction “Gaul” in *Rome: Total War*, meant to represent the varied Celtic peoples that resided in modern day France and Northern Italy, is granted very simple and generic units such as “swordsmen” or “skirmishers” that have little to no historical design. Additionally, as noted earlier, games such as *Age of Empires* focus on European designs

⁷⁷ Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?” 1.

⁷⁸ Adrienne Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies” *Games and Culture* 5, no.4 (October 2010), 408.

⁷⁹ Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture?” 408.

for units, with all generic units designed like European knights or soldiers regardless of which civilization the player is controlling.⁸⁰

As seen in the 2018 scandal, efforts to change or subvert this narrative have been met with severe backlash from gamers, who see these efforts as historical revisionism and politics corrupting otherwise perfectly accurate historical games. What is critical to understanding GamerGate and its relationship with historical gaming is the culture surrounding computing and gaming that evolved into GamerGate and toxic gaming. Even as early as the 1990s there were discussions on culture and discrimination in computing and early gaming. In 1992, scholars Sherry Turkle and Seymour Papert wrote an article on how computers and computing have been a male dominated space and act as a privileged domain for white men. This has translated over into gaming and Historical Strategy, wherein women, people of color, and queer people are excluded or relegated to secondary characters or figures. Efforts to diversify gaming culture have resulted in backlash characterized as attacks on gamers and gaming itself.⁸¹

Professor of Communication and Media Dr. Christopher A. Paul discusses the ideology and thought behind gaming culture in 2018's *Toxic Meritocracy*. According to Paul, gaming culture has a long history of emphasizing a form of false equality among players, while avoiding discussing any "structural inequalities" within videogames and the larger gaming culture.⁸² Paul notes that any "critique of what exists" is not welcome in most spaces, which proves especially

⁸⁰ *Rome: Total War*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2004); *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Developed by Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, and Wicked Witch (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2019)

⁸¹ Sherry Turkle and Seymour Papert, "Epistemological Pluralism and Revaluation of the Concrete," *Journal of Mathematical Behavior* 11, no.1 (March 1992), 3, 5-6; Michael Salter, "From geek masculinity to GamerGate: the technological rationality of online abuse," *Crime Media Culture* 14, no.2 (February 12, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017690893>.

⁸² Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 3.

challenging to any attempt to bring other people into the culture.⁸³ Scandals like GamerGate were simply an extension of this culture into a greater social movement attempting to maintain a gaming status quo. Similarly, the scandal around *Total War: Rome II* and women in its historical settings show the pushback gaming receives to such changes.⁸⁴

In terms of both gameplay and game design, gaming culture functions like a meritocracy. On the surface, this ideology supposedly renders all players equal and “responsible for their own success or failure,” while failing to account for any real inequalities within the culture and the industry.⁸⁵ Paul points out major issues studios have with racial depictions of characters who are often reduced to stereotypes and caricatures as opposed to in-depth characters. Women in gaming are often reduced to an “optional” feature to be “included as an afterthought.” This makes proper representation difficult and heavily challenges the culture’s claim of meritocratic equality.⁸⁶

Paul’s primary example of this is based on the *Witcher* series, a fantasy role-playing game featuring the player talking with and fighting monsters, wizards, and other creatures. Paul cites South African writer and journalist Taurig Moosa’s essay on *The Witcher 3*, which notes that there are nearly no people of color in the game. Moosa’s essay calls out the fact that while there are many journalists and reviewers who would complain about “less pretty grass physics,” no reviewers mentioned the lack of people of color. Secondly, Moosa notes that most reviews for

⁸³ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 90.

⁸⁴ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 9, 16.

⁸⁵ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 10.

⁸⁶ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 18.

the game that he saw were written by white men, which is reflective of the fact that gaming and tech in general is a highly male-dominated area.⁸⁷

Critics of Moosa's essay argued that *Witcher's* use of Slavic mythology as a base necessitated the presence of a largely white cast of characters for the sake of accuracy.⁸⁸ However, Moosa noted arguments based on mythological accuracy falter when confronted with the presence of mythical creatures in a games space, as if "wraiths and magic" are acceptable where people of color are not. This points to a major problem within gaming culture, wherein mythical beings such as dragons can exist without issue, but people of color are a step too far for many players. At the same time, *Witcher 3's* portrayal of racism is arguably a good one, depicting bigotry towards non-human characters, such as dwarves and elves. Moosa notes that this trend shows how people of color in gaming are often not "considered human."⁸⁹

Crucially, Moosa faced severe enough harassment to delete his Twitter account following his essay in a series of events similar to the harassment surrounding GamerGate. As Paul notes, this is reflective of a space where "troublesome" speech and action is normalized to limit who plays videogames.⁹⁰ Many people who were part of GamerGate or were critical of Moosa's article will cite "freedom of choice" as an argument against adding either women or people of color. Moosa notes these arguments are made by white players who contend that making main characters a certain race removes player choice and is an example of "forced politics," whereas

⁸⁷ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 18-19; Tauriq Moosa, "Colorblind: On the Witcher 3, Rust, and gaming's race problem," June 3, 2015, <https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem>.

⁸⁸ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 18.

⁸⁹ Moosa, "Colorblind: On the Witcher 3," <https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem>.

⁹⁰ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 19.

for people of color it represented “business as usual” to be forced to play a white character.⁹¹ For Historical Strategy games, this argument will take the form of players demanding an optional setting that can be switched on and off or calling for such changes to be part of a separate expansion that players can choose to ignore.⁹²

The earliest versions of *Total War: Rome II*, which first released in 2013, and previous titles suffered from this pattern extensively. Women as characters had no presence outside of the “politics” screen where players could manage and control various commanders and politicians within their faction. Even then, they had far fewer actions than their male counterparts, able only to seduce, marry, or influence male characters within the player’s faction. Additionally, people of color featured far less prominently than white people in game, with European factions such as Gauls, Germans, Romans, and Greeks represented by a fairly diverse range of generals and politicians, while women and people of color have far fewer character appearances. Earlier titles such as the original *Rome: Total War* in 2004 did not have women participate at all except as “portraits” in the family tree screen, where the player could see where they fit into their faction’s royal family. The 2018 update for *Total War: Rome II* addressed this somewhat, making women more interesting and active characters, while also overhauling the game’s barebones political system simultaneously. *Rome II*’s successor, the 2015 game *Attila: Total War*, still features

⁹¹ “This was the last true historical Total War game,” Steam Community *Total War: Attila Discussions*, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/325610/discussions/0/2568690416483396300/#c2568690592362590750>, Accessed June 23, 2022; ⁹¹ Moosa, “Colorblind: On the Witcher 3,” <https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem>.

⁹² “How to Turn OFF Female Soldiers,” Steam Community Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/325610/discussions/0/3108018050518270586/>, Accessed June 23, 2022.

women as little more than secondary characters, though its presentation of Middle Eastern and African peoples during Late Antiquity is notably better than *Rome II*.⁹³

When it comes to Historical Strategy, this tendency to render women and people of color secondary comes from a largely white and male industry that focuses on Eurocentric histories in much of their game design. Paul notes that the gaming industry largely caters toward white and male players, with more than 83 percent of gamers identifying as white and 88.5 percent identifying as male.⁹⁴ A 2015 survey showed developers are also largely white men, with three-quarters of developers interviewed identifying as such. In 2021 the Entertainment Software Association published a breakdown of “essential facts” about the industry, showing that players remain skewed toward a majority male player base, with 55% identifying as male and 73% percent as white.⁹⁵ While these statistics do show a gradual shift in player base, there is still a notable white majority on the development side. Additionally, this leads to a situation where assumptions are made that “certain players just don’t want certain types of games, or predominantly prefer certain genres.” For example, a common perception is that people of color prefer sports or “military FPS” over other genres. However, these perceived preferences are more likely due to a phenomenon where certain player groups assume certain content is “not for them” as a result of underrepresentation. As these statistics reflect the industry more generally, it is unclear what the breakdown is for Historical Strategy and strategy games in general.⁹⁶

⁹³ *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2013); *Rome: Total War*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2004).

⁹⁴ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 4.

⁹⁵ Entertainment Software Association, “2021 Essential Facts about the Video Game Industry,” July, 2021, 3, <https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-Essential-Facts-About-the-Video-Game-Industry-1.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Cale J. Passmore, Max V. Birk, Rowan Yates, and Regan L. Mandryk, “Racial Diversity in India Games: Patterns, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Chi Play’17 Extended Abstracts* (October 2017),

Attempts to be more inclusive in Historical Strategy have been treated as though the primary objective was to erase or alter Western culture. One commenter referred to the 2018 update as “cultural Marxism” and an attempt to “redefine western gender roles.”⁹⁷ Another argued that Creative Assembly’s goal was for white people to be “erased from both the present and the past,” while in agreement with another commenter who argued that the company was “disproportionately replacing white men” in the game.⁹⁸ Another stated that Creative Assembly was supporting “hatefilled political ideologies, whose sole purpose is the destruction of ALL our most hard earned Western ideals and achievements.”⁹⁹ These arguments reflect a conviction that goes beyond anti-feminism and historical accuracy in gaming, but a genuine belief that these attempts to make a genre of gaming more accessible or less disrespectful to marginalized peoples is a direct attack upon white culture.

This trend can be seen to a lesser extent within the *Age of Empires* series, with one person asking for a less Eurocentric game criticized by a user for supporting “white erasure.” The same commenter referred to the desire for reduced Eurocentricity within *Age of Empires II* as

140.<https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3130859.3131438>; FPS stands for “First Person Shooter,” example of these games include the *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* series.

⁹⁷ “LEAVE ROME 2 ALONE It doesn’t need another update,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1698293255119310368/?ctp=16#c2949168687313774128>, Accessed March 10, 2023.

⁹⁸ “In regards to the current debate about ROME II...,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524721186900/?ctp=6#c1735465524721608491>, Accessed June 13, 2023; “LegendofTotalWar and RepublicOfPlay have joined Arch and TheQuartering, WE are WINNING,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524722688272/?ctp=2#c1735465524722849173>, Accessed March 10, 2023.

⁹⁹ “Don’t do this CA,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524718622957/?ctp=3>, Accessed March 10, 2023.

“immoral.”¹⁰⁰ Another cited European History and wider Global History as one and the same, and therefore the introduction of non-European cultures was irrelevant. The concept that certain cultures are irrelevant to either historical gaming or historical narratives more generally is just as prevalent within the *Total War* series and especially *Total War: Rome II*, where some players refer to histories that were “cut” from much of the narrative as not worthy of note or even lesser than others in the larger scheme of history. Arguments on the Steam forums devolve into users blatantly referring to certain cultures as insignificant in the larger scheme of world history and therefore unworthy of note.¹⁰¹

Some commenters on Steam note that *Total War* titles in certain eras or locations, such as in sub-Saharan Africa, would not sell as well as European-focused games. This further shows the bias within the industry itself, as a largely white developer structure coupled with a largely white audience will produce games emphasizing white narratives. Pushback to this trend results in outcries of historical revision, white erasure, and harsh reactions to “woke” culture and feminist narratives. This manifests within Historical Strategy games themselves as certain cultures or peoples acting as mere placeholders.¹⁰²

For example, *Rise of Nations* has several civilizations that exist in name but have no unique story or identifier attached to them. The game features a system to represent cultural

¹⁰⁰ “Less euro-centrism please,” Steam Community *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/3145179089264254038/?ctp=5#c5836080604443015916>, Accessed June 7, 2023.

¹⁰¹ “anyone have a black hannibal mod?,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/2995422276371544760/?ctp=11>, Accessed June 23, 2023 ; Please we need Romanians in this...,” Steam Community *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/4758602630160376558/?ctp=2#c4758602630163803390>, Accessed March 10, 2023.

¹⁰² “Do You Think Creative Assembly Will Ever Make A Game Taking Place In Lower/Sub-Saharan Africa?,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/530645446324231345/>, Accessed March 10, 2023.

difference and focuses for each civilization by granting them certain “Nation Powers.” These “Nation Powers” grant various bonuses to each civilization, which can be military, economic, technological, or cultural. They can appear in the form of unique military units, faster resource gathering, cheaper buildings, or free technologies. When playing one of the single-player campaigns available, the player must expand into “unclaimed” territories which are held by native “barbarians.” The Vikings, Comanche, Chimu, Sumerians, and Khmer all borrow the Aztec “unique power” and are meant to represent “barbarian” peoples that the player assimilates into their territory. *Rise of Nations*’ successor, *Rise of Legends*, takes some of these tropes into a fantasy setting and has the setting’s main factions, all based on European, Mesoamerican, and Middle Eastern “Oriental” stereotypes, fight for control of small zones and structures. The process of taking some zones implies subjugation or assimilation of smaller people groups into the larger empires.¹⁰³

Much of the resistance to progressive narrative or representation in gaming comes from a “save the past” mentality that exists within gaming subgroups and the larger gaming culture, as noted in an article on the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering*. Gaming spaces, digital or otherwise, act as an escape from the real world. In the case of those who considered themselves aligned with GamerGate, that included escaping from political discussions of sexism, racism, and homophobia. The introduction of others into their space constituted an invasion to this safety bubble, and a fixation on past time periods as preferable to the current time of social justice and change.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *Rise of Nations: Extended Edition*, Developed by SkyBox Labs and Big Huge Games, (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2014); This is a redone version of the game available on Steam, which released in 2003 and received an expansion in 2004.

¹⁰⁴ Thiago Falcao, Tarcizio Macedo, and Gabriella Kurtz, “Conservatism and toxic masculinity in gamer culture: An approach to Magic: the Gathering,” *Revista MATRIZez* 15, no.2 (2021) 259.

As certain groups are pushed out of gaming more generally, they are also pushed out of historical narratives in videogames. Historical Strategy has a strong masculine focus that also emphasizes the military, as noted earlier, which has resulted in strong resistance to including others, such as women or even people of color in historical gaming.¹⁰⁵ The male-only ideology of GamerGate and the anti-political correctness movement that went with it were determined to keep others out of historical gaming. Companies envision an audience of white men as their players, and the Historical Strategy community is no different.¹⁰⁶ Its player base, its developers, and even its major creators on YouTube and Twitch are largely white and male, with few queer people, people of color, or women among them. Souvik Mukherjee notes how non-European factions in gaming are portrayed in a stereotypical manner, adhering to a Western idea of the “Orient,” and appealing to a concept of an exotic Eastern land. A key example is that of *Civilization III*, which is designed around “the logic of colonialism” with its erasure of many peoples deemed unworthy of note.¹⁰⁷

For example, a major theme of the *Civilization* series is “civilizing” lesser peoples, a trend that can be described as an “imperial urge,” to use the words of Souvik Mukherjee.¹⁰⁸ The series features a generic “barbarians” faction, meant only to be a nuisance that the player eliminates from the map. The player is encouraged to play the colonialist; as there is no method with which to open relations or seek peaceful relations with “barbarians,” the only option is subjugation. Additionally, even when indigenous people are present in the game, they progress

¹⁰⁵ Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?,” 1.

¹⁰⁶ Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern,” 513, 515.

¹⁰⁸ Mukherjee, “Playing Subaltern,” 517.

by working with European technologies and advancements, implying they must first “civilize” themselves by European standards to be recognized as independent peoples.

Often developers will create games on subjects without real critical nuance or “requisite subtlety,” in the words of Professor John Wills, and more nuanced or lesser-known themes and stories get lost in the translation over to a digital game. In his book *Gamer Nation*, Wills discusses how the development of games is highly focused on “what sells—and plays—best.”¹⁰⁹ The result is a fragmented, and often skewed, perspective on how American history played out and, to an extent, how reality operates. The same process influences Historical Strategy set within Europe, the Middle East, or the larger globe, as “simulation shapes our view of reality” and games have the potential to reframe ideas of the past.¹¹⁰

One thing to note is that even *Total War*’s more “inclusive” titles, specifically its high fantasy games in the “Warhammer: Fantasy” universe, feature largely white and male humans despite efforts to make the series more inclusive. Creative Assembly notes that its most recent title, *Total War: Warhammer III*, was intentionally designed to be more inclusive, with characters and factions based around ancient China and more women as military leaders and faction leaders within the game. However, the *Total War: Warhammer* series of games is not historical and is based on the *Warhammer* fantasy tabletop game. Furthermore, it should be noted that the other human factions within the game almost all feature white characters with European, specifically Germano-French, designs. The factions built within the lore of *Warhammer* that

¹⁰⁹ John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 233.

¹¹⁰ Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 16-18, 233.

represented Arabian or African factions were left out entirely of the game's representation of the world.¹¹¹

The ideology behind GamerGate has a strong link to the assumptions expressed in the design of Historical Strategy games, such as *Total War* and *Age of Empires*. Attempts to incorporate histories beyond the masculine and military have been met with severe backlash and resentment on the part of players that very much resembles and is directly related to the GamerGate controversy. Though as of 2021 hostility to developers and journalists has leveled off, there is still a strong resentment toward non-Eurocentric changes in Historical Strategy gaming.

¹¹¹ *Total War: Warhammer III*, Developed by Creative Assembly and Feral Interactive (Published by SEGA and Feral Interactive); Gemma Ryles, "How Creative Assembly wants to make Warhammer 3 more inclusive," Trusted Reviews, January 19, 2022, <https://www.trustedreviews.com/news/gaming/how-developers-want-to-make-warhammer-3-more-inclusive-4196804>.

3 CHAPTER 3: QUEER GAMING AND INCLUSION POST-GAMERGATE

A 2014 post on the “Games” subreddit featured a discussion on Zoe Quinn’s game *Depression Quest*. The general tone of the discussion was far removed from the vitriolic hatred leveled at Quinn by the GamerGate movement. Users on the thread generally talked about the game as a flawed but well-meaning attempt to show the reality of depression.¹¹² Another post on the “GamerGhazi” subreddit, a subreddit directly opposed to GamerGate, wondered why *Depression Quest* was the game that the GamerGate movement chose to get outraged over. The original poster noted that the game was free-to-play and generally intended to be informative yet was a target of severe harassment while official gaming studios use controversial methods to pull more money in from customers. Methods include breaking games up using DLCs or Downloadable Content Packs which lock certain, sometimes mundane or fundamental, game features behind an additional paywall, expensive pre-order specials or Season Passes that players must buy to even have the chance to unlock certain content. Other users on the discussion thread cited other major gaming scandals that received far less attention from the GamerGate community and its hyperfocus on “ethics.” The fact that Quinn and *Depression Quest* were the catalyst for the outrage seemed to be either pure happenstance or intentional targeting.¹¹³

Despite GamerGate’s accusation that Zoe Quinn had used sexual favors to secure a positive review for her game, the primary reaction seemed to stem from a fear of a changing

¹¹² “Have people bothered to play *Depression Quest*? No, I mean it.,” Games Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/2fb1o7/have_people_bothered_to_play_depression_quest_no/, Accessed March 10, 2023.

¹¹³ “*Depression Quest* of all the games to get outraged over,” Games Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/GamerGhazi/comments/57nafx/depression_quest_of_all_the_games_to_get_outraged/, Accessed March 10, 2023 ; “Season Pass” is a term for certain types of “Battle Games,” where the player purchases special access for a particular “season” of gaming content that allows the player to potentially unlock unique content. Additionally, as of June 12, 2023, the GamerGhazi Subreddit along with many others, locked itself in protest to changes made by the site targeting third party apps.

gaming industry.¹¹⁴ Quinn's *Depression Quest* was an attempt to build a game where "fun" was not the primary goal at all. Rather, it was an attempt to build a gaming space around the experience faced by those with depression, and therefore intentionally designed to be uncomfortable. The game did not follow a traditional format with mechanics to learn and exploit and objectives for a player to accomplish in order to win. Rather, it was designed as a form of social commentary on mental health and depression. This reflected a shift in the gaming industry, as more social critique, cultural nuance, and discussion of problematic design or political ideas in games were more openly discussed. In response to an industry that was becoming more diverse and games becoming more involved in social commentary, GamerGaters reacted by claiming that feminism and left-wing politics more generally were corrupting or censoring traditional gaming content. With Historical Strategy, especially the *Total War* titles, this was seen as a form of "white male replacement" within historical gaming.¹¹⁵

Commonly, GamerGater remarks in both 2014 and during 2018 centered around the idea of keeping "political agendas out of entertainment."¹¹⁶ Bonnie Ruberg, a professor of media studies who focuses on queer theory in videogames, argues that this sort of rhetoric reflects a critical part of GamerGate discourse, which centers around a concept that videogames should not

¹¹⁴ Stephen Totilo, "In recent days I've been asked several times," Kotaku, August 20, 2014, <https://kotaku.com/in-recent-days-ive-been-asked-several-times-about-a-pos-1624707346>.

¹¹⁵ Bonnie Ruberg, "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015) 111; "Women soldiers?," Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/3108018050522811353/?ctp=2#c3108018050533542883>, Accessed February 3, 2023 ; "Trying Again," Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735466157769528339/#c1735466157769542824>, Accessed June 13, 2023.

¹¹⁶ "People are still talking about this," Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735466157769835178/#c1735466157769891878>, Accessed June 13, 2023.

be “subject to socially engaged critique” and are “just for fun” in the eyes of the GamerGate movement and similar controversies. This idea plays off the already present stigma of gaming as mere entertainment and shuts down larger discourse and discussion around ideological design and biased world-building in gaming spaces. The argument is that there is a correct and “normal” way to build and play videogames, and this presumption can cause more nuanced messages in gaming to get lost. Ruberg argues that looking past the normalized narrative of “fun” allows for an expanded view of how gaming is approached and how games are designed.¹¹⁷

Ruberg’s emphasis on “No Fun” and other works on “queerness” in gaming is part of an emphasis on the queer perspective in gaming, which refers directly to the subversion of common industry tropes. Many Triple A games feature intense themes of militarization, heteronormativity, and linear history as discussed previously. Historical Strategy games are no different, emphasizing military and conquest over other historical facets and coding superiority narratives into their mechanics. The *Total War* series is designed purely around conflict and aggressive expansion, with diplomacy, commerce, and cultural matters relegated to a mindset of “make the numbers go bigger.” Players often attempt to “paint the map” or cover the entirety of the game’s setting in their color. Nuances of culture, assimilation, coercion, and even genocide get lost in the game’s space of military expansion and total supremacy. Even “cultural” and “economic” objectives, present only in *Total War: Rome II*, require the player to seize or hold some form of power over certain regions. These objectives can technically be completed through diplomatic means but owing to *Rome II*’s limited diplomacy and political mechanics, this is incredibly frustrating to achieve.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Bonnie Ruberg, “No Fun,” 108, 111.

¹¹⁸ Triple A (AAA) refers to videogames with high budget and production values, usually produced by large, established studios such as Ubisoft.



Figure 6: Military Victory Requirements



Figure 7: Economic Victory Requirements



Figure 8: Cultural Victory Requirements

All Victory requirements shown require extensive military expansion and emphasize exercising hegemonic control over other Factions.

In direct contrast to the belief that political agendas and social issues have no place in games, Ruberg counters that videogames in general are “fundamentally political.” Intentional or otherwise, political or ideological themes make their way into gaming as they do in other forms of entertainment. Historical Strategy games, with their emphasis on military conquest, subjugation, and might-makes-right game design, code in a very imperialist ideology. As previously seen, efforts to diversify or open up different historical narratives in the gaming industry, such as with *Total War: Rome II*’s addition of women in playable roles, results in major backlash against a perceived leftist enemy trying revise history. Attempts to move Historical Strategy away from Eurocentrism and to bring more emphasis on African or Asian cultures resulted in some players claiming that changing the focus away from European history was a

form of erasure that targeted average players. Those civilizations deemed unworthy are simply removed from the narrative as they did not contribute as much to history in general and therefore adding them to historical narratives in game format constitutes a form of revisionism.¹¹⁹

The primary goal of Queer games studies is to subvert common gaming tropes and dismantle norms about how games are designed and what worlds they build. While this partly concerns how people are represented in gaming spaces, it also involves questioning exactly how such spaces are designed. Often Historical Strategy revolves around justifying military expansion and the subjugation of other peoples for the sake of “civilization.” Though there is an undertone of rewriting history and getting involved in historical content more generally, Historical Strategy games emphasize a very hegemonic and controlling historical narrative. Economic issues in these types of games often only serve as a vessel for military matters. Money means a stronger military, a stronger military can hold more territory, more territory equals more money, rinse and repeat. Queer games studies aims to examine gaming systems and challenge their tropes in effort to challenge the “monolith” of large studios and their productions.¹²⁰

As it stands many Historical Strategy games have built in complex systems promoting capitalistic or imperialistic solutions to problems presented within them. In province management in the later *Total War* games, players are faced with the concept that it is possible to buy stability for a larger empire, using vast treasuries built from conquering to buy upgrades for buildings that keep their empire stable. The game becomes very capitalistic in its philosophy; as

¹¹⁹ Phillips and Ruberg, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg ; Paul, *Toxic Meritocracy*, 2; anyone have a black Hannibal mod?,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/2995422276371544760/?ctp=4#c2995422276379512799>, Accessed June 23, 2023.

¹²⁰ Naomi Clark, “What is Queerness in Games,” in *Queer Games Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 4-9.

there are no real downsides or costs to expansion and control of territory, the player eventually becomes rich and all-powerful and unable to be beaten. Rebellions can be dealt with in a few clicks, and further unrest handled with a quick investment into an army or infrastructure.

Scholar Zoya Street refers to a form of “extreme heteronormativity” within the gaming industry at large that often colonializes marginalized experiences and reduces them down to more “comfortable” historical narratives, which turns even violent histories into distant resource management games and building simulators.¹²¹ Historical Strategy’s tendency to focus on military stories and great leaders in history simplifies and normalizes the militarized narrative in historical gaming and in popular history. Street argues that standard historical practice and methodologies can often leave out marginalized peoples and can render “messy, personal, and perhaps a little painful” histories “rationalized” into narratives that are more comfortable for the “status quo.” We can see this trend within gaming and Historical Strategy, where the messy factors of military expansion and intervention are covered up by the entertainment value of gameplay and the cold logic of reducing public happiness and political approval to numerical values.¹²²

A primary example exists within some earlier Historical Strategy games, such as the original *Rome: Total War* and *Medieval: Total War II*. The LGBT community, often reduced to stereotypes in the industry more generally, is represented very poorly within the genre, with traits alluding to transgender or homosexual behavior as negative for commanders and characters. These traits apply a “debuff,” or penalty to the character, reducing their ability to function in the game’s designed space. *Medieval Total War II* has the worst representation to date, with one

¹²¹ Zoya Street, “Queering Games History,” in *Queer Games Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 35.

¹²² Alex Adams, “Colonialism Simulator,” <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/rebel-inc-colonialism-simulator/>.

forum citing the increasingly egregious stereotypes applied to homosexuality and gender non-conformity within the game. The homosexuality “trait” for generals in *Medieval 2* has three tiers or levels of severity. The final level implies the stereotype of queer people as child predators, noting the general as an “embarrassing parody of an ugly woman.”¹²³




5	Arse	Uninhibited	1	Not at all embarrassed about embracing another man.	-1 Authority			When to test : BrotherAdopted Condition : Affects : Arse 1 Chance : 1 %
		Shameful	4	Aware that his unholy urges to be with other men could see him in trouble.	-2 Authority			When to test : CharacterComesOfAge Condition : IsGeneral Affects : Arse 1 Chance : 4 %
		Too Well Groomed	8	Just one step too pretty and polished for his sexual preference to escape a discerning eye.	-1 Command, -3 Authority			When to test : CharacterTurnEnd Condition : Trait Arse >= 1 Affects : Arse 1 Chance : 4 %
		Shameless Queen	16	An embarrassing parody of an ugly woman, endlessly prattling on about young boys.	-3 Command, -5 Authority		the Queen	When to test : CharacterTurnEnd Condition : EndedInSettlement RemainingMPPercentage = 100 RandomPercent > 90 Affects : Arse 1 Chance : 1 %

Figure 9: Homosexuality traits within *Medieval II: Total War*

In *Rome: Total War* a general can acquire a secondary character called an ancillary which reflects the general taking a lover while on campaign. Though initially simply labeled as “adulteress,” the third “level” of this ancillary implies a transgender or gender-nonconforming person with the description “a ‘woman’ that can grow a beard.” Some arguments state that the negative “debuffs” applied to characters with these traits or ancillaries reflect a historical disdain for homosexuality and queerness in general, which results in a decrease in authority or respect. However, the games often also included a heavy decrease in the ability to command soldiers, implying homosexuality directly impacts a general’s ability to lead. Since *Rome: Total War* and *Medieval Total War: II*, released in 2004 and 2006 respectively, traits like these have appeared

¹²³ “Extreme Homophobia from the Total War series,” last modified September 20, 2018, <https://www.resetera.com/threads/extreme-homophobia-from-the-total-war-series.68876/>, Accessed February 14, 2023.

less and less but any representation of LGBT people remains reduced to a trait and one or two lines of text if they appear at all. This not only builds a narrative that queer people only existed as peculiarities in history, but also creates an aura of abnormality around the LGBT, which both pushes queer players out and emboldens those who follow a heteronormative narrative of history.¹²⁴

98		Adultress	Sex	Though never publicly seen at his side, it is common knowledge that this woman is there when his wife is not.	+1 Dread, -1 Piety, -1 Morale for all troops on the battlefield, Decreases the chance of having children	When to test : CharacterTurnEnd Condition : EndedInSettlement RemainingMPPercentage = 100 SettlementBuildingExists >= coaching_house IsGeneral IsMarried SpouseAttribute Charm < 6 Attribute Chivalry < 3 Chance : 5 %
99		Outlander Adultress	Sex	Though long campaigns make his lordship's desire for this woman understandable, it's shameful that his wife back home has no chance to see the deception for herself.	+1 Dread, -1 Piety, -2 Morale for all troops on the battlefield, -1 from popularity (has a negative effect on public order), Decreases the chance of having children	When to test : CharacterTurnEnd Condition : InEnemyLands IsMarried TimeInRegion > 3 Trait Loyal < 0 Attribute Chivalry < 3 Chance : 5 %
100		Foreign Fruitcake	Sex	Forsaking one's wedding vows for a 'woman' that can grow a beard does nothing for a leader's rapport with his men.	+1 Dread, -1 Piety, -3 Morale for all troops on the battlefield, -1 from popularity (has a negative effect on public order), Decreases the chance of having children	When to test : CharacterTurnEnd Condition : Trait Arse >= 2 IsMarried Chance : 5 %

*Figure 10: “Comfort Woman” Ancillary
The final tier of this implies a transgender individual*

Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda Phillips argue that gaming “as a medium and an industry have been aligned with the forces of hegemony and empire” and that the field of games studies has largely been dominated by white men, who often emphasize “apolitical formalism” in their discussions of gaming. The allegedly “apolitical” aspect of games studies links closely with the “just for fun” argument pushed by GamerGate. Journalists covering larger mainstream games will often praise or critique general design or mechanics of games, either without engaging in social critique or otherwise dismissing it. *The Witcher* series is a prime example as Christopher

¹²⁴ “Extreme Homophobia from the Total War series,” last modified September 20, 2018, <https://www.resetera.com/threads/extreme-homophobia-from-the-total-war-series.68876/>, Accessed February 14, 2023; I credit the online forum where I accessed the images here, but these traits are available within the game’s files.

Paul and Tauriq Moosa noted how reviewers would laud the series' storytelling and gameplay but make no mention of the lack of people of color.¹²⁵

As of 2022, the industry itself has taken steps to reduce Eurocentrism within historical gaming and made public attempts to be more inclusive. *Age of Empires II* has both continued its trend of adding more non-European civilizations to the game, as well as delving into more regional areas of history such as in the *Dynasties of India* expansion, which replaced the generic "Indians" civilization with Dravidians, Bengalis, Hindustanis, and Gurjaras. The *Total War* series has attempted to distance itself with "the misogynistic overtones of the past" in its most recent title *Total War: Warhammer III*, which released in February of 2022. Additionally, GamerGater rhetoric within some discussion boards was relatively muted compared to the original GamerGate scandal and the 2018 update for *Rome II*, though some users still decry "far-left talking points" within the genre.¹²⁶

A Total War Saga: Troy, which focuses on the events of the Iliad, saw some players questioning why the Aethiopian King Memnon was portrayed as a black man within the game. In a discussion thread from 2022 on the matter, several commenters argued the primary reason was "sjw bs" and connected to further efforts on the part of Creative Assembly to change history. However, other commenters disagreed with these statements, and argued that while "wokeness" was a problem within the industry, the portrayal of Memnon in *A Total War Saga: Troy* did not constitute such a transgression. In another post a user countered a claim that the 2018 update for

¹²⁵ Phillips and Ruberg, "Not Gay as in Happy," https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.; Ruberg, "No Fun," 111.

¹²⁶*Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Developed by Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, and Wicked Witch, (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2019; ""unseasonal conditions,"" Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/3156453942256717300/?ctp=1>; Gemma Ryles, "How Creative Assembly wants to make Warhammer 3 more inclusive."

Total War: Rome II involved “forced implementation of Roman females.” The poster argued that while they did not like “pro-leftist” developers in gaming, the claim of women as soldiers in *Rome: II* was inherently false. The tone of these discussion threads is noticeably different from earlier GamerGate rhetoric with players challenging the common narrative around the 2018 scandal and GamerGate more generally.¹²⁷

However, this does not mean GamerGate and its rhetoric have since vanished from historical gaming and from gaming in general. It is far more likely that such rhetoric is simply less mainstream, and users have spread out to various other social media sites and online forums. The ideology present within GamerGate can still be found with discussions and reviews of various Historical Strategy titles. Mentions of “radical feminism,” “typical leftists,” and “cringe woke vibes” still populate the discourse within the genre, particularly in reviews of *Total War* games.¹²⁸ *Age of Empires*, though less inundated with such rhetoric, still features discussions that harshly push back against any changes to the game’s depiction of history. For example, a user posted that shared European unit designs for “generic” units was immersion breaking for some players and that there should be cosmetic changes to some units. A second user commented that the poster was a “woke obsessed passive aggressive clown.”¹²⁹ The slogan “get woke, go broke,”

¹²⁷ “Why is Memnon African Black????,” Steam Community *A Total War Saga: TROY* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1099410/discussions/0/3196993831805737324/?ctp=3#c3271309684524380370>.

¹²⁸ What’s coming after TROY?,” Steam Community *A Total War Saga: TROY* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1099410/discussions/0/2946999778474824599/?ctp=7#c3056240606704418633>, Accessed June 13, 2023 ; “In regards to the current debate about ROME II,” Steam Community *Total War: Rome II Emperor Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/214950/discussions/0/1735465524721186900/?ctp=159#c1744478429688353532>, Accessed June 13, 2023 ; “Is this better than AoE 4?,” Steam Community *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/3824162576333006178/?ctp=3#c3824162683810261582>, Accessed June 13, 2023.

¹²⁹ ““Will there ever be an ethnic unit variety DLC?,” Steam Community *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* Discussions,

a phrase very common during *Total War: Rome II*'s scandal, is still common for both users of r/kotakuinaction as well as on Steam discussions, though it has greatly lessened in the latter.¹³⁰ cursory searches of the terms “woke,” “SJW,” and “leftist” on Steam discussion threads for *Total War: Rome II* are largely set within 2018 and focus on the patch introducing women. Mentions of GamerGate on the site are also limited to the same time period. It should be noted, however, that this project does not effectively cover GamerGate and its presence on other social media sites such as Twitter or 4chan, where this type of language was commonplace.

Efforts to reduce Eurocentrism and promote the inclusion of non-white or heterosexual players have been extremely limited. As mentioned previously, the *Total War* series introduced more women as central figures in their most recent fantasy title *Total War: Warhammer III* and placed much of their focus on the “Grand Cathay” faction based on Chinese history and folklore. However, *Warhammer III*, as well as the previous *Total: Warhammer* titles, are designed around cultural stereotypes and cliches and Grand Cathay is less a fantastical re-imagining of China than an idea of an exotic “Oriental” stereotype as described by Souvik Mukherjee.¹³¹ Furthermore, recent inclusions to the *Age of Empires* series, such as the Burgundians and Sicilians, show that

<https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/3773490215223689425/?ctp=3#c3771239453233025276>, Accessed June 13, 2023.

¹³⁰ “Remember: Go woke go broke,” Kotaku in Action Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/12hdvpm/remember_go_woke_go_broke/, Accessed June 13, 2023; Butt-Head, Steam *Total War: Rome II: Emperor Edition* Reviews, <https://steamcommunity.com/id/AwesomeEdward/recommended/214950/>, Accessed June 13, 2023.

¹³¹ *Total War: Warhammer III*, Developed by Creative Assembly and Feral Interactive, (Published by SEGA and Feral Interactive).

there is still a major focus on European nations as well as non-European ones, with some users describing the continued introduction of European peoples into the game as “excessive.”¹³²

Bonnie Ruberg argues for an intensified and continued “resistance” to games and traditional gaming culture, as well as the “communities they have commonly hailed, the problematic politics and values they often embody.”¹³³ The stereotypical idea of a videogame for many is that of the violent and chaotic FPS or “First Person Shooter,” such as the *Halo* or *Call of Duty* series, first released in 2001 and 2003 respectively, and the average gamers as socially inept, often unhealthy, white males. Historical Strategy follows the same trend, as while the general chaos and toxicity present in other genres may not be as apparent, the fact that the games focus on war and violence shows a similar pattern. Historical Strategy represents a subset of what Bonnie Ruberg refers to as “hardcore” gaming often associated with the negatives of gamer culture, with all the insults and aggression present in other genres.¹³⁴

The Queer perspective also subverts the standard methods of play, intentionally ignoring conventional methods with which to play games. The inclusion and representation of marginalized people is not the primary goal, as “inclusion itself can be limiting” and reinforces power structures present within gaming rather than undermining them. Rather, the purpose is to question the very norms of game design and undermine the traditional constraints games place on players. Ruberg notes, for example, how a game designer used the game *Halo* for virtual hikes through the landscapes of the game, rather than for the intense combat it is known for.

¹³² “Less euro-centrism please,” Steam Community *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* Discussions, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/813780/discussions/0/3145179089264254038/?ctp=2#c3145179152331652977>, Accessed June 7, 2023.

¹³³ Phillips and Ruberg, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

¹³⁴ Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture?” 1; Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 202, 208.

Instead of playing the game as it is “meant” to be played, she uses it for conversations with friends and for observing a meticulously crafted 3D world. In subverting how *Halo* is “meant” to be played, the game’s meaning could be reinterpreted and reimagined.¹³⁵

A Queer perspective can look past the narratives around militarization and history through conquest to explore other stories in the genre. A key method by which players can undermine conventional play in the genre is through the act of modding. Modding allows players to directly change the function or appearance of a game, from small cosmetic changes to full overhauls that recreate the game entirely. Some mods allowed players to unlock factions or nations that were otherwise unplayable, which enables them to experience the game from a new perspective. In the case of *Total War*, unlocking factions this way resulted in a gameplay experience without set objectives or territorial requirements for the player, turning gameplay from military conquest to a purely open “sandbox” style of play free of the constraints of pre-determined objectives.

The original *Rome: Total War* has a feature by which players could choose to observe a settlement during its day-to-day existence. The game would load a 3d render of the chosen village or city and players could observe buildings they had constructed and see townspeople wandering the city streets. Unlike the rest of the game’s design, there is no action to take nor soldiers to command. The player could simply observe their city from any angle and admire it. This is a harsh break from the structured expansion and military conquest for which the series is known and granted players an option to simply exist in a space.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Phillips and Ruberg, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg ; Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 208-209.

¹³⁶ *Rome: Total War*, Developed by The Creative Assembly (Published by Sega, 2004).

Within the broader terms of game design, Historical Strategy games began affecting changes to their design in the leadup to and during GamerGate. In 2015, within the general timeframe of the GamerGate period, Creative Assembly released *Attila: Total War* as a successor to *Total War: Rome II*. *Attila* featured more complex game designs and players were suddenly faced with many moving pieces to consider during play. Climate change was a major feature as the game is set in a time where global temperature is dropping year by year. Sanitation, cultural buildings, food supply, administration, and diplomacy all play a much more critical role in *Attila* than in earlier titles and many later additions to the series. Military conquest and expansion are far more difficult and the player is often scrambling to protect what little they have rather than branch out.¹³⁷

Attila represented a development within the industry as studios attempted to expand how their games operate and how they portrayed history. The main campaign setting features survival as a major objective for the player. Though expansion and military matters are still a large part of gameplay, the design of the world and the objectives granted to the player create a complicated and chaotic experience. Players are forced to deal with climate change, migrating peoples, and the chaos that comes with a collapsing Roman Empire. These new layers to play created an active simulated historical system, wherein both player and AI factions responded to opportunities and crises with a mix of military and non-military actions.

New campaigns for *Age of Empires II* involve more story based or unconventional missions past the ubiquitous “build and destroy” type scenarios present in earlier campaigns, though the game still places most of its emphasis on military expansion, army control, and empire building. For example, the Kotyan Khan campaign, released in 2019, places very little

¹³⁷ *Total War: Attila*, Developed by Creative Assembly (Published by SEGA, 2015).

emphasis on empire-building and conquest and rather has the player technically losing battle after battle. The main aim of the Cuman campaign is survival, and this drastically changes the feel of the game and narrative overall. Each scenario has the player desperately clinging to life and escaping their enemies rather than defeating them. Though the gameplay still emphasizes battle and warfare above all else, the campaign tells a unique story using the game's mechanics and design tools. Combat is a major part, but the story told through play is one of desperation and chaos, rather than conquest. This is a very different type of narrative from many other campaigns in earlier versions of the game. Rather than goals emphasizing the players' subjugation or conquest of others, the narrative is focused on desperation and survival. The player is often set against an unofficial clock, where they must achieve objectives in order to simply survive.¹³⁸

Compared to the Cumans' earlier appearance in the original Genghis Khan campaign in 1999, it's a night and day change. The Cumans originally appeared as a minor, easily defeated, village in the Mongols' feature campaign. The original title, which did not include the Cumans as a playable, had them in the game as a renamed Mongol player and gave them no real story or background. While the representation of the Cuman people is not too far from the heavy military-minded history of much of the rest of the game, it does show a step in a different direction. The campaign's difficulty and desperate narrative changes play into an uncomfortable and frightening experience.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Developed by Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, and Wicked Witch (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2019).

¹³⁹ *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, Developed by Forgotten Empires, Tantalus Media, and Wicked Witch (Published by Xbox Game Studios, 2019).

However, most Historical Strategy games maintain a style of play that normalizes hegemonic and colonial gameplay. Cultural matters within *Total War* settle around forced conversion of other religions and cultures outside of the players own via leveling religions structures and “barbarian” towns to raise civilized cities in their place. *Age of Empires* and *Civilization* are each designed around a combat style where, as one *Civilization* player described it, “genocide is practically a victory condition.” “Wonders of the world,” often available for players to build or capture depending on the game type, often focus purely on Western Classical monument such as Halicarnassus, the Parthenon, or the Colossus of Rhodes with few others among them. Each game emphasizes military expansion, destruction, and the conversion of native populations and indigenous peoples and portrays it in a manner that is apolitical and normalized.¹⁴⁰

Responses to any change to this style of play, as seen with both GamerGate and the *Rome Total War Scandal*, have been mixed. For every commenter that advocates for more inclusive and diverse historical simulations, another claims such an action equates to historical revisionism or the presence of “radical leftism” within the videogame industry. GamerGate showed that a culture that espoused control and exclusivity of its digital space would readily apply that control to historical simulation when pressed.

¹⁴⁰ Majewski, “What Do Players Learn from Videogames,” 78.

4 CONCLUSION

Historical Games post-GamerGate are noticeably more careful in their approach to marginalized peoples than early titles from the mid-2000s. Presentation of non-European peoples, women, and LGBT people has improved from the days of the original *Rome: Total War* in 2004. YouTuber Cody Bonds has made a series of videos on recent *Total War* content including *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, released in 2019, and the continuing *Warhammer* series of games which began in 2016, arguing that military history content and war gaming has long been a “boys club.” In a video from 2019 on *Three Kingdoms* introduction of female character, he stated that efforts from CA and other developers are intended to expand the audience of Historical Strategy and gaming to appeal to a more diverse audience. Bonds voiced his support for this idea, as introducing more players to historical games could build a wider interest in history. While this shows a definite change from the early 2000s and 2010s in both gamer culture and industry approaches to representation, it does not remove the presence of toxicity in gaming culture.¹⁴¹

However, GamerGater rhetoric has not disappeared and has in fact resurged on Twitter as of early 2023. Sites such as 4chan and certain Reddit pages still uphold the idea that changes in the gaming industry are direct attacks on history and constitute the erasure of white people from the narrative. Online forums and discussion boards, such as Steam and the total war forums, are still filled with those who respond to any attempt to shift the culture of gaming with rage. It is likely that toxicity within gaming and Historical Strategy will never die out entirely, and games that attempt to broaden their audience or tell understated histories will continue to receive backlash on par with *Total War: Rome II* in 2018 and GamerGate in 2014.

¹⁴¹ Cody Bonds, “ZHENG JIANG: The Bandit Queen | Total War: Three Kingdoms - Warlord Legends,” March 24, 2019, YouTube video, 4:45-5:45, 6:00-6:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oisQDRSa20>.

Queer game theory, through its intentional subversion of common tropes with gaming, challenges how history is presented within Historical Strategy. The “reimagining” of games and how they are played opens the possibility to tell stories that do not rely on themes of exploitation or military expansion in their design.¹⁴² The impact of such radical rethinking of historical games can already be seen, as more players question Eurocentrism or hegemony within games, and developers aim to diversify gameplay experiences and make some efforts towards inclusion. However, as a whole, Historical Strategy games still prioritize military violence and exploitation as primary vessels for their historical worlds. Gaming culture remains toxic and will continue to resist efforts to reimagine them.

¹⁴² Phillips and Ruberg, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

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