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Novigrad in the evening sun. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015)

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Special Issue

Gamevironments of the Past.

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

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Introduction: Gamevironments of the Past – A Broad Take on Games and History

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

Abstract: Notes on the workings of history in games, historical culture, game design, and putting together this special issue of *gamevironments*.

Keywords: gameenvironments, historical culture, historical consciousness, history, video games

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The many faces of history and games

Initiating the work on this issue, *Gamevironments of the Past*, we wanted to revisit the open and inclusive take on scholarship that has so far been a staple in our academic discipline, in order to cover as many aspects of gaming and history as possible. The cross-sectional and interdisciplinary space of game studies continues to be a melting pot of scholarly experimentation and development. We wish this issue to mirror this notion, and to build it particularly on the potential that arises from the mix of game studies and the humanities. While the scope of game studies expands and branches into specific subfields, we find it important not to lose sight of the benefits of broader thinking. Studying the interplay of different aspects of a game, such as design, contents and reception, allows us to see the networks of communication surrounding both gameplay and development.

The quote below may exemplify these thoughts; it comes from a *GameSpot* review (Clarke 2014) of the historical war survival game *This War of Mine* (2014), which was

set to take place during the Balkan Wars of the 1990's. The player is taken on an emotional roller-coaster in a game dealing with micro-events, mentalities, and atrocities of a civilian experience, which forever changed the lives of so many people in the area and beyond it.

“Is this a game you want to play? No. Is it a game anyone with a beating heart should play? Yes. A million times yes. It's a long-form exercise in empathy, a sobering piece of work that fills in the blanks left when all we see of war are the headshots. It's a much-needed course correct in the current shoot-first-ask-questions-never gaming landscape that supposes war is won because one supreme bad guy caught a bullet through his brainstem. No: It's won when the people who lived under his boot get to go home.” (Clarke 2014).

In the above quote, something in particular caught our interest. The journalist writes of a “much-needed course correct in the current shoot-first-ask-questions-never gaming landscape”. The suggestion here is, that players would tend not to ask questions to the contents of the games, past the instant gratification of a kill, a score, or some added experience points, unless the game was specifically designed to trigger moral or ethical considerations. Furthermore, it also suggests that there is a particular need for games like *This War of Mine*, in order to achieve interactive products that allow players to *truly* ask questions about the essence of the games they are playing.

It is, of course, certain that other types of games also trigger similar and other relatable questions, thoughts, or even to some extent, learning processes concerning history in the minds of the players. One need not go further than any Internet forum discussing some gaming topic and read the near infinite number of debates, comments, player accounts, reviews, or hints, to understand that players are indeed quite invested in the digital products that they are handling. The question is, in which ways do games of varying genres facilitate communication, produce value, and invoke thought through the vast provisions of design, historicity and narration?

Because, images of history and conceptions of historicity do saturate the design process, the completed games and the gaming experience as a whole. If these relations were brought into the open, they would probably concern most of the available scene and most of the merchandise. Design principles and choices, partially hidden in the rules, principles, categorisations and genres, build upon decades of traditions and theoretical considerations, just like those outlined in for example Wendy Despain's *100 Principles of Game Design* (2013). Historical culture overflows the visual design, anchoring games in certain environments, each new game capturing yet another plausible ambience and relatable realism, while rendering novel yet adapted *Zeitgeists* for obvious reasons of immersion and incorporation.

Games can be virtual time travels into imagined communities. The contents, storylines, narrative layers and textual elements of digital games utilize centuries of folklore, beliefs, historical events, and literature. Sometimes the writers and designers even create backdrops of imagined libraries or detailed (semi-)fictional timelines, working just like historians developing counterfactual sources and chronologies, all for the extended joys of the fans. In addition, the games, even if fully commercialised, often promote reflections on ideologies, alternatives and political choices, often consciously taking the players into the grey zones of ethics and morality.

Games, even many which were not intended for this, work their way into the minds of the players as educational experiences; scores of games have a serious core dealing with history conceived as problematic, historical traumas, commemorations, private and national memories, as well as modern anxieties stemming from the past but bearing into the future. To pose a related question, have you ever considered why so many historicizing games display some level of an Apocalypse, be it then from zombies, a rat plague, nuclear fallout, Reapers, "The Incident" or plain civil war? Many

game features, like having female protagonists or presenting sexual freedom of choice, or storylines considering racism, segregation, totalitarianism or the essence of humanity in general, are all firmly anchored in modern discourses, in the present historical moment. Even the current interest in retro gaming, without any overtly ideological issues, can be seen as part of a modern historical culture.

Content Summary

The possible topics that could be covered by related research are too numerous to mention here, and the field remains vast for the coming years of historical game studies.ⁱ We can, nevertheless, in this issue of *gamevironments* provide some contributions to enlighten the readers and develop future scholarship on some of the outlined subjects.

In this issue at hand, Cecilia Trenter, Xenia Zeiler and Sarah Zaidan all contribute with developer perspectives in their articles. Trenter provides us with a rather unique interview on *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and historical culture and consciousness. With regards to the sometimes frustrating wall between scholars of games and game developers, the questions and insights provided by the article are valuable and contribute greatly towards an understanding of the thinking and decision-making behind the products we study.

In a compelling report from the Indian game development scene, Xenia Zeiler gives her perspective on the current state of the industry through a platform and topics analysis and interviews conducted on-site in 2016. The indie scene in particular appears to draw heavily on history and cultural heritage for inspiration.

Zaidan, in turn, is a game scholar as well as a game developer herself. Building on the work she did on her PhD, she contributes with an article in which she elaborates on her work on building a video game based on theories and principles sprung from game research. She is on a journey to produce a video game called *The Adventures of Ms Meta*, a historical superhero brawler game.

Along the same lines, Owen Gottlieb tackles the topic of design-based research in his article about learning history through situated documentaries. He asks questions about the reception and potential benefits of a learning tool which mixes the authentic with the fictional, with particular regards to augmented reality mobile platforms.

In an empirical study, Robert Houghton asks students of history at university level “where did you learn that?” The article builds on a small-scale, preliminary study with the aim to examine if the video game form has a greater level of perceived transformative impact on players than other media. The results highlight the potential in using video games to teach history alongside the importance of understanding the portrayal of history in the games before we do.

Vinicius Marino Carvalho’s article is a contribution on game design, history and agency. Deconstructing tropes of historiography and the causal chain of *Witcher 3: A Wild Hunt* (2015), Carvalho describes the various interplay of contents and mechanics with a profound theoretical approach.

JD Mallindine’s contribution delves into the culture of JRPGs – Japanese Role Playing Games. In her preliminary pilot study, Mallindine explores the topics of *genre* and *nostalgia* by looking at games critique and accompanying comments online. Her findings point to the importance of mapping community life and fan cultures when

exploring the history and development of game genres.

Brittany Kuhn writes about the first instalment of the *Bioshock* series (2007) – a game with an explicit intent to criticise Ayn Rand’s objectivism. Focusing on how the building architecture and symbolism inside the game facilitate said critique, Kuhn brings forward interesting insights on the meaning of level design.

A contribution to historical game study methodology, Mattia Thibault and Vincenzo Idone Cassone draws on theoretical applications of semiotics and historiography in order to describe three processes used to create a historical discourse, called the History-Game Relations Framework. The framework is then tested on two games as case-studies: *Total War: Rome II* (2013) and *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (2010).

Finally, on the topic of level design, Samir Azrioual asks “in what ways do *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008) and *Assassin's Creed* (2007) use historical events in their level structure to produce temporal progression?” Building a theoretical framework on time and the layering of time, Azrioual conducts a comparative analysis of the named games.

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ⁱ For a developed discussion on the nature and state of historical game studies, see for example Chapman, Foka and Westins (2016).