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REPLAYING HISTORY:

Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Video Game Narratives

Abstract

In this research paper, I develop a conceptual framework through which I identify two ways in which historical practices, events, and spaces are represented and engaged with in video games. The concepts I propose are historical accuracy to reflect well-established narratives and a high fidelity to factual data, and historical authenticity to reflect lesser known narratives and a more complex and sometimes abstract interpretation of history. The research concentrates on the modalities in which history is represented in mainstream video games, what similarities or dissimilarities can be drawn from the analysis of various historical digital games, and how can these games be designed to foster diversity and fair representation.

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1 Introduction

Adam Chapman succinctly and efficiently defines historical video games as "those games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it" (Chapman et al., 2017, p. 359). Thus, by representing practices related to history, historical video games are presented as artifacts that are closely connected to socio-cultural aspects of both our past and present. These video games hold cultural value and meaning and retain an interdiscursive character as they engage with a variety of discourses that over time influence our perception and understanding of the past.

Yet historical games represent a rich source of study not only through their content but also through their development process as they take inspiration from not only game studies but a variety of other fields such as historiography, education, cultural studies, and memory studies. This thesis aims to contribute to a theoretical and critical discussion around games as intersectional and transdisciplinary bodies of research. The study approaches digital games as cultural products and concentrates on their form and on their narrative aspects.

In this research paper, I will develop a conceptual framework in which I identify two ways through which history is represented and engaged with in video games. The first concept I discuss is historical accuracy wherein games concentrate on factual accuracy and realism, usually portraying history as a linear account and relying on master narratives that reinforce a hegemonic view of historical events and spaces. The second concept I discuss is historical authenticity wherein games concentrate on socio-cultural aspects of history and present historical accounts as negotiable rather than unequivocal, allowing for the inclusion of marginal narratives that have been previously ignored from traditional historical accounts.

After developing these concepts, I will apply the created conceptual framework on four mainstream historical video games for the purpose of analyzing the way in which they represent and engage with historical events and spaces, and how this representation impacts their narratives. The analysis will focus on what specific historical elements are included or excluded from the ludic space by game developers, how these elements are presented through game narrative and mechanics, and how players can negotiate these elements in constrained practices of play.

The first section of this paper offers background information that introduces the problem area and places the study within a wider social context by providing understanding about the game industry and its audience, the cultural importance of games, and the reason why people play historical video games in the first place. The second part of this thesis serves as a literature

review that elaborates previous research, synthesizes and analyzes the existing literature on the topic, and situates my own work in relation to this literature.

The third part of this paper presents the research question and the approach of this study, elaborating the methods and concepts I use to develop this research. This section also contains the conceptual framework I designed in order to guide the analysis of the games and to present the main theoretical discussions surrounding the problem area. This framework is constructed out of a combination of theoretical models and concepts retrieved from a variety of fields and disciplines. The forth part of this paper is a presentation and analysis of results where I relate and discuss the findings of my study. This part is succeeded by the fifth and final part of my thesis where I summarize the work as a whole and I discuss the main conclusions of the study in relation to the research questions and aim while also mapping out future research possibilities.

2 Background

In the last two decades the value of the global video games market has experienced perhaps the quickest growth of all new media, attesting to the increasing popularity of video games across the world. On a narrower scope, in 2019, 65% of American adults (ESA, 2019) and 54% of Western Europeans aged 6 to 64 (ISFE, 2019) declared that they play video games, while the total video game revenue produced in these regions amounts to over 66.5 billion USD.

Due to this evolution in the commercialization and distribution of video games, our understanding of the industry, its audience, and its products have changed over the years. However, divides over what video games are and towards who they are addressed still exist both in public opinion and the scholarly field.

2.1 Games as Cultural Products

For a long time, video games have been regarded simply as forms of entertainment, construed to portray fantasy and experimental spaces that are used by players as a form of escapism. Video games are also often viewed as a medium addressed towards children, and so their ludic nature is dismissed as not being of cultural importance or not as something to be taken seriously (Leonard, 2006, p. 83; Chapman et al., 2017, p. 359). Marino Carvalho (2015, pp. 137-138) argues that video games are a fundamentally escapist medium whose purpose is to momentarily distract players from their routine existence and that escape from the real is one of the main forms of satisfaction that can be obtained from gaming. As a consequence, concerning elements present in video games such as racism, misogyny, and homophobia have been regularly trivialized as "just a game" or disregarded as playful or fictional elements that do not reflect reality.

However, in this paper I argue that video games need to be regarded as cultural products that reflect and in turn impact the culture within which they circulate. The effects of media on culture have been previously researched and documented by scholars, leading to the emergence of various theories that demonstrate and explain the relationship between these entities. For example, media ecology theory maintains that a culture's dominant media and its tools and methods of communication shape and form its cultural environments, while cultivation theory posits that habitual exposure to television influences people's beliefs about social reality (Schut, 2007, pp. 215-216; Song and Fox, 2016, p. 200). Thus, media and culture are interlinked and are constantly influencing one another.

These perspectives can also be applied to video games since they are recognized as an important platform for cultural expression, learning, and discussion, and the medium has the

ability to create situated meaning, facilitate discoveries, and encourage social sharing of knowledge (Marino Carvalho, 2015, p. 128; Schut, 2007, p. 214). This means that video games have the ability to store and transmit, both directly and indirectly, information about our present social and cultural environments and they can influence the way players view and interact with socio-cultural issues.

To define culture, I use the lens of cultural criticism which describes culture as "constituted at any given moment in time by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, occupation, and similar factors that contribute to the experience of its members" (Tyson, 2006, p. 297). Therefore, in this paper I argue that video games are products of culture which contain within them gendered, racialized, sexualized, and national meanings and that they contribute to and have a significant role in contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural discourses.

Games also foster a dual focus on culture: internal, showing the culture represented within the game, and external, showing the culture of games and gameplaying (San Nicolás Romera et al., 2018, p. 523). This is especially true for historical video games; these games aim to simulate a real-world historical period and to portray and recreate within the ludic space of the game the social and cultural contexts of that time. As a result, these types of video games hold a great internal focus on culture. Furthermore, in recent years, historical themes have become increasingly popular in mainstream media, with the majority of them being set in Ancient Rome, World War II, and most often in the Middle Ages (Lidén, 2017, p. 2). This surge in interest for historical content has also widened the audience of historical video games and led to the formation of a community of players who have created a gaming culture surrounding this genre. Consequently, historical video games also have an external focus on culture which concentrates on its gaming community.

The external focus can also be extended to reflect on the impact the historical representations within these games have on players' perception and knowledge of historical narratives. Historical content in games is of particular importance due to the unique interactive nature of the medium which has been shown to facilitate learning and dissemination of knowledge more so than older media like film or literature (McCall, 2016, p. 524).

Historical games are essential as cultural products because they not only reflect our present cultural environments and contexts but they also portray our current understanding of the past. Marino Carvalho (2015, p. 128) cites that "videogames, as manifestations of a new digital culture, are vital to understanding and conditioning popular appropriations of history [...] and they might even illustrate a generational shift in the contemporary perceptions of temporality and historical consciousness." This then shows that, as a new medium, video games bring new

ways of reflecting the past, but they also illustrate a propagation of stereotypical outlooks on history.

Historical games often portray hegemonic narratives that favor Eurocentric, heteronormative, and patriarchal historical accounts in order to emulate an image of the past that aligns with contemporary popular appropriations of historical periods and events. These popular views frequently associate history with simpler times, traditional values, senseless violence, and strict social roles and hierarchies, and thus with factors that actively discourage diversity. For this reason, a limited understanding of historical accuracy has often been used, especially by players, as an umbrella term to motivate and excuse cases of racism, misogyny, and homophobia portrayed in video games.

2.2 Social Context and Industry

Both computers and video games are largely associated with male-dominated or male-oriented activities and professions and, for many years, the image of the average gamer has been represented by a white, male, heterosexual teenager (Shaw, 2009, p. 232). As a consequence of viewing this identity as a primary consumer, the video game industry creates content that appeals to this specific category of audience, largely excluding the representation of people of other identities. To support this claim, a number of studies observing various game development companies found that masculine fantasies dominated design discussions relating to characters and gameplay (Shaw, 2009, p. 232).

However, by limiting their base of consumers by age, gender, race, or sexuality, the video game industry is also limiting its own diversity and its ability to appeal to broad audiences. Focusing on the European and North American gaming industries and markets, a shift in audience demographics can be observed, signaling that the face of the average gamer is beginning to change. In 2019, in both the United States and the European Union, 46% of the people who play games were women, and the average age of a gamer was 31 in the EU (ISFE, 2019) and 33 in the US (ESA, 2019).

Nevertheless, despite a changing demographic and growing audience, the gaming industry is still widely criticized for its lack of diversity. A survey conducted in 2019 on over 1000 game developers across the globe showed that only 24% of developers were female, while 71% were male, and 5% had other gender identities (IGDA, 2019). This lack of workforce diversity has an evident impact on the way products are developed. Shaw (2009, p. 232) states that the masculine prevalence in both video game development and audiences is the main reason given for the sexist portrayal of women in most video games. Building upon this argument, I find it important to clarify that the negative portrayal of women in video games does not necessarily

stem from an inherent sexist nature of male game developers or consumers, but rather it can be the result of a lack of female staff who could bring their experiences to the table and voice their opinion in the development process. Tyson (2006, p. 84) notes that there exists a cultural attitude that uses male experiences as the standard by which the experience of all genders is evaluated and that this can blind us to women's point of view.

The same cultural attitude can also be observed when discussing race and sexuality, since the experiences, lifestyles, and perspectives of a white and heterosexual majority are often considered as a standard of universality (Tyson, 2006, pp. 84, 321). The results of IGDA's Developer Satisfaction Survey showed that 69% of developers identified as White or Caucasian while other racial and ethnic identities had a significantly lower percentage (IGDA, 2019). Regarding sexual orientation, 79% of respondents identified as heterosexual, 12% as bisexual, 4% as homosexual, and 5% selected other sexual orientations (IGDA, 2019). Therefore, the heterosexual white male identity occupies the forefront position not only as the primary audience of video games but also in their development process.
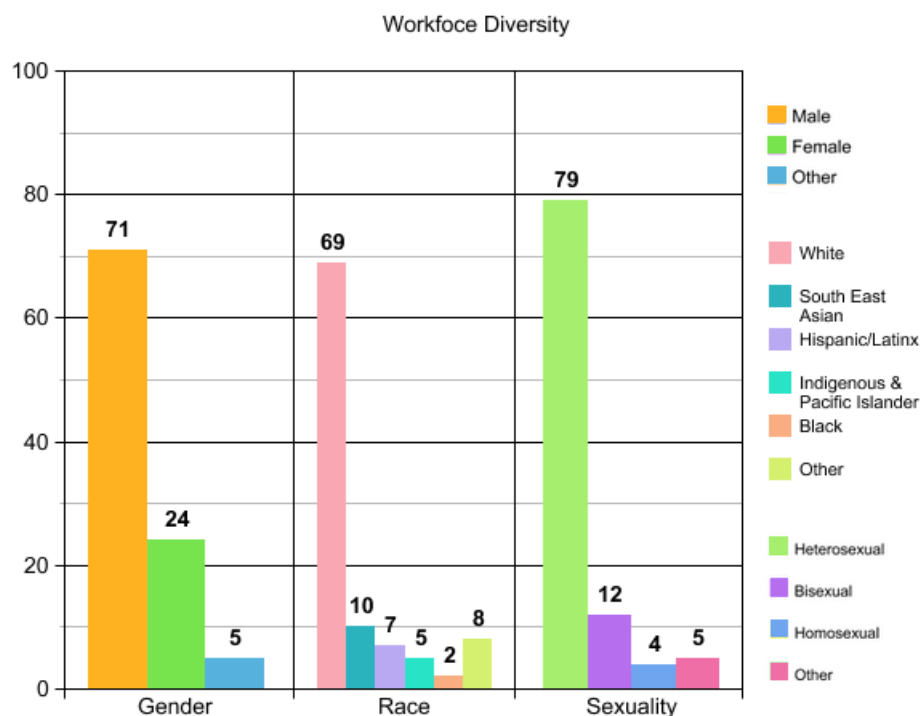

Figure 1. Representation of workforce diversity in the global video games industry. Source: IGDA (2019).

The lack of diversity in the industry is also reflected in the games themselves. A virtual census measuring representations of gender, race, ethnicity, and age in 150 video games from the United States showed that less than 15% of all characters in these video games were female, while over 85% of all characters were male (Williams et al., 2009, p. 825). Moreover, 80% of all characters were White, and only 10% were Black, 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander, less than 3% were Hispanic, and less than 2% were Native American or biracial (Williams et al., 2009, p. 825). When comparing these findings with the US population census, they reflect an over-representation of white bodies and under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in both the industry and among video game characters.
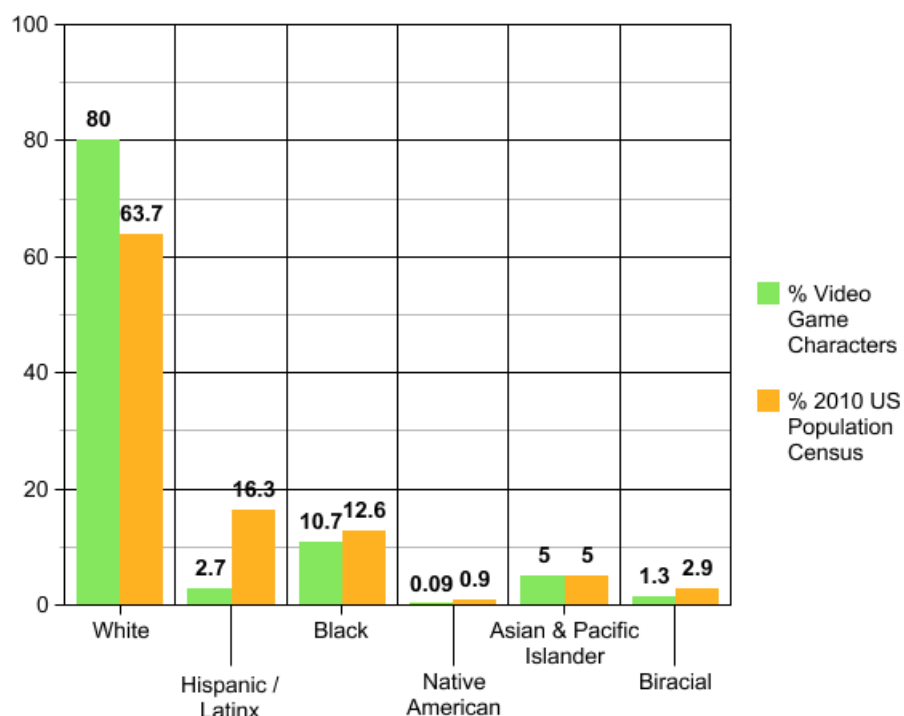
Figure 2. Representation of race in American video games compared to US population. Sources: Williams et al. (2009); United States Census Bureau (2011).

The video game industry has also often shied away from including and openly discussing content that may be seen as "political". This attitude could be caused by a spectrum of views across the development community regarding contemporary social issues but it can also stem from a fear of backlash from the audience. For example, in the case of LGBTQ content in games, gaming spaces are often regarded as being populated by a largely heterosexual audience and are also perceived as potentially homophobic spaces. Shaw (2009, p. 240) notes

that there exists a frequent usage of homophobic slurs within the gaming community, even though they are not always intended as insults against gay people. As a result, this view on gaming culture may deter game creators from including LGBTQ content in their games from fear of losing consumers or revenue.

The same reaction can be observed when looking at the inclusion of female characters in games. In 2018, during the pre-release of *Battlefield V,* a first-person shooter video game, fans of the franchise started a social media campaign marked by the hashtag #NotMyBattlefield devised to protest against the portrayal of women as soldiers. Some of the fans voiced that the representation of women participating in combat during World War II is historically inaccurate, with one Twitter user stating that the game is a "huge sjw [social justice warrior] propaganda turd instead of a proper world war 2 game [...] that looked feeled authentic and believable" (@GeneralAwesome2, 2019). While many video game journalists responded to the campaign by providing historical examples of women participating in combat, instances such as these prove how players correlate hegemonic narratives with historical accuracy. This understanding leads the players to reject representations that deviate from traditional accounts and is also used as a gatekeeping tool that can potentially enable misogynistic views on the role of women or limit the diversity of their representation.

When discussing whether or not diversity and representation in video games are important, some critics like Espen Aarseth have claimed that the immersive qualities of games render representational elements unimportant since players see through and past the digital body of the player character and are able to identify with the character regardless of race, gender or other identity markers (as cited in Young, 2016, p. 344). However, scholarly research employing cultivation theory to investigate effects of television viewing on topics such as perceptions of gender and racial stereotypes have shown that representation in media shapes people's beliefs about social reality and that a lack of representation leads to a form of "symbolic annihilation", signifying that the lived experiences of the group not being represented are deemed as unimportant and therefore not necessary to represent in media (Song and Fox, 2016, p. 200; Shaw, 2009, p. 231).

These principles can also be applied to the medium of digital games since the effects of this lack of representation can be observed through racism, misogyny, and homophobia within the gaming community, the stereotypical portrayals of minorities in video games, and the frequent failure of developers to create characters with realistic non-White appearances (Young, 2016, p. 343). In the case of historical video games, the lack of representation can be ascribed to maintaining a perceived "historical accuracy" whose factual basis lies less in complex portrayals of time periods and more in the hegemonic bias of traditional historical research.

As Chapman et al. (2017, p. 365) also note, mainstream historical videogames seem to have a tendency toward deeply hegemonic interpretations of the past, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity/race, since games favor historical experiences that are white, European, or male.

2.3 Simulation and Nostalgia

In order to better understand why a limited understanding of historical accuracy is used as an excuse for gatekeeping and for the omission of a diverse cast of characters, it is first necessary to explore how history manifests within video games and why do gamers choose to play historical video games.

To assess historical construction in film and television, Rosenstone (2001, p. 52) distinguishes between three different ways through which this medium can depict historical discourse: history as drama, history as document, and history as experiment. The first refers to the dramatization of historical events as seen, for instance, in period dramas; the second refers to historical documentaries that are focused on factual data and historical artifacts; and the third refers to experimental films that reject mainstream subjects and practices and instead chose to construct alternative histories. Each one of these models affect in different ways how people approach and negotiate past events.

To extend this typology to video games, Potzsch and Sisler (2019) propose a forth model of depicting historical discourse: history as simulation. Potzsch and Sisler (2019, p. 5) state that "when dealing with history in computer games, issues of representing past events have to be supplemented with attention to the ways through which players are actively engaged in the (re)enactment and (re)shaping of these incidents." This model is created bearing in mind the interactive nature of video games which is absent from other types of media like film and television. Therefore, history as simulation accounts for the direct involvement of players in the simulation of past events through interactivity with the narrative.

When discussing simulation, the works of Jean Baudrillard are seminal in understanding the properties and effects of the medium. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (2006) analyses the boundaries between virtual reality and real-world references, discussing hyperreality, or mediated reality, as a byproduct of the wide-spread use of simulation. He argues that media create and depict representations that are no longer reflective of real-world references and that simulations become our new points of reference instead. In the case of historical video games, this shows how certain representations of historical events and spaces can influence a player's perception about the social and cultural contexts of those times and make the player more willing to accept those representations as real. As a consequence, habitual exposure to media representing historical spaces as highly violent or lacking diversity

may influence the player to perceive them as historically accurate and thus to invoke historical accuracy as an excuse to motivate the presence of problematic elements in video games.

Sloan (2015, p. 534) cites that "Baudrillard emphasizes that simulated realities emerge from a nostalgic desire to return to historical referents, that they create new origin myths and new authenticities, and that ultimately these simulations suppress the original referent, making it more diluted and more distant." In other words, Baudrillard argues that our perceptions of history and the way we position ourselves within historical narratives are mainly based on media representations rather than on direct experience and that the wide-spread use of simulations reflects a collective nostalgic desire to return to those times.

To motivate this nostalgia, Lidén (2017) introduces the concept of *vita gravis*, or heavy life, reflecting the idea of a difficult but purposeful lifestyle that we often commonly associate with the past and with the lives led by our ancestors. Lidén (2017, p. 3) argues that players yearn for a return to a past in which things seem simple and tangible. A similar argument is also brought up by Hong (2015, p. 36) who discusses the reappropriation of historical elements in video games by saying that games draw on the past as an intense and heroic time when life seemed to matter more than it does now. Nonetheless, this nostalgic view on history tends to strip it of social and cultural complexities and transform historical simulations into idyllic spaces that stand in opposition with turbulent contemporary times and widely debated socio-cultural issues.

As previously discussed, video games are often regarded as an escapist medium where players retreat to escape from their routine (Marino Carvalho, 2015, p. 137). This is applicable to historical video games as well since "the alluring promise of uncomplicated purposes in life, mortal strife and the absence of a digital era call out to people as a respite from daily life" (Lidén, 2017, p. 3). This can lead both players and game developers to avoid discussing issues that can be seen as addressing political correctness or social justice because they are seen as sensitive real-life topics that may break the player's immersion into the world of the game. Shaw (2009, p. 236), for example, notes that the main argument against the inclusion of LGBTQ content in video games is that real world issues have no place in virtual fantasies.

However, both Lidén and Hong underline that representations of historical periods as idyllic or overtly simplistic spaces are often inaccurate or exaggerated. Hong (2015, p. 36) debates that "games' reappropriation of the past is primarily oriented not around 'accuracy,' but a pragmatic pillaging of historical, mythical, and ritual elements," while Lidén (2017, p. 4) maintains that "in essence, society craves the idea of a simpler time, and thus, creates it whether it aligns with historical accuracy or not." Therefore, portrayals that strip historical events and spaces of complexity and diversity are not in fact a true reflection of the times but

rather a reflection of our own assumptions and projections about the past that offer an incomplete representation of the social and cultural contexts of the period they portray and enable the propagation of stereotypical views and narratives.

3 Previous Research

In their journal article titled "Video Games Set in the Middle Ages: Time Spans, Plots, and Genres," San Nicolás Romera et al. (2018) classify and analyze 664 digital game titles that deal with historical themes and are set in the Middle Ages. Their research observes games released between 1980 and 2013 and discusses typical plot lines and narratives, popular genres, supported platforms, and the most and least represented historical eras or events that appear in these games.

Firstly, the researchers propose two broad categories of historical games: pure historical video games "in which the story lines and characters remain faithful to past events, with no references to imaginary creatures," and hybrid video games, "those that, while inspired by medieval backdrops and aesthetics, enjoy a degree of creative license similar to that of science fiction narratives, enabling creators to embed their story lines and participants in a mythological universe" (San Nicolás Romera et al., 2018, p. 522). Therefore, pure historical games rely on realism and hyperrealist scenarios that simulate the medieval past, while hybrid games rely on fantasy elements and combine historical facts with the folklore, mythology, or superstitions of the time.

Secondly, the research showed that historical video games experienced a surge in popularity in the last decade and that hybrid games are much more popular than purely historical ones and also tend to have a longer shelf life. The PC platform was found to be the one supporting the highest proportion of games over a longer period of time. The research also revealed that most pure games were strategy-based, whereas hybrid games fell mainly into the action and adventure genres. Over 78% of the pure games and 97% of the hybrid games made no specific allusion to a historical period or event and were just set in generic medieval times. For the ones set in a concrete period, the 11th, 13th, and 15th centuries were the ones most commonly used.

This journal article represents an extensive, effective, and elaborate study of mainstream historical games released in the past few decades and as such it provides a valuable source of theoretical material and empirical data for my own study. San Nicolás Romera's research served as a guiding point in the sampling process of my material since it provided me with insight regarding the most common genres, timelines, and narratives of mainstream historical video games. My study aims to contribute to the problem area by expanding the analysis of historical video games beyond the medieval setting by also including the analysis of games set in Antiquity. Furthermore, my study also offers insight into more recent games by analyzing games released after the year 2012.

Another important research and perhaps a seminal work in the field of historical game studies is Adam Chapman's book titled "Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice" (2016). The book offers an elaborate study of the field of historical video games and defines its conventions and features.

Chapman discusses various aspects of academic history and also popular history (or the history presented in media), stating that video games have the ability to make statements about the past and should therefore be studied. He also introduces the concept of "historying" which reflects the unique ability of video games that allows players to participate in "writing" historical narratives and to create their own perspectives about the past as opposed to passively receiving information from historians (Chapman, 2016, pp. 21-22). This ability deepens the players' understanding of historical narratives. Chapman (2016, p. 272) states that even counterfactual narratives should be studied and taken up for historical consideration because they can serve as a tool for understanding historical causality and can provide complex insights into the motives behind real past events.

Chapman also defines various types of simulation styles that can be encountered in historical video games and can be connected to different epistemologies. Realistic simulation styles are most commonly encountered in shooter games and they feature high-fidelity audio-visual elements that attempt to recreate historical spaces on a limited scale and show the past "how it was" (Chapman, 2016, p. 61). This simulation style is connected to a reconstructionist epistemological approach that is concerned with facts and maintains that history exists independently of those who wish to write about it and so discovering the past is an objective process. On the other hand, conceptual simulation styles are mostly used in strategy games and they favor telling rather than showing history by allowing players to interact with more abstract concepts to better understand historical causality and large scale historical processes (Chapman, 2016, p. 70). This style of simulation can be connected to a constructionist epistemology that is concerned with history as constructed through various discourses and theories, thus identifying causal generalizations and patterns of behavior.

However, Chapman identifies a problem with reconstructionist and constructionist epistemologies as both profess an impartial and independent approach to historical knowledge and fail to account for the subjectivity of history writers. Thus, Chapman (2016, p. 81) also identifies a deconstructionist epistemology which concentrates on the process of history writing but it is not connected to any particular simulation style. The deconstructionist epistemology is concerned with self-reflexivity and an acknowledgement of subjectivity in historical accounts. In regards to this, Chapman (2016, p. 15) also proposes the concept of

"developer-historians", in which game developers act as historians and are responsible for the interpretations and representations they include in their games.

The main question in Chapman's book is whether or not video games can be used to tell history and how does the medium of games affect historical narratives. Therefore, the book provides a valuable source for my own research and represents a fundamental starting point in my study of historical games. My thesis builds upon and expands the concepts developed by Chapman by connecting the narrative styles to the form, rules, and mechanics of the game in order to analyze the ways in which historical practices, events, and spaces can be transcoded and represented in various digital games.

4 Problem

Previous scholarly research materials have discussed many aspects of digital games, analyzing their content and design, the way players interact with and immerse themselves within the ludic space, their potential to convey knowledge, and their use as learning tools, thus studying video games as cultural products. However, both developers and gamers frequently shy away from ascribing ideological or socio-political meaning to games, arguing that video games are designed for entertainment and should therefore not engage with real world issues (Leonard, 2006, p. 83; Shaw, 2009, p. 236). Yet, as previously discussed, due to the nature of the medium and the social and cultural contexts around it, historical video games have a tendency towards hegemonic representations of history.

Nonetheless, the focus of this research falls less on whether or not the digital game medium is suitable for the dissemination of historical knowledge and revolves more around the questions that arise from problems of representation. To analyze why video games portray hegemonic perspectives, inquiries need to be made about what specific historical elements are included or excluded from the ludic space by game developers, how these elements are presented through game narrative and mechanics, and how players can negotiate these elements in constrained practices of play.

This paper then focuses on the following research question: *How is history represented in video games and in what way does this representation influence historical narratives?* The research concentrates on the modalities through which history is represented in mainstream video games, what similarities or dissimilarities can be drawn from the analysis of various historical games, and how can these games be designed to foster diversity and fair representation.

To address these queries, I propose a framework for analyzing, exploring, and demodulating concepts and designs present in already existing video games. This framework of analysis is based on historical accuracy/authenticity theorizations that discuss the various ways in which historical narratives are represented in video games. Using this approach, my research discusses historical representation and diversity within the ludic space of a selected sample of video games and analyzes how these games convey specific cultural discourses that impact the game's narrative. These concepts can then be used when developing video games to ensure better representation and diversity within the game industry and its consumer base in the future.

The conceptual framework is based on data collected from game studies scholarship but also other multidisciplinary fields, and it aims to bring together and map out two modalities of

historical representation for a better understanding of historical video games. This framework is mainly analytical and it aims to assess the way games and their developers represent and engage with historical events and spaces and how these representations affect historical narratives. However, the framework aims to both provide understanding about the nature of historical representation in digital games as well as encourage reflection about our record and conception of the past and our position in relation to historical narratives. Therefore, the framework can also be applied as an analytical tool by game developers themselves in the decision-making process of designing new historical games in order to evaluate the nature of the historical accounts they engage with and the way they choose to represent them.

4.1 Theorization: Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity

4.1.1 Method

For the development of a conceptual framework, I am employing a qualitative method as opposed to a quantitative approach because it is better suited for the study and understanding of artifacts such as video games that are linked to multiple fields of research. Jabareen (2009, p. 51) defines conceptual frameworks as networks of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of phenomena that are linked to multidisciplinary bodies of knowledge. He states that conceptual frameworks possess ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. In this case, the studied phenomenon is the representation of historical elements in digital games, a subject which draws upon theories from various fields of study such as game studies, cultural studies, media studies, and so forth.

These types of frameworks are products of qualitative processes of theorization. However, Jabareen (2009, p. 51) argues that conceptual frameworks are indeterminist in nature and they do not enable the prediction of an outcome. For this reason, I do not propose any hypothesis or other deductive logics of enquiry that precede my current research but instead I will conduct an open-ended study based on inductive reasoning.

The empirical data used in the process of theorization is sourced from various discipline-oriented theories that provide the basis for developing the concepts used to build the framework. Subsequently, the selected texts effectively represent the relevant social, cultural, and political discourses and the multidisciplinary literature that focuses on the phenomenon under study (Jabareen, 2009, p. 53). In my research I employed 16 texts of different types such as books, articles, and essays. The texts were selected using a purposive non-probability sampling procedure and they cover a variety of multidisciplinary bodies of knowledge including historiography, memory studies, game design, digital humanities, cultural heritage, and education. Iterative and comparative processes were used to develop the concepts. The

data collected was analyzed multiple times and it was compared across the texts to limit and verify the attributes, role, and scope of the emerging concepts.

4.1.2 Concepts

When reviewing samples of the existing literature regarding historical representation in video games, I have found a consensus between most. Schott and Redder (2018, p. 3) cite that historical games rarely convey morally challenging or intellectual representations of history but instead use linear accounts of the past that recycle traditional views, discourses, and tropes, avoiding difficult or sensitive historical conflicts and issues. Schut (2007, pp. 220-222) also shares a similar argument, stating that historical video games tend to produce a stereotypical image of history that presents only the life and decisions of powerful White men. In addition, Schut (2007, p. 223) also maintains that games portray history as essentially a chain of cause and effect and reduce complex political and economic developments to simple forms of violent interaction or aggressive power acquisition.

Most historical simulations strive for factual accuracy and realism and for this reason they are commonly based on traditional historicism that presents Eurocentric, heteronormative, and masculine narratives. Therefore, the understanding of **historical accuracy** in digital games is limited and mainly expressed through master narratives that are not necessarily a complete reflection of the past. Tyson (2006, p. 287) defines master narrative as "a narrative told from a single cultural point of view that, nevertheless, presumes to offer the only accurate version of history." These narratives focus on the life of powerful people such as rulers or military leaders because their stories are the ones that get recorded most often and constitute the majority of historical accounts that are preserved in our shared historical consciousness through formal education or storytelling. As a result, history in digital games is primarily focused on a combination of politics, economics, and warfare.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that all historical records are biased. Tyson (2006, p. 283) highlights that "like all human beings, historians live in a particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture." Consequently, historians may leave out the narratives of certain groups of people without realizing or can even choose to intentionally exclude certain identities from their accounts. Schut (2007, p. 219) rejects the idea of objective history and claims that all history is mediated through someone else's recollection or collection of recording technologies such as writing or photography. This is important to keep in mind because different ways of presenting history create different meanings and perspectives, and ultimately they influence the way people think about

themselves and about each other, making the necessity for a diverse historical representation even more evident.

Furthermore, in addition to the bias present in historical records, the medium of digital games also holds its own biases. Schut (2007, p. 216) notes that through the perspective of media ecology, each medium has a bias, since a medium is useful at facilitating some forms of communication but inevitably inhibits other forms. These limitations have cultural effects as they enable certain kinds of uses or interpretations. Schut (2007, p. 218) identifies three biases of the digital game medium: they favor stereotypically masculine interests and constructions, they have a highly systematic nature, and they present spatially oriented and interactive versions of history. Focusing on the systematic aspect of video games, Schut (2007, p. 223) states that the people modeled in historical games tend to have defined roles, that the development of history is presented within a cause and effect dynamic, and that any unavoidable non-systematic elements of life are rendered as inconsequential or random influences. This results in a simplified representation of history that discourages diversity and reinforces highly hierarchical views on social structure.

However, Chapman (as cited in Potzsch and Sisler, 2019, p. 7) affirms that history is always a reductive exercise that entails capturing the evidence of the past and transcoding it into a narrative that can be accessed and assimilated. In the development of historical themed media (Figure 3), historical periods and events go through a filtering process that reduces them to a selected set of variables that are then included in the constrained system of historical video games. Just like historians, game developers choose what to include and what to exclude in order to create a balanced game. The representations included in games are then subjected to the interpretation of the audience which is informed by various discourses and politics of memory that circulate within our contemporary society. Yet Cruz Martínez (2016, p. 2) notes that historical representations portraying ethnocentrism, pejorative depictions of minorities, or omission of certain histories seems to be more frequent than what we might expect. This reflects that the feedback loops and contexts of the games enable this type of problematic representation as they directly influence the selection process of historical content and its interpretation.
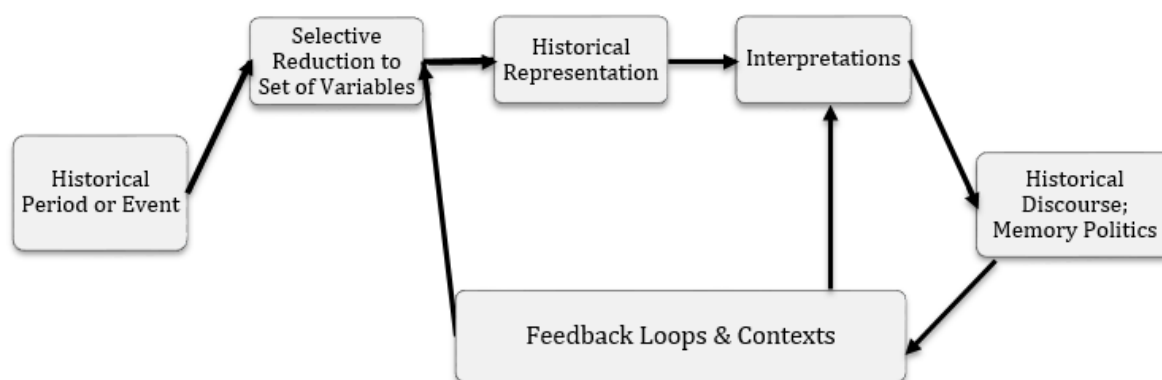
Figure 3. The process of historical representation in media. Source: Potzsch and Sisler (2019, p. 6).

However, through the emergence of new historicism, historians have tried to redress the hegemonic perspective of traditional historical research by promoting the histories of marginalized peoples which have been so far largely ignored. Similarly, a new wave of historical video games has surfaced in recent years where developers no longer merely portray traditional historical accounts or popular views on the past but instead attempt to bridge marginal narratives with mainstream media. This leads to a more authentic historical representation in video games that also provides a richer understanding of what can be considered as historically accurate.

By reviewing the existing literature, I developed the concept of **historical authenticity** based on the premise that historiography is not a linear description of unequivocal past events but instead it is a description of one out of many versions of the past. It represents the belief that history is a construction rather than a set of facts and it is an on-going process of discussion, consensus, and dialogue (Cruz Martínez, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, historical authenticity is not based solely on factual accuracy and tends to reject master narratives; it is instead based on marginal narratives and interpretations of history. This allows for a greater diversity in representation since it includes the histories of groups and identities that have been previously left out or erased from traditional accounts and records of the past.

Digital games that aim for historical authenticity usually portray social and cultural histories that are particularly valuable for emphasizing the significance and individuality of people. For this reason, these types of games usually present a larger socio-cultural sphere than games based on historical accuracy and focus less on politics, economics, or warfare. Moreover, when they do portray these aspects, historically authentic games strive to increase the complexity of

accounts and developments by presenting narratives that explore challenging themes such as natural calamities, psychological and emotional trauma, or the nature of relationships and interactions between governmental, military, and civil forces and agents.

However, the purpose of historical authenticity is not to undermine or challenge the past but rather to negotiate discourses about the past. Thus, historical authenticity does not stand in opposition to historical accuracy but instead serves as an extension of those narratives and facts that have been previously considered as the only true version of history. Bolter and Grusin (1999) discuss the concept of remediation and how new media pay homage to earlier media forms by building upon or refashioning their codes and conventions. This practice inevitably leads to the propagation of stereotypes and the recycling of historical discourses. By exploring new narratives that diverge from established master narratives, history can be navigated from various perspectives and explored not as a set of unequivocal events and definite conclusions but rather as socially constructed, inherently multifaceted, contested, and object for constant negotiation, thus opening up new discourses both about our past and present (Potzsch and Sisler, 2019, p. 19). These types of games include in their sources and references idiosyncratic personal experiences, individual life stories, and family memories that intersect with factual or traditional historical accounts.

Table 1. Theorized concepts

Concept	Description	Role	References
Historical accuracy	Politico-economic sphere, factual accuracy, realism, linear accounts, master narratives, reduced complexity	Factual	Historiography, game design, memory politics, simulation, traditional historicism (Schut, 2007; Tyson, 2006; Chapman, 2016; Potzsch and Sisler, 2019; Schott and Redder, 2018; Cruz Martínez, 2016; Leonard, 2006; Hong, 2015; Lidén, 2017; Marino Carvalho, 2015; Brock, 2011).

Historical authenticity	Socio-cultural sphere, negotiable past, marginal narratives, increased complexity	Interpretative	Historiography, game design, cultural memory, education, new historicism (Schut, 2007; Tyson, 2006; Chapman, 2016; Potzsch and Sisler, 2019; Cruz Martínez, 2016; Sloan, 2015; Begy, 2017; McCall, 2016; Young, 2016, Copplestone, 2017).

4.2 Sampling: Video Games Selection

4.2.1 Description

In order to apply and test the conceptual framework proposed in the present research, a number of digital games have been assessed and selected for analysis. The sample consists of four historical video games that have received critical acclaim and are reflective of mainstream media practices and themes.

Crusader Kings II (CK2) is a grand strategy game developed and published in 2012 by Paradox Interactive. The game is set in the Middle Ages, spanning from 769 CE until 1453 CE. The game incorporates RPG and fantasy elements and allows players to simulate the lives of nobility by impersonating historical figures or creating their own dynasty. The player can assume a royal title from Count to Emperor and rule over regions in Europe, North Africa, and a large part of Asia. The game is open-ended, ending only when the player character dies with no heir of the same dynasty or when the game reaches the year 1453 CE.

Total War: Rome II (TWR2) is a turn-based strategy game developed by The Creative Assembly and published in 2013 by Sega. The game allows players to undertake various campaigns ranging from the Peloponnesian War (431 - 404 BCE) to the Crisis of the Third Century (235 - 284 CE) and rule regions in Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia. The player plays as a faction rather than as a character and can manage the agents, territories, and infrastructure of their faction as well as its economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural

development. The game also features large-scale real-time battles that are played out in a historical setting. For the purpose of this thesis, the analysis of the game will mainly focus on the *Imperator Augustus* campaign which concentrates on the conflict of the Second Triumvirate War (32 BCE – 30 BCE).

Kingdom Come: Deliverance (KCD) is an action RPG developed by Warhorse Studios and published in 2018 by Deep Silver. The game is set in 1403 CE in the historical Kingdom of Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic), featuring an open world environment. The player assumes the role of Henry, a blacksmith's son and apprentice, who seeks to avenge the murder of his family who died in a raid committed by Cuman soldiers under the command of Sigismund of Luxembourg. The game includes period-accurate weapons, combat techniques, clothing, and architecture, recreated with the assistance of architects and historians.

Assassin's Creed Origins (ACO) is an action-adventure RPG developed and published in 2017 by Ubisoft. The game is set at the end of the Ptolemaic period of Ancient Egypt, around the year 48 BCE, in an open world environment that lets players explore points of historical interest such as the Great Pyramid of Giza, but also rural areas and vast deserts. The player assumes the role of Bayek, a Medjay or member of an elite paramilitary police force. The game features fantasy aspects that combine Ancient Egyptian history and mythology. However, the game also features a Discovery Tour curated by historians, where players can experience a guided tour of Ancient Egyptian culture and society.

4.2.2 Method

The games were selected using a single-stage non-probability sampling method based on a purposive/judgmental approach that took into account the release date, setting, and genre of the games in order to emulate the most common aspects of mainstream historical games. Out of a total of 30 available historical games released in the past two decades, four were selected for analysis. Only games released in the last 8 years were considered for selection, since the popularity of historical themed games spiked dramatically in 2012, heavily permeating mainstream media (San Nicolás Romera et al., 2018, p. 528).

According to San Nicolás Romera et al. (2018, p. 537) most historical video games are either strategy-based or action/adventure games and so games that did not fall into these two genres were excluded from the selection pool because they were not considered to reflect the majority of games and thus they were not suited for the purpose of this study. *Total War: Rome II* and *Crusader Kings II* fall into the strategy genre while *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Assassin's Creed Origins* are classified as action/adventure role-playing games.

The setting of the games was also considered as being of great importance since the majority of historical video games are set in the Middle Ages, Classical Antiquity, or World War II (Lidén, 2017, p. 2). TWR2 and ACO are set in Classical Antiquity, while KCD and CK2 are set in the Middle Ages. Games set in World War II were not selected due to a lack of immediate accessibility that I was not able to address due to time limitations. In addition, CK2 and ACO are categorized as hybrid games because they feature fantasy elements, while TWR2 and KCD are classified as pure historical games.

As a researcher, I engaged in a close reading of the games' content and their formal elements by directly playing each game. The playthrough consisted of two stages: at first, I played the game in an unassuming manner from the position of a player, then I replayed the games with the intent purpose of critical observation, documenting my progress through writing and visual recording, and engaging in a comparative approach across all four games. This method resulted in more than 15 hours of engagement with each one of the game's content and form, familiarizing me with the narratives, mechanics, and systems that occur within the ludic space. For the purpose of analysis, I relied on intrinsic and objective criticism, basing my interpretations on the context and content provided by the game itself (Tyson, 2006, p. 148). Additionally, I have also consulted gameplays and game reviews by other players to gain a wider perspective and understanding of the games and the way they might be negotiated within wider social discourses.

The analysis of the video games revolves around their form, narrative, content, mechanics and, in some cases, their paratexts. In order to assess these elements, I have employed visual analysis, critical discourse analysis, and an iterative and comparative approach. Critical discourse analysis was chosen as a method of analyzing the selected games because it offers a transdisciplinary approach that allows me to employ theories from both game studies and other disciplines like historiography and use them to analyze the games as cultural products. Critical discourse analysis also enables me to discuss the relation between social and historical discourses and the implications they have on the way history is represented in games.

In my research, I have also chosen to employ visual analysis mainly due to the inherent visual nature of the medium of digital games but also due to its significance to media representations. Visual signs rely on a scopic regime that refers to a culturally constructed way of seeing that affects not only what visual signs we take into consideration when looking at an image but also how we perceive them (Rose, 2001, p. 6). This constructed way of seeing often produces specific visions of social difference, marking hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality and so on (Rose, 2001, p. 9). For this reason, I will analyze the visual signs and imagery of the

selected games and subject them to a critical analysis in order to examine whether or not they reproduce gendered, racialized, sexualized, and national meanings.

However, my analysis does not involve player immersion or interactivity with the narrative as part of its focal points. Potzsch and Sisler (2019, p. 6) consider that "critiques that exclusively focus on games' historical content are often misguided." Nevertheless, while this paper considers historical video games as simulations of history and takes note of the player's presence, I do not concentrate on the way a player's involvement impacts the narrative progression and outcome. Instead, I discuss how players may perceive certain narratives within the ludic space and how they translate them to an external environment using discourses that relate to historiography or contemporary issues. Thus, this research explores representations that exist within games regardless of direct player involvement. Instead, this study takes a cultural production perspective that allows me to assess how narratives and meanings are produced and reproduced in the complex relationship between the medium of digital games, the game development industry, and the gaming community.

5 Analysis

5.1 Framing Historical Content

Historic places and settings have the ability to increase the appeal and enrich the gameplay experience of a digital game. Therefore, many video games transcode historical information by reducing it to visual elements, and emulate historical accuracy through the reconstruction of spaces that hold real-world historic significance or that attempt to recreate historical environments. This leads to the creation of what Chapman (2016) identifies as realistic simulations, or games that rely on audio-visual elements to relay historical information. In these games, environments, objects, and characters are visually detailed and show a degree of fidelity to the physical evidence of the past (Chapman, 2016, p. 61).

In such cases, historical representation is used as an aesthetic tool and game developers often tend to over-emphasize the historical theme of a game in order to appeal to the expectations of the audience and grant authority to their product. A game that is labeled as historically accurate emulates a certain type of aura. Aura is a concept introduced by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility", and it refers to the "here and now of a work of art—its unique existence in a particular place'" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 21). However, this concept can be extended to more than just works of art, as many other things such as landmarks, objects, and natural environments can also have their own type of aura (Benjamin, 2008, p. 23). In this thesis, I employ the concept of aura in the case of historical settings to define the unique character and history of a place which video games often try to recreate.

Although Benjamin (2008, p. 22) states that through industrial reproduction the aura of the original work of art is lost, I would argue that simulations (and other types of media) are in fact partly responsible for the creation of the aura of historical places. As Baudrillard (2006, p. 454) notes, simulations blur the lines between virtual reality and real-world references creating hyperreality. Thus, simulation renders obsolete the idea of an "original" and becomes instead the new reality. In historical video games, simulation represents the referent by which the audience comes to understand historical spaces and events, especially since many of them represent a copy without an original, that is to say that many historic places have suffered transformations since their original construction or have been lost altogether. Yet through simulation and the reproduction of these imaginaries in other types of media through remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), an aura is created around historical representations in video games and what they should look like, therefore directly influencing what elements and features are considered (or not) to constitute historical accuracy. For this reason, historical

accuracy is increasingly being used to distinguish the relative merit of historical video games (Schott and Redder, 2018, p. 1), and game developers tend to blend historical representation with generic conventions and audience expectations.

Video games represent content as historical by using specific designs, mechanics, and audio-visual elements that reinforce hyperreality and recreate an aura of historicity. To analyze these elements, I firstly look at both the form and canonical content of the selected games and also at the games' paratexts, or those elements that surround the game but are not necessarily a component of gameplay.

From the first moment players interact with a game they are immersed in a ludic space that asserts its historical theme through visual elements. This is first apparent from the logo of the games. *Total War: Rome II* features the *aquila*, a military standard in the form of an eagle, which was used as a prominent symbol in Ancient Rome. *Assassins' Creed Origins* employs the trademark logo of the franchise alongside the Eye of Horus, an ancient Egyptian symbol of protection. *Crusader Kings II* depicts a red cross upon a white shield reminiscent of the armor used by the Knights Templar during the Crusades. Thus, they all don easily recognizable symbols that bear historic meaning and place the game within a certain historical period. Perhaps less accessible is the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* logo which features a sword and crown resembling those of Saint Wenceslas which were ceremonially used in the Kingdom of Bohemia. However, the game also places "1403" on their logo, showcasing the year when the action takes place, therefore clearly signaling the game's medieval theme.

Three of the games, TWR2, ACO, and KCD, also feature introductory cinematic sequences before the start of gameplay. In ACO, the main character, Bayek, is introduced as a Medjay in the ancient city of Siwa where he witnesses a shadowy organization corrupting the Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII and destabilizing Egypt. The sequence leans towards historical authenticity rather than accuracy by presenting short glimpses of everyday life in a busy city and a ceremonial procession, therefore emphasizing a socio-cultural context over a politico-economic sphere. While violent conflict is present in the sequence, it is framed as part of a personal experience (Bayek seeks retribution for the death of his son) rather than as a grand military undertaking.

On the other hand, TWR2's *Imperator Augustus* Campaign is introduced by a cinematic scene where Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, dialogues with his mother and is encouraged to take on his responsibilities as the future leader of Rome. The sequence presents a purely political and military context, thus emphasizing historical accuracy, with Octavian riding in battle, attending diplomatic discussions in the Senate, and plotting political intrigue against his enemy, Mark Antony. It is interesting to note that while the campaign focuses on the Second

Triumvirate War between Octavian, Mark Antony, and Lepidus, the sequence makes no mention of Lepidus who is perhaps lesser known to the wide audience than his two rivals. Instead, the cinematic scenes include the presence of widely popular historical figures like Caesar and Cleopatra, thus representing a selected set of historical narratives that align with popular perceptions of this time period.

In both games, these cinematic sequences provide a familiar narrative structure by featuring a dramatic representation of the historical events that precede the gameplay. The scenes take on cinematic conventions and present history not only as simulation but also as drama, a mode of construction that Rosenstone (2001, p. 52) commonly identifies in film and television. As a result, the games rely on and refashion the codes and conventions of older media, a practice which, as in the case of TWR2, inevitably leads to the recycling of historical discourses and narratives.

KCD also features a cinematic sequence in the game opening, however, this differs from TWR2 and ACO. While the two other games make use of cinematic conventions to relay their historical context, KCD employs a cartoon-style of animation which is meant to mimic the art style and format of medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, had a long and successful reign.

Figure 4. Opening sequence of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Source: Deep Silver (2018).

As it can be observed in Figure 4, the sequence is designed to seem as if narrated from a medieval chronicle, the lower left corner featuring a huge ornamented capital letter that traditionally adorns medieval texts. Moreover, the sequence also makes use of audio elements that recreate musical styles associated with the Middle Ages. The resulting aesthetic emphasizes historical accuracy by situating the player as a witness to a stylized representation of historical happenings that aligns with recording and archiving methods used during the portrayed period.

5.2 The Role of Documents

Cruz Martínez (2016, p. 3) notes that video games represent content as historical by using specific elements such as encyclopedic texts, diaries, quotes, and references to create "an illusion of historicity that is worth to analyse." I argue that these elements are used in games as a mode of representing historical events and spaces that mainly show historical accuracy and grant the game a certain type of authority. In this case, history is constructed as document, or a narration of history done by a witness or an expert and usually accompanied by historical materials such as photographs, artifacts, paintings, or newspaper clippings (Rosenstone, 2001, p. 53). Because this form of construction is closer to the practice of historiography, it is granted more authority than for example the dramatized representation of history. Rosenstone (2001, p. 53) states that the authority of this form of representation in the medium of film comes from the fact that history as document seems to deliver facts and to make some sort of traditional historical argument. To expand on this, I argue that the construction of history as document also manifests in video games and it contributes especially to a historically accurate representation of history which is also concerned with factual information and traditional narratives.

For example, KCD makes use of a so called codex where information about characters and places encountered in the game is stored and can be accessed by the player. In this case, the game system acts as a witness or historian that records these encounters. This codex acts as an encyclopedia where historical information is provided in addition to the gameplay experience and its entries are oriented towards facts, disseminating knowledge about a certain topic both inside and outside the world of the game.

ACO also has a Discovery Tour function where players can experience a guided tour of Ancient Egyptian cities and traditions curated by historians and presented in an exploration mode that lacks combat and can be experienced at the player's own pace. The feature explicitly highlights the research knowledge informing the game and includes, for instance, visual reconstructions

of the city of Alexandria created for the game by archaeologist and historical reconstruction illustrator Jean-Claude Golvin.

However, ACO and KCD also feature books and letters scattered across the ludic space that once found provide additional information to the player and act as documents that offer a greater understanding of the game world. Yet, the presence of letters and books shows historical authenticity more that accuracy since they reflect plausible or believable narratives that circulate within the ludic space of the game rather than transmit real-world historical facts.

Figure 5. Chronicle in *Crusader Kings II*. Source: Paradox Interactive (2012).

CK2 also features a chronicle function where the major events of the game are archived, providing players with an elaborate narrative of their actions and experiences. As it can be observed in Figure 5, the game employs a format and style that resembles medieval illuminated manuscripts and that is similar to the one used in KCD (Figure 4). In this case, the document does not act as an encyclopedia but it is rather a record of counterfactual or

alternative histories. Here, I identify what Chapman (2016, pp. 21-22) defines as "historying," or the ability of players to participate in "writing" historical narratives due to the unique interactive nature of the digital game medium. Through historying, players no longer passively receive information from historians or developers but instead are free to experience history as experiment (Rosenstone, 2001, p. 54) and understand the complexities of historical causality and the multifaceted nature of historical accounts by exploring narratives that deviate from mainstream views or traditional historicism. While scholars generally disapprove of the counterfactual representation of history that often occurs in media, Chapman (2016, p. 272) finds merit in it, arguing that counterfactual reasoning is the basis for determining why the past happened the way it did, thus providing complex understanding of historical causality. Indeed, historical agents were free to act and make decisions which were influenced by innumerable factors and could have had a multitude of effects and results.

In TWR2 history is heavily constructed through the use of documents and encyclopedic texts. Quests, military units, buildings, and research tiers are all accompanied by information that explains the historical meaning, usage, and context of these elements both inside and outside the ludic space of the game. This places an aura of accuracy around the gameplay even as the systematic bias of the medium limits the development of these elements. Thus, although their use in the game is limited to a systematic role, the player receives factual information that exceeds constrained practices of play and reflects a larger historical context.

Figure 6. Loading screen showing a map, an artistic rendition of Cleopatra embracing Mark Antony, and a quote by a Roman poet. Source: Sega (2013).

It is also interesting to note that TWR2 employs documentary authority even outside the gameplay per se. The title screen offers access to an online archive separate from the game titled "Total War Rome II Encyclopedia" (accessible at r2encv2.totalwar.com) where the player can browse through information about the various characters, factions, regions, and other elements featured in the game. Moreover, as seen in Figure 6, the game makes use of quotes and historical maps and references even in the loading screen, which reinforce the legitimacy of the game's historical accuracy. Therefore, the use of iconic historical images and cinematic sequences showing important historical figures or famous historical events connect the world of the game to real-world historical references and situate the game within a context of historicity.

5.3 War and Combat

As previously stated, many historical video games emphasize their historical accuracy through visual elements, investing great detail and effort into creating high-fidelity structures, objects, and clothing that recreate environments from the past. In most games, special attention is given to the weapons, vehicles, and armor of the era. In KCD, for example, the developers have undergone extensive research to establish accurate representation, performance, and functionality of late Medieval armor, weapons, and fighting techniques, resulting in the inclusion of lesser known historical practices in the game that challenge popular views on Medieval warfare (Schott and Redder, 2018, p. 7).

However, as Schott and Redder (2018, p. 3) affirm, "you can accurately re-create all the weapons, battles and locations […], but this is not going to be an authentic evocation of the infantry experience." Many games that rely on a reconstructionist epistemology focus solely on visual realism and violent forms of conflict but fail to account for the situational and social complexities of war. Schott and Redder (2018, p. 3) note that games often disregard the inclusion of elements such as disease and hunger, low ammunition supplies, weapon malfunction, exploration of death and psychological trauma, racial segregation amongst soldiers, and the nature of relationships and interactions between combatants and civilians. These elements offer an authentic representation of historical experiences and increase the complexity and understanding of the narrative.

The four selected games all try to include, to various degrees, elements that make the experience of warfare more authentic. In ACO, the main character, Bayek, can receive poison and fire damage from some enemy weapons, however, there is little other evidence of the effects combat has on his body and psyche other than a temporary decrease in health when hit. Bayek functions more like a machine than a human as his health auto-regenerates and his weapons and armor seem indestructible. Yet he can engage in combat only against a pre-selected set of enemies and harming civilians results in losing progress in the game. This feature takes away from the popular perception that the past was filled with senseless violence (Lidén, 2017, p. 3) and confers understanding of the dynamic between civilians and armed forces.

TWR2 includes diseases that can affect an army as well as attrition and desertion suffered due to lack of food, money, or extreme weather conditions. However, the game's real-time battles are reduced in complexity and follow a systematic pattern, showing little information about the impact combat has on soldiers. In reality, pillaging and sieges were more common than land battles, and the battles could last from a few hours to several days (Schott and Redder, 2018, p. 4). The inclusion of these elements and the complexity of combat is, of course, limited by the medium of the game, since video games are highly systematic and are guided by rules and structures that limit the scale, nature, and duration of battles (Schut, 2007, p. 218).

CK2 brings more authenticity to violent conflict as it oftentimes includes the evidence and effects of its aftermath. During conflict, characters can acquire various types of injuries as well as skills, and can be afflicted with emotional and mental repercussions such as survivor guilt or post-traumatic stress disorder. At times, the character's physical appearance also reflects these effects as characters can gain scars, lose limbs, or be splattered with blood. The combat type includes raids, sieges, and land battles that can last several days.

Similarly, KCD also employs some of these mechanics as the main character, Henry, experiences fatigue, hunger, injuries, and bleeding during combat. Combat also damages Henry's equipment and his clothing can get stained with blood and dirt which in turn influences the way other characters react to his appearance. All these mechanics offer a more realistic and authentic experience of conflict and reflect the balancing act that developers need to undertake in order to deliver a presentation of combat history that is functional within constrained practices of play but also avoids the oversimplification of warfare and its aftermath.

However, another issue with representations of historical conflict in games is the way the games' narrative and mechanics invite biased understandings and one-sided reenactments of historical actors and events. The formal properties of the game often reduce the complexities

of society and politics to a simple binary opposition, thus, as Potzsch and Sisler (2019, p. 14) relate, "players are invited to perceive historical processes as driven by unambiguous dichotomies such as sanity—madness, good—evil, heroism—cowardice rather than the result of balanced assessments and carefully deliberated decisions by rational actors." This binary may have ethical implications since foreign nations are often automatically labelled as an enemy or a target for conquest. Within this line of thought, games continue to rely on using the same narrative archetypes of individual heroism and a just war (Schott and Redder, 2018, p. 3) which can also lead to a process of "othering" nations and characters that are not controlled by the player. Because video games are cultural products, they inherently hold gendered, racialized, sexualized, and national meanings and they have a significant role in the way this information is transcoded to real life and contextualized within contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural discourses. For this reason, these types of representations should be approached with a degree of historical sensitivity.

5.4 Master Narratives and Issues of Diversity

Schut (2007, p. 214) argues that because of their cultural and technological construction, digital games are predisposed toward presentations of history that are stereotypically masculine. As I have previously discussed in the theorization of historical accuracy, most historical games place a great focus on representations of warfare and political and economic power, features which Schut (2007, p. 221) identifies as displaying the importance of stereotypical manhood to historical simulations since these themes mirror popular perceptions of masculine aggressiveness and domination. For this reason, digital games tend to replicate master narratives that center around men in positions of power and fail to account for the narratives of other identities, especially those of women.

The inclusion of women in historical video games has often been met with backlash from the audience and gaming community who deems their active involvement in the game's narrative as historically inaccurate. For example, in 2018, the developers of TWR2 launched a game update through which various factions could now have female generals and they also included famous historical figures such as Cleopatra and Queen Teuta. Shortly after the update, the game received a sudden insurgence of negative reviews on Steam, most of them criticizing the number of female characters featured in the game (Figure 7). One user wrote that "there is a political agenda being exercised in historical titles to introduce female characters unrealistically" (@Timmy, 2018), while other users accused the developers of trying to rewrite history.

Figure 7. Steam reviews of *Total War: Rome II* before and after the September 2018 update. Source: Steam (2020).

Therefore, due to the promotion of stereotypical interpretations of history, the inclusion of marginal narratives that offer a new perspective on historical representations is immediately rejected by players as inaccurate or unrealistic and is instead subordinated to a master narrative that is continuously favored and accepted as the only true version of history. It is important to understand here that because of the social and cultural marginalization of minority groups (i.e. lack of access to education, lack of rights) there are significantly less accounts and records detailing their lives and perspectives and thus these narratives are more difficult to research and to preserve in our shared historical consciousness. Nevertheless, the inclusion of these narratives offers an authentic representation of history since, although largely unrecorded, these marginalized groups were still active participants in historical events and spaces.

However, it is interesting to note that the developers of TWR2 decided to feature female characters 5 years after the initial launch of the game. This constitutes a trend in video games where the inclusion of female characters comes as an afterthought rather than as an integral part of the game development process. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise and KCD have also been criticized for failing to include female characters in their narratives. In the default gameplay of ACO, the player gets the opportunity to play as a female character only for a small number of missions. In addition, the game can be tweaked through a feature called the Animus Control Panel in order to change the player character to female, but this change disables the game's

achievement system, reflecting that this is not the way the game is supposed to be played. In KCD, the player can play as a female character, Theresa, however, the narrative is not part of the main game but part of a DLC titled *A Woman's Lot*. In this DLC, the player gets to experience ordinary life in a medieval village and can also take part in some adventures where Theresa engages in political debates and combat. Yet the game narrative serves as a constant reminder of how Theresa is less skilled than Henry and how out of place she is in these situations due to her gender.

CK2 approaches the inclusion of women in historical narratives through a game mechanic. The game includes a "Status of Women" law that allows the player to modify the role women can assume in society and the amount of political power they can have. The settings of this feature can be modified before the start of the gameplay so that is can be enabled, fully unlocked, or set as "historical." If the "historical" option is selected the game mechanic is disabled and the role of women is modified according to culture and religion. If the setting is enabled, the game defaults to a traditional status of women where they can hold no positions of power (Figure 8). Additionally, the game also features a gender law relating to inheritance so that the player can decide if only one or both genders can inherit noble titles.

Figure 8. "Status of Women" game mechanic in *Crusader Kings II*. Source: Paradox Interactive (2012).

The "Status of Women" law can then later be modified but, until full status is achieved, female rulers still suffer from a -10 opinion penalty from their male vassals who appear to be programmed to unanimously disapprove of female rulers and female heirs. Female vassals, on the other hand, do not grant an opinion penalty for their female liege. This is an interesting system since it seems that even if the player approves of having female characters in positions of power, the world of the game is still designed to hold biases against them. This design decision may be informed by the popular view that historical spaces were highly violent and unwelcoming towards women, and this stereotypical narrative influences the selection process that developers undertake when transcoding historical information into games, restricting the representation of women in games.

Therefore, although women are being increasingly featured in historical video games, their agency and the diversity of their roles is still limited. In cases such as CK2 and KCD the active involvement of women in historical spaces is presented as an optional feature and often narrowed down to a traditional status. Here, it is important to evaluate the effect this representation has on the game narrative and on its subsequent reception by the audience. As Schut (2007, p. 223) remarks, due to the systematic nature of digital games, "anything in a computer game either has some kind of game function or is, in game terms, decoration." Therefore, if female characters enjoy no agency and fulfil no function, they are limited to being mere decorations. This form of representation leads to the following two problems: tokenism and objectification.

Rose (2001, p. 24) cites that there exists a voyeuristic tendency of viewing women in visual media wherein "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." Consequently, women are visually portrayed for the purpose of being watched, and as a result they are often represented as vain, passive, sexually alluring, and wearing revealing clothing or no clothes at all (Rose, 2001, p. 24). This leads to the objectification of female characters, meaning that they are stripped of agency and subjectivity and are instead portrayed as objects of male desire or objects that reinforce in one way or another stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. There have been many studies written about the oversexualized image of women in video games (see A. Shaw, A. Sarkeesian, H. Jenkins) so I will only briefly discuss this topic here.

Figure 9. Cleopatra as represented in *Assassin's Creed Origins*. Source: Ubisoft (2017).

In ACO, the character of Cleopatra is introduced to the game as a sexually promiscuous and manipulative woman. As seen in Figure 9, Cleopatra is scantily clad in comparison to the other male characters and she declares that she will sleep with anyone as long as they agree to be beheaded the next morning (Ubisoft, 2017). The *femme fatale* representation of Cleopatra is just one out of many other media narratives that play on the popular image ascribed onto her since the time of Octavian. Through propaganda, Octavian gathered the support of the Roman people against his political enemy, Mark Antony, by presenting him as a puppet of Cleopatra who succumbed to her decadent foreign lifestyle and her allure. This representation shows a tendency of portraying male historical figures as using politics and military force to achieve their goals, while female historical figures are represented as using intrigue and seduction. This type of representation reinforces the dichotomy between masculine and feminine spheres of historical interest and leads to an oversexualized representation of women. Thus, by portraying women as mere decorations that lack any function in the game narrative, games not only erase the contribution of women to historical events and spaces but they also facilitate their objectification.

Another problem that arises from presenting women as decoration is the issue of tokenism. Shaw (2009, p. 236) describes tokenism as inclusion for the sake of inclusion or, in other words, that characters from minority groups are often added to video games just to create an illusion of diversity but they lack any real depth or function in the world of the game. Tokenism

applies to more than just women and targets especially people of color and LGBTQ characters. In the case of racial and ethnic diversity, tokenism is closely linked to Eurocentrism. Tyson (2006, p. 420) defines Eurocentrism as the assumption that European (and later American) ideas, ideals, and experiences are universal and represent the standard for all other cultures.

Chapman et al. (2017, p. 362) identify that historical video games and especially strategy games have a predisposition towards reinforcing colonialist ideologies and the teleological master narratives that sustain them. Similarly, Marino Carvalho (2015, p. 131) also adds that in these type of games history is commonly measured in civilizational tiers reachable through development that follows a specific path, namely that of European countries. In addition, Schut (2007, p. 225) clarifies this by stating that in these historical strategy games "you can play the Zulus, Russians, or Aztecs, but all of them essentially have to follow the Western pattern of economic and technological development and conquest." Therefore, the inclusion of various nations is more aesthetic than functional since they all follow the same pattern of development and lack individual depth, which may result in tokenism.

As strategy games, TWR2 and CK2 also include technological, civil, and military development tiers in their gameplay. In CK2 technology tiers and civil development are the same for all cultures and are influenced only by the noble rank of the player character. In TWR2, on the other hand, the military and civic development tiers differ based on culture groups and also on individual nations. Thus, for example, while both Sparta and Egypt fall into the Hellenic culture group and have similar technology tiers, each have a handful of different technologies that can be researched. This mechanic enriches the narrative of the game and offers a more authentic historical representation as it avoids the generalizations that usually appear in constructionist epistemological approaches when trying to represent large scale historical practices and processes (Chapman, 2016, p. 70).

However, some generalizations still remain. In both CK2 and TWR2 homosexuality is viewed in the same way across all cultures, although that is neither an accurate nor authentic representation of history. In both cases homosexuality incurs a penalty from the system as homosexual characters receive a decrease in authority/opinion and fertility points. The narrative around this type of representation is concerning, especially in CK2 where homosexuality is treated as a trait that can be randomly acquired or discarded (Figure 10). Moreover, besides the -5 opinion points that homosexual rulers receive from their heterosexual vassals, they also receive -5 opinion points from other homosexual vassals of a different gender and +30 attraction points from homosexual characters of the same gender. This system reflects that homosexual characters are negatively viewed by everyone, including other homosexual characters, and that the only form of positive interaction is of a sexual

nature. As in the case of female characters, this sort of representation leads to an oversexualized image of homosexual characters which plays into stereotypical and harmful narratives of homosexual characters being overly promiscuous or immoral (Shaw, 2009, p. 241).

Figure 10. Random event concerning homosexuality in *Crusader Kings II*. Source: Paradox Interactive (2012).

Figure 10 shows one out of several events that can grant or remove the "Homosexual" trait from a character. As it can be observed, the narrative of this event frames the character renouncing his sexual orientation in an attempt to conform to social and religious traditions and norms. However, as previously discussed in an earlier part of this section, CK2 also gives players the opportunity of "historying", or writing their own historical narratives to experiment with counterfactual or alternative histories (Chapman, 2016, p. 21). The player has the power to shape society and decide its level of tolerance through a technology tier and can also change its legislation. I find it rather odd then, in this context, that a homosexual character needs to be subjected to a traditional master narrative that regards the past as deeply

homophobic regardless of time period, culture, religion, or the societal changes undertaken by the player. These types of representations and narratives reflect a stereotypical and Eurocentric interpretation of history.

Furthermore, the representation of homosexuality in historical video games is also rather limited, relying solely on the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy and failing to account for other sexual orientations that are positioned outside this binary. This view might be informed by the main misconceptions that modern society attributes to historical periods which is the notion of simplistic life or, as Lidén (2017, p. 20) explains, "simple as in without much variety, rather than easy." This misconception strips historical spaces of complexity and inhibits their diverse representation in historical digital games.

The lack of diversity is also applied to representations of race, as games tend to over-represent white populations and under-represent racial or ethnic minorities (Williams et al., 2009, p. 825). For instance, in TWR2's *Imperator Augustus* Campaign, Egypt is represented as a culturally homogenous space. It is included in the Hellenic culture group and it is represented only through characters belonging to the Greek nobility. On the other hand, ACO offers a more authentic representation of Ancient Egyptian society, including representations of its Egyptian population, the Greek nobility, and the presence of Roman military. ACO also offers a rare opportunity for a mainstream historical game, which is to have a person of color as the main player character. Thus, the game offers a perspective that deviates from traditional white and European experiences, offering a wider understanding of history.

However, Schott and Redder (2018, p. 6) affirm that "in contrast to […] *Assassin's Creed: Origin's* representational adequacy, its developers have also yielded to the pressures of the current socio-political climate to present greater levels of diversity in its populations than historicity dictates." The authors do not exemplify or further explain their claims, but their statement appears to mirror the TWR2 players' comments earlier discussed in the beginning of this section (see @Timmy, 2018) that state that there exists a political agenda to force diversity in historical titles. These views appear to be commonly informed by the supposition that digital games are an escapist medium where players retreat to escape from contemporary life and that discussing issues that can be seen as addressing political correctness or social justice have no place in virtual fantasies (Marino Carvalho, 2015, p. 137).

In contrast, I would argue that this is hardly the case. It is problematic to consider that identities belonging to minority groups must be politically or socially justified in order to be included in games. For many years our interpretation of history has been shaped by traditional historical accounts that present a hegemonic bias and favor Eurocentric, heteronormative, and patriarchal narratives (Chapman et al., 2017, p. 365). Yet, as Shaw (2009, p. 247) cites,

"sometimes a person can be gay or black or a woman for no reason whatsoever". Therefore, the inclusion of minority groups in historical spaces and events is less of a political statement and more of a simple acknowledgement of their existence and contribution to history. New media like digital games allows us to see a wider version of history that can accommodate those records, narratives, and accounts that have been previously ignored or excluded from representations of history. The inclusion of marginal narratives brings a new perspective and understanding not only of our shared past but also of our individual identity, making digital games a rich cultural product and a valuable source of research.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Summary

To sum up, this thesis has discussed the importance of digital games as a cultural product and their relation to historiography when contextualized within industry practices and audience and developer interpretations of historical events and spaces. The thesis proposes two ways in which history is approached and represented in historical video games, namely historical accuracy to reflect well-established narratives and a high fidelity to factual data, and historical authenticity to reflect lesser known narratives and a more complex and sometimes abstract interpretation of history.

The analysis was conducted on a limited number of mainstream historical video games which were deemed to be representative of the majority of digital games released in the past few years. The analysis identified some designs, mechanics, and narratives present in these games that facilitate or lead to accurate or authentic representations of history. It is important to note, however, that not one game is purely accurate or authentic and that all games use a combination of features and techniques that allow them to be multifaceted, intersectional, and transdisciplinary.

Table 2. Summary of identified formal properties

Concept	Description	Role	References
Aura creation	Connect the game world and narrative to historical periods and generate certain expectations from the audience to be able to explore realistic historical settings	Accuracy	TWR2, CK2, ACO, KCD
Cinematic sequences	Contextualize the game within a historical time or space	Accuracy and authenticity	TWR2, ACO, KCD
Use of documents	Confer documentary authority to the game and disseminate knowledge	Accuracy and authenticity	TWR2, CK2, ACO, KCD
Reconstruction of weapons, armor, etc.	Recreate and reconstruct period-specific military equipment, objects, and structures	Accuracy	TWR2, KCD

Representation of combat and its effects	Complex representations of warfare that discuss its effects on a combatant's body or psyche	Authenticity	TWR2, CK2, KCD
Presence of minority groups	Inclusion of narratives that foreground members of marginalized groups	Authenticity	TWR2, CK2, ACO, KCD

This table is a summary of the abovementioned analyzed game features and it serves as an index that presents commonly used practices and processes used by game developers in order to represent historical practices, events, and spaces and confer an authentic or accurate aura to their game. This framework is mainly analytical, however, it aims to both provide understanding about the nature of historical representation in digital games as well as encourage reflection about the way developers engage with and negotiate historical narratives. Therefore, the framework can be applied as an analytical tool by game developers themselves in the decision-making process of designing new historical games in order to evaluate the representational nature and historical content of their products.

6.2 Discussion

Chapman et al. (2017, p. 360) relate that popular cultural products are capable of meaningful engagements with the past and have the potential to determine and reflect how we both collectively and individually think about, understand, negotiate, and talk about the past in the present. I believe that my thesis frames digital games as cultural products that hold meaning and influence in our contemporary society and can contribute to the way their audience engage with historical narratives. As a new medium, video games hold innovative possibilities of representing history and promoting those accounts that have been previously omitted from older types of media, thus opening up new discourses about both our past and present.

However, games have a tendency of recycling narratives. My thesis has shown that most of the digital games I analyzed rely on remediated perspectives and data, a finding that relates to Chapman's (2016) more extensive research which also highlights, through its focus on historical games, that there exists a persistent recycling of certain historical periods and narratives in games. Yet, as Chapman et al. (2017, p. 360) cite, form exerts pressure on content and each form represents the past according to its own "rules of engagement" and should therefore be considered on its own terms. Consequently, games have a need for new narratives

and perspectives that specifically fit their form, and game developers should critically engage with this form and the way it influences the representation of historical events and spaces. For this purpose, developers have to take on the role of what Chapman (2016) describes as "developer-historians", or developers who, through the exploration of the limitations and conventions of games, create histories and representations of the past.

The direct involvement of developers in historical research and writing is beneficial not only to enrich the world of the game but also to obtain a critical approach to historical sources. As Schott and Redder (2018, p. 7) note, "not everything in the past has been recorded," thus, by working closely with historical data and modelling it to fit the medium of games, developers can come to the realization that the existing historical evidence does not contain all the information needed to accurately represent the past. For this reason, developers can turn towards an authentic representation where, as theorized in this thesis, the past is constructed through a negotiable set of narratives.

However, it is important to keep in mind that developer-historians are also consciously or unconsciously biased and that their representation of history will subsequently reflect these biases. Shaw (2009, p. 232) states that "game developers create games that they think appeal to their target market […]. As only economically successful genres are reproduced, this results in a narrower vision of what 'gamers' play." Yet, as shown in the background section of this paper, the face of the average gamer is changing and so it is only pertinent that game narratives should change as well. Moreover, Marino Carvalho (2015, p. 144) remarks that the history that is sought after as a commodity is rarely the same history historians have to offer. Therefore, developers need to be aware of how and why certain narratives are being reproduced and also assess their own contribution to the creation of new narratives.

6.3 Future Work

As a concluding thought, it is also important for me to acknowledge the limitations of my thesis and point out some directions for future work which might be relevant in order to expand the discussed problem area.

Firstly, perhaps the greatest limitation of this work is that my research has dedicated relatively little space for examining the interpretations, practices, and understandings of the gamers that play historical video games or the developers who produce them. By concentrating mainly on the content and form of these games, my research is limited only to a portion of the complex relationship between the medium of digital games, the game development industry, and the gaming community. However, there is definitely room for future research to provide a foundation for understanding how and why history is negotiated, conceptualized, and

implemented in video games by not only developers and gamers but perhaps also by historians themselves.

In addition, my analysis is also limited due to its focus on the North American and European industries which have conventions and practices that differ from other regions of the world. It would be of interest to further research, for example, the Asian game industry where issues relating to diversity are contextualized through other discourses. Indeed, Asian countries like Korea and Japan produce a large number of games that include LGBTQ characters and the social contexts of these countries position games as more than just children's toys but instead as something that is targeted towards adult audiences (Shaw, 2009, p. 248).

Lastly, another interesting aspect that could be considered for future research is a focus on user-created mods that are meant to enhance the historical accuracy or realism of games. Games like CK2 and TWR2 have a multitude of mods through which their respective gaming communities actively reinterpret history by modifying the systems and rules of the game, applying their own interpretations of history, and appealing to the community's own accumulated points of interest.

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