Digital Gaming, Past and Place: Accuracy, Authenticity and Agency

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Today

- Students as consumers of digital games

- Digital games and historical knowledge
  - Accuracy
  - Authenticity
  - Agency

- What do students learn about the past from gaming in digital environments? How do they learn it?

Approaching video games

- Formalist
  - Narrative
  - Ludic frameworks

- User-experience

- Games as texts
- Influence of literary analysis and critical theory
- Design-based approaches
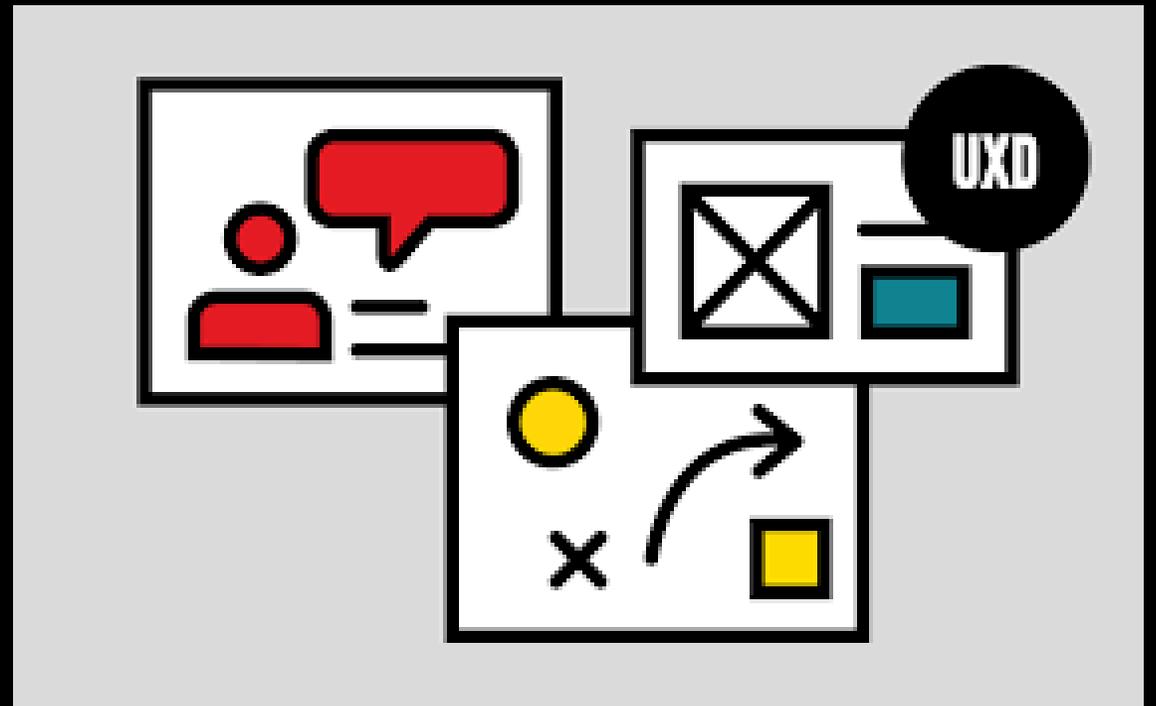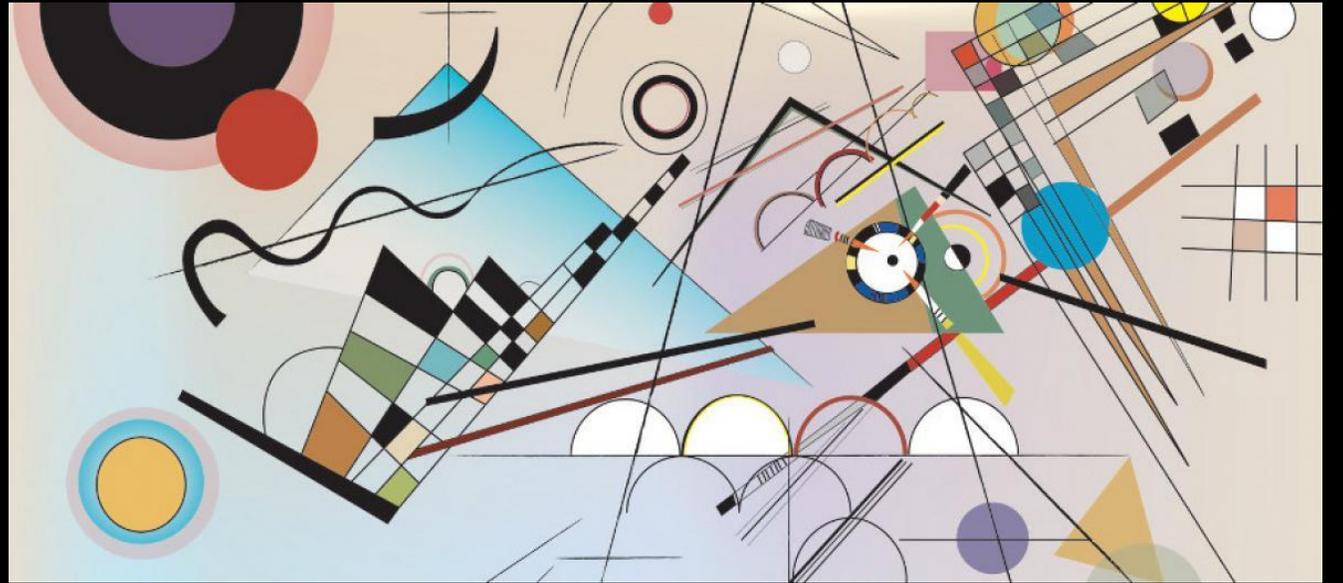
Approaching historical video games

- Accuracy
- Representation

- Users constructing meaning and making narratives through gameplay choices
- Thinking strategically

- Hidden constraints of game architecture
- Reproducing (or challenging) dominant interpretive/ ideological frameworks
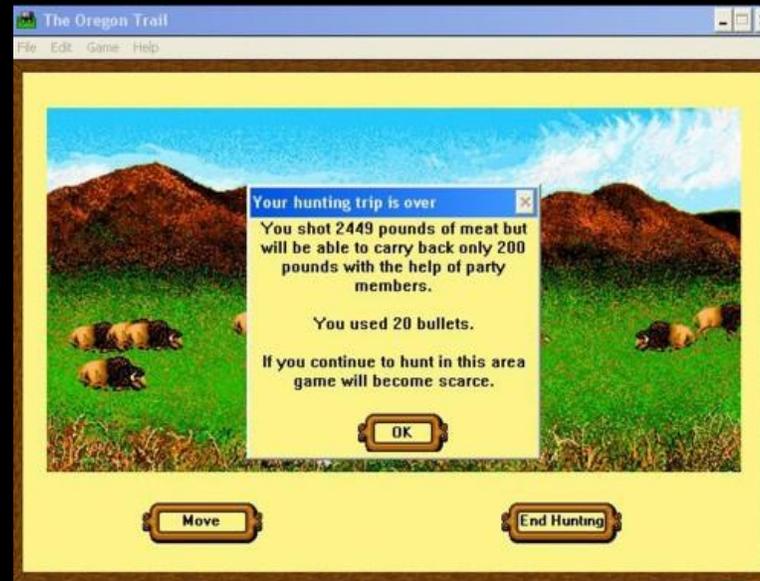
Research question

- How and why does playing video games affect individuals' engagement with and understanding(s) of the past?
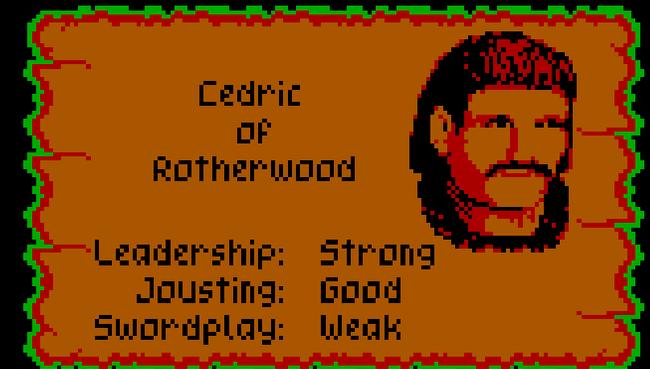
Method and data

- Anonymous questionnaires, and focus groups from 2015/16

- UG and PG students

- 60 responses (over 200 to a later survey)

- 25% were female and 75% were male

- 47% studied History and 53% Design

Most played game

Favorite game

Contextualising the findings

- 36 different game titles mentioned

- 89% had played a 'historical' game (as defined by respondents)

- Most popular 'historical' games:
  - **Assassin's Creed**
  - Total War
  - Europa Universalis

Accuracy

Is it important that the gameplay environment is historically accurate?	
Yes	(146 responses): 71%
No	(61 responses): 29%

"actually happened"

"real"

- "A game can't really be historical if it does not represent the environment to some degree of accuracy. If the game provides a historical learning element then the environment it is set should be also, otherwise it might as well all be a work of fiction."
- "more realistic" environments lead to better play
- Accuracy (perceived or otherwise) = more authenticity

"existed"

"reflected the time"

Authenticity

Importance of authenticity
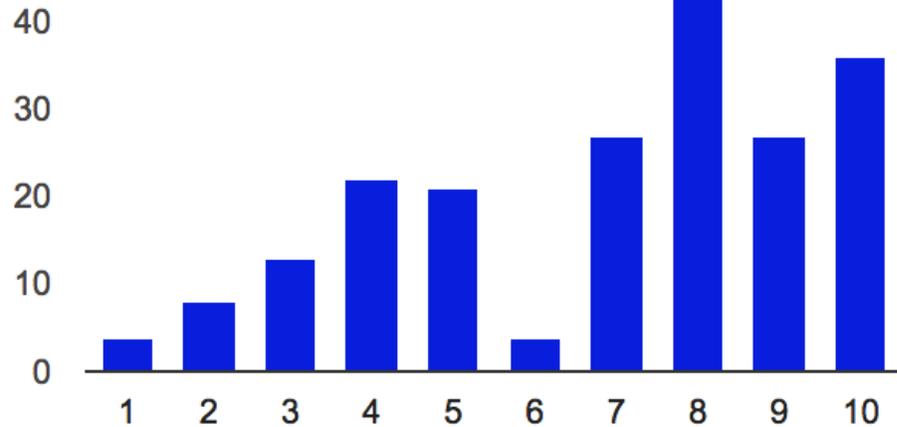
"If I am to be expected to believe in the events taking place in a game, then the environment those events are set in must be as authentic as possible […] and a more authentic environment could help player get a better experience in that game."

Authenticity

Making History: The Second World War is the 4th title of a series of turn-based Grand Strategy games. It's unique open-ended design allows players to experience alternative outcomes in the World War II era. This was an industrial conflict between the Great Powers of the Machine Age. The battles will begin in the factories, mines and the research labs, and resolve in the fields, skies and seas across the globe. Players and the AI are faced with historical decisions that change the course of history making every play through a new immersive Grand Strategy experience. (https://factusgames.com/products/making-history-the-second-world-war)

- Environments, actors or events that gave the player the *feeling* (or sense) of what *really happened*
- "The game designers had done everything possible to capture the <u>feel</u> of crusader Jerusalem despite the limitations of not being able to build the entire city within the game."

- Fless et al. (2016, 486): authenticity "denotes both the experience of genuineness and the genuineness of experience"
- "while it may not be historically accurate in terms of time and events (the more physical elements), I believe it to be historical in terms of placing the player in a scenario where one would have to deal with different factions, groups and people in a manner which would reflect decisions that had to be made at the time."

Agency

- Action not restricted to the game itself

- Personal engagement, positioning oneself as an actor within the gameplay environment:
  - "You go back in time and play as one of your ancestors"
  - "advancing your country" by engaging with "real events"
  - living life "as they did"

From your experience of playing that game did you?	
Try to find out more	42
Learn something	41
Play another game	33
Talk to someone	22
Change gameplay	20
Visit a place	14
Visit a forum	9
Other	4

Agency

- Chapman (2016), Copplestone (2017) and McCall (2016): historical games provide simulated spaces in which gamers can exercise agency, actively crafting and participating in the past

- "It is set in Ancient Rome and contains a lot of real historical characters and events from the past, even if your actions may cause events to play out differently to how they actually occurred."
- "Although not very accurate, it is based on the past. I like how it gives a great opportunity to re-shape actual history."

- When gaming: "use familiar frameworks of history and mechanics built into the game to understand how historical figures, institutions and kingdoms interacted."

Conclusions

- Perceived accuracy of digital spaces helps to generate a feeling of historical authenticity, which enables gamers to exercise agency

- Gamers' perceptions are framed by formal and experiential elements, as well as by prior (historical) knowledge and activities conducted outside the digital environment

- The importance of context

- Interplay between the digital and the "real world"

- Debates about accuracy/ authenticity of digital games = those about the nature of historical knowledge itself?

You have died of dysentery.

References

- Chapman, A. (2016). *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. London: Routledge.

- Copplestone, T. J. (2017). But that's not accurate: the differing perceptions of accuracy in cultural-heritage videogames between creators, consumers and critics. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice, 21*(3), 415-438.

- Fless, F., Graf, B., Dally, O., Franke, U., Gerbich, C., Lengyel, D., Knaut, M., Näser, C., Savoy, B., Steinmüller, L. K., Steudtner, K., Taschner, M., Toulouse, C., & Weber, S. (2016). Authenticity and communication. In G. Graßhoff and M. Meyer (Eds.), *Special Volume 6: Space and Knowledge. Topoi Research Group Articles*, pp. 481-524.

- McCall, J. (2016). Teaching History With Digital Historical Games: An Introduction to the Field and Best Practices. *Simulation & Gaming, 47*(4), 517-542.