



# Learning about the (medieval) past through digital gaming

Jamie Wood (University of Lincoln)  
Eve Stirling (Sheffield Hallam University)

# Today



- Investigate UK university students' perceptions of how playing historical videogames has affected their understanding of (and therefore learning about) the past.
- 2 disciplines: History and Design.
- User-centred, processual understanding, concentrating on how active engagement in gameplay affects perceptions of historical time and place.
- Themes: accuracy, authenticity, agency.

# Research question



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

Probing the key paradox of historical gaming: that gamers are tightly constrained in their ability to experience the past due to the games' ludic, narrative, and formal structures but at the same time the gameplay experience provides them with opportunities for sophisticated ways of engaging with history and exercising agency.

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## TEACHING THE MIDDLE AGES THROUGH MODERN GAMES

USING, MODDING AND CREATING  
GAMES FOR EDUCATION AND IMPACT

Edited by Robert Houghton

VIDEO GAMES AND THE HUMANITIES

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# Method and data

- Anonymous questionnaires, and focus groups/ workshops
- UG and PG students
- 200 responses



Stirling, E., and Wood, J. (2021). "Actual history doesn't take place": Digital Gaming, Accuracy and Authenticity', *Games Studies* 21.1.

[http://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/stirling\\_wood](http://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/stirling_wood)

Stirling, E., and Wood, J. (2022). 'Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games', in *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games: Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact*, ed. by Robert Houghton (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 29-43.

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783110712032/html?lang=en>

A speculative *design fiction* that drew on data from the survey. The fiction, we explore *what* students thought that they had learnt about history through playing "historical" video games in their free time and *how* they thought that they had learnt it, considering how it might inform the use of digital gaming in an imagined future university.

# Accuracy

Is it important that the gameplay environment is historically accurate?

Yes (146 responses): 71%

No (61 responses): 29%

“actually happened”

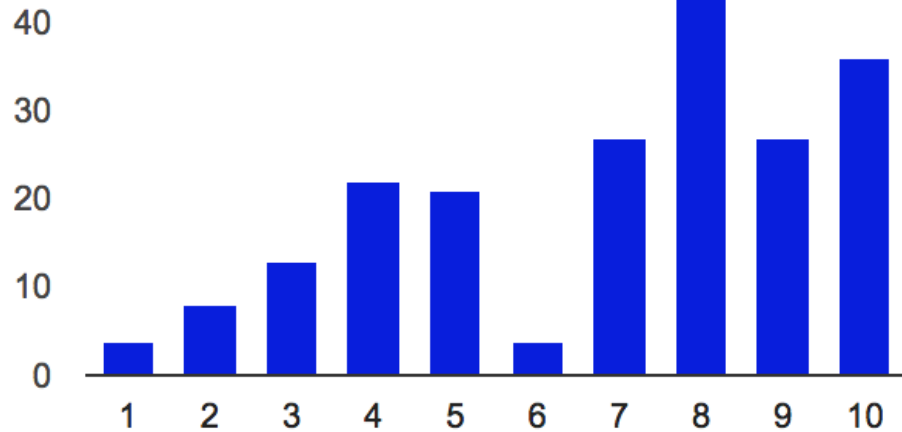
“real”

- “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”

## 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



# Authenticity



- 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 feel of crusader Jerusalem despite the limitations of not being able to build the entire city within the game.”
- “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.”
- “use familiar frameworks of history and mechanics built into the game to understand how historical figures, institutions and kingdoms interacted.”



# Conclusions

- Some gamers learnt a lot about history by playing games set in the past.
- Extends beyond learning information about history to engaging in processes of historical – or quasi-historical – thinking and acting.
- A highly social activity, also involving action in the ‘real’ world
- Gamers’ perceptions framed by formal and experiential elements, as well as by prior (historical) knowledge and activities conducted outside the digital environment.
- Aesthetic quality of some games encourages repeat play.



# Conclusions

- Debates about accuracy and authenticity reflect those about the nature of historical knowledge itself, I think...
- (Some) gamers have a sophisticated understanding of these issues; they are purposeful actors in the process, not passive consumers.
- Passion for playing “challenging” games: difficulty is valued.
- Gamers work through scenarios repeatedly in order to figure out effective gameplay strategies.
- Gamers note (as per theories of historical gaming) that re-playability of historical games enables them to explore a range of potential outcomes of historical scenarios, engaging in forms of counterfactual play.





*E.Stirling@shu.ac.uk @evestirling*  
*jwood@lincoln.ac.uk @woodjamie99*