THE AGENCY OF ASSASSIN'S CREED: A SPECULATIVE DESIGN FICTION

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Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games

- Video games as digital places of cultural meaning making.
- Games which are set in the past (e.g. the medieval setting of Assassin's Creed II) combine the past and present in their storyworld.
- Design fiction allows us to suspend disbelief about change while at the same time open up space for discussion.
- We present a speculative *design fiction* that draws on data from a survey of student gamers' perceptions of their learning about the past through playing video games.
- We used survey data to create a story to imagine how students might learn about the past through gaming in a future university.
- Through 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.

- User-centered approach.
- Survey asking gamers tell us their perceptions of the impact of playing historical video games on their understanding of history.
- Probing 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 can provide them with opportunities for sophisticated ways of engaging with history and exercising agency.
- Design fiction: challenge of remaining 'loyal' to the data:
  - written using 80% participant voices and 20% our narrative voice
  - based on analysis of themes identified in the data
  - refined by reviewing the dataset on several occasions
  - worked separately to code the overall dataset
  - collaboratively reviewed and cross-checked codes and emerging themes
  - extracted representative quotes from the participants' responses to the questionnaire to help us to exemplify key themes and codes.

The storyworld of
## MD 348211 – Playing the Past: making history in digital spaces 01

Gaming for me is about escapism and challenge. I love it when I can't get off a game. I love the realism, action, the potential for strategy, the interaction, the attention to detail in the gameplay and the graphics. And the freedom in the game to explore. It's a draw like no other media.

So, a module based on playing computer games? Of course, I would choose that. I love gaming. My favourite? Assassins Creed because it is thoroughly enjoyable, and is what sparked my interest in history as a child, and led to me pursuing it at uni.

You are now at the Kansas River crossing. Would you like to look around?

Date: April 10, 1848
Weather: hot
Health: good
Food: 1365 pounds
Next landmark: 0 miles
Miles traveled: 102 miles

As well as this, the game is fun, entertaining, well designed, challenging and, at the same time, educational. It (the module) was an opportunity to do something different where I could try out role playing as historical characters, rather than writing about them. I was also interested to see what it would be like to design a historical game that my friends could play.
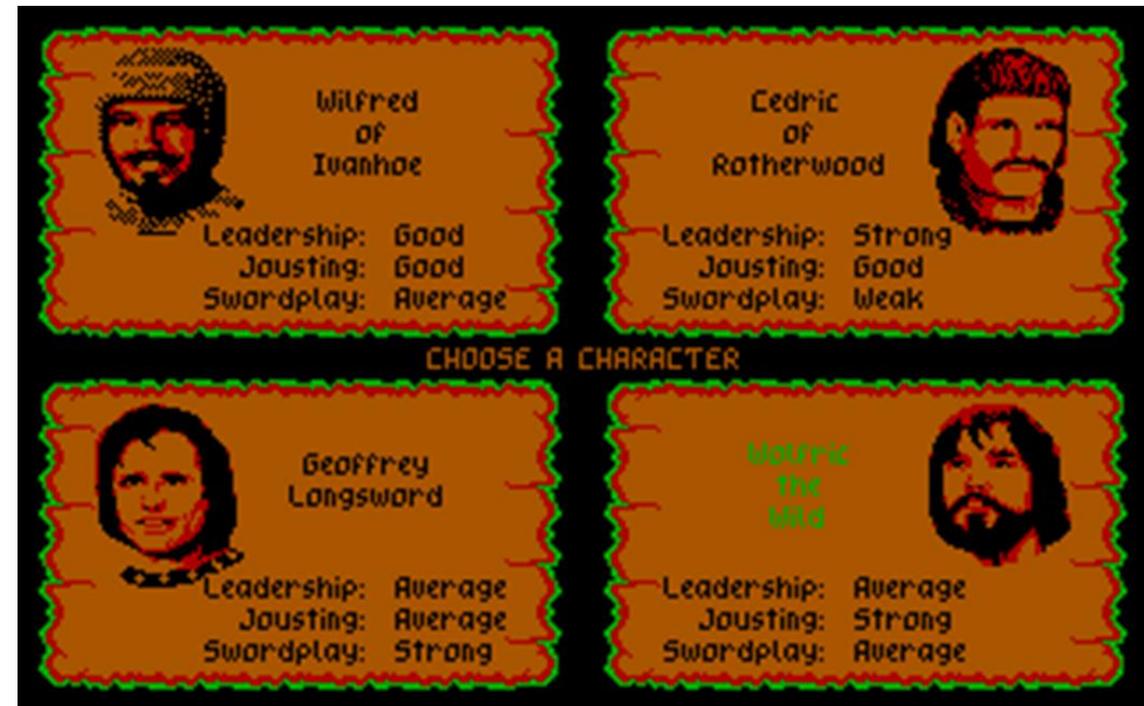
The module runs twice a semester for seven days in total each time. It's tricky to get a place on it because there is a cap of 40 students. And it's popular because students like the idea of getting credit for playing video games! But many of us are also interested in the variety of different ways you are able to get involved, from RPG (role play game) aspects to working together and even getting the chance to design a game for the next group of students.

I really like the concept of alternative history and wanted to see what it was like to see historical events play out in different ways from different perspectives. We were told at the start of the module that we'd have to adopt a variety of different roles over the week. Some of the others were a bit nervous about this because they prefer playing solo, but I love the teamwork aspect of gaming so I was looking forward to it.

We all started the module in the first-person role and, although it was fun, at first, I couldn't really see what we were learning by rampaging around the medieval countryside. But as it went on, the prompts during gameplay, interactions with other characters, and the beauty of the architecture really drew me in and I learnt a lot about everyday life in medieval Italy as well as developing my combat skills. Every hour or so, we had to take a break and record a quick voice memo about what we had learned.

At the end of the day, we had read a blog post about late medieval Italy that our tutor sent to us and had to write a paragraph or two in our online learning diaries.

I felt like I had a better idea of what was going on the next day when I joined three other students to complete a quest from Florence to Rome. It was good to work together and fun to be travelling around Italy and learning about all the different cities, although some of the others weren't taking it that seriously all the time. Then I got really into it and we played through the night on a side quest (not a module requirement). The learning center has 24-hour access and so we can still use the VR rooms to continue our game.

Then I slept . . .

On the fourth day I had the choice of doing the strategy game either on my own or in a group. I decided to pair up with one of my friends and we were given the position of a general in charge of the army of Milan planning a campaign against Florence. We're used to gaming together, so I think that we made a good team and we didn't have too many disagreements! The fact that if we made a mistake, we could go back and try again meant that we could think about alternative histories.

On the fifth and sixth days, I was part of a team that designed elements of the game for the next time the module runs. Some of my teammates are really into modding games to make them more interesting or accurate, so they really got into this task. We were given a pre-formatted "world" so we only had to add the details that we had researched about medieval life.

I prefer gameplay and experiencing different historical worlds so this was a bit less interesting to me. But I did learn a lot about how to use digital mapping software so that the game could be played in historical spaces, and about how important stories and characters are to game design.

Once we completed the week-long gameplay (equivalent to 40 hours of study) we then had a week to document and reflect on our experiences before the assessment submission.

I loved the module. Some of my friends said that it wasn't "proper" History, and I sort of understand that, but it was great to be able to bring my passion for gaming together with my love of History. But playing this way meant that we explored different elements of living in a quasi-medieval world. We could do things that would not have been feasible in real life, let alone in other modules.

Working through key decisions to be made with other students offered me insights into the complex nature of history. We were able to shape our own history through making choices based on real-life past events – it was so difficult! And we got assessed on how we engaged and reflected on these experiences.

I love that the university has offered this immersive experience. The world that the "game developer students" have created is filled with a rich back story and impressive environment (luckily, we have an agreement/relationship with a local games developer who donated the game engine so we had a prototype into which we could insert specific elements of the game, including historical information that we had researched).

Even though I wasn't as into the game design aspect of the module as some of the others, I feel like I learned a lot by getting to play with the past, rather than just observing it from a distance. It's not for everyone, but I think it could help some students understand how history "works" (rather than just about what happened in the past) by doing modules like this.

When I looked back at my learning journal, I noticed that I enjoyed – or at least learnt something from – working through the "grind" of gameplay with other students. It also made me much more interested in Renaissance Italy than I'd ever have thought possible!

- Positivity about gaming suggested an intrinsic openness to taking a module that involved playing and making historical video games.
- No predictable single reason why a student might choose to take a module on historical gaming.
- Personal experience of gameplay, whether carried out solo, in collaboration or in competition with others, was pivotal, as was the sense that such gameplay was potentially individualized (or even individualizable).
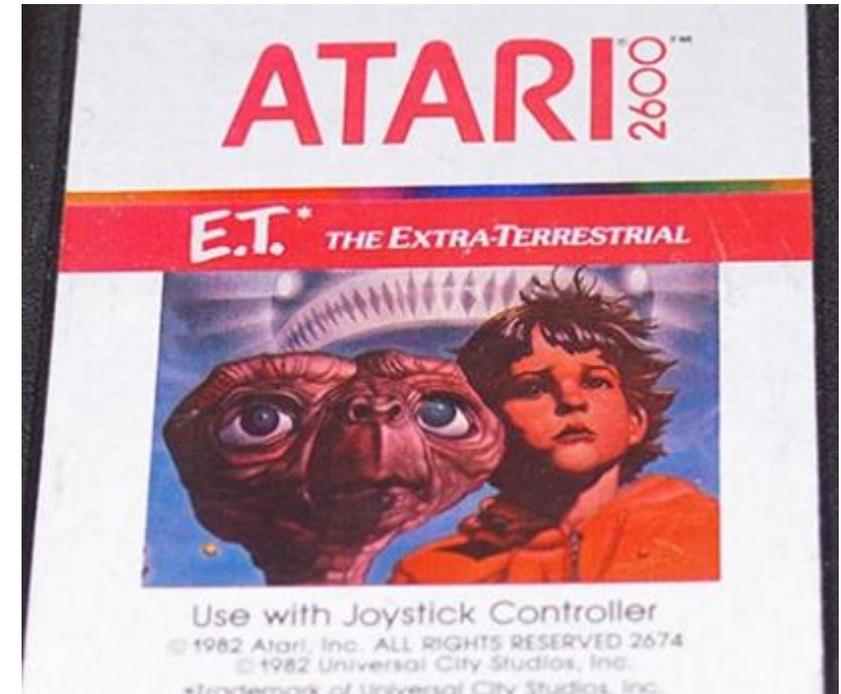
- Vital factors in generating a positive gaming experience: aesthetics, social interaction, choice, 'challenging' gameplay.
- High aesthetic quality of games mentioned often as encouraging repeat play.
- A highly social activity.
- Respondents' passion for playing challenging games - difficulty viewed positively.
- Challenging nature of some games means that gamers may have to work through scenarios repeatedly in order to figure out effective gameplay strategies.
- Re-playability of historical games enables players to make different decisions and thus to explore a range of potential outcomes of different historical scenarios, engaging in forms of counterfactual play.
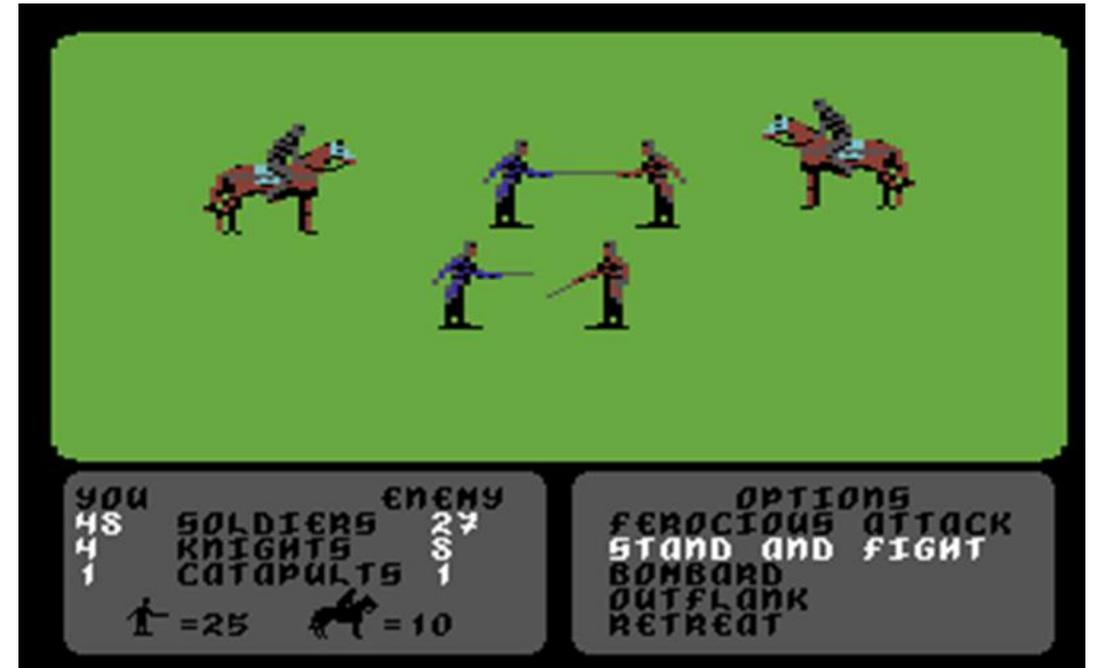
- Some gamers learnt a lot about history by playing games set in the past.
- Extends beyond learning information about history to engaging in processes of historical – or quasi-historical – thinking.
- Games have strong potential to engage people with history, including teaching them about specific places, ideas, and perspectives.

You have died of dysentery.
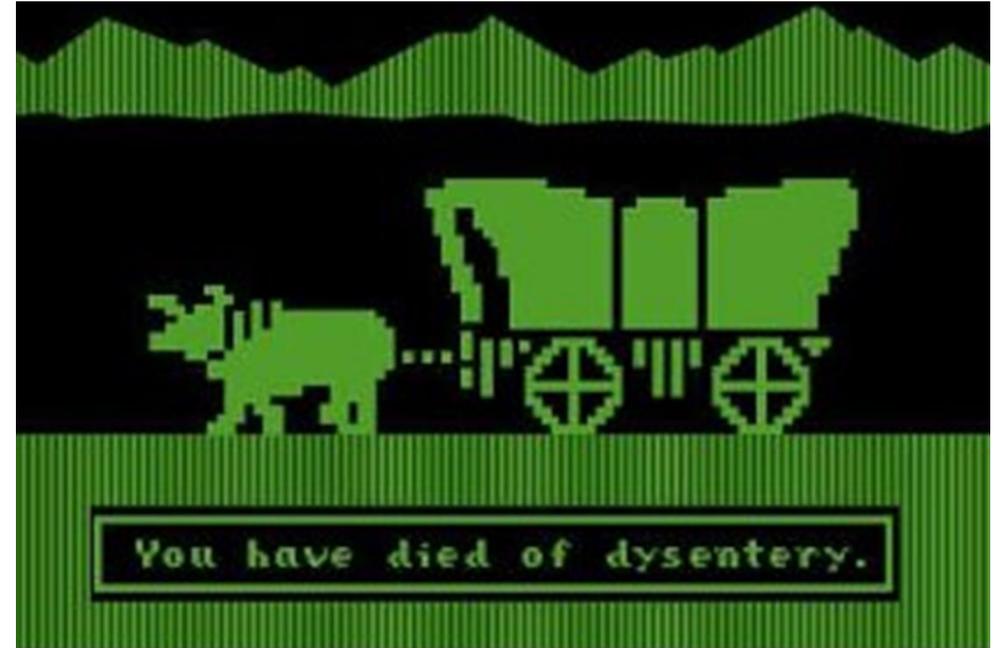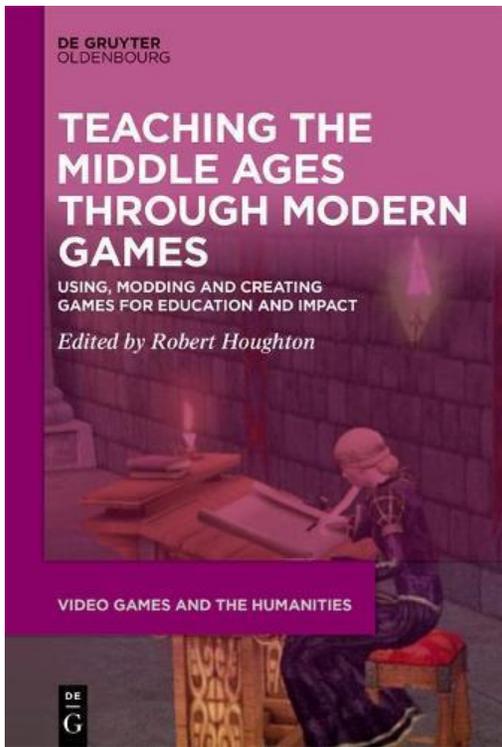
Having worked on a number of projects exploring the experiences of students who play video games set in the past we would like to take part in this event as we are looking for collaborators to develop new and subsequent projects.
Please get in touch *if you would like to explore possible avenues for collaboration.*

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- 2021: '"Actual history doesn't take place": Digital Gaming, Accuracy and Authenticity', *Games Studies* 21.1. http://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/stirling_wood
- 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 (Oldenboug: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 29-43.
  https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783110712032/html?lang=en