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## Simulations and Simulacra: History in Video Games

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Historical video games are not only entertainment, but big business. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the worldwide success of fantasy games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* have brought about a renewed flurry of interest in formal Medieval Studies programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Yet, despite some excellent scholarship examining the so-called ‘edutainment’ debate which questions whether games can teach history, what has been overlooked is a more important question: if so, what kind of history would that be? This article uses the concept of simulation to question the ways in which games confront history, arguing first that history is itself a model, before arguing that what is often on offer in many video games is a kind of simulation which allows for historical thinking.

Keywords: Video games, History, Historical simulation.

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**Simulações e Simulacros:  
A História nos Videojogos**

Os videojogos históricos não são apenas entretenimento, mas um negócio enorme. Provas circunstanciais sugerem que o sucesso mundial de jogos de fantasia como *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* e *World of Warcraft* estimularam uma renovada vaga de interesse pelos programas académicos de estudos medievais, tanto a nível de licenciaturas como de mestrados e doutoramentos. Contudo, e apesar de alguns trabalhos notáveis em torno da capacidade destes jogos de ensinar história, uma questão mais importante tem sido ignorada: que tipo de história podem ensinar? Este artigo usa o conceito de simulação para questionar os modos como os videojogos se relacionam com a história, começando por argumentar que a história é em si mesma um modelo, para depois afirmar que muitos videojogos oferecem na realidade uma espécie de simulação que propicia o pensamento histórico.

Palavras-chave: Videojogos, História, Simulação Histórica.

# Simulations and Simulacra: History in Video Games

Andrew B. R. Elliott\*

Historical video games—as the growing scholarship explored in this article attest—are not only a growing area for discussion, but they are important in their own right. Examining the bestseller lists of videogames sold over the past four years, the top ten bestselling video games for 2014, 2013, 2012 and 2011 all feature video games franchises like *Assassin's Creed*, *Call of Duty*, *Elder Scrolls*, *World of Warcraft* or *Battlefield*, all of which share a setting in a past historical world, however loosely that world might be understood.<sup>1</sup> In fact, of the top twenty bestselling games of the last four decades since the domestication of the video console, alongside many obvious examples like *Tetris*, *Wii Fit* or *Mario Kart* for the Wii, or *Kinect Adventures* for the Xbox there are three immensely popular historical games and franchises: *Skyrim*, *World of Warcraft* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.<sup>2</sup>

Now, as one who works on historical representation in popular culture it is immensely tempting to jump ahead and conclude from

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1 Given the problems of obtaining objective statistics about downloads and sales for comparison purposes, overall sales figures and data have been aggregated from two different games websites: <http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/geekend/the-top-25-best-selling-video-games-ever/> (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2014), and <http://www.gamesradar.com/20-best-selling-games-last-generation/> (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2014). Individual years' sales figures are drawn from <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/Media/Slideshow/2013/12/13/10-Bestselling-Video-Games-2013> on the basis that it offered consistent data year on year for the past five years (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October 2014).

2 The significance of historical titles is further supported by the observation that the three non-historical games cited (*Wii Fit*, *Mario Kart*, and *Kinect Adventures*) were often sold in a bundle with the purchase of the console itself. While those sales were not always recorded as sales in their own right, their proliferation and ubiquity risk distorting any subsequent sales figures generated from them.

these kinds of statistics simply that ‘people like to play historical video games’. Indeed, this thought has become such a truism that it has prompted a growing agreement that the media are becoming the primary mode through which most people now understand history. Peter C. Rollins, for example, in a book which is generally welcoming of historical films, begins his study by claiming that “contemporary Americans know what they know about foreign affairs, domestic politics, and history primarily from what they see on the motion picture screen, television, and—in a recycled form—on videotape and DVD technologies.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in their study of historical films, Francaviglia and Rodnitzky begin with the claim that “film is such a good medium for teaching history” because “our current students are clearly a film generation. Increasingly, they see more films and read fewer books.”<sup>4</sup> John E. O’Connor similarly argues that “even well-educated Americans are learning most of their history from film or television.”<sup>5</sup>

So entrenched, in fact, are these claims that they can even find themselves being used to destabilise scholarly authority—again without any evidence offered in support of them. As Gaea Leinhardt claims, nowadays “students learn history outside of school [...] The voice of the academy is not privileged in the development of historical memory or in the constructions of students, their parents, or even teachers”,<sup>6</sup> prompting Paul Weinstein to suggest we “acknowledge film and television media as the great educators of our time”.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, there is among scholars of media and history a prevalent but untested syllogism

3 Peter C. Rollins, “Film and History: Our Media Environment as a New Frontier,” in *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. by Richard V. Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (Arlington: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 1–9 (1).

4 *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. by Richard V. Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (Arlington: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), viii.

5 John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past”, *The American Historical Review*, 93.5 (1988), 1200–1209 (p. 1201) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1873535>>.

6 Gaea Leinhardt, ‘Lessons on Teaching and Learning History from Paul’s Pen’, in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. by Peter N. Stearns, Peter C. Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), pp. 223–45 (p. 225).

7 Paul B. Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project,” *The History Teacher* 35, n.º 1 (2001): 27–48 (27) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3054508>>.

that—as a result of an explosion of popular history in the media—the public is learning most, if not all, of its history from the media—especially television and film—in place of ‘official’ sources like books and museums.

Not only is this latter claim unexamined but, appealing as it might be, within the context of video games it is frankly untenable since it takes into account neither the extraordinary variety of historical video games in existence, nor the extraordinary variety of ways of playing them. More importantly, it overlooks the significant number of initiatives with good (or at least pedagogically-inclined) intentions that nevertheless resulted in poor video games, like MECC’s *Freedom!*, a side-scroller which aimed to teach students about slavery but which resulted instead in a series of lawsuits for its alleged racism. Likewise, such an argument masks a basic assumption that a historical video game is trying to represent the past accurately or authentically. Such an assumption ignores the vast ludic graveyards filled with entertaining yet loose or obviously counterfactual historical settings, like *Gettysburg: Armed Warfare* (which introduces modern warfare to the Battle of Gettysburg), or the ill-judged *JFK: Reloaded* (which allows the player to attempt to recreate the Kennedy assassination, awarding points for historical accuracy).<sup>8</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum sit games like the immensely popular *Assassin’s Creed* franchise. While the historical detail of a game like *Assassin’s Creed II* might be commended—indeed, Connie Veugen argues that the series’ “meticulous recreation of past eras is exactly what has made these games so successful”<sup>9</sup>—such claims raise questions about whether players actually *want* historical accuracy in the first place, and how many of them might recognise it in any case.

In this article I propose to build on existing scholarship, not by trying to offer a generalised theory of engagement or enquiry, but rath-

8 All of these examples are drawn from a feature exploring bad taste or unusual historical video games on [www.theverge.com](http://www.theverge.com). See Molly Osberg, “Nine of the Weirdest Historical Video Games Ever Made,” *The Verge*, 2014 <<http://www.theverge.com/2014/9/18/6352709/nine-of-the-weirdest-historical-video-games-ever-made>> [accessed 13 October 2014].

9 Connie Veugen, “Using Games to Mediate History,” in *Companion to European Heritage Revivals*, ed. Linde Egberts and Koos Bosma (Springer, 2014), 95–113 (101).

er by turning back to the historiographic questions which underpin that scholarship, in order to highlight some similarities between academic history and computer simulations. The objective here is not to try to prove that games are capable of replicating historical inquiry, but rather to show that the process of simulation bears, in fact, marked similarities with the process of representing history. Historians, admittedly, use a range of disciplinary tools and methods to enquire about the past. Consequently, I do not suggest that the two processes are the same. Rather, my point is that—in its capacity to invoke a model of past behaviour—games can often require some similar processes to some facets of historical enquiry. These behaviours offer new and interesting ways of thinking about the past which can encourage a form of historical thinking.

Similarly, as a theoretically-inflected article, my work does not try to make grand claims about all games, or indeed to offer any broader suggestions about different genres, since without sufficient empirical data it is both unhelpful and impossible to generalise. Ubisoft's intentions with regards to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise clearly operate according to a very different set of priorities when compared to games like *Europa Universalis* or *Crusader Kings*. In the latter, a different set of affordances (to use Adam Chapman's concept)<sup>10</sup> make for a markedly different interaction with the past than the former's immersion into history. These affordances encourage a player to shift from an "observation of historical objects" to take on more of an "exploratory agency" in games which offer an interactive past world.<sup>11</sup> Ubisoft's historical world is not (only) an affordance, but a setting. As Chapman argues, "a large part of the aesthetics of games such as *Assassin's Creed* are actually

10 Adam Chapman, "Affording History: Civilization and the Ecological Approach," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 61–73.

11 Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 175; see also Andrew Rheinhard's work on archaeological exploration of No Man's Sky in Gita Jackson, "Archeologist Digs Into Remains of No Man's Sky Abandoned Player Civilization," *Kotaku*, 2017 <<https://kotaku.com/archeologist-digs-into-remains-of-no-mans-sky-abandoned-1819114074>> [accessed 11 December 2017].

algorithms, that, though written logically, are still subjective aesthetics that attempt to represent historical experience through reactively producing signs to be read and responses to be acted upon.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition, this article objects to the insistence on equating consumption with learning inherent in the various claims that audiences learn history from the media. Firstly, any analysis of historical video games (or any other medium depicting the past) ought to be deeply wary of suggesting that players are passively consuming media. Not only is such a claim palpably untrue—as the vast literature on game studies demonstrates—but it also fundamentally misunderstands how and to what extent players of historical video games become involved in some kind of historical investigation. There is a great variety of mechanisms by which a ‘player’ can interact with a given game, which means that it is difficult to generalise exactly what sort of relationship exists between a player and a game. From the isolation of a player absorbed in a handheld game to a multiplayer console game with friends; from playing an in-browser game on a smart phone to playing a Facebook game against or with friends; from an intensive FPS played against a player several time zones away to entering the world of Massively Multiplayer Online RPG: in all of these cases the relationships between gamer and game are complex and multifaceted and—clearly—almost impossible to generalise without basing one’s descriptions on unhelpful assumptions. Thus, to suggest a generalised theory of what people are doing when they play historical video games seems to be somewhat naïve at best, and utterly misguided at worst.

What is more, when we try to analyse historical video games, we are often overlooking legions of casual gamers who, as Jesper Juul observes, rarely show up in those bestseller games lists, but who might nevertheless be engaging with the past in broadly similar ways.<sup>13</sup> Yet,

<sup>12</sup> Adam Chapman, “Privileging Form over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, n.<sup>o</sup> 2 (2012) <<http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman/>>.

<sup>13</sup> Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

while there are dozens of articles and chapters on *Assassin's Creed II* or *Sid Meier's Civilization* and history, very few explicitly explore casual games and their relationship with history. Serina Patterson's essay on medievalism remains one of very few such studies, carefully analysing the ways in which social gaming's uses of the Middle Ages in Facebook, Twitter and mobile devices integrate a memory of the period and incorporate it into users' everyday lives.<sup>14</sup> Patterson's argument that casual medieval games form pseudomedieval worlds which "serve a variety of social and emotional needs"<sup>15</sup> draws out the subtle point that it is not merely a clique of hard-core gamers who 'reimagine' history, but rather, to some extent, we are all likely to engage, in one way or another, with digital games and history.

### **Games and/as Historiography**

Historiography has, for some decades now, been wrestling with questions about what it means to study the past. An important part of the debate concerns what it means to 'do history', as Robert A. Rosenstone termed it in his 1995 book, *Visions of the Past*, in which he overtly questioned whether film is capable of conducting serious academic and historical enquiry, a process he later called doing "History with a capital H".<sup>16</sup> Part of the problem, Rosenstone wrote, is that the formal ways of carrying out historical enquiry were analysed and the inevitable subjectivity of the historian increasingly became a focus of critical enquiry in itself. Thus, Rosenstone suggested, perhaps films were in some ways carrying out a kind of history on screen, even if it was not the same work as professional historians.

In the context of games, similar suggestions have been made for over a decade. From the earliest examples—such as Uricchio's now sem-

14 Serina Patterson, "Casual Medieval Games, Interactivity, and Social Play in Social Network and Mobile Applications," in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. by Daniel T. Kline (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 243–56.

15 Patterson, 245, 254.

16 Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film and History* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2006), 2.

inal 2005 article “History, Simulation, and Computer Games” and Kurt Squire’s work in the field (including his ground-breaking doctoral thesis on *Civilization*) – to more recent studies by Adam Chapman, Daniel Kline, Jeremiah McCall, Tobias Winnerling and Florian Kerschbaumer, there has been a steady acceptance that historical inquiry through computer games is something with which players are concerned, and which scholars should acknowledge accordingly.<sup>17</sup>

Even as early as 2006, Niall Ferguson acknowledged that non-historians were engaging with history in ways which already recognised that the process of ‘doing history’ was changing. In a much-cited article in the *New York Magazine*, Ferguson acknowledged that a new generation of gamers had grown up with simulations of the past and were capable of replicating some of that History with a capital H, suggesting that:

the Game Boy generation is growing up. And, as they seek a deeper understanding of the world we live in, they may not turn first to the bookshelves. [...] in the past winners wrote history; now they are programming and selling it.<sup>18</sup>

More empirical evidence emerging in recent scholarship seems to bear out Ferguson’s anecdotal suggestion. Gareth Crabtree’s discussion of ‘modders’ who cross the imaginary line between consumer and producer examines the ways that players are ‘modding’ (modifying) existing video games in order to make adjustments to the historical record.<sup>19</sup>

17 William Uricchio, “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 327–38; Kurt Squire, *Replaying History: Learning World History through Playing Civilization III* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2004) <<http://website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/dissertation.html>> [accessed 1 December 2012]; Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire, “The Art of Contested Spaces,” in *Game On: The History and Culture of Video Games*, ed. L. King (London: Lawrence King, 2003); Adam Chapman, “Is Sid Meier’s Civilization History?,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 17, n.º 3 (2013), 312–32; Chapman, “Privileging Form over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames,” *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (London & New York: Routledge, 2013); Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

18 Niall Ferguson, “How to Win a War,” *New York Magazine*, October 15, 2006.

19 Gareth Crabtree, “Modding as Digital Reenactment,” in *Playing with the Past: Digital*

His conclusions that “modding communities are a new form of digital re-enactment group, facilitated by communication technologies”<sup>20</sup> offer interesting possibilities for discussions of the way that historical capital (to use Pierre Sorlin’s borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu) is both affecting and being affected by users and consumers of popular culture.<sup>21</sup> Modders thus embody a degree of historical engagement which is unprecedented and largely unforeseen by the scholarly literature on the topic.<sup>22</sup> Modding communities offer examples of an intriguing mode of historical gaming in which players do not operate in the capacity of passive players responding to stimuli on screen, but instead become actively engaged in modding a source text in order to heighten verisimilitude, to enhance authenticity, or to manipulate the reception of the video game text itself.<sup>23</sup>

In another example, Shawn Graham’s innovative course at the University of Carleton, “Digital History: Gaming and Simulation for Historians”, encourages students to explore how historical narratives emerge in video games, and teaches history in ways which “take advantage of the key affordances of digital media”.<sup>24</sup> Throughout this course, students are encouraged to formalise their learning through a similar process to modding, in ways which harness history-as-entertainment in order to apply findings to historical inquiry and traditional pedagogic practices.

*Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 199–214.

<sup>20</sup> Crabtree, 207.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Sorlin, “How to Look at an ‘Historical’ Film,” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (London: Continuum, 2001), 25–49 (38).

<sup>22</sup> With the exception of Shree Durga and Kurt Squire, “Productive Gaming and the Case for Historiographic Game-Play,” in *Gaming and Simulations: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and Applications*, ed. Information Resources Management Association (Hershey: IGI Global, 2011), 1124–40.

<sup>23</sup> See *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013), chap. 6, 12 and 13.

<sup>24</sup> For an overview of the course, see <http://www.3812.graeworks.net/syllabus/> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> November 2014]. Graham has also written elsewhere about the possibilities of a digital history Kevin Kee and Shawn Graham, “Teaching History in an Age of Pervasive Computing: The Case for Games in the High School and Undergraduate Classroom,” in *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 337–66.

### Video games and historical engagement

Such practices, and the possibilities that this proposed new generation of digital historians suggest, mean that the historically ‘real’ implied by the term ‘simulation’ in my title becomes itself a site of negotiated meaning. As Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger argue:

As the lines between history-as-knowledge and history-as-entertainment become increasingly blurred, it is important for historians and students to recognize not only how historically themed products situate the past factually, but also how certain depictions of the historically ‘real’ resonate culturally.<sup>25</sup>

Both Adam Chapman’s and Alexander Galloway’s analyses of Sid Meier’s *Civilization* series offer some of the most intriguing kinds of analysis in their assertions, albeit for different reasons, that historical games can offer not only new media for engaging with the past, but also new *forms* of engagement in their own right. As Chapman argues, when analysing video games we ought to be wary of restricting analysis to the content of those games at the expense of any consideration of the form itself.<sup>26</sup> Put simply, unlike representations of history on film, games require a de facto engagement on the part of the audience, requiring them to engage with a prefabricated model, and one whose narrative is not fixed but evolves in direct response to decisions taken by the player. Consequently, the mechanic by which these games work turns on the simple but often unrecognised point that these representations are dynamic, not static, simulations which are in part co-authored by the player rather than—as with film—apparently prefabricated fixed narratives prepared by the filmmaker and consumed by the viewer.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past,” in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153–67 (163).

<sup>26</sup> Chapman, “Privileging Form over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames”.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting here that I am by no means suggesting that film viewing is a passive

Such a position thus requires new methodologies to understand them, which is why both Chapman and Galloway shift the focus from content to form in order to develop new analytical tools to understand what the past does to games, rather than what games do to the past.

In this respect Chapman adopts the ecological theory of affordance to understand how the player might go about engaging with the historical world based on the choices which are available to her.<sup>28</sup> In his argument he recognises that the process of creating a simulation directly affects the kinds of choices available to a player, and therefore the kind of history on offer.<sup>29</sup> Taking this one step further, he goes on to critique historical representation itself, suggesting that even if games can constitute history, “such a broad term does not convey the approach that analysis of these new historical texts requires.”<sup>30</sup> His recognition that history is a ‘broad term’ comprising a range of functions is an important one, since, rather than asking whether one medium is able to ape a scholarly discipline, it recognises that the scholarly study of history is itself by no means a straightforward and monolithic process.

### History as a model

What is also overlooked, however, is that in borrowing the term ‘simulation’ from computing, historical simulation games are in fact operating according to a highly specific understanding of the term ‘simulation’ which has some interesting similarities with the process of traditional historical thinking. In computing, the standard definitions of simulations, such as Jerry Banks’ definition in his *Handbook of Simulation*, suggest that:

Simulation is the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time. *Simulation involves*

process, only that video games depend on an immediate interaction between player and game which is dependent on a player’s agency.

28 Chapman, “Affording History: Civilization and the Ecological Approach”.

29 Chapman, “Affording History: Civilization and the Ecological Approach”, 62–63.

30 Chapman, “Privileging Form over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames”.

*the generation of an artificial history of the system and the observation of that artificial history to draw inferences concerning the operating characteristics of the real system that is represented.*<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, Roger McHaney argues that the real work of simulation comes in the construction of the model, not in its operation or execution, since the principle objective of the computer simulation relies on “using a computer to imitate the operations of a real world process or facility according to appropriately developed assumptions taking the form of logical, statistical, or mathematical relationships which are developed and shaped into a model.”<sup>32</sup>

When asking about how or whether historical video games are able to engage with history, then, it matters what kind of history, or indeed what kind of historical engagement, is being discussed. To reduce it to its most basic elements (and, in fact, to remove the idea of history as an academic practice altogether), just as computer simulations involve the creation of a set of rules and an artificial history, so too does the historiographically-rooted process of creating plausible historical narratives. As several scholars have suggested, in common usage the notion of history covers two contradictory ideas: according to J.L. Gorman, “History is an ambiguous word [...] it can refer to the historical past itself, to the subject matter about which historians write. Second, it can refer to the study of that past, to the practices and writings of historians.”<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, the term implies the *study* of the past as a series of facts and movements. On the other, it suggests a broader *concept* of the past considered as a whole, in which those facts, movements and events have combined in a certain way to lead us to the present day. Not incidentally, it is for this reason that

31 Jerry Banks, *Handbook of Simulation: Principles, Methodology, Advances, Applications, and Practice* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 3–4 Emphasis my own.

32 Roger McHaney, *Understanding Computer Simulation* (Bookboon), 10.

33 J. L. Gorman, *Understanding History: An Introduction to Analytical Philosophy of History* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1992), ix.

Keith Jenkins helpfully suggests a distinction between ‘history’ and ‘the past’.<sup>34</sup>

The distinction between history as a set of data, on the one hand, and history as a process of understanding those data, on the other, is an important one. Such a distinction allows for a more coherent separation between the academic pursuit of history and wider public engagement with history. History is thus revealed to conflate two distinct fields, which Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and I have elsewhere termed a differentiation between fact- and processed-based history.<sup>35</sup> Fact-based history, we argued, includes the sort of event-based history which prioritises learning specific dates, people and places, and which is most familiar perhaps to compulsory education and historical pedagogy in its earliest and most rudimentary forms. Process-based history, on the other hand, encourages questions about contingency and what material, economic, social or political conditions led events to unfold as they did. Process-based history therefore requires a more sophisticated and nuanced kind of historical enquiry.<sup>36</sup>

A second point to note is the separation between the facts of the past and the involvement of an external agent capable of reassembling those facts into a coherent historical narrative. A great deal of ink has been spilled over the last half-century describing the historiographic issues that this external agency engenders and trying to separate out the historian from the history she retells.<sup>37</sup> The recognition that history is not an objective science but a process of ‘shaping’ the past into something meaningful means that the history that emerges in narrative form depends on two factors. First, it depends on *which data are chosen* (the facts), and second, on *how they are put together* (the process).

<sup>34</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013), chap. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Kapell and Elliott, 14–19.

<sup>37</sup> Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (University of Chicago Press, 1984); Paul Veyne, *Comment on Écrit l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1996); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

The first factor, the selection of the facts, is the least visible phase, since it has already been undertaken in the construction of the game-as-model. It is thus often masked by the simulation itself.

This separation is one which Shaffer, based on empirical studies of history educators, classifies as a distinction between knowledge and epistemology.<sup>38</sup> Epistemology, in Shaffer's definition as it relates to learning through computer games, "is a particular way of thinking about or justifying actions, of structuring valid claims. Epistemology tells you the rules you are supposed to use in deciding whether something is true".<sup>39</sup> In terms of public history, Sam Wineburg, the author of one of the studies to which Shaffer refers, implicitly argues that it is epistemology, not facts, which shapes popular understandings of the past.<sup>40</sup> Following a broad study on historical knowledge in 2006, he and his co-authors argue that studies testing factual recall "tell us precious little about the development of historical understanding in contemporary society and the knowledge widely shared among its citizens."<sup>41</sup>

In this respect, then, the key differences between the facts learned by non-historians and the insight gained by historians comes from the process of thinking about how those facts fit together, a process which requires a knowledge of contingency, teleology, narratology and causality. As Mark Gilderhus observes in his own influential study of historiography, by removing all of the metatextual criticism required by historiography, we are left with a process that resembles the same model of simulation outlined above:

Scholars want to know what is likely to happen under various sets of circumstances [...] on the basis of fragmen-

38 David Williamson Shaffer, *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), chap. 1.

39 Shaffer, 31–32.

40 Sam Wineburg and others, "Common Belief and the Cultural Curriculum: An Intergenerational Study of Historical Consciousness," *American Educational Research Journal* 44, n. 91 (2007), 40–76 <<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831206298677>>.

41 Wineburg and others, 69.

tary and imperfect evidence, historians make retroactive predictions [...] about what probably happened in the past and, in so doing, seek to define the cause-and-effect relationships that make the flow of events understandable.<sup>42</sup>

Gilderhus' definition of history, which reconfigures historical enquiry as the generation of a model, closely resembles the process of simulation outlined in our definitions above, according to which both historical thinking and computer simulations are "used to describe and analyse the behaviour of a system, ask what-if questions about the real system, and aid in the design of real systems."<sup>43</sup>

The reconfiguration of historical video games as modelling agents is further supported by Harry J. Brown's categorisation of a historical simulation which:

creates imaginary worlds within the world we know from history—a pocket of imaginary events that reflects and responds to the established historical narrative [...] The game teaches history not by recounting the past, as textbooks do, nor by inviting students to rewrite the past, as strategy games do, but rather by constructing a simulacrum of the past, which brushes against history itself only very lightly.<sup>44</sup>

As a consequence, when we begin to take on board the function of history as using a series of incomplete fragments to recreate a given situation in order to extrapolate from—and understand—a given situation, it no longer seems especially controversial to suggest that, in many ways, *history is itself a simulation*. McHaney's definition of

<sup>42</sup> Gilderhus, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Jerry Banks, *Handbook of Simulation: Principles, Methodology, Advances, Applications, and Practice* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> Harry J. Brown, *Videogames and Education* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), 122.

agent-based modelling could just as easily apply to historical enquiry when he suggests that:

Agent-based modelling addresses the simultaneous interactions of multiple agents to simulate, recreate, study, and predict complex phenomenon. The concept of agent-based modelling is that an overall behavior emerges through the micro-level interactions of individual agents. The primary assumption is that simple local behaviors generate complex high-level behavior. Individual agents are modelled according to individual characteristics and are generally assumed to be rational, acting in their own interests which may be economic or socially derived. The model will use local heuristics and simple decision-making rules that create the larger environment.<sup>45</sup>

When, or if, we question what simulation is for, we can find that history's goals are similar to those of simulation. History aims at understanding processes on the one hand and motivations on the other, on the twin assumptions that agents are logical beings and rational agents.<sup>46</sup> As a consequence, in terms of doing history, video games are not acting like historians in their analytical and speculative mode and their engagement with primary sources, but they are in some cases replicating their process-based, epistemological mode, running simulations which allow us to understand difficult concepts like contingency, teleology etc. Where a historian internalises this process, video games can take the prefabricated model and they can externalise it.

### **History as imperfect simulation**

It is worth reiterating at this juncture that I am certainly not suggesting that historical video games are able to replace the historian or that

<sup>45</sup> Roger McHaney, *Understanding Computer Simulation* (Bookboon), 24.

<sup>46</sup> Gilderhus, 9.

the results of these simulations are identical, for the simple reason that we ought to be wary of claiming any kind of single or definitive narrative of the past. In historical inquiry, the idea that simulation offers a like-for-like process of representation is inherently flawed. Among professional historians, such claims are widely acknowledged as a problematic Rankean view of history ‘as it really was’, on which historiography has cast serious doubt.<sup>47</sup> However, this doubt should not lead us to the other extreme by suggesting that a historical simulation has no relationship with the past either. Given the definitions above, one primordial criterion is that any given simulation must be recognisably related to and generated from the original. The middle path is the simple acknowledgement that these are imperfect simulations.

Given that any kind of historical representation requires in the first instance an agent capable of representing, in both written and digital history the ostensible objectivity of the term ‘simulation’ is already lost from the outset. Whereas in traditional historical inquiry such objectivity has been extensively critiqued, in historical games a similar framework obscures the intervention of the game designer and the game mechanic. As a recent blog post by medievalist and games scholar Robert Houghton notes, this lack of impartiality occurs because the process of modelling ‘the past’ conceals the historical inquiry required to do so. By pretending to simulate the past, the mechanisms of game play and regimes of representation obscure the inevitable intervention of the author:

The recognition that the historical simulation is inevitably one created by a given agent has important consequences for the historical simulation game. It suggests that the work of historical invention and representation, by the time the player first enters the game, *has already been conducted by the game’s creator(s)*. Put this way, it is tempting (though wrong) to suggest that the gamer has little choice

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Hayden White (1990).

but to accept the rules of the game in their engagement with the simulation, a passive stance which disbars any sense of real historical engagement.

One final barrier thus arises in a need to develop a methodology powerful enough to overcome such representational aporia. Carr's recognition that history is constructed by the historian has important consequences for the study of historical simulation games, since it recognises the necessity of shaping a historical narrative into something meaningful. This narrative issue is critical for many representations of history in popular culture, such as television, novels, films and plays. It becomes essential, however, for the study of games, which by necessity must negotiate a fine line between narratological concerns (which study the ways that video games tell a story) and ludological concerns (which study the ways that games are played) by shifting the emphasis from developer-as-creator to player-as-creator.<sup>48</sup>

Reduced to their simplest functions, in a simulation game the choices of a player affect the events of the game, and in turn influence the ways in which the game progresses and the kinds of narratives that are produced. As such, even if the developer is responsible for the initial design of the game world, if we were to take a snapshot of any simulation game halfway through a given game, we would find a model of the world which is co-authored by both the developer and the gamer, with potentially exponential numbers of variations. In this respect, it is scarcely controversial to suggest that the player becomes in some sense the creator of a part of each game's individual narrative. Ignoring this fact means ignoring a significant aspect of the ways that a video game engages with history.

Relating this back to history, if the assembly of a narrative is a significant factor in the creation of history itself, it is essential to create

48 For more on the distinction between ludology and narratology, see Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," *Game Approaches/SPil-Veje. Papers from Spilforskning.Dk Conference*, 2004; Thomas H. Apperley, "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres", *Simulation Gaming* 37, n.<sup>o</sup> 6 (2006), 6–23; Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video)Games and Narrative," *Www.Ludology.Org*, 1999.

a new analytical tool. Such a tool must not view historical games as strict attempts to represent the past as a set of facts to be learned and recalled (knowledge, as Shaffer calls it). Instead, it must understand games as a means of immersing players into constructed historical environments and be able to explore what effect the process of playing with these historical worlds has on our understanding of them (epistemology).

### **Historical games as simulacra**

One such methodological tool is the introduction of a Baudrillardian simulacrum in order to prioritise the simulation as a process of generating the hyperreal, instead of viewing the game as a simulacrum allowing players to explore the facts of the real.<sup>49</sup> The world of *Crusader Kings II* illustrates this distinction. Set in the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest, the ‘real’ medieval world upon which the virtual has been constructed is not a medieval world located in the past and dragged into the present by means of a simulation. Instead (and this distinction is subtle but important), it is a historical model built in the present which is superimposed onto the past. Given that the gameplay will propel the player through several centuries in the space of a few hours (depending on the skill of the player), the factual accuracy of the historical setting is largely irrelevant, or at least subordinate, to the gameplay. The important factor for the player is the effect which her actions have on later events in the game according to the rules of the simulation. In other words, the historical narrative does not have to match the ‘real’ historical narrative in order to win. *Crusader Kings II*, therefore, represents an attempt to copy an imagined original, even if that original no longer exists.

In many ways, the separation between the historical outcomes of the game and the historical outcomes proposed by scholars reflects the same important distinction between ‘the past’ and ‘history’ offered by

49 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Keith Jenkins.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, then, the video game-as-model functions perfectly as a Baudrillardian simulation which, in its original definition, is no longer the simulation of “a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”<sup>51</sup> The reference to the hyperreal, rather than the real, means we no longer need to rely on the verisimilitude of video game simulations and the historicity of the games, since it removes the idea that the simulation is a like-for-like replica of the past and instead shows us that all historical simulation is an extrapolated model. A video game is thus not history itself, but history operating in the subjunctive mood of possibility.

This is not to say that the simulacrum is not valuable for historical inquiry. Douglas Dow, in a chapter on simulation and art history in *Assassin's Creed II*, offers an excellent example of how such simulacra may not help us to learn history as knowledge, but can offer us a lesson in historiography/epistemology. Over the course of his argument, Dow makes the important point that “the Florence of *Assassin's Creed II* turns out to be not an exact re-creation of the fifteenth-century city, and must be seen instead as a simulacrum, a version of the city that purports to be a true representation of Florence, but that presents a false likeness instead.”<sup>52</sup> Following this argument, the medieval world on offer in *Assassin's Creed II* has been created from an extrapolated model, not recreated from history.

The example which Dow uses is the Florentine church of Santa Croce, which, in the game, uses a façade that was in fact not constructed until the nineteenth century, but is here shown in fifteenth-century Florence.<sup>53</sup> He terms this a ‘non-obvious anachronism’, since it is an anachronism that is not immediately obvious to those players (most

50 Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

51 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 2.

52 Douglas N. Dow, “Historical Veneers: Anachronism, Simulation and Art History in *Assassin's Creed II*,” in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 215–31 (218–19).

53 Dow, 219–20.

probably the vast majority) without detailed knowledge of Florentine architecture and art history.

However, the crucial point here is that even if they are, strictly speaking, not accurate, such non-obvious anachronisms rarely undermine the historicity of the game, since their inclusion can meet the *expectations* of players, especially given that its nineteenth-century construction followed a neo-Gothic design reflecting a modern evocation of the thirteenth century. Thus, even if it is *not* medieval, it looks like the sort of thing one *might expect* to find in fifteenth-century Florence as an already two-hundred-year-old relic. It is thus a simulacrum, a model which reflects modern ideas about the past even if those are not technically faithful to the historical facts.

The primary function of the gameplay, Dow argues, recreates a version of Florence which is recognisable to modern players and which seems suitably medieval. Such a recreation is born neither of laziness nor of wilful misrepresentation. Rather, it reflects an attempt to strike a delicate balance between verisimilitude, on the one hand, and gameplay, on the other. In short, it is not a narratological decision, but a ludic one. The game is, after all, a commercial game and it must make sense in the present according to modern, not medieval, logic. As Ubisoft explicitly and unabashedly acknowledges, while historical accuracy might be desirable for game designer and developers, for the company ultimately “history is [a] playground.” It is not doing history as archival research, but offering players the capacity to engage with a model of the past.

### **Historical intentions**

Ubisoft’s ‘playground’ defence—and indeed the fact that we might term it a ‘defence’—leads to the often unacknowledged recognition that much of the debate about historical video games relies on an underlying, pernicious assumption that historically-themed games are *even trying to* create any kind of simulation or verisimilitude in their depictions of the past. Although they produce commercially viable games,

the fact that Ubisoft—like Paradox Interactive and others—work with historians in the production process does suggest that developers take their history seriously. More revealing, then, is what happens in the case of a game which declares no intention of maintaining any kind of historical accuracy. Should this second category of games be criticised for overlooking historical responsibility, something which they never intended to do in the first place?

Any such neat categorisation of games does not stand up to scrutiny. Instinctively, common sense urges us to regard historical impulses not as a discrete division into ‘serious’ and ‘playful’ histories, but to view them as gradations on a wider spectrum. A game like *Beowulf*, for example, clearly does not attempt to provide any real kind of historical accuracy, for the simple reason that the original poem is itself so enshrouded with translations, retranslations and accretions that, even if we wanted to, we would be unable to place its narrative into any historical timeframe with any degree of certainty. The major concerns of a game like *Beowulf* are not to produce another culturally-attuned, sensitive and scholarly meditation on the poem, but rather to provide a means of playing in the same kind of mediated world as the Zemeckis 2007 film of the same name.<sup>54</sup>

In this sense, a player is not propelled *backwards* into the early medieval past, but *sideways* to the modern film, causing us to shift the original question from one medium to another in order to ascertain whether the film was trying to replicate history (and whether it can be described as ‘doing’ history). Instead of providing answers, such genealogical medievalism raises still more questions, since it in turn reflects a complex genealogy. The film clearly owes as much to the medieval poem as to Michael Crichton’s novel, *Eaters of the Dead*, which in turn produced John McTiernan’s 1999 film *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*. McTiernan’s film, like Zemeckis’ *Beowulf*, did not access the poem directly either, but filtered it through the prism of Tolkien and other translations, as

<sup>54</sup> For more specifically on *Beowulf*’s adaptation into video games, see Victoria E. Cooper and Andrew B.R. Elliott, “‘I braved in my youth-days battles unnumbered:’ *Beowulf*, Video Games and Hack-and-Slash Medievalism,” in *Beowulf in the Media* (forthcoming).

well as a series of outright fantasy films like *Dragonheart* and *Dragon-slayer*, and so on. Thus Zemeckis' 2008 *Beowulf* bears similarities not only to a richly cross-fertilised Beowulf tradition (including the poem's translation by Tolkien), but also to reworkings of Tolkien's other neomedievalisms like Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-3). My point here is not that it is impossible for games or films to do history, but rather that it is impossible to describe popular cultural products as existing hermetically sealed from any outside influences, in which case discussing historical intentions is problematic to say the least, since it only leads us along a broad chain of influence and inheritance.

Perhaps a clearer example might then be found by a *reductio ad absurdum*. Such absurdity finds an expression in, for example, a pseudo-medieval game like the casual game *Medieval Shark* made by Armor Games, whose reference to the medieval beyond its title is tangential at best. Given that the principle form of historical reference constitutes a shark rampaging through a vaguely Nordic medieval world, the references to Vikings and the medieval world are clearly incidental to the gameplay, which is in reality a side-scrolling platform game set in a vague, ahistorical yet vaguely medieval, past. However, there are other, similar, games like Rapid Rabbit's *Medieval Merchants*, available through the iOS App Store, which are less clear. Though a clone of any number of grand strategy games which just happen to be placed in a past world, the setting of 'the Hanseatic World' in which *Medieval Merchants* takes place is far more deliberate in its medieval model than *Medieval Shark*. Common sense thus forces us to conclude that *Medieval Shark* is not a historical game, but that *Medieval Merchants* is. However, trying to decide *how* we know this fact is a great deal more difficult.

In fact, it is hard to argue for absolute historical intentions in most cases. For instance, history equally exists as a hyperreality in another free iOS game, *Golden Age*, which offers a postmodern bricolage of historical details. As another clone of generic turn-based strategy games, *Golden Age* is also set in a loosely-conceived medieval/fantasy

world—though it is one rife with obvious anachronisms. For instance, playing as a Templar Knight (whom I named, deliberately incongruously, Amadis of Gaul), I was able to turn to Chaucer for advice before developing my fortification to withstand cannon attack, a precaution which was of course unnecessary for a twelfth-century cavalry-based order who operated several centuries before the introduction of cannon-based warfare. Similarly, playing Sid Meier’s *Civilization IV* allows a player to strike treaties with Peter the Great, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra and Gandhi, allowing them to accelerate or decelerate historical evolution according to skill. In all of these examples, it is difficult to argue that any of them are able to teach a player much about historical facts and might even risk adding to popular confusion about history.

Such a criticism, then, summarised in the assertion that games use inherently imperfect models of the past, might seem to be devastating for any assertion that video games can function as historical simulations. Firstly, the need to create a model of the past which privileges models and rules over accuracy suggests that historical video games do not, and cannot, ‘do’ history in any meaningful way. Secondly, the suggestion that historical computer games are functioning as models or simulations of real-world behaviours solves the first problem but raises a new one, as it shifts the emphasis on ‘doing’ history to the game developers, and not the players.

### **History as a process**

My argument that historical video games function as models circumvents these problems because I propose that their status as dynamic models allows them to act as simulacra. The suggestion that the model is dynamic and not static means that players’ interactions with a historical model form ways of engaging with past simulations. When players are playing with a model which is a simulated copy of an absent original (even if *Crusader Kings II* might be more historically plausible than, say, *World of Warcraft*, it is nevertheless an imagined past world), those players are free to explore the model as a hypothetical construct.

While they are not there to learn about facts (history as data) and, if we are honest, they probably will not, playing the game might mean unconsciously simulating history-as-epistemology in the process.

The reason for my optimism in this respect is outlined by turning to Games Studies to examine the ways in which players actually do interact with simulations. As Thomas Apperley points out, “simulation games are characterized by the process of the player learning gradually to think like the game”.<sup>55</sup> This concept of collaboration between player and game in which “self and Other give way”<sup>56</sup> has important ramifications for simulation games based on history, since it requires that, not only the game space and the rules of the game, but the game world itself be understood or learnt. Friedman suggests that ‘computer games can be powerful tools for communicating not just specific ideas, but structures of thought—whole ways of making sense of the world.’<sup>57</sup>

What this means in practice is that learning to play the game is learning to absorb the rules of that game, and thus replicating the model of inquiry. In this form of gameplay, the game is won or lost not by superior historical understanding. Instead, as Friedman, Myers and Apperley all argue, it is won by understanding the rules of the game, by “learning to think like a computer”.<sup>58</sup> According to Alexander Galloway, “To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system.”<sup>59</sup>

Consequently, the suggestion implicit within the above is that historical facts are incidental to the historical simulation. It is the absorption of the rules of the game that allows the player to win, not historical competence. Certainly such games cannot replicate professional historians’ quotidian practices (though important questions remain

55 Apperley, 14.

56 Ted Friedman, “Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity and Space,” in *Discovering Discs: Transforming Space and Place on CD-ROM*, ed. by G. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 132–50 (138).

57 Friedman, 132.

58 Friedman, 135.

59 Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2006), 90–91.

about whether, or why, games would want to do so). It is also true that these mediated forms of history in popular culture have no footnotes and they can often lack nuance. However, if games are viewed instead as a model of historical enquiry, they can be understood as a loosely-defined kind of public history—or at least an introduction to the past—which offers exciting possibilities.

Indeed, moving towards a more anecdotal and speculative conclusion, the research above means that, for some games, exciting glimpses emerge of a kind of historical engagement which bear similarities with formal mechanisms of history. Even relatively primitive games such as *The Oregon Trail* incorporate important lessons about contingency without denying agency to individual players. As Harry J. Brown argues, the game’s “structure [...] illustrates a fundamental approach to thinking about the past, [... forcing players to accept that] history is contingent upon decisions, and while some are more consequential than others, they all add up to what we know as history.”<sup>60</sup>

A game like *Valiant Hearts*, for instance, which takes a view of history ‘from below’ that has only recently begun to emerge as a useful historical tool, has much to offer, even if it gets many of the historical facts wrong. Sid Meier’s much-studied series can offer useful discussion, even if they offer a number of coeval illogicalities: as Squire argues, “*Civilization III* represents world history not as a story of colonial domination or western expansion, but as an emergent process arising from overlapping, interrelated factors”.<sup>61</sup> Squire’s findings have since been replicated using other games by Sam Wineburg at Stanford, with the conclusion reported by Shaffer that after a history simulation “what distinguished the high school students from the historians was not the number of facts they knew about the American Revolution. Instead, the difference was in their understanding of what it means to think historically.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Brown, 118.

<sup>61</sup> Kurt Squire, “Replaying History: Learning World History through Playing Civilization III” (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2004), 4 <<http://website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/dissertation.html>> [accessed 1 December 2012].

<sup>62</sup> Shaffer, 31.

In other words, it is the *process* of historical simulation which is replicated here—even if not the end result. This encourages a cautious optimism about the advantages that historical games might offer in their status as simulacra. In this respect, a game like *Assassin's Creed III*—with its reappraisal of the mythology surrounding George Washington—offers an interesting experiment in altering historical capital by using a simulacrum of counterfactual history to rethink the American War of Independence. The possibilities of trying to make the Aztecs beat Cortès in *Age of Empires II: the Conquerors* is another case in point. As Holdenried and Trépanier show in an essay on the game, the practical impossibility for all but the most skilled player to defeat the colonial forces makes even a casual gamer understand the realities of the overwhelming odds faced by the Aztecs during the Conquest.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusions

While it might prove to be useful fodder for scurrilous headlines, and despite the optimism expressed by scholars like Gee, Shaffer, Wineburg and Brown, the above exploration begins from the assumption that there is no serious suggestion that games are capable of ‘doing history’ in the same way as historians. No matter how much we might consume historical media, and no matter how useful they are, it seems to be fairly clear that consumption is by no means the same thing as learning. As things stand, computers or consoles are not able to delve into the archives of a library to discover the kind of raw evidence needed by historians in order to construct a model of the past, but can only respond to the commands of their developers.

What is changing, however, is the slow recognition that simulations can offer a useful—and more importantly an *enjoyable*—engagement with history in ways that complement and enhance traditional modes of historical thinking. One of the first questions in need of ad-

63 Joshua D. Holdenried and Nicolas Trépanier, “Dominance and the Aztec Empire: Representations in *Age of Empires II* and *Medieval II: Total War*,” in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 106–19.

dressing, therefore, is the one asked by Kevin Kee in his study of narrative options in games and history: namely, what is it that historians want students to learn?<sup>64</sup> Moreover, when games are played outside of formal education, both anecdotal and analytical evidence seem to demonstrate a significant benefit.<sup>65</sup> To give only one example, while expressing a general scepticism over its use for education, Jason Pitruzzello outlines a number of qualities of *Crusader Kings: Deus Vult* which offer significant advantages to players in terms of historical insight. As he argues, “with the game mechanics employed in *Crusader Kings*, players are invited to see the Middle Ages not as just a different historical period subject to nostalgia, but they are invited to avoid anachronism by participating in the kinds of cultural and religious shifts that occurred.”<sup>66</sup> This final emphasis, then, suggests that historical video games are not at their most effective in terms of historical simulation when they are incorporated into traditional pedagogic practices as an afterthought. Instead, they succeed best when they are doing precisely what they are designed to do: when they are being played. This article thus proposes that fun and historical enquiry—as historians have long known—are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, as enjoyable simulacra, historical games can simulate certain modes of ‘doing’ history with great promise which deserves much greater critical scrutiny.

64 Kevin Kee, “Computerized History Games: Narrative Options,” *Simulation & Gaming* 42, n.º 4 (2011): 423–40 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878108325441>>.

65 Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (New York: Routledge, 2011); John Pagnotti and William B. Russell, “Using Civilization IV to Engage Students in World History Content,” *Social Studies* 103, n.º 1 (2012), 39–48 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2011.558940>>; Z Yu and others, “An Exploration of Computer Game-Based Instruction in the ‘World History’ Class in Secondary Education: A Comparative Study in China,” *PLoS ONE*, 9.5; Pagnotti and Russell; Amelia Hill, “Video Games ‘Teach More than School,’” *The Guardian*, July 20, 2003, section Technology <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2003/jul/20/games.schools>> [accessed 8 October 2014].

66 Jason Pitruzzello, “Systematizing Culture in Medievalism: Geography, Dynasty, Culture, and Imperialism in *Crusader Kings: Deus Vult*,” in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 43–52 (51).

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