Old worlds, new histories: Engaging with the past through video games

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Abstract

Video games have the power to re-create historical spaces and events in ways impossible in other media such as film or text. This capacity for recreation allows the gaming medium to destabilise traditional views and approaches to history, and enables players to create their own narratives in historical spaces. Players of history games engage not only with what happened in history, but also with what could have happened (counterfactuals). In doing so, the illusion of an inevitable and monolithic historical narrative is broken. Through these means, games can also implicate players in historical situations, causing them to question their morality and ethics in ways that neither history nor gaming alone could. The complex rules and mechanics that underpin these experiences allow games to abstract and simulate historical processes and frameworks. Through this abstraction of history, players are themselves able to be impacted by historical forces rather than simply being told about them, as would occur with text. This paper will utilise ideas from prominent historical thinkers of the postmodern era who seek to put forth a new kind of history, that breaks from ‘facts,’ in favour of exploring the consciousness of history, that is the understanding of history as a meaningful nexus of past, present and future. It will then argue that video games present the greatest opportunity for the creation and exploration of this new approach to history. This will be grounded in ideas of game theory, as well as a semiotic and textual analysis of the game Hearts of Iron IV (2016).

Keywords: history, video games, simulation, counterfactual, historical consciousness
The time has come. In violation of the treaties of Versailles and Locarno, German troops have crossed the Rhine river and are being welcomed by rapturous crowds in Cologne. The world awaits with bated breath for the French reaction, your reaction. You know what is coming, you know the cost of this action, but your nation does not. A declaration of war would galvanise the left against you, shutting down factories across the nation and perhaps even causing civil war. Such action would be unpopular with the general staff as well, content to sit behind the Maginot line and lick the wounds of the Great War. No matter your choice, the world is doused in gasoline, but this could be your final chance to hold the match.

This decision, along with countless others, come together to form critical and historical counterfactual narratives that players engage with while playing the video game *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016). When adding the idea of ‘play’ to historical events such as this, it is tempting to see this process as trivialising, perhaps even disrespectful to those who suffered through them. However, an allowance for player agency and involvement within historical spaces can be used to facilitate a deepening of historical consciousness. In tandem with this, the complex engines that drive historical games have the potential to meaningfully convert and abstract historical ideas and processes into mechanics which determine or drive the rules of the game, allowing players to experience and adapt to historical situations impossible in other forms of media. These ideas will be explored here, for the scope of this essay, through this single historical game and will be further grounded within conceptions of history from relevant theorists.

History has traditionally been conceptualised as a linear narrative progressing from tangible fact to tangible fact through various dates towards the present. This positivist approach sought to align history closer to Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and the supremacy of the scientific method (Elton, 2002). However, in the second half of the
twentieth century thinkers such as Lukacs began to question the primacy of fact-based quantitative approaches to history, stating firmly that: “historical truths touch our senses and minds differently from scientific truths, because we are, literally, more involved with them” (1994, pp.109-110). Lukacs goes on to attribute this to the myriad ways in which humanity engages with history, through speech, text and other “everyday nomena” (1994, pp.110). where scientific facts cannot exist due to the required rigour of the scientific method. Thus, the establishment of historical ‘facts’ is less important than the ultimate interpretations of historical narratives, or the consciousness of history. This historical consciousness approach to history is described in opposition to the positivist view by Rüsen here:

History is a meaningful nexus between past, present, and future - not merely a perspective on what has been, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. It is a translation of past into present, an interpretation of past actuality via a conception of temporal change that encompasses past, present, and the expectation of future events. (2004, pp.67)

Following this approach, history cannot be conceived as a monolithic, linear collection of concrete facts, but must be seen as a nebulous cloud of events and ideas that can be formed into infinite changeable narratives. However, in attempting to adequately portray this new approach to history, the medium of text, the authoritative home of history since Thucydides and Herodotus, falls woefully short. Text is by its very nature set, at least in the printed sense, indefinitely. A historical work sits on a shelf with its narrative closed within the covers regardless of whether it has been read by a reader or not. The entire narrative sits unchanging, concrete, much like the positivist ‘facts’ it may seek to subvert. While works may be edited and changed officially over a period of time, this does nothing to alter the individual book on the shelf, or the reader’s experience of it. In addition to this problem, the
traditional mediums of history, fixed oral, written, or performed narratives are by their nature inherently passive experiences (Petersen, Miller & Fedorko, 2013). This creates a one-way didactic relationship between the historian and the audience wishing to engage with ‘the historian’s’ history and removes their capacity to engage with explore history for themselves. While this approach was suited to the older, positivist view of history as either an easily corrupted science, or a high art that required years of formal training to pursue, it is incompatible with Rüsen’s idea of historical consciousness and the permeation of quotidian experience with historical meaning and relevance. This would ideally evolve into history told through what Clendinnen calls the ‘middle voice,’ which she explains as:

“…writing [that] is not a distanced setting-down but is itself ‘the means of vision or comprehension,’ with the reader no passive recipient, but called upon to be closely engaged in the writing process.” (1998, pp.202)

While Clendinnen may seek here to change the medium of text, her statement creates a compelling argument for its disposal as the primary means of engaging with history. As stated above, text is inherently passive, and thus to achieve Clendinnen’s goal, it must be substituted for a participatory and interactive medium. Video games provide a platform wherein these ideals can be implemented, as they begin from the outset as a user-centred and collaborative medium. This is because without play or players, games cannot exist, interaction and agency are intrinsic to their form.

The inclusion of the player within video games creates a unique element within the structure of the experience, this ludic element (from the Latin ludere ‘to play’) informs every situation and decision within a gaming space, as it is the defining characteristic of the medium. For this reason, even within games that purport to explore real-world historical spaces and ideas, “the purpose of a video game is never to simulate real life, but to offer the
gift of play” (Elliot & Kappell, 2013, p. 6). However, when approaching historical exploration not from a fact-based perspective but as an expression of historical consciousness, this foregrounding of play can be taken, rather counterintuitively, as aiding authenticity, rather than hindering it. This is because, according to J. Huizinga, in his seminal early work on game-theory in culture, *Homo Ludens*: “Civilization arises in play, and never leaves it” (1949, p. i). This shift in priority has the potential to create more complex, vibrant historical experiences. This concept can be related to the issue of realism in historical films, an idea criticised by Rosenstone thus:

You do not have to see many films to know that a fact-based approach is ridiculous in the extreme. Films that have been truest to the facts have tended to be visually and dramatically inert, better as aids to sleep than to the acquisition of historical consciousness. (1998, pp. 7)

This sentiment can be extended to the failures of historical video games that do not place play at the forefront of their experiences. This is what Sid Meier, creator of the long-running *Civilization* series of historical strategy games, refers to as the difference between learning through games and education through games. He separates the two concepts saying that “education is typically boring but learning is very exciting … in learning you decide what to learn – in education you are told what to learn” (Kee et al., 2009, p.304). In this way play facilitates engagement with historical ideas, by engaging players in self-directed learning and development of their own (albeit guided) historical consciousnesses.

Counterfactual exploration in historical games is an attempt to facilitate the necessity of ludic engagement in historical scenarios that would otherwise run an identical course each time they are played. Counterfactual history in games is distinct from alternative history, which E.H. Carr famously derided as “having nothing to do with history” (1964, pp. 97). While alternative history begins from a point of historical divergence and
explores the world created by it, counterfactuals explore historical contingencies and their impacts on the path of ‘real’ history. The difference is a removal of authenticity and replacement with an elaborate world-building fiction. Counterfactuals are exemplified by the experience above from *Hearts of Iron* and the exploration of scenarios around the re-militarisation of the Rhineland. By contrast, a popular community created modification for the same game, titled *Hearts of Iron: Kaiserreich* (2016)\(^1\) puts players in an alternate 1936 wherein the German Empire won a partial peace in the First World War and the former Entente fell to Syndicalist revolutions. While this modification (or mod) uses historical imagery and personalities in its storytelling, it is removed from historical authenticity in such a way that its decisions lack emotional weight. This is because, according to Clendinnen:

> We listen differently to stories which are ‘real’, however naively or awkwardly reported, from stories, however beguiling, which we know to be invented. With a work of fiction, we marvel at the fictioneer’s imagination. With real thought and actions presented for our scrutiny we are brought to wonder at ourselves. (1998, pp.193)

Counterfactual history, by maintaining links to ‘real’ history, retains this authenticity and the emotional weight described by Clendinnen. Not only is the player exploring events that could have happened, in experiencing these counterfactual narratives, they can develop an understanding of how and why things happened the way that they did. In addition to this, counterfactuals’ links to historical narrative and divergent decision making in history, when compared to the fantasy of alternative history destabilises the fact-fiction dichotomy. Lukacs asserts that the ‘difference between something that happened and something that did not happen does not quite correspond to the difference between ... fact and fiction”

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\(^1\) Modifications alter a game’s code in order to change the game experience, this can range from changing the flags and portraits, to total global overhauls, such as seen here. In the case of *Hearts of Iron IV*, the gaming platform Steam allows players to select and install mods from within the platform, as well as providing a space, the ‘workshop,’ for ‘modders’ to host their creations.
(1994, p.104). A player sending the French to war over the re-militarisation of the Rhineland isn’t simply playing out a fantasy, they are discovering the consequences of such a change on history, as well as gaining a deeper understanding of why this is not what happened in history. Both of these ideas would be passed over without the ability to take a counterfactual approach. At the same time, the counterfactual element of this choice is the component that provides space for ludic engagement, while a simple description of what happened in history and a change in the game space would not; the player is not only involved here, they are central in the game’s version of 1936.

In this way, players engage with the concept of historical contingency, something which is key to Rüsen’s idea of history as a nexus of past, present and future. In providing the possibility for counterfactual explorations, games have the capacity to destroy one of the “key problems with establishing coherent narratives over historical events … [the] notion of teleological inevitability that fails to acknowledge past contingencies” (Apperley, 2013, pp.188-189). Counterfactuals showcase the teleological truth that what seems like an inexorable progression of events in hindsight, was contingent on an innumerable number of factors in each present moment. These representations examine “the ways in which multiple potential temporal and spatial trajectories of change exist simultaneously at different conjunctures” (Warf, 2005, p. 21). The historical monolith of a single fact-based reality is completely incompatible with the idea of historical contingency, and thus the ‘real’ must be broadened from beyond what has been observed and ‘reality’ becomes no longer simply what was, but also what might have been (Warf, 2005). The decision the player makes over the Rhineland is only representative of that which was made by the French Prime Minister in 1936 if the multiple possibilities presented in that moment are included, otherwise it does not reflect the contingent nature of the historical reality. Thus, removing
the linear approach to historical reality does not cheapen or trivialise the players’ experience of historical events, it provides more gravitas to each occurrence of contingency within the historical narrative. By allowing players to see the repercussions of counterfactual decisions, an engagement with the depth of historical possibilities is opened and explored. In foregrounding the concept of historical contingency, counterfactuals create the possibility for a deeper engagement with the historical narratives and environments presented in video games.

The Rhineland example also reflects Clendinnen’s assertion that “the pathos of Anne Frank’s diary derives not from the words before us … but from our knowledge of what is to come” (1998, pp. 185). The player is not only compelled by the factors that compelled the French in historical reality, but also by their foreknowledge of the potential loss of life in the Second World War and the Holocaust that they could seek in that decision to prevent. Rüsen’s nexus of historical consciousness is expressed explicitly in this confluence of ideas driving player engagement and decision-making. This complex engagement with historical choices is also expressed when players take on the roles of darker historical figures. *Hearts of Iron* is unambiguous that players not only embody the nation which they choose to play, but also their leader. The Soviet player, as Stalin, has the capacity to orchestrate the Great Purge of the late 1930s. In doing so, the player makes decisions on which men to execute and which to spare, losing both valuable political and military advisors. The purges also decimate the capacity of the armed forces to conduct war, but provide Stalin [and thus the player] with a firmer grasp on power and increased options in political decisions. Choices are presented with options to execute men based on Stalin’s historical choices, make pragmatic decisions based on player preference, or avoid the purge altogether and risk facing either an officer’s revolt or a Trotskyite coup. The player is presented with the
opportunity to participate in historical political crimes, and must make the choice as to whether these crimes are justified in their ends if they provide them with a more stable grip over their nation. Following these choices, the player is not only ‘wondering at themselves’ in an abstract sense, but directly in relation to their justification of Stalin’s [and by extension their own] crimes. In this example, the player is not only engaged with history, but is made complicit in one of its darkest moments. While other media could attempt to communicate the fear and horror of the Great Purge, only a counterfactually enabled exploration in a video game could truly facilitate Clendinnen’s desire for the reader [or player] to be ‘no passive recipient’ of history. Far from trivialising the subject, the suffering and death of this period is put into stronger, more meaningful focus through the capacity to play in history.

The complexity of game systems within historical simulations such as that of *Hearts of Iron* provide the ideal method of communicating the effects and power of underlying historical ideas and processes. Mechanics such as a ‘world tension’ meter, which tracks political friction caused by the actions of the totalitarian states in turn allowing democracies to take increasingly drastic political and military steps to curb them as it increases, seeks to translate historical trends into challenges or goals for the player to contend with, and in doing so quite literally engage the player with these ideas and processes (*Kostlbauer, 2013*).

While simulations lose the ability to translate or communicate facts, dates and events of history as precisely as a set representation, their unique power is to allow for the inherited representations of history to be destabilised. Rather than hindering historical understanding or engagement, historical video games such as *Hearts of Iron IV*: “...allow for an in-depth understanding not just of facts, dates, people, or events, but also of the complex discourse of contingency, conditions, and circumstances, which underpin a genuine understanding of history” (*Spring, 2015*, p. 209). Through this lens, in removing restrictions
based on fact-based interpretations of history, historical simulations use their abstracted mechanics to engage players in the more complex elements of historical consciousness.

Much like the way in which counterfactual exploration facilitates play in history, the choice to follow simulation rather than representation of historical spaces allows for ludic, play-centred experiences. This is because “unlike representation, which tends to be fixed in nature, simulations are capable of generating countless encounters that may subsequently be fixed as representations ... a simulation is a machine for producing speculative or conditional representations” (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013, p.156). Elaborating on this, Urrichio asks what happens if “we push the notion of mediation beyond language, to the domain of game, enactment, or simulation? Does this allow us to slip out of the well-critiqued trap of representation? And if so where does it land us?” (2005, p. 337). Clearly, when games break away from the ‘trap of representation,’ a standard that they rarely can attain in an engaging fashion, and embrace simulation, they can maintain player engagement for enormous periods of time (Petersen et al., 2013). Where ‘we land,’ is in an environment where players are constantly made to question and explore historical themes, ideas and processes in such a way that not only provides them enjoyment, but an increased consciousness of the ways in which societies in the past developed and survived.

While Hearts of Iron IV is a powerful example of the ways in which historical games can serve to deepen engagement with the past, it is by no means the only available sources of such experiences. The emphasis on this game was merely to provide a clear and concise method of illustrating the principles of this essay. The Europa Universalis and Crusader Kings series from developer Paradox Interactive serve as sister games to Hearts of Iron, each covering earlier periods of history ranging from the 7th century CE to 1914. In addition, classic franchises such as Creative Assembly’s long running Total War series, and Ensemble
Studios recently revived Age of Empires also provide opportunities for equally valuable historical experiences.

Historical video games present a uniquely powerful vehicle for the exploration of new forms of history, and facilitate the breakdown of fact-based hegemonic ideas of the past. This is due to their capacity to provide spaces for players to explore their own interpretations and experiences within historical narratives, a quality that is intrinsic to the interactive nature of the medium. This capability is wholly unique to video games in the sense that history as communicated through passive oral, written or performed means can never truly engage their audiences on this level. The demands of the new, consciousness based history proposed by Rüsen and the middle voice put forth by Clendinnen are elements that are difficult or impossible to provide with these older media, but simple to institute through the ludic experience of video gaming. The institution of agency in history through the exploration of counterfactuals allows players to deepen their understanding not only of the narrative of history itself, but also of the complex nature of contingency in historical narratives. Video games also present opportunities for players to engage with historical ideas and processes through abstraction of said processes into complex game mechanics. In doing so, games allow players to experience the processes of history first-hand as rules and objectives within the gaming space, providing deeper engagement than merely being told about them in a more passive medium. When comparing the power of these experiences and the engagement with historical consciousnesses that they facilitate, far from trivialising these experiences, games provide the optimal vehicle for historical exploration.
Reference List


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