RETURN TO THE INTERACTIVE PAST

The Interplay of Video Games and Histories

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1. Introduction

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Welcome back to The Interactive Past! It's with more than a little bit of relief and pride that we, co-editors of this book and some of the members that make up a growing VALUE team, write these words. The first edition of *The Interactive Pasts Conference* (TIPC) started as a crazy idea in 2015 as a way to get people together who were as passionate about the past as they were about making and playing games. The conference took place in May 2016, right after a successful Kickstarter campaign that enabled us afterwards to publish *The Interactive Past* (Mol *et al.* 2017) as an open access book. Both the conference and the book were well-received. As Tara Copplestone (author in *The Interactive Past* and at the time PhD student at York University/Aarhus University) wrote in 2016 on her blog, TIPC was "a much needed start to a solid foundation and a supportive, diverse community" (Copplestone 2016).

This, and other positive feedback on *The Interactive Pasts Conference* and book, made it clear that we should just do it again! Such a thing is easier said than done, of course. While we did want to bring back the solid fun, support, and diversity of TIPC 1 and the resulting book, we did not want to repeat ourselves. Fortunately, fun never repeats itself in exactly the same way and *The Interactive Pasts Conference 2* in 2018 was certainly fun in many new ways. TIPC 2 was again such a refreshing, inspiring, insightful event that we again decided to create a book on the basis of a selection of presentations, choosing those authors who had not been included in the first book. Fittingly, this *Return to the Interactive Past* takes place within a gorgeous retro cover. Therefore, just like what happens when revisiting a cherished classic game, replaying a level for that extra star, or diving back in for an NG+ run, we are not so much back in the same Interactive Past but are instead returning to explore the same playground with new perspectives, more experience, and fresh energy.

Like last time, we do this together with you, beloved reader, and with an inspiring group of writers from the wide reaches of academia and the creative industry. This first chapter of *Return to the Interactive Past* does not only provide a short overview of the contributions you will find in the other chapters, but also a retrospective on how making and studying the interactive past itself has developed and how this field has grown in size and complexity.

A Rollercoaster Decade in the Past-playground

In contrast to the foundational 70s, the boom-bust-and-boom-again 80s, the golden age of the 90s, and the blossoming of HD and online play in the naughties, the 2010s may seem like a moment of consolidation, even stagnation, for the once-young medium of video games. Yet, upon closer inspection, the 2010s has been the most complex and tumultuous decade in games so far, perhaps not from a pure technological point of view but from one in which games and the people who play them felt the full complexity of their status as social and cultural fact. What, how, when, with, and as whom we choose to play, the 2010s reshaped our idea of all of these and more. It is also during these last few years that we have come to more fully feel and openly discuss the impact games have on our individual and collective lives. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the *Manifesto for a Ludic Century* (Zimmerman 2015). The manifesto argued that some of the defining features of the last century – moving images, systems, and information – had come together to play in this century. This influential piece called for embracing games as productive, creative, and empowering.

At no time before in the history of our planet (and maybe the galaxy) have so many games been made as during this decade. This is in part due to the success of game distribution platforms like Steam, GoG, Itch.io, and others and the democratization of game development through intuitive and freely available game engines (*e.g.* Unity, Unreal Engine, Love2D, Twine, ink). The Steam store alone listed more than 30,000 standalone games at the end of 2019, in contrast to around 1000 in 2010: a growth of 2,900%. More importantly, for people playing on PCs and consoles it is sometimes easy to forget that a wave of games on phones and social media platforms were a key factor leading to an immense rise in the number of games and players in this decade. This also meant that the diversity of the global community of developers and players is rising too. From South America, Africa, to mainland Asia the video game community is growing far beyond the traditional cores of North America, Europe, and Japan (Wolf 2015). This fact was on brilliant display during the *Culture Arcade*, an interactive video game exhibition of cultural games from across the world, held at the Prince Claus Fund in Amsterdam and curated and hosted by some of us in the fall of 2018.

The *Ludic Manifesto* and similar upbeat works from people like Jane McGonigal (2011), as well as the indie game explosion, stand as high-water marks of the positive vibe around games in this decade as we celebrated how many more people were playing as well as creating games in new, fun ways and were convinced games were going to provide new solutions to old problems.

This general success and celebration of games is a key context from which to understand the sparking off of this decade's academic interest in games and the past (Politopoulos *et al.* 2019; see also Chapman *et al.* 2017). Clearly, game developers and players alike were already convinced – since *The Sumerian Game* (Mabel Addis 1964), the very first game set in the past – of the rich and deep playgrounds offered by our histories and heritages. It cannot be denied that during the 2010s games in which you can play with the past in some shape or form have gone from success to massive success, opening up heritages and histories in both quantitative and qualitative terms like never before. For example, the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft Montréal 2007-2018) has allowed many millions of us to virtually visit Bronze Age Greece to industrial Britain with stops along the way that all read as 'history's greatest hits.' This was also the decade in which we learned that from 2010-2016 people had collectively been playing *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (Firaxis Games 2010) for more than 1 *billion* hours. A truly mind-boggling amount of time, eclipsing, for example, the time spent in the world's most visited museums. This past-playground seems to know no bounds: just stop to think about the vast number of heritages that have been recreated in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), from the millions of versions of Eiffel Towers, Coliseums, Big Bens and other heritage icons, to your own blocky build of that one special place for you and you alone.

The gears of academia move slowly, but the sustained popularity of games in general and the ever increasing numbers of games in which you can play in and with the past, meant that there was both an audience and a field so large and unexplored that its scholarly investigation was, in a way, inevitable. This opened up so many avenues of research that even a sustained and wide-ranging first wave of enthusiastic inquiry has not really begun to chart the full potential of the field. Looking back on the start of the decade when the study of the past in video games was only of occasional interest to game study scholars and almost never discussed by 'serious' scholars of the past, to a situation in which not a day goes by without new insights from and discussions between an ever growing group of people, it can be said that this development has been nothing short but a minor revolution for the disciplines that study the past.

It is telling that this 'revolutionary' moment had its roots not in academic conferences or publications, but in the 'blogosphere,' a term that by its very antique sound shows the rapid developments in both online media and the field itself. Many of these early blogs, such as *Play the Past* (playthepast.org) which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary or *Archaeogaming* (archaeogaming.com), are still going strong today and have been joined by a host of new blogs, social media communities, YouTube and Twitch channels, as well as published books, chapters, and articles. Indeed, the field has grown so quickly, that it surprised even those who were its biggest supporters, like Andrew Reinhard: "when I started the Archaeogaming.com blog and @archaeogaming Twitter account in 2013, I had little idea of the depth of what archaeogaming quickly would become" (Reinhard 2017: 99). The same can be said for the field of historical game studies, which has more or less seen mainstream acceptance in academia.

More important than its status as an acceptable avenue of research is how this transdisciplinary project has been able to share its insights and aims beyond academia. Johan Huizinga, a cultural historian and a foundational figure of game studies, remarked in his notes for his book *Homo Ludens* that "the time when academics could retreat into unreadable professional publications is over" (Leiden University Library 1934-1938: ms HUI 72 I.V.6b; our translation). Unfortunately, unreadable professional publications are still around, which is why it is so important that accessible game-based research for and with the public has been one of the main cornerstones of this movement in which scholars, game makers, and citizens from around the world share the past. Connecting the 'ivory tower' with the playground is the core purpose of *The Interactive Pasts Conference* series, which also includes workshops and online events. Indeed, 'sharing knowledge playfully' covers the three key values of our VALUE Foundation (yes, we are aware of the horrible pun corner we accidentally painted ourselves into when choosing a name back in 2015). Whether we are re-constructing the Roman Limes in *Minecraft*, running Twine workshops, curating the *Culture Arcade* exhibition, or having fun with viewers during our weekly livestreams, we never get tired of exploring the boundaries of play and knowledge. And we are not alone in this: from frequent contributions to (game) news outlets, to growing social media presences on Twitter and Facebook, and open events held for and with the public (*e.g.* Glas *et al.* 2017), the movement of which VALUE is just a small part continues to show the larger value there is in making, playing, and understanding games at the intersection with the past.

Although the 10s have given us much to celebrate, it has also revealed that not all is well in the playground. The gaming market is heavily dominated by relatively few large titles. The result of this is that, bar a few 'American dream'-like indie successes,[1] most player attention and money go to a few widely known IPs held by established, relatively large corporations. This is also painfully obvious when looking at games set in the past, illustrated by ownership numbers of games tagged as 'historical' on Steam (see Figure 1.1). This data, taken from the Steam Spy platform, shows that the vast majority of these games are owned by only a few people – 0 to 20,000 – which is generally not or barely enough to recoup development costs. Much has been made of the abundance of low quality games on Steam, but in this segment you will also find absolute gems, such as *Herald* (Wispfire 2017; van der Schilden & Heijltjes 2017), *Heaven's Vault* (Inkle 2019), *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (Dim Bulb Games & Serenity Forge 2018; see Johnnemann Nordhagen, Chapter 2), and *Attentat 1942* (Charles University & Czech Academy of Sciences 2017), which would all deserve to be more widely played. At the same time, the games with the most owners are of the type we already discussed in the conclusion to *The Interactive Past* (2017): games which portray the past through a lens of action, violence, warfare, or resource competition and

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1   A recent exception has been the explosive success of *Valheim* (Iron Gate Studio 2021), which sold 4 million copies during its first three weeks into Early Access. By this time, it had already been played for a combined total of 10,000 years or 87.6 million hours. The game's developer, Iron Gate Studio, consists of a team of only 5 persons (Jagneaux 2021).
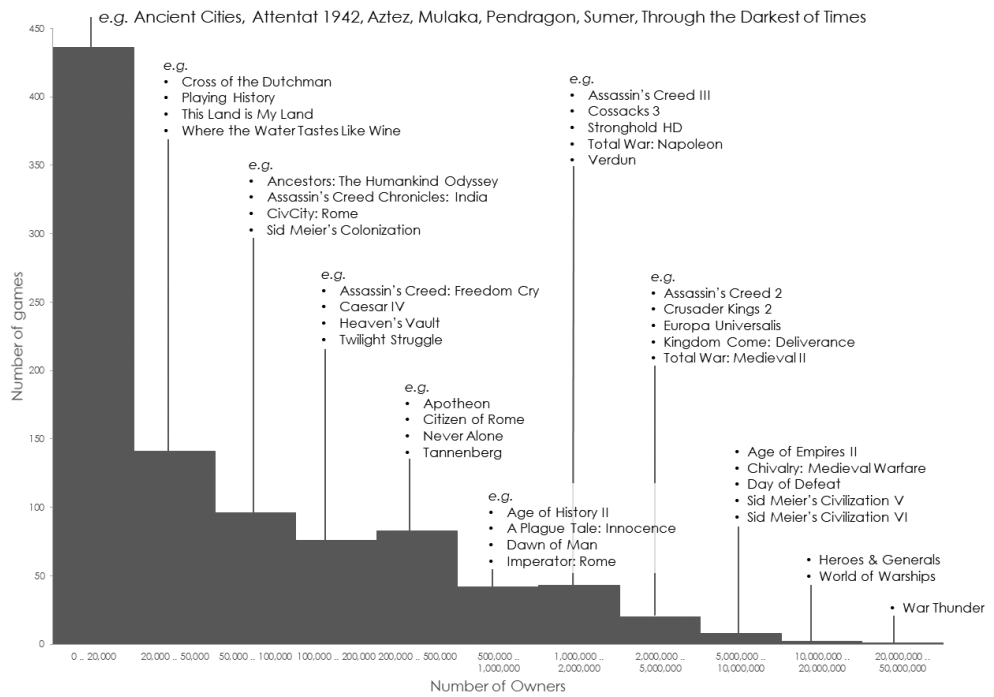
Figure 1.1: Historical games on steam and their amount of owners based on data from Steam Spy (image by: Angus Mol 2021).

extraction. So, while innovative indie and smaller game studios have brought a lot of welcome innovation, games which are set in the past have, on the whole, been mostly creatively stagnant in this decade.

In conjunction with this imbalanced consumer market and the game industries growing market cap, the human economy of game making has improved little. Game making may be more accessible from a technological perspective, but it is still hard to live a life that is either economically or personally viable while doing so (*e.g.* compare the letter by EA_Spouse from 2004 with the stories in Schreier 2017). This is due to the labor practices in a global industry that are often aimed at increasing (shareholder) profitability by profiteering off of their employees' passion for game making or sense of collegiality. Whether you work as part of a development team that is a thousand, or more, people strong or as one-person studios, what we understand from our game developer contacts is that it is fun and rewarding but also hard and stressful to work in an industry that is defined by extreme competition, crunch, shifting but strict deadlines, and low job security. This is even more so the case for game makers who are non-white and non-male, as they have to face, amongst others, issues of harassment, exclusion, and biased hiring policies besides. This naturally puts a further damper on diversity in the professional field, which ultimately translates into the (hi)stories and other elements that make it into the games we play and research.

It is also telling that Gamergate reared its ugly head less than a year after the, in hindsight rather too triumphant to be true, *Manifesto for a Ludic Century*. Without wishing to give more exposure to the nasty fever-dream arguments of its proponents, it is clear that Gamergate was really a case of playground bullying taken to its extreme, with threats, harm, and other violence aimed at shutting others out from play. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, Gamergaters mostly targeted others for exclusion with bodily or cultural identities different from the average member of this group of so-called 'hardcore gamers.' Specifically, anyone that did not identify as male was (and are still) prominently targeted.

Games set in the past are a small but noteworthy proxy of this ongoing war that is being waged on diversity and inclusivity. A particular lowlight is the firestorm that raged in the *Battlefield* subreddit, ostensibly a debate concerning historical authenticity but really a case of internet identity politics, which took place after the *Battlefield V* (EA Dice 2018) trailer showed that players could play as female combatants[2] (see Mol 2020: 6min). Another depressing example was how some sexist players celebrated and cheered on the virtual violence against suffragettes in the game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios 2018). On the side of game makers, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios 2018) provided a lowlight when, after clear evidence to the contrary, they still denied the fact that persons of color were present in medieval Bohemia (see for an overview Medievalpoc 2018). Indeed, POCs were altogether lacking in this historical roleplaying game branded and believed by players to be 'hyperrealistic.' Arising from 4chan and other cesspits of the internet and focused on games, Gamergate has been a defining moment of this decade, not only for games themselves but also as an early sign of the ugly coming of age of digital culture at large.

In short, it has been a wild rollercoaster ride for games in the last decade – a ride that may become even wilder with the current crises of the Covid-19 pandemic, social inequality, climate change, and big tech. Whether you make them, study them, or play them, games set in the past are impacted by large, global cultural, societal, and economic currents and, in turn, also make their own mark on them. Moreover, through what they provide access to, these games are also entangled in (sometimes) equally wildly positive and deeply negative ongoing historical processes. Making and playing games that let us understand the past in its full diversity has never been more relevant and studying these has never been so richly complex as in this present. This is why we are extra happy to have a wonderful line up of chapters for you, dear reader.

Chapter Trailers

The authored chapters that make up *Return to the Interactive Past* are divided into three parts: narratives in and of video games; representations and intersectionality in video games; and historical research and learning through video games. The

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2   For the *Battlefield* series, this was the most audible debate concerning the supposed inauthenticity of the presence of female combatants. However, this was not the first game in the series to include female combatants (e.g. the *Battlefield 1* expansion *In The Name of the Tsar*, EA Dice 2017) nor was it the first to be criticized by its player base for this, leading to counter posts about the real-life WW1 unit of the 1st Russian Women's Battalion of Death (e.g. Sarkar 2017).

book concludes with a collective chapter, *Stories Around the Campfire*, in which various people from the Interactive Pasts community share their personal stories showcasing meaningful examples of video game play. Curated by Csilla Ariese, it offers a beautiful and diverse overview of the ideas, experiences, emotions, and memories that are at the root of our love for playing video games and playing with the past.

Narratives in and of Video Games

Our return to the interactive past begins with chapter 2, authored by Johnnemann Nordhagen, who is the main developer behind *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*. Nordhagen takes us on a trip around the Depression era United States and the development process of the game. He describes the creation of the characters, the vignettes, and the setting, and shares his insights into the false boogeyman of historical accuracy. Fighting against conservative political trends, the game celebrates immigration and diversity, giving voices to those histories that are often left untold.

The concept of untold narratives continues in chapter 3 by Iain Donald, Emma Houghton, and Kenneth Scott-Brown, who showcase *Their Memory* (Abertay University 2018). This was a virtual reality project that explores how game design and immersive technology can be combined to enhance historical research and to preserve and meaningfully share the experiences and memories of veterans to a wider, younger audience. This latter aspect is key to the chapter which illustrates both the need to tell such stories, but also how virtual worlds allow veterans to have their stories heard. The authors openly discuss how the project changed from conception to completion and what did – or did not – work.

Chapter 4 changes tack by revealing a reverse-engineered biography of a video game, exploring a video game artifact. John Aycock and Hayden Kroepfl investigate the story of the elusive game *Desolation* (Barry Cambell 1984), a game bundled together with the Osborne Vixen portable computer. By reconstructing the digital existence of *Desolation*, they deal with issues such as the preservation of code, programming practices, and digital artifacts, asking: how can we learn and reconstruct the archaeology of video game artifacts when we do not have access to their creators anymore?

Focusing on the construction of fictional narratives in and about games, Dennis Jansen analyzes the role of online communities in archiving and preserving virtual histories in chapter 5. Through a close reading of the *Elder Scrolls* web archives, he studies how fans of the series have archived, interpreted, and re-interpreted parts of the lore of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios 2002), using the Battle of Red Mountain as a case study. He showcases how in-game lore is treated by an online community and can be hotly contested, debated, and re-written, and how archival hierarchies come in to play to determine 'the truth.'

Representations and Intersectionality in Video Games

Mata Haggis-Burridge presents the conception and development of their game *Fragments of Him* (Sassybot 2016) in chapter 6. In an exemplary study of game and narrative design, they explore how game creation and storytelling is affected by personal experiences and societal norms, especially when it comes to stories taking place in past

settings within living memory. By including characters from different generations in the game, changing perspectives on queer identities and gay relationships become a point of discussion. These game development choices inevitably demand a vulnerable tapping into the identities of the developers themselves.

In chapter 7, Dunstan Lowe surveys representations of classical antiquity in versus fighting games from the 1980s and 1990s. This unexpected choice of genre, which rarely features in historical game studies, produces surprising results. Despite the fact that most of these games are set in modern or futuristic settings, they include significant mentions or allusions to classical pasts. Lowe shows how six major franchises have exploited antiquity for level design, characters, and lore, and analyzes the various patterns and discontinuities that emerge. He furthermore discusses imitations of games and those featuring softcore pornography to "reveal what has truly soaked through from the background cultural fabric."

Ashlee Bird offers an important and critical review of the problematic narratives and representations of Indigenous cultures in video games in chapter 8. She discusses misrepresentations of race, the myth of the 'vanishing race,' and the de-evolution of Native peoples through several well-known games. Violent representations and misogyny are main themes in her chapter. However, through Indigenous-made games and her own ROM hack experiment, she demonstrates that decolonization is possible. If approached properly, Indigenous cultures offer unique creative spaces for designers and novel experiences for players.

In chapter 9, Florence Smith Nicholls takes a critical look into the field of archaeogaming by looking at the ways in which its scholars create and interpret video game maps. They begin with a discussion on cartography itself and note some of the well-known (*e.g.* colonial) problems of the field. This is followed by three case studies which illustrate the role of the archaeogamer and the various analogue and digital tools that can be used in the mapping of video games for their study. Crucial for this, they highlight, is collaboration, self-reflection, valuing autoethnography, and embracing the messiness of play.

Historical Research and Learning through Video Games

Robert Houghton writes about video games as means for teaching and learning in the history classroom in chapter 10. In doing so, he focuses not so much on learning historical data, but more so on constructing historical arguments. Thus, he argues, games can facilitate scholarly debate and be used as an entry point to engage with historiographical issues. Furthermore, he suggests methods that could be used to design games that would be able to be used for this kind of teaching.

In chapter 11, Juan Hiriart takes us to the primary school classroom. Through his own process of designing a video game set in medieval England, he shares the challenges and revelations of game making for this young target audience. During development, the game was also play-tested with the pupils, who reflected on the game through drawings and conversations. By playing, the students were able to experience the hardships of medieval life.

Jeffrey Lawler and Sean Smith provide a practical overview of their own teaching experiments in the college classroom in chapter 12. Setting out to combine history, game studies, and computational skills, they share how they changed their history

curriculum. Using the platform Twine, they had their students make their own histories by creating fictional characters based in a historical reality. The authors reflect on several courses, their outcomes, and the students' responses.

Finally, in chapter 13, George Vlachos takes a multidisciplinary approach, combining the study of environmental history with games studies. He discusses the differences between ecosystem and landscape by applying the concepts to the virtual worlds of video games. For his case studies he includes first-person survival games and walking simulators, genres not often analyzed in terms of interactive pasts. In doing so, he illustrates the potential of games to convey historical information, even when they are not strictly historical.

Conclusion

In short, for those of you who return with us to the interactive past, you will find many new smart, challenging, and fun ideas in these pages. For those of you who are on their first trip to the interactive past: great to see your interest in scholarly and creative work on games and the past! If you like what you read here, we suggest you check out the first *The Interactive Past* (Mol *et al.* 2017) as its pages contain similarly engaging writing, but by an entirely different set of authors.

Whether you are an Interactive Past veteran or greenhorn, we are glad to have you along on this journey because remember: "it's dangerous to go alone!" (*The Legend of Zelda*, Nintendo 1986). We definitely did not walk this path alone, so we would like to give a big thanks to the Netherlands Institute of Sound & Vision and especially our co-organizer Jesse de Vos for providing us with the amazing space in which TIPC2 took place, as well as incredible coffees and lunches and our favorite throwable microphone cube. Thanks to the wonderful AV support, it is possible to watch the presentations of the entire conference on the VALUE Foundation's YouTube channel. Yet, you will note that the chapters in this book go far and above those presentations thanks to the hard work of all the authors in fleshing out their ideas and research. Finally, we would like to thank all our amazing conference speakers, participants, community members, stream-watchers, and all the other people and games that make this *Return to the Interactive Past* a good one!

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