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# Masks, Motorbikes, and Mosquitoes: Observations on African Cultural Heritage in African Games

Ivan Anderegg

Leiden University | Africa Studies Centre Leiden

Despite various infrastructural and financial challenges, the African game development industry is growing quickly, with established studios, newcomers, and hobbyists regularly releasing games. Many of these games feature explicitly African settings, putting the player into the role of spirits, gods, and bus drivers. In this, they show a different representation of Africa than the negative stereotyping still often prevalent in the wider global games industry.

Drawing on research I conducted in Accra, Ghana, I aim to highlight and explore some of the ways African game developers have used to incorporate and represent Africa and its cultural heritage in their games. For this I look at common themes and story elements, as well as graphical and linguistic choices, and connect them to wider discussions. I investigate the motivations behind developers' choices to incorporate these elements instead of developing "culturally odourless" global games - often framed through the lens of cultural heritage education - and how this relates to the industry's reliance on serious/educational game funding by western donors. Drawing on my interviews, I furthermore give some initial insights into the ways these elements are interpreted and seen by local Ghanaian players, whom they are intended to reach and marketed towards.

Through this presentation I hope to share and encourage insights into the African gaming landscape, and furthermore into game development outside of the centres of global game production, as well as the ways developers incorporate cultural heritage into their games.

## One, Two, Three, Four, I Declare a *RobotWar*

John Aycock,<sup>1</sup> Katie Biittner<sup>2</sup> & Hailey Sikstrom<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> MacEwan University, Canada

Silas Warner's *RobotWar* (1981) for the Apple II computer was an early entry in the "programming game" genre, where the player played the game through crafting a computer program to control a virtual robot on a battlefield. *RobotWar* was not the first programming game, but was arguably the first widely available one. We study *RobotWar* through interdisciplinary lenses, both from computer science as well as anthropology and archaeology, using historical sources along with reverse engineering of the game's code. There is much to unpack: players' agency in the game was several degrees of separation removed from the code the computer ran, and there were social aspects thanks to *RobotWar* tournaments held in person and by physical mail. For players, software development work was cast as play, with software development tools repurposed in the process. Distinguishing between a tool and a toy can be approached using discourse on toy points in the archaeological record and on loose parts play in contemporary early childhood pedagogies. In the context of games, where play is expected, these interdisciplinary views give us a productive line of inquiry into tool (toy?) use, reuse, and repurposing. The digital artifact of *RobotWar* was far from perfect, meanwhile, and players needed to battle software bugs in addition to other robots. Here we find another parallel to physical artifacts, as what makes toy points identifiable as children's toys is not their context of use but rather their imperfect construction.

# *No Stone Left Unturned: An Archaeologist's Journey into Game Design*

Louise Bedford  
University of York

This presentation will discuss the creation of an archaeology cozy game developed for my undergraduate dissertation. *No Stone Left Unturned* is a top-down pixel art game set in 1938, where the player explores Avebury henge and gathers essential resources to secure a position in the site's excavation team. The game incorporates archival material from the UKRI-AHRC Funded Avebury Papers project (reference AH/W003619/1), allowing players to discover items from the archive and learn about this extraordinary site. The development process was shared on social media, combining two approaches to communicate archaeology.

The talk will begin by introducing myself, Avebury, and the Avebury Papers project, a four-year Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded initiative to digitise, explore, and share the multimedia archive of Avebury's Neolithic origins and subsequent history (project reference AH/W003619/1). I will then discuss the methodology applied in creating the game, which included archival exploration, writing a Game Design Document, and developing a scaling system for the pixel art reconstruction of Avebury. Elements of cozy games and the rationale for their use in this project will also be addressed.

Following this, I will reflect on and critically evaluate the game development process. I hope this presentation will provide insights into the importance of studies where the archaeologist acts as the creative maker and explore the fascinating intersection of gaming, heritage, and public engagement.

# Petronostalgia and Cosiness in Driving Games

Bettina Bódi  
University of Birmingham

This paper explores nostalgia for Easy Oil (LeMenager 2014) through the analysis of *Lake* (Gamious 2021). *Lake* is set in 1980s Oregon, USA, and could best be described as a cozy driving game. Players control Meredith, who, seeking respite from her demanding city job, returns to her hometown to take over her father's postman duties. Each day, she drives around a charming lakeside town in a sturdy, easy-to-handle van, listening to country music and delivering mail. Players can accept side quests from townsfolk, which steer Meredith further from daily duties and centre relationship management. As such, *Lake* defies traditional play styles associated with driving games: while vehicle operation remains central, the focus shifts from acceleration—speed, growth, progress—to deceleration. This introduces a new way of perceiving and measuring time, aligned with the management of fuel extraction infrastructures ("petroduration" in op de Beke 2024). *Lake* is a complex case study, because on the one hand it is a cozy game (Waszkiewicz and Tymińska 2024), challenging driving genre expectations both representationally and mechanically. There are no achievements to be won, safe driving is encouraged, and the female protagonist is more concerned complaining to the local radio station DJ about playlists than upgrading her carburettor. But it also exemplifies a nostalgic longing for times of Easy Oil, a fantasy of replete resources unburdened by worries about the ethics and ecological consequences of oil-reliance (LeMenager 2014). *Lake* can therefore be seen to simultaneously challenge but also uphold the status quo of petroculture, embodying the duality of cozy games (Bódi 2024).

Bódi, B. (2024). "The Duality of Cozy Games: Cozy Agency, Neoliberalism, and Affect." *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 11:1, 51–64.

Gamious (2021). *Lake*. PC. Whitethorne Games.

LeMenager, S. (2014). *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Op de Beke, L. (2024). "Dark Play and the Flow Time of Petroculture in Oil-Themed Games." In *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*, edited by L. op de Beke, J. Raessens, S. Werning, & G. Farca, 295–310. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.10819591.16>

Waszkiewicz, A., & Tymińska, M. (2024). Cozy Games and Resistance Through Care. *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies*, 11(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2391-8551.11.01>

## Decay and the Practice of Historiography in *Kentucky Route Zero*

Rüdiger Brandis  
University of Göttingen

The world of *Kentucky Route Zero* lives in a liminal space between the present and the past. Its inhabitants and artifacts appear somewhat out of focus, as if they are not quite there with you, in another story long gone or yet to happen. History in the game appears as something not quite real or something that could change from moment to moment. And this magical sense of uncertainty is specifically tied to the game's concept of decay: Businesses are dying, administrative procedures appear absurd, and analog technologies are giving their last performance. I will use the concept of decay to connect the practice of historiography within *Kentucky Route Zero* with the potential for exploring the deconstruction of history through digital narrative games. To do so, I frame history in digital games as simulacra of historical descriptions. Jacques Derrida describes a simulacrum as a trace of something that exists or once existed. By its very existence, a trace always refers to another present, the existence of which is evidenced by the trace itself. As a simulacrum the trace refers both to a specific point in time, the present in which it came into being, and simultaneously to its past and possible future. I will trace the concept of decay through *Kentucky Route Zero* and use it to explore how it evokes a notion of time for the player to interpret. From this, I will discuss how *Kentucky Route Zero* opens up the process of historiography itself to the player.

## I Have an Axe to Grind: Immersive Historical Literacy and Interactive Pasts Through Co-play

Erik Champion  
University of South Australia

Immersive environments (XR, game worlds) require new ways of orienting and navigating a digital "world." They also must discard or simplify many real-world affordances. We require a term for designing with an understanding of *others'* (players'/visitors') understanding.

Despite advances in extended reality (XR) and the "Metaverse", I don't yet see great attention in critical heritage studies to the important challenges and opportunities of immersive and interactive pasts. To address this apparent gap, I coined the term "immersive literacy" due to specific requirements of immersive media beyond conventional definitions of visual and digital literacy. The concept of immersive literacy extends "literacy" in the digital age, going beyond mere technical proficiency, and encompassing the ability to navigate, interpret, and critically engage with digital content (Bekele et al., 2021).

A further challenge: how to understand and design for historical immersion in a digital world? "Immersively historical literacy" is my suggested term: the ability to critically evaluate and understand the historically contextual simulated and interactive immersive experiences provided by digital cultural heritage applications. If these or similar terms are useful conceptually, can they be elaborated on to help us understand how to design digital worlds to deepen and extend immersively historical literacy? And can the presence and participation of other players help rather than hinder this?

Bekele, M. K., Champion, E., McMeekin, D. A., & Rahaman, H. (2021). The Influence of Collaborative and Multi-Modal Mixed Reality: Cultural Learning in Virtual Heritage. *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction*, 5(12), 79.  
<https://www.mdpi.com/2414-4088/5/12/79https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21r3q81>.

## The Clothes Make the Man? Functional Cross-Dressing in Ancient Rome Games

Kate Cook  
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This paper explores cross-dressing, primarily female to male, in four games set in the Late Roman Republic: *Shadow of Rome* (2005, Capcom), *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017, Ubisoft), *Choices: A Courtesan of Rome* (2018, Pixelberry) and *Expeditions: Rome* (2022, THQ Nordic). These games all feature striking examples of female to male cross-dressing, each time associated with spatial transgression. These female characters cross-dress to access two traditionally male spaces of ancient Rome: the military, and the senate house. The oldest game considered here, *Shadow of Rome*, also the only game with a Japanese development context, includes the same connection between cross-dressing and gendered space, when the male Octavian dresses as a 'maid' to infiltrate a senatorial home.

These examples establish what Garber has described as the "progress narrative," when individuals are narrativized as taking on transvestism temporarily, "unwillingly, as an instrumental strategy".<sup>1</sup> At the same time, they suggest a model of historical gender which is both instrumental and constructed, especially through dress. However, they are also, as we shall see, associated with an element of danger in the form of murder, which make these instances of cross-dressing more transgressive than the progress narrative established by each act might otherwise suggest. This paper will therefore examine what this dress-based attitude to gender and space might tell us about modern approaches to ancient gender, and what they tell us about modern game developers' views of gender flexibility in the Roman period.

<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

## Assassinate the Narrative: Depictions of Ancient Games in *Assassin's Creed*

Walter Crist  
Leiden University

As a franchise that has spent considerable time and resources into accurate and realistic depictions of historical settings in its games, *Assassin's Creed* has received plaudits from players and scholars of the ancient world alike. It is largely viewed as the gold standard in the gaming industry for balancing representative depictions of ancient places and people with engaging gameplay.

The series incorporates ancient games and players in its games. Nevertheless, depicting ancient play presents challenges to game developers, as even archaeologists have not yet begun to take ancient play seriously as an avenue of research. To what degree, then, have the *Assassin's Creed* developers incorporated ancient games into their products, and what role are games shown to have in the ancient societies represented?

This paper examines *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, *Odyssey*, *Valhalla*, and *Mirage* to explore the role games played in the Iron Age to early medieval societies of western Eurasia and Egypt as represented in these games. It documents the artifacts used as inspiration for in-game items, the role these objects take as gameplay objects, as well as the motivations and settings in which people are shown playing games. Gambling, whether as a gameplay mechanism or as a character behavior indicating unreliability, appears as a major theme across the games. This suggests that long-perpetuated narratives of gameplay as a character flaw in Greco-Roman, Christian, and Islamic texts that influence colloquial understanding of ancient play still permeate the culture of play, even among those who take contemporary games very seriously.

# When Games Met the Library: What Industry Expertise Can Do for the Digitization of Kinetic Cultural Heritage

Casilda de Zulueta & Zoe Schubert

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin | Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz

Generally speaking, everybody knows the Stanford bunny, but nobody knows how to animate it. In the process of digitizing cultural heritage artifacts —be it a vase, a book, or the ruins of Italica—, it is progressively more common to assemble multidisciplinary teams. Historians, archaeologists, geographers and anthropologists meet software developers, data analysts and architects. But where are the designers? A role so crucial in entertainment industries becomes an afterthought in academic environments... That is, until they decide that the rabbit needs to jump.

In this talk, I would like to show how standardized tools and professions in game development can play their part in preserving history. For this task, I will be using as an example the “Pop-Up 3D Projekt”, a collaborative task between the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin and the NFDI4Culture, which consists of kinetic digital representations of pop-up books from the XIX and XX centuries. What pipelines can we use? How do we tackle material rendering? How many is too many polygons? And how does animation take place? Finalized pieces at the moment of the conference will be shown in the Game Exhibit.

Further reading:

<https://staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/die-staatsbibliothek/projekte/project-id-1041a-2023>

<https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/527302005?language=de>

Development screenshots:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1uBvgr8o\\_uudYDhlyYtAsVuDAVGxy00\\_s](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1uBvgr8o_uudYDhlyYtAsVuDAVGxy00_s)

Currently-available objects:

<https://kompakkt.de/entity/675807ecbb6c75e68c58cb5c>

<https://kompakkt.de/entity/675964aa2376f983dc4f627e>

## Graffiti Games as Rock Art: An Exploration of Cultural and Archaeological Significance

Ashwini Gawli & Raamesh Gowri Raghavan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Mumbai

Etched board games, found at various archaeological sites, hold a cultural significance comparable to that of rock art, yet they remain underappreciated in archaeological and anthropological studies. Like rock art, board games have been a prominent feature of human civilization, serving as mediums for social bonding, rituals, education, and entertainment. These games, often etched into horizontal surfaces of monuments, sacred spaces, rock boulders, caves, and open-air sites.

Notably, many of these games coexist with rock art, suggesting an intertwined relationship between the two forms of expression. Despite their importance in understanding human past, the study of these etched games is often overlooked. Elevating the significance of etched board games alongside rock art could provide valuable insights into the social, cultural, and ritualistic practices of ancient societies, emphasizing their role in the broader context of material culture.

The above paper will focus on compiling examples of such instances from various known sites, adding further emphasis to the argument that etched board games, as part of material culture, deserve greater attention and scholarly recognition. By presenting these examples, the paper aims to underscore the importance of including these games in discussions about human history, social dynamics, and cultural expression, advocating for a more holistic approach to the study of these games.

# “Mead is My Lifeblood”: Understanding the Mechanics of Vikings

Corine Gerritsen  
Leiden University

Work in the field of history and reception studies has established the significant role video games play in shaping cultural memory about the past.<sup>1</sup> Through mnemonic hegemonic theory,<sup>2</sup> researchers can explain the narratives that are built by prioritizing certain elements over others, and portrayals in media, such as games, solidify elements of cultural memory. This contribution studies how the past is marked in the case study game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. I explore game elements in the structural and representational layers of the game,<sup>3</sup> how the elements conveying a setting in the past relate to one another, and their connection to hegemonic historiographies. Using three game elements —the drinking mini-game, a monastery raid, and the skill upgrade menu— I make a data-driven qualitative analysis with ATLAS.ti of elements that frame the past, and display the resulting concepts in the relational visual database with Neo4J. This approach displays the broad utility of ATLAS.ti for game research and the added value of using relational database tools to express conceptual and abstract relationships between game mechanics, aesthetic elements, and historiography. This type of analysis can foreground the dominant cultural values and ideas about the past expressed in the relationship between a mechanic and representational layer and question the neutrality of these elements. Moreover, it demonstrates how the past is used in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* to create mechanics in the game. Ultimately, this analysis underscores how specific game elements actively construct and reinforce dominant historical narratives within cultural memory.

<sup>1</sup> Stefano Caselli, K. Bonello Rutter Giappone, and Tomasz Z. Majkowski, "Ten Years of Historical Game Studies: Towards the Intersection with Memory Studies," *Game 10* (2023): 29–50.

<sup>2</sup> Berthold Molden, "Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony: On the Power Relations of Collective Memory," *Memory Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 125–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015596014>.

<sup>3</sup> Different layers as employed in mostly ontological studies, see for example: Espen Aarseth and Paweł Grabarczyk, "An Ontological Meta-Model for Game Research," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018 Conference: The Game is the Message* (Tampere: DiGRA, 2018), <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/973>.

# Insights into the Past: Meaningful Historicized Gameworld Interfaces in Historical Video Games

Simon Hagemann  
University of Lorraine

This paper explores a specific category of virtual game world interfaces—systems that connect players to the game system (Jørgensen, 2014)—in historical video games. It examines how these interfaces not only facilitate interaction with the game world but also function as historiographical tools, offering players unique access to the past evoked in the game. Beyond standardized interface elements such as menus, cards, or technology trees, we focus on interfaces that serve as historically meaningful artifacts within the narrative, deepening immersion and shaping players' engagement with history.

These interfaces take the form of documents, archives, testimonies, and other sources that provide historical insights. For instance, some games, such as *Forced Abroad: Days of a Forced Laborer* (2022), incorporate diaries as interactive interfaces. Others, like *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (2016) and *Mexico, 1921: A Deep Slumber* (2024), integrate photography as both a game mechanic and a means of reflecting on historical documentation. Such approaches not only embed media practices into gameplay but also critically engage with the production and materiality of historical sources.

Drawing on historical game studies, game UX design, and research on historical sources, this paper reexamines gameworld interfaces as both interactive mechanisms and historiographical constructs. Through this interdisciplinary lens, we highlight their narrative and analytical potential in historical video games, shedding light on their role in shaping players' understanding of the past.

## Low-Poly Photogrammetry: Having Archaeology Match the Art Style

Katrine Haydock  
University of York

Photogrammetry, the creation of 3D models by combining photographs is used by both the archaeological discipline and the video games industry for similar reasons, for both it is a quick and efficient way to create high-quality digital models of objects that can be used in a range of different applications. For archaeologists, this comes in the form of research and dissemination whilst in videogames these models can be used in a variety of ways, from game backgrounds to character clothing. There has even been the crossover of photogrammetry of archaeological sites being used within video games. The usage of photogrammetry within both archaeology and videogames is currently restricted to high-resolution, high-polycount models. This greatly restricts the opportunities for archaeological photogrammetry to find a place within videogames. However, through the usage of Mesh Labs, these high-poly models can be turned into low-poly models, widening the application of photogrammetry models beyond hyper-realistic AAA games. This study presents a workflow for the transformation of high-poly archaeological photogrammetry into low-poly models which can be imported into game engines such as Unity. Through discussing the potential usage of these models within low-poly games this study will demonstrate the significance of being able to combine archaeological data and videogame art styles.

# Archaeogaming and Indigenous Representation: Designing Immersive Gaming Experiences of the Southern Jê

Juan Hiriart<sup>1</sup> & Priscilla Ulguim<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Salford

<sup>2</sup> Vrije Universiteit

Digital game technologies have become increasingly important to archaeological investigation and interpretation, offering immersive ways to engage with the past that extend beyond traditional research dissemination methods. As digitally constructed environments, games enable players to explore synthetic worlds developed from archaeological and ethnographic records, fostering meaningful interactions with historical narratives.

This presentation examines the design and development of an archaeogame project focused on the Southern Jê Indigenous group, who inhabited a vast territory stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Paraná River in southern Brazil between AD 800 and 1000. Developed in collaboration with archaeologists, Indigenous educators, and game designers, this project leverages gaming and immersive technology to represent the archaeology of the Southern Jê through both a digital game and an immersive exhibition. The game translates archaeological and ethnographic data into interactive narratives and gameplay systems, depicting the landscape, material culture, and intangible heritage of this Indigenous group. Meanwhile, the exhibition integrates multiple technologies to foster a multi-sensory engagement with the Southern Jê virtual world.

This presentation will explore key design and development aspects, as well as the challenges involved in creating meaningful digital gaming experiences, engaging ethically with Indigenous communities, interpreting gaps in the archaeological record, and balancing educational and engagement goals in archaeogaming. Drawing from these insights, we will propose a ludo-narrative framework for archaeological game design, offering guidance for future projects at the intersection of archaeology, Indigenous studies, and interactive media design.

## Beyond the Backdrop: Representing Scotland's Cultural Heritage in Games

Kayleigh MacLeod

Abertay University

Scotland's rolling hills and misty glens are a familiar sight in popular media, and video games are no exception. Yet, this scenic backdrop often masks a deeper cultural absence. Many games set in Scotland rely heavily on environmental visuals, such as sweeping landscapes and ancient ruins, to establish a sense of place while neglecting the rich tapestry of cultural expression. Games like *Hogwarts Legacy* (Warner Bros. Games, 2023) and *Forza Horizon 4* (Microsoft, 2018) reinforce this pattern, drawing on Highland imagery while overlooking the country's cultural roots. Scottish Gaelic, and by association its culture, is often treated as a relic of the past rather than a living language, shaping how players perceive Scotland's cultural heritage. However, games have the potential to challenge these assumptions by embedding cultural knowledge into interactive storytelling.

This talk explores how games engage with Scotland's cultural heritage—whether through preservation, reinterpretation, or misrepresentation. It considers how interactive media can mediate cultural memory, either reinforcing outdated ideas or contributing to a more nuanced, living representation of Gaelic culture. Drawing on the perspective of a practitioner, it advocates for a culture-first approach that embraces oral traditions, song, and language.

Using *A Highland Song* (Inkle, 2023) and *Still Wakes the Deep* (The Chinese Room, 2024) as case studies, this talk explores how a culture-first approach can enrich game narratives. Drawing comparisons with *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023)—which uses food and storytelling to represent Tamil culture—it highlights the potential of games as platforms for cultural exchange and language revitalization.

## Developing a Digital Field School in *Minecraft Education Edition*

Oscar Poulsen

Independent, graduate of University College London & University of Copenhagen

In 2020, I developed a Minecraft-based archaeological field school to explore the possibilities of using Minecraft as a teaching tool, similar to how it is used in some schools to teach STEM subjects (Furukado, Zhu and Hagiwara, 2024). The project was published (Poulsen and Ariese, 2022). In 2023 *Minecraft* introduced their take on archaeology in the Trails & Tales update (Minecraft, 2023), and with the increased cost of attending field schools (Heath-Stout and Hannigan, 2020; Smith, 2024), it seemed proper to dust off the old prototype and tailor it to an academic audience. This paper will present the updated version and reflect on how to represent the skills presented in the BAJR Archaeology Skills passport (BAJR, 2025), which is used to document practical training for early career archaeologists in the UK, in *Minecraft*.

- BAJR (2025) *BAJR Skills Passport, British Archaeological Jobs Resources*. Available at: <https://shop.bajr.org/shop/>
- Furukado, R., Zhu, Y. and Hagiwara, G. (2024) 'Integrating Minecraft Education in Curriculum Design to Enhance Chemistry Learning', *Procedia Computer Science*. Elsevier B.V., 246(C), pp. 4375–4384. doi: 10.1016/j.procs.2024.09.287.
- Heath-Stout, L. E. and Hannigan, E. M. (2020) 'Affording Archaeology: How Field School Costs Promote Exclusivity', *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, 8(2), pp. 123–133. doi: 10.1017/aap.2020.7.
- Minecraft (2023) *Minecraft: Trails & Tales - Discover the Trails & Tales Update, Mojang*. Available at: <https://www.minecraft.net/en-us/updates/trails-and-tales>
- Poulsen, A. S. and Ariese, C. E. (2022) 'Part 1: Recreating an excavation in Minecraft Education Edition/Part2: Recreating an excavation in Minecraft Education Edition: A Response/Part 3: Recreating an excavation in Minecraft Education Edition: Final Thoughts Author', *KLEOS - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology*, (5), pp. 75–107.
- Smith, A. (2024) *The ACC's Survey on the Cost of Archaeological Field Schools, Archaeological Centers Coalition*. Available at: <https://archaeologycoalition.org/the-accs-survey-on-the-cost-of-archaeological-field-schools/>

# Alternative Pasts in Videogames: The Cases of *Pentiment*, *Heaven's Vault* and *SEASON: A Letter to the Future*

Ian Regueiro-Salcedo<sup>1</sup> & Xavier Rubio-Campillo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Università degli studi di Ferrara

<sup>2</sup> Universitat de Barcelona

This study examines how three narrative-driven indie video games—*Pentiment*, *Heaven's Vault*, and *SEASON: A Letter to the Future*—engage with cultural heritage through the lens of archaeogaming and historical game studies. By analysing how they deal with concepts such as immaterial and tangible cultural heritage, historical documentation mechanics, and a layered concept of time, the goal is to evaluate how these games challenge traditional archaeological and historical narratives popular in videogames while allowing players to interpret and shape the preservation of the past.

*Heaven's Vault* can be defined as a post-processual archaeological game that emphasizes the past as a “modern myth-making”. In *Pentiment* the player investigates Tassing's ancient past and explores to what extent collective memory can be preserved by the user through the creation of a town mural grounded on a micro-historical perspective. *SEASON* allows players to document a vanishing world with reflections on the fragility of both material and immaterial heritage. In the three games analysed, a pattern emerges: History is not immovable, but a space that is mutable and disputed, that resonates with present time needs. Through player agency and a deconstructionist approach, the narratives question what is remembered, who decides it, and how those memories shape future identities.

The study focuses on experiences that discuss heritage while avoiding a real historical setting, being the story and characters invented or using a science fiction setting. By acknowledging History's layered and non-linear nature, these games reflect how the past is constantly reinterpreted in the present.

## Preserving Scotland's Heritage through Games

Andrew Reid [presenter], Martin Zeilinger, Gareth Robinson, Luke Allen, Rian Hamill, Keiran Holtom, Connor Pegg, Oli Thom, Iris Ilesan, Setareki Ligaiviu, Yu-Che Lin, Martin Taylor, Daniel Szablowski & Huarong Yuan  
Abertay University

Records of Scotland's dates to 12,000 BC and has served as a cultural inspiration for many films, television shows, and music. Scotland has some representation in video games, from the realistic simulation of the golf courses of St. Andrews in the *EA Sports PGA Tour* series to the fictitiously authentic coastlines and cathedrals in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. Generally, there is less representation of Scottish heritage in games and interactive media in comparison to other media types. This presentation outlines a curriculum-based approach to developing two digital games, both with goals of preserving different aspects of Scotland's history. Firstly, *De-Pict Dunkeld* represents the past and present of an archaeological dig site of King's Seat Hillfort, a seventh century royal Pictish hillfort in Dunkeld, Perthshire excavated through a two-year citizen science project. The game was developed in partnership with Historic Dunkeld and aims to continue inspiring local communities and visitors about a site almost lost to time. Secondly, *Rennie Room Decorator* is an interior decoration game developed alongside the V&A Dundee's Scottish Design Galleries. It is based on the Oak Room, an early-twentieth century tearoom interior from Scottish designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh which was salvaged and restored from ruin. The game positions players as an interior decorator to Miss Cranston, the owner of the Oak Room, underpinned by social history events and the written evidence of the interior's design, of which there is no photographic evidence. Reflections on the practices and outcomes of the projects are provided.

# History Is Written by the Losers: The Perpetuation of World War II Myths through Game Design

Fiona S. Schönberg  
Regensburg University

Video games tend to converge on certain patterns of control schemes and visual and game design. It is because of these tendencies that this presentation will argue that video games in general, and games portraying historical events in particular, are almost uniquely suited for the perpetuation of Barthesian 'mythical speech'. An example will be presented by tracing the myth of invincible German World War II era war machines. Ranging from *Steel Division* to *Company of Heroes* to *Battlefield V*, the depiction of tanks is far removed from the historic performance of the overengineered and critically unreliable machines. Instead, it more closely resembles a mixture of wartime misinformation and outright propaganda of efficient war machines tearing through allied armour with ease.

This is of particular interest precisely because very little of the signification of the myth happens narratively. Rather than through cutscenes or expository dialogue, it occurs on the formal level of game mechanics. A Tiger Tank, for example, will simply have better game characteristics than its allied equivalents. In fact this myth is so ubiquitous, and in Barthes' own words, so "coagulated into natural belief" that players have come to expect a bossfight when they see a Panther tank, even to the point where the myth itself can be used as a signifier for associations of German-ness in more heavily fictionalised games like *Iron Harvest*.

The presentation intends to discuss and challenge this particular myth, but also use it to discuss how historical video games engage in mythical speech.

# The Polyvalence of (Historical) Empathy: How *Valiant Hearts* and *Disco Elysium* Demonstrate it Is Much More than 'an Asset'

Jakub Šindelář

Charles University | Leiden University

Elon Musk's biography claims the game *The Battle of Polytopia* taught him that "empathy is not an asset". He is said to have been extensively playing the simplified *Civilization*-like (predominantly mobile) game in the fall of 2021 (Isaacson 2023). This year, he has continued his crusade against empathy as a "fundamental weakness", an "exploit" that threatens the "western civilization" (PowerfulJRE 2025). Such a narrative connecting digital games and anti-empathy discourse is a curious observation as the medium has been predominantly connected to its overly promising empathy potential and discourse around it — in industry and academia circles (Ruberg 2020; Schrier and Farber 2021).

Assuming empathy is actually a virtuous positive value and basis for democracy (Morell 201) and human rights (von Harbou 2014), this contribution aims to show the polyvalent qualities of empathy as used in the games *Valiant Hearts* and *Disco Elysium* — both praised for their deploying of empathy in an effective and creative ways (Boltz 2017; Meier 2025). The first, a WW1 puzzle adventure game uses the shifting perspective of multiple playable characters for ludonarrative purposes, the second one, an allohistoric RPG maintains a single character perspective but integrates empathy as part of its core game mechanics. It will finally explore how empathy can help analyze why some, like Elon Musk, look for and find reinforcement for despising empathy through *The Battle of Polytopia*, just like 'methodological empathy' showed its analytical quality when investigating the history of fascist ideologies, regimes and their policies (Kohut 2020, Mosse 2022, Allen 2023).

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## Ludography

*Civilization* series (MicroProse, Activision, Firaxis Games; 1991-2025).

*Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019).

*The Battle of Polytopia* (Midjiwan AB, 2016).

*Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014).

## Hamlet in the Hypertext: Counterplay as Improv in *Elsinore* and *To Be or Not To Be*

Keerthi Sridharan Vaidehi  
Leiden University

Historical games have long been a productive substrate for conversation across disciplines. This allows us to re-situate core concepts from the field in new (or 'new') contexts, continuously enriching epistemological and analytical possibilities for the study of past-play. In this talk, counterplay is recontextualized as improvisational theater practice using two game adaptations of Shakespeare's Hamlet, *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch Games) and *To Be or Not To Be* (Tin Man Games). Following a longstanding trend of 'updating' Shakespearean media for contemporary audiences, the potential of counterplay in these games is positioned as a function of modernization, theoretically allowing for greater engagement and investment on the part of the player. Examining practices from historical gameplay and longform improv in parallel, I demonstrate how deviation from (literary and historical) 'canon', intertextual meta-commentary, and the idea of 'infinite replay' all contribute to a rhetoric of modernization and renewal, juxtaposed against the comparative inaccessibility of dusty historical source text(s). Given the resurgence of improvised theater properties in the current media landscape, this work posits a useful exploration of both counterplay and the dominant play it counters, the role of choice abundance in deconstructing historical and literary habitus, and counterfactual play as predicated on the principle of 'yes, and'.

## Intertextual Ruins: An Off-modern Reading of Intertextual References in *Fallout: New Vegas*

Filip van Dijk  
Leiden University

I draw upon Svetlana Boym's concept of 'off-modern' (*The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001) to find a deeper, nostalgic layer in intertextuality. I localize this deeper layer of intertextuality in reaction to Frederic Jameson's reading of the concept as "replac[ing] depth by surface, or by multiple surfaces." I analyse intertextual references in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), especially ones to old science fiction films, as off-modern ruins. I read the references as ruins since they're the remains of earlier texts that the new text was built upon, as Boym does with post-war ruins. They leave traces behind in the new texts that make us aware of their history, they fit under Boym's notion of reflexive nostalgia. I explain this metaphor by connecting them to cases found within the game, like an Elvis Presley impersonation school. My main point is that engaging with these references in the virtual world creates a sense of longing, a sense of nostalgia, even if the player hasn't engaged with the "source" before.

Based on my thesis, this new reading of intertextuality through an off-modern lens enables us to analyse references in an affective, engaging way. It fosters a drive for looking at influences of games, not shying away from making explicit references to what inspired creators. Instead of flattening it, as Jameson would believe, looking at references through an off-modern lens gives games and media researchers a framework that lends intertextuality the ability to deepen meaning.

# Hacking the Big Smoke: Alternate Reality Games and London's Archaeology

Maki Wardle

Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) | University of York

Archaeology and Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) build worlds using contrasting, even conflicting toolkits and notions about reality and our place within it. Development-led archaeology focuses on discerning single, incontestable chains of evidence from 'finds' made into data. ARGs play with the tensions between *what is* and *what if?*, transforming everyday digital and physical spaces into playgrounds for speculation and reinvention.

My design-led PhD project, *Hacking the Big Smoke*, draws on the expertise, data, and collections of MOLA—London's largest archaeology company—to explore what the encounter between archaeology and ARGs in a global metropolis reveals about their potentials and limitations as worldbuilding practices.

The ARG centres on London's Victoria station and two archaeological investigations yielding data considered too obscure for public engagement—things, as MOLA's Collections Manager says, 'nobody ever cares about.' These biological and geological fragments —diatoms, pollen grains, molluscs and vanished rivers— as well as meaningful absences, are read by archaeologists as traces and shadows of humans' interactions with London's landscape over millennia. They are the *dark matter* that invisibly binds together our understandings of the city's deep past.

This presentation offers a snapshot of a hacker ARG-aeology in-the-making. I reflect on the challenges of transforming MOLA's *dark matter* into compelling gameplay for Londoners. I ask: can embracing archaeology's glitches, lacks and overlooked data inspire a radically inclusive, empowering and co-evolving new game design—one that harnesses collective play with London's deep past to shape its future? Along the way, I introduce new tools and toys emerging from this experiment, from WhatsApp game engines to pollen music machines!