REVIEW ESSAY

STILL PLAYING WITH THE PAST: HISTORY, HISTORIANS, AND DIGITAL GAMES

PLAYING WITH THE PAST: DIGITAL GAMES AND THE SIMULATION OF HISTORY. Edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 388.

ABSTRACT

Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, was a significant publication in the establishment of historical (digital) game studies, a field that has since continued to grow. This review essay notes some of the key interventions made by the edited collection and its scope in accounting for the complexities of digital historical games. It also reflects on what the book represented at the early stages of the discipline and the ways in which scholarly approaches have developed (or not) in the decade since its publication. In doing so, it focuses on several key areas that arose in *Playing with the Past* and have remained central to historical game studies. In particular, this essay examines questions of digital games' relationship to "professional," written history; whether games can (or need to) teach their players about the past; and the troublesome reoccurrence of and reliance on certain difficult terms, such as "historical accuracy" and "historical authenticity." This essay argues that all three of these fundamental aspects of our current approaches to historical game studies require further criticality to build on the foundational work of *Playing with the Past* as well as the vital work published in the field over the last decade.

Keywords: digital games, historical gaming, accuracy, authenticity, historical practice, public history

We often read evangelisms about how "the digital" is "changing history" and the ways we study and represent the past. A vital, though often overlooked, aspect of this digital "transformation" has been the representation of past spaces, events, and historical ideas in digital games for (at least) the last forty years. Although digital games were once a largely maligned medium (and in many quarters, they remain so), awareness of games and gaming technology's potential to engage with the past has been growing among developers, historians, educators and students, and museum, heritage, and cultural practitioners for some time. This has certainly been the case in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby digital experiences and engagements have come to define so much of our daily lives. As many people are now discovering this medium's potential, a meaningful exploration of digital historical games' value and function requires serious engagement with the

ways in which researchers have, for at least the last decade or so, been trying to untangle the ways in which they "represent the past and offer access to historical practice."[1]

Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, represents a formative moment in the history and historiography of historical game studies. Though preceded by some key foundational works,[2] the book was the first defined space that assembled a (large) cohort interested in how the past was represented, and how history was expressed, through digital games. A wide range of texts and topics are covered in the collection. There is plenty of focus on war games and gaming, the relationship between the (US) military and government and digital games, and the scores of immensely popular, action-centric shooter games about warfare (such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*). Strategy games (for instance, *Sid Meier's Civilization* and *Colonization*, *Age of Empires*, and *Total War*) are also covered here; such games are beloved by historians for their potential to model causality via game mechanics. Although they have been criticized,[3] they remain some of the most discussed games in the field.

None of these are especially surprising inclusions given their ubiquity in the games industry, popular discourse, and, indeed, academic scholarship. However, what is particularly pleasing to see for such early work is the inclusion of a wider variety of games than many might straightforwardly label "historical." There are multiple chapters on science fiction, dystopic games (such as *Fallout 3*) that are firmly and deliberately historically minded. Such games reshape the known past in ways that make a variety of arguments. For instance, Tom Cutterham's "Irony and American Historical Consciousness in *Fallout 3*" and Joseph A. November's "*Fallout* and Yesterday's Impossible Tomorrow" discuss how such games are about the Cold War and American historical memory. Other chapters, including Robert Mejia and Ryuta Komaki's "The Historical Conception of Biohazard in *Biohazard/Resident Evil*" and Erin Evans's "The Struggle with Gnosis: Ancient Religion and Future Technology in the *Xenosaga* Series," consider examples wherein the past is brought to bear on the future in video games. Others—particularly Emily Joy Bembeneck's "Phantasms of Rome: Video Games and Cultural Identity," Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens's "Modeling Indigenous Peoples: Unpacking Ideology in *Sid Meier's Colonization*," and Joshua D. Holdenried's (with Nicolas Trépanier) "Dominance and the Aztec Empire: Representations in

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1. Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

2. See, for example, William Uricchio, "Simulation, History, and Computer Games," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 327–38; Kevin Schut, "Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007), 213–35; and Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (New York: Routledge, 2011). An edited collection with a similar, though adjacent, scope (and even name) was published in 2008: *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).

3. Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Age of Empires II and *Medieval II: Total War*"—explore how Western games negotiate otherness, foreshadowing the necessary, expanding work of postcolonial game studies.[4] There are also considerations of Chinese and Japanese historical games in Hyuk-Chan Kwon's "Historical Novel Revived: The Heyday of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* Role-Playing Games" and Kazumi Hasegawa's "Falling in Love with History: Japanese Girls' *Otome* Sexuality and Queering Historical Imagination"; in the latter's case, there is evident potential for queer history approaches and reception studies of women. To greater and lesser degrees, by looking beyond the boundaries of individual games, some chapters constitute an early acknowledgement of the way histories of and histories in games, as well as histories of play, will always permeate each other, a vital area of study that has since been further explored by scholars.[5] The contributors are also drawn from diverse backgrounds, for they are historians as well as media scholars, educators, and cultural and heritage professionals. This diversity speaks to the inherent interdisciplinarity of historical game studies and the variety of people and perspectives that all have a stake in it. Ultimately, the collection acutely anticipated the position occupied by Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin in their 2017 state-of-the-field article, which argued that we should be as expansive as possible in how we define our corpus.[6]

    Playing with the Past covered a lot of ground given its position in the discipline's development. Yet when revisiting it almost a decade later, it is striking that certain debates and thorny matters remain at the heart of historical game studies. It is beyond the scope of this essay to account for all the divergent trends and issues *Playing with the Past* foreshadowed. But it will focus on certain issues around which the discipline still seems to revolve. Questions of factuality and games' relationship to traditional, written historical scholarship, and whether games can (or need to) satisfactorily teach players about the past, remain central. In important ways, these intertwined areas underpin the troublesome, lingering specter of such terms as "historical accuracy" and "authenticity" and how different stakeholders use them to evaluate games' engagement with the past. This essay highlights some the interventions *Playing with the Past* made in these areas and notes the directions they have (or have not) taken scholars ever since.

    4. See, for example, Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2018), https://olh.openlibhums.org/article/id/4527/.

    5. See, for example, Adam Chapman, "The Histories of/in Games," *ROMchip* 1, no. 1 (2019), http://www.romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/70; Yannick Rochat, "A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981–2015)," in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, ed. Alexander von Lünen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3–19; Holly Nielsen, "'The British Empire Would Gain New Strength from Nursery Floors': Depictions of Travel and Place in Nineteenth-Century British Board Games," in von Lünen et al., *Historia Ludens*, 20–34; Nick Webber and E. Charlotte Stevens, "History, Fandom, and Online Game Communities," in von Lünen et al., *Historia Ludens*, 189–203; and Alexander von Lünen, "Ye Olde FAQ: The *Darklands* Game, Immersiveness and Fan Fiction," in von Lünen et al., *Historia Ludens*, 204–27.

    6. Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, "Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?" *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017), 358–71.

One of the central preoccupations of historical game studies has been to interrogate (and justify) the status of games as worthwhile objects of study and their potential to function as meaningful representations of the past.[7] It is increasingly difficult to argue that games do not deserve scholarly attention. Yet, in terms of the way we assess historical games, they still occupy a position on a far lower rung of the ladder than history written by professional historians—that is, history "with a capital H"[8] (and by "written," I mean published in books and articles).

I do not mean to suggest that we should consider historical scholarship unnecessary. Nor would I defend historical games *en masse* as inherently worthy; successive controversies, particularly ones centered around mainstream commercial games, prove time and again that they are not. Rather, what I mean by this is that, despite all the energy expended by those keen to take games seriously, many have still never relinquished the assumption that written academic history is the standard by which all should be judged in perpetuity. These assumptions are apparent in many chapters of *Playing with the Past*. Many are close readings of specific case studies: single or groups of games read for their content and how it approximates the more traditional architecture of historical knowledge (that is, history written by historians). This approach has outlasted the book, continuing to this day as a central, unavoidable aspect of the way we critique historical games.

Like *Playing with the Past*, A. Martin Wainwright's *Virtual History: How Videogames Portray the Past* offers a broad and accessible look at digital games and the many ways they interface with historical discourse. Its stated aims clearly illustrate a tension that is at the heart of the literature:

This book examines many of the most popular historical videogames released over the last decade and *assesses how well they portray history*. It looks at the motives and perspectives of the game designers and marketers. It also *compares the games to what historians and other scholars have written regarding the themes they cover*. While it's *important to identify the extent to which videogames get the details of history correct*, it's even more essential to understand how these games depict the underlying processes of history. For history is much more than names, dates, and strings of events. It is the *interpretation* of the significance of events and the relationship of causes and effects that make history continue to be such a dynamic and controversial discipline of study.[9]

We often compare games to a stable, professional body of "knowledge," despite knowing that such claims of "objectivity" and infallibility are long behind historians. To a degree, then, this is rocky territory. Elsewhere, Wainwright stated that the book does not aim "solely to criticize videogames' presentation of history," acknowledging (as most surely would) that it is "far too easy to poke holes in creative works set in the past."[10] Similarly, as Kapell and Elliott note in their conclusion to *Playing with the Past*, no game is "factually correct" in sum. Indeed,

7. See, for example, Dawn Spring, "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship," *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015), 207–21, and Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

8. Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

9. A. Martin Wainwright, *Virtual History: How Videogames Portray the Past* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2 (emphasis added).

10. Ibid., 7.

it would be neither interesting nor productive for the editors to have organized *Playing with the Past* around instances of pointing out where game content was merely correct/incorrect (358). As the editors wrote in their introduction, "it is less interesting to note where and whether a given product *deviates* from the historical record" than it is to explore "for *what reason it does so* and what effect this might have" (8); the latter is a more nuanced approach that enables us to account for contexts of development and reception, among other things. Yet many approaches to historical games cannot get away from implicit value judgments about "how well" the past is portrayed, *vis-à-vis* scholarly knowledge formations, even while acknowledging that professionally written history depends on the historian's interpretation and narrative (beyond certain basic, undeniable facts, of course).

Other prominent writers, such as Chapman, including in his chapter for *Playing with the Past*, have proposed alternate ways to approach this by focusing on the form of games rather than on their content—that is, focusing on the *way* they make meaning as a mode of historical representation rather than on the substance of their argument alone, as a historian might read it (61–73). Chapman developed this argument into an influential analytical framework in *Digital Games as History*, noting that the process of making historical games—the research, interpretation, and assembly of "facts" into an argument, just in a different form—had inherent similarities to the process of more traditional historians.[11] Chapman's work, and much work published within and since *Playing with the Past*, is thus situated within the space opened up by countless historians who have grappled with public history (for instance, Alun Munslow, Robert A. Rosenstone, and Hayden White) and have sought to widen accepted understandings of what "history" is, the acceptable forms it might take, and how we might approach and evaluate them differently (8).

Still, it is difficult to know, in a basic sense, where else we might start when analyzing the core arguments made by a game's representation of the past: What might we compare it to, if not to what historians have argued by more traditional means? Indeed, some historians are now creating games to make historical arguments from their own research and are engaging meaningfully with the past in the present.[12] But if written-in-books, "capital H" history must always remain the standard by which all representations are judged, then will new forms of digital history always be assumed subordinate and subservient to traditional modes of writing about the past?

This positioning by scholars is important because underlying many of these notions of where games sit in relation to "scholarly knowledge" are central questions, identified by Elliott and Kapell, about whether games can, should, or need to "teach history" (10). Many historians—in *Playing with the Past* and elsewhere—have remarked on this point when discussing games because it has become patently obvious that students of history *are* learning things about the

11. Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

12. For a recently published overview, see Julien A. Bazile, "An 'Alternative to the Pen'? Perspectives for the Design of Historiographical Videogames," *Games and Culture* 17, no. 6 (2022), 855–70.

past from historical games (4, 216), regardless of whether we like it and whether those lessons approximate what historians have written.[13]

But this brings us to another fundamental point: mainstream games are made, first and foremost, to be *games*. Many are quick to defend or belittle them, often with equal-though-opposing enthusiasm, because game designers' priority will usually be to design an experience that is fun and enjoyable to play (and that makes money) (207). To do so, designers often deliberately include elements that historians would decry as "inaccurate" (8–9, 108). Their dismissals as "just entertainment" or "not serious" as a result of decisions made to make a "good game" (rather than "proper" history) echo similar attitudes toward historical films (that is, before historians generally conceded that they are also worth paying attention to).[14] This does not mean that even mainstream games can't be used by educators to help their students learn things about the past or even about how history is written, as many have argued.[15] But it creates another tension point that we see in the literature.

In one early chapter of *Playing with the Past*, Rolfe Daus Peterson, Andrew Justin Miller, and Sean Joseph Fedorko argue that, "while commercial history video games cannot function as a medium for true historical representation, they are effective at teaching invaluable tools for acquiring and producing historical knowledge" (35). In their estimation, certain games (here, the *Call of Duty* franchise) cannot meaningfully simulate or represent the past; they are faulty because they "do not model real world processes or real subjective experiences." The demands of competitive, combat-focused gameplay do not represent "options, actions, and motivations" of actual soldiers in the actual conflicts they model. That is, there's too much fiction (arguably, too much *game*) in the game's history, and the history itself is merely window dressing: "We do not claim that all video games are historically instructive simulations merely because they are historically contextualized" (41). The authors posit that games might never be "genuine" or "proper vehicle[s] for historical representation" while stipulating what must be done in order for them to fulfill such a role—namely, game designers must abide by the same standards historians would (37). Yet although player interaction with simulation games (and the messy possibilities for counterfactuals they allow) might spark players' interest and teach something about causality, the implicit judgment is that it dilutes the worthiness, scholarliness, and, implicitly, value of a game as a representation of the past (37–38).

Not all historians who study games subscribe to this view, and some are more willing to be playful and evaluate the worth of *all* games that engage with history regardless of the manner in which they do so. Moreover, despite their assumed entertainment-first remit, game developers themselves do not

13. See also Sian M. Beavers, "The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games" (PhD diss., The Open University, 2020), https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.0001111f.

14. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2. Such decisions made by game developers have also been explored in more detail in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

15. See, for example, McCall, *Gaming the Past* and *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games: Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact*, ed. Robert Houghton (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).

always entirely eschew the notion that they are responsible for teaching players something about the past through their games. Some marketing materials occupy a deliberately "pedagogical tone," as Andrew Wackerfuss observes (238), and as I have elsewhere explored in work on Rockstar Games.[16] Some developers use various forms of paratextual materials to stake a claim for their "educational ambition," as Clemens Reisner explores (255). We need only look at the rise in prominence of such franchises as *Assassin's Creed* and its *Discovery Tour* mode, which is deliberately positioned as an educational experience with official curriculum guides currently under development in partnership with McGill University.[17] Alongside smaller-scale (but no less valuable) projects such as Historiated Games' *Blackhaven* or Charles Games' *Attentat 1942*, which are merely two examples, these are games made in collaboration with historians and with a level of criticality about what it is they want to communicate about the past and how they want to do so. Player communities, particularly "modders," also espouse their ambition to "educate" other players by introducing important historical aspects into games, aspects that they feel developers have left out (2–7).

Questions about what historical games are (or could be) teaching players are of course important to ask. But in the years since *Playing with the Past* was published, these questions have at times been pushed in a direction that has resulted in overly simplistic analyses. And in many of these cases, we can also identify a major problem that is at the heart of historical game studies and that is epitomized in the use of certain oft-repeated, descriptive terms—most notably, "accuracy" and "authenticity." At face value, it may seem relatively unproblematic to say we understand these terms' usage in different contexts—that we just "know it when we see it." Many works, such as those noted above, occupy the position (explicitly or not) that history produced by a historian, and a game's likeness to it, is what underpins the judgment for or against a game being "historically accurate." But what then of "historical authenticity," a term with an even more problematic and hazy application when it comes to historical games? When coupled with questions about what games say, or teach, about the past, the uncritical use of such terms has rendered them almost entirely without meaning. Given how evidently important they are to players, developers, and scholars, this is a problem.

A recently published article exploring player perceptions of "accuracy" and "authenticity" in games (as problematic, often-interchangeable terms) claimed that "there have been few explicit examinations of historical authenticity in video games."[18] This is a fair point to make insofar as few works have set out with the goal to define the term. But there's no denying that it has been very liberally employed in the literature. Simply flicking through the pages of *Playing with the Past*, one can find explicit or more subtle discussions of these notions in almost every chapter, and when the terms themselves are not used, they are often

16. Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).

17. See "All Discovery Tour Curriculum Guides," Ubisoft, accessed 21 June 2022, https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed/discovery-tour/curriculum-guide.

18. Jacqueline Burgess and Christian Jones, "Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity in Video Games," *Games and Culture* 17, no. 5 (2022), 820.

otherwise substituted with other troublesome terms, such as "realism," which also eludes consensus. They haunt most works published in the field, including very recently published essay collections.[19]

Despite *Playing with the Past*'s nuanced engagement with a variety of games, what we find in this book are numerous uses of the terms "historical authenticity" and "historical accuracy" that seek to offer value judgments on a game's representation of and engagement with the past. The applications of "authenticity" and "accuracy" in *Playing with the Past* are far-ranging, but these terms are often heavily dependent on each other in each author's argument. Remarking on player perceptions, Gareth Crabtree notes that players often exhibit "an obsessive desire for the authentic," leading those who choose to "mod" games to take great pains to alter them to fit their own view of what this constitutes (207). In the case of war games such as the *Battlefield* franchise, he argues that, for modders, the standard for attempting to create a heightened sense of "authenticity . . . is [often] defined by the incorporation of a larger portfolio of weapons and the inclusion of more technical details" (208), and by doing so "accurately," as well as by drawing attention to lesser-known conflicts (206–8). Such player demands or expectations for what Wackerfuss terms "accuracy-based authenticity" are also explored in his survey of early World War I games, especially air combat simulators (238). Reisner similarly notes that, although understandings of authenticity shift and change depending on culture, context, and period, the term "authenticity" is often a "benchmark" for players, one that is "measured by specialists and laymen alike, by the degree of historical accuracy they achieve" (249). In all of these cases, it seems difficult to satisfactorily, critically understand "authenticity"—especially what it means to wildly different groups of people—by defining it with the use of "accuracy," because they often refer to the same things. Doing so creates something of a tautology, because neither term is sufficiently defined and contextualized. Indeed, recent studies of player experience found that users too often confuse these terms and value them differently,[20] making it more difficult to argue such things with certainty.

Complicating matters further, some alternate history games are deliberately, potently *inaccurate*, but this does not necessarily jeopardize their "authenticity." That is, some games "use their inaccuracies in order to work with, not against, the prevailing historical memory of [a period or event], and thus secure a kind of authenticity" (243). Wackerfuss uses the example of games that seek to capture a spirit of horror and darkness of World War I by employing more fantastical, "supernatural or satirical elements," favoring "accuracy of narrative" over "accuracy of detail" (242). This argument can, of course, also be extended to other more fantastical historical games, such as *Fallout* (explored in *Playing with the Past*),

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19. For only a few examples of recent Anglophone scholarship, see *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, ed. Alexander von Lünen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2020); *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, ed. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), which is wholly dedicated to notions of "authenticity" in historical games; and *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games*, ed. Jane Draycott (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).

20. Burgess and Jones, "Exploring Player Understandings."

as well as other popular franchises, such as *Wolfenstein*.[21] But it adds another level of complexity to the varying uses of these terms, their flexibility, and their malleability, rendering even the term "accuracy" essentially meaningless.

Moreover, the use of these terms often involves certain assumptions about the kind of experience and awareness of a historical topic that the player might already have. Reisner's chapter on *Call of Duty: Black Ops* talks in detail about the construction of an "authentic" game space and series of scenarios that presumes a very specific kind of player will believe this space is "authentic" because of that player's own very specific frame of reference (250–54). But what of the player who has no contextual knowledge of what the Cold War "looked like," consisted of, or represented? How would such a player interpret or judge what was on offer in the game and its own negotiation of the "reality" and "truth" of the Cold War? These games exhibit, at best, a Western (or, perhaps more correctly, an American) conception of these (global) conflicts, but little is done to place this front and center in assessments of their "authenticity" or "accuracy."

Thus, the sometimes overlooked potential political and ideological ramifications of the use of these terms,[22] and the way they crucially underpin understandings of historical memory in the present, hint at a wider problem that lies at the heart of historical game studies and needs to be addressed. This is especially true when such terms underlie questions about how colonialism and colonization should be represented in games, if they should be represented at all (as Mir and Owens discuss in their chapter [102]), or how the histories of long Othered peoples and places are dealt with by Western game makers (as, for example, Holden-ried [with Trépanier] and Bembeneck discuss in their chapters). How do we begin to answer any of these above questions about the meaning, potential value, role, and status of these cultural texts, and especially how they deal with complex and traumatic histories, if we ourselves are so consistently imprecise (and, at times, far too superficial) with the terms we use and when and where we use them?

My aim here is not simply to point a finger at this book (and what it ultimately represents as a foundational contribution to the field) and make blanket accusations about a lack of critical engagement with these terms. Rather, I make this point to underline their complexity and difficulty and to acknowledge that, a decade later, historical game studies is still grappling with their usage. Even very recent evaluations by historians continue to be imprecise. A recent issue of the *American Historical Review* published a series of commentaries by historians on various *Assassin's Creed* titles that have a relationship with early American history. Here, too, we find some troublesome uses of the terms "accuracy" and "authenticity." When characterizing *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s representation of the Caribbean in the early 1700s, one author wrote:

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21. Adam Chapman, "Playing the Historical Fantastic: Zombies, Mecha-Nazis and Making Meaning about the Past through Metaphor," in *War Games: Memory, Militarism and the Subject of Play*, ed. Philip Hammond and Holger Pötzsch (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 91–110.

22. See also Adrienne Shaw, "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in *Assassin's Creed III*," *Loading . . .* 9, no. 14 (2015), 4–24.

There is a degree of *historical authenticity* baked into these people and places. Príncipe is, in fact, a small island located off the western coast of Africa that the Portuguese actually did colonize. And gamers do get some solid information on the relationship between slavery and sugar production in the Caribbean. . . . Having said this, the game *isn't very historically accurate*. Geography is condensed for the sake of convenience. It only takes minutes to sail around the Caribbean in *Black Flag*. English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish languages have all been modernized to appease consumer sensibilities.[23]

There are notable critiques made in this review about how the game dilutes the history of pirates and piracy, including by the creative decision to center a white British protagonist. But criticizing Ubisoft for making decisions about language for the sake of (contemporary, Western) audience accessibility seems unproductive. Likewise, would it ever be possible, or even *desirable*, to make a game in which it took an "accurate" amount of time to sail around the Caribbean by boat? Surely, it would be the biggest game ever made, a technological marvel—and it would likely be boring to all but a narrow niche of players. Such critiques demonstrate that, in some cases where those writing are professional historians first, games are being judged by utterly impossible standards and in ways that fundamentally misunderstand the constraints under which this particular form of history operates.

It's not that there should be a singular, unified approach to applying such terms; their mutability makes this both inappropriate and impossible. As ever, there are no straightforward solutions or answers here: games themselves are not singular, nor is history, and there is no such thing as a stable, static definition of "authenticity," though there is at least some more consensus around what "historical accuracy" constitutes in its most basic form. But even then, if we appreciate that even "capital H" history is always necessarily subjective and interpretive, brandishing "accuracy" as a descriptor requires us to ask "*whose* accuracy, accuracy to *which version* of events, and *who gets to decide* what kind of accuracy that might be."[24] This often involves asking more subtle questions about power and authority, and about how they are almost always being performed and/or negotiated.

This brings us full circle to the question about the relationship between "History" and history games, and the latter's responsibility and relationship to the former. As Felix Zimmermann has summarized, "authentic" (as a term) "can still refer to an object which has been approved as correct or valid by a person of authority," as in the case of historical objects or artifacts.[25] Pertinently, the term "is still to this day linked to questions of authority and power and therefore raises the question of who is in a position to declare something as authentic."[26] Players and developers use different means through which to declare a game "authentic" or "inauthentic." Historians use these terms in other ways altogether.

    23. Christopher P. Magra, review of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Montreal: Ubisoft, 2013), *American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (2021), 217 (emphasis added).
    24. Andrew B. R. Elliott and Mike Horswell, "Crusading Icons: Medievalism and Authenticity in Historical Digital Games," in Lorber and Zimmermann, *History in Games*, 143.
    25. Felix Zimmermann, "Introduction: Approaching the Authenticities of Late Modernity," in Lorber and Zimmermann, *History in Games*, 10.
    26. Ibid.

We might therefore say that purely academic assessments can only take us so far, especially when historians judge these qualities through the prism of their own expert knowledge and standards. Perhaps more productive is the work undertaken to study what players and developers *perceive* as authentic and/or accurate about the games they play and create.

Might it be possible to develop a critical theory of "authenticity" as it relates to historical games? Theoretical engagements in these areas, and with the term "historical authenticity," have since been teased out within some work in the field,[27] but they began in *Playing with the Past*. There are particular chapters that stand out in terms of their engagement with the complexities of these terms and that paved the way for new directions. Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger's chapter on "selective authenticity," the way a "Brand WW2" manifests in games, and the design conventions or tropes developers rely on has been frequently engaged with and cited by scholars (153–68). Tom Apperley's chapter on modding communities and "the counterfactual imagination," Crabtree's chapter on reenactment practices, and Mir and Owens's chapter on *Sid Meier's Colonization* are distinct from other chapters in terms of their direct engagement with player practices and their digital afterlives. Such chapters and approaches have since been particularly important for studying how players actually interact with, react to, and sometimes challenge the historical arguments games (and their developers) make, highlighting the seriousness with which some communities view their role as "player-historian," a term coined elsewhere by Chapman.[28] These approaches demonstrate the need to engage with material outside of game content and to begin decentering the interpretations and expertise of historians, thus recognizing that they are not the only players here.

In their conclusion, Kapell and Elliott also explain their distinction between "accuracy" and "authenticity." In doing so, they engage with the work of Richard J. Evans and his own distinctions between what history "is" and "is for" in the present. Paraphrasing Evans,[29] they claim:

Whatever the use of history might be, it can only be useful if the facts and events organized by the historian can be widely accepted as "true." Leaving aside the philosophical issue of what "true" might mean, at the very least the "facts" used by a historian must be *perceived* by the reader of a work of history to be "correct," which is what leads us to separate *accuracy* from *authenticity* in the current volume. (358)

These questions of perception and use pivot the onus of our considerations of games in such a way that called for a wider engagement with the practices of players and developers. In this way, too, *Playing with the Past* anticipated future developments in games industry studies and player-focused studies within both historical game studies[30] and game studies more widely. They noted explicitly that,

27. For one overview, see ibid.

28. Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

29. Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1999), 222–23.

30. See, for example, Tara Jane Copplestone, "But That's Not Accurate: The Differing Perceptions of Accuracy in Cultural-Heritage Videogames between Creators, Consumers and Critics," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017), 415–38; Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra, "'Honestly, I Would Stick with the

although (some) professional historians "have long policed access to the past and its interpretation by virtue of their perceived professional status," the agency that games and their developers provide players has, for decades, been radically destabilizing such gatekeeping under historians' very noses (365). It is thus worth continuing to decenter the kind of knowledge and representations valued and deemed acceptable by historians in our engagements with digital histories of all kinds.

We should be careful not to unconditionally extol games as a more wholesale "democratic" way of accessing and relating to the past, especially given the existing and serious concerns about the toxicity that is so present in development and player cultures as well as about the marginalization of whole groups of people (namely, women and people of color), which historians have taken steps to discuss meaningfully in their works. There has been a (very welcome) increase in works that consider historical games' engagements with race, colonialism, and gender, among other areas, all of which add new levels of complexity to questions about "authenticity," design, and response. Moreover, "agency" (as a buzzword) is often thrown around as much as "authenticity" is; this is done without consideration of the fact that developers are (the new) gatekeepers of historical knowledge and how it is incorporated into games played by millions of people.

Historical game studies is still a young discipline, but it proliferates each year. *Playing with the Past* will (and should) continue to be considered a foundational text, a primer for those new to the field and looking to understand its varieties and complexities. Yet to continue building on the critical work of *Playing with the Past*, and the vital works published since, historians must always engage with notions of "authenticity" and "agency" critically, and they must understand that these terms are more than mere labels conferred by historians based on their own subjectivity and expertise. This is something that requires further play.

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Books': Young Adults' Ideas about a Videogame as a Source of Historical Knowledge," *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016), http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/oneilfeenstra; Eve Stirling and Jamie Wood, "'Actual History Doesn't Take Place': Digital Gaming, Accuracy and Authenticity," *Game Studies* 21, no. 1 (2021), http://gamestudies.org/2101/articles/stirling_wood; Burgess and Jones, "Exploring Player Understandings"; and Ylva Grufstedt, *Shaping the Past: Counterfactual History and Game Design Practice in Digital Strategy Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).