WAYS OF APPROACHING THE PAST IN DIGITAL GAMES IN THE DISCOURSE OF PUBLIC HISTORY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Despite their immense popularity, digital games remain understudied in the academic environment in terms of the way they represent the past. This thesis uses the term "digital games" to encompass all forms of games that employ digital visual representation, such as video games, computer games, mobile games, etc., and argues that digital games set in the historical past provide a qualitatively distinct way of interaction with history not readily available in other forms of media (text, theatre, cinema, music, art, etc.)

Despite the growing body of academic research into the relationship between the historical past and digital games, the modern academic environment still remains largely dismissive of such games based on the assumption that academic historical discourse is the only source of infallible knowledge about the past. This belief in the ability to extract pure knowledge about the past has been substantially undermined in the post-modern era of historiography, while the research into other forms of media has proven prolific in examining widespread concerns and ideologies of their era.

Digital games can be divided into two groups by the way they simulate the historical environment: the so-called "realist" and "conceptual" simulation-style games. Realist simulation games rely on meticulous audio-visual reproduction of the historical context in order to appear authentic and thus are economically constrained in the scale of the environment they can recreate. Conceptual simulation-style games are less bound by the considerations of expensive digital assets, and so can more easily engage with complex and abstract notions. A global strategy game is better positioned to mediate early-modern Europe's demographic processes and international trade than a role-playing game that follows a limited group of characters and is set in the same era.

While games of the realistic simulation style focus on the perception level of a historical agent (e.g., showing the medieval era through the eyes of a medieval noble), conceptual simulation games operate with large-scale processes and abstract notions traditionally associated with a diegetic level of a historian. Such games may enable players to construct complex arguments and causal relationships about the past and even encourage them to do so in the process of adapting to the game rules, overcoming gameplay challenges, and achieving victory conditions. In the sphere of game research, this process of mediating a message via the game rules or strategies has received the name of "procedural rhetoric."

This being said, the way digital games reproduce the past is heavily influenced by an attempt of delivering positive ludic, narrative, or/and aesthetic experience to their audiences, not to mention the commercial implications behind the creative process of their production, all of which factor in the distortions of the resulting image of the past.