Approximately history: Developer perspectives on counterfactual history in digital strategy games

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Keywords

Counterfactual history; strategy games; historical culture; popular history; game design.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital strategy games on historical topics are often made to illustrate the past in dynamic ways that highlight causality, change and continuity in the past. This is done, for instance, by allowing the player to engage with counterfactual scenarios, i.e. depictions of alternative pasts in which events play out differently from historical actuality. Historians associate counterfactual history with the somewhat controversial method through which attempts have been made to empirically discuss the outcomes of paths-not-taken (Tetlock, Lebow & Parker 2006; Ferguson 1997).

The present study and paper builds on the notion of counterfactual history as a use of history – i.e. the cultural positioning and employment of the past in the present (Aronson 2004, 17–19). For example, future fictions based on counterfactual outcomes of the Second World War, are so frequent and popular compared to other counterfactuals because they reflect on the overwhelming popular interest in the war itself (Tucker 2002, cited in Evans 2013, 66). As such, the design and implementation of counterfactual scenarios may have different functions depending on intent and context. Studying them and their design can lead to important findings on game design frameworks, as well as the framing of the past in popular history.

Recent work on game design practice has identified specific values and ontologies that contextualise game-making, for example timeliness and opportunism (Kultima 2018, 20–21), as well as shifts in design paradigms over time (Wilson & Sicart 2010, 2). From this perspective, the frameworks of game design practices, and the facilitation of history as a topic for strategy games, become key aspects to explaining how the design of counterfactual history relates to historical culture. Furthermore, an approach focused on design practice also highlights the mechanics of popular uses of history, and what contexts influence game developer decision-making and framing of the past in specific genres.

Accordingly, this paper will discuss the results of a study that explores this interplay of counterfactual history and game design practice based on a case study of two games made by Paradox Development Studio: *Europa Universalis IV* (2013; henceforth *EU4*)

and *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016; henceforth *HoI4*). Both games make complex arguments about the past by way of design; *EU4* by letting the player navigate the Early Modern world, and *HoI4* by illustrating Second World War scenarios that allow the player to consider and reconsider the politics, power balances, and mechanics of global war. Both games depict history and counterfactual scenarios, but they do so in different ways, which seems to depend on each game's design tradition and legacy, genre convention, historical cultural values, and player communication (Apperley 2018; Loban 2017).

The study builds on two materials: 1) Qualitative interviews with game developers and associated beta testers at Paradox Development Studio in Stockholm, Sweden. The game developers are employed at Paradox Development Studio in various creative and technical roles related to the games. The beta testers are players and fans of the games who contribute to game development, for example through content sourcing and testing, on a voluntary basis. 2) A game analysis and technical reading of the digital strategy games *EU4* and *HoI4* to highlight how developer statements relate to artefact design. The technical reading was done using the games' files – for example scripted code and localisation files (Sample, 2013; Yang 2017) – and analysed through a framework based on counterfactual history, illustrated as different types: wishful thinking, possible worlds and future fiction (Evans 2013). The categories are distinguished by their focus and intentionality, i.e. what historical arguments the games make about for example causality, continuity, and contingency, in designed counterfactual scenarios.

The results identify game industry specific frameworks that influence how developers navigate their understanding of the past, and historical culture, for the benefit of designing the games. These frameworks include, for example, practices related to the sourcing and omission of content, as well as the role of beta testers, whose efforts and motivations play a significant part in the games' design and content. Furthermore, design goals such as monetization strategies and replayability appear to, in part, frame how synergies between mechanics and counterfactual outcomes are designed. The findings also discuss how play-related values such as replayability, and content-related values such as historical verisimilitude, are balanced and negotiated.

The analysis of counterfactual scenarios suggests that while developers carefully underline the importance of unpredictability to facilitate challenging gameplay, counterfactual scenarios require historical reference to work. The three types discussed in this paper (again: wishful thinking, possible worlds, and future fictions) all rely on understandings of invoked pasts and points of divergence, but in different manners. Wishful-thinking scenarios are focused on reconstituting the in-game past in the in-game present, possible worlds on re-imagining in-game outcomes, and future fictions are focused on the repercussions and aftermath of altered events.

It is also possible to discern ways in which historical culture imposes itself on the design of counterfactual scenarios in both *EU4* and *HoI4*, mainly in the implementation of goal-setting and emergent stories. Consequently, demonstrable differences in counterfactual design between the games appear related to historical period and themes depicted. The results also show how genre legacy and player expectations frame the design of counterfactual history and the use of history based on the interplay of historical verisimilitude and challenging gameplay.

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