

Game as history: How does *Pentiment* recreate a vivid sixteenth-century central European everyday life?

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how *Pentiment* employs research achievements in microhistory and game design to create an authentic portrayal of daily life in sixteenth-century central Europe, providing players with an immersive experience. The analysis covers an examination of historical research and game theories relevant to the game, highlighting three key aspects through which *Pentiment* effectively portrays the complexities of individuals' lives: the nuanced dialogues and fonts assigned to characters, the diverse cuisine options that reflect social status, and the depiction of unpredictable living conditions. In the context of this theory, the essay argues that historical games have the potential to evoke players' emotional responses. Moreover, this study aims to propose a design framework for the worldwide DiGRA readership. This framework promotes the utilisation of microhistory to enhance historical game design and research.

Keywords

Pentiment, everyday life, historical game, sixteenth-century, microhistory

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, as video game designers and academics intersect in increasing quantities (Chapman, 2016), games could become a medium to turn printed historical knowledge into vivid images. For example, the game *Pentiment* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2022) recreated sixteenth-century central European everyday life. Inspired by the historical murder mystery *The Name of the Rose* (Eco, 2004), the developers of the game successfully created a vibrant atmosphere in the small Bavarian town of Tassing. In the article of an IGN reviewer, *Pentiment* 'tangled me up in the complexities of its gorgeously-realised world and made me want to learn all I could about its people and its past.' (Hafer, 2022). Furthermore, the development team undertook comprehensive research to ensure the historical authenticity of the background and its director Josh Sawyer thoughtfully curated a recommended reading list for players to gain a more profound understanding of the game's historical context (Nelson, 2022). Their effort resulted in a genuine historical atmosphere, as depicted in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: This screenshot of *Pentiment* represents a delicate sixteenth-century European art style and the developers' careful research towards the historical era.

To help people better understand how this game could have outstanding emotional impacts on players, the depiction of everyday life in *Pentiment* could be a suitable perspective for analysis. This article would choose the lens of everyday life as a research viewpoint, aiming to demonstrate how *Pentiment* represents authentic sixteenth-century central European everyday life as a historical game. It will draw upon an interdisciplinary approach, reference both materials and theories from microhistory and game studies and compose a comprehensive literature review for both fields. Subsequently, this article will endeavour to present a compelling case study, with a specific focus on how the protagonist of *Pentiment* Andreas encounters and interacts with Tassing's locals during Act II of the game. Furthermore, this article will advance the argument that historical games possess the capacity as profound vehicles for historical narratives, similar to traditional academic publications, thus expanding the scope of historical works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that *Pentiment* is a historical game rooted in examining sixteenth-century European microhistory, this essay will review both the game-related history and digital historical game study theories. Also, it will deal with *Pentiment*'s design and its developers' accomplishments.

Microhistory, a historiographical paradigm that came to prominence in the 1970s (Ginzburg et al., 1993), was unique compared to earlier historical methodologies. Different from nineteenth-century German historiography, which emphasised the representation of precise historical facts within grand narratives of political, military, or national history; or twentieth-century French Annales school historiography, which focused on the long-term historical progress influenced by environmental factors such as climate, geography, or specific social structures (Iggers, 2005), microhistory takes a diverse path. It concerned the humble individuals who could barely leave their written records in the past and attempted to describe their intricate and fluctuating everyday lives which were frequently marginalised in official historical documents (Ginzburg et al., 1993). It emerged as a response to the historiographical crisis of the 1970s. At that time, academic history was being criticised for its inability to explain

the dramatic global transformation, regardless of whether it was through grand narratives, long-term historical analyses, or other prevailing historical paradigms. Simultaneously, microhistory was influenced by anthropological research, which proposed that fieldwork based on small-scale communities could transcend its local context (Giovanni, 1992). Microhistorians endeavoured to construct a new historical analytical framework that avoids regarding written history as an objective, accurate and reliable primary source. Instead, they indicated that written history was inextricably linked with authors' ideological and social status bias. In response, they accessed formerly neglected sources including diaries of ordinary individuals, trial records, and village chronicles, in their effort to reconstruct the everyday life of a small unit. Therefore, microhistory revealed elaborate and broad insights within their geographically narrow research topic. As the famous microhistorian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote: 'It is the factual history of ordinary people... it is the breath of life...' (Le Roy Ladurie, 1980).

Prosperous publications appeared after the emergence of microhistory, many of which were related to sixteenth-century Europe. Carlo Ginzburg, the pioneer of Italian microhistory, utilised Catholic religious trial records to portray the popular culture thriving in sixteenth-century northern Italy through the horizon of a countryside miller, in which he also described how ordinary people responded to the dramatically changed village life (Ginzburg, 1992). As a continuation of Ginzburg's research interest and method, Natalie Zemon Davis referenced sixteenth-century Toulouse (a city located in southern France) official documents to reconstruct both the emotional relationships within contemporary illiterate peasants and their identity changes affected by persistent warfare and migration (Davis, 1984). Likewise, Le Roy Ladurie also directed his research interest to the French countryside and discussed the medieval Christian heresy and daily life of a small village (Le Roy Ladurie, 1980). In addition, he depicted the social conflicts during sixteenth-century France through the lens of a festival (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979).

Inspired by the predecessors in microhistory, scholars tended to apply this method to a wider range. Food became another aspect for scholars to discuss, and help people to understand the food supply as a social and mythological construct for peasants' attitudes towards hard and dangerous lives (Camporesi, 1989). Similarly, with the long tradition in German local history, marginalised members of German society during the aforementioned period also became important research topics. By tracing the journey of a rebellious German peasant, scholars unravelled a society full of miracles and religious visions with gradually intensified conflicts between noble rulers and common people that could be represented in front of readers (Wunderli, 1992). Also, the relationships between German local villagers and marginalised people during the sixteenth century are well studied from the perspective of racism and religionism (Eliav-Feldon, 2009). Furthermore, by studying the long-forgotten diaries of a dishonoured German executioner, researchers pointed out how this unfortunate man tried to prevent children from the stigma of his profession, underscoring a similar ideology about discipline and punishment between our ancestors and us (Harrington, 2013). All of those microhistory monographs served as a solid foundation for the development of *Pentiment*, featured in the recommended reading list curated by the director of the game, Josh Sawyer (Nelson, 2022).

Comparable to the emergence of microhistory, the twenty-first century witnessed a flourishing of novel theoretical frameworks within the interdisciplinary digital historical game studies. In contrast to most existing academic attitudes that treated

digital historical games as a product of informal and simplistic public history, game scholars argued that digital historical games could also be regarded as another important medium for simulating historical events and conveying educational experiences apart from historical academic publications (Šisler et al., 2022). The influence of these pioneering theories has manifested in the establishment of new academic courses and conferences tailored to the emerging game studies PhD students, with an increasing number of publications focused on historical games reflecting different eras or various genres (Chapman, 2016). There are even game study periodicals specifically on historical games, exemplifying the growing importance and specialisation within historical game studies (Kłosiński, 2022).

As the study of historical games has become progressively fruitful, game researchers have increasingly emphasised the significance of historical games as a professional form of historical representation and an academic approach to their study. Chapman eloquently argued that academics usually regard history as an institutional and systematic formal document rather than popular history, collective memories, or digital products. This historical approach traditionally overlooked visual images and oral history as part of the history. However, ‘history need not be done on the page’, and historical game developers also use similar methods as academic historians to weave the narrative texture and construct the historical explanation. Therefore those developers and their products should be regarded as contributors to the serious history (Chapman, 2016). Based on Chapman’s foundations, Šisler and his team proposed two methodologies for interpreting digital historical games. The first one is ‘inter-medial authenticity’, which describes the capacity of historical digital games to draw inspiration from diverse preexisting media to create a sense of real history for players. The second one is ‘procedural heritage’, which means those games could use narratives, rule systems and mechanics to offer players opportunities to acquire historical knowledge and engage with authentic historical sentiments (Šisler et al., 2022). This approach reaffirms historical games as vehicles for historical representation and educational engagement, which can be demonstrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Two related historical game study cases: *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* and *Train to Sachsenhausen* (Šisler et al., 2022).

Similar to the brave innovations of microhistory or digital historical game theories, the development of *Pentiment* represented a new attempt different from the traditions of Obsidian Entertainment. Previously, players were familiar with their fantasy action role-playing games such as *Neverwinter Nights*, *Pillars of Eternity* or *Fallout: New Vegas*. However, *Pentiment* was more like a historically based adventure interactive game. This is because Josh Sawyer, the director of Obsidian Entertainment, had been looking forward to making a historical game for a long time (Packwood, 2022). Like professional historians, before the development of the game, Josh Sawyer and his team undertook careful research on sixteenth-century Germany and its literature

world, where manuscripts, initial printed publications and oral popular beliefs together portrayed the minds of ordinary people. They also collaborated with historical professors and librarians to learn how to create an immersive experience for players to explore the fictional historical world (Alvis, 2022). Grounded in the historical materialism attitudes during their research procedure, the developers refine the game experience by providing abundant daily meal events based on food history research (Bedingfield, 2022), as well as nuanced depictions of how historical characters write or speak on account of contemporary printed or handwriting fonts (Alvis, 2022). These subtle differences reflect the diverse lifestyles at that time, and successfully embody the similarities between nowadays and the past, enabling players to connect emotionally with ordinary people in the game (Bedingfield, 2022). Therefore, through the lens of both microhistory and digital game studies, *Pentiment* could be regarded as a marvellous digital historical achievement and an interesting topic for this article to study.

METHODOLOGY

This essay will take advantage of the following case study to carefully discuss how *Pentiment* vividly designed sixteenth-century central European everyday life. This involves a detailed description of Andreas as he wanders around in Tassing during Act II, which utilises delicate and descriptive narration usually applied in microhistory to attempt to give readers a sense of immersion similar to the gameplay experience itself. All of the mentioned screenshots will come from the game itself.

Thereafter, given game study scholars proposed that history digital games should be regarded as the same importance as historical monographs, the essay will reference theories from both microhistory and game studies to discuss how the game constructs authentic feelings for players to explore the daily life of villagers in Tassing. Using the ‘procedural heritage’ concept raised by Šisler and his team, this section will state how *Pentiment* describes the dialogues and designs the dialogue fonts between Andreas and villagers in Tassing from multiple statuses; how the game depicts the daily diet of all sorts of non-player characters; and how developers portray the dangerous and violent living environment. Those three perspectives represent distinct analysing pathways for the discussion, which will be residents, food and living environment. Through the analysis, this article will prove how vivid and delicate *Pentiment* recreates daily life in a sixteenth-century German town, surpassing the traditional printed historical books in its capacity to engage players. It emphasises that the game’s potency lies not in the pursuit of an accurate restoration of historical facts but in its ability to evoke a sense of historical immersion, thereby facilitating a more evocative understanding of the past.

Both the case study and the discussion will be useful in constructing a framework to provide a reference for applying microhistory methodologies in historical game studies. Also, it will provide resources and inspiration for crafting games that resonate with players through the nuanced exploration of the human experience. Finally, this article will conclude all research results in the last component of the article.

CASE STUDY

At the beginning of Act II in *Pentiment*, after seven years, Andreas, an accomplished and famous artist, returned to his long-absent Tassing. The wearied traveller found the most prestigious inn in Tassing — ‘The Golden Hand’ to take a rest and cast off his

fatigue. With the dreamland unfolding before his eyes and the wheel of time flashing through Andreas's mind, a peaceful respite awaited him. he would be able to explore the village he had not visited for a long time. It was time to refresh his spirit before rediscovery the village he had left behind for so many years.

Once Andreas gently roused from sleep, he could explore the village in detail. Even facing both a cruel famine and the high taxation from Tassing's abbot, the unfortunate peasants in less favourable economic conditions still would welcome Andreas and invite him to share a humble meal. Andreas would have a chance to get acquainted with the countryside lifestyle where livestock lived in the same environment as their owners, and people following the beliefs intertwined with Christianity, folklore, and supernatural magic. Travels from town to town, even long distances tours were not unusual, and the return of travellers heralded a communal sharing of adventures and the wonders seen during their faraway journeys. The peasants' lives are represented in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Andreas saw peasants' humble meals.

As illustrated in Figure 8, Andreas would also visit the wealthier townspeople. possessing a wealth of knowledge and extensive connections with families of diverse ethnic backgrounds, such as Jewish-speaking families, and being more inclusive with the different customs compared to more strict friars. Their prosperity not only shielded them from the hardships of life but also enabled them to live a better life. For instance, printer Claus could welcome Andreas with abundant cheese and tasty vegetable porridge, and the miller Lenhardt was able to go hunting or prepare delicious sausage for our fortunate protagonist. The dining table of townspeople served as a vibrant stage for exchanging all kinds of gossip and rumours in Tassing, from family affairs, conflicts between peasants, townspeople and friars, or plots against the harsh abbot of Tassing. In the last circumstance, the very table that keeps people alive seems to be a breeding ground for life-threatening programmes.





Figure 4: The Interior views of the house of printer Claus (far left in the first image), the miller Lenhardt (the man in the last image) and their daily meals.

The most powerful and wealthy individual, abbot (the leader of a Christian monastery) Gernot would also invite Andreas to his dinner. As Tassing's senior clergy with the status of an aristocrat, Gernot would provide another perspective towards the struggles of the peasants and townfolk, which would attribute the miserable lives of ordinary people to themselves, rather than the harsh leadership of the abbot. As seen in Figure 5, in Gernot's splendid mansion and his banquet, Andreas would experience a lifestyle with privileges but with a cover of the Christian spirit of poverty and compassion.



Figure 5: Gernot's splendid mansion and his delicacies.

However, no matter good or bad, rich or poor, lucky or unlucky, everyone would receive a chance to celebrate the grand Christian festival in June: Saint John's Eve. As portrayed in Figure 6, people would prepare a magnificent bonfire in the centre square of the town, and request young people to wear monstrous masks to amuse the inhabitants. This cherished tradition, both a solemn Christian ceremony and an echo of ancient German paganism, held varying significance for each individual. Beyond the bustling square, 'The Golden Hand' tavern extended its warm embrace to all who sought friendship and celebration. Nevertheless, behind the scenery of harmony and happiness, there was an upcoming crisis. Figure 6 depicts the arrival of mercenaries notorious for their acts of looting and robbery in the village. These individuals cautioned Andreas to distance himself from the impending catastrophe that loomed in the future...



Figure 6: The bustle and hustle sceneries in Tassing during Saint John's Eve



Figure 7: Samuel Grau, a mercenary visiting Tassing, was trying to tell the upcoming danger to Andreas.

DISCUSSION

Thoughts Flying in the Spiritual World

Tassing, despite its modest size within the context of sixteenth-century Germany, served as a miniature reflecting the colourful and complex characteristics of that historical epoch. The thoughts and lifestyles inherent to various classes of inhabitants are exquisitely displayed through the procedure of the game. Therefore, this section will discuss the spiritual worlds of Tassing's inhabitants, specifically the thoughts and fonts for various statuses shown in their dialogues.

The spiritual world of Tassing's local people is mainly represented through their dialogues and related fonts, as seen in Figure 8. Through the protagonist Andreas' conversations with the residents of Tassing, the game reveals the residents' thoughts according to their educational backgrounds. The delicate design of the dialogues and fonts carefully represented residents' temptations and preferences, creating authentic feelings similar to the lavish and detailed narration of Ginzburg's masterpiece, which could just use different people's handwriting to determine their personalities (Ginzburg, 1992).



Figure 8: Developers of *Pentiment* designed five different stylised fonts for residents.

Peasant script was for the peasants or illiterate people, scribe script was for the aristocrats or townspeople, humanist script was for well-educated people, monastic script was for friars and nuns, and printer type was for printers/drunkers.

In the pursuit of delivering a seamless gaming experience, the developers of *Pentiment* made certain adjustments to historical fonts, balancing accuracy and readability, such as printer type or scribe type (Alvis, 2022). These alterations, however, were not solely driven by functional considerations; they also served to better represent the personalities of the characters. For example, each character's dialogues were accompanied by the rustling sound of a feather quill writing on paper, and every character acquired matched speech styles and font variations. As an illustration in the game, the prestigious abbot Gernot utilised a complex and elegant tone when communicating with Andreas, as shown in the monastic script. Nevertheless, several years ago, when confronted with the unsettling revelation of a patron's murder within the abbey and colleagues' suspicions cast upon his leadership, he was too overwhelmed by anger and fear to loudly curse other friars. As indicated in Figure 9, *Pentiment* introduced a visual effect that inks would dramatically spill from the quill onto the parchment within his text box, reflecting Gernot's furious temper at this moment.



Figure 9: Gernot's fury.

The connection between the spiritual world and the occupations of the residents in *Pentiment* is often intertwined, where individuals with a wealthy status enjoy greater opportunities for nurturing their intellectual pursuits. A prime example is illustrated through the printer Claus, his interest in knowledge acquisition was because of his well-off economic level and his engagement with printed books and movable types. Therefore, as seen in Figures 10 and 11, he would use his rigorous printed fonts to discuss with Andreas and sought Andreas' assistance to find a reliable and enjoyable book in the abbey's library to educate his younger daughter Magdalene.



Figure 10: Claus's dialogue style (Lacry, 2022).

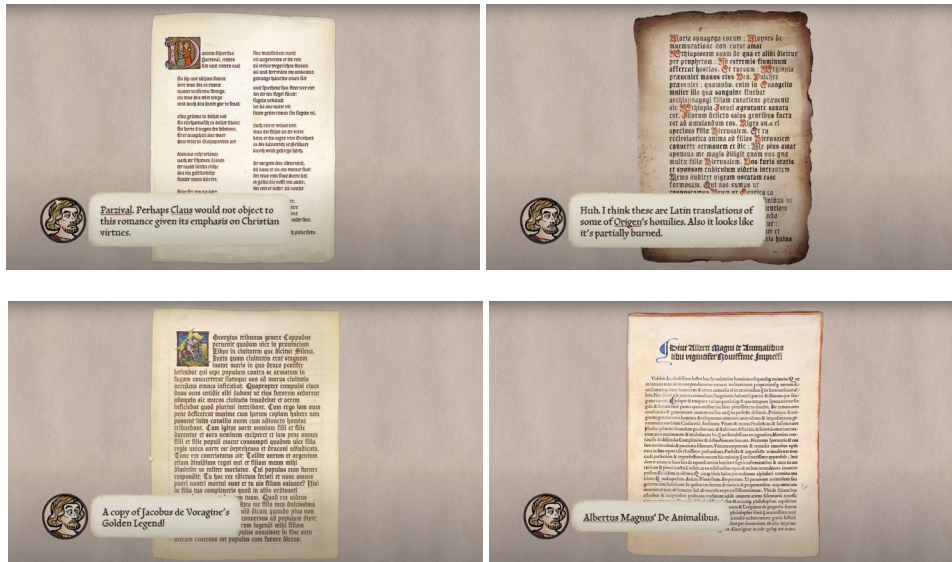


Figure 11: Andreas could choose one book from several options, which would be *Percival* (the story of a Knight of the Round Table), Latin translations of Origen's *homilies* (a commentary for the Bible from an early Christian scholar in the Roman Empire), *Golden Legend* (biography collection of Christian saints) and *De Animalibus* (treatise on living things by a Christian scholar).

However, the interest in knowledge of Tassing's residents could not be categorised solely on their occupations. One example of this complexity was Andreas' initial perception regarding Til the shepherd. At first glance, Til appeared to be a typical peasant with limited knowledge. However, unknown to Andreas, Til had cultivated an interest in reading the local chronicles and manuscripts nestled within the abbey's library since his youth and had successfully consumed half of the collection a long time ago. As depicted in Figure 16, this revelation led Andreas to recognise the profound underestimation of the talents among Tassing's seemingly ordinary inhabitants.



Figure 12: The dialogues between Andreas and Til the Shepherd.

Similarly, Otilia, an elderly and stubborn peasant in Tassing, might easily be dismissed as humble and illiterate. Nevertheless, in contrast, she emerged as a source of Tassing's ancient lore and history of the pre-Christian pagan period. She possessed a unique perspective on the community's customs, infusing them with insights drawn from pagan traditions. For example, when people celebrated Saint John's Eve (Figure 17), she would utilise pagan ideologies to portray the festival as a celebration of the ancient pagan goddess Frau Perchta, known as 'The Bright Lady'. Her interest towards the pagan traditions came from the ongoing dispute with Abbot Gernot over her property ownership, leading to her disgust towards Gernot and Christianity; and her dedication to preserving and honouring Tassing's long-standing traditions.



Figure 13: Andreas could have a chance to speak with Otilia during the festival, and she would recite the ancient hymns towards to goddess Perchta.

Social Status on the Dining Table

Prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europe was frequently afflicted by famine, a terrible circumstance for the poor people that transcended starving but literally 'starving to death'. This catastrophic state came from adverse meteorological

conditions and malfunctioning local food distribution systems (Camporesi, 1989). Adding to the woes of the sixteenth-century population, this era witnessed the most destructive phase of the Little Ice Age (c. 1400-1700), a climatic phenomenon characterised by heightened precipitation in Europe, culminating in poor harvests and devastating floods. Therefore, people were more likely to face starvation and illness (Harrington, 2013).

Unfortunately, when Andreas revisited Tassing in Act II of *Pentiment*, this town was suffering from both famine and oppressive taxation, meaning a difficult time for the humble peasants. This economic adversity manifested vividly on the dining tables of these distressed households, where food had transformed into a luxury for many. Figure 18 portrays an illustrative example when Andreas visited his longtime friend Clara's family, where the meal consisted of only seldom cheese, rye bread, and insufficient portions of fresh pottage to be shared among eight people. To deteriorate the situation, bread and cheese were reserved exclusively for Andreas and his apprentice, Casper, while Clara and her family, limited by financial constraints were that the bread and cheese were only for Andreas and his apprentice Casper, and Clara and her families could only possess a small amount of pottage, because they could not afford enough bread but still tried to maintain politeness to their old friend.



Figure 14: Andreas visited Clara (far left) and her family, who worked hard to earn a living. On the dining table, Andrea's apprentice Casper (in the second image) was shocked by the suffering of peasants.

However, *Pentiment* also highlights how individuals who managed to ascend to the middle class, with increased capital and economic stability, were markedly shielded from the threat of famine. This financial security afforded them to purchase enough food from the market, ensuring food supply for their families and the ability to extend hospitality to friends, transforming meals into moments of abundance and pleasure. As seen in Figure 19, the printer Claus could afford more expensive white bread, apple pies and mushroom pottage for both his Jewish friends and Andreas, and the amount of food was abundant enough to satisfy the appetites of all gathered. Another example was the prosperous Lenhardt, who was the only miller of Tassing and therefore his family could control power over food supplies, just as the protagonist of Ginzburg's publication, who was also a miller with considerable influence in his hometown (Ginzburg, 1992). Indeed, Lenhardt's profession as the miller granted him a distinct advantage in securing food resources, enabling him to extend generous hospitality to Andreas, which was delicious venison (from Lenhardt's hunting result), white bread, custard pies and good quality beers. In these instances, *Pentiment* underscores how socioeconomic differences resulted in distinct dining experiences during times of food scarcity.



Figure 15: Andreas could enjoy better meals in both Claus's home and Lenhardt's home, as both acquired a decent occupation.

Abbot Gernot, distinguished as the most affluent and influential figure in Tassing, welcomed Andreas to visit his mansion with the most lavish dishes. The culinary offerings showed the luxury of Gernot's life. For Andreas, this manifested as delectable dishes, including plum pudding, pheasant, and the renowned German gingerbread, lebkuchen. In contrast, Gernot enjoyed an even more extensive cuisine, featuring pancakes, stewed delicacies, and an assortment of baked foods. During their private meeting, Gernot expressed his frustration regarding the local peasants' complaints about the burdensome taxes, even as he remained aware of their struggles for survival amid the famine. As the suffering situation escalated to the point where the peasants could no longer sustain themselves and sought to rebel, Gernot, accompanied by friars and nuns, was compelled to relocate to the safety of the abbey. This relocation, though necessary for their security, meant leaving the lavish dining experiences. Nevertheless, even in the face of adversity, they still retained access to red wine, cheese, and rye bread, intended to preserve their strength. The great disparity witnessed at the dinner table was a footnote to the sharp social tensions of the time, when religious people, whose aim was to be compassionate, were able to enjoy sumptuous food; while the peasants struggled on the deathbed. This disheartening reality vividly exemplified how the clergy's strong privileges remained, even in the face of peasant uprisings aimed at challenging this glaring societal disparity. In the following Figure 20, readers can explore the lavish life of the clergy.





Figure 16: Through the diet, Andreas could see the luxurious lifestyle of Gernot and the clergy, even when they lacked a food supply.

Other two important meals need to be mentioned in this part, although both of them belong to Act I of *Pentiment*, which is not the essay focused on, the meal scenes are shown in Figure 17. During the first meal, Andreas will meet Adam “Smokey” Köhler, a local charcoal burner living in the woods next to Tassing; and Vácslav, a Romani traveller who lived with Smokey at that time. This scene delicately portrayed underlined discrimination towards humble workers or travellers in sixteenth-century Germany, because they were rejected to live in the town and were being treated with hostility. Additionally, in *Pentiment*, Vácslav’s attitude towards Christianity is different from the mainstream, which was accurately depicted according to contemporary history. However, the German authority was not concerned about the religious practice of the Romani people, which was different from the game (Eliav-Feldon, 2009).

In the second meal, Andreas could enjoy a meal with local ladies, children and an Ethiopian priest Sebhat. All people among Andreas treated Sebhat decently because he was a member of the Ethiopian church in Rome, which could be an honourable visitor in Tassing. Here we can see a difference towards outsiders in a society. Both Vácslav and Sebhat are outsiders from different ethnic groups in Tassing, but the way the locals treated them varied marvellously. From a meal in the woods and a meal in the church, *Pentiment* depicted a fine portrayal in which the locals treated outsiders of their society.



Figure 17: The two meals with outsiders. Both of the meals contained a vast amount of Christian theology discussion.

Lives as Unpredictable as the Weather

From previous discussions, readers could find Tassing as a modest German town facing natural calamities and human-made tribulations, all set against a background of profound social tensions. The living conditions for contemporary people were quite dangerous. Apart from famine, the plague would also easily take away the lives of both children and adults. For sixteenth-century Germans, only half of the newborn

babies managed to survive to the age of twelve, and for those fortunate enough to reach the age of fifty, their survival was because of escaping at least six brutal epidemics (Harrington, 2013). Similar to Tassing, a small European town suffering from plague, warfare and famine typically accommodated populations ranging from six thousand to twelve thousand, with a devastating plague outbreak often decimating half of the town's residents (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979). In *Pentiment*, when Andreas came back to Tassing in Act II, many of his dear friends had succumbed to the disease. As shown in Figure 18, Claus lost his wife Marie and his son Bertholt.



Figure 18: Claus shared his suffering about the loss of relatives to Andrea.

In addition to the danger of hunger and disease, continuous warfare was an additional threat to ordinary inhabitants. In their quest to expand dominions, the great princes within Germany tended to recruit the notorious mercenary corps and drive these powerful soldiers to fight the enemy. Although the mercenary troops (known as 'Landsknecht' in German, which means 'servant of the land') were established by Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor as a symbol of the imperial military hegemony with gorgeous uniforms, they gradually became outsiders of the social order similar to the Romani people (Morrall, 2002). They were treated as 'soulless people [who] have no respect for honour or justice [and practise] whoring, adultery, rape, gluttony, drunkenness... stealing, robbing, and murder' (Harrington, 2013), which could be found in Figure 19. In this figure, Andreas met a 'Landsknecht' called Samuel Grau, who came to Tassing for possible fortune and warned Andreas of the following dangers, which caused locals in Tassing afraid of him.

Moreover, relying on the power of princes, local landlords also raised their taxation to oppress inhabitants. In response to those oppressions, as seen in Figure 20, peasants formulated their codes of resistance. Since that time supernatural magic and local traditions have still been an important part of daily lives, peasants frequently invoked divine revelation to legitimise their quest for equity and justice in the face of tyranny (Wunderli, 1992). Therefore, in *Pentiment*, Andreas encountered not only mercenaries seeking opportunities for wealth through warfare but also peasants who were actively preparing for a rebellion.



Figure 20: Peasants' preparation for a rebellion: public speeches and printed pamphlets about their requirements for freedom and equality.

Those explosive conflicts finally burst out during the delighted and joyful festival of Saint John's Eve, transforming a day of happiness into a Shakespearean tragedy. The explosion could be regarded as a mixture of the traditional peasant revolts, the union of townspeople and humble peasants, the conflicts between harsh taxation and an ideology of capitalism freedom and equality (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979). In *Pentiment*, the tragic chain of events was set in motion when Otto, the leader of the peasants, was murdered at midnight during the festival. Both peasants and townspeople became furious and swiftly accused Abbot Gernot as the murderer of Otto because Gernot was outraged by Otto's challenge to his leadership, even though Andreas could provide testimony supporting Gernot's innocence. Despite this, the rebellious people remained in their belief that Gernot was the criminal and demanded revenge (Figure 21).

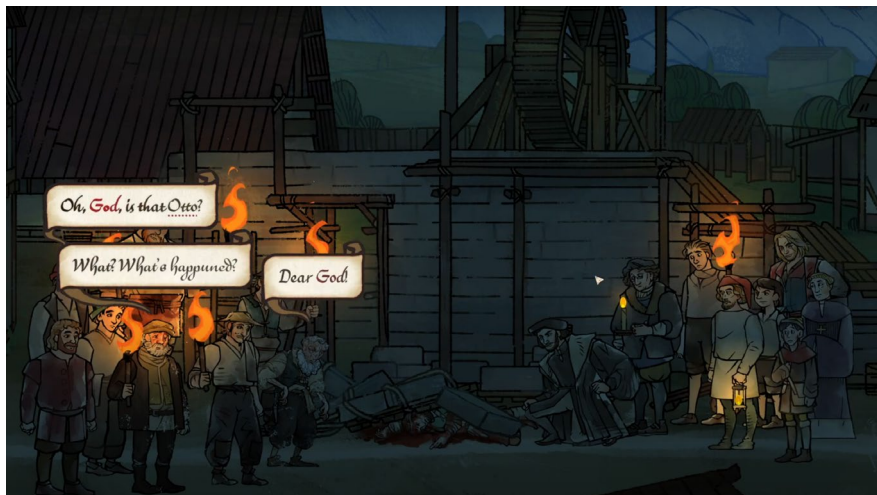


Figure 21: Otto's murder scene. Only in the final scenes of *Pentiment*, players could know Otto was murdered by someone else rather than Gernot.

Facing the escalating conflicts between local lords and peasants, the higher nobilities often resorted to forceful measures to maintain order and control (Harrington, 2013). In *Pentiment*, the peasants' rebellion was suppressed by the troops of the grand aristocracy of Bavaria. This strategic move was motivated by the nobles' recognition that peasants were challenging the authority and the importance of ensuring a peaceful environment for taxation. Furthermore, sixteenth-century Germany was suffering from a devastating peasant war that destroyed the order of most German princely states (Wunderli, 1992). In this larger context, nobles were more sensitive to the first signs of potential peasant resistance and exhibited a greater willingness to employ force to suppress such uprisings. In the game, this resulted in both Tassing

and the abbey being reduced to ashes in a devastating fire, and numerous villagers perished during the rebellion, reminding the brutal consequences that accompanied a miserable social environment and the clash between authority and the ordinary people (Figure 22).



Figure 22: The war has caused irreparable damage to Tassing. As the screenshot shows, the abbey was destroyed, and villagers were slaughtered by professional soldiers.

DESIGN-FRAMEWORK

This essay could provide an accessible research framework for developing subsequent video games with similar historical contexts.

Following determining the period setting of a historical game, developers can undertake comprehensive historical research and gather material around the relevant context, as illustrated by the development of *Pentiment*. Its developers sought help from professors in medieval manuscripts and several libraries to create an authentic feeling of the art style and storyline (Alvis, 2022). Also, developers could rely on the narrative styles of other mediums, such as historical novels (Nelson, 2022) and films (Chapman, 2016).

As an important part of electronic entertainment, historical digital games could also be regarded as a unique historical form. In this context, developers could be regarded as professional historians. Similar to academic historians who use printed publications to explore historical theories, developers could be considered as ‘developer-historians’, and even players could also be seen as ‘player-historians’ (Chapman, 2016) to highlight the importance of video games in historical fields. As Šisler and his team believed, games could be designed to facilitate players’ comprehension of past events and the decision-making processes of their ancestors (Šisler et al., 2022).

Besides the attitudes towards the relationship between games and history, developers could also treat the characters as vibrant individuals existing within a historical context rather than mere electronic data serving the game’s narrative. Given the capacity of games to serve as a medium for players to gain insights into the past and acquire knowledge applicable to their lives (Šisler et al., 2022), it is important to create a lively scenery for them to explore the virtual world as same as daily life. From

this perspective, developers could reference inspiration from the methodology of microhistory, which emphasises the materials closely tied to the everyday lives of ordinary people, and regard these individuals as friends who had their lives, relationships, emotions and desires (Le Roy Ladurie, 1980). Just like in *Pentiment*, this method could facilitate the creation of immersive gaming environments that enable players to understand that Tassing is not only the historical buildings but also those generations of people who grew up in their hometown and had complex relationships with each other.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed how the developers of *Pentiment* designed an immersive and authentic historical atmosphere for players to explore the vivid everyday life of inhabitants in Tassing. It referenced materials and theories from microhistory and game studies to create a first-class work. Also, it achieved the goal of inviting players to both learn from and critically engage with historical narratives, which was proposed by the designer-historians Šisler and his team (Šisler et al., 2022). From the analysis, the effects of how developers created a good historical simulation game are represented through three lenses. Firstly, the study elucidates the impact of nuanced dialogues and the judicious utilisation of diverse fonts within the game's narrative structure. Secondly, it scrutinises the differences within food for diverse statuses. Finally, it successfully recreated a dangerous and critical living environment for the characters.

This study also furnishes a compelling framework with related developments in digital historical games. It recommends that developers should diligently acquaint themselves with the historical epochs that serve as their chosen settings before designing the game. Moreover, developers should treat themselves as historians and the game as a historical form, and treat the characters as their friends or living beings to create people with genuine emotions. Therefore, historical games emerge not merely as avenues of entertainment, but as potent vehicles to explore a historical period. From this perspective, historical games offer an immersive adventure memorable narratives and foster an emotional attachment to historical events.

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