

Journeying Through Time: Navigating Experiences of Past- Play

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INTRODUCTION

This research project seeks to investigate the notion of past-play from a player-experience perspective. Rooted in an understanding of historical video games as “playful time machines”, the project aims to combine theoretical and methodological insights from the fields of historical game studies, sociolinguistics, discourse studies, performance studies, anthropology, and digital humanities to sufficiently account for the widely varied processes and practices that comprise and influence contemporary past-play. These insights will be employed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do players interact with elements related to the past—such as props, characters, and stories—during gameplay?
2. How does this interaction differ across different types of past play(ers)?
3. What are the direct effects of this interaction on players’ understanding, valuation, and emotions regarding the past?

SITUATING PAST-PLAY

I begin by contextualizing past-play within the fields of historical game studies, archaeogaming, and heritage studies. Various formulations of past-play are discussed, from the view of video games as providers of historical knowledge (Copplestone 2016), to the notion of video games as a “crucial form of digital heritage” (Politopoulos & Mol 2021), to the idea that in “[demanding] engagement with their mechanics to progress”, video games oblige players to “conduct a close reading of the argument posited by a game’s creators” (Houghton 2018, 28-29).

Building on this, I further ground and situate past-play(er) experience within discussions of dominant and non-dominant histories, agentive and counterfactual play, and discursive authenticity in relation to representation and accuracy. Work in these domains has established the sociocultural impact of these games, as well as how

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said impact influences play; players and developers alike prioritize *expected* historical narratives, leading to an overrepresentation of dominant--white, Western, cishetero--histories, as well as a societal aversion to attempts to “diversify” games of this nature in ways that are *perceived* as inaccurate (Copplestone 2016; Kempshall 2019). This exploration also necessarily delves into interrogations of colonial play, queer gaming, and discussion of what games constitute the historical games canon (Mukherjee 2018; Pavlounis 2016; Ruberg & Shaw 2017).

As *interaction* is the central focus of this project, I pay particular attention to approaches that frame the player-game relation as a mutable, discursively shaped linkage, namely Apperley, looking at individual instantiations of play as “particular local [enactments] of the global” and Chapman, establishing that players, unlike audiences, “have access to *production* in the story space” (2011, 28; 2016, 33). Conceiving of past-play as interaction with, rather than exposure to, various possible pasts, allows for the conceptualization of past-play as a form of *historying* (Chapman 2016; Houghton 2018). This additionally moves away from the framing of historical video games as static objects, from which players can only glean limited historical information; instead, past-play is understood as a form of *situated gaming*. This view conceives of paratexts, gaming interfaces, and play practices such as modding as integral to the past-play experience, rather than as peripheral processes and materials. From here, questions of affective self-involvement, embodied play, immersion, and identification begin to emerge, specifically with regard to how these processes drive player interaction with historical elements during play.

To examine the ways in which various elements of gameplay contribute to and complicate player interaction with and through the past, I present a *props-based affordance framework* for the understanding of player interaction with game-objects, rooted in performance and theater studies, existing game studies work on perceptual discrepancies, and cyborg theory (Keogh 2015; McLuhan 2009; Van de Mosselaer 2023). The construction of additional frameworks exploring the role of phenomena such as affect, counterplay, and *rubberbanding* in past-play contexts will follow.

METHODS

The goal of establishing frameworks such as those outlined above is to effectively select socioculturally-informed research practices for the investigation of past-play(er) experience. The methodology for this project seeks to combine existing methods in sociolinguistics and anthropology, such as surveys, interviews, and discourse analysis, with Digital Humanities tools such as eye-tracking and distant reading, all with a focus on games user research (Drachen 2018). The project’s overall experimental design will center participant observation of the gameplay of nine historical games, covering grand strategy, adventure, and shooter games, making use of a replicable, multi-modal, interdisciplinary approach to examining experiences of past-play. Insights into and critical feedback regarding this aspect of the project’s implementation are welcome.

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