

History, Time and the Past in *Radiant Historia*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Radiant Historia (Atlus/Headlock 2010) is a JRPG focusing on themes of time travel, history and the past, released initially for the Nintendo DS and reissued with some additional content, as *Radiant Historia: Perfect Chronology* (Atlus/Headlock 2017) for the 3DS. As the espionage agent Stocke, players navigate two parallel timelines - a “standard” history and an “alternate” history - and the strange extradimensional realm of Historia, attempting to configure the “true history” and save the world from being engulfed in sand. In this paper, I explore how ostensibly ‘non-historical’ games like *Radiant Historia* can play with ideas of history, time and the past much more freely than more traditionally historical games. Through textual analysis of both versions of the game, I show how arguments about all three ideas are made through game structure and language, particularly in dialogue between Stocke and Lippti and Teo, the denizens of Historia, and between Stocke and the time-travelling princess and self-proclaimed historian Nemesis. I argue that *Radiant Historia* is a historiographical game, firstly because it reflects particular ways of *thinking about* history, and secondly because to play the game is to undertake the act of *writing* history, articulated in part through the metaphor of time-travel. This paper will be of interest to researchers concerned with Historical Game Studies, with (historical) time and temporality in games, and with the capacity of games to trouble disciplinary frameworks beyond game studies.

Attention to historical representation in games has been widespread, connected with significant ongoing work in the field of Historical Game Studies. This scholarship not only explores historical content (e.g. Grufstedt 2022; Donald and Reid 2023), including paratextual materials (e.g. Wright 2022) and historical mods (e.g. Houghton 2022), it also explores historical thinking or historical processes. This is visible, for example, in Chapman’s use of Braudel’s conception of historical materialism in respect of the *Civilization* series (2016, 239), or Cruz Martínez’s (2019) focus on the potential of video games as deconstructionist history. However, Historical Game Studies has tended to emphasise games that seek to represent the past of the ‘real world’ in some manner, with a few exceptions (e.g. Webber 2016; Webber and Stevens 2020; Vandewalle, 2023). Similarly, extensive attention has been paid to time and time-travel in connection with games (e.g. Elverdam and Aarseth 2007; Zagal and Mateas

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2010; Arjoranta 2011; Alvarez Igarzábal 2019) but comparatively little detailed attention has been paid to *historical* time, the ‘time of history’. Thus while Chapman (2016, 90-99), for example, explores the relationship between history and time, this is contextualised in discussions about narrative, and avoids the rather inconclusive debates in historiographical literature around the nature of historical time itself (e.g. Koselleck 2002; Simon and Tamm 2023).

Radiant Historia contributes to these discussions by foregrounding a sense of history that emerges from the relationship of the past and future, grounded in the present, aligning with Koselleck’s (2002, 111) sense of historical time. Although the game seems to offer an explicit *telos*, suggesting a fundamentally linear path to a narrative outcome (the “true history”), in fact much of this game is about the reconfiguration of events towards a history and a story outcome that the player is happy to accept. In effect, *Radiant Historia* advances a reconstructionist and deterministic argument about history, only to dismantle it through play, as the structure of this game cuts against the historical discourse of its surface presentation. In addition, throughout the game’s dialogue, whenever history is under discussion there is continual reference to its writing and rewriting. This is particularly pronounced as Stocke traverses the timeline, and I therefore argue that, if we accept that *Radiant Historia* is making claims about history rather than the past, then it isn’t really about time-travel at all, other than as a metaphor for the way in which history is written. While we cannot travel in time to change the past, we can review our understanding of events, and revise our account of them accordingly.

Radiant Historia, then, makes clear arguments about history, time and the past. I conclude that it is able to do so because its ‘non-historical’ nature affords a form of conceptual playfulness, and this allows developers to circumvent constraints that emerge from player expectations of what history in games should look like or what ‘facts’ must be included. Much like other playgrounds, games like *Radiant Historia* sit outside the constrictions imposed by the classroom, meaning that they can avoid the influence of high-school history and its practice in a way that very few historical games are able to. Even more importantly, such games create an opportunity for us to think about what historical writing in games looks like beyond simple play, underlining how the video game form affords a complex and nuanced articulation of history.

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