

# **Excitatio Corcyrae: Embracing history through mindful game design**

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## **KEYWORDS**

Tabletop RPGs, History, Content Integration, Game Design, Educational Game, World Building, Character Creation, Map Creation

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The integration of historical content in games has always been a point of interest in both digital and analog media. Games based on history allow players to explore past eras and figures (Wainwright 2019). However, while those games frequently use these elements as a backdrop, they often fail to delve deeply into historical contexts, limiting opportunities for meaningful engagement. Yet, the interactive nature of games uniquely positions them to communicate a variety of complex historical themes, fostering debate, understanding, and empathy through lived experiences in-game (Houghton 2018, 11-43), as well as offering an experiential space to learn about history.

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), in particular, offer a promising medium for players to interact with and embrace historical perspectives, social dynamics, and political structures. For instance, *The Price of Coal* (Jennifer Adcock 2022) is set in 1921 West Virginia, centering on the labor rights of coal miners during a pivotal historical period. By transcending temporal limitations (McCall 2016, 517-542), TTRPGs can immerse players in the social, political, and economic facets of history, yet despite their potential, little research has focused on how to integrate these elements across all aspects of TTRPG design—beyond narrative alone. This study explores practical methods to embed

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historical themes across game mechanics, world-building, and visual art in order to engage players intellectually and emotionally.

To solidify this study, we developed *Excitatio Corcyrae*<sup>1</sup> (Ek-skee-TAH-tee-o Kor-KEE-reh), a TTRPG that commemorates an important moment in Greek history, taking place during the siege of Corfu in 1716.



**Figure 1:** Cover Art from the Game.

Designed for TTRPG players, educational institutions, and history enthusiasts, *Excitatio Corcyrae* incorporates historical, mythological, and cultural elements into every aspect of its gameplay. Players begin their journey at the Church of Anunciata, responding to a recruitment notice from Marshal Schulenburg, chief of the island's defense, as the Ottoman fleet has begun to besiege the island. After selecting roles that suit their skills, they are briefed by the Marshal and assigned a mission critical to the city's survival.

To ensure a rich representation of Corfiot history while remaining accessible and entertaining, we conducted extensive research, including local and international archives as well as interviews with historians. This project aims to demonstrate how these games can promote awareness, empathy, and critical thinking by emphasizing collaboration, problem-solving (Baile and Blatner 2014), and storytelling—skills aligned with teaching students to "think like historians" and to view history as a process of inquiry rather than a collection of facts (Schrier 2024, 73-91).



**Figure 2:** A visual representation of players engaging in Collaborative problem-solving and decision-making.

To immerse players within the reality of Corfu while under Venetian rule, we studied a variety of game systems and incorporated them in a way that is both creative and innovative. For example, the character creation process highlights the island’s social dynamics, linking character classes to historical roles, like Rifleman, Rabbi, etc. while the integration of social status serves as an element that affects in-game interactions and resources. In addition to that, character origins provide unique traits inspired by real historical migrations (Kyrgiagini et al. 2024). Maps also play an integral role in the clear and accurate representation of Corfu’s history and mythology. Inspired by video game maps, such as *Elden Ring*’s “The Lands Between” world map (FromSoftware 2022), they aim to provide a more engaging reading experience (Röhl et al. 2008) without detracting from the overall historical authenticity. Furthermore, the importance of visual art in historical games cannot be overstated; it reinforces the narrative and helps players form a stronger connection to the world they are inhabiting – making it feel real and lived in (Brinck 2017, 201-213).



**Figure 3 (Left) & Figure 4 (Right):** Comparison of Elden Ring’s Limgrave region and the Main map of *Excitatio Corcyrae*.

For this reason, *Excitatio Corcyrae* employs a wide variety of thought-out visual designs and props, ranging from 2D illustrations and tokens to 3D-printed pawns. Last but not least, uniquely integrated mechanics further enrich the gameplay, including – but not limited to – bartering, physical puzzles, and a final battle that represents historical events as they were, consisting of both ground and naval warfare accompanied by real-life war

tactics. This layered approach ensures a rich, immersive experience, blending historical accuracy with diverse playstyles and meaningful player choices.

*Excitatio Corcyrae* also introduces the historical and mythological context of Corfu through specific Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Influential figures from the period help build a living, breathing world that ensures that players of all experience levels can enjoy and learn from the game. Moreover, incorporating folklore and mythology enriches gameplay by reflecting the cultural beliefs of the time, aligning with the view that learning is included in cultural contexts (Bruner 2018, 179-188). With this approach, games create a multi-dimensional narrative that also enhances immersion, thus allowing players to explore societal responses to challenges and connect emotionally with the cultural psyche of the past.

The design and development of *Excitatio Corcyrae* makes several contributions to the field of game design and cultural education. Firstly, the project offers a practical framework for integrating historical and cultural material into all aspects of a TTRPG, demonstrating how such content can enrich gameplay without compromising player agency, enjoyment, and historical integrity. Secondly, it highlights the potential of games as tools for education, showing how they can inspire players to critically engage with historical content and foster empathy for the experiences of past societies. Finally, the game serves as a case study for how TTRPGs can bridge the gap between entertainment and education, offering a compelling model for future historical games.

In conclusion, by combining rigorous research with creative design as well as receiving praise from playtesters and spectators for its ability to balance entertainment with education, such as one tester noted, "*It is amazing you took something that could be considered boring and created all of this!*", *Excitatio Corcyrae* demonstrates the latent potential of TTRPGs as a powerful medium for cultural education. Yet refinements are still needed and are currently underway while further evaluations of the future versions are planned through qualitative and quantitative methods.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>More information on *Excitatio Corcyrae* can be found on <https://excitatio-corcyrae.framer.website/>