Unexpected Feelings: Counterfactual History in *The Seven Cities of Gold* (1984)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Some historical games are about re-living the past. Others promise players the option to re-write it, creating counterfactual versions of history. Since the 1980s, much of the scholarly debate about counterfactuals in Intellectual History and the Philosophy of History has been concerned the boundaries that make them a viable method of historiographical inquiry rather than just "parlor games" (Hughes-Warrington, 2019, p. 268). Game scholars have built to this discussion, either by arguing that counterfactuals in games do contribute to the practice of historiography (Chapman 2016; Apperley 2018), or by moving away from a distinction between "serious" and "fictional" uses of these conditionals and studying them as part of a wider historical culture (Grufstedt 2022; Mol 2020). In a recent contribution, Mol, Politopoulos, and Lammes have argued that 4X games like *Civilization* promise players radical freedom, only to leave them "stuck in specific forms of past play" (Mol et al., 2023, p. 2). This is the case with many Western strategy games in which counterfactual play never breaks aways from the boundaries established historical narratives. But how did historical strategy games first get stuck? And to what extent do design and technology determine the shape of alternative pasts?

To begin to answer these questions and trace a longer history of this phenomenon, this abstract looks at the 1984 computer game *The Seven Cities of Gold* (Ozark Softscape, 1984), an adventure-strategy game that allowed players to explore and colonize the New World as 16th-century explorers.[1] Advertised as "A Second Chance to Get the New World Right," *Seven Cities* invited players to consider counterfactual scenarios – "If Columbus had landed in New Jersey; if Cortez had been nicer to Montezuma; if Pizarro had been a more generous soul, would the world be different today?" (Electronic Arts 1984). On the one hand, the game promised the freedom to explore a vast, realistic world map, one of the first open-world designs in historical games, and a random continent generator that adhered to geological and cultural principles (Chandler & Grady 1984, 9). On the other hand, it promised freedom of choice in interacting with native populations: players could conquer by force or

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engage in trade and conversion, with rewards to encourage the latter (Leyenberger 1985).

Publisher Electronic Arts (EA) intended *Seven Cities* to be the first in an "Ages of Man" series that would combine entertainment and historical pedagogy. EA's marketing campaign promoted it as an edutainment game that would evoke "a sort of feeling that's unexpected in computer games. It's deeper. Maybe a little disquieting" (Electronic Arts 1984). This approach tied the game to EA's ambition of selling artistic and thought-provoking games as opposed to simple entertainment. The pedagogical value of *Seven Cities* was thus a blend of historical accuracy and morality, offering meaningful choices that could complicate how players felt about the history represented on the screen. The developers saw counterfactual play as the core of the game's pedagogical mechanism, in which experimentation with the historical playground would lead to self-actualization and personal growth. This approach was in line with Ozark's pro-social and non-violent design philosophy seen in the multiplayer computer game *M.U.L.E.* (1983). Following these principles, *Seven Cities* was designed as an open-ended playground (what lead designer Danielle Bunten Berry called a "process-type game"), combining the historical and geographical simulation with radical freedom of choice (Leyenberger 1985).[2]

To test the promise of radical freedom, this research relies on a textual analysis of *Seven Cities'* design, contemporary reviews and play-tests, and the memories of players. The exploration sections of the game, where the players manage resources and navigate to the New World, was largely successful thanks to a balance of freedom and uncertainty and the implementation of a random continent generator. Instead, the model for interacting with native populations failed to provide a meaningful choice. On paper, both trade and conquest are viable paths in the game, and the options available to the player are historically motivated. To simulate the complexity of communication without a common language, the Ozark team modeled a system of interaction based on movement: upon entering a native settlement, a player could approach the chief cautiously to trade, or attack head-on in a violent conquest. Partly by design and partly by flaws in implementation, nonviolent gameplay is slow and unrewarding, while violence is fast and efficient. While trade and conversion existed as potential strategies, they were used by players as a form of counterplay rather than a straightforward option; even then, it was easy to trigger unintended deaths that escalated conflicts and often pushed players into violent cycles (Apperley 2018). Players often remember feeling guilt and frustration: they would often begin the game trying to act peacefully, but always ended up into the role of violent *conquistadores*, even if reluctantly.

In light of this analysis, *Seven Cities'* legacy as an early attempt at counterfactual play is mixed. Features like procedural world generation, vast historical scope, and unrestricted freedom of exploration inspired later developers such as Sid Meier, who described it as "a cloud-parting, shackle-removing, mind-blowing masterpiece" (Meier & Noonan 2020, 190). Indeed, elements of the game's design would become staples of the 4X and historical strategy genres of computer games. On the other hand *Seven*

Cities fell short of its ludic and pedagogical ambitions. In addition to glaring problems with the representation of indigenous people, the game's tension between agency and historical realism remained unresolved, with the actual experience of play undermining the developers' moral framework. This research concludes that *Seven Cities'* limitations are as much a problem of design as they are a problem of historical imagination. Despite the developer's intention, the game could not transcend the boundaries of their historical imagination (Fogu 2009; Gatachew 2019, 3) and displayed limitations that reverberate into contemporary historical games.

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2 Before her transition in 1992 Danielle Bunten Berry used to be called Dan Bunten. Other versions of her name that appear throughout the sources are Danielle Berry and Dani Bunten Berry. For an insightful reflection on Bunten Berry's legacy as a trans game designer see the work of Whitney Pow (2019) and their forthcoming book *People Orientations: Toward a Transgender Software and Video Game History*. (Duke University Press, Forthcoming).