A Plague Tale: Autoethnography and Authenticity in Historical Games Research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A Plague Tale: Innocence (Asobo Studio 2019) and *A Plague Tale: Requiem* (Asobo Studio 2022) are a duology of games set in the historical context of 14th century France during the Black Death. As the protagonist Amicia, players escort their ailing younger brother, Hugo, through different plague-ridden landscapes, as it becomes apparent that Hugo's blood carries an ancient 'corruption', and he develops abnormal abilities and powers. Given their historical setting, the *Plague Tale* games fall firmly within the ambit of highly critical discussions about authenticity in historical games, and ongoing debates about realism and verisimilitude. Here we adopt an explicitly subjective methodological approach - that of autoethnography - to explore how authenticity can be rehabilitated in discourses about historical games. As a method that focuses on conveying cultural experience through evocative narrative forms, autoethnography rejects the historical, patriarchal ideology of the 'objective' researcher, "confront[ing] the reader with subjectivity" (Janish 2018: 224). Our findings show how autoethnography offers insight beyond a historian's textual analysis, and engages with a key question in Historical Game Studies: in what ways do historical games (re)present historical discourse? This paper will be of interest to researchers concerned with Historical Game Studies and with the affective qualities of video games, and will be useful to anyone considering an autoethnographic approach to video game research.

The idea of authenticity (often alongside accuracy or realism) is used through the literature on historical games, and tends to be understood as a category of historical representation, something felt and/or experienced, and an indicator of player familiarity with a particular past, grounded in players' "cultural endowment" (Salvati and Bullinger 2013: 157-8). Frameworks of authenticity in game studies, then, are drawn from historical studies, tourism studies, and media studies. Claims to authenticity have, however, been criticised by historians because of their emotional,

interpretive and contextual nature (Jordanova 2006: 92; Classen 2009: 88). Although researchers in historical game studies have attempted to articulate their frameworks and typologies of authenticity (e.g. Salvati and Bullinger 2013; Zimmermann 2020), analysis of authenticity is better developed in tourism studies, particularly around concerns of 'authentic' experience, where the concept is broken down even further (e.g. Chhabra 2012: 499). Discussion of authenticity is also common amongst developers (Wright 2022) and players (Apperley 2013), where it often becomes entangled with discussions about accuracy (see Copplestone 2017; Burgess and Jones 2022).

Authenticity thus owes a lot to interpretation and is deeply subjective. As contemporary historians increasingly acknowledge, this is much like history; even when evidence-based, it never achieves the objectivity that many would like to claim. To reconcile ideas of authenticity, history and game experiences, then, we adopt an autoethnographic approach, for its ability to centre the player and their experiences in making meaning from play, and to produce empirical evidence about subjective experiences.

In order to convey the affective experiences of the researcher, autoethnographies utilise thick description to evoke feelings in the reader that offer an insight into their experiences. Ellis et al. (2011) argue that "[f]or autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true," bringing an alternative perspective to ideas of 'authenticity'. Ethnographies in games or virtual worlds are fairly popular, and subjective participation in games has been widely acknowledged as an appropriate method of complementing the study of games and gamers (e.g. Cote and Raz 2015; Pearce and Artemesia 2009).

Autoethnographies have been growing in number in game studies, following calls for more reflexive accounts of lived experience in ethnographies and human-machine subjectivities (see Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Sundén 2012). Reflexive autoethnographic work therefore offers ways that (video) game studies can bridge gaps that can occur in other methods and approaches. This might involve focusing on particular affective experiences, for example those of romantic desire (Sundén 2012) or those of disturbing feelings with ideological dissonance (Borchard 2015). Through these affects, critical insights can be shared into how games shape our understandings of self, others, and specific situations.

We approach our analysis of *A Plague Tale* with both authors having previously played the games in 'full' (to the end of the main story arc, without collecting all objects and achievements), and drawing on these initial experiences. Memories can form an important part of autoethnographic work – and particularly what has been termed "retrospective autoethnography". Further, as the research draws on the experiences, notes, and conversations held between two player-researchers, it represents "collaborative autoethnography" (Chang et al 2013). Thus, the paper explores the use of retrospective collaborative autoethnography, where "retrospective not only means that the described event has already taken place but denotes that the researchers employing RCA did not anticipate participation in the said event with an intention to engage in research around it" (Tripathi et al 2022). However, to collect further, in-depth fieldnotes, supplementary gameplay was

conducted specifically for the purposes of autoethnographic data collection. This paper will therefore explore the mechanics of how autoethnographies can operate and function in game studies, and specifically consider how this method allows for a greater understanding of the complexities of authenticity through the (re)production of historical texts.

Given the importance that has been attached to placing players of historical games in plausible, convincing historical environments, autoethnography offers valuable affordances in gathering information that can only otherwise be obtained indirectly. While players can of course be interviewed, and texts analysed as noted, autoethnography encourages the player-historian (see Chapman 2016) to document, analyse, and reflect upon their *own* play and the effectiveness - the authenticity, we might say - of the historical experiences they encounter in video games. We argue that autoethnography allows a methodological intervention that sheds light on experiential authenticity as experienced when playing historical games. We consider authenticity through its connections to affective and evocative experientiality, helping to make it meaningful and usable in historical games analysis beyond the frame of historical accuracy.

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