Fantasy Beyond History: Games as Method for Ecocritical Understandings of Time and Change.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper intends to explore some ways historical games, and game scholars interested in historical theory, can draw from the fantasy genre to address contemporary dilemmas brought about by the Anthropocenic condition. The research behind it is part of the broader project "Amazonian Dreams and the Relational Imagination", which aims to combine scientific, historical, and Indigenous epistemologies to implement responses to the climate emergency.

The field of history finds itself at a crossroads, with profound implications for historical theory. The Anthropocenic condition – the emergence of the human species as a historical actor in a geological scale, whose actions threaten the survival of our societies (Chakrabarty 2009; Chakrabarty,2021; Marques 2020) – forces us to rethink the relevance of "the recent human past [...] to the big questions that loom large in the historical imagination." (Izdebski et al. 2024, 1) The global disillusionment with liberal democracy, as well as the growing resentment towards the legacy of Eurocentrism, prompts a reevaluation of history's primacy as the science of the past. Acknowledgment of non-academic, non-Western models of temporality, agency, and personhood led to the understanding that the human experience of being in time is multiple and nonsynchronous (Simon and Tamm 2023; Jordheim 2022). Not everyone believes history, as we know it, will necessarily survive in a future knowledge economy attuned to these new demands. (Tamm and Simon 2021; D'Oro, 2021).

Perhaps paradoxically, interest in history within game studies has surged in recent years. Little more than a decade after its first systemic efforts at consolidation, Historical Game Studies (HGS) is supported by several research societies, published monographs, special issues, and competing research trends (Cf. e.g. McCall 2022; Wright 2022; Caselli et al. 2023).

Yet, while the defense of games as a type of historiography in equal footing with the written narrative is revolutionary in itself, HGS has not always been quick to incorporate theoretical breakthroughs undertaken by its mother discipline. von Lünen et al. (2019, xvii) provocatively remarked that "it is digital history that has remained stagnant" while mainstream history "is constantly exploring new modes and venues of expression". The gradual consolidation of disciplinary subfields within HGS – most prominently around Medieval history and Medievalism (Houghton 2024; Caselli et al. 2023, 41) – while invaluable for studying the impact of industry tropes and scholarly conventions on public memory, also mirror pre-existing – and, very often, Eurocentric, and obsolete – reifications from its mother discipline.

From the point of view of ecocriticism, two particular concerns remain inadequately addressed by HGS. The first is the acknowledgment of non-human agencies (or actancies) in historical processes, from animals (Nance, 2015; Dománska, 2017) to inanimate matter (Iorvino and Oppermann, 2014) to climate (Benito Y Monclús, 2023). The second is the imperative to deal with disparate temporalities, from the day-to-day experience to the geological level, that challenge the limits of human cognition – and, consequently, human capacity to record them in historical sources. Many game scholars have explored how these conundrums can be resolved, or at least discussed, in game- or play-based environments (e.g. Chang, 2019; Ruffino, 2024; Wilde, 2024; Zhou, 2024). However, whether history games, and historical game scholarship, can incorporate these principles remain to be seen.

Due to its ties to empiricism, scholarly history cannot fully commit to a logic of speculation in the way scholars like Cameron Kunzelman (2022) have alluded to. Some practitioners also argue that history "cannot be analyzed through the lens of a flat ontology" that does away with the primacy of human agency: "non-human beings […] matter, but only as long as they can be included in anthropocentric narrative[s]" (Rueda, 2022, 373). History, as Marc Bloch (1952) canonically stated, is the science of humans in time. When concepts of 'humanity' and 'time' are questioned and refashioned, does history still have a purpose? Or does it become something else entirely?

Academic history has understandably threaded lightly around the topic of its own obsolescence. Which is perhaps why, although HGS practitioners have shown great interest in games that "think of the world in the way that it isn't" (Kunzelman, 2022, 4), they have, in general, been theoretically cautious regarding bold ontological claims. They have made important strides not only in identifying elements of historicity in fantastic games (Fewster 2015; Cooper 2016), but also in mobilizing the fantastic as fictional laboratory for testing out and discussing historical theory. (Marino Carvalho 2016; Webber 2024). Their insights notwithstanding, these works have also had a tendency to "history over" a genre that is not necessarily beholden to an academic historical epistemology, and that derives much of its inventiveness to its capacity to "weigh the claims of myth against those of its Modern rivals, history and science" (Attebery, Fantasy as a Route to Myth, The History of Fantasy as the History of the Myth Concept, para 2). If the fantastic becomes just another arena on which to

test historical ideas, games will have no room to escape Modern ideas about the past – or Modern perspectives about the future.

The movement away from questions of historical accuracy and recognition of more nuanced forms of memory-making in games – sometimes hailed as a "heritage turn" (Mochocki 2022) - has acted as a bulwark against more extreme kinds of historiographical appropriation. As has Vanderwalle (2023)'s suggestion to interpret games as mythography. Still, the academic weight of HGS and the strict disciplinary guidelines of the field of history –which many of its practitioners are encouraged to follow – may yet marginalize non-historical readings of fantastic temporalities. Nikolchina (2017, 28)'s observation that "[m]yth and history touch in a corrosive way" within computer games might also prove prescient of the impact of history on the fantastical imagination.

In this paper, I propose a theoretical reevaluation of the role of fantasy in games, arguing for its recognition not simply as non-factual historiography or technocultural mashup (Cole 2022), but as a potentially distinctive mode of being in time. I will seek to address its points of conflict with historical epistemologies and highlight ways it can (or it cannot) be reconciled with historical understanding. My point of departure is the growing number of studies highlighting how ludic means of manipulating time in games - or conversely, denying temporal agency outright - affect the representation and perception of temporalities (e.g. Zagal and Mateas 2010; Bódi 2022). This potential is evident in games in which ontological agency in on the line, from classics like *Legend of Mana* (Square 1999) to more recent titles like *Slay the Princess,* (Black Tabby Games 2023). Yet, as scholars like Nikolchina (2017) and Jayemanne (2019) have shown, heterochronia – a multiplicity of competing times – is present in most computer games thanks to commonplace features like save games, pause buttons, fast-travelling, auto battling, and levelling up mechanics.

The ubiquity of such features even in the most factually grounded of historical games means that, just like fantasy works can be framed as history games, historical games can be interpreted as temporal fantasy. More importantly, it also means that resorts to the fantastic can be mobilized as a method with which to interpret in-game temporalities. This perspective may prove particularly fruitful for the ludic representation of phenomena that challenge the limits of the historical discipline, like the decentering of human agency and reappraisal of non-Modern ontologies proposed by ecological theory and ecocriticism (Morton 2016; Bennet 2010).

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