

Time vs. History in JRPGs

Nick Webber

Birmingham City University

Birmingham, UK

nick.webber@bcu.ac.uk

Keywords

history, time, JRPGs, historical game studies, time travel, narrative

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“To change history is a sin” - Caius Ballad, *Final Fantasy XIII-2* (Square Enix 2011).

This paper examines a range of JRPGs (Japanese Roleplaying Games) which employ time travel as a narrative or gameplay mechanic, exploring the intersections between time and history in these games, and their implications for both player and scholarly understandings of history. Time travel is a common trope in the JRPG genre, and games are in any case especially good at facilitating temporal play. While other media forms explore different temporalities, games offer specific temporal (Gopinath and Holopainen 2025) or temporal-ergodic agency (Bódi 2023, 48-53) absent elsewhere. Yet, in time travel games, this agency is often applied in pursuit of transforming the timeline and ‘changing’ history. But what does history mean, here, how is change to it represented, and with what moral implications? This paper contributes to discussions in Historical Game Studies (HGS) about how far we can read fantasy games within academic historical frameworks, arguing that - much like other non-academic treatments of the past - they can shape how we understand history, rather than be ‘historied over’ (Marino Carvalho 2025) by modernist perspectives. The paper will be of interest to researchers working on HGS, therefore, along with those engaging with JRPGs as a genre.

There is significant recent and ongoing interest in the relationship between games and time. A range of scholars have attempted to understand this relationship, developing frameworks to explain the different ways in which game-related time might be considered and experienced. This includes work by Elverdam and Aarseth (2007), Zagal and Mateas (2010), Arjoranta (2011), Hanson (2018), Alvarez Igarzábal (2019), and Gopinath and Holopainen (2025). Most recently, a special issue of the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* (2025) included a host of new perspectives, with particular attention to queerness and slowness. However, relatively little of this prior work pays attention to the intersections between time and history in games, or to the idea of historical time (the ‘time of history’), beyond discussions about narrative (e.g. Chapman 2016, 90-99). For Historical Game Studies in particular, this absence matters: discussions between historiographers and philosophers of history about the nature of historical time have been rather inconclusive (e.g. Koselleck 2002; Simon and Tamm 2023), and perspectives based on games can offer new insight into this relationship.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Surprisingly little of this interest in time has been directed towards JRPGs. Although sometimes caricatured as a genre of linear narratives, JRPGs in fact demonstrate a deep interest in time and non-linear storytelling, especially in relation to the idea of time travel. Highly successful series like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* feature time travel as a recurring theme, the latter seemingly due to designer Horii Yūji's particular interest in the idea, and other popular JRPGs, such as *Tales of Phantasia* (Wolf Team 1995), incorporate it either as a mechanic or as a key narrative element. Indeed, *Chrono Trigger* (Square 1995), which researchers routinely refer to when discussing time travel video games, is a JRPG. All of this time-play sits alongside ideas of history (rekishi, 歴史), and many time-travel titles - JRPGs and otherwise - emphasise how history is changed during the unfolding of their temporal plots, or through their time-based mechanics. This is particularly evident, for example, in *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, where changing history is central to the plot and appears repeatedly in character dialogue; or in *Radiant Historia* (Atlus/Headlock 2010), where your mission is to rewrite past events in pursuit of the 'true history', as I have discussed previously (Webber 2024).

Exploring these ideas through a range of JRPG titles - those signalled above, plus *Chrono Cross* (Square 1999; sequel to *Chrono Trigger*), *Final Fantasy XIV: Heavensward* (Square Enix 2015), and *Tales of Destiny 2* (Wolf Team 2002) - this paper seeks to understand the implications of this temporal play for our thinking about history. It asks what history is in these games, as it is variously changed for the better or returned to a 'proper' course, made or unmade, in pursuit of moral ends or with shattering moral consequences. Always in these temporal connections, history is something acted upon, and to specific ends and, as other writers have noted (e.g. Zimmermann 2025), the concept of chrononormativity points to a particular way we are used to experiencing and understanding time, as a structuring principle in life and narrative. Does unseating these (chrono)normative, linear expectations, leave us searching for a replacement, pushing us to see history as fractured and in need of repair? Or is this instead about a collision between the narrative needs of our relationship with the past and time travel as method? What is to be won from these heroic encounters across the temporal landscape? Is it history as narrative or as conceptual - or moral - structure? Is (was?) Caius Ballad right?

REFERENCES

- Alvarez Igarzábal, F. 2019. *Time and Space in Video Games: A Cognitive-Formalist Approach*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Arjoranta, J. 2011. "Do We Need Real-Time Hermeneutics? Structures of Meaning in Games." *DiGRA '11 - Proceedings of the 2011 DiGRA International Conference: Think Design Play*, Utrecht, January. Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA)/Utrecht School of the Arts.
<https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2011i1.595>
- Atlus/Headlock. 2010. *Radiant Historia*. Nintendo DS Game. Atlus.
- Bódi, B. 2023. *Videogames and Agency*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chapman, A. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Elverdam, C. and Aarseth, E. 2007. "Game Classification and Game Design: Construction Through Critical Analysis." *Games and Culture*. 2 (1), 3–22.

- Gopinath, K.K. and Holopainen, J. 2025. "Temporal Agency and Timeplay in Video Games." Conference Proceedings of DiGRA 2025: Games at the Crossroads, Valletta, June/July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2025i2.2425>
- Hanson, C. 2018. *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Koselleck, R. 2002. *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Marino Carvalho, V. 2025. "Fantasy Beyond History: Games as Method for Ecocritical Understandings of Time and Change." Conference Proceedings of DiGRA 2025: Games at the Crossroads, Valletta, June/July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2025i3.2682>
- Simon, Z.B. and Tamm, M. 2023. *The Fabric of Historical Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Square. 1995. *Chrono Trigger*. SNES. Square.
- Square. 1999. *Chrono Cross*. PlayStation. Square.
- Square Enix. 2011. *Final Fantasy XIII-2*. PlayStation 3/Xbox 360. Square Enix.
- Square Enix. 2015. *Final Fantasy XIV: Heavensward*. Online game. Square Enix.
- Webber, N. 2024. "History, Time and the Past in *Radiant Historia*." In *Abstract Proceedings of DiGRA 2024 Conference: Playgrounds*. Tampere: DiGRA. <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2024i2.2335>
- Wolf Team. 1995. *Tales of Phantasia*. Super Famicom. Namco.
- Wolf Team. 2002. *Tales of Destiny 2*. PlayStation 2. Namco.
- Zagal, J.P. and Mateas, M. 2010. "Time in Video Games: A Survey and Analysis." *Simulation and Gaming*. 41 (6), 844–868.
- Zimmermann, J. 2025. "Queer temporality, chrononormativity and monstrous composition in gameplay compilation videos." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*. 17 (2), 193-205. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00130_1