

Making the Past Count: Developing quantitative measures for past-player experience

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INTRODUCTION

Much recent work in the field of game studies, both in research and rhetoric, has made efforts to center player experience. Historical game studies and archaeogaming, however, has a ways to go in terms of detaching from scholar-fronted accounts of play and focusing on player populations and gaming communities (Politopoulos and Mol 2023; Gerritsen et al. in press). Game studies, and historical game studies and archaeogaming in particular, is still learning to “do” data science, in large part because of the field’s interdisciplinary underpinnings; games scholars variously adapt measures from media studies, sociology, reception studies, and behavioral psychology, but the resulting research is uniquely “ours”. When it comes to the widespread implementation of quantitatively oriented methods, historical game studies and archaeogaming are still finding their footing. This paper is part of finding that footing, engaging with the idea of iterative surveys of “past-player” populations as a fruitful mode of research. By exploring the development and execution of two quantitative measures for historical videogame play, we hope to highlight the importance of scaffolding established work in the field with interventions that are both player-focused and scalable.

STUDYING (PAST-)PLAYER EXPERIENCE

The goal of interventions in past-player communities is to identify **who** historical game players are: to profile the population of historical game players and understand their motivations, their preexisting historical knowledge, their value systems, and their

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other interactions with the past. Previous work in this domain, which has ranged from game analysis to participant observation and the qualitative study of player communities (Apperley 2018; Politopoulos et al. 2019; Vandewalle et al. 2022), has demonstrated that past-play is a recursive interaction where players ‘rubberband’ between norms and expectations of past and present. As an affective, value-driven process that is taking place at massive scales — millions of people playing billions of hours of historical games — qualitative readings of games and small-scale communities, need to be joined with methods, including iterative, large-scale surveys, that are able to provide a macroscopic look at this ‘population of players.’

In this talk, we compare the development, execution and results of two of these survey studies aimed at historical videogame players. The first, the VALUE survey (VS), took place in the spring of 2020. In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we set up a survey to start an initial mapping of historical videogame players, and understand how the past is perceived in historical videogames. The survey ran for a period of one month and respondents (N=1676) were recruited through subreddits, forums, and Facebook groups of historical videogames. The second survey, the Past-Play Experience Questionnaire (PPEQ), was developed with two aims in mind: first, to assess players’ general attitudes towards historical content within historical videogames, their assessment of the role of historical videogames in shaping ideas about the past, and their interest in the past outside of games; and the second, to investigate players’ experiences of certain affective and embodied processes during play of a specific historical videogame or franchise. In line with the first aim, the PPEQ contained several adapted items from the VS. The survey ran for a period of one month and respondents (N=451) were primarily recruited through social media channels, subreddits and fora for specific game communities. Our talk will present results, analyses, and interpretations from both datasets, oriented towards three broad observations distilled from this research that can inform further investigations. These observations concern pre-existing historical knowledge, player investment in representation and verisimilitude, and historical videogames as catalysts for and sites of knowledge production.

DISCUSSION & DIRECTIONS

We present this research with the aim of demonstrating what quantitative research interventions can do for historical game studies both in terms of gaining insight into player populations and in terms of working towards common ground as researchers, across the multidisciplinary underpinnings of the (sub)field. We frame quantitative interventions not as an inevitable or immediate “next step” for the field but as a fruitful way to scaffold established insights in historical game studies and game studies broadly, emphasizing the importance of mixed methods research design. The result of methodological convergence is that we will be able to rely more strongly on each other’s work and expand the range of insights that historical game studies and archaeogaming can deliver to game studies and disciplines that study the past.

In analyzing these two surveys, we hope to also highlight the advantages of working in an iterative design process, replicating and adapting as videogames and their players also adapt and evolve with changing technologies and habits. Finally, we hope to stress the undertapped potential of direct and indirect communication with player communities, who are curious about this kind of work, enthusiastic to share their experiences with each other and the world, and who, through their interactions and responses to these videogames, shape them.

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