Public History, Game Communities and Historical Knowledge

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ABSTRACT
In considering history and video games, great emphasis is placed on the ways in which historical information can be encoded in game content as a route to fostering an engagement with the past, and with historical narratives. This paper proposes that more attention should be paid to the communities which form around games, and to the historical activity which arises organically within those communities, particularly those which form around persistent massively multiplayer online games. The ideas of public history can be drawn upon to understand how this historical activity functions, and how it might be valued as a form of engagement not only with the past of those playing, but with the practices of history more generally, and with historical concepts such as truth, bias and authenticity.

Keywords
Public history, community, massively multiplayer online games, *EVE Online*

INTRODUCTION
Discussions around 'playing with history' inevitably alight upon games which offer clear representations of elements of the past, in series such as *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios et al. 1997-2015), *Civilization* (Microprose et al. 1991-2015) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward et al. 2003-15). In so doing, commentators have begun to define a canon, in effect, of 'historical games': the games to which we look for a sense of player engagement with history. Yet to learn about history is not simply to learn about the past – the two things are not the same – and in this paper, I want to argue that there are dimensions to the ways in which games encourage historical thinking which go far beyond the content which exists within those games. Adopting a public history approach in and around games might allow us both to stimulate and encourage audiences to understand history more clearly as a complex and compromised representation of the past, and to engage directly in discussions about the relationship between that representation and the past it represents.

Recent decades have seen a growing understanding of the importance of public history: the public understanding and communication of history (e.g. Jordanova 2006, 126-149). Such history is produced by the work of many more active agents than traditional academic history, and writers on the subject see public history as a practice which breaks down traditional distinctions between historians and their audiences, their 'publics' (Kean and Ashton 2009: 1). Perhaps as a result, engagement with public history often means

Proceedings of Playing with History 2016
DiGRA/FDG Workshop on Playing with history: Games, antiquity and history

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more than a simple interest in the past, moving beyond a passive appreciation and into an active role in the cultivation of a more organic and democratic form of historical knowledge.

In some regard, we can consider representational video games – those which (re)present the past as an element of setting or of play – as public history texts. Situated in the main outside the context of academic purpose, and often criticised for their inaccurate or even inappropriate rendering of what we believe we know about the past, these games have the potential to foster an explicit and significant engagement with history, in particular through their capacity to encourage their players both to understand and to learn more about the past laid out before them (see, for example, Kapell and Elliott 2013). Indeed, as one writer has observed, 'you would be hard pressed to find a large public audience as interested in history as video game players' (Whitaker 2016). Setting aside games' relative weakness as 'accurate' historical documents, our attention is drawn to the broader understandings of the past that can be gained from, for example, exposure to alternate histories, 'counterfactual' narratives, and so on (e.g. Apperley 2013).

The issue of historical engagement is not necessarily as clear cut as it might seem, however. In his response to Rosenzweig and Thelen's major work of popular and public history, *The Presence of the Past* (1998), Michael Zuckerman stressed what Bernard Jensen (2009, 42-3) has called the 'pastness of history' – an essential quality, which separated history from the present, pushing it beyond immediate experience. Yet the evidence of the study which underlay *The Presence of the Past* was that American adults, at least, didn't see history in that way at all. Their concern with history focused on how history connected with – explained, perhaps – the present. This was the history not of a remote or removed past, but of a usable past (Jensen 2009, 43), a past meaningful in the present. In terms of our discussion about games, this is paralleled by a sense that there is a basic divide between the public – who are presented to – and historians, who, mediated by game developers, present. Robert Whitaker, the originator of the *History Respawned* series, has indicated his satisfaction that viewers of the series were concerned to distinguish between 'actual professional historians' and 'self-proclaimed "historians"', and that they were eager to engage with 'genuine historical expertise' (Whitaker 2016). But while this may accurately reflect a perception that professional historians are the only legitimate bearers of knowledge of the past (Kean and Ashton 2009, 6-7), it presumes that the purposes of these historians and their audiences in learning about and discussing the past are aligned. If the public see history differently from historians, though, we cannot assume that this is the case.

WHAT, WHY AND HOW

The distinction seemingly at play here, between history as knowledge to be conveyed (i.e. the historians' position), and history as something practical or meaningful (the public position), is closely connected to debates about the status of history more generally. Professional historians often write of 'what we know', a knowing derived through a semi-scientific process of analysis of evidence, interpretation and argument, underpinned by a consensus about what is and isn't important, what is and isn't, in E.H. Carr's terms, a 'historical fact' (Carr 1990, 7-30). As Hayden White has indicated, the truth value of a historical narrative is of primary importance to the legitimacy of its claim to represent and/or explain 'specifically real events' (White 1990, 45); to talk about 'historical games', therefore, is to ask what claims to truth underpin the notion that these games *are* historical, and what 'specifically real events' they purport to represent. At the same time, however, White, along with critics of modernism like Foucault, rejects the attitude of

certainty which might present one interpretation of the past – one history – as authoritative; as Keith Jenkins (2003) observes, history is discursive. Yet even in light of these discussions, the position of many historians remains didactic; they deliberately inhabit this idea of 'genuine historical expertise', from which they seek to share a form of 'true' knowledge.

The more pragmatic approach to the past taken by non-historians, however, tends to prioritise meaning over the complexities of historical knowledge itself. This is particularly evident when history is put to political use, for example in support of modern state agendas (a matter vexed with complexity: see Dalley 2009: 87 and Jordanova 2006: 159-60), but communal senses of identity are also often underpinned not only by shared values but also by the continuity of a shared or common past (Heather 1998: 5; Armstrong 2009). As national myths perhaps demonstrate, these histories are not required to be true or exhaustive as long as the story they tell is in some manner explanatory of the present, often by way of a historic golden age which nurtures a contemporary nostalgia, and they are typically highly selective in their presentation of events. Indeed, a blending of deliberate fiction into traditional foundation histories was a well-established practice in the past, with many medieval writers, for example, tracing the descent of their people from individuals present at the siege of Troy. In Britain and the US, stories of King Arthur and Robin Hood remain considerably more compelling for the public than many factual tales of the times in which they are purported to have lived. This use of knowledge to a purpose is perhaps less about 'what' we know, therefore, and more focused on 'why' we should (want to) know it and what value that knowing has.

The tension between the didactic historian and practical public lies at the heart of the idea of public history, encoded in discussions about how the term should be understood: is public history the activity of museums in making historical material available to a public, or is it history produced and curated by a public, or both things? About the past in general or about a specific shared past, or either, or neither? Importantly, in some of these modes, public history appears as a shared space in which it is possible to reconcile these ideas, through the encouragement of a form of historical engagement which pays close attention to how histories are made. As Hilda Kean and Paul Ashton suggest, drawing on the tremendously influential work of Raphael Samuel, public history can be thought of as an engagement with 'activities and practices in which ideas of history are embedded or a dialectic of past-present relations is rehearsed' (2009: 15, quoting Samuel 1994: 8). Through considering such activity in and around games, therefore, we can begin to understand mechanisms to more effectively bring together these two knowledge positions – the historians' 'what' and the public 'why' – to achieve a more established and fundamental understanding, reflecting pragmatic but disciplined historical practice and engagement: an exploration of the process of *how* we know.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND GAME COMMUNITIES

This process is, of course, central to the practice of professional historians, but is not typically the element of historical activity which those historians seek to convey to the public, or in which they seek to involve the public, much as they might wish to. The meticulous and careful judgements made about reliability, bias, truthfulness and significance; the decisions about what those 'historical facts' are. These are difficult ideas to work through effectively with a focused audience; far harder to foster such exploration with people who are only passingly interested at the outset. Yet an appreciation of these difficult issues is vital if we are to move our publics beyond an uncritical regard of the work of historians to genuine historical engagement. How might historical games

accomplish this? As Tom Apperley has suggested, we know that games which offer players the chance to resist or to critically reflect upon 'official' histories can help them to understand the past as something plural and contingent (2013, 194-5). Yet is it possible to go beyond challenge in considering a deeper engagement? Indeed, if games can convey historical understandings when they present an 'inaccurate' past, can we look beyond historical games altogether in our pursuit of historical thinking?

We have, of course, no *Phoenix Wright: Ace Historian* to turn to, and in any case, foregrounding these procedural issues would not necessarily make for a compelling game. Certainly, attempts are already made to explore these ideas in an applied gaming context, for example in Alex Moseley's *The Great History Conundrum* (2008), an alternate reality game (ARG) used to teach undergraduates historical research methods, but this is not a game aimed at a commercial market. Yet we know that games can foster tremendous engagement amongst their players, and the attention paid to game knowledge issues, such as theorycrafting in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004, and see Paul 2011) or around the *Mass Effect* (Bioware et al. 2007-12) storyline, in game and book form, is tremendous. To return to White's observations, this is not attention focused on 'specifically real events', but in the collaboration and involvement which these practices reflect, we can see fertile ground for public history work. Games provide a focal point for the emerge of significant communities, and it is in these communities where historical thinking can be fostered, applied to the community and its engagement with the game as subject, rather than to the historical content within the game itself. Importantly, such a community must have a past, but in communities with significant longevity, particular those emerging around persistent games, such a past may exist and invite historical reflection.

We can see this occur around games such as *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003). Now 13 years old, *EVE* is a persistent, science-fiction themed, massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) with more than 300,000 players, who play together on a single shard (server). Thus in *EVE*, players have a shared interest in the results of gameplay in a singular 'world'. While CCP Games, the game's developer and publisher, provides a fictional backstory (lore) to underpin game events, *EVE* is a 'sandbox' game, in which the vast majority of activity is shaped and driven by players, who form alliances and coalitions of thousands in order to prosper. The relationships within and between these strong communities are both socially and politically complex, providing space for historical reflection. As I have indicated elsewhere (e.g. Webber 2016), the longevity of the game world means that it has a past, populated by player activities and interactions ('specifically real events'), and the competition between player organisations, the speed with which events occur and the turnover of players drive opposing discourses about that past. Most explicitly, though, historical thinking is demonstrated through a collection of player practices, some driven by CCP through the reflective activities organised around *EVE*'s tenth anniversary in 2013 (e.g. the *True Stories* project: Webber 2016), others arising organically from the player communities themselves, including player journalism which situates game events in their player-historical context and attempts to produce book-form histories of the game (Webber forthcoming; Webber and Milik forthcoming).

Importantly, these player activities are immersed in extensive discussion about what we might think of as 'historical' issues – truth, bias, actuality, verification – alongside attendant concerns around identity and a sense that the game 'needs' historians (Webber 2016). These discussions generally emerge unprompted, and demonstrate that not only is *EVE*'s history a site of contestation, as we might expect, but that it is important to at least

some *EVE* players: this past is meaningful to them and to their communal identity, they are engaged with it, and they are keen to ensure it is properly presented and understood. Furthermore, these engagements are supported by warrants of authenticity: not of what we would normally understand as historical authenticity, a sense of the contextually appropriate and accurate, but rather a sense of cultural authenticity derived from presence and witnessing (Carter, et al. 2015).

KNOWING WITH MEANING

In *EVE*, therefore, we can see both a game which is not about history but which provokes historical thinking and engagement, and one which does so without the involvement or engagement of historians, calls for them from that community notwithstanding. Fascinatingly, the majority of history produced within the *EVE* community is bottom up and democratic, and while (much as with all history) it is vulnerable to deployment and manipulation by the socially or economically powerful, including the game provider, it still represents a relatively radical form of public history: political, community-based, open and usable (Jordanova 2006, 126). And although *EVE* appears as something of a unique space, given its particular architecture and the social organisation its play encourages, the strands of similar histories exist in and around other long-running MMOGs such as *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999). When players ask 'Just how much of a "big deal" was [*EverQuest* guild] Fires of Heaven back in the day?' (Safon 2012), they seek information about the player- or social- historical context of their play. Elsewhere, calls for the preservation of the human history of such games (Kollar 2016) and explicit attempts to build a public history presence (e.g. Howard 2015) demonstrate that these discussions do not have to take place against the backdrop of interstellar war, even if that context seems to drive them rather effectively.

So in thinking about how (historical) games can encourage player engagement with history, it is as important to think about the communities around those games as it is to think about the content of the games themselves. Public histories represent the manifestation of significant engagements with the past, and some of the strongest engagements arise from a personal or experiential connection with that past. In the case of MMOGs, this might be presence at the events under discussion, or membership of the organisation being discussed; more generally, it connects with the established engagement potential of 'affective' history (as demonstrated by, for example, Cogswell and McLauchlan 2014). The engaged public are still keen to discover the details of the past – the historical knowledge – but in a way and under terms which make it meaningful to them, which connect it to the present.

How, then, does this inflect the role of historians in terms of games? In fostering broader engagement with history, and with understandings of the past, historians still have a central role to play, not only in supporting the knowledge basis of historical games, but also in helping to catalyse historical debates around those games. Historians can provide thoughtful commentary and helpful reflections for communities exploring their histories, and can contribute to those histories not only as external observers but also as active members of those communities themselves. Centrally, however, historians must work to inflect the position of histories within and around games to ensure that they consider meaning as much they consider knowing. Both are central to further engagement, and to genuinely success 'historical' games, in all their forms. The example of EVE Online demonstrates that discussions grounded in historical ideas can emerge organically when a sufficiently social (and, perhaps, political) past exists to underpin them. The value of games to history, therefore, may be less about communicating specific historical

information, and more about providing a focus around which complex and enduring communities can come together to create such pasts.

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