

History, biography and empathy in Inkle's '80 Days'

Răzvan Rughiniș

University Politehnica of Bucharest
Splaiul Independentei 313
Bucharest 060042, Romania
razvan.rughinis@cs.pub.ro

Ștefania Matei

University of Bucharest
Schitu Măgureanu 9,
Bucharest 010181, Romania
stefania.matei@sas.unibuc.ro

ABSTRACT

Inkle's '80 Days' offers players the chance of an unusual experience of history. The game combines a layer of historical events and characters with a layer of steampunk science-fiction, using the later as a magnifying glass to highlight minority perspectives and experiences. At the same time, 80 Days merges two views on the relation between biography and history: the player remains a witness, while non-player characters are deeply immersed in making and remaking histories. These dual structures make '80 Days' into a strong resource for discussing the interplay between history and biography, and appealing to history as a resource for empathy.

Keywords

Historical games, Inkle's '80 Days', sociological imagination, empathy

INTRODUCTION

Games that approach historical topics offer, by virtue of their interactivity, new possibilities for relating us to the past. Some games, such as Sid Meyer's Civilization (Meier and Shelley 1991), offer players the possibility of rewriting grand historical narratives, while others, such as Valiant Hearts (Ubisoft 2014) invite us to re-play the past and experience historical events more vividly, yet with a closed, predetermined ending (Rughiniș and Matei 2015). There is a wide spectrum of player positions – from a God-like creator of civilizations, to a soldier with superheroic abilities or simply heroic gestures, or, such as in This War of Mine (11 bit studios 2014), a humble civilian in a war-torn city. In what follows we look into Inkle's 80 Days (Inkle 2014), a game with an atypical approach to history, and we discuss its specific way of linking players' experiences with historical events and characters.

Inkle's '80 Days' is a digital gamebook based on Jules Verne's novel. We play as the versatile Passepartout, in service to the gentlemanly Phileas Fogg who has wagered that he will circumnavigate the world in 80 days. While the main two protagonists remain the

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

© 2016 Authors. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

same as in the novel, the remaining elements of the story are very much changed. The action takes place in a science fiction world, as it would have been imagined in the late XIXth century – a steampunk future projected from the past. Still, this retrospective SF universe is written with the hindsight of present-day authors. 80 Days is not designed as a serious historical game – but it touches on history and it can be played with a historical bent.

Compared with the original novel, the game includes considerably more historical references. The game proposes brief and episodic glimpses into the past, thus accomplishing a type of mystery that invites further exploration. There are no in-game supplementary historical resources such as in *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft 2014), so that players must exit to the Internet (or other people, books etc.) to find out more about any specific event mentioned in the game story. Still, getting out of the game is an option, not a necessity. It is a personal decision but not a prerequisite for successful gameplay. Inkle's '80 Days' historical references invite (but do not require) players to get out of the game and explore a little to better understand and appreciate the game universe. Thus, the layer of historical accounts may be experienced as an *additional, optional layer of significance*, which players can explore if and when they feel like. What should we do if we encounter a mention of New York City draft riots (Figure 2)? We may know what they refer to, or not; if not, we may check Wikipedia, or just go on with gameplay.

Because history runs in the background, rather than in the foreground of gameplay, 80 Days presents a tension between two types of relations with the past. As we argue below, the player, as *Passepartout*, experiences historical events from a distance, as a detached witness. Yet, in his encounters with non-player characters, they are deeply immersed in historical events, and their biographies are interlinked with larger forces.

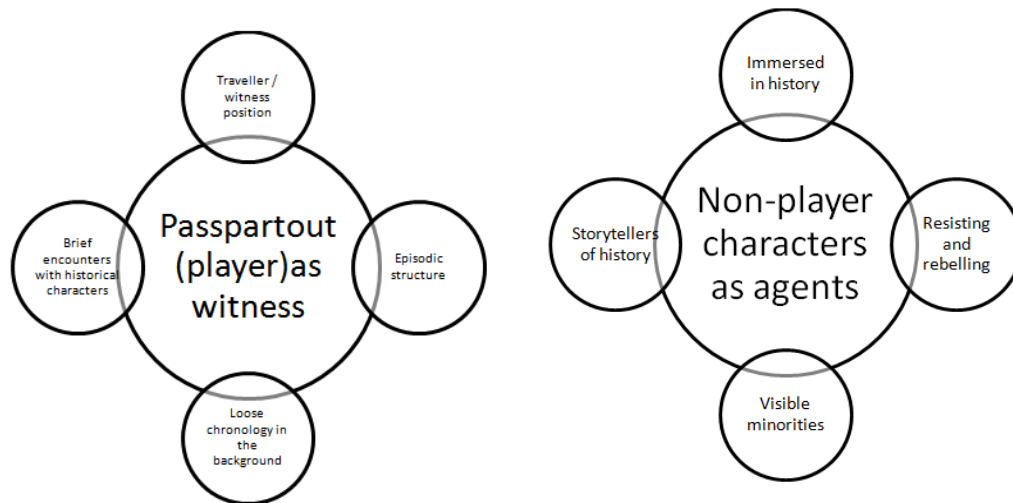


Figure 1. The dual relation with the past in 80 Days: witness players and agentic non-players

PLAYERS, PASSEPARTOUT AND HISTORY

In 80 Days different types of events with parallels in the real world history are introduced to build the game world. Even if these events are not part of the main storyline, they offer contextual information, useful in order to interpret certain stages of the game. There are cases in which protagonists' travel is affected by these events (e.g. they cannot reach

some destinations because of revolts). Still, very often those events do not have implications on protagonists' travel: either the historical events are narrated by other characters, or the main protagonists find about these events as they happen (see an invocation of New York City Draft Riots in Figure 2).

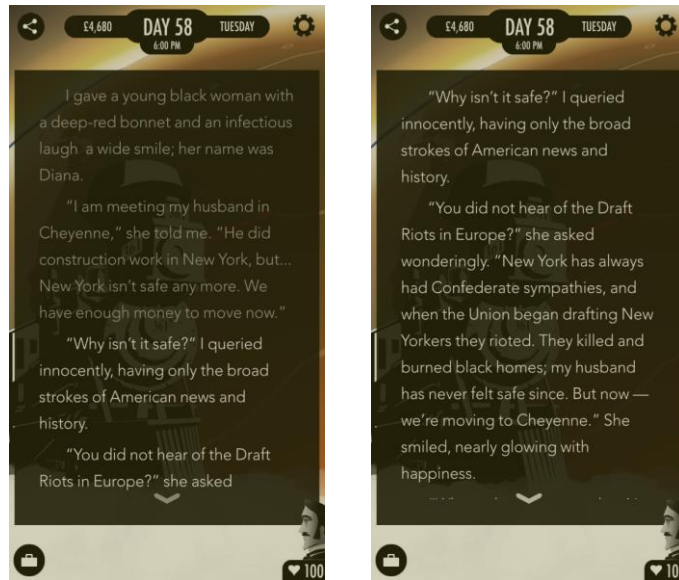


Figure 2. New York City draft riots, in 80 Days

The game has an *episodic character* (Ingold and Humfrey 2015): events taking place in different locations are largely unrelated and they do not have lasting or pervasive significance in the game. Passepartout, the main protagonist, has the option of engaging more or less with the visited places. As regards the large historical events incorporated into the story, he is largely a witness. When travelling around the world, a second layer of more personal happenings is open for his experience, gaining meaning in the context shaped by larger historical forces. This episodic nature *limits the relevance of historical knowledge for players*: whatever we know or do not know about a certain event in a certain place, it will not matter for our experiences in the next location.

Chronology and causality

The chronology of events that emerges through players' travels does not map accurately onto the historical chronology of events. In order to ensure some degree of correspondence, the historical events included in the gameworld belong to the end of the XIXth century. They are not only historical events currently happening in the past world of the game, but also past events in the past world of the game.

Lacking an explicit “post hoc”, the game also avoids an explicit “propter hoc”. History does not appear in the game as a *sequence of events*, but as a loose chronology, a *commutation of events*. The game approaches history from a cross-sectional perspective (with focus on events that characterize different parts of the globe in a distinct period of time) compared to a longitudinal perspective (with focus on events that characterized the same place in several periods of time). *This rhetorical option marginalizes the idea of a causal understanding of historical events*. The cross-sectional and fragmentary presentation of historical events supports a vision of history as dependent on discursive and situational framing.

History and agency

In 80 Days, historical events are neither used to maintain players' involvement with the game, nor to be of immediate concern. Historical events exist as such whatever decisions or trajectories the players choose to follow. *Historical events are running in the background*, so that Passepartout and Fogg, the main protagonists, *are witnesses, rather than historical actors*. Yet, as we see in Figure 3, failure to take into account history may lead to a failed engagement with the present world – which is ironically condemned in the game through news reports of Fogg's travels.

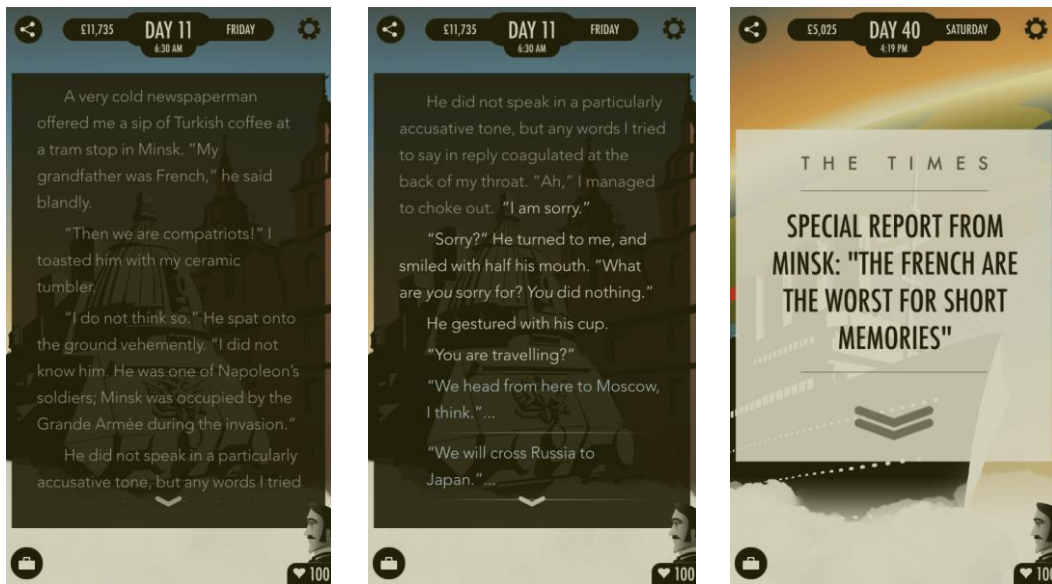


Figure 3. Agency and memory in 80 Days. Interaction trouble in Day 11, and ironic news report in Day 40

Not only that players are not participants in history, but the gameworld *historical events are often detached from their agents*: historical events appear either as a consequence of collective actions or as a consequence of anonymous rulers' decisions. The identity of rulers whose decisions affected the life of people may only be implied, but not made explicit.

Figuring out influential characters

History is brought into the game world not only by including events with parallels in the real world history, but also by incorporating references to historical characters. They might be recognized by some players. However, they might remain unrecognizable to others, who may consider them fictional. This is why exploring sources outside the game and looking for different information about gameworld characters might change the game experience. When players find out more about the historical characters brought to life in the game, Passepartout's journey can be significantly enriched.

As a rule, historical characters are present in the game only by their name, without any avatars or audio-visual counterparts. This is largely due to the textual nature of the game. Some unusual details may be brought to the fore in order to fill the gap created by the lack of other forms of representation than text (Figure 4). Most often the historical characters are portrayed such as to impress players and catch their attention. The historical characters are scientists, activists, artists, religious leaders and other cultural

personalities. Historical characters are sometimes humorously and ironically portrayed, but in any case their portrayal is meant to provoke reactions especially for connoisseurs. For example, we find out about Esther Hobbart Morris that she was 6-foot tall and had a pistol at her waistband (see Figure 4). While the first element appears to be true, according to our cursory survey of easily available online portrayals, the pistol seems fictive. Or did we miss something? A trace of mystery persists.

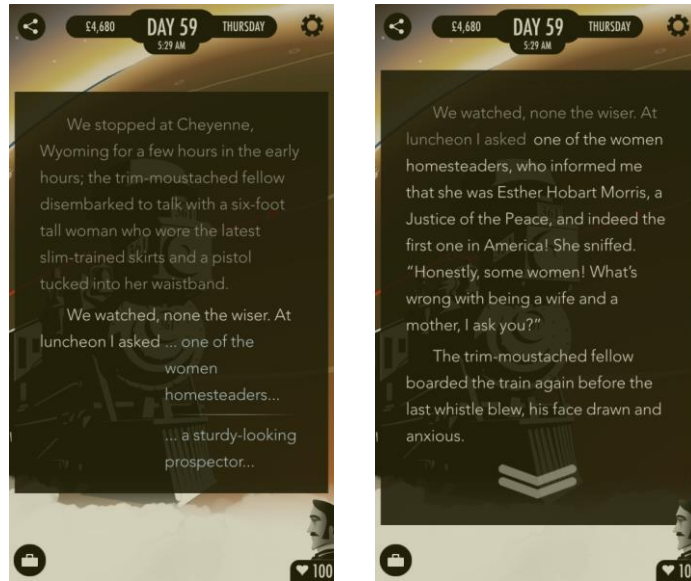


Figure 4. Esther Hobbart Morris, in 80 Days

On the one hand, historical characters come to be present in the game because there are other characters that talk about them. On the other hand, players may directly talk or interact with them. Players are offered the possibility to establish a brief relation with the historical character included in the game by choosing one of the proposed alternatives to continue the interaction. However, the interactions with real historical characters do not have major consequences on protagonists' journey: they may continue their itinerary as if nothing happened. In this context, to meet historical characters is to experience the game as an attractive adventure. In order to preserve historical characters as appealing to the gameplay, *they also have an episodic presence*: protagonists cannot establish more than one interaction with a certain historical character over the journey.

NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS AND HISTORY

Still, although historical events do not influence the main protagonist's adventure, they do shape the lives, actions and voices of non-player characters. Historical events appear as *highly significant for the non-playable characters*, whose lives are storied in relation with historical forces. This relationship between individual lives and broader social processes gives depth to characters, even when they are only briefly introduced. This characterization strategy illustrates Mill's concept of 'sociological imagination' (Mills 1961), referring to the ability to see relationships between biography and history. Passepartout and other characters seem to be endowed with such sociological imagination, on which they rely in order to interpret and tell the interplay between large-scale processes and daily lives of encountered people.

Generally, the historical events introduced in the game either happened with the participation of groups of people, or had implications on the lives of several people. *They are narrated from someone's perspective* and the game does not pretend to follow a neutral stance on history. The game does not assume an objective stance, offering facts in a textbook voice; rather, players are invited to guess on the basis of intuition or feeling what the particular event represented for the group of people they encounter. On the one hand, this situated, personal storytelling invites players to explore external sources in order to make better sense of the game experience. On the other hand, it implies a view of history as a realm that cannot be understood objectively, but always hinges on somebody's *perspective*.

80 Days often situates non-player characters in movements of resistance and opposition to power, in revolts, mutinies, conspiracies and the like. Non-player characters appear therefore as highly agentic in history, *making – and re-making – history through their actions*.

Visible minorities

Inkle's '80 Days' can be read on two layers, which players experience simultaneously but are still analytically distinct. Firstly, there is a non-fiction historical layer, that informs the stories of each visited place. Secondly, there is the steampunk science – fiction layer of mechanical androids and technologies, created by Artificers – the powerful engineers of the time. Most non-player characters in the game belong to the second layer. They also have an interesting gender distribution: probably than more than half of all Artificers, drivers, pilots and all sorts of professionals that create and maintain the technological infrastructure of the gameworld are women. The fictive layer brings women to the forefront, much against the traditional representation of women in history.

In the words of Meg Jayanth, writer of 80 Days: "If you're inventing a world, why not make it more progressive? Why not have women invent half the technologies, and pilot half the airships? Why not shift the balance of power so that Haiti rather than barely postbellum United States is ascendant in the region? Why not have a strong automaton-using Zulu Federation avert the Scramble for Africa? Why not have characters who play with gender and sexuality without fear of reprisal? History is full of women, and people of colour, and queer people, and minorities. That part isn't fantasy - the fantastical bit in our game is that they're (often but not always) allowed to have their own stories without being silenced and attacked. That their stories are not told as if they're exceptional" (Jayanth 2014).

80 Days encourages players *to examine history from the viewpoint of diverse minorities*. We found the episode in Figure 5 particularly telling, because it stirred our curiosity. The school history of Romania at the end of the XIX-th century is dominated by the Independence War against the Ottoman Empire 1877-1878, with little weight for information about the Jews living at that time in Romania. We were therefore surprised by this topic and especially by our ignorance of how Jewish people lived then. We promptly went to Wikipedia for assistance (Wikipedia Contributors 2016a), and this has been quite a significant change both in our gameplay experience and in our understanding of the evolution of anti-Semitism in the Romanian society. The encounter presented in Figure 6 brought us to the history of Jews in Ukraine, courtesy Wikipedia (Wikipedia Contributors 2016b) and thus to a brief exploration of historical roots of anti-Semitism, well before the 20th century.

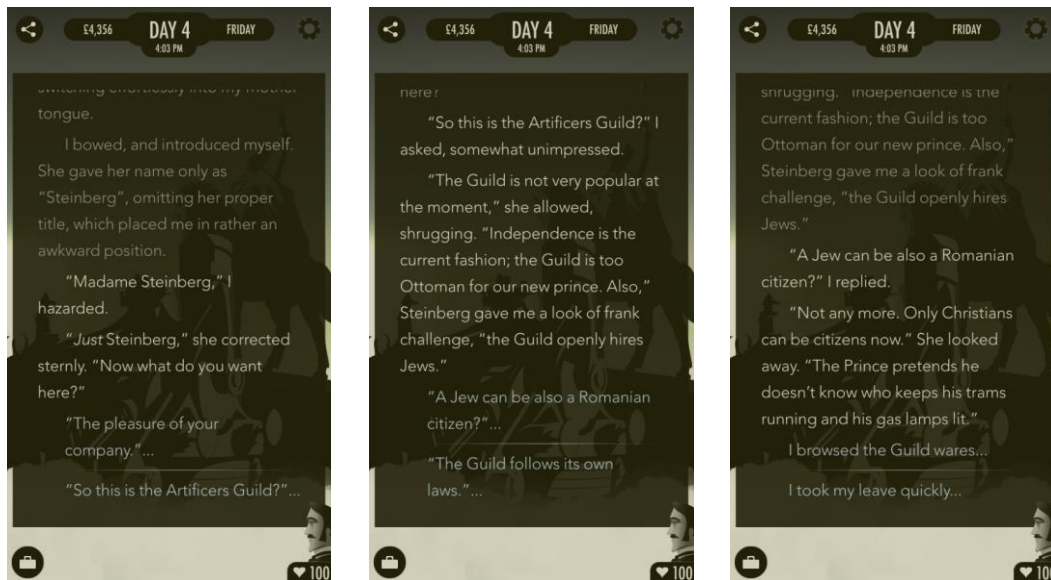


Figure 5. Jews in late XIXth century Romania, in 80 Days

Fiction is therefore used as a medium to support an engagement with less-known points of view in history. The game neither provides a taken-for-granted version of the past nor conveys common sense information. Inkle's '80 Days' proposes alternative formulations and views of history, inviting players to critically reflect and explore. It stimulates players to question assumptions and deconstruct meaning.

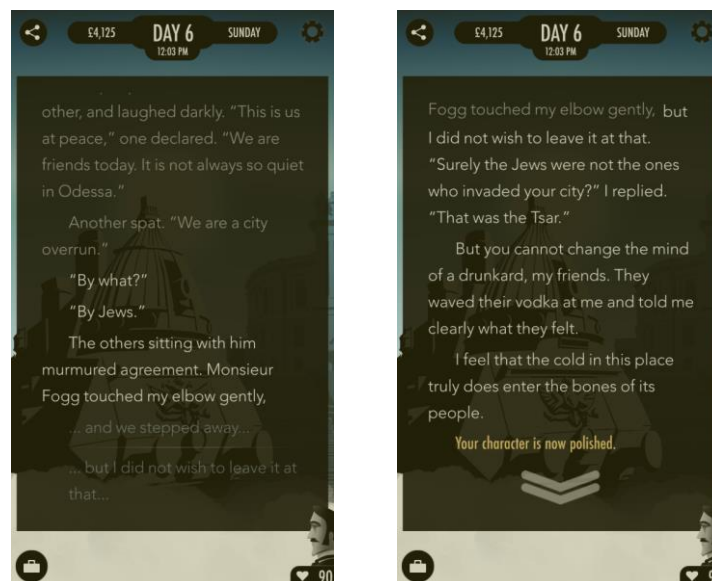


Figure 6. Talking about Jews in Odessa, in 80 Days.

CONCLUSIONS

Inkle's 80 Days is a great opportunity to teach geography, but it offers an equally powerful resource to examine history. Unlike other games that focus on a specific historical event, such as Valiant Hearts or This War of Mine, 80 Days keeps history in the background, as an optional, latent layer of significance and depth. Players have the choice to pay attention and investigate the game's references to historical events and characters – but this is not required for gameplay, and it is not even encouraged through in-game resources. Still, non-player characters' biographies are thoroughly interlinked with history, and the player as Passepartout has ample occasion to ponder, investigate and be amazed by their actions and opinions.

80 Days *combines two divergent perspectives on the relation between biography and history*. On the one hand, Passepartout (the player character) and Fogg are witnesses to major events, which are largely inconsequential for their travel. On the other hand, non-player characters are very much engaged in making and remaking the history of their time, and also in re-telling it from the perspectives of various historical minorities. The non-player characters vividly illustrate Mills' sociological imagination – the ability to “grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society” (Mills 1961). This means that in 80 Days *history is a resource for empathy*. We play for the fun of circumnavigating the world, but we may also play for the excitement of unravelling the massive forces that shape people's thoughts and actions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 11 bit studios. 2014. “This War of Mine.”
<http://www.11bitstudios.com/games/16/this-war-of-mine>.
- Ingold, Jon, and Joseph Humfrey. 2015. “Postmortem: Inkle's 80 Days.” *Gamasutra*.
http://gamasutra.com/view/news/255970/Postmortem_Inkles_80_Days.php.
- Inkle. 2014. “80 Days.” <http://www.inklestudios.com/80days/>.
- Jayanth, Meg. 2014. “Fantasy, History and Respect.” *You Can Panic Now*.
<http://megjayanth.com/post/100280300365/fantasy-history-and-respect>.
- Meier, Sid, and Bruce Shelley. 1991. “Sid Meier's Civilization.”
<http://www.civilization.com/en/home/>.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1961. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
<http://sites.middlebury.edu/utopias/files/2013/02/The-Promise.pdf>.
- Rughiniş, Răzvan, and Ştefania Matei. 2015. “Play to Remember: The Rhetoric of Time in Memorial Video Games.” In *Human-Computer Interaction: Interaction Technologies Volume 9170 of the Series Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 628–639. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Ubisoft. 2014. “Valiant Hearts. The Great War.”
- Wikipedia Contributors. 2016a. “History of the Jews in Romania.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Romania.
- . 2016b. “History of the Jews in Ukraine.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Ukraine.