

Playing with History's Otherness. A framework for exploring historical games

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present a provisional framework for analysing and exploring historical games based on identity/alterity theorizations. Using this approach, I situate history in different roles exploring multiple dimensions of identity/alterity. I propose an application of these dimensions to analyse how games represent historical themes and convey specific discourses. I will argue that similar frameworks that aim to deconstruct history are pertinent tools for exploring the medium's potential as they allow deeper insights on historical representations and unveil new designing perspectives. In this sense, I use this approach to identify unique characteristics of games that could challenge specific discourses, adventuring how games can add further historical reflections, reaching creative and critical interpretations of the past. While the framework presented here requires further development, I hope this paper will encourage debate on the applicability of critical approaches as tools for the design of subversive historical games.

Keywords

Historical video games, history, game design, deconstruction, framework, identity, alterity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, historical video games have been analysed from multiple perspectives. Considerations on the use of video games as learning tools (Gee 2010; Gee 2003; Squire and Durga 2009), on their capacity for historical representation at multiple levels (Chapman 2010; Chapman 2013a; Kappell and Elliott 2013; Uricchio 2005) and even on their potential for scholarly/research uses (Spring 2014) populate the field. From this extensive literature, I want to rescue two ideas that seem key in the current situation of the field: that critical approaches to historical games are desirable, and that engaging with the medium's form and usability should also be on scholars' agenda.

The first one is about acknowledging that many historical approaches hasn't been considered for video game analysis and development, and that engaging with different epistemologies is most required if we want to develop a more critical field or truly exploit the medium's potential (Shaffer et al. 2004, 18; Uricchio 2005, 336; Chapman 2013b, 75). The second aspect is a call to understand how the formal aspects behind game design and

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development operate (Chapman 2012) and to experiment with history in new ways by engaging with game designing/making (Spring 2014, 207).

In this paper, I will argue that internalizing and engaging with these two concerns is beneficial for the field, and it allow us to explore both history and the medium in unexpected and exciting ways. To support this claim, I will share a provisional framework that I am currently developing, based on understanding history as a concept through the gaze of identity/alterity theorizations. With the exposition of this model, I want to highlight the process of moving from deep epistemological concerns about history's conceptualization, towards its application for designing games that could work as tools for further testing, experimenting, and enquire.

I hope this example will bring further debates on how similar frameworks and processes can be applied for historical video games' analysis and design. I firmly believe that deconstructing history is a required step in the exploration of any form of representation of the past. Working towards unique games that challenge our ways to understand history could also open new possibilities for the inclusion of different histories and subaltern memories.

IDENTITY/ALTERITY FRAMEWORK

Identity has been a common topic among philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and almost all areas of knowledge, and that means several approaches towards it have been shared for decades. The primacy of this topic within cultural studies is well known (Grossberg 2003), and the recent criticism towards it remarks not only the relevance and importance of the theme, but the critical tradition behind it. The critical and experimental stance of anthropologists Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich has shaped the framework I will present in this paper (2006). Two elements are being contemplated from their research:

- The use of 'weak' definitions of identity/alterity that imply a critical stand on essentialised readings.
- Multidimensional considerations on how to explore identity/alterity, assuming the complexity and diversity within the terms and acknowledging several interpretations or different perspectives.

The framework I am presenting here draws from these considerations and attempts to analyse the concept of history as one built by discourses on identity/alterity at different levels of representation. These levels are not fixed nor definitive, and the dichotomies I am using to illustrate them should be considered with extreme caution, as just illustrative and subject of other complex interactions. Each level imply different readings of history as knowledge, and part of this approach requires playing with history and situating it at different positions at each level.

A first level is defined within the historical narrative, and it is exemplified with the dichotomy Us/Them. It implies looking at how history defines identities/alterities within its own narrative, stablishing protagonists, describing societies in different terms, and omitting entire groups. Within historiography, studying historical identities/alterities has been a well-known approach mostly influenced by postcolonial schools. But my concern is with how this dichotomy is integrated as a crucial discourse in video game's historical representations, where ethnocentrism, pejorative depictions, or omission of certain histories seems to be more frequent than what we might expect (Mir and Owens 2014; Holdenried and Trépanier 2014; Owens 2012; Mir and Owens 2012; Douglas 2002).

A second level is defined by the situation of history as a science, and by which discourses about identity/alterity affect this conceptualization. The dichotomy reality/fiction acts as example in this case, asking about how history is defined in relation to “others” and what constitutes the essence of its legitimation as a science. The historiographical debates on this area are quite broad, with Hayden White’s (1986; 1973) analysis of historical narrative forms and the subsequent responses and debates around his work (Doran 2015; Vann 1998; Munslow 2015; Korhonen 2006; Ankersmit 2009). What I find interesting, in this case, is how video games represent content as historical by using specific structures, formats, and images that reinforce the dichotomy reality/fiction. Encyclopaedic texts, diaries, quotes and references, are frequent in games like “*Valiant Hearts: The Great War*” (Ubisoft Montpellier 2014), but they are also used in historical fictions like “*Valkyria Chronicles*” (Sega 2014) to create an illusion of historicity that is worth to analyse.

Finally, a third level that situates history as a “cultural other” is included. This one deals with the representations of the past as legendary, mysterious, and unknown, and situates these discourses within the dichotomy present/past. In this case, theorizing identity/alterity through Edward Said’s (1979) concept of “orientalism” allows to recognize a process of objectification where history’s position as an “other” enables narratives and assumptions about the past that most of the times are in direct relation with the present (“self”). While media’s conception of the past as a mysterious object to be discovered by good-looking archaeologists could be related to 19th century historiography and the boom of expeditions and “discoveries”, it is interesting to analyse how historical video games integrate as well these representations. They might be involved in their narratives about legendary societies, treasures, and even aliens, as seen in the *Assassins Creed*’s series (Ubisoft Montreal 2010), or in their gameplay focused on exploration, especially in recent titles like *The Curious Expedition* (Maschinen-Mensch 2015) or *Renowned Explorers* (Abbey Games 2015).

Using identity/alterity as framework for analysing historical representation in games allows considering different perspectives and unveiling specific discourses about how history is being conceptualized. Deconstructing history through similar approaches brings a complex understanding of the representations, enables further interpretations, and opens new possible topics to analyse. But it also can (and should) be used for challenging current representations and recognize the medium’s potential.

POSSIBLE HISTORIES

Supporting the unique possibilities to explore and enact roles in video games, it is possible to adventure forms to subvert how the dichotomy us/them plays in historical games. In fact, the general increasing concern to reach a wider inclusive industry is in line with this possible exploration and has already impulse historical games like *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014), *1979 Revolution* (iNK Stories 2016), *Herald* (Wispsfire 2016), among others. These unique possibilities for empathy allows to subvert assumptions on the protagonists of history, leading to more critical and diverse historical representations.

Similarly, assuming the role of video games’ rules-based knowledge and it’s relation with disciplinary fields (Gee 2004, 3), we could identify in this characteristic a tool for subverting the dichotomy reality/fiction, by allowing players to acknowledge and interact with the rules behind historical narratives, understanding history as a construction rather than a set of facts. And because this construction process isn’t static nor passive, the interactive requirement of the medium (with the multiple possibilities to integrate players’ input in the game) can also be reconsidered to challenge ideas of history as an object to

discover and prompt notions of history as an on-going process of discussion, consensus, and dialogue.

TOWARDS MULTIFUNCTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

These elements are not new. They are already being considered by researchers from multiple perspectives. But by integrating them to a more complex deconstruction of history, and by mapping them in relation with each other, I found an interesting approach that could lead to the development of a specific type of deconstructive historical games. And this is what I want to highlight. The process of going through a complex understanding of history in order to analyse current historical games and to evaluate the possibilities to use the media for further explorations, is highly promising.

What I presented here is just one approach among others. The levels and dichotomies considered are just one of many possible ways to theorise about identity/alterity and the concept of history. And further development and reflection is required. But the multiple perspectives this approach has allowed me to consider, and the way in which it addresses the medium seeking for specific tools that allow quite particular explorations, holds some potential at least for debate and discussion. Developing similar approaches could be a quite positive direction for the field, regardless if our ultimate goal is educational, scholarly, or commercial games.

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