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Controversies: Historicising the Computer Game

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ABSTRACT

Games which involve historical topics have always been a staple of digital games, but at the same time they have often caused controversy and debate. This paper traces some of the pitfalls inherent to the creation of historical games, as well as trying to reach an understanding of how a history game can be defined. Throughout the paper, we investigate how some aspects of history can be problematic, and how others have been made more difficult by a lack of definition or an expectation that all historical games operate on the same intellectual level. We also examine how controversial games have coped with difficult subjects, and relate this to the development of complexity and scope within gaming.

Author Keywords

Gaming, History, Historical Gaming, Games Studies, Digital Games, DiGRA, War Games.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between history and digital games has always been complex. As the ability of games to realise more complex permutations has grown, it should stand to reason that the complexity with which history has been presented in these games should also grow. This is both a visual change and a change in the involvement of games with the world that surrounds them. This paper investigates the development of these games and specifically, discusses how games have sometimes caused controversy in their attempts to present historical events. Equally, many games have caused controversy by their attempts to avoid difficult historical moments or issues. We argue that although digital games now take a larger role in popular culture, they do not always fully grasp this transmedial potential. Additionally, we discuss how historical games exist in different strata; thus not only is it disproportionate to argue in blanket terms that they are not capable of providing detailed and often morally challenging representations of history, but equally not *all* historical games provide the same levels of education, accuracy, or information.

History is not an isolated article in cultural production. Indeed, the past shifts as social, political and cultural values

change, blending with current ideologies to form reinvented moments of the past. In popular culture, these mythologies of history often coalesce into distinct tropes – for example the idea that war is futile and terrible. Additionally, the idea of a homogeneous past has long been discredited [15]; meaning that as well as history being continuously in flux in the present, it is a mistake to assume that it contained a series of static truths in the past. However, this paradox has relatively little currency in games, which often need to present a very linear account of either narrative or place, and therefore it is this problematic interchange which we wish to investigate further. This paper aims to discover if the representation of history is intrinsically problematic – and that digital games that associate themselves with history are almost always courting controversy – or if there are some avenues in which the presentation of history can be a positive force that not only sustains the game, but adds an important contribution to the ways in which history itself can be conceptualised.

History is often integral to a game's worldscape, even if a game has not specifically identified itself with a moment of actual chronology. History contextualises many games since it informs their construction; a large-scale mythology is needed to underpin them, and this is often heavily derivative of historical eras. This can be the case even if a game appears to be located entirely in fantasy or science fiction narratives; for example, there is a longstanding association with the *Star Wars* 'Jedi' and the history and culture of medieval Japan, made even more implicit in the *Star Wars Galaxies* (2003) series, and historicised tropes such as the medieval period or the Vikings dominate many fantasy games. These historical signifiers need not be very specific, but they rely on a player's base understanding of how past mythologies or races might have lived. They are not, it is important to stress, either particularly detailed or particularly accurate, but rely on popular representations of history to sustain them. For example, in *World of Warcraft* (2004-present), the Tauren race bears many passing similarities to an idealised version of the Native American Indian. However in actuality this is more a series of cultural signifiers such as tepees, an affinity with the land, a language that speaks in terms of 'winds' and 'the eternal sun', than an actual representation of the trials or behaviour

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of indigenous Americans. Thus history exists in many places within digital games as a motif, but is not really very historical as a result.

Therefore, this paper wishes to concern itself with games that specifically identify themselves as dealing with history, and this raises the first difficult question, what is a historical computer game?

HISTORY AND GENRE

Historical computer games are not considered a genre in their own right; and this is odd, given how often history is a part of games. Genre itself is a difficult issue in games, since academic studies have hitherto tended to use type of game as a genre definition rather than the narrative contents. Thus 'history' in games is not a genre in its own right but instead, is covered within a wide breadth of game genres, with First Person Shooters, Real Time and Turn Based Strategy Games being the most commonly associated with historical themes. Thus history as a setting, or even as a series of tropes within games, has taken a back seat to other considerations. As Rune Klevjer argues:

There is a curious lack of genre studies in our field, which strikes me as a bit of a missed opportunity. It means that variation, tension and significant detail too easily fall below the radar of academic game studies. It also means that we are less able to bridge the gap between the very specific and the very general, and less able to describe the connections between aesthetic convention and social practice. [9]

Whilst history has hitherto not been a games genre of itself, since 'history' usually only refers to the narratological and not ludological aspect of the game, the fact that it given genre status elsewhere (for example, in literary studies), means Klevjer's argument that refusing to address genre in this way is not only a missed opportunity, but causes a form of 'blindness', certainly holds true here. Substituting the world 'theme' for 'genre' might in this case point to the ways that the underlying precepts of games – historical, fantasy, science fiction, recreational – might frequently lead back to more traditional understandings of genre in cultural, media and literary studies.

This idea of genre is also questioned by Tanya Kryzwinska, whose research is moving towards a more defined understanding of genre as a series of events or mythologies, rather than specific types of games (whose complexity now eludes clear definition). [10]

Thus we wish to define a historical game outside the parameters of 'activity' (shoot, manage, take a turn), and within that of its world setting. A historical game can therefore be defined simply but with the potential for scope:

The game has to begin at a clear point in real world history and that history has to have a manifest effect on the nature of the game experience.

ACCURACY: EARLY HISTORICAL GAMES

Historical games are often blamed for their lack of accuracy and linear depictions of historical events. At the same time, they often involve recreations of history which may alter events, or encourage players to pursue multiple paths through a game which potentially follows different routes through history or offers alternative endings. Both of these issues are seen as problematic. One ignores history, the other changes it.

To contextualise the reasons for this, it is perhaps necessary to return to very early historical digital games. These games lay down the foundation not only for the ways in which history is represented, but their basic composition also leads to a crucial flaw which was to come back to haunt the games industry in later years. This is the issue of space versus representation.

Chris Crawford's *Eastern Front, 1941* (1981) was one of the first war games to directly link a digital game with a historical battle. The game visually recreated a tableau with nominal similarity to the Eastern Front in World War Two: involving the movement of troops on two opposing 'Fronts' on a map that vaguely mirrors Europe. The troops have military names and various strengths, and the turn-based nature of the game means that each turn is named for a subsequent day in 1941. However, other than these basic motifs, the game bears little similarity to the events of 1941 itself. Part of this is because the game simply lacks the complexity to do so – it connotes a world sphere through a historical event, but does not have the ability to go further. Graphics also suggest a military map of squared units and arrowed movement, but cannot move into more sophisticated depictions. The memory available for the Atari 8 Bit games platform also meant that additional background details could not be provided. The game must therefore stand as a representation of the Eastern Front in 1941, but not recreation of it. For its time, *1941 Eastern Front* was as accurate as it could be, given its limited capacity for memory.

However, these early representations have sometimes led games either into complacency or inadvertent difficulties. The linearity with which early games used history as a tool rather than an actual event, rapidly became unsuitable as games became more complex. With complexity came both a need and the ability for further historical explanation. However, a second problem meant that this was often assumed that this was unnecessary – and that the player did not need a particularly detailed history to support a historical game. By supplying a player with a simplified version of historical events, two things happen. Firstly, exclusions are made and often noted by critics and players alike; secondly, the history that supplied is often extremely

linear; rendering it rather implausible. Early games therefore tried to get around these problems in two ways. The first limited historical scope – an action that remains popular in computer games today. *Gettysburg!* (1998), the *Medal of Honor* games (2002-2004) and *Brothers In Arms: Road to Hill 30* (2005) all focus on very specific battles, units or moments of history, in order to avoid complex retellings of history. However, the political differences inherent in a discussion of Gettysburg, let alone the military, social and cultural considerations, should give an idea that this has not been an altogether successful tactic.

The second tactic involves deliberately exploiting the idea of counterfactualism in history games. Counterfactualism is a popular motif in literary production, and can be most simply described as either a fictional or rhetorical study of ‘What if’:

Counterfactual history takes our own world and in some way changes it through the alteration of an event in our known past. The resultant story portrays a world which is still clearly identifiable to the reader, yet changed by this occurrence. Specifically, the premise involves the removal of, or a different outcome to a historical event. [11]

Indeed, the argument that anyone who writes about history is doing so in a counterfactual manner – recreating what happened even in a non-fictional context – is a strong one. Historical games, must, by default, involve counterfactualism – even if the events portrayed are supposedly accurately recreated, they must still contain aspects of creation or alteration to facilitate gameplay. Counterfactualism is therefore a useful option when game mechanics require excitement and continuous action.

Game producers have been quick to use the counterfactualist argument, even for games with a very high level of information, since it is at once a ‘get out clause’ (in case the history is either wrong or controversial), and it also means that time can be tweaked for more enjoyable gameplay. Bruce Shelley of the *Age of Empires* series, ironically one of the most detailed historical games currently on the market, makes a merit of this:

one of the key element in any *Age of Empires* game is verisimilitude -- the idea that while a game doesn't have to be completely historically accurate, it should contain enough accurate elements that one gets the flavor of the time period

...

"We're creating a commercial product here, a game that we'd like to appeal to a lot of people. Creating a truly accurate historical videogame would not only

touch on areas we'd rather not deal with, in the end it just wouldn't be any fun. [13]

LEVELS OF HISTORY

Historical games from the early 1990s moved in two different directions; the world management game and the wargame. To be rather blunt, either conquering the world or razing it to the ground with armies apparently constitute the ‘interesting’ moments of history for gamers, and thus although alternatives do exist, such as *Sim City 2000* (1993), in which various types of city improvement are directly linked to the history of architecture: 1920s tube trains and arcology blocks being some of the developments granted over time, they are rare. However, this split also led to another division in the ways history was presented – games which used history in a key manner, aimed to educate and performed considerable research in order to get things ‘right’, and games which contained history, but viewed it either as a marketing tool, or something to be presented, then quickly discarded as relatively unimportant to the main drive of the game.

In an article for *The New York Magazine*, Niall Fergusson argued against the relevance of games as historical tools:

In fairness, games like *Medal of Honor*, *Call of Duty*, and *Soldiers* have taught my sons an amazing amount about World War II hardware. But at root, they're just playing *Space Invaders*—make that *Beach Invaders*—with fancy graphics. [5]

Partly, this argument is the traditional one that games are a Bad Thing, but it also argues that games as a whole are not educational. The mistake that Fergusson makes here, is that he assumes that the First Person Shooter games mentioned stand for ‘all’ games, and goes on to decry historical games as both redundant and culturally offensive. In fact, his sons have only learned about World War II hardware because this is (almost) as far as the games mentioned go as an educational aid.

Once historical games move outside game studies and are scrutinised by more traditional means (including the media), Klevjer’s idea of genre blindness is not only not considered, but frequently becomes a weapon. As with Niall Fergusson’s comments, critics refuse, or simply do not understand that history is not the sole function of the game itself. The traditional embarrassment that comes alongside a scholar acknowledging that games might have an educational function leads critics to compare them unfavourably with texts that address the subject far more directly. Game Studies largely agrees that games do not function to a single purpose (hence the need to be a discipline in their own right or genre) – thus their aim is not just history, it is also gameplay, narrative, flow, agency, and so on. These factors cannot help but clash on some levels, but it is a tension that is easy to exaggerate if compared to more linear texts such as history books or lessons. Games

cannot, and do not try to compete, and the fact that counterfactualism is an inevitable part of their construction also means that they are constantly aware that in some ways accurate historical representation in digital games is always going to be impossible.

What is not acknowledged in these debates is the differing complexity with which digital games address historical perspectives. As games have developed, so too has their relationship with the culture that surrounds them. Historical games in particular are no longer in a position where they can ignore the demands that society places on them. In many respects they have a responsibility to present history in the 'right' way. This begins with an acknowledgement of the accuracy of the setting, but it is not always the designers' core motif.

The central tenet of the *Call of Duty* series is not to produce a historically accurate depiction of the Second World War. Instead, it is to present a visually exciting, fast-paced shooter game in which the player kills many bad guys to get to the next level. In essence, then, the core motif of the game is not World War Two at all – it is killing things in the fastest and best manner. However, this presents a moral dilemma. Killing things, especially human shaped things, is a point of tension in computer games vs. the rest of the world, the subject of countless accusations of 'video game violence' and dissolution amongst its previously right thinking player base. History provides a useful placebo to this. By including a historical context, and filling this with accurate imagery and even information, games designers are partly able to offset accusations of violence with the claim that in some part, these events really happened. The history they provide, even if it is in the form of very detailed weaponry, or even the masterful idea of Easter Egg bonuses allowing files, photographs and first person narratives to be unlocked, is not the primary objective. And whilst the history is meant to be accurate, it is by no means meant to be overly detailed outside of a military context. Even strategy is underplayed (since it is the player's prerogative to decide on this), and may only be explained retrospectively, or through walkthrough guides (which do not reference history even if the strategy may be derived from it). Like a bad historical novel, these games make no claims to represent a full understanding of events and are pointers to further historical learning, not definitive texts. This does not devalue their importance – indeed the military detail is often excellent, but because it is not the central aim of the gameplay, it should not be treated as more than a useful subtext to the main thrust of the game.

The impact of historical games – even ones that present a 'lite' version of history, is one that is continually underestimated. Better known in this sphere are the games at the opposite end of the scale which use historical development as key elements of their gameplay. These games are largely intricate historical management games, or military strategy games such as the *Total War* series (2000-present). However, whilst the continued reasons for the sale

of *Civilisation III* (2001) is apparently its use by educators and schools [7], it is also short-sighted to view these games as straightforward historical educators. Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen's thesis *Beyond Edutainment* [4] chronicles the tribulations of using *Europa Universalis II* (2001) as a teaching aid in secondary education. One of the key problems he records is that students did not really grasp why counterfactualism could teach about 'real' history, which they regarded more as 'concerned with facts and events since ancient times'¹. In this case, the gamers rebelled at the nature of the game, recognising that a game predicated on historical development presents fictionalised problems of its own.

Finally, developers have a cultural responsibility which hinges on the ways in which history is presented or may evolve in their games. This reflects an awareness of the outside world – history games cannot exist in a bubble, and need to be accountable for the version of history they present, as well as changing attitudes to historical theory and representation in the outside world. As a game's involvement in history becomes more complex, so too do the pitfalls of this responsibility.

In FPS wargames; the most simplistic of these historical discourses offsetting this obligation is relatively simple. Since these games concern leading their player through the field of war, they are often overridden by excessively nationalistic or militaristic discourses. The justification here is that war is right and fitting, has already taken place, and does not need further qualification except perhaps to note that war in general is a bloody and unpleasant business. Traditional ideas of comradeship in war are often introduced – frequently in-game rhetoric strongly suggest that it is not the player's country they are fighting to defend, it is their troop, or their friends. Supporting characters or narrative often serve to placate individualist violence by suggesting actions are collective, inevitable, and against a uniformly evil enemy. Dehumanisation of the enemy aids this; in the *Call of Duty* games, the enemy is often referred to as 'Jerry', 'Fritz', 'the Hun' or simply 'the Nazis'. Conversation or warcries revert to the traditional jingoistic language of the war comic. Overall, enemies are presented on fairly linear terms, to be shot at if they are a threat, or jeered at (usually by NPCs) if they are traitors, informers or spies. Points or rewards are however deducted for dishonourable combat in battle, usually identified as the shooting of civilians or turncoats.

¹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen also acknowledges that this is also because of the difficult choice of game: the learning curve of *Europa Universalis* is notoriously fiendish for a novice player, especially one with little experience of strategy games.

As games move up the tiers of involvement and engage history more, this responsibility cannot be relegated to such linear terms, especially when games concern counterfactual events. Some games simply stand at a neutral point – the *Total War* games offer up scenarios for example, but then leave choice to the player. Noise and sound is muted to generic warcries that are the same on both sides, and the multiplicity of troops means that involvement is relegated to the role of an omnipotent general. The troops may look realistic, but there are so many of them that it is difficult to engage with them in a personal context. However, the choice of all of these games to present development and research options is one that needs to be carefully considered, and exclusions or inclusions from the game are even more contentious, as we shall demonstrate.

Development trees are often an important feature of large-scale management games. In these trees, research enables various progressive artefacts to be unlocked as the player develops. These developments grant statistical bonuses to the player, and affect their future choices. If I had the seed drill, for example, my people might gain a ‘well fed’ bonus that meant I could concentrate on researching political developments. I have chosen between ‘seed drill’ or ‘horse drawn plough’, which give different benefits, and unlock different future developments. Sometimes these are used in combination – a player may not develop ‘x’ if she does not already have ‘y’ and ‘z’. This might seem a relatively simple series of choices by a designer, but it can stem from profound political assumptions on the behalf of the developers.

This can be clearly demonstrated from the latter stages of the development tree in *Civilisation* (1991). Development of the SETI project gives a 50% research bonus to every city with a science lab in it. This assumes that not only is SETI a positive thing, but has a life-changing effect on a civilisation because it effectively doubles all research carried out. The fact that in our present day SETI is relegated to a memory intensive screensaver, and that the space programme has so far not only become a redundant backwater of 1950s technology, but has so also failed to find any trace of life beyond Planet Earth, might indicate that not only is SETI not the life-changer that *Civilisation* anticipated, but that my political opinion of it as an author would suggest that I do not believe that SETI should be (in the game), or is (in the real world) responsible for a 50% increase in all research.

The choice of research topics might seem flippant, but research in games covers all sorts of elements, and makes all sorts of comments in the information it provides. This can vary from troops to governmental decisions, medical research to railroad building. All of these resources have at some time, or will be, the subject of historical and political debate. Representation of these events, and the ways in which they are written about in games, is a core responsibility of the historical games designer.

ALTERED HISTORY

In the past, the relative simplicity of games meant that they were not able to present developed representations of history by virtue of space, graphics and size. Inevitably, this led to problems.

Sid Meier’s *Colonisation* (1994) was a management game which involved the exploration and subsequent colonisation of the American continent. The player could take the role of either English, Spanish, French or Dutch seafarers. Colonisers had to establish successful settlements by setting up small towns and balancing their resources, harvesting the land and negotiating with the local natives for trade and land space. These latter relations involved trade and balancing the relationship between settlements and indigenous tribes already living in the area. Key decisions involved encroaching on locals’ land, and making the choice to supply the Indians first with horses, and then with guns. The final objective of the game was to fight off an invading army from the country of origin, and achieve Independence.

The colonisers most frequent option was to go to war with the natives, destroying them in the process. As Rob Foreman remarks:

[*Colonization*] is inherently troubling. Its object is to grow crops, earn money, build a colonial foothold in the New World and – most importantly – carry out genocide, wiping out the player’s choice of Indian tribes that already inhabit these Americas. They inevitably get in the way of deforestation, road-building, and seizure of land. All of these activities reflect historical colonization, and all of them contributed to the eradication of Native American livelihood. [6]

It is in fact, possible to win *Colonisation* without eradicating the Indian tribes, but it is extremely hard, involving not only a very detailed knowledge of the game dynamics, but a deliberate decision by the player to keep her colonisers in small, under developed settlements. Foreman’s argument in this respect is rather extended, since he clearly wants to make the point of historical denial in *Colonisation*. He neglects to mention this course of action, as well as the fact that the player loses points in the final ‘score’ of the game (totted up when Independence was achieved), for every Indian colony destroyed. However, the central point remains that *Colonisation* marks a juncture at which historical inclusions or exclusions suddenly become accountable.

The lack of counterfactual agency in the game was seen as problematic – expressed through the criticism that there was only one efficient way to win the game and that alternatives were rendered redundant or especially hard to achieve. This is ironic, since *Colonisation* does accurately follow the

progress of colonising the Americas in this respect. Colonisers *did* wipe out the Native Americans in order to achieve progress. Thus *Colonisation* is problematised, as it appears to revolve around the destruction of indigenous American peoples, including the fact that Indians were supplied with the equipment that abetted their demise².

Perhaps this inclusion might have been acceptable, were it not for a notable *exclusion* from the game. If *Colonisation* wanted to make the point that peace with the Indians was hard, then the argument runs that it should not shy away from other unsavoury elements of the colonisation process. However, in no part of the game was slavery mentioned. Pierre Macherey's theory that the exclusions from texts – that 'the text says what it does not say' [12] (Macherey in Walder, 2003: 215-223), holds great store here, as do theories of post-colonialism and choice. In deciding not only to avoid this issue, *Colonisation* seemed to be presenting an oddly bifurcated version of American history. On the one hand, the destruction of Native American tribes was condoned, yet at the same time slavery was ignored. Both methods of rewriting history – favouring a genocide and excluding enslavement, apparently justify the actions of the European colonisers. To players, there is a potential area of bleed from a historical game purporting to follow the path of the pilgrims, and the actual history of colonisation itself. Foreman cynically concludes that of course, some elements of history are simply not a fitting subject for games, however the duality presented (condone genocide, avoid slavery) makes this position untenable:

It would cross an important line, however, to ask the player of *Colonization* to shuffle African slaves by point-and-click across the overhead map and put them to work in fields and silver mines. It would be hard to miss the villainy there. Conquest of the Indians, on the other hand, slips more easily under a player's ethical radar, because war is a regular computer game element, and a player of one expects it. It is not unreasonable to want to excuse the game's creators for wanting to keep within the bounds of acceptable computer game atrocity. [6]

Foreman's argument reverses the previous claim by developers that only exciting history (ie. war and violence) should be included for the purposes of entertainment, by expanding on the idea that games have at least some moral responsibility to acknowledge events in a consistent manner.

² It is worth noting again at this point, that if Independence was attempted with relatively happy Indians, their insurrectionary activities helped the coloniser – since the invading fleets would suddenly find themselves terrorised by large numbers of mounted tribes of Indians with guns!

Issues of slavery and colonisation arise again in *Age of Empires III* (2005). A similar management game involving settling America, *Age of Empires III* involves the settlement of America by the European powers. In order to offset criticisms that the Native Americans were marginalised in the game (this time they were described as 'courageous tribes of Native Americans' and 'proud Native American civilizations' [1],[2]), Microsoft consulted a focus group of Native Americans within the company. As a result, the basic game included indestructible Native American villages, and players used the tribes people themselves as a resource; making Native American units and utilising their technology.

We wanted to be sensitive to the Native American perspective, but we're making entertainment here, not pushing any sort of political agenda. In an ironic twist, that might actually make the game more historically accurate since while the team worked to emphasize the positive aspects of Native American cultures, they didn't shy away from some of the negative ones either. The Carib, for example, were cannibals, something mentioned in the game's historical database. [13]

The focus group advised against setting the indigenous Americans as a playable race in this version of the game, since the potential to totally wipe out each race was felt to be too close to the ugly truth of history itself. However, the expansion pack for the game, *Age of Empires III, WarChiefs!* (2006), released almost immediately after the main version, deliberately inverted these pacifist sentiments. This time, players could now choose three indigenous races in order to 'fight back against the conquest of America'. Whilst reviews went very much for the rhetoric of getting ones own back against the oppressors, Microsoft themselves were very careful to avoid this in their own promotional material.

The two games, *Colonisation* and *Age of Empires III*, show very differing responses to a controversial issue. *Age of Empires*' initially careful treatment of the issue was then counterpoised with a deliberate inversion, and whilst they avoided the sentiments of revenge and payback, this was clearly one of the underlying draws in the *WarChiefs!* expansion. Microsoft's deliberate exploitation of controversy in many ways offset criticisms that they had not done enough in the first version of the game – clearly they were saving the rather passive portrayal of the Native Americans for a big impact later. Similarly, they were careful to offset this by making it clear why slavery was not included; because the issues involved were simply not pleasant, and whilst the game contained history, it did so in a truly counterfactual manner; giving a 'flavour' rather than a truly historical perspective.

'JUSTIFIED' HISTORY: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R Shadow of Chernobyl*.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R Shadow of Chernobyl (2007) is a first person shooter. The central character navigates their way around the geographically accurate ruins of Chernobyl in order to uncover the 'truth' behind a second explosion at the infamous nuclear power plant. It quickly becomes clear that more than human error is responsible as the plot turns to shadowy organisations and mutations, charting their role in the conspiracy of 'what really happened'.

At 1.23 am April 26, 1986, reactor number 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine (then UUSR) exploded after a series of safety precautions were disregarded. 31 people were killed; mostly firefighters and emergency personnel unaware of the risk of locking down the contamination. A radioactive cloud spread over the surrounding countryside, approximately 50% of which fell on Belarus, the Ukraine and Russia. The rest dispersed around the world – who were only alerted when workers in a nuclear plant in Sweden, 1100km from Chernobyl, were found to have radioactive particles in their clothing. It is difficult to estimate how many people were exposed to the results of the explosion, especially since in an atmosphere of post- Cold War suspicion, the then Soviet government covered up any cases of acute radiation, refusing to let doctors cite radiation poisoning as a cause of death. 336 000 people had to be permanently evacuated and resettled from a 20 mile radius around the explosion. Deaths due to the disaster from cancer or leukaemia as a result of exposure to the cloud have not yet materialised (and are difficult to prove due to migration and the fact that cancer is endemic to the population anyway) meaning that the exact amount of causalities will never be known. Currently, the plant is covered by a sarcophagus of concrete estimated to be in such poor condition that a minor earthquake or severe windstorm could cause it to collapse.

The makers of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R Shadow of Chernobyl*, GSC Gameworld, are clearly more than aware of the potential for their game to cause controversy. Indeed, this forms a central part of their marketing strategy:

Despite the play tests of the game haven't yet started, we found it impossible to refuse the request of one particular player to come see the game in action. Our special guest to check out *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* was the General Director of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Igor Gramotkin, accompanied by ChNPP Deputy Technical Director for Safety Alexander Novikov.

The power plant officials have been very positive on what they saw on screen. "I heard about the game previously, but I never saw it live. And what I've seen today has actually amazed me with the

level of authenticity you get while playing it", said Mr. Gramotkin. [14]

In a preview for the game in *GamesTM*, the magazine argues forcefully for the game as an ethical representation of Chernobyl, citing its use of 'elementary RPG' to present seven possible endings; four 'false' and three 'true'. The review goes on to justify the setting in forceful terms: 'Why anyone should pick on the perceived moral quagmire in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* and not the morass of, say, WWII games confounds us' [8]. It cites residents of the city at ease with the game, as well as the regular tours given to the abandoned and irradiated city of Pripyat as evidence that the game is no more controversial than an average FPS. The review ends however by vociferously citing events after the disaster (looting, the continued presence of workers at the plant)³, and adding:

In this way, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* has already paid homage to the catastrophe, so maybe anyone taking a moral high ground on this matter should put their reservation aside and instead prepare themselves for one of the most exciting PC FPSs since *Half-Life 2*. [8]

Obviously, all of these arguments are simplistic, but the review shares a common line with the game developers, who are seemingly keen to demonstrate that the game is no more controversial than any other FPS, and that the residents of the Chernobyl agree. Thus, goes their argument, it must be okay for them to produce the game. The curious statement about the 'true' endings is however a strange one, especially as the review also mentions that these endings are only accessible 'by pursuing subtle clues that lead to extra missions' [8]. On a basic gameplay level, then, this implies that the 'true' endings are not only hidden, but 'subtle', suggesting that in fact, history was being obscured rather than revealed. Finally, it should be noted that although *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* was released in 2007, it was in production since 2001, and won a Vaporware award in 2006 [3].

S.T.A.L.K.E.R demonstrates a deliberately antagonistic negotiation of the historical controversy line. The developers are obviously aware, and courting the fact that the game will provoke strong opinions. At the same time, they are keen to promote an idea of historical sensitivity – making sure the residents have played the game to endorse it, showing an awareness of the events to players and reviewers, and trying to make the game look geographically

³ The review does not mention but it is worth noting that the Chernobyl nuclear plant remained open until 1996. As well as the concrete sarcophagus, an exclusion zone of 200m of concrete was placed around reactor 4. In 1991, a fire at Reactor 1 took it out of action, and the final two reactors were closed in 1996.

accurate. One might argue that this is what *Age of Empires: Warchiefs!* also did. In no part of the press releases by the company, was the sentiment that *Warchiefs!* might represent the colonised 'getting their own back' on their oppressors – this sort of contentious statement could be happily left to the reviewers and critics. By naming the expansion *Warchiefs!* however, the suggestion of violence and retribution is clearly intended.

CONCLUSION

Historical games need to engage with the world around them more than other games. They address subjects, events and issues which are still discussed in a much broader context than just gaming, and this means that they come under more scrutiny than other games. However, since they rely on an understanding of genre, and lie across all spectrum of game types, they also exist on very different levels. Some address history in great detail, and need to be aware of the consequences of doing this. Others are more simplistic, and thus tend to remain within the tiers of history that prompt mythology and jingoistic rhetoric. In this way, both categories of historical gaming outlined here directly reflect the ways history is presented in the world outside games, but this factor needs to be considered far more than it is at present, especially when historical games are used either as education, or as objects of critical study.

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