

Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games

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THE POTENTIAL OF VIDEO GAMES for teaching history is receiving increasing recognition. However, the greatest emphasis is on their use as tools in secondary education.¹ The few studies focusing on undergraduate education demonstrate the use of games to create an immersive historical experience with counterfactual options.² While exploring these issues, my undergraduate course, *History in Video Games*,³ also introduces students to concepts and literature normally explored at the undergraduate honors and graduate levels. History professors often base their undergraduate content on theoretical frameworks, which they reserve for discussion in graduate seminars, because they assume that undergraduate students will be unable or unwilling to comprehend and appreciate such complex ideas. By requiring students to analyze historical video games in the context of both gaming critique and recent historical scholarship, my course not only increases student appreciation of the potential and limitations of historically themed video games, it also enables them to tackle—often enthusiastically—material that is frequently difficult for most students to comprehend in more conventional classroom and seminar settings.⁴

I have offered *History in Video Games* three times so far, in Spring 2011 at the junior level, in Summer 2012 at the hybrid senior and graduate level, and again during the regular semester in Spring 2014. I am applying to make the course permanent at the higher level and offer it biennially. The accompanying syllabus (see Appendix A) is from the course's first offering, since at the time of writing, the Spring 2011 class was the only completed

course that adhered to the regular fifteen-week semester schedule rather than the concentrated five-week summer session.

Since my course focuses on the use of historical theory to inform our understanding of video games, and vice versa, this article devotes considerable space to a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the games themselves. This discussion forms much of the content of the course. It is through the process of discovering the games that students learn historiography.

Student Profiles

The University of Akron is a regional state university in northeastern Ohio. At the time of the first two offerings of the course, it was the third-largest institution in the state. Most of its students live in the region and commute to campus. Many work in full- or part-time jobs. The social backgrounds of the students generally include medium-income families in the factory and service industries. Few of them come from elite backgrounds. The gender balance of new students was roughly even. During the same period, African Americans formed about a quarter of the student body, with other minorities totaling less than a tenth.⁵ Although the course was experimental in nature, I did not run it as a controlled experiment. Therefore, my understanding of the class profile for both offerings is both anecdotal and empirical. Nevertheless, students' informal remarks regarding their home and work situations indicated that the economic and social class profile of the courses was typical of The University of Akron.

A more significant departure from the university profile, however, existed with race and gender. Out of a total of twenty students in the course's first offering, only one self-identified as a member of an ethnic minority—an African-American male. Only four students were female. Of the eleven students enrolled in the course's second offering, none were self-identified minority students, while three were female. Initial enrollment for the Spring 2014 offering had five women out of a total enrollment of nineteen, with three minority students. This discrepancy is not surprising, given similar discrepancies in the general game playing population among gender and racial lines. Partly due to fewer financial resources, African Americans and Latinos play video games less than whites, although they are more likely than whites to play hand-held games. Indeed, the sole African-American student in my course's first offering had the least access to game playing technology at home. Although the female share of the gaming population exceeds forty percent, and is growing, males spend two to three times as much time playing games

as do females.⁶ Counter to prevailing gender stereotypes, the female students in the first two course offerings all preferred first-person shooters to social games.

The greatest student sample bias in the course was by major. In the first offering, eighteen students were either juniors or seniors, and nineteen had declared a major. Thirteen were History majors (some of them double majoring in a related discipline). Three were not studying for a humanities, social science, or related education degree. A Social Science major, however, worked in the university's computer center. The second course offering had two juniors, seven seniors, and two graduates. Seven were primarily history majors. Three of the remaining four were studying humanities or social science disciplines. The lone science major also had a strong minor in History. The third course offering began with three sophomores, one junior, thirteen seniors, and two graduates. Thirteen were majoring in History or training to teach History in the school system. Three were majoring in science disciplines, and two in other social science disciplines. Since our department does not conduct student course evaluations in the summer, I only collected surveys for the first offering of the course. In these evaluations, students in the first course attested to their interest in history as a strong motive for enrolling. "I had an interest in both video games and history and wanted to explore how historical the game I was playing actually were [sic]," was a typical sentiment. Writing in hindsight, one student saw the course serving a specific scholarly purpose: "Video games are becoming more and more popular. As Historians it is *imperative* [original emphasis] that we are prepared to analyze this medium in the same way we view other media." If nothing else, the number of history majors taking the course, and their interest in the subject, indicates that historical video games help history majors to reflect on their field of study.

Course Design and Implementation

The course comprises seven thematic units covering in order: (1) Game Mechanics; (2) Economics and Environment; (3) Cultural Bias; (4) World Systems and World History; (5) Determinism and Contingency; (6) Combat and Brutality; and (7) Gender. Students are tested on their knowledge of these themes through in-class exams. Gameplay is on an individual basis and occurs outside class. The classroom instead serves as a venue for presentation, discussion, and analysis. I introduce students to various games that illustrate each of the themes as we discuss them. Before addressing the course's major themes, however, students learn to play *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*,⁷ the one game required of the entire class.

Civilization IV is a turn-based strategy game in which the player takes on the role of a ruler of a “civilization” (for instance, Catherine the Great for Russia) and guides its development from its first settlement in 4,000 B.C.E. until the twenty-first century C.E. (or until a civilization achieves victory through conquest, diplomacy, scientific superiority, or cultural prowess). The game serves as a useful anchor for a number of reasons. First, it is technologically accessible—old enough to work on most computers and operating systems produced over the past ten years, but new enough to work on the latest operating systems as well. It also comes in editions for both Windows and Macintosh. Moreover, in contrast to action-adventure games, such as first-person shooters (FPSs) and role-playing games (RPGs), it does not require well-developed eye-hand coordination to progress through the game. Additionally, the *Civilization* series is one of the most popular historical game franchises, having sold over eleven million copies.⁸ As such, it has also been the object of scholarly critique, more so than any other historical strategy title.⁹ *Civilization IV* in particular serves as a useful example for raising several issues connecting historical scholarship and video games. It has a more sophisticated and less deterministic combination of civic options for a player to adopt than its predecessors in the series. For instance, one can adopt democratic government and state property ownership at the same time. In contrast to its predecessors (and, until the release of a recent expansion pack, its successor, *Civilization V*), religion is a central feature of *Civilization IV*, affecting an empire’s productivity, internal loyalty, and external alliances. Finally, as a turn-based strategy game dealing with the grand sweep of world history, *Civilization IV* enables students to examine many aspects of history while deconstructing its game mechanics and thematic assumptions.

Throughout the seven thematic treatments, we use *Civilization IV* as a common game to test the application of historical scholarship. However, students are required to explore other historical games of their choosing, which they review in the light of the seven major course themes in a final fifteen-page paper (or a few smaller papers during the short summer session). These games must bear some connection to one another, in terms of either historical period or theme, or production and marketing. Students choose from a wide list of free, inexpensive, or recently released game titles. Apart from *What If? 2: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*¹⁰ (used in the first course) and Jeremiah McCall’s *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History*¹¹ (used in the second), all required readings are of article or chapter length and posted on Springboard, The University of Akron’s online “learning environment” developed by Desire2Learn.

Theme 1: Game Mechanics

Game mechanics is the least historical theme, but essential to understanding the limitations of video games as presenters of historical content. Students view two videos and a PowerPoint presentation by *Civilization IV* design team leader, Soren Johnson.¹² These presentations focus on the difference between gameplay mechanics and subject theme, arguing convincingly that one does not necessarily depend on the other. Classroom discussion focuses on comparing and contrasting *Civilization IV* mechanics with those of other similarly themed strategy game franchises, such as *Age of Empires* and *Europa Universalis III*. Unlike *Civilization*, both of these titles are real-time strategy (RTS) games covering large stretches of history. That, however, is the extent of the similarities between the two. Whereas *Age of Empires* leads the player through carefully scripted tactical scenarios, hopping from one recreated event to another, *Europa Universalis III* gives the player enormous freedom to guide a country through four centuries (c. 1400-1800). Whereas *Age of Empires* sacrifices detail for graphics, *Europa Universalis* does the opposite. All three games portray vast stretches of time, but in very different ways and through markedly different interfaces.

Action games are even more scripted than most RTSs, forcing the player from one scenario to another, usually requiring the player to complete them in a predetermined sequence. Some of these games are actually much simpler concepts dressed up in superior graphics and historical themes. For instance, at their core, many FPSs—such as the *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* series—bear marked similarities to arcade games, relying on rapid eye-hand coordination. While these elements are present in the *Assassin's Creed* series, so too are puzzles, which play a much greater role than they do in most FPSs. For instance, the ability of the main character to reach viewpoints at the top of buildings involves discovering the correct route to climb them. While players experience the visual sensation of climbing a wall several stories above a medieval or Renaissance city, they are, in fact negotiating a maze designed by the game's programmers. Much as special effects in movies are in part the magician's art of misdirection through illusions, so too is the craft of the game designer in the attempt to produce a suspension of disbelief. The reduction of games to their basics is an important first step, because it encourages students to look for underlying mechanics throughout the rest of the course.

Theme 2: Economics and Environment

The distribution of resources in *Civilization* invites a focus on economics and the environment. William Uricchio has observed that "*Civilization*

boils down to several ideologically positioned maxims such as the more efficient production, the more advanced the civilization."¹³ I suggest to the class that the computational nature of video games directs them toward quantification, thus privileging economic and environmental issues. Indeed the geographical placement of resources, a central theme in Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, is also an important determinant in the success of civilizations in the *Civilization* series. The early part of the game involves exploring and uncovering a blank (and unpredictable) map containing a variety of resources that can be exploited by the civilization that settles near them. Some of these resources, such as horses and iron, are necessary for the player to build a competitive military in pre-modern eras. Other strategic resources, such as coal, oil, and uranium, appear later in the game when civilizations discover new technologies. Nevertheless, environmental history is a relative newcomer to the historical discipline and remains controversial, in part because of its apparent determinism and denial of agency to human actors and societies. In the course, students discuss excerpts from Alfred Crosby's *Columbian Exchange* and Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. They also read criticisms of both authors.¹⁴

In order to illustrate further the economic/environmental theme, I show students the games *Railroad Tycoon II* and *CivCity: Rome*. In the former, players build railroad empires across nineteenth-century America, Europe, and Africa. They must locate stations near resources, build mines and farms, and trade commodities to where they are most needed, all while trying to minimize maintenance costs of running rolling stock and servicing track. This game is more obviously economic in focus than the *Civilization* series. In fact, it can get quite complex with the selling and buying of shares. Nevertheless, since Sid Meier originally designed both titles, the similarity in game mechanics is clear, and encourages students to reflect on the underlying economic nature of almost all decisions in *Civilization IV*. During this unit, we discuss the popularity, from Karl Marx onward, of treating economics as the main driving force in history, and the tendency of computers, which are basically calculating machines, to encourage this materialist view of history.

This tendency of the medium to determine the message is also evident in *CivCity: Rome*, one of a long line of games that focuses on building and managing a city.¹⁵ The most famous of this genre is Maxis's *SimCity*, now in its fifth edition, which takes place in the present day. However, several titles have attempted to simulate the development of cities in the past. The Roman Empire has been a particularly popular setting for such games, which usually place players in the role of governors tasked with building and defending progressively more complex settlements. Although some cultural and social elements enter these games, such as temples and



Figure 1: “Redcoat” information screen from *Civilization IV*.

marriage, even they boil down to mathematical calculations, increasing the odds of political stability and happiness. While scholars have criticized Sid Meier’s creations for their Western triumphalist and capitalist orientation, the treatment of religion in both *Civilization* and *CivCity: Rome* bears the clear message that it is, to quote Karl Marx, “the opiate of the masses.”

Theme 3: Cultural Bias

Cultural bias is a conventional target of postcolonial analysis, and easily demonstrable in many historical games. Students are assigned contrasting readings that include Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis and Edward Said’s assertion that such arguments represent “orientalist” ethnic bias.¹⁶ *Civilization* has received much criticism for its cultural bias, for obvious reasons. From its introductory sequence, the game indulges in stereotypes regarding the civilizations in play. At the beginning of the game, players choose from a list of civilizations, each with its own distinct advantageous characteristics. For instance, during the “Renaissance” period, England is the only country capable of producing “Redcoats,” enhanced versions of the riflemen that are available to all the other civilizations (see **Figure 1**). This particular juxtaposition is inherently

problematic, since during most of the period that British soldiers wore red uniforms, they bore muskets rather than rifles. Although the game displays accompanying explanatory text on the longevity of the “Redcoats” into the age of khaki, most players are unlikely to read it or make the connection.

More fundamentally questionable, however, is the notion that the English (note that the designers ignore the union with Scotland) would inevitably develop superb drill infantry during the early modern and industrial periods, no matter what their earlier history. This is the type of determinism that Said and other postcolonial scholars decry, and is a source of much discussion and debate in the course. While *Civilization IV* delegates other characteristics to the civilizations’ “leaders,” of which the player usually has a choice, the essential quality of these characteristics is difficult to reconcile with the contingent nature of history that so many scholars emphasize today. For instance, in the introductory screen, a gamer playing England chooses from three possible leaders: Elizabeth I, Victoria, or Winston Churchill. In keeping with her historical role in chartering various overseas trading and settlement companies, such as the East India Company, Elizabeth enhances buildings and sites that produce wealth. She also works best diplomatically when she has adopted the “free religion” civic. This may be an effort of the developer, Soren Johnson, who studied under an expert in early modern English history at Stanford University, to recognize Elizabeth’s attempt to construct a doctrinally broad English church in order to minimize opposition to her rule. Once again, regarding the specifics, the characterization is problematic. As an anonymous writer on the *Civilization* wiki observes, “free religion...is the favorite civic of Elizabeth, ironically, as historically she had Catholics executed left and right.”¹⁷ But also, at a deeper level, applying the characteristics of one ruler to an entire culture from 4,000 B.C.E. to the present makes little sense. Not only do dominant cultural narratives and values change over time, few cultures have existed throughout the entirety of recorded history. After all, England did not exist before the Middle Ages, and Babylon does not exist today.

To contrast *Civilization IV*, the class discusses *Assassin’s Creed*, whose introduction proclaims that “this work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs.”¹⁸ It is true that Altair, the main character in the first title of this series, seems to exist comfortably amid both the Islamic and Christian societies of the thirteenth-century Levant at a time when Europeans were sending Crusading armies to wrest control of the area from the Turks. In order to do so, however, the designers cast the Knights Templar in the role of villains, engaged in a deep conspiracy worthy of a Dan Brown novel. While *Assassin’s Creed*, therefore, manages to avoid offending modern

cultural sensibilities (after all, who is going to get too upset over the Knights Templar?), it also avoids much history. Nevertheless, this game and its successor set in Renaissance Italy capture the flavor of the time, with lavish attention to architecture and clothing. Students discuss the merits and dangers of characterizing cultures, whether through “essential” strengths and weaknesses, as in *Civilization*, or through street scenes as in *Assassin’s Creed*.

Theme 4: World Systems and World History

A particular strength of grand strategy games is their ability to portray world systems. In the unit entitled “World Systems and World History,” the class reads excerpts from Arnold Toynbee, David Landes, and André Gunder Frank,¹⁹ who argue that the last few centuries of Western dominance of the globe are respectively either: the culmination of a lineage of civilizations, the result of European cultural superiority, or a temporary anomaly resulting from Europeans stumbling onto the Americas. Because it focuses on conquest, trade, and technological development across North America, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, *Empire: Total War* is an ideal game to feature in this unit. This game raises a variety of issues. For instance, it gives players the opportunity to play as non-European powers, Ottomans and the Marathas in the East, and (in an expanded version) various Native American societies in North America. Using screenshots from one of my own sessions playing the game, I show a counterfactual East Indian-dominated Caribbean resulting from the Maratha conquest of India in the early eighteenth century, a republican revolution in 1747, and a subsequent policy of naval expansion and industrial modernization which brings them into a war against Spain in the 1770s (see **Figure 2**). Students discuss such counterfactual scenarios in the context of the authors above and debate whether European dominance of the world system over the last few centuries was an inevitable historical outcome.

Students also discuss how well such games portray the creation of these systems. Of particular interest in this regard is *Europa Universalis III*, in which initial European explorations of the American and African coasts reveal potential resources already sitting in these locations, when they were, in fact, developed only after European arrival. Indeed, some Old World crops, such as coffee and sugar, are depicted as New World resources awaiting European cultivation through the development of plantations (see **Figure 3**). The ability to transplant crops and livestock from one ecological location to another is a major feature of Crosby’s and Diamond’s scholarship. Yet it is missing from all games on the subject, a fact the class discusses.



Figure 2: The eighteenth-century Caribbean under India’s occupation, *Empire: Total War*.



Figure 3: Coffee, in pre-Columbian Guatemala, *Europa Universalis III*.

Perhaps the most infamous byproduct of trading systems is disease. I teach a “new” World History course entitled *Global History: Encounters and Conflicts*, which focuses on world systems, interstices between “civilizations,” and contact zones between cultures. Many students enter the course under the impression that “plague” was a product of “dark ages” or collapses in long-distance communications, rather than a symptom of a robust network of trade. None of the games I have surveyed do much to dispel such notions. Plague shows up seemingly randomly in *Medieval II: Total War* without any obvious connection to the trading system. One might, for instance, expect plague to become more prominent in the wake of the Crusades or the Mongol invasions, but this is not apparent. The same applies to *Europa Universalis III*, in which disease, if a factor in the gaming algorithms, is so well hidden that it has no obvious connection to trade. Such omissions merely represent missed opportunities for instruction in the context of the medieval Afro-Eurasian trading system. In the context of the encounter between the Old and New Worlds, however, they are downright misleading, in ways that arguably perpetuate harmful stereotypes regarding the European conquest of the Americas. Four decades of scholarship have demonstrated the importance of contagious diseases in depopulating the Americas, thus enabling European settlers and the African slaves that accompanied them to replace much of the indigenous population of the New World. This acknowledgement of the role of disease replaced an earlier narrative that stressed European superiority to Native Americans in science, technology, and social organization. While the new narrative stressing disease may be problematic in its apparent ecological determinism,²⁰ it at least avoids the cultural chauvinism inherent in its predecessor, a narrative that remains commonplace in modern white American perceptions of the encounter between the Old World and the New. By failing to focus on this central feature of the Columbian Exchange and the integration of the Americas into the World System, video games dealing with the early modern world and European expansion perpetuate the earlier, Eurocentric narrative.

Just as disease receives little or no attention in video games’ portrayals of the early-modern world system, so too does slavery. In order to avoid controversy (discussed more below), some games depicting the Atlantic economy omit the issue altogether. Perhaps most notorious in this regard is *Sid Meier’s Civilization IV: Colonization*, in which European settlers establish colonies, trade with Native Americans (without, of course, spreading disease), and happily create productive plantations *which they farm entirely by themselves!*²¹ Although some European immigrants arrive as indentured servants, nowhere in *Colonization*’s economic model does one find an African slave (see **Figure 4**).



Figure 4: Jamestown's city screen, including accompanying plantation squares (upper right) without slaves, *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Colonization*.

Slaves are also absent from *Empire: Total War*. This simulation of warfare and economics across much of the Americas and Eurasia has much to recommend itself as a tool for understanding the eighteenth-century world system. In particular, its technology tree (an in-game diagram that shows options a player can research and develop) does not simply focus on armaments industries, but also on the underlying process of industrialization and its correlation to the development of Enlightenment ideas. Nevertheless, in terms of modeling trade specifically, it falls far short of an adequate simulation of eighteenth-century global economics. In addition to the three theaters of military and political action (Europe, North America, and South Asia), the player can conduct maritime trade with South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. The rewards of parking, and defending, your "East Indiaman" in the ports of these regions are, however, not specific commodities such as spices, tea, raw cotton, ivory, or slaves, but abstracted wealth signified by gold coins rising from the ship. Since the wealth is abstract, the player is never shown where it is bound in the short run. Spices might go to European and white American customers; raw cotton to lucrative textile mills that the player is encouraged to build

in his or her territories, and slaves to similarly productive plantations in the Caribbean and North American coastal colonies. However, the game makes no such connections. Players simply command plantations to develop and textile mills to arise without any sense of their dependence on resources from other regions, leading the player to conclude that their creation occurs in isolation from the wider world system. Moreover, in this game—which features India more prominently than any major title previously marketed in Europe and the United States—East India Companies are conspicuously absent. Certainly, there are East Indiaman trading ships, but governments, rather than companies, direct them. If Britain or France conquer India, they do so mainly through military means rather than trade, and they do so directly rather than through their trading companies.

If *Empire: Total War* fails to model trade adequately in its military-political world system, Nitro Games' *East India Company* suffers from the opposite problem. It has players taking on the role of director of one of the major European East India Companies, sending ships to ports from West Africa to Southeast Asia, and trading specific commodities in which compartments of ships are filled in a manner similar to *Colonization* (and as with *Colonization*, slaves are not a commodity available in African ports). This is an economically focused trading game in the spirit of *Railroad Tycoon*. However, players have no opportunity to engage in local politics, as they did with spectacular consequence in reality. Nor can they project military power on land, as they did to stunning effect in India. The game leaves the player with no sense whatsoever of how the British East India Company ended up governing most of India by the end of the eighteenth century.

Having students critique games for such omissions underscores an important aspect of modern historical scholarship: that sources can reveal as much about their authors' perspectives through what they leave out as from what they include. This understanding is particularly important when examining an artifact of popular culture, such as a video game, in which the designer must choose what to include and exclude. However, not all aspects of history are omitted because their designer thinks them unimportant. Some are excluded for reasons of political and social sensitivity.

Theme 5: Determinism and Contingency

No theme demonstrates the power of video games for understanding history as much as determinism and contingency. After reading *What If?* 2, Geoffrey Parker's introduction to *Unmaking the West*, or Richard Ned Lebow's "Counterfactual Thought Experiments: A Necessary Teaching Tool,"²² students discuss the plausibility of counterfactual scenarios, as

well as their own simulations of alternative historical outcomes through gaming. The potential of video games to enable students to explore alternate outcomes sets this medium apart from others, such as film. Movies focusing on historical themes frequently depart from the historical record, but they do not advertise themselves as doing so. For instance, in the 1965 movie, *Khartoum*, British general Charles Gordon (played by Charlton Heston) and Sudanese leader Muhammad Ahmad, a.k.a. “the Mahdi” (played by Laurence Olivier, in skin-darkening cosmetics), meet during the siege that ultimately takes Gordon’s life. In reality, the meeting never occurred. However, in the film, it serves an important purpose in allowing both leaders to state their world views and explain why they are engaged in what the movie portrays as a clash of civilizations. Such plot devices are common in film, because historical events are usually too complicated, involving too many characters to allow their portrayal in two or three hours. *Khartoum*, therefore, purports to portray what happened, albeit modified for the limits of the medium.

Video games do not do this in the same way. They often claim to be faithful to the historical setting or the forces at work at the time. But they also allow a variable—the player—to interact with other variables—the opponents controlled either by the artificial intelligence or, in multiplayer games, other human players. In action-adventure games, the player’s goal is usually to achieve certain objectives within the historical setting. In strategy games, it is often to do better than the player’s historical faction did in reality. Some of the most commonly played grand strategy counterfactuals involve World War II, where a player might choose the side of Germany or Japan (and attempt to win) or opt for France (and try to avoid collapse). Paradox’s *Hearts of Iron II: Armageddon* provides a counterfactual setting at the end of World War II in which the Western Allies fight against the Soviet Union. The initial deployment of forces and resources emulates those at the moment of Germany’s surrender, but the game immediately branches into an alternate history. Having specialized on Britain’s encounter with India, I was fascinated to see whether *Empire: Total War* would allow me to industrialize India to the point that it could compete with the major European powers in the New World rather than be dominated by one of these powers, as happened in reality. As I have described above, the game did allow this alternate outcome. However, in pursuing it, I discovered that, in order to meet the limitations of the medium, particularly playability, the designers grossly oversimplified the politics of South Asia in the eighteenth century.

By inviting and even demanding the player to pursue paths different from those actually taken, video game designers, perhaps unwittingly, stake out a clear position on one side of an issue that has caused some debate



Figure 5: Religion screen, *Sid Meier's Civilization V: Gods and Kings*.

among historians. Some argue that their discipline should not indulge in counterfactual speculation, but solely in what actually occurred. Others have retorted that to identify causal relationships is implicitly to speculate on what would have occurred if those causes had not existed, thereby considering alternate outcomes as well. The latter view may be more popular among scholars than it used to be, since recent historical scholarship has increasingly emphasized contingency and the role of chance.

Reading Parker's and Lebow's discussions of this debate encourages students to form their own opinions on the basis of gameplay. Not surprisingly, students tend to have a favorable view of the utility of counterfactual historical speculation, since so many games lead them in that direction. However, they also detect nuance in the levels at which counterfactual developments are possible. For instance, *Civilization IV*, rather deterministically, allows you to "discover" a religion, such as Judaism, by being the first to research a "technology," such as monotheism. *Civilization V: Gods and Kings* allows you to develop your own religion independently of the technology tree by choosing from unclaimed features that may enhance your faction's position at that point in the game (see **Figure 5**). Thus, although you choose the qualities of your faction's

religion, you do so partly in the context of the civilization's physical surroundings in the early game, which encourage you to pick certain features over others. Such distinctions encourage students to explore the boundaries between determinism and contingency in history and enrich their appreciation of critiques regarding the determinism of scholars they have already read, particularly those dealing with environment and world systems.

Theme 6: Combat and Brutality

If grand strategy games most easily depict historical contingency, then role-playing games have the greater capacity to portray combat and brutality. A central concern is the extent to which such games, for all their claims of realism, actually soften the brutality of war. A particularly useful critique of the sugarcoating of violence in these games is James Campbell's essay, "Just Less than Total War: Simulating World War II as Ludic Nostalgia," in which the author argues:

The goal at least as far as *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* are concerned, is immersing the player as a character in a war film. More specifically, they aim to give the player the experience of fighting World War II as represented in films dating from the late 1990s.²³

Campbell's essay provides an excellent starting point for discussing the ways in which role-playing historical video games relate to historical combat movies. One is the implausibility of recovery from wounds as depicted in *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*.²⁴ If the player's character is wounded, he (it is almost always a he) is temporarily disoriented. This is rarely a serious problem, however, because a brief rest sheltered from gunfire and explosions behind some large object is sufficient for the protagonist to emerge fully recovered and ready to continue combat. Such Ramboesque behavior is in stark contrast to the reality that a soldier injured by gunfire or shrapnel is usually incapable of further serious combat until he or she has received treatment and rest recovering from the wounds. Adding to the humor that accompanies this class discussion is a fake commercial from the satirical online newsmagazine, *The Onion*, purportedly reviewing a new *Call of Duty* video game that, for once, portrays real life as an American soldier during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. In this fictitious game, the player spends hours dealing with mindless bureaucracy and maintaining equipment. The only combat in the game occurs when another player's character is killed by a sniper without that player having ever fired a shot.²⁵

Focusing on game editions depicting World War II, the class explores the absence of civilians in these games and the omission of opportunities

to commit atrocities or kill one's comrades through friendly fire. An exception to this treatment of civilians is in the *Assassin's Creed* series, in which innocent bystanders are constantly interacting with, and getting in the way of, the main character. Readings from Michael Dower and Paul Fussell, focusing on wartime brutality and unit cohesion among the Western allies during World War II,²⁶ frame discussion of the tendency of combat games to portray the Western Allies in a more favorable light than they actually behaved. Dower's argument that Americans also committed atrocities in what amounted to a race war in the Pacific is muted in *Call of Duty: World at War*. Certainly, the Japanese are shown acting brutally, as are the Germans in the scenarios occurring in Russia. However, Americans appear honorable while fighting a fanatical enemy. The fact that the *Call of Duty* series also features a scenario in which the player fights zombies only underscores the dehumanization of the enemy in this game. Informing this discussion are excerpts from Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter's *Games of Empire*, which, using Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's broad definition of informal empire, argues that "video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—and of some of the forces presently challenging it."²⁷ The assertion that video games may be the tools of a Western corporate-government imperial agenda recruiting consumers as allies, and even warriors, provokes animated discussion in class. However, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter also argue that the free-thinking nature of many designers makes the video game industry a site of tension between this digital military-industrial complex and its internal critics. This book served as the additional major reading I required of the graduate students taking the graduate level section of the course's second and third offerings.

The tendency to gloss over brutality in history is not confined to role-playing combat games. We have already seen that some games dealing with the early modern world system omit slavery. To explain why this occurs, I discuss the Disney animated film, *Tarzan*. Written during an age of white supremacists, Edgar Rice Burroughs' original novel portrayed the population of Tarzan's Africa along an evolutionary continuum with apes at the bottom, Europeans at the top, and Africans somewhere between the two. To perpetuate such gross racist stereotypes in the 1990s was unacceptable, so rather than confront the prejudice inherent in the original story, the movie's producers simply avoided the issue by portraying an Africa without Africans.²⁸

Similarly, the treatment of humans as trade commodities is too controversial for many game designers. This is particularly the case in the most hands-on economically oriented games, such as *Colonization*

and *East India Company*, in which one actually buys specific amounts of a commodity to transport to another place. In his online lecture, “Theme Is Not Meaning,” Soren Johnson discusses the board game, *Train*, in which players try to fit as many yellow pawns as possible into railroad cars, only to find out when the first player reaches a train’s destination that the rolling stock is bound for a death camp and the players are assuming the role of Nazi bureaucrats with the pawns being victims of genocide. Johnson’s point is that the underlying mechanics of the game are similar to the classic Russian video game, *Tetris*, but the gruesome theme makes the overall experience of the game radically different. This relationship easily explains the moral problem in applying slavery to trading games set in the early modern New World. Indeed, Brenda Braithwaite, the video game designer who created *Train*, developed her first board game to supplement her daughter’s understanding of the Atlantic slave trade’s “middle passage.”²⁹ As a marketing proposition, however, such games are highly problematic. The purpose of Braithwaite’s board games, to make players reflect on the moral implications of their choices, is not the purpose of most commercial video games. Among games dealing with the early modern period, only Paradox Interactive’s *Europa Universalis* series actually depicts slaves as a commodity, represented in the most recent version simply as chains.

Yet slavery is quite prominent in titles focusing on the ancient Mediterranean. In Longbow Games’ *Hegemony: Philip of Macedon*, the capture of slaves to work mines is specifically an economic reason to go to war, and the actual transformation of prisoners of war into slaves occurs by the captives shedding their armor for loincloths. Significantly, however, the game does not portray the enslavement of women, even though this practice—primarily for sexual purposes—was commonplace and may have been the reason for slavery’s origins.³⁰ Creative Assembly’s *Rome: Total War* similarly presents players whose armies have conquered a city with the options of either simply taking over the government of the settlement, plundering it and enslaving the population, or massacring the population. The second option provides the most loot, but the third option effectively ends the possibility of rebellion in the future. If the player chooses the third option, a screen appears—entitled “Resistance is Futile”—that shows a line of condemned prisoners hanging on crosses (see **Figure 6**). This disturbing image of ancient brutality serves as a centerpiece for class discussion of the issue.

Similar depictions of war’s consequences are notably absent from games dealing with more recent history. Paradox Interactive’s *Hearts of Iron* series, which depicts the grand strategy of World War II, does not provide the player, as Germany or Japan, the opportunity to massacre civilians.



Figure 6: The result of choosing to destroy a city in *Rome: Total War*.

Nor does it allow a player taking on the role of the United States to see the effects of incendiary or nuclear bombing. Indeed, the hate speech laws of many European countries forbid game developers from using the swastika as an emblem for German forces during World War II, much less attempting to depict the Nazi Holocaust. Paradox Interactive shuts down posts on its forum that protest this policy.³¹

The fact that Paradox depicts slaves as commodities in one game but refuses to discuss the genocidal nature of the German state during World War II in another leads to a discussion of the tendency of games to reflect the sensibilities of their respective home markets. As a Swedish company, is Paradox more concerned than American counterparts about steering clear of European legal obstacles to depictions of Nazis? Do American developers, such as Fireaxis, ignore African slavery in order to avoid potentially offending African-American sensibilities? Alternatively, do they do so to perpetuate a positive image of American history? Or is it for both reasons? Is ancient slavery and violence less taboo, because it singles out no modern ethnic groups as victims (or perpetrators)? Since the game developers do not provide definitive answers, the students apply cultural critique to arrive at their own conclusions.

Theme 7: Gender

The final theme, gender, has been the subject of much analysis regarding video games.³² Using Joan Scott's classic argument for the non-compartmentalization of women as a scholarly subject,³³ the class discusses the difference between gender studies and women's studies and the possibility of gender analysis in the apparent absence of one sex or the other. Therefore, inasmuch as combat games reinforce traditional masculine identity and stress competing male themes of rugged individualism and "band of brothers" unit-cohesion, gender permeates their content every bit as much as it does Ubisoft's non-historical, girl-oriented title, *Imagine: Fashion Designer*.

The almost complete absence of females in historically based combat games, however, underscores a dilemma for game designers: how to give women agency in gameplay when their actions are not prominent in the historical record. This issue is one with which professional historians have grappled for decades. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the male-dominated group of amateur historians designing historically based video games runs into at least as much trouble portraying the past in terms of gender, perhaps most notably when they make an effort to give women some agency in historical settings.

In order to understand these pitfalls, students read excerpts from *From Barbie® to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*,³⁴ in which the authors discuss the evolution of female archetypes from the highly sexualized, dependent non-professional Barbie of yore to the equally sexualized, tough and violent heroines or femme fatales of modern video games such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. Along with the authors, students discuss the extent to which either image does justice to women, particularly when applied in the historical contexts of the games under review. An interesting case in point is Catherine the Great, who appears in *Civilization IV* as a pouting, coquettish sovereign, and implies that diplomatic relations might involve sexual relations with her (see **Figure 7**). Students examine this presentation in the context of historian Ruth Dawson's analysis of sexualized portrayals of the Russian empress during and immediately after her lifetime.³⁵

By contrast, the *Total War* series features women as domestic advisors and men as their military counterparts, when in reality women rarely served in either role. A rare exception I raise is the English aristocratic couple, Sarah and John Churchill, who played these respective parts during the early reign of Queen Anne. Of course, history records some strong female leaders, who were famous in part because they were female. Elizabeth I, Boudicca, Wu Zeitan, and Hapshetsut all appear as the guiding spirits

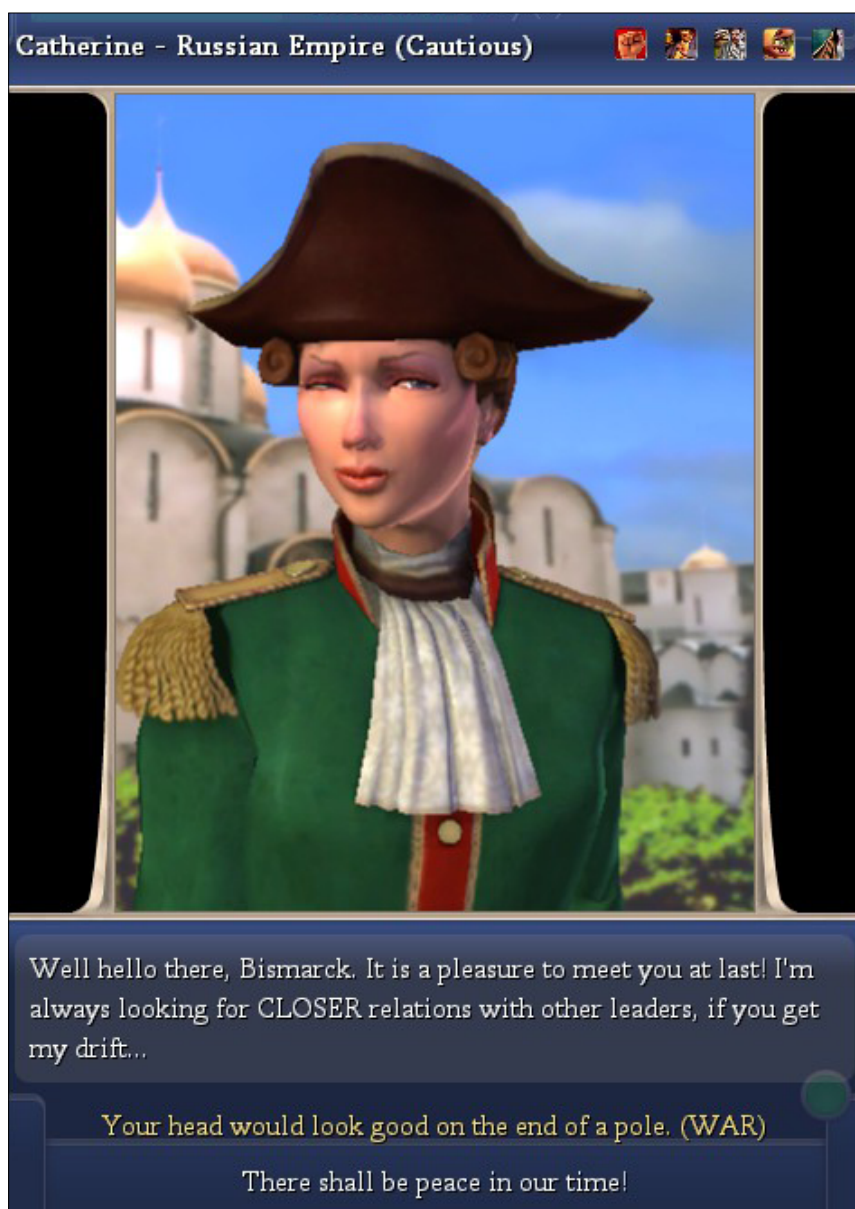


Figure 7: Negotiating with Catherine the Great, *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*.

of their respective lands in the *Civilization* series, though, interestingly, a classic case of a woman running a civilization through her husband and sons, such as the Mughal empress Nur Jahan, does not. Their presence sparks class discussion as to whether women are over- or mis-represented in these roles compared to the historical record. If so, to what extent do video game designers, often out of the best intentions, project modern sensibilities and biases into their portrayal of gender in history?

Grand strategy games, however, may not provide the best venue to study gender in history. By necessity, these games deal with large populations, whose individual members, apart from the occasional leader, are invisible to the player. They are the equivalent of meta-histories, which fell out of favor in the mid-twentieth century and have only recently come back into fashion, albeit amid considerable controversy, in the world of professional historians. Role-playing games afford players the opportunity to view small portions of history from the ground level. In some respects, they are more akin in focus to the micro-studies that are the basis of most historians' early careers and form the bulk of professional publication in the discipline. In other respects, they resemble historical novels, playing out fictional stories in historical settings. Between the two lie city-building and economic-management games such as *Sid Meier's CivCity: Rome* and Ubisoft's *Anno* series. Although these games have the player acting the role of a principal male character, such as a provincial governor in the former and a merchant in the latter, their depiction of residents going about their daily lives shows women performing essential roles in their communities' economy and society. These women, however, like their male counterparts, remain anonymous.

Role-playing games afford a more hands-on approach to social interactions in historical settings. How they approach gender is largely a function of the target audience for the games, the designers' biases, and gender balance among the design team. Combat games do not have to exclude women, as the *Tomb Raider* series demonstrates. In historical settings, however, they have tended to. A major exception is the *Assassin's Creed* series. Although the series' first installment largely relegates women to the scenery of its medieval Middle Eastern historical context, the second installment, set in Renaissance Italy, makes a much more serious attempt to develop female characters in their class contexts and explore their relationships with the male protagonist. The story line still occurs from a male perspective, but women are not mere scenery. In fact, because part of the story occurs in the early twenty-first century while most of it plays out in the late fifteenth, the game even slightly contrasts female role models and male-female relationships in the two periods. The modern period features a major character, Lucy, who displays an assassin's



Figure 8: Florentine courtesans training the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed II* to blend in a crowd.

combat skills as she introduces the neophyte, Desmond, to the shadowy conspiracies underlying the story. By contrast, the mother of Desmond's fifteenth-century banker ancestor, Ezio Auditore, pursues art purchasing, an activity more appropriate of Renaissance Florentine ladies. When exiled from Florence and forced to manage the family estate, Ezio's sister Claudia even complains that she has never had to work before. The designers of *Assassin's Creed II*, however, do not portray all Renaissance Italian women as so sheltered. On the contrary, the madam of a Florentine bordello and her charges train Ezio to pick pockets and maintain a low profile while the city's authorities hunt him. Of course, this brings the game—and the player—to a chamber filled with seductive women (see **Figure 8**) whose “role” is in prostitution. Later, in Venice, a female thief trains Ezio further in the “climbing-leap” technique, important for his success as an assassin. Just as important as the roles of women in *Assassin's Creed II* are those of men. The male honor code is on full display in this game, replete with family rivalry, vendettas, and assassinations.

A wealth of scholarship on the society of Renaissance Italy is available against which students can judge *Assassin's Creed II*. Of particular use are chapter excerpts from multi-authored works such as *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence* and *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* that cover topics ranging from the criminal underworld, to the participation of women in public culture, to the role of honor in female chastity and male violence.³⁶ By referring to previous arguments regarding female agency,

these essays indicate the evolution of gender studies over the last forty years and the controversies surrounding it. Like so much social history, they are highly local in their focus, but so is *Assassin's Creed II*, which the course uses to inform students. Other venues would require different sets of sources. *Assassin's Creed III* occurs during the American Revolution, and its co-release, *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*, is set in eighteenth-century New Orleans and features for the first time a female protagonist assassin—one of mixed French and African heritage. Clearly, as the course continues to change in order to take account of recent releases, some of the historiography that provides context for new games will as well.

Outcomes

Student written evaluations of the first course offering indicated generally positive results. Most appreciated the combination of scholarship and game analysis. For instance, one student wrote, "I personally enjoyed the scholarship aspect of the class. It was interesting to me to find sources that could be related to video games." Another stated their appreciation for "Exposure to Ed [sic] Said, Andre Gunder-Frank, and other schools of historical thought. Then learning to apply them. This goes beyond the scope of most undergrad work." Other comments focused on what the course revealed about game design, such as, "I liked picking out specific details in the games and explaining why they were right or why the developers possibly made them wrong on purpose." Students also highlighted their own level of engagement in the course. Comparing it to other courses, one wrote, "It is far more involved with the students. The class seemed more invested in the class." Another declared, "This course was more open-ended than most courses. It encouraged critical thinking."

Some students objected to the amount of work. Comments included, "There is a lot of reading and writing for a non-history major to do," and "Less reading!! And more gameplay." The last comment raises concerns about the course acting as what Chris Lott has described as a "creepy tree-house," luring students in with promises of "fun" technology only to inflict the misery of conventional book learning on them.³⁷ Yet the positive comments above indicate that for many students, the course achieved its goals. Indeed, detailed course descriptions explaining these goals and the work involved were available in the History Department and online. Perhaps the most encouraging remark came from an obvious non-History major who declared that the instructor "helped make my first History class an enjoyable one."

Since our department does not run student course evaluations during the summer session, I simply asked the summer students on the last

day of the class to suggest possible improvements to the course. This informal situation encouraged positive feedback, but discouraged some frank comments that might have appeared in the anonymity of formal student course evaluations. Nevertheless, useful suggestions arose during the students' critique of the course—among them, that the discussion of counterfactuality be placed much earlier in the course, since it affects all the other considerations. Interestingly, students rejected my suggestion that the course become a completely online offering, because, they argued, its power was in the free-wheeling discussion that occurred in class. Since first offering the course, I have more student inquiries as to when it will be offered again than for any other course, often on the recommendation of students who took the course.

Conclusion

The generally positive student assessment of this course indicates that video games are an effective tool for teaching complex historical concepts to undergraduates and introducing even non-History majors to advanced theoretical arguments. At the same time, students learn to analyze games critically for their historical content and design assumptions. For some students, such courses develop new levels of critical thinking that they might not have embraced in more conventional venues. Video games offer unique opportunities to shape history virtually as well as study it in reality. Most importantly, in spite of the work and the use of class for instruction, discussion, and analysis (rather than gameplay) most students enjoy it—thus better enabling them to learn. As one student commented when asked how the course compared to others: “The best part is that it doesn’t.”

Notes

My thanks go out to Dr. Stephen Harp, Dr. Kevin Kern, Dr. Michael Levin, Alexandra Wainwright, and Elizabeth Wainwright for their assistance in preparing this article.

1. For instance, Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Educational Potential of Computer Games* (London, United Kingdom: Continuum, 2007); Kevin Kee, “Computerized History Games: Narrative Options,” *Simulation & Gaming* 42, no. 4 (August 2011): 423-440; Jeremiah B. McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Adriana de Souza e Silva and Girlie C. Delacruz, “Hybrid Reality Games Reframed: Potential Uses in Educational Contexts,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 3 (July 2006): 231-251; Kurt Squire and Sasha Barab, “Replaying History: Engaging

Urban Underserved Students in Learning World History Through Computer Simulation Games,” in *ICLS '04 Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Learning Sciences* (London, United Kingdom: International Society of the Learning Sciences, 2004), 505-512; Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins, “Harnessing the Power of Games in Education,” *InSight* 3, no. 1 (2003): 7-33.

2. Thomas Arnold, “Make Your History Class Hop with Excitement (At Least Once a Semester): Designing and Using Classroom Simulations,” *The History Teacher* 31, no. 2 (February 1998): 193-203; Shawn Graham, “Rolling Your Own: On Modding Commercial Games for Educational Goals” (paper presented at the Playing with Technology in History Conference, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, 2010); Aaron Whelchel, “Using Civilization Simulation Video Games in the World History Classroom,” *World History Connected* 4, no. 2 (February 2007), <<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/4.2/whelchel.html>>.

3. For its first offering, the course went under the title, *Special Topics: History in Computer Games*. For its second, *Selected Studies: History in Video Games*. The title used in this article is the one that I am listing it as in my application to make it a permanent course.

4. For a discussion of the challenges of getting students interested in historiography, see Stephanie van Hover, David Hicks, and Stephen Cotton, “‘Can You Make ‘Historiography’ Sound More Friendly?’: Towards the Construction of a Reliable and Validated History Teaching Observation Instrument,” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 4 (August 2012): 603-612.

5. Based on statistics from the annual reports on new students for 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011 in “The University of Akron: New Student Enrollment Profile,” <<http://www.uakron.edu/ir/new-student-enrollment-profile.dot>>.

6. Mary E. Green and Mary Nell McNeese, “Factors That Predict Digital Game Play,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 19, no. 3 (September 2008): 262-263; Philip Bonanno and P. A. M. Kommers, “Gender Differences and Styles in the Use of Digital Games,” *Educational Psychology* 25, no. 1 (February 2005): 13-41; Victoria Rideout, Donald F. Roberts, and Ulla G. Foehr, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds: Executive Summary* (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005).

7. *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* (Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2005).

8. Kyle Orland, “Grand Theft Auto IV Passes 22M Shipped, Franchise Above 114M,” *Gamasutra.com*, 14 September 2011, <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/37228/Grand_Theft_Auto_IV_Passes_22M_Shipped_Franchise_Above_114M.php>.

9. The *Civilization* series is a focus of numerous studies of historical games. For a standard cultural critique, see Matthew Kapell, “Civilization and Its Discontents: American Monomythic Structure as Historical Simulacrum,” *Popular Culture Review* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 129-136.

10. Robert Cowley, ed., *What If? 2: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: Putnam Adult, 2001).

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12. “Civilization IV: Prototyping (part 1),” YouTube video, 10:00, posted by Kasman, 9 April 2010, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTM7TT7bOUk>>; Soren Johnson, “Game Developer Column 11: Theme Is Not Meaning (Part I),” *Designer Notes: Soren Johnson's Game Design Journal*, 14 June 2010, <<http://www.designer-notes.com/?p=237>>; Soren Johnson, “Playing to Lose: AI and ‘Civilization’ (Soren Johnson),” YouTube video, 1:00:28, posted by GoogleTechTalks, 26 August 2010, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJcuQQ1eWWI>>.

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14. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492, 30th Anniversary Edition* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003); Jared M. Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006); Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Tom Tomlinson, "Review of *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*," *Reviews in History*, review no. 51 (May 1998), <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/51>>; Victor Davis Hanson, "Decline and Fall (Review of *Collapse, How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*)," *National Review*, 28 March 2005, <<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/214502/decline-and-fall/victor-davis-hanson>>.
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21. *Empire: Total War* (Horsham, United Kingdom: Sega, 2010); *Civilization IV: Colonization* (Novato, CA: 2K Games, 2008).
22. Cowley, Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker, eds., *Unmaking the West: "What-if" Scenarios That Rewrite World History* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
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24. *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, 2002); *Call of Duty: World at War* (Santa Monica, CA: Activision Blizzard, 2008).
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36. Margery A. Ganz, "Perceived Insults and Their Consequences: Acciaiuoli, Neroni, and Medici Relationships in the 1460s," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 155-172; John K. Brackett, "The Florentine Criminal Underworld: The Underside of the Renaissance," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 293-314; Robert C. Davis, "The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, Women and Men in History (London, United Kingdom: Longman, 1998), 19-38; Sharon T. Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, Women and Men in History (London, United Kingdom: Longman, 1998), 39-60; Samuel K. Cohn, "Women and Work in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, Women and Men in History (London, United Kingdom: Longman, 1998), 107-126.

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Appendix A

Special Topics: History in Video Games

Professor: Dr. A. Martin Wainwright

Office: CAS 216

Office hours: MWF 9:10-9:50, or by appointment

Purpose

Video games are the latest technology to present historical material as entertainment. Like authors of novels and producers of movies, designers of video games must choose how to present historical themes in their games. Unlike previous media, however, video games offer the consumer the opportunity to participate actively in the re-creation of history, exploring alternatives to actual events and developments. This course examines the presentation of history in video games, analyzing them for accuracy, bias, structural limitations, and utility as teaching tools.

Required Course Material

Games

Civilization IV: Complete—This version includes *Civilization IV* and its expansion packs, *Civilization IV: Warlords* and *Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword*. It also includes the standalone game, *Civilization IV: Colonization*. This game is for PC. Mac users should buy *Civilization IV: Gold Edition* for Mac. *Civilization IV* will serve as our template early in the course for learning how to analyze computer games. We will also be considering first-person action games and those who wish to can make these a major part of their course experience.

You are also responsible for buying other games of your choosing as necessary to analyze in subsequent assignments. If appropriate for this course, you can use games you already own.

Readings and Online Lectures

Robert Cowley, ed., *What If? 2: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*. Since a unique feature of gaming is its ability to allow players to construct alternatives to what really occurred, we will be using this collection of professional historians' speculations of what might have happened if a single event in the area of their interests had changed.

A series of other readings are available on Springboard (springboard.uakron.edu), which you can access with your university ID and password. The course schedule later in this syllabus refers to the due dates for completing these readings.

The course's Springboard site also has links to lectures that you are expected to watch outside class. Further links take you to major game developer sites and discussion blogs.

Gaming Hardware

In order to take this course, you must have the hardware to run the games you analyze. Since it is acceptable to use older releases that demand less memory, storage space, and graphics capabilities, your machine's minimum capabilities must be those needed to

run the one required game, *Civilization IV*. Please make sure that your equipment is adequate for this task.

You are welcome and even encouraged to bring laptops to class, but doing so is not essential if you run your games on a desktop or other game device.

Assignments and Their Values

In-class participation	100
On-line participation	200
Test #1	100
Test #2	100
Individual game analyses and comments (2 x 100 each)	200
Comparative analysis - Initial draft	100
Comparative analysis - Presentation	50
Comparative analysis - Final draft	150
Total	1000

Assignments

Attendance

Attendance is required. You are allowed four absences for whatever reasons you choose. Every absence beyond these four will result in the loss of a letter grade from the course total of 1000, no matter what the reason. It is therefore wise to reserve your four absences for emergencies. If emergencies arise that require you to miss more than four classes, you should consider withdrawing from the course. Discussion means more than simple attendance. It involves active participation in class discussion of the movies.

Participation

Participation forms a major portion of this course. 100 points will be devoted to in-class participation and presentations of game material. Another 200 points is devoted to online discussions. I will keep you posted on your progress in participation.

Tests

Students will take two essay tests that will test their knowledge of how specific computer games fulfill or depart from historical scholarship. Familiarity with the online readings will be essential for success on these tests.

Comparative Review

Choose a group of four computer games dealing with historical themes and submit a typewritten fifteen-page, double-spaced comparative analysis according to the guidelines provided on Springboard. The games should relate to each other in some way, sharing either a common design team or theme. Only one of these can be either *Civilization IV* or a game you have already reviewed individually. Before you write, you must submit a list of games with a tentative thesis for my approval. This assignment includes the submission of a preliminary draft.

Presentation

Make a ten- to fifteen-minute presentation on a game in your comparative review, using either PowerPoint, still screenshots, videocapture files, or the actual game. Explain how the clip(s) or shot(s) illustrate one or more major issues in your review.

Course Policies

Grading

The plus and minus system applies according to the following percentages: 94-100 A; 90-93 A-; 87-89 B+; 83-86 B; 80-82 B-; 77-79 C+; 73-76 C; 70-72 C-; 67-69 D+; 63-67 D; 60-62 D-; below 60 F.

Exemptions

Alternative due dates for student submission of assignments will be arranged only when evidence of an illness or unavoidable scheduling conflict is demonstrated.

Withdrawals

College policy forbids students from withdrawing from a course after the last class-day of the seventh (7th) week of the semester. Exceptions to this policy are only considered in demonstrable emergency cases and must be approved by the dean.

Plagiarism and other forms of Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism is the attempt to present a copy of somebody else's work, or a portion thereof, and pass it off as one's own. Assignments exhibiting substantial evidence of plagiarism may receive an "F" no matter what the other merits of their content. Evidence of extreme forms of plagiarism may result in failure of the entire course and disciplinary action by the university administration.

Electronic Devices

Since this course focuses on a medium requiring electronic devices, you are welcome and even encouraged to bring them to class. However, you must use these devices only for matters related to course content, such as checking information online, presenting material, and taking notes. Cell phones must be silenced. If you need to answer an urgent call, please excuse yourself from the class. **Texting during class or working on assignments unrelated to the material being discussed in class is absolutely forbidden. Violation of these rules may result in the withdrawal of privileges for the individual concerned.**

Tentative Schedule of Discussions and Assignments

Readings are due at the beginning of the unit in which they will be discussed. Weekly assignments are tentative and may be adjusted.

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| Unit 1. | <u>Course Introduction (Weeks 1-2)</u> |
| a. | Syllabus review |
| b. | <i>Civilization IV</i> instructions |
| c. | Comparing versions of <i>Civilization</i> |
| Unit 2. | <u>Game Mechanics (Weeks 3-4)</u> |
| a. | What to consider |
| b. | Discussion: <i>Civilization IV</i>'s development. Soren Johnson, "Civilization Prototyping" (on YouTube). |
| c. | Discussion: Soren Johnson, "Theme vs. Meaning" lecture summary with PowerPoint display (on Springboard). |
| d. | Discussion: Soren Johnson, "Playing to Lose: AI and <i>Civilization</i>" (on YouTube). |
| e. | Modding |
| f. | How historical can a computer game be? Playing <i>Europa Universalis III</i> and <i>Victoria II</i> |

- Unit 3. Economics and Environment (Week 5)
- a. **Discussion:** Alfred Crosby, “The Columbian Exchange”; Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee*, chs. 10 and 14; and reviews of Diamond’s work by James Michael Blaut, Victor Hanson, and Tom Tomlinson.
 - b. To what extent does *Civilization IV* incorporate the Columbian Exchange into their presentations of history?
- Unit 4. Cultural Bias (Week 6)
- a. Introduction to historical scholarship relevant to computer games
 - b. **Discussion:** Samuel P. Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations”; and Edward Said, “The Clash of Ignorance”.
 - c. **Discussion:** Is *Civilization* culturally biased? Matthew Kapell, “Civilization and Its Discontents”; and Joseph Sautler, “Include Cultural Diversity”.
 - d. Is there any way to avoid cultural bias? Analyzing *Assassin’s Creed World Systems and World History* (Weeks 7-8)
- Unit 5. World Systems and World History (Weeks 7-8)
- a. What to consider: Introduction to World Systems Analysis and World History
 - b. **Discussion:** Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, ch. 1; David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, ch. 3; and André Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT*, ch. 1.
 - c. World systems in *Empire: Total War*
 - d. **Game Review #1** (due Monday, February 21)
 - e. **Comparative analysis proposals** (due Wednesday, March 2)
- Unit 6. **Midterm (Week 9)**
- a. **Midterm Exam, Units 1-6** (Wednesday, March 9)
- Unit 7. Determinism and Contingency (Week 10)
- a. **Discussion:** Alternate History. Robert Cowley, et al., *What If? 2*.
 - b. Technology trees and military tactics in *Civilization V* and *Medieval: Total War—Kingdoms: Americas*.
- Unit 8. Combat and Brutality (Week 11)
- a. **Discussion:** Paul Fussell, *Wartime*, chs. 9-10 and 18; John Dower, *War Without Mercy*, ch. 3.; and Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee*, ch. 16.
 - b. Portraying combat in *Men of War* and *Call of Duty: World at War*
 - c. **Game Review #2** (due Friday, April 1)
- Unit 9. Gender (Week 12)
- a. **Discussion:** Why is gender so important in social history and vice versa? Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis”.
 - b. **Discussion:** Do historical computer games have a gender problem? Sheri Graner Ray, “Include Both Genders”.
 - c. Gender in grand strategy games: *CivCity: Rome*; *Civilization*; *Total War*
 - d. Gender in social history games: *Oregon Trail* and *Titanic*
 - e. **Comparative analysis—initial drafts** (due Friday, April 8)
- Unit 10. End of Term Assessments (Weeks 13-15)
- a. **Comparative analysis—presentations**
 - b. **Comparative analysis—final drafts** (due Wednesday, May 2)
 - c. **Final exam, Units 7-10** (Wednesday, May 4, 12:00-1:55)

Appendix B

History in Video Games Sample Examination Study Guide

(Note: This sample study guide combines questions used in the midterm and the final.)

Your final exam will include three questions taken from the list below. You must answer two of them. Most of the questions ask you to analyze *Civilization IV* and a game of your choice on the basis of historical scholarship we have studied in this course. Make sure that your choice of game is appropriate to the question you are answering. It would not, for instance, be appropriate to choose *Rome: Total War* for Question 3, and find no evidence of the Columbian Exchange, because the game's theme predates the topic. Choose games that will provide you scope for analysis of the question's topic.

1. Discuss *Civilization IV* and a game of your choice that has different underlying mechanics. How do the mechanics of these games differ? To what extent do the themes of these games drive the mechanics and vice versa? Your essay should refer to Soren Johnson's discussions on theme and meaning.
2. Discuss the conflation of time and space in *Civilization IV* and another game of your choice. How and why have the designers conflated these dimensions in the two games? Does this conflation obscure players' understanding of history? Would the games have been better without these alterations?
3. How well do *Civilization IV* and a game of your choice reflect our understanding of the Columbian Exchange? Your essay should refer to Alfred Crosby's and Jared Diamond's theories as well as David Jones' and Tom Tomlinson's critiques of these theories. How would you improve either game to better reflect ecological and environmental history?
4. Discuss cultural bias in *Civilization IV* and a game of your choice. How does each of these games approach cultural difference? Do they adhere more to Edward Said's view of cultural interaction or Samuel Huntington's? How would you improve these games to make them reflect more accurately historical encounters between different cultures?
5. Discuss the role of religion in *Civilization IV* (or *V: Brave New World*) and a game of your choice. To what extent do these games portray religions as influencing the course of history? To what extent do trade and conquest affect the spread of religion?
6. How well do *Civilization IV* and a game of your choice simulate the concept of "world systems"? Inasmuch as they deal with the last five hundred years of history, to what extent do these games allow for André Gunder Frank's view of Western dominance in *ReORIENT*? Your answer should also refer to Immanuel Wallerstein's definition of a "world system."
7. How can a game portray no female characters yet still be the subject of gender analysis? Use two games of your choice as examples. These games may or may not include female characters. Your essay should refer to Joan Scott's article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis."
8. Do historical video games have a gender problem? Your answer should examine the portrayal of gender in *Civilization IV* and another game of your choice. It should refer to our readings on gender in video games.

9. How well do *Civilization IV* and a game of your choice depict the historic contributions of women to society? To the extent that they do a poor job of reflecting these contributions, is it because of problems with the subject matter or with the designers? Explain.
10. Discuss combat as portrayed in two games of your choice. How realistic is it? To what extent does it glorify war, and if so why? Your answer should address issues of civilian casualty, friendly fire, and atrocities in the light of scholarship by Paul Fussell, John Dower, Nick Dyer-Witherford, and Grieg de Peuter.
11. What considerations influence game designers' portrayal of brutality (such as rape, pillage, slavery, massacres, bombing of civilians, and genocide)? How do cultural and political considerations of the society serving as a market for games shape their content in this regard? Pick two games as contrasting examples and refer to issues in the book, *Games of Empire*.
12. Compare *Civilization IV* to another strategy video game of your choice. How does each game allow you to explore counterfactual historical scenarios? Which game presents the more plausible historical alternatives? At what point do these alternate timelines become so speculative as to be useless as counterfactual simulations? Your essay should refer to Geoffrey Parker's essay as well as any relevant essays in *What If?* 2.