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**Video Games and History: some initial reflections  
on a troubled**

Luciano Gallinari

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## **Special Issue**

**Jeux vidéo,  
Pratiques plastiques contemporaines  
et Histoire(s)**

**Video Games,  
Contemporary Visual Arts  
and History(ies)**

Sous la direction de / Edited by

**Emmanuelle Jacques - Luciano Gallinari**



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## Video Games and History: Some initial reflections on a troubled relationship

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### *Abstract*

in this text I would set out some brief initial reflections on the relationship between History and Videogames, a subject in which I have been taking an interest for some years now. Specifically, I will dwell on some epistemological and methodological considerations elaborated in the field of digital games on the historical narrative produced in the academic world that, in my opinion, reveal an inexact and even somewhat stereotyped knowledge. Furthermore, I reflect on certain aspects of historical narration on the one hand and Video Games narration on the other, which reveal a proximity between them that proves very stimulating for further research.

### *Keywords*

Historical Video Games; Video Games as Tools for Teaching History; Epistemology of History.

### *Resumé*

Dans ce texte, je voudrais exposer quelques brèves réflexions initiales sur la relation entre l'Histoire et les jeux vidéo, un sujet auquel je m'intéresse depuis quelques années. Plus précisément, je m'attarde sur certaines considérations épistémologiques et méthodologiques développées dans le monde des jeux numériques sur la narration historique produite dans le monde académique, qui, à mon avis, révèlent une connaissance inexacte et même quelque peu stéréotypée. Par ailleurs, je réfléchis à certains aspects de la narration historique d'une part et de la narration vidéoludique d'autre part qui révèlent une proximité entre elles très stimulante pour la suite de la recherche.

### *Mots-clés*

Jeux vidéo historiques; les jeux vidéo comme outils pédagogiques pour l'enseignement de l'histoire; épistémologie de l'histoire.

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1. Introduction. - 2. Some interesting points of contact between History and Video Games - 2.1. The historical truth and plausibility within historiography and ludology. - 2.2 The representation of Timelines in Video Games. - 2.3. The functional utility of History for game design. - 3. Very brief and preliminary conclusions. - 4. References. - 5. Curriculum vitae

### 1. Introduction

While this is not the appropriate juncture to introduce a detailed historiographical discussion, it must be noted that for several decades, History has been undergoing a profound crisis. This is attributable to various factors, notably the difficulty of interpreting the postmodern world through the diachronic frameworks that prevailed until the late twentieth century. Such interpretative tools appear to have been overwhelmed by an accelerated 'Presentism'—a phenomenon where events are almost immediately forgotten, rendering history seemingly superfluous and incapable of deciphering contemporary developments. Consequently, some scholars have provocatively suggested the 'end of History' (Fukuyama, 1992)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that digital technology has played a pivotal role in the questioning of Clio. Having rapidly permeated every facet of human existence, these technological advancements have imparted an unprecedented acceleration to social and historical processes. Over forty years ago, Jean-François Lyotard (1979) observed that his era was defined by the exhaustion of the 'grand narratives' that had driven the modern world—including the French Revolution, German Idealism, decolonisation, and sexual emancipation—through which humanity had previously been cast as the 'heroic agent of its own liberation'.

A further dimension of the contemporary historiographical crisis is the increasing tendency of the discipline to prioritise themes deemed relevant by the market—and, by extension, by the consumers of history. Consequently, History appears to have abdicated its guiding role, instead undertaking research that often seems demand-driven or commissioned (Deleuze, 2018, pp. 5-12; Zuboff, 2020). As a result of these shifts, we have entered a historical period—originating in the 1980s—in which robust historical literacy has become essential. In an era where societies evolve with unprecedented rapidity, generating entirely new cultural,

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<sup>1</sup> Attali 2015, p. 145 recalls that from the end of the 1960s, and even more so since 1989, the modernity of reason, so criticized and fought against until then, took hold in an increasingly large part of the world. We are once again talking about the end of history' ("A partir de la fin des années 60 et plus encore depuis 1989 la modernité de la raison si critiquée et combattue jusqu'alors s'installe dans une partie de plus en plus vaste du monde. On parle à nouveau de fin de l'histoire"). The scholar proposed the hypothesis that the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the USSR coincided with the end of history known as a one-way process.

social, and economic paradigms, a profound understanding of the past is no longer merely advantageous, but fundamental.

Building upon these premises, this study explores the synergy between History and video games, aiming to identify innovative research and pedagogical methodologies. Such approaches seek to more effectively convey the content and rigorous methodologies of scientific historical analysis, leveraging the widespread cultural reach of gaming<sup>2</sup>. This reflection considers the recent arguments of Italian scholars Paci and Salvatori (2023), who caution that the 'historicity' of video games must be understood as an 'ontological' element of the discipline, as it is dynamically reshaped through the interaction between the player and the digital medium. Indeed, for over a decade, the field of historical video games has become increasingly distinct from the broader digital gaming landscape, defined by its specific theoretical frameworks, content, and objectives.

So much so that in 2016 *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice* dedicated a Special Issue to Historical Games Studies, presented as an already established discipline (Peñate Domínguez, 2017, pp. 387-398).

My engagement with these digital tools is further informed by the epistemological framework established in a significant edited volume, a perspective I share, which defines History as "a shared cultural process spread across multiple forms, practices, social domains, and stakeholders" (Chapman, Foka, and Westin, 2017, pp. 359–361). This conception of history as a multifaceted

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<sup>2</sup> Marti, 2018, p. 3 mentions Chartier, 1998 pp. 120-126, who underlined that "fictional narrative and scientific narrative seem formally quite similar: they plot characters within the framework of a temporal and causal construction" ("récit fictionnel et récit scientifique semblent formellement assez proches: ils mettent en intrigue des personnages dans le cadre d'une construction temporelle et causale"). But there were some notable differences: 'the nature of the facts narrated: the notes and references to the historian's archive construct a narrative based on 'verifiable knowledge' ("la nature des faits narrés : les notes et les renvois à l'archive de l'historien construisent un récit qui se fonde sur" un savoir vérifiable" Marti also adds that "the purpose of the two types of story is different: fictional narration has above all an aesthetic and/or entertaining aim, whereas historical narration is intended to be cognitive, transmitting knowledge in the service of science" ("la finalité des deux types de récits diverge : la narration fictionnelle possède avant tout un but esthétique et/ou ludique alors que la narration historique se veut cognitive, transmettant un savoir au service de la science").

process is one I shall endeavour to highlight at various points throughout this text. Furthermore, my interest stems from the inherent parallel between the reconstruction of History and the design of video games. Both are the product of artificial connections that constitute ‘the very essence of the inevitable retrospective mental process aimed at constructing a plot’. This convergence highlights how both the historian and the game designer engage in a form of narrative synthesis to render complex events intelligible<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, this study originates from the international Journée d'étude entitled *Jeux vidéo, pratiques plastiques contemporaines et histoire(s)*, held on 16 June 2023 at the University of Montpellier Paul Valéry. This symposium provided a highly productive forum for examining the intersection of video games and historical discourse. Having chaired the round table in the latter part of the proceedings, I was afforded the opportunity to review the contributors' abstracts in advance. This prior engagement enabled the identification of several thematic keywords common to the papers presented. From this analysis, a series of connections emerged—not only between the individual contributions but, more significantly, between empirical historical research and the epistemological frameworks of Historical Video Games. These reflections underscore the necessity of synthesising rigorous, evidence-based historical narration with the vast communicative potential of digital media.

Furthermore, an analysis of the diverse scientific literature concerning the relationship between historiography and ludology has highlighted a point of significant relevance, which this study intends to examine. Specifically, it appears that historians and game designers may engage in a mutually beneficial exchange to enhance their respective narrative frameworks. This synergy is supported by the observation, as noted by several scholars:

(...) such individuals and organisations [designers and producers of video games with big budgets] have not traditionally been and are frequently still not taken seriously in their role of shaping our collective Teaching through Play (...). (Boom -

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<sup>3</sup> Zerubavel, 2005, pp. 29-30: “l'essenza stessa dell'inevitabile processo mentale retrospettivo volto a costruire un intreccio”, (“the very essence of the inevitable retrospective mental process aimed at constructing a narrative”). See also White, 1987, p. 83.

Ariese, - Hout *et al.*, 2020)

These data are significant as, consistently with established research, the primary consumption of video games—including those with historical themes—occurs within informal settings rather than through institutions formally tasked with historical education. Consequently, it is imperative to understand how these digital tools shape public perceptions of the past. A compelling and somewhat concerning confirmation of this dynamic is provided by Lisa Gilbert (2019, p. 127); her recent work highlights that students often perceive the design choices of a video game as historical facts, “fully trusting the designers to present an unbiased view of history.”

## *2. Some interesting points of contact between History and Video Games*

The second part of this study examines several points of convergence that could render the collaboration between History and the video game industry more effective. This is particularly relevant for the dissemination of rigorous historical knowledge across all sectors of contemporary society. Such dissemination provides individuals with enhanced analytical tools to interpret and decode rapid societal changes, thereby transforming these shifts into opportunities—starting with the student population. In this regard, video games may serve as sophisticated digital environments for bolstering the social and cultural awareness of players and citizens, regardless of their formal educational background.

The three aforementioned points comprise: (A) historical truth and plausibility within historiography and ludology; (B) the representation of timelines in video games; and (C) the functional utility of History for game design.

### *2.1. historical truth and plausibility within historiography and ludology*

The initial point of focus stems from an observation derived from an extensive review of specialised literature on historical video games. Specifically, there appears to be a rigid, and perhaps overly pedantic, dichotomy between the concept of 'plausibility'—often attributed to ludic narratives—and that of 'truth', which is occasionally and uncritically defined as the definitive objective of historical

research. This tension is exemplified by the arguments of Jeremiah McCall, who states: "The idea that academic historians generate a single factual, agreed-upon narrative for anything is problematic".

It is difficult to maintain that such definitive historical narratives exist; conversely, there are numerous historiographical interpretations of events and their protagonists which, as previously noted, evolve over time and under the influence of shifting human societies and cultures. These interpretations are the product of several competing factors, including the varying quantity and provenance of sources relating to a specific subject, as well as the diverse exegetical methodologies employed by scholars. Such factors yield narratives of markedly different scholarly value. Furthermore, a second prominent figure in this epistemological debate, Adam Chapman, challenges his colleague's position by asserting that historians are adept at providing explanations as to why the past unfolded in a specific manner: "they [i.e. Historians] are very good offering explanations for why things happened", that is, it emphasises the search for the causes that led to certain events rather than others (McCall - Chapman, 2017, p. 4).

Returning to the concept of 'plausibility', this notion is intrinsically linked to the postmodernist critique concerning the crisis of values within preceding societies. As previously noted in the Introduction, it is also connected to the profound crisis facing the discipline of History and its perceived utility in interpreting the contemporary world. In this regard, a pre-eminent theorist on the relationship between temporal structures and human societies explicitly stated that:

Presentism no longer believes in history, but relies on memory, which is, in short, an extension of the present towards the past, by evoking and summoning certain moments of the past [...] into the present<sup>4</sup>.

Memory is essential, for without it, both personal and collective identities dissipate. However, this memory weakened considerably at the turn of the twenty-first century and has since been frequently instrumentalised in favour of 'politically correct' agendas. The notion that transitioning into a postmodern, globalised society would be facilitated by shedding the memory that underpins responsibility

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<sup>4</sup> Hartog, 2019, p. 4: "Le présentisme<sup>4</sup> ne croit plus en l'histoire, mais il s'en remet à la mémoire, qui est, en somme, une extension du présent en direction du passé, par évocation, convocation de certains moments du passé [...] dans le présent".

proved to be an illusion—particularly when such memory lacks the necessary counterbalance of historicisation within its specific temporal and cultural context. This is exemplified by the numerous instances of 'cancel culture' that have emerged globally since the turn of the century; these episodes underscore the problematic relationship that the Western world maintains with its past and, by extension, with the discipline of History itself.

Due to spatial constraints, I shall present a single instance of 'cancel culture' that is arguably indicative of the mechanisms governing such phenomena. This case study focuses on a particularly significant example of 'uncomfortable memory': Christopher Columbus. I have previously examined this figure in an extensive article, to which I refer the reader for a more detailed analysis of additional cases, the primary sources consulted, and the associated bibliographical references (Gallinari, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

The Admiral has long embodied this discomfort and has recently—though, in truth, he has never ceased to be so—become a battleground for cultural and minority conflicts within a globalised world. The original impetus for that research on Christopher Columbus arose after I encountered several newspaper articles concerning the removal of monuments dedicated to the Admiral, initially in Argentina and subsequently in the United States. These removals occurred in parallel with the dismantling of statues commemorating Confederate generals, key figures of the American Civil War<sup>6</sup>. An analysis of these events, as documented in American and European media, immediately revealed significant connections to concepts such as collective memory, social identity, suppressed memories, globalisation, presentism, and historical revisionism.

The study of these attempts to obliterate history and specific figures is both crucial and paradigmatic; it demonstrates the convergence of diverse memories that may be defined as 'ethnic' in the cultural sense of the term. The phenomenon of removing or replacing monuments, alongside attempts at their resignification and the subsequent debates, is particularly illuminating. These initiatives clarify that our memories are inherently social, as they encode perceptions based on

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<sup>5</sup> The article also contains reflections on the removal of monuments to Columbus in other countries, as well as the damage and removal of Confederate Army memorials.

<sup>6</sup> These are cases of what are currently called "Dissonant Heritages" that is heritages politically uncomfortable given their narrative, their use or their resignification.

shared meanings—specifically, a world-knowledge structure that serves as the direct expression of a culture (Halbwachs, 1997, p. 3). In the case of the Columbus monuments in Argentina, there was a manifest, albeit unsuccessful, attempt to supplant a contentious historical figure with one more aligned with the policies of indigenous rediscovery and the promotion of Native American cultures prevalent at the turn of the twenty-first century. Specifically, Columbus was to be replaced by Juana Azurduy, a Bolivian patriot noted for her anti-Spanish resistance.

The lack of a rigorous scientific objective behind this initiative is evidenced by the absence of any intention to juxtapose a monument to Juana Azurduy, or any other indigenous figure, with that of the Admiral. Had such a juxtaposition occurred within a museum-like setting, it would have facilitated a scholarly contextualisation of the two memorials; instead, the project lacked the drive to produce a balanced historiographical narrative.

Returning to the dichotomy between 'truth' and 'plausibility', historians recognise that scholarly discourse concerning the past eschews categorical statements in favour of multiple reconstructions and interpretations of events and their protagonists. The degree of plausibility—to adopt a term favoured by many scholars of historical games—is heavily contingent upon the quantity and quality of available primary sources, as well as the methodological exegesis employed. Consequently, historians are often the first to resist a rigid application of the concept of 'truth' within their discipline.

To corroborate the aforementioned points, it must be emphasised that History and Memory are perpetually reconstructed according to the stimuli and conditions dictated by the societies and cultures to which the researchers belong. These influences often operate—powerfully—at an unconscious level. From this perspective, the perceived gap between formal historiography and the world of video games appears significantly narrower than is frequently asserted.

## *2.2. the representation of Timelines in Video Games*

A second theme of focus concerns the significant evolution of timelines within strategy video games. These structures grow increasingly complex as gameplay progresses and new data are acquired, thereby stimulating the player's analytical skills and their interaction with the technological medium (Radetich & Jakubowicz,

2015, p. 18). Timelines emerge as ‘the most tangible signs of the cognitive fields stimulated by historical strategy games’; furthermore, they serve as a vital tool to counteract the contemporary flattening of temporal perception. This flattening is heavily conditioned by the presentist and postmodernist interpretations discussed in the Introduction. Indeed, such timelines provide students and players with a tangible representation of the *longue durée* of cultural and social structures. Consequently, they offer enhanced tools for comprehending contemporary reality and its enduring—albeit often obscured—connections to the past<sup>7</sup>.

A further point of contention regarding the perceived rigidity of certain scholarly discourses arises when the concept of ‘historical truth’ is challenged. Such critiques often argue that video games merely produce a ‘rewrite of what might have happened’ based on historical variables, thereby privileging the more relative notion of ‘plausibility’. However, this perspective frequently rests upon a somewhat monolithic conception of history; it fails to account for the reality of multiple, and often conflicting, historiographical reconstructions that define the discipline (Radetich and Jakubowicz, 2009, p. 19).

A potential foundation for these restrictive interpretations of history may be found in the work of the influential educational psychologist Jerome Bruner. He posited that the language of history belongs to the realm of ‘what is’—and is therefore indicative—whereas the language of a video game may be considered ‘subjunctive’, or the language of ‘what might be’. By categorising historical discourse as purely indicative, this perspective risks relegating history to a mere chronicle of facts. In doing so, it overlooks history’s inherent nature as a narrative construction—one that remains perpetually subject to scholarly reinterpretation and ideological shifts<sup>8</sup>.

Based on these claims, it is argued that while historical language is assertive, that of the video game is the language of ‘what could have been’—effectively, a

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<sup>7</sup> Lorenz, 2019, p. 22 ‘observed that “the spectre of presentism is haunting Europe” arguing that recent decades have witnessed the dissolution of the temporal and spatial coordinates within which history was traditionally conceived. Similarly, Attali (2015, pp. 146-147) emphasises that when the present becomes the sole focus, the future becomes unpredictable and contingent; under such conditions, ‘no one has to worry about what can be such an uncertain future’ ” (“nul n’a plus à se préoccuper de ce que peut-être un avenir si aléatoire”.

<sup>8</sup> Bruner, 2013 p. 141, cited by Laura Radetich; Eduardo Jakubowicz, “Using Video Games for Teaching History. Experiences and Challenges”, p. 10.

counterfactual history<sup>9</sup>. I contend, however, that this perspective is somewhat ungenerous towards historical narrative. Even at a purely linguistic level, historians frequently employ the conditional mood to propose hypotheses or reconstructions of events and figures that appear most acceptable—or indeed, *plausible*—among various competing interpretations. The reliance on the concept of ‘plausibility’—a cornerstone of the counterfactual history advocated by game designers and players—appears to be inextricably linked to the relativism of ‘Truth’ characteristic of postmodernist thought (Paci and Salvatori (2023, p. 1)<sup>10</sup>.

This approach further diminishes the perceived distance from academic historical reconstructions, a gap frequently highlighted by scholars of digital games. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that psychology also demonstrates a profound interest in counterfactual thinking. Research in this field underscores the inclination of individuals to explore and experience the impact of self-constructed alternatives—a process directly linked to their emotional states and self-perception (Gilbert, 2019, pp. 108-137)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> A similar, albeit more nuanced, perspective is presented by Bazile (2021, p. 10), who observes that while historical narrative presupposes the fixation of a discourse on the past as it unfolded, the ludic conception relies on the realisation of scenarios in which “it is not over yet” (“tout n’est pas joué”). However, this definition of historical narrative arguably overlooks the fact that such discourse is the product of an analytical engagement with extant or newly discovered sources. These sources are interpreted by scholars through their specific epistemological and exegetical frameworks. This explains why historical analysis yields multiple, shifting interpretations of events and their protagonists; it also clarifies how scholars can revisit established topics by introducing new evidence or innovative interpretative lenses. Such re-evaluations invariably reflect the contemporaneous cultural and social parameters of the researchers, as previously noted.

<sup>10</sup> The two academics argue that the player “can also make use of “counterfactual imagination”, which invites a creative and critical attitude towards the reimagining of history (“il giocatore può anche fare uso della “immaginazione controfattuale” che invita a stimolare un atteggiamento creativo e critico di rielaborazione della storia”). This cognitive engagement transforms the player from a passive consumer of a fixed narrative into an active participant in the historiographical process, albeit within a simulated environment.

<sup>11</sup> The scholar underscores that students, through the act of play and the immersion in ludic narratives, experienced a sense of immediate access to history and the individuals of the past. This perceived immediacy allows for an affective engagement with historical

However, while emphasising the considerable utility of students' active participation in historical study through video games, several authors highlight an absolute necessity: once the ludic phase concludes, students and teachers must engage in sustained discussion and comparison to distinguish historical fact from fictitious elements, thereby completing the learning cycle. Consequently, traditional formal education remains indispensable, enabling players to critically evaluate the knowledge acquired through gaming (Lynch - Mallon - Connolly, 2015, p. 35).

A similar situation is faced by those who use generative Artificial Intelligence to do research. Its usefulness is reduced if one consults it without having the knowledge to verify the information received.

Regarding the perception of time in postmodernity—and as a demonstration of how historiography and the philosophy of history are shaped by epistemological reflections that are anything but monolithic—Zoltán Boldizsár Simon provides a crucial intervention. In his essay '*History in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Theory for the 21st Century*', (2019) posits that the disruptive shifts of the post-war era—encompassing the threat of nuclear conflict, anthropogenic climate change, and the technological horizons of artificial intelligence, bioengineering, and transhumanism—are of such magnitude that they challenge the very concept of a historical continuum. He argues that we must fundamentally question whether such transformations can be meaningfully integrated into traditional frameworks. In essence, Simon calls into doubt the capacity of conventional historical thought to fully comprehend the singular, global developments that characterise the contemporary world)

However, while emphasising the considerable utility of students' active participation in the study of history through Video Games, several authors highlight an absolute necessity: once the ludic phase concludes, students and teachers must engage in sustained discussion and comparison to distinguish historical fact from fictitious elements, thereby completing the learning cycle.

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figures, bridging the temporal distance that traditional, purely indicative pedagogical methods often struggle to overcome. Roberts, 2011 pp. 117-123 "Using counterfactual history to enhance students' historical understanding" states that his students who interacted with the historical cause/effect mechanism contained in *Sid Meier's Civilization (Civ)* showed an increased understanding of History and a greater interest in it.

Consequently, traditional formal education remains indispensable, enabling players to critically evaluate the knowledge acquired through gaming<sup>12</sup>.

In one of his subsequent works, the scholar explicitly states that “The modern idea of history as a temporal construct and a specific way of conceiving of change over time in terms of processual developments has been subject to severe criticism over the last decades on several grounds”. He also goes so far as to ask “why would there be only one kind of historical time? There are sound reasons to believe that not only is modern time multi-temporal, but even a specifically historical time should not mean one monolithic conception of time experienced as ‘historical’”<sup>13</sup>.

This scholar, drawing on the interpretative theories of other scholars, demonstrates that he has arrived at a multi-temporal conception of modern time, stating that “Modern historical time is not gone; it has only become one of the multi-temporalities we came to embrace”. A multi-temporality that also encompasses the temporality of cultures ‘other’ than that of the Western world, such as Chinese culture, for example.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike Simon and Hartog, Aleida Assmann does not see the postmodern regime of time as defined by a complete dichotomy between the “realm of experience” (Erfahrungsraum) and the “horizon of expectation” (Erwartungshorizont). On the contrary, she argues that ‘wherever we look, the gulf separating the realm of experience and the horizon of expectation is being bridged, and the past and present are once again becoming more closely linked to one another.’ (Assmann, A., 2020, pp. 195-199). The above essays provide a wealth of

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<sup>12</sup> Lynch - Mallon - Connolly, “The pedagogical application of alternate reality games: Using game-based learning to revisit history”, *International Journal of Game-Based Learning*, 5, 2015, p. 35 (18–38). Paci -, Salvatori, 2023 state that “after the game experience is over, the teacher [...] should accompany the students in an operation aimed at deconstructing the narratives in which they have been protagonists” (“una volta conclusa l’esperienza di gioco, l’insegnante [...] dovrà accompagnare gli studenti in un’operazione volta a decostruire le narrazioni di cui sono stati protagonisti”) In doing so, “the teacher will be able to act as a mediator in charge of following the student/gamer during, before and after the game [...]” (“il docente potrà porsi come figura di mediatore preposta a seguire lo studente /giocatore durante, prima e dopo il gioco [...]).

<sup>13</sup> Simon, ‘Domesticating the future through history’, *Time & Society*, 30 (4), 2021, pp 497-498 (494-516), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X2111014804>>

<sup>14</sup> Huang C. and Henderson JB (2006) (eds). *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking.*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

epistemological and historiographical data concerning the critical relationship between time and the historian and, thanks also to the extensive references cited, offers a vivid image of how History is negotiating its active role in postmodern society. All this to propose a more dynamic function of this discipline, which can further enrich the world of Video Games as well.

A further point of convergence between history and digital media is found in the assertion by various game designers that the video game serves as a vessel for a 'contemporary gaze' upon the past. As will be elaborated in the following section, this contemporary perspective is equally intrinsic to the historian's craft. As sociology and psychology demonstrate, the act of remembering and reconstructing the past is fundamentally shaped by the specific stimuli and exigencies of the observer's present-day context."<sup>15</sup> It is imperative that the historian remains profoundly aware of these psychological processes, as they inevitably shape the reconstruction of historical events and figures. Indeed, historiographical tradition offers numerous instances where the scholar's subconscious biases have been granted undue latitude, leading to results that are—at best—contentious. Failing to acknowledge these internal influences risks producing a narrative that reflects the researcher's own contemporary anxieties rather than a rigorous engagement with the past. Again, a somewhat naïve statement made by Darby McDevitt can nevertheless further unite History and Video Games. The scriptwriter of the video game *Black Flag* asserts that historical sources do not generate 'pure' facts, that is free of interpretation (Bazile, 2022, p. 12). Granted that the scriptwriter should better detail his thoughts: it is clear that sources, regardless of their nature, are cultural products that contain and propose a narrative of events and figures created by its 'authors'. Precisely for this reason, the reconstruction of the past must be based on the greatest possible number of sources of information as well as exegetical methodologies. Only in this way can more plausible historical analyses be offered.

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<sup>15</sup> Assmann, J. 1997, p. 22: "the need for meaning and the frames of reference of the present" ("[il passato è] una costruzione sociale la cui composizione risulta dal bisogno di senso e dai quadri di riferimento del presente").

### 2.3. *The functional utility of History for game design*

The assertion that Video Games lack both the intent and the capacity to engage in historiographical debate (Bazile, 2022, p. 8) is one I do not entirely share. Indeed, this claim appears to be contradicted by the practices of game designers themselves, who frequently invoke history as a foundational element of their creative process. When digital media confront 'sensitive' or 'divisive' themes—topics that necessitate a degree of neutrality between competing narratives—designers often fall back upon the scientific rigour of history. By doing so, they delegate the responsibility for providing a 'plausible' response to the discipline itself, effectively using historical methodology as an objective arbiter in the face of contemporary socio-political friction. These statements are important because, although they have an utilitarian purpose, they explicitly recognise the importance and value of historical reconstruction with a scientific nature and also, in my opinion, they would show that Video Games might participate in historiographical debates, since, in reality, by accepting rigorous data from scientific historical analysis, they do nothing more than accept some historiographical interpretations on certain divisive/sensitive topics, among the different ones that exist, choosing on the basis of their own parameters that should always be based on the aforementioned criterion of greater plausibility<sup>16</sup>.

The inclusion of such themes within video games establishes them as potent tools of Public History, with their efficacy predicated upon the degree of player interaction. Regarding these digital products, several scholars contend that it is essential to avoid the pursuit of a strictly 'objective' or neutral gaze. Such a stance is arguably unattainable, given that players—much like historians—approach historical events, their causalities, and their protagonists through a lens shaped by

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<sup>16</sup> Among these sensitive issues is the construct of Western modernity—a concept that has historically produced and legitimated civilisational hierarchies. This framework places European development at the vanguard of progress, while condemning all other cultures to what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008 2nd ed, p. 8) memorably termed the 'imaginary waiting room of history'. By invoking this phrase, Chakrabarty critiques the historicist assumption that non-Western societies are merely 'not yet' civilised, perpetually trailing behind a European ideal. In the context of video games, this suggests that the 'scientific rigour' designers claim to employ may often be filtered through a Eurocentric lens, inadvertently codifying these hierarchies into the very mechanics of the game's progression.

pre-existing perspectives and values. Consequently, the utility of the History lies not in providing a sterile, neutral account, but in fostering a participatory engagement with the complexities and controversies of the past. As previously observed, even primary sources are far from 'neutral'; they are themselves 'cultural' artefacts, fashioned with specific rhetorical or ideological purposes. Furthermore, individuals do not possess a neutral cognitive state. Indeed, as Daniel Cohen (2022, pp. 36–37) reminds us, “we start from the conclusions we believe in and look for the path that validates them”<sup>17</sup>. This subjective inclination represents one of the most significant hazards for the historian; if one fails to critically monitor the impulses arising from the subconscious, they risk compromising the integrity of the historical narrative. Without this self-awareness, the resulting history may inadvertently become a mirror of the historian’s own psyche rather than a disciplined engagement with the traces of the past.

By adopting diverging perspectives on a single event or theme, players foster a space for internal and collective debate. In this capacity, video games serve as instruments for resolving conflicts between antithetical positions (Paci - Salvatori, 2023, p. 1). This process mirrors the fundamental methodology of the historian, who—when examining primary sources of disparate origins—must navigate conflicting accounts and establish a hierarchy of credibility based on the empirical reliability of the data. Consequently, the player’s negotiation of multiple ludic viewpoints functions as a practical exercise in historiographical exegesis.

A further dimension of the affinity between video games and history is found in Adam Chapman’s conceptualisation of the 'ludic form', which aligns digital play with sociological theories of memory. Within this framework, memory is understood as a dynamic process that periodically reinterprets the past through the prism of the present. This re-evaluation is driven by a scholar—or indeed, a player—intent on re-analysing and re-signifying historical narratives. Crucially, this 'gaze' at the past is fundamentally conditioned by the contemporary socio-cultural structures of the observer, transforming the video game into a site where

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<sup>17</sup> Cohen, 2022, p. 36-37: “nous partons des conclusions en lesquelles nous croyons pour chercher le chemin qui les valide”. The sociologist also adds that: “The human mind [...] is especially inclined to simplistic reasoning. We always need to be for or against something, we prefer to jump to conclusions and stick to them”. (“L'esprit humain [...] est surtout enclin à des raisonnements simplistes. Nous avons toujours besoin d'être pour ou contre quelque chose, nous préférons sauter aux conclusions et nous y tenir”.

collective memory is not merely stored, but actively reconstructed to meet modern exigencies

"Building upon previous discussions regarding the historiographical reflections of game designers and the construct of Western modernity, Bazile (2022) highlights a persistent dissonance: development teams within the video game industry often project a homogenous Western gaze onto past societies. This frequently results in the re-propagation of stereotyped imagery that has long been refuted by 'official' historiography, leaving the industry 'lagging behind' professional historians. Paradoxically, this reinforces the parallelism between the two fields; just as historians must navigate their own subconscious biases, studies have underscored the profound ideological and cultural constraints that weigh upon game designers—even those who claim to be motivated solely by artistic intent. Ultimately, this commonality is inescapable, as both types of professionals are inextricably immersed in the specific societal and cultural milieus to which they belong.

### *3. Very brief and preliminary conclusions*

By way of a brief and preliminary conclusion, I would like to conclude with two final examples that illustrate the increasing scientific rapprochement between the disciplines of history and video games. The first concerns the pedagogical application of these theories, specifically the university-level coursework developed by John J. Harney (2016, p. 19), Professor of Asian History at Centre College, Kentucky. His experience in integrating digital media into the historical curriculum resulted in profound student engagement and academic satisfaction. His findings suggest that when students move from passive consumption to the active, systemic analysis required by video games, they develop a more nuanced understanding of historical contingency mentions that fit in with the further scientific rapprochement between history and Video Games of which we talked about earlier.

Students are eager to accept Video Games as historical sources, and the challenge inherent in guiding them to understand when games can be valid or how they can be rendered valid within specific analytical approaches creates positive experiences in the classroom.

The teacher also added other elements of satisfaction with the results of the course as it seemed to him that there was the potential for students to take initial opinions on the value of Video Games as narrative and historical tools and then attempt to engage with historical dynamics. Finally, he concluded that the students

just need to see the games as sources, important resources and examples of human contributions to competing discussions on our collective past purpose or not, that can be brought to bear within a work of historical value when used with the right tools (Harney, 2016, pp. 19-20).

To conclude the discussion on video games as a historical source—one that serves as a vital tool for contemporary historiographical consultation—I wish to offer a reflection by Marc Marti:

Games based on historical narratives are a form of reception and appropriation that can reveal the relationship to memory of the societies that consume them, the place they accord to History and the way in which they construct their national narrative. From this point of view, video games are undoubtedly a prime document for contemporary historiography<sup>18</sup>.

Whilst significant progress has been made in intertwining the spheres of history and Video Games, substantial work remains. This is particularly vital in the effort to engage younger generations with historical discourse, providing them with the analytical tools necessary to interpret the complex societies they inhabit.

By fostering this connection, we may counteract the growing phenomenon of historical detachment—a dissociation even from the recent past that, as previously noted, erodes the identity perception of the individual. Ultimately, strengthening this link serves to bolster the collective identity of society itself, transforming history from a distant memory into a functional framework for navigating the contemporary world.

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<sup>18</sup> Marti, 2018 p. 16: "Les jeux issus de la narration historique en constituent une forme de réception et d'appropriation qui peut révéler le rapport à la mémoire des sociétés qui les consomment, la place qu'elles accordent à l'Histoire et la façon dont elles bâtissent leur roman national. De ce point de vue, le jeu vidéo constitue sans doute un document de choix pour l'historiographie de l'époque contemporaine.

Last but not least

I have left until last, given its significance, what I consider to be the most important aspect of the relationship between history and Video Games: the latter are a highly effective tool for fostering a critical mindset among users of these digital devices and for building modern societies that are democratic and inclusive of all forms of diversity.

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