Playing the Great War:
Getting Historians Involved in Video Games

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Introduction

"Despite the computers that host them...video games are no expressions of the machine. They are expressions of being human. And the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become."

- Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*[1]

Video games shape our culture. They transmit ideas. They normalize discourses.

They also teach us history – intentionally or not. For this reason, historians should engage with them: they should study them, critique them, create them and, of course, play them. Through a case study of computer games which represent World War One – in particular, the games *Valiant Hearts, Darkest Hour, Commander: The Great War, Verdun*, and *Making History* – this thesis will demonstrate how video games communicate messages about the past through text, images, and gameplay.[2] Moreover, this thesis will suggest ways that historians can become involved in video games – both as informed critics and expert consultants.

This is certainly not the first call for historians to engage with video games, as evidenced by a growing body of literature pertaining to the new field of historical game studies;[3] however, much of this literature remains theoretical. Summarizing last year's

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[1] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, (United States: MIT Press, 2010), 340.

[2] In many ways, this essay takes inspiration from Natalie Zemon-Davis' book-long examination of historical film: *Slaves on Screen*. Here Zemon Davis takes the theme of slavery and historically analyzes a series of films dealing with the topic – from Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* to Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* – as a way of meditating on the historical possibilities of film. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2000).

[3] Kevin Kee et al., 'Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming', *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (June 2009), doi:10.3138/chr.90.2.303; Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Matthew Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, 'Introduction: to Build a Past That Will Stand the Test of Time – Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives,' in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Kapell

Challenge the Past/Diversify the Future conference, Adam Chapman, a scholar working

in this field, writes "whilst we have been good at studying historical games as texts...we

have...perhaps stumbled a little in facilitating communication with [the game

development] industry to find out exactly why they choose to represent the past in

particular ways and the pressures they are subject to in this regard."[4] This thesis responds

to this gap in the scholarship and moves beyond theoretical discussions to provide a more

practical analysis of how games make claims about history and how those claims can be

manipulated. Its goal is to help establish 'a theory of good history through gaming.'[5]

In this context, good history really means good *public* history. Public history is

the translation of academic historical discourse into a format that is easily consumable by

the public. This translation should not only convey the broad contours of current research,

but also encourage the development of critical thinking skills which drive the production

of historical research – such as the ability to assess interpretations/narratives about the

past. Good public history, therefore, should teach both the facts and the form of history.

In the context of video games, it should also be fun – or at least not boring. Essentially,

this thesis's definition of 'good history' stresses its pedagogical aims. But balancing

pedagogy and enjoyment is difficult – especially in video games. As the authors of

'Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming' note "as researchers, we run the

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and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2013); Adam Chapman, 'Privileging form Over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames,' *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2012), http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman/; Kevin Kee et al., *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[4] Adam Chapman, 'Challenge the Past/Diversify the Future: Reflections on Historical Game Studies and the Study of Historical Representation Across Disciplines,' Play the Past, April 7, 2015 (accessed April 4, 2016) http://www.playthepast.org/?p=5177.

[5] This essay takes much inspiration from the work of Kevin Kee et al.'s article 'Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming' and envisions itself as responding to its call to action.

risk of ruining what makes a good game if we do not consult with professional game designers." They go on to note, "at the same time, gamers are good at figuring out what makes a game 'fun' but will not make games that are pedagogically sound if they do not engage with experts."[6] The goal then, is to create a bridge between these two groups: game developers interested in representing the past and historians looking to reach a wider audience with their work. This thesis is an attempt to build just such a bridge.

Thus, this thesis is not a history of World War One. Instead it uses the conflict as a staging ground for an argument about historians' involvement in video games. Of course, this thesis will make reference to the war and its historiography, but an in-depth analysis of the various arguments and interpretations cannot follow. Then why World War One? On a practical level, a limitation to this thesis's scope needed to be applied. On a public interest level, the recent centennial of the start of the war reminds us that this conflict still looms large in the public's memory;[7] examining how World War One is remembered by certain video games can illuminate the contours of this memory and encourage speculation on how that memory might change in the decades to come. Finally, World War One poses interesting challenges for game designers. Certain historical realities, such as trench warfare, appear to be naturally resistant to gamification – that is being turned into a video game. Yet by analyzing how game developers work within the language of game design to portray these historical elements, we can bring to the fore the abilities of video games to communicate historically.

The focus on a particular historical event has another advantage: ease of fact-

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[6] Kee et al., "Towards a Theory of Good History Through Gaming", 306.
[7] Thomson Reuters, 'Britain goes dark as countries mark 100 years since start of WW I,' *CBC News*, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/britain-goes-dark-as-countries-mark-100-years-since-start-of-ww-i-1.2726888 (accessed March 3, 2016).

checking. Historians have a natural skepticism when it comes to popular culture and rightfully so; cheap appropriations of the past are commonplace – from *300* to *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. In order to counter this natural skepticism, this thesis will fact-check several of the historical claims made by the games under consideration. Frequently these claims resemble those made by academic historians – filtered, of course, through the medium constraints of video games. This resemblance demonstrates either the involvement of actual historians in the development process – as with *Valiant Hearts* – or a genuine desire to represent past. This desire to get the past 'right' on the side of game developers is a necessary prerequisite to getting historians involved in video games; if the people who create games have no interest in the past beyond its commercialization, then calling for historians' involvement in this medium would be hopeless.

But before exploring just how and what some video games say about World War One we must first establish several points of reference. In the first chapter, this thesis will briefly examine the inherent limitations and strengths of the historical video game. By comparing video games to historical feature films, we will see that while video games avoid some of the criticisms levelled at film, they still are restricted by their fundamental need to be 'playable'. This playability, however, is also historical video games' greatest strength – especially in the context of public history – because it makes the past engaging. In order to understand the types of play video games encourage – and how that restricts and strengthens historical representation – we will examine the concept of video game genre. While genre can be defined in a number of ways (aesthetic presentation, production context, etc.), this thesis will focus on a gameplay defined approach.[8] How

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[8] Genre is a multivalent term and much exploration still needs to be done in order to create firm categories

does the player interact with the game world? What are his/her goals within the game? What role does she/he embody? By describing what the player does in any given video game, a working definition of genre can be applied. This has important ramifications for thinking about historical representation as we will see with the example of *Verdun*. By analyzing it through the lens of the first-person shooter genre, we can see how its representation of the past is communicated – and restricted – through genre conventions. We will end this chapter by briefly looking at two more genres which will be examined later in the essay: the adventure game and the grand strategy game.

In chapter two, we begin by examining how *Valiant Hearts* reflects the dominant memory of the Great War as a tragedy. This depiction of the war – found frequently in other works of popular culture from Wilfred Owen's poetry to Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* – makes *Valiant Hearts* typical in its handling of its subject matter. What makes *Valiant Hearts* atypical, and particularly interesting for historians, is its ability to package nuanced public history within this dramatic narrative through contextual information. These elements consist of pairing archival images or depictions of artifacts with objectively-written text descriptions to create something that closely represents traditional methods of conveying historical scholarship. These methods came about as a result of *Valiant Hearts'* second atypical characteristic: the involvement of actual historians in the development of the game. Yet, despite this laudable historicism, the actual gameplay does little to convey information about the past. This disconnect is a function of the adventure game genre that *Valiant Hearts* works within. This chapter ends

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for video games. For two scholarly explorations on the subject see: Dominic Arsenault, 'Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation,' *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 149 – 176, http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol3no2-3/125; and David Clearwater, 'What Defines Video Game Genre? Thinking about Genre Study after the Great Divide,' *Loading...* 5, no. 8 (2011) http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/viewArticle/67.

with a call for historians to not only assist in video game development but also to publicly critique video games in an effort to open up a debate about the historical representations contained within games.

Chapter three opens with a discussion of the historical forces that shaped the course of World War One. This debate about causation is essential to the work of an academic historian and the grand strategy game genre is uniquely placed to allow players to generate their own interrogations about causation and which forces are historically significant in the outcome of the Great War. Unlike *Valiant Hearts*, grand strategy games' main historical strength comes from the gameplay. By examining in-game examples of geography, diplomacy, and historical decisions, this thesis will show how gameplay conveys historical mentalities. Despite this potential for historicism, historians remain relatively uninvolved in the creation of these games and the tail end of this chapter suggests some practical methods for getting historians involved: either by influencing the development process from the inside or by following players' lead and critiquing the parameters of grand strategy games simulations.

Finally, this thesis will conclude with some general reflections on the intersections of video games and history, arguing that historians should pursue whatever means necessary to involved themselves in what is shaping up to be the dominant pop culture medium of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1: History Through Genre

Video games are wildly popular. In 2014, consumers in the United States alone

spent $22.41 billion dollars on video games.[9] Games are launched with fanfare

comparable to movie premieres and close to half a billion dollars can be spent during the

'opening' weekend for certain new video game titles.[10] Within this enormous industry,

historically-themed video games are some of the best-sellers. For example, the latest

iteration in the globe-and-epoch spanning *Civilization* series is currently the sixth most

played game on personal computers.[11] This all hardly needs to be said. Many, if not all,

historians will concede, for better or for worse, that video games are a central part of the

cultural landscape. Therefore, the important question is not "Are video games popular?"

but rather "Can they represent the past?"

This question has a parallel in the debate about historical feature films. Discussion

about the uses of film in the portrayal of history began in 1970s Europe and gained

popularity in North America during the 1980s.[12] An iconic article in this historiographical

debate appeared in the December 1988 issue of the *American Historical Review* where

historian Robert Rosenstone championed the cause of film by arguing that historians

must embrace its audio-visual language and stop claiming that the written word has

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[9] Entertainment Software Association, '2015 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data', Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry, http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-2015.pdf (accessed April 3, 2016), 13. This is a promotional piece for the games industry but it provides a useful ballpark for games spending.

[10] Paul Tassi, 'Activision Announces $550M Opening Weekend for Call of Duty: Black Ops 3' *Forbes*, November 11, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2015/11/11/activision-announces-550m-opening-weekend-for-call-of-duty-black-ops-3/#6a216ce8522f, (accessed April 3, 2016).

[11] Sergey Galyonkin, 'Top 100 Games in the Last 2 Weeks by Total Time Spent', Steam Spy, http://steamspy.com (accessed April 3, 2016).

[12] William Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2 – 3.

exclusive rights to the representation of the past.[13] His essay was accompanied by a series

of responses from other scholars. Most supported Rosenstone's argument wholeheartedly,

but not all. David Herlihy, for example, in his article 'Am I a Camera? Other Reflections

on History and Film', was broadly supportive of making historians' work intelligible to

the general public, and even saw the strengths of film as a pedagogical tool, but failed to

see how historical film could truly rival the written word as a medium for good history.

His disagreement with Rosenstone included two important criticisms. First, a good film

suspends the audience's disbelief, an element that clashes with good history's ability to

cultivate a critical attitude in the reader. Secondly, film has difficulty exploring "beneath

surfaces and [illuminating] the desires or motives that drive behaviour", particularly the

large historical forces – such as geography or economics.[14] Video games avoid Herlihy's

critiques. As this thesis will demonstrate, certain genres of games – such as the grand

strategy game – naturally encourage a critical attitude to singular historical narratives and

do explore motivation for historical behaviour.

  Yet the broad argument of Herlihy (and other critics of film such as early French

theorists Jean Chesnaux and Michel de Certeau)[15] can still be applied to historical games:

due to the various restrictions of the medium it is inherently difficult (if not impossible)

to provide the same type of information as written academic history. In film, an

entertaining singular narrative is often the most 'natural' form for cinematic

representation.[16] In games, playability – that is, the ability of the player to interact with

the game world in a meaningful and enjoyable way – has primacy. Even proponents of

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[13] Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/history in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film". *The American Historical Review* 93 no. 5 (December 1988): 1173–85.
[14] Herlihy, 'Am I a Camera?' 1189 - 91.
[15] Guynn, *Writing History in Film,* 3 – 8.
[16] Ibid., 76.

historically analyzing games readily admit this problem. Historian William Kapell, in his introduction to *Playing with the Past*, notes that "history is designed with the goal of knowledge, understanding, and enlightenment in mind; video games are designed to be played. As a result, playability can be seen to overpower historicity."[17] Yet, the primacy of play over truth is not nearly as damning as it initially appears. As Kapel argues, video games' historical strength lies not in their ability to convey large amounts of complex research; instead it lies in making the past tactile and engaging – either through the embodiment or re-enactment of a historical role (as in *Verdun*), the creating of counter-factual histories (as in the grand strategy games considered here) or through engagement with a compelling narrative (as in *Valiant Hearts*). It is the very primacy of play in video games that makes them a compelling medium for historical exploration.[18]

In order to begin that exploration, however, this thesis must first place the games being analyzed in the context of their genre. As discussed above, genre is a method of classifying games according to the type of gameplay they employ. What are players doing within the game? What role do they embody? How do they engage with the game world? The answers to these questions help determine the genre a certain game belongs to. Before any historian engages with a video game he/she must determine its genre and understand that genre's limitations and strengths. Failure to consider genre during analysis or when working with game developers will result in unhelpful critiques/suggestions that miss the realities of what is possible in any particular game and will also fail to understand how certain games generate meaning for players.

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[17] Kapell and Elliott, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, 12 – 13.
[18] Ibid., 14 – 19.

To provide a practical example – and begin this thesis's exploration of World War One video games – let us look at the most recognizable of video game genres: the first-person shooter (or FPS). This genre sees players mainly interact with the game world through shooting a gun from the first-person perspective. The ultimate goal is to 'kill' either computer-controlled entities or other players playing on the same game level. It is fast-paced and incredibly violent. Often players play online against each other in a sub-genre called the multiplayer FPS. In this format, a group of players playing on the same level are divided into two teams and these teams compete against each other until a certain win condition is met. One of the genre conventions of these multiplayer FPS games is that levels be 'balanced'. This means that players expect the game to provide both teams with an even playing field. If the level is designed to give one team an advantage – for example a team starting the game controlling the high ground – the level is considered unbalanced. Usually this violation of genre conventions would be considered bad game design. The meritocracy of skill that these games thrive on would not be able to flourish. Most importantly, the FPS must always provide players with interesting choices. What gun should I use? Should I reload my weapon now or when I get to that covered area? Where is a good place to lay an ambush? The player, in a first-person shooter, should never be bored.

Trench warfare does not appear to lend itself well to this type of game. As PhD candidate Chris Kempshall notes, "the diaries and letters of First World War soldiers...report a recurring theme, but it is of boredom rather than horror."[19] The

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[19] Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games,* 6. It should be stated outright that this essay owes

visceral terror (and excitement) of combat was a rare occurrence and future British

Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, writing home to his mother, said that "the thrill

of battle comes now once or twice a twelvemonth."[20] Soldiers spent much more

time engaged in menial tasks such as trench fortification away from the front

lines.[21] This historical reality seems at odds with the FPS, yet *Verdun* interprets

Western Front combat through the FPS genre with relative success. This game sees

teams of players take turns going 'over the top' and charging across a barbwire

strewn No-Man's Land in an attempt to take the opposing team's trenches. The

flow of combat is constant with players alternating attacking and defending every

five minutes. A shovel for trench duty is nowhere to be found.

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much to Kempshall's analysis. His book is a strong overview of the intersection of video games and the Great War. However, his focus is overly thematic. His four chapters deal with narrative, landscape, combat, and the end of the war. While he does pay attention to practical matters – such as genre and issues around historian's involvement – it is not the focus of his work. This essay, while dealing with similar subject matter to Kempshall, fills this gap in his work: how do video games communicate about the past on a practical level and how can historians become involved.

[20] Stephen Bull, *Trench: A History of Trench Warfare on the Western Front*, (United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing, 2014), 218.

[21] Ibid., 90 – 94.

Figure 1: Looking across No Man's Land through a machine gun's sight in *Verdun.*

Yet, if a historian were to criticize the game for not forcing the players to spend long hours piling sandbags, such criticism would be short-sighted. Instead, historians should pay attention to how the game could be more historically accurate while still working within the framework of the first-person shooter genre. For example, historians might critique the uniforms or the weapons of the game without interfering with larger gameplay concerns. The *Verdun* developers researched both these elements in-depth but used non-academic sources – specifically two lesser known museums in Europe, Le Poilu Museum of Alkmaar and the Romagne '14 – '18, and various World War One movies, such as *Passchendale*.[22] Investigating the accuracy of *Verdun's* weapons and uniforms is beyond the scope of this thesis, but this example shows historians how they can constructively fact-check video games while simultaneously respecting the genre

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[22] Gilles Roy and Ros Hoebe, 'In the Trenches: Verdun Developer Interview, part 2,' playthepast, June 3, 2015, http://www.playthepast.org/?p=5261 (accessed March 3, 2015).

constraints of the medium. It also demonstrates a genuine – if amateur – desire on

the part of the developers to get the past 'right'.

This game also demonstrates how video games play within genre to

communicate historical information; *Verdun's* main strength, one that a written

history cannot hope to match, is encouraging players to immerse themselves in the

mentalitié of a unit ordered to attack or defend a trench. One of the ways it

communicates this idea is by contradicting the convention of balance mentioned

above. When a team is tasked with going on offense, it is forced to cross No Man's

Land in an effort to reach the other team's trenches. Most multiplayer FPS levels

provide players with ample cover under which they can move and flank the

opposing team; *Verdun* does not. As a result offensive players are incredibly

vulnerable to enemy fire and they are often killed in droves by the defending

team's machine guns – a historical reality that is one of the most potent images of

the war.[23] By subverting the idea of the 'balanced' level, *Verdun* immerses players

more fully in the historical period it is trying to evoke.[24] Games journalist, Hayden

Dingman, wrote in his review of the game that, "If nothing else, Verdun's given me

an excellent understanding of what a mess World War I was...The first time I went

over the top I said more than a few "Holy $@*&%s" out loud. It seems impossible

you're going to cross this massive field of barbed wire, craters, and mud all while

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[23] A vivid example of the havoc machine guns could wreak up attackers is summed up in a German soldier's diary recorded on the front near Loos in 1915: "Never had the machine gunners such straightforward work to do or done it so effectively. They traversed to and fro along the enemy's ranks unceasingly. The men stood on the fire steps, some even on the parapets, and fired triumphantly into the mass of men advancing across open grassland. As the entire field of fire was covered with the enemy's infantry the effect was devastating and they could be seen falling literally in hundreds." Bull, *Trench*, 218.
[24] It should be noted that *Verdun* does not subvert this notion of balance so much as to make the game 'un-fun'. A co-ordinated offensive team can still take a trench. Rather *Verdun* feels significantly more unbalanced in the context of other multiplayer FPSes.

bullets crack overhead."[25]

This sense of historical immersion resembles academic consensus on World War One trench warfare. The advancement of weapon technology during this period gave defenders a significant advantage and this advantage resulted in many casualties when large scale combat broke out at battlefields like Verdun.[26] While on the offensive in the video game *Verdun* players can expect to die many times without even seeing an enemy – let alone killing one; the attritional nature of the historical battle – with casualties amongst both French and German soldiers standing at 337,000 each – is mirrored in the way the game plays.[27] Genre, therefore, is an important element in how video games produce historical representations. It is a language historians must, at least vaguely, comprehend before they can become involved in the analysis, consultancy or criticism of the medium.

The two other genres that will be analyzed in this thesis – the adventure game and the grand strategy game – will be explained more in the following chapters but it is important to introduce them here. The adventure game, the genre to which the game *Valiant Hearts* – the subject of chapter two – belongs, has a long history within the medium stretching well back into the 1970s.[28] By-and-large, the player's chief interaction with the game in this genre is through solving puzzles and exploring the game world as the protagonist of a pre-designed narrative. The

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[25] Hayden Dingman, 'Verdun review: A thoughtful, squad-based take on WWI,' PC World, May 17, 2015, http://www.pcworld.com/article/2923080/verdun-review-a-thoughtful-squad-based-take-on-wwi.html#comments (accessed March 15th, 2016).
[26] William Kelleher Storey, *The First World War: A Concise Global History* (United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 11 – 13.
[27] Storey, *The First World War*, 89.
[28] Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (East Sussex: Yellow Ant, 2010), 51 – 53.

puzzles are often mandatory and players must solve them first before continuing

their exploration of the game's world and narrative.[29] In most adventure games, the

puzzles do not affect the outcome of the story; they merely act as fixed gateways

that lock "narrative content that a player unlocks piece by piece over time".[30] This

allows a fixed narrative to be told. The emphasis on narrative is particularly

important for historical purposes because it means that these types of games can

focus on a linear account of events: history is not being played with here, it is

being related. However, this comes at the price of arbitrary gameplay; that is

gameplay disconnected from game's setting and therefore, in the case of *Valiant*

Hearts, disconnected from the history of the Great War.

The second genre this thesis must consider is the grand strategy game.

These are strategy games that are played at the level of nation-states, are

historically based and that take place over a long period of time – often decades or

centuries. Players choose a nation and, frequently, a starting date. The game then

simulates the nation's historical position – what wars it was fighting, what major

alliances it maintained, what territory it controlled – and then hands control to

players. The rest of the world (i.e. other nation-states) is simulated and controlled

by the computer. Players take near omnipotent control over all aspects of their

chosen nation state, frequently controlling economic production, military

campaigns and diplomatic relations by manipulating a series of menus and an in-

game map. Essentially, grand strategy games look like an incredibly complex

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[29] Marek Bronstring, 'What are adventure games?' Adventure Games, October 15, 2002, (accessed April 4, 2016), http://web.archive.org/web/20080702195815/http://www.adventuregamers.com/article/id,149.
[30] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 479.

version of the board game Risk. These games, as will be discussed in chapter three of this thesis, are excellent generators of counter-factual histories. As the game begins, a combination of player agency and imperfect simulation causes a divergence from 'real' history and by the end of a game, the player has created his/her own unique narrative. The counter-factual nature of this genre makes it of immediate interest to historians.

In the same way that *Verdun* is restricted and strengthened by the first-person shooter genre, the games analyzed below are similarly influenced by the genre conventions that they must work within. Any historical analysis of games must be placed within this context. As we will see in the coming chapter, the adventure game genre allows *Valiant Hearts* to tell a tragic narrative of the Great War but results in the actual gameplay being relatively disconnected from historical reality. *Valiant Hearts,* however, makes up for this paucity of historically meaningful gameplay by providing rich contextual information about World War One and the result is a strong piece of public history.

Chapter 2: History Through Text/Images

The Great War is remembered as a senseless tragedy. Paul Fussell, in his classic

examination of literary memory of the war *The Great War and Modern Memory*, notes

that again and again, throughout the twentieth century, writers returned to the memory of

the war, even if they themselves had never experienced the conflict.[31] It is the ultimate

evocation of "innocence savaged and destroyed" he wrote.[32] Countless poets and writers

codified this overarching narrative theme following the war, including Siegfried Sassoon,

Wilfred Owen, John McCrae and Erich Maria Remarque. Many of the soldiers who died

– especially in Britain where much of the most evocative war poetry originates from –

were middle class and this resulting loss of educated men provoked an outpouring of

tragic writing by their surviving peers.[33] This outpouring was not just the lament for a lost

generation; it was a lament for a lost sense of self. Historian Modris Eksteins writes

"because of its staggering cost in talent and traditions, the war was bound to provoke…a

re-examination of the very foundations of civilization and society."[34] Modris claims that

the origins of the linguistic turn and the subsequent deconstruction of language had its

roots in the rupture that occurred from 1914 to 1918. Both Fussell and Eksteins see in

Great War the birth of the modern condition through tragic upheaval.

The subject of this chapter, *Valiant Hearts,* is a video game successor to this

popular memory of the Great War as a tragedy. A hyperbolic Kempshall waxes about the

game, "if Wilfred Owen's pity was to be found in the poetry here it lurks amongst the

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[31] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 321.
[32] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 335.
[33] Modris Eksteins, 'Memory and the Great War,' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 318 – 319.
[34] Ibid., 319.

pixels."[35] The tragic tone it strikes is significant in itself because it is a slant on the war

that most video games do not adopt despite this popular memory. Combat is the central

theme amongst all but three of the twenty-eight World War One games found on Steam, a

popular online video game store for computers.[36] This does not necessarily preclude a

tragic remembering of the war; after all, violence and tragedy go hand-in-hand with other

forms of media. Games are different from other media however – player interaction is

required and it is rare for games to undermine player interaction by making their

participation emotionally painful. Making a game like *Verdun* painful and upsetting in

the same way that the war is remembered would considerably dampen (one hopes) the

players' ability to kill each other without guilt. The fact that *Valiant Hearts* is by far the

most popular World War One game of the twenty-eight video games found on Steam –

with nearly 400,000 owners on Steam alone and another 400,000 on mobile phones and

home television consoles – reflects how strong this popular memory of the war as a tragic

event remains in society today.[37]

     Valiant Hearts reflects this popular memory mainly through its narrative.

Published in June 2014 by the Montpellier division of Ubisoft, *Valiant Hearts* is a

puzzle/adventure game that takes place during some of the most famous events of World

War One – including iconic battles at the Marne and Ypres. With a highly stylized

cartoon aesthetic, the game follows four playable characters – Anna, a Belgian nurse;

Freddie, an American volunteer soldier; Karl, a German farmer deported from his

adopted home in France; and his French father-in-law, Emile. These characters are all

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[35] Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 36.
[36] This conclusion is reached through my own analysis of the twenty-eight games available on Steam.
[37] Sergey Galyonkin, 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War / Soldats Inconnus: Memoires de la Grande Guerre,' Steam Spy, (accessed April 4, 2016) http://steamspy.com/app/260230.

caught up in the events of the war and while most survive, the larger narrative arc is one

of tragedy. In the emotional climax of the game, the player witnesses Emile being

executed for the accidental killing of a French officer during the Nivelle offensive of

1917 – a plot point which is intended to represent the widespread mutiny that occurred

within the French army during this period, in which close to "35,000 soldiers were

involved in acts of 'collective indiscipline.'"[38]

But while a reinforcement of the dominant memory of the war is embedded in the

narrative arc of the game, *Valiant Hearts* also provides nuanced historical information –

the type historians are more accustomed to – through written descriptions, archival

pictures and artistic representations of artifacts. These methods of historical

representation demonstrate how games can communicate good public history through

visuals and texts while not interfering with the playability of video games. *Valiant Hearts*

is of further interest to this thesis because of the involvement of historians in the

development process. It provides a great example of constructive ways that historians can

help create good video games that also double as good public history.

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[38] Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, 'Eastern Front and Western Front, 1916 – 1917,' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 187.

Facts

In partnership with APOCALYPSE

Taxi to Marne

September 6th and 7th 1914, General Gallieni requisitioned 630 Parisian taxis to transport troops rapidly to the Marne. While relatively few soldiers were actually transported (4,000 in all, 3 % of the total number of men deployed in the battle), the impact on the public was huge. The event became a symbol of solidarity for the nation and the Marne counterattack saved Paris from German occupation.

Space Validate   Esc Close   Left Alt Change tab   More info APOCALYPSE
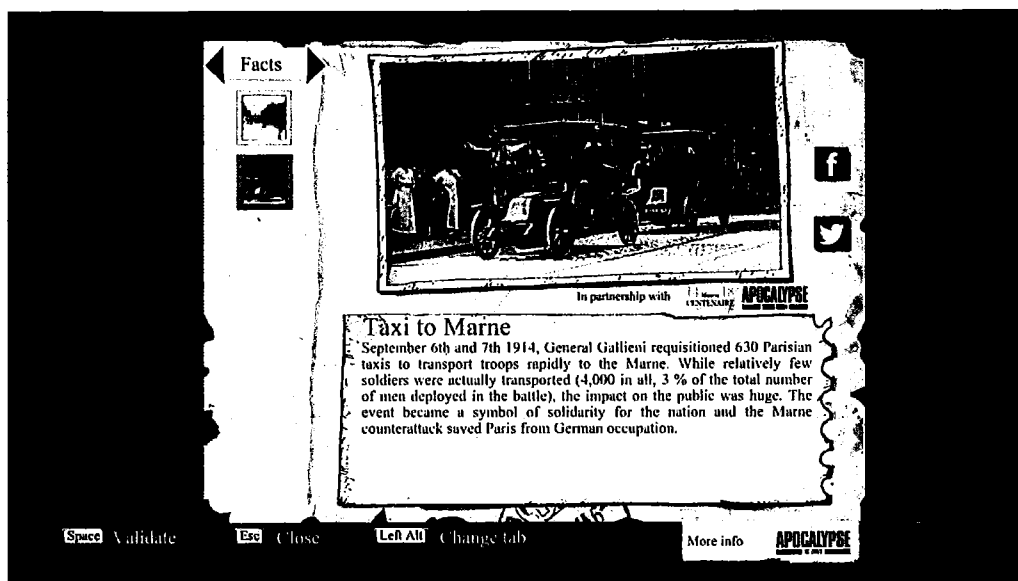
Figure 2: 'Taxi to Marne' contextual content in *Valiant Hearts.*

The most common example of this good public history is contextual information

provided in the game's menu. As players progress through the game they will

occasionally be notified about new contextual information being available. This

information provides historical background to the gameplay sequence the player is

engaged in. For example, during Anna's requisition of a taxi to travel to the first Battle of

the Marne, the game notifies the player that the Military Governor of Paris, Joseph Simon

Gallieni, did indeed requisition taxi cabs to transport French troops to the Battle of the

Marne.[39] As is evident in Figure 2, these contextual descriptions convey historical

information in ways that resemble traditional historical scholarship. First there is the

objective language used in the description. Numbers are deployed ("4,000 in all, 3 % of

the total number of men deployed in the battle...") and the sidebar menu that this

description is nested within has the straightforward heading of "Facts" (see upper-left

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[39] Sewell Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne 1914* (United States: Westholme Publishing, U.S., 2007), 239 – 240.

section of Figure 2). Secondly, the inclusion of a historical photo makes another claim to

authority and accuracy.[40] Finally, this blurb even contains an explicit reference to an

outside authority for this historical fact: the '14 – 18 Mission Centenaire', a French

public history organization and a source that will be discussed presently. The result is a

space within the game where traditional historical scholarship – with its careful use of

archival imagery, objective language and quantifiable data – can be presented.

Valiant Hearts also places artifacts throughout its levels which players may find

through exploring the game world thoroughly. When the player acquires these artifacts

he/she is again informed of a menu that can be accessed for more information. There the

artifact will be displayed along with a textual description of its historical significance. An

example of one of these artifacts is found in Figure 3. They range from quotidian items

like linen embroidery – an item the game uses to illustrate the widespread prevalence of

soldier created 'trench art' during the Great War[41] – to more significant cultural items

like a Khukuri knife – symbolizing the involvement of the Ghurka units in the Indian

Army, 55,000 of which were recruited over the course of the Great War[42] – and a crucifix

(pictured below) – which the game uses as an opportunity to elaborate on the religious

diversity of British troops.[43] These artifacts, with their stylized drawings, and less

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[40] This picture is taken from the footage from the TV Documentary series, *Apocalypse World War 1*. Time stamp 15:30 – 16:30. Cosmos Documentaries, 'Apocalypse World War 1 | 2of5 Fear,' Daily Motion video, 15:30 – 16:30, posted 18 March, 2014, (accessed April 4, 2016) http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3dvltj. The producers of *Apocalypse World War* 1 helped the *Valiant Hearts* developers acquire images from French government archives during the creation of the game. Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games,* 35.
[41] For a discussion of trench art see: Nicholas J. Saunders, 'Trench Art,' *History Today* 53, no. 11 (November 2003): 32 – 38.
[42] Kaushik Roy, 'Race and Recruitment in the Indian Army: 1880–1918', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (February 8, 2013), 1340.
[43] Over 1.4 million troops were deployed in both non-combatant and combatant roles by British India. The Indian troops were incredibly diverse in belief and were, rather obviously, overwhelmingly non-Christian. In 1912, .75% of the Indian Army was Christian and .01% was Jewish. The remainder was composed of
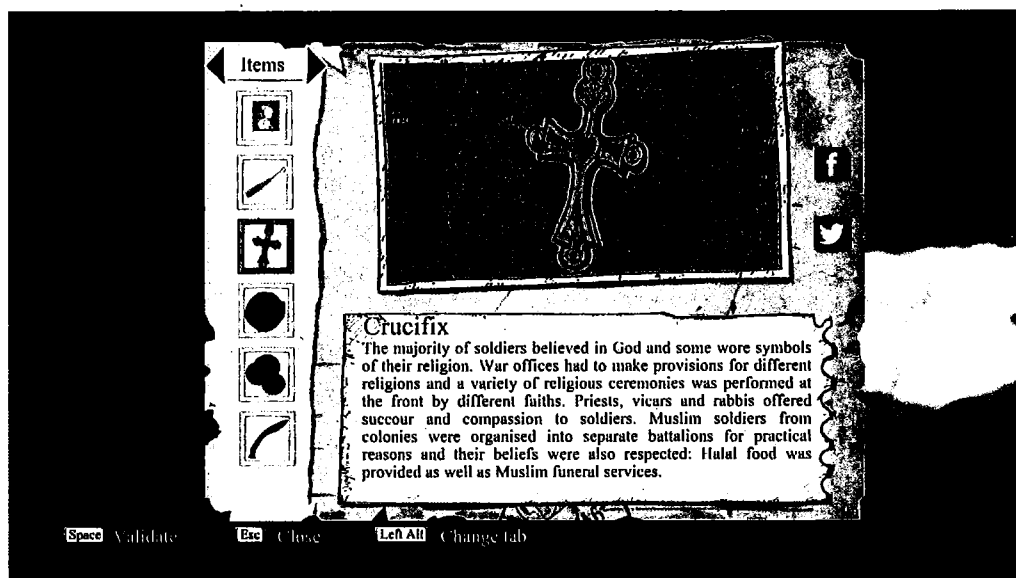
Figure 3: Crucifix as historical artifact in *Valiant Hearts*.

detailed informational language – in comparison to the "Facts" sub-menu – still offer a

window on to the past. While the "Facts" discussed in the paragraph above often convey

military or political history, these artifacts explore the social and cultural history of the

period using a museal technique of pairing object with explanatory text. This has the

additional benefit of not only conveying the facts of history but also the form of history.

Players are encouraged to think about individual items and how they can indicate larger

historical ideas or realities.

These artifacts also frequently challenge popular conceptions of the war. The

crucifix highlights the religious diversity of armies, challenging an interpretation that the

Great War was solely fought between white soldiers from European nations.[44] The

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Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and various other religious-ethno groups. Roy, 'Race and Recruitment in the Indian Army', 1330 – 45.

[44] This Eurocentric interpretation of the war extends to academia as well, although this is changing. See: Santanu Das, 'Introduction,' in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

game's "Facts" sub-menu also challenges historical myths about the war. Note how the 'Taxi to Marne' description actively subverts the importance of the taxis in the outcome of the battle. Popular memory celebrates the taxis' contribution as decisive. Stephane Jonard, a cultural interpreter for *La Musee de la Grand Guerre* near Paris, notes that "When we welcome school children to the museum, they don't know anything about the First World War, but they know the Taxis of the Marne."[45] The reality is far less dramatic and *Valiant Hearts* is cognizant of this fact. It notes that while "impact on the public was huge...relatively few soldiers were actually transported."[46] This assessment reflects the current academic consensus on the event with historian Holger Herwig noting that while "it was great publicity for Galliéni; militarily it was insignificant."[47] Contrary to what many historians might presume about them, video games do not just reinforce historical myths and are more than capable of challenging them. If one of the tasks of history is to bring to light the stories that are not always told in the national myths that surround events, then *Valiant Hearts* does a commendable job.

The inclusion of actual historians in the creation of the game undoubtedly helped *Vailant Hearts* include more nuanced historical information. The main organization involved in the historical aspects of the game was the 14 - 18 Mission Centenaire. The Mission Centenaire "is a public interest group established...by the [French] Government for the preparation and implementation of the commemorative program for the First

[45] John Hanc, 'A Fleet of Taxis Did Not Really Save Paris From the Germans During World War I,' *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 24, 2014 (accessed April 4, 2016) http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fleet-taxis-did-not-really-save-paris-germans-during-world-war-i-180952140/?no-ist.

[46] Ubisoft Montpellier, *Valiant Hearts* [PC version], (Ubisoft, 2014).

[47] Holger H Herwig, *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (London: Random House Publishing Group, 2010), 262.

World War centenary."[48] During an advertisement for the game before its release

Alexandre Lafon, a historian working with the Centenaire, discusses how he assisted the

video game developers in finding relevant archival materials.[49] The Centenaire was not

always involved in the game's development and only began to assist after the developers

released a promotional video early in the game's creation process.[50] By actively seeking

to help game developers with their historical representations, Alexandre Lafon helped

create a game that was more historically responsible.

Of course, this was an easy task as many of the historical elements of *Valiant*

Hearts are secondary to the actual gameplay. The actual tasks a player is required to do

during the game are often relatively unconnected from the historical reality in which the

game is set. Consider the puzzle in Figure 4 in which the player first encounters chlorine

gas at Ypres. This particular gameplay sequence sees the player, embodying Emile,

sabotage a monstrous contraption which is pumping chlorine gas onto the Ypres

battlefield. During the actual battle of Ypres, the Germans deployed chemical weapons

on April 22, 1915 by releasing "150 tons of chlorine from 6,000 cylinders".[51] Later

deployment methods included gas shells (used by both sides), a gas drum launcher called

the Livens Projector (used by the British) and the mortar-like 'Gaswerfer' (used by the

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[48] 'The Centenary Partnership Program,' 14 – 18 Mission Centenaire, January 16, 2013, (accessed February 13, 2016) http://centenaire.org/en/la-mission/centenary-partnership-program.

[49] Ubisoft, 'Valiant Hearts Developer Diary 3: History [US],' Youtube video, 00:40 – 00:55, posted June 19, 2014, (Accessed February 13, 2016) http://valianthearts.ubi.com/game/en-CA/rearguard/detail_news.aspx?c=tcm:164-148921-16&ct=tcm:148-76770-32.

[50] Creative director for the game, Yoan Fanise, notes how, "Then later, after we released the first teaser, Apocalypse producers [a historical TV mini-series working with the *Mission Centenaire*] contacted us, [and] we found our approach had a lot of similarities and decided to work together on the historical part. It was a pleasure to work with their documents and also with historians like Alexandre Lafont. [sic]" Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games,* 35.

[51] Edgar Jones, 'Terror Weapons: The British Experience of Gas and Its Treatment in the First World War', *War in History* 21, no. 3 (June 4, 2014), 356.

Figure 4: Ahistorical gas deployment in *Valiant Hearts*.

Germans).[52] The cartoonish monstrosity in the game bears little relation to these deployment methods and this disconnect can be found at various points throughout the game. Unlike *Verdun*, where gameplay helps to convey a historical mentalitié, gameplay in *Valiant Hearts* conveys little information about the past.

However, just because because a game's gameplay says little about the past does not mean that the game as a whole says nothing about history. Games are multimedia constructs trading equally in traditional and new forms of representation. *Valiant Hearts* therefore demonstrates the utility of a multi-pronged approach to considering games. Its narrative reflects a popular memory of war as tragedy while it uses textual and visual representations to reflect a more nuanced, multi-layered understanding of the war. At the same time, its gameplay is typical of the adventure genre – arbitrary and disconnected from the larger context around it – and does not contribute much to the historical

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[52] Jones, 'Terror Weapons, 359.

information being conveyed by the rest of the game. Video games are versatile: they

work on multiple registers. Historians must be aware of this when engaging with them.

. . .

Valiant Hearts is a popular game that also contains strong historical elements. It is

a good example of what games can do when made in collaboration with historians. But is

there another way historians can involve themselves in addition to assisting in game

development? This thesis answers in the affirmative: historians can discuss and debate

certain video games merits in the public sphere. Through writing op-eds or historical

reviews on video games for large publications such as The New Yorker or The Guardian

– both of which have a growing habit of writing about games themselves – historians can

open up a debate space around the intersection of history and video games. While many

of the articles written by historians are still relatively unsympathetic, historians'

involvement in public debates about historical films is a good model to replicate. By

wading into the fray historians can hopefully make players think about the strengths and

weaknesses of games like Valiant Hearts in their depiction of the war. More broadly they

can encourage players to critically assess the historical interpretations that they encounter

both within video games and in other forms of media. For example, an interesting debate

could be opened up about the game's tragic narrative. According to historian Dan

Todman, the popular memory of the war as a tragedy has not always existed: "[World

War One was] often entered into in a spirit of hope, enthusiasm and willing sacrifice, and

won with resolution, determination and even fury; [it] is now looked back on with a sense

of regret, betrayal and failure."[53] Valiant Hearts, embodying this latter stream of memory,

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[53] Dan Todman, The Great War: Myth and Memory (United Kingdom: Continuum International Publishing

could serve as a jumping off point for an article about the Protean remembering of the Great War.

To some extent, this is already being done. History PhD candidate, Robert Whitaker, in a video review of the game – published on his Youtube channel, *History Respawned* – asks whether *Valiant Hearts* has a French bias in its portrayal of history.[54] His arguments hinge upon the negative characterization of German characters – the main villain, a German officer named Baron Von Dorf, is merciless in his use of gas warfare and his distinctive hat features a human skull. He also argues the game downplays the use of French colonial troops. He notes that "while the game includes copious references to British imperial possessions, there is little to no reference to French imperialism." This does a disservice to "the 140,000 of these soldiers who saw service during the war...many of [whom] were recruited by violence or by the threat of violence to their families if they did not cooperate."[55] Did the government body of the Centenaire steer the developers away from this embarrassing aspect of French history? These subtle arguments built into games should be interrogated and debated, not ignored.

Whether *Valiant Hearts* exhibits a French historical point-of-view or not, the point of this example is to show that the possibility for debate and exploration of games in a historical context exists. Debates force players and the public in general to think about the narratives that steer their own lives and how the past is represented in modern society. But this debate does not have to only take the form of external criticism: it can also be engendered by the video games themselves. For the next chapter, we turn to the

Group, 2007), 221.

[54] History Respawned, 'History Respawned: Valiant Hearts', Youtube video, 6:31, posted August 6, 2014, (accessed February 13, 2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzYQ8uAqAg0.

[55] Ibid., 5:10 – 5:50.

grand strategy genre. A genre, as we will see, that conveys information about the past through gameplay. This gameplay, by encouraging players to generate counter-factual histories, creates a naturally interrogative relationship with the historical representations contained within – teaching players not only the facts of history but also its methodologies.

Chapter 3: History Through Gameplay

Historical memories of World War One's beginning are contradictory. On the one hand it is remembered as a moment of individual agency determining the course of history: if Gavrillo Princip had not been in the right (or wrong?) place at the right time, how might things have changed? The significance of individual human agency – so often seen as the beginning of the war in popular remembrance – is set against the backdrop of large historical forces: the interlocking continental alliances, the precise mobilization timetables, the striving imperialism of Germany,[56] and the rabid nationalism sweeping across Europe.[57] These forces are accepted by historians as the ultimate causes of the war and from this macro viewpoint, the war is almost inevitable; Princip is non-essential. Yet, historian Samuel Williamson notes that while there was mounting tension on the international stage, when Princip's bullet found Franz Ferdinand the major European powers appeared relatively at ease. Three international crises had been avoided already; diplomatic tensions appeared to have relaxed slightly.[58] So while Princip's bullet – and by extension human agency – did not create the war *ex nihlo*, his actions certainly shaped the ultimate contours of the war. World War One then lies at the crossroads of an interesting debate about causation: what were the causes of the war? What role did human agency play? This debate is unlikely to end. Earlier this year, World War One historian Margaret MacMillan wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "We still have no consensus on how

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[56] Storey, *The First World War*, 5 – 34.
[57] Samuel R. Williamson Jr., 'The Origins of the War,' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15.
[58] Ibid., 13 – 17.

the First World War happened and I suspect we never will."[59] Causation in World War

One history – as in all history – will always be contested.

Grand strategy video games are especially suited to exploring these questions of

causation through counter-factual imaginings. These games allow players to manipulate

nations and make important historical decisions, with the option of either following

history or diverging from it. The result of this playing with history is an alternate version

of the Great War – one which allows players to test their own hypotheses about the war

or simply acquire a better understanding of the forces that shaped its course. But while

these games allow players to manipulate historical forces, they do not allow completely

unbounded play; the rules of the game and the choices it offers players make subtle

arguments about the historical reality the game is claiming to simulate. In the case of

World War One games, the inclusion of certain choices – the ability to modify the

Schlieffen Plan for example – implies that these choices were a) important in shaping the

war and b) that these choices could have turned out differently. Choices that are not

presented to players – such as decisions to enact conscription or not – imply the opposite:

that these factors were not important in shaping the war or even if they were important,

could not be changed. As concluded in chapter two, while historians can and should root

out factual inaccuracies when games are making factual claims via text and images, they

must also examine and critique video games' representation of history through gameplay.

This chapter examines World War One grand strategy games – paying particular attention

to *Commander: The Great War*, *Darkest Hour,* and *Making History* – through the choices

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[59] Robert Fulford, 'The shifting sands of history: Just as the words we use to describe our past change, so too does our understanding,' *National Post*, March 14, 2016, (accessed March 15, 2016) http://news.nationalpost.com/arts/books/the-shifting-sands-of-history-just-as-the-words-we-use-to-describe-our-past-change-so-too-does-our-understanding.

they offer the player and the parameters of the games' simulation. By examining these elements – with examples of how these games represent the war's geography, diplomatic maneuvering and military aspects – this thesis demonstrates the historical arguments being made on the level of gameplay and, again, suggests ways that historians may influence them in a positive manner.

These gameplay representations are often simplifications and sometimes place players in ahistorical situations. However, criticizing these aspects of the gameplay would be unproductive. These ahistorical situations and simplified representations are made in the service of capturing a greater historical truth or evoking a historical mentalitié. Instead, criticism and analysis should be aimed at the counter-factuals these grand strategy games pose and the details of the simulations that drive them. Are they plausible? Do they emphasize historical forces? Do they suitably capture the broad forces that drove political history? [60]

The most obvious historical force in grand strategy games is that of geography. This provides a good example of the unique capabilities of the medium to convey a historical reality in a much more engaging way than written history. It may seem blindingly obvious but by forcing a player to inhabit a nation-state, the player is immediately made aware of the geographical factors helping determine that country's actions in history. A good example of a game giving players a sense of geographical space, and how that geographical space forced states into certain strategies, is found in *Commander*. In the game, players are not tasked – as is usual for grand strategy games –

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[60] It is interesting to note that the grand strategy game downplays the individual and collective agency of human beings. These games, as a whole, reduce history to nation states expending human lives as if they were another set of resources, to push nationalist agendas. This tendency however is very much a function of genre. To ask grand strategy games to tell a 'history from below' in a manner similar to *Valiant Hearts*, with its individual characters and quotidian artifacts, would be an example of unhelpful criticism.

with embodying a single nation but rather a whole alliance system. If players choose to embody the Entente – the alliance composed mainly of Serbia, Britain, France and Russia – they begin as the small Serbian nation hemmed in by the larger Austro-Hungarians. Over the next several turns, the player is given control of Russia, France and Britain as the other Entente allies enter the war. This impresses upon the player a number of things. First is the sheer logistics of modern war as huge numbers of units must be moved and produced each turn by the player. Secondly, the large scale strategy places the player in a position where pressure on one front can relieve pressure from another, mirroring factual strategic concerns such as those that drove the 1916 assault by the Russians at Lake Naroch in order to take pressure off the French at Verdun.[61] Of course, this is ahistorical; complete coordination between allied war plans – as is allowed in *Commander* through the singular control of an entire alliance – is decidedly inaccurate. Historically the various nations' politicians and generals all had their own agendas. For the Entente, it would take until the final year of the war for the armies on the Western Front to be placed under the united command of French general Ferdinand Foch.[62] Nonetheless, the ahistoricity of *Commander* leads to a historical understanding of the interconnectivity of the two fronts and the sense of scale that the Great War was fought on.

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[61] Storey, *The First World War*, 89 – 90.
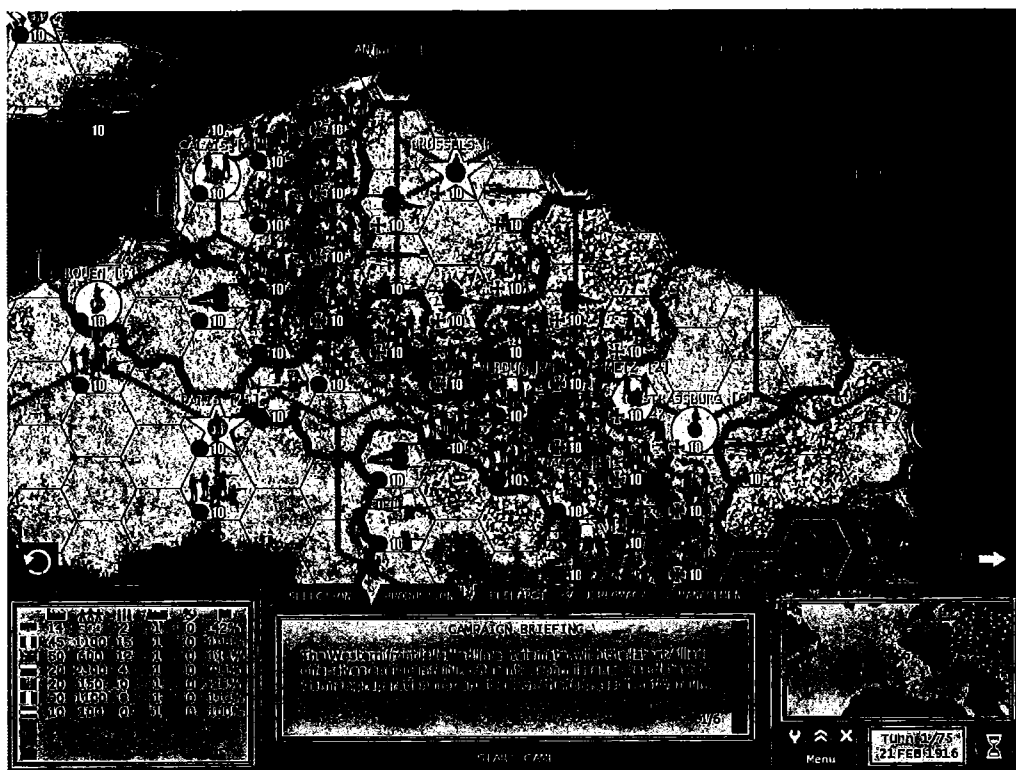[62] Ibid., 144.

Figure 5: The Western Front: February 1916 - according to *Commander*.

Looking at the Figure 5 above, we can see the main parameters of *Commander's*

gameplay by examining the tabs in the central and left rectangles at the bottom of the

picture. Worth particular note are the resources on the left including ammunition (the

three bullets), manpower (the three people) and national morale (the flag). These three

resources are used extensively during a game of *Commander* and act as abstracted

representations of actual resources that were crucial to the war effort. Ammunition, which

in *Commander* is a crucial resource to maintain if the players want to use artillery, was in

short supply during the early years of the Great War and served as a major impetus for

industrial development for the belligerent nations.[63] Manpower also played an important

role in the historical war and it was again an important resource to be managed – during

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[63] Hew Strachan, 'Economic Mobilization: Money, Munitions, and Machines,' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),138 – 142.

the final month before the collapse of the Central Powers, "the cry of the [German]

supreme command was not for munitions but for men."[64] National morale in the game is

affected by the capture of cities and losses in battle. Once national morale reaches zero,

that particular nation surrenders and the player no longer can control it. This too has an

obvious real-life parallel. J.M. Winter described the mobilization of consent within the

belligerent countries' populations as a crucial element that ensured the war lasted as long

as it did.[65] *Commander* thus reveals how games take historical forces, abstract them, and

ask players to manipulate them in pursuit of victory. The implicit argument here is that

manpower, morale and ammunition were the most crucial factors driving the Great War's

outcome.

Another historical process that *Commander* simulates is diplomacy. In the game,

neutral countries – such as Holland, the United States and Bulgaria – have an opinion

(represented by a number) of the player's alliance. If this opinion becomes too high or too

low, they ally with or declare war on the player respectively. Certain actions, such as

declaring war on other neutrals or using gas for the first time on the battlefield will affect

the neutral's opinions of the player negatively – just as it did when Germany broke the

1899 Hague Convention and released chlorine gas on French colonial troops at Ypres in

1915.[66] The diplomatic wooing of neutrals was very important for all the belligerents in

the Great War and *Commander* captures this element through a relatively simple

gameplay element. Not only is this an example of yet another historical force that grand

strategy games imply is important in the history of the war, it is also an example of how

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[64] Strachan, 'Econommic Mobilization,' 146.
[65] J. M. Winter, 'Propaganda and the Mobilization of Consent,' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Stachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 216 – 218.
[66] Storey, *The First World War*, 47 – 48.

video games must simplify historical detail in order to communicate a larger truth about the war and allow players the ability to play with it.

But offering players historical forces as lego pieces in a reconstruction of the past is not the only way that grand strategy games generate historical meaning; they often use events that prompt the player for a decision. These events are historical but often offer some counter-factual choices along with the historical choice. For an example, see Figure 6 from *Darkest Hour,* where the player is being prompted for a decision about a defensive pact between Germany and the Ottoman Empire – a real historical event.[67] The text box informs the player about the factual history surrounding this event but then offers the player to engage in counter-factual decision making. In this case the player can
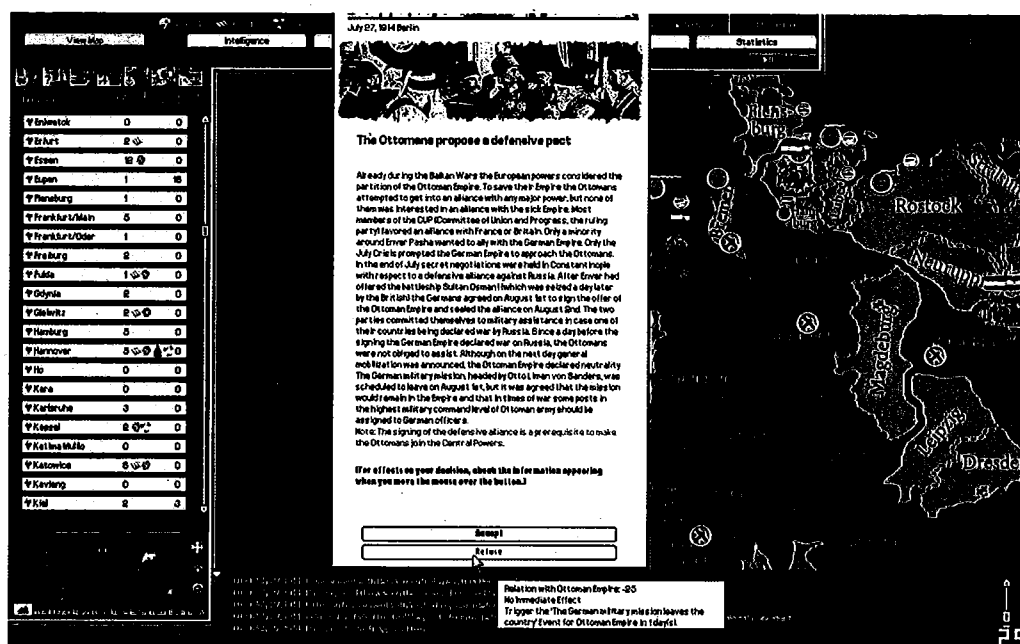

Figure 6: The German and Ottoman defensive pact in *Darkest Hour.*

refuse to sign the pact with the Ottomans. The result of the player decision gives he/she

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67 Ulrich Trumpener, 'Turkey's War,' in The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80.

certain bonuses or penalties in the game: declining to sign the secret alliance lowers the

Ottoman opinion of player-controlled Germany which could have ramifications later in

the game when the Ottomans are deciding whether to ally with the Central Powers. Here

again is an argument about significance of certain forces and decisions – by offering this

as a key moment of player agency, the game implies that this decision was important in

the historical reality of the war. Whether the counter-factuals contained within these

games are plausible or not is a debate for another paper. What this technique does is keep

players aligned with historical events; even if they decide to pursue the counter-factual

decision, they are constantly reminded of the way history actually 'went'. This constant

playing with the factual narrative of the war allows players to interrogate historical

Figure 7: 'Explainer' about Austro-Hungarian Empire for *Making History.*

interpretations in the same way that historians do – it teaches not only the significant

events of the war but also the historical mindset that drives academic research.

As we can see, just as in *Valiant Hearts*, there are varying methods of

communicating historical information. The large boxes of text, like those found in Figure 6, should be analyzed by historians for factual accuracy and corrected if needed. Similarly, the historical 'explainers' at the beginning of each game – that is the text or film that explains a particular country's history before play begins (see Figure 7) – should also be subjected to scrutiny. The counter-factual questions these games pose also need to be addressed. Are they plausible? Are these moments significant in the historical trajectory of the war?

Historians working with game developers could even suggest their own counter-factual decisions for players to make. The implementation of historian input is well within the genre framework of the grand strategy games as it would not fundamentally alter the way the game works on a macro level. Despite this none of the three games analyzed in this chapter had an accredited historian involved in their development as did *Valiant Hearts*. Although the company that designed *Making History*, Muzzy Lane, has hired Niall Ferguson as an advisor, his name does not appear on the credits for this game.[68] Again, there are suitable lacunae for scholarly historians to influence these important pieces of pop culture.

Yet, there are also options for historians who are not directly involved in developing a historical game to exercise influence over their design. In the case of grand strategy games, historians should look to players who are already critiquing the interpretations offered by these games. One of the many examples can be found on the *Darkest Hour* forum where commenters began debating the merit of the Schlieffen Plan

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[68] 'Experience Team,' Muzzy Lane, (accessed April 4, 2016) http://www.muzzylane.com/company/team/.

after discussing its implementation in the game.[69] Often players will not just debate on forums but will create their own works of alternate history in the form of an AAR or After-Action Report – an account of the unique alternate history that a player has generated from playing a grand strategy game.[70] Even more ambitious players will create modifications to the games themselves correcting errors they see in the accuracy of the original historical representation. Some games – such as *Making History* – offer the option to 'mod' (slang for modify) their game directly in the main menu of the game. All these options are potential avenues for historians to offer nuanced historical criticisms of the game or, at the very least, a body of primary source data on how publics engage with representations of history.

Sometimes this engagement can directly influence the game through pointed criticism about certain elements of a simulation. "Gas attacks WAY too deadly" reads one online forum post on the *Making History* feedback forum.[71] Here a player points out that not only did the efficacy of gas attacks appear to be exaggerated, but the game failed to allow players to research anti-gas preventative measures. While this complaint did not make reference to the work of historians – instead merely pointing to a subjective sense of history ("To my knowledge...") – it unintentionally mirrored an interpretation by historian Edgar Jones. Jones' article, 'Terror Weapons: The British Experience of Gas

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[69] '[WW1] Why do the Germans get their IC increased by 100% if they don't go with a plan?' Paradox Interactive Forums, May 22, 2011, (accessed April 4, 2016) https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/index.php?threads/ww1-why-do-the-germans-get-their-ic-increased-by-100-if-they-dont-go-with-a-plan.557964/.
[70] For examples of an AAR, see: 'Commander The Great War AAR's,' Slitherine, (accessed April 4, 2016) http://www.slitherine.com/forum/viewforum.php?f=131. As an ethical side note: this essay understands that 'alternate history' is a term that has been co-opted by Holocaust deniers. Whether Holocaust deniers interact with grand strategy games to create problematic alternate histories would be an interesting research question and points to yet another interesting lacuna in the field of historical game studies.
[71] 'Gas attacks WAY too deadly,' Making History Gaming Headquarters, December 27, 2015, (accessed April 4, 2016) http://making-history.com/forum/thread/618583/1.

and Its Treatment in the First World War', argues that chemical warfare accounted for 1% of British casualties and "from mid-1916, respirators offered troops reliable protection against chlorine and phosgene."[72] Yet gas, concludes Jones, remained for various reasons, remained an effective psychological weapon and caused panic amongst soldiers – especially new recruits.[73] A nuanced criticism of the game – one that could be delivered by a historian knowledgeable about World War One – would argue that the game should a) reduce the number of casualties produced by a gas attack, b) allow for gas-resistant technologies to be simulated, and c) create a morale penalty under attack from such weapons. Implementing such suggestions can be difficult and historians must be aware that some elements are not simulated in certain games. However, in *Making History* the means for simulating these elements of gas are available: the first two criticisms could be tweaked through modifications to the game's code (and it appears the game's producer is considering doing so)[74] while the last suggestion appears quite possible as the game already simulates troops' morale.

This example not only demonstrates how players critique the historical representations within video games but also how historians could potentially involve themselves in influencing game design. Players and developers of grand strategy games already engage in an iterative feedback loop: players offer critiques of games' historical simulations and designers take these critiques into consideration when updating the game

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[72] Jones, 'Terror Weapons,' 357.
[73] Ibid., 374 – 375.
[74] The last post in this forum thread, dated February 23, 2016, is by *Making History*'s producer Dave McCool and reads "Good thoughts – we'll look into them." 'Gas attacks WAY too deadly,' http://making-history.com/forum/thread/618583/1. For an example of this iterative dialogue between players and developers in *Making History* see this forum thread: 'Running Suggestion Thread,' Making History Gaming Headquarters, Feb 17, 2015, (accessed April 4, 2016) http://making-history.com/forum/thread/560438/1.

– an element that happens frequently in the grand strategy genre. By inserting themselves

into this loop, historians can influence game development. One can draw an analogy of

an extended peer-review process: a video game presents an interpretation of history;

historians/players fluent in both the restrictions of game design and the historical period

being represented offer critiques and suggestions; the designers make tweaks and edits to

their work within the confines of what is possible; and (hopefully) the result is a more

historically responsible video game. Of course, the analogy does not completely fit. A

historical article will not be published if it does not suitably respond to peer-reviewers'

critiques; a game is already published before it is exposed to the critiques of players –

although the possibility for pre-publication critique has become much more common in

game development recently.[75] The fact that games do not go through any historical

analysis before publication augments the need to subject them to historical critique.

Robert Brent Toplin, writing about historical film, relates "the words of a filmmaker who

expressed surprise at the latitude a producer enjoys in rendering history to the public.

'Nobody is watching us.'[76] The parallel can be made for the creators of video games,

except in this case, the final product can be modified and tweaked to respond to historical

criticism.

    While the example above provides historians an opportunity to influence games in

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[75] In recent years, early-access testing has become a common game design practice. Early-access means that players can buy the game before it is in a fully completed state and provide feedback to developers. This in turn helps developers deal with game design issues before releasing the game to the general public. The popularity of this design philosophy indicates a wider democratization of game development and historians should embrace this opportunity to be involved in the development process of video games. For an article discussing the rise of early-access game design and the possibilities offered by this phenomena see: Rowan Kaiser, 'Early Access exposes the lie that the best games should, or even can, be finished,' *Polygon*, Jan 24, 2014, (accessed April 4, 2016), http://www.polygon.com/2014/1/24/5338478/early-access-exposes-the-lie-that-the-best-games-should-or-even-can.

[76] Robert Brent Toplin, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1988): 1227.

a direction that aligns more with academic consensus on certain historical elements, it is important to note two things. First, to reiterate a point: games always privilege play over historical accuracy. Large design considerations cannot be modified. The effect of gas on morale and soldier casualty rates can be modified because those elements are already simulated in *Making History*. However, critiquing *Making History* for not simulating the rise and fall of civilian governments during wartime would be illogical. This important historical factor is not included in most grand strategy games because it actively goes against the genre convention of allowing player omnipotent and continuous control of a single nation. The second point is that while critiquing the historical accuracy of simulations can be useful, it is also important to remember that simulations which are not strictly factual can often teach players about larger historical truths; ahistoricity can be historical if it allows players to capture a larger sense of period's mentalitié as was discussed with *Commander's* use of omnipotent control of an alliance system. In short, historians must never forget that games are meant to be fun as this is the medium's greatest strength when it comes to its potential as a form of public history.

Conclusion

Through exposing a variety of ways that video games communicate history this thesis has offered several suggestions about how historians can engage with games. These roles are as consultants and as public critics. Historical games often have keen but amateur historians who double as game designers creating the historical content for their games. Collaboration with historians – who are educated in the inherent limits of the medium – could improve the factual accuracy of these games and even allow historians to make their hard-earned research available to the public in a simplified but consumable format. By publicly criticizing historical games – writing op-ed pieces in newspapers or magazines – historians can generate historical discussions amongst the public and therefore encourage designers, players, and society at large, to think about how history is represented in games and in other forms of public history more generally. A model already exists in the often vehement discussion surrounding controversial historical films such as *Selma.*[77] In both instances, historians should be constructive in their analysis of the medium; games should not be dismissed, they should be discussed.

This thesis will not be so naive as to assume that historians have infinite time and resources. This thesis has argued that games have different medium limitations, genre conventions, and ultimate goals than written history. In order to deliver nuanced criticism and suggestions, historians must take time and effort to understand video games on their own terms. To assume the vast majority of historians have time to embroil themselves in

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[77] Mark Harris, 'How Selma Got Smeared,' *Grantland*, January 28, 2015, (accessed April 4, 2016), http://grantland.com/features/selma-oscars-academy-awards-historical-accuracy-controversy/. Rallying against the dismissal of film in general, Harris notes that historical criticism of pop culture "requires an approach to pop culture that is both sympathetic and interested".

a whole new medium is idealistic,[78] but, as has been demonstrated, video games often trade in modes of representation that historians are already familiar with. Textual depictions of history play a prominent role in both *Valiant Hearts* and the grand strategy games discussed here and historians can easily engage with these elements of video games. While the upcoming generation of historians will surely be more comfortable with this burgeoning medium and be able to engage with games and their creators on a more productive level, current historians should not resign themselves to video games being an incomprehensible medium.

Therefore, this thesis holds the position that historians should not be elitist if approached with an opportunity to be involved in the creation or critique of video games specifically and public history generally. There are gaps where historians' skills and vast knowledge can help create a stronger factual infrastructure for popular historical video games. Professional historians should not expect full control over the historical representations contained within these entertainment products. In certain cases, such as *Valiant Hearts*, simplified but verified historical facts can be presented via contextual elements. The historian can even potentially add footnotes to encourage further constructive learning about the past. In others, where historical representation is tied more closely to gameplay, historians must relinquish controls and instead seek to modify the variables already existent within the simulation and think about ways that designers can get at larger historical truths or mentalités – while perhaps sacrificing some smaller historical truths along the way.

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[78] Credit for this important grounding comment goes to Dr. Matthew Koch, who remarked after this thesis's presentation at the Honours Colloquiam of January 2016, that "I do not think you convinced me of your argument...for one, I simply do not have enough time."

The latter can also be done externally, as well. Nuanced criticism that pays attention to limitation of genre and the primacy of play could be highly useful. A good example of the type of criticism this thesis advocates for can be found on the aforementioned Youtube channel *History Respawned*, where historians are invited to play games that deal in their speciality while offering background information and criticisms of the game. An example of written criticism can be found in *The Guardian*, where a recent article saw a historian and a games journalist play and critique *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate,* a popular game which depicts Victorian London in a fully explorable three dimensional rendition, complete with famous historical figures such as Karl Marx, Charles Dickens and Benjamen Disraeli.[79] The results of both these are pieces of public history themselves; public history that will hopefully go on to influence players and designers to think about the larger issues at play when they sit down to play or create the next historical blockbuster.

Either way, there is no doubt: games are poised to shape our society. In the fall of 2013, an academic at the NYU Game Centre, David Zimmerman, wrote an article called *The Manifesto for the Ludic Century.* In it Zimmerman argues for the embracing of games as the dominant art form of the twenty-first century. He argues that this is net positive for society. As we learn to think critically about the systems that create meaning in games, we can use this literacy in systems and play to tackle larger societal problems:

> How does the price of gas in California affect the politics of the Middle East, affect the Amazon ecosystem? These problems force us to understand how the parts of a system fit together to create a complex whole with emergent effects. They require playful, innovative, trans-disciplinary thinking in

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[79] Holly Nielsen and Alana Harris, 'Reductive, superficial, beautiful – a historian's view of Assassin's Creed: Syndicate,' *Guardian*, December 9, 2016, (accessed March 3, 2016) http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/dec/09/assassins-creed-syndicate-historian-ubisoft.

which systems can be analyzed, redesigned, and transformed into something new.[80]

Historians can and should contribute their vast expertise on the past to improving video games; they should help redesign systems that generate popular memory of past events such as World War One. This thesis does not dispute the monograph – and by the extension the written word – as the ultimate purveyor of nuanced historical information – one that can contain the rigorous chains of evidence and debate in which all professional historical work is situated. But this thesis notes that the public learns about the past through a variety of methods and that historians should seek to influence these methods with their expert knowledge. Sounding a note of caution in response to Robert Rosenstone's advocay of historical film, David Herlihy still argues for the pursuit of public history:

> [Historians] are a kind of priesthood, duty-bound to remind our society of its near and distant origins, of the experiences that have shaped it, of its cultural wellsprings. We should pursue any means that makes our message stronger, clearer, more appealing to often skeptical [sic] listeners. And yet the problem remains: can films genuinely interpret the past for the present?[81]

Video games face the same scepticism. But as this thesis has demonstrated video games do interpret the past for the present, through text, visuals and gameplay. Is it as richly detailed as a historical monograph? Of course not, but this lack of academic complexity is counter-balanced by a much more enjoyable medium – one that makes video games very popular amongst today's society, especially youth. This popularity means games make up significant chunk of the vast historiocopia – a term coined by public historian Jerome DeGroot - that is

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[80] Eric Zimmerman and Heather Chaplin, 'Manifesto: The 21st Century Will Be Defined By Games,' *Kotaku,* September 9, 2013, (accessed April 3, 2016) http://kotaku.com/manifesto-the-21st-century-will-be-defined-by-games-1275355204.
[81] Herlihy, 'Am I a Camera?' 1187.

modern society's use of the past.[82] Historians, if they would like to be relevant and useful for today's society, would do well to exercise their expertise in a way that makes an impact on the zeitgeist – whether it is through engendering historical thinking, promoting facts that are closer to the historical consensus, or simply monitoring how the public engages with the past. Video games are important. So is history. The marriage of the two could prove to be an effective pedagogical tool and should be pursued wherever possible.

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[82] Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 14.

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