Using Games to Mediate History

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Introduction

An old Chinese proverb says "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand". More than any other medium, computer games have the intrinsic ability to involve their players in the world they depict. Thus they do not only make us remember particular scenes we play, but also make us understand more of the world they involve us in. They are immersive, i.e. they make us forget the world around us, taking us away to a different place, a different life, and some of them take us to a different time. At the 2003 Digital Games Research Conference *Level Up* in Utrecht one of the talks was about the game MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE (2002). In this talk the game was compared to the film SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (1998) and the TV mini-series BAND OF BROTHERS (2001). All three depict the landing of the allied forces in Normandy in 1944 and events that followed. And even though they are works of fiction, both content and mise en scène are based on hours of research into the real events and many interviews with those who were involved and survived. After the talk one of the audience members stood up and explained that though the film and the mini-series, as well as several documentaries about the invasion of Normandy he had seen, had been very gripping, he had never really understood the 'horror' of the actual invasion itself until he played the game. His experiences as Lt. Jimmy Patterson fighting his way up Omaha Beach had had an enormous impact on his understanding of the landing and had left him with a lasting respect for the men who sacrificed their lives in the undertaking. Or as he put it himself: "When you see footage of the landing you really have no idea. But when you have to try and get up that bloody beach, being shot at, seeing your comrades die and dying yourself time and again, then it definitely starts to sink in." [1]

The game MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE is a work of fiction. Lt. Jimmy Patterson is a fictional character, just as Tom Hanks' character Captain Miller in the film SAVING PRIVATE RYAN is. But as the above comment indicates, in the game you are not only invited to identify with Lt. Jimmy Patterson (as you would with Captain Miller in the film); you have to play as the character. In that way games can add something to historical fiction that other media cannot. Or as Guardian journalist Keith Stuart put it: "games are the perfect medium for historical fiction – through their unique interactivity, they don't have to tell us about life in previous ages, they can show us; and we can live it." [2] Of course there are other, more tactile, ways to 'live' history, such as re-enactment or experimental archaeology. But these usually are not as accessible as games are.

Historical games

Historical games can be roughly grouped into two categories: serious games and fictional games. Serious historical games are educational; their primary purpose is to teach history. In the past such games were often produced by educational publishers or made by teachers themselves. Nowadays, educational games are often short free-to-play games on the internet. Quite a few are produced by television channels as part of their services for schools, such as the game BOW STREET RUNNER (2008)[3] commissioned by British Channel 4. Apart from the fact that these games take historic accuracy seriously, they are explicitly made for the general public

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[1] Translation of notes taken at the time.
[2] Keith Stuart, "Assassin's Creed and the Appropriaton of History," *The Guardian* (November 19, 2010), http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2010/nov/19/assassin-s-creeed-brotherhood-history (accessed October 27, 2012).
[3] On the opening screen of the game it reads "*Bow Street Runner* is designed to be historically accurate, and therefore the game's content and its setting may not be suitable for younger players" http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/C/city-of-vice/game/bow-street-runner/game.html (accessed January 10, 2013).

so they are not very demanding as far as hardware or game skills are concerned. This often also means that they use simple graphics and animations giving them a cartoon-like appearance, a far cry from the more realistic graphics of commercial games. As a consequence they usually are visually less appealing and less immersive.

The primary purpose of commercial historical games is entertainment. This does, however, not mean that they are not historically accurate. Because gamers who prefer this genre value truthful and realistic depiction, historical accuracy in the mise en scène is especially important in games like MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE. But the story is fictional; it depends on the writers how much factual history is included. Consequently history is usually included when it adds to the story, but because the story is about fictional characters most of the time history only functions as a backdrop.

One specific type of commercial historic game is the strategy game. These games echo the 19th century tin soldier war re-enactments, as they are specifically designed to 'restage' battlefields. But unlike the previously mentioned games, strategy games focus on the managerial and strategic skills of the player. Restaging the invasion in Normandy in such games is about troop movements, managing supplies and trying to minimize losses. A historically accurate mise en scène is less important, as the player is more focussed on making the correct decisions to win the battle. Consequently, how the battle unfolds depends on the decisions of the player, not on what actually happened. But this in itself has its own appeal as strategy games are the ideal vehicle for 'what if'-scenarios. In the BBC television program TIME COMMANDER (2003-2005) a strategy game was used to have two teams of players 'refight' famous historical battles such as the Battle of Trebia (Carthage versus Rome). After the game, two military specialists analysed the performance of the players and explained how the actual historical battle unfolded. War is only one of the subjects presented in strategy games. Many are also about discovery and settlement or about trade, again often in a historic setting. And even though they are historically perhaps less accurate than games like MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE, playing any of the PATRICIAN games (1992 – 2011) does teach you about the Hanseatic League and the main products traded in the specific ports.

The main difference between games like MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE and the PATRICIAN games is that the first is a so-called game of progression, a game in which the story 'drives' the actions of the player. Strategy games are games of emergence, games where, given the input of the player, the rules of the game determine what happens next. Because the former type of game is story driven, the game designer can force the player to go through certain experiences. In MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE the player has to fight his way through the Omaha beach landing in order to be able to play on. For many this means dying and retrying several times, hence the remark of the player at the *Level Up* conference. Because the designer ultimately determines what happens next, these games can include more accurate historical scenes, such as the invasion in Normandy.

ASSASSIN'S CREED

Apart from commercial games like MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE, where historic accuracy is important (though not as important as the entertainment aspect), there are also commercial games that use a historic time period as the setting of the game but only as a backdrop for the story and gameplay. This does not necessarily mean that their mise en scène is pure fantasy. Just as some films and television series try to give as accurate a vision of a certain period as possible, some game producers strive for a similar accuracy in their games.[4] One such a company is Ubisoft, who with their ASSASSIN'S CREED series (2007 – present) have set a high standard in recreating historic locations. Their meticulous recreation of past eras is exactly what has made these games so successful. The times depicted in the main games are the Third Crusade (1191) lived through the assassin Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, then Renaissance Italy (1476 – 1507) and Constantinople (1511 – 1512) as Ezio Auditore da Firenze and finally the American Revolutionary War (1753 – 1783) as Connor Kenway.

The dedication to historic accuracy is shown in the fact that the ASSASSIN'S CREED design teams not only consist of writers and designers, they also have a team historian, who is an expert on the period and historic events being depicted. This shows Ubisoft's commitment to make the sceneries and characters as historically accurate as possible. In the first game, for instance, when Altaïr approaches the city of Acre, the discerning gamer will notice the siege marks left by Richard the Lionheart (a historical fact that did take place in July 1191). Except for the many corpses, we see small palisade walls used by the siege army and buildings that have been damaged or were completely destroyed by the siege engines. Aside from the knowledge brought to the game by the team historian, the team also visit the actual places taking thousands of photographs and hours of

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[4] Of course any depiction of a historic setting can only be as accurate as the sources it is based on, and even then the (im)possibilities of the medium dictate what can and what cannot be shown.

video footage, which they compare to actual historic records. For example, when researching Florence for *ASSASSIN'S CREED II* (2009) lead-writer Corey May read Machiavelli's history of Florence. Consequently elements such as the Vasari corridor and the Uffizi were not included in the game, as they had not been built at the time. One exception the team made was the Duomo. Although the building itself was completed in 1436, the exterior was not completed until 1887. As most people only know the Duomo in its completed form, the team decided to forego historic accuracy and show the Duomo as it looks today, to make the landmark, and thus Florence, more easily recognisable for the modern player.

Where the accuracy of the historic settings in the first game seems to be more important than the historicity of the events themselves, throughout the series we see the game protagonists getting involved more and more in 'actual history'. In *ASSASSIN'S CREED II* (2009), for instance, the murder of Giuliano di Piero de' Medici which took place in the Piazza del Duomo on 26 April 1478 is part of the actual gameplay. Even so, the historic events in the games fit around the overall *ASSASSIN'S CREED* story, not the other way round. Thus the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* games are very much in keeping with Honoré de Balzac's saying that "Il y a deux histoires: l'histoire officielle, menteuse, puis l'histoire secrète, où sont les véritables causes des événements." However, history is important to the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* player as well. When asked what inspired *ASSASSIN'S CREED* gamers to learn more about the historical setting the games take place in Maxime Durand, team historian for *ASSASSIN'S CREED III* replied:

> People truly experience History by being able to navigate, fight and interact with their environment, in a manner not possible in movies or books. Plus, we give players access to an in-game encyclopaedia that sums up our knowledge. In the end, a lot of people are curious to know more or even to challenge our research efforts. We find that truly inspiring for us and our audience and it makes us strive to always go a step higher.[5]

And as game designer Charles Cecil argues, history itself can be engaging, whether it appeals or not depends on what the designers make of it:

> If the history resonates with the audience then a heightened sense of drama can be built, and the immersion enhanced through authenticity. And, to be honest, wonderful, dramatic history is so exhilarating that it would often be harder to invent anything more exciting. But get it wrong, and the opposite effect is achieved and the use of history can feel irrelevant and clichéd.[6]

In *ASSASSIN'S CREED* Ubisoft did succeed in creating a succesful mix of historic accuracy and immersive gameplay. A fact that has not eluded teachers who found that *ASSASSIN'S CREED II* especially can be a valuable tool to inform their students about Renaissance history, art and architecture.[7] The game also inspired many (young adult) fans to visit the actual cities in Italy.[8]

Alternate Reality Games

In the past few years a new type of game has emerged that uses the internet and social media: the alternate reality game. Imagine yourself faced with the kinds of tasks and puzzles Professor Robert Langdon was faced with in *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Of course you can in the *DA VINCI CODE* (2007) computer game, but would it not be much more fun to be able to solve the puzzles at the actual sites, just as Langdon and Sophie Nevue did in the book? When playing an alternate reality game, you can. An alternate reality game is a narrative game spread through several (social) media as well as the real world. The interesting part from a maker's point of view is that Alternate Reality Games can be scaled up or down depending on the environment the story is told in/for and, of course, the budget available. For the players Alternate Reality Games appeal because they resemble treasure hunts and because you usually need other players to succeed, just as Robert Langdon needed Sophie.

Of course the success of an Alternate Reality Game, like any other narrative game depends on the appeal of the story. Here both *The Da Vinci Code* as well as *ASSASSIN'S CREED* can serve as examples. For instance,

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[5] Maxine Durand, "Amazon's Exclusive Assassin's Creed III Historian Q and A and Reading List," *Amazon.com* (October, 2012), http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html/ref=tsm_1_tw_s_vg_mcd72s?ie=UTF8&docId=1000844081 (accessed October 29, 2012).
[6] In Stuart, "Assassin's Creed and the Appropriation of History."
[7] See e.g. Pilar Khder, *BrainMeld Teaching Guide: Assassin's Creed II: A Virtual Tour to the Italian Renaissance for 7th Graders* (San Diego: self-published, April 2011).
[8] See e.g. "Assassin's Creed Tour," *Ubisoft Uplay Forums,* (2011 – present) http://forums.ubi.com/showthread.php/267627-Assassin-s-Creed-Tour-Forums (accessed October 29, 2012).

in *ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD THE DA VINCI DISAPPEARANCE* (2011 expansion set) the players find a set of coordinates that point to a particular area in New York State. On several of the many *ASSASSIN'S CREED* Internet forums players discussed the location of the coordinates and those living in the vicinity volunteered to check out what was there (as Google Maps did not give enough detail). In *ASSASSIN'S CREED INITIATES*, a new 2012 browser based game; the coordinates reappear as a possible hiding place. And in *ASSASSIN'S CREED III* it turns out that it is the site of an ancient temple which the assassins need to explore. The *ASSASSIN'S CREED INITIATES* game itself uses many Alternate Reality Game characteristics to involve the player community, most notably collective intelligence. Sometimes the collective intelligence puzzles are simple, for instance decoding Morse code or translating Italian newspaper articles. But in one particular instance the fans were confronted with a Latin text which turned out to be lines from a relatively obscure volume by 17th century poetess Elisabeth Jane Weston. Fortunately one of the players had the necessary skills to ferret this out.

The Da Vinci Code shows how Alternate Reality Games could be used to combine actual real-life places with a dispersed[9] narrative, as Langdon and Sophie have to travel to several historic places to eventually solve the code. The initiating clue could for instance, be incorporated in a Paris tour guide. In Alternate Reality Games these kinds of clues are called rabbit holes as they lead the players into the story. Such rabbit hole clues could, of course, also be placed in an e-mail, on a Facebook page, the website of a museum or historic site, or in a brochure. They could even be part of the explanatory text in an exhibition or tour. As quite a lot of people have a smart phone site-based clues and puzzles can easily be combined with information to be found on the Internet.[10] In London (another important location in the *Da Vinci Code*), players could be directed to Temple Church to find a particular symbol on the tomb of the knight whose oath led to the signing of the Magna Carta. The symbol could then be photographed and sent to a specific e-mail address, which in turn should then lead on to the next puzzle. Contrary to the traditional treasure hunt, however, the clues should not lead to a final physical award; they should enable the players to piece the story parts together, where the final piece leads to story closure. Of course the actual places, buildings, artefacts within the Alternate Reality Games should preferably also tie in meaningfully with the story, as they did in *The Da Vinci Code* and the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* games.

Commercial Alternate Reality Games can be very elaborate, involving thousands of players (such as *THE ART OF THE HEIST* (2005) which was used to introduce the new Audi A3). But, as already mentioned, Alternate Reality Games do not have to be quite as elaborate and expensive as these examples. Three years ago, for instance, students of the game design course at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam where asked to design a game to familiarize children with the Amsterdam Public Library. One team designed a game which combined alternate and augmented reality.[11] They came up with the story of a cute little alien who, like ET, was stranded on earth and needed the children's help to return home. To do so the children had to go to the library building and use the actual library system to find cards with QR codes. These cards could be hidden at a specific place within the building, but they could also be hidden in a particular book. Once a card was found, the children could take it to one of the library's computers to scan it with a webcam. On the screen they saw the table on which they had placed the QR card, but instead of the card they saw the little alien talking to them and showing them how this card helped him repair his spacecraft (the augmented reality bit). When the final card was scanned, the alien said a tearful goodbye and flew away in his spacecraft. As all the physical elements, apart from the QR cards, where already present, the main cost of this game was programming the actual code and making the short films. In this case the QR codes were used to tell the story of the little alien, but other examples show that they can also be used to, for instance, access short (historic) films at the actual place where the event happened.

Something similar happens in the Alternate Reality Game *LOST IN TIME* (2012) by Tempeest.[12] This game takes place in an actual Dutch city. It revolves around the story of a young hacker called Thijmen who has stolen a time machine (a converted iPad). Thijmen uses the tablet to travel through history. But in doing so he changes history, jeopardizing his own and other people's future. The players, also using a tablet time machine, wander (or run, depending on the mini-game they are playing) through the streets of the city trying to find Thijmen and to restore history (when they succeed). The game takes them to historic sites where videos not only tell part of Thijmen's story, but also give them historic information. As you can see, this Alternate Reality Game is quite similar to the previous one. It relies on a real setting, a computer program and pre-recorded

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[9] A dispersed narrative is a narrative that is told in pieces, distributed over different texts (and/or media).

[10] Nowadays, QR codes (Quick Response Codes i.e. two-dimensional barcodes) have become a standard means to link physical objects to a webpage.

[11] In augmented reality a smartphone or another digital device with camera function is used to project an extra layer of information on top of the actual image.

[12] Tempeest is a Dutch game design company that specializes in location based games.

video fragments that play at specific locations. But *LOST IN TIME* is more interactive, because the players have to play mini-games in the city. As the game can be seen as promotional material for the city it is based in, the locations and data included are determined by agreement, thus assuring their historic accuracy.

History Based Games and Violence

From the above it may seem that most history based games are about war, battles and killing. This does hold true for a majority of the strategy games as these are our modern day equivalent of the tin soldier war-game. However, in these games the gamer sees the battlefield in an overview because this is the best view to move armies, build defences, etcetera. Actual fighting is not shown. Even so, games such as *CRUSADER KINGS II* (2012) have an age rating of 13 and older (may contain violence and minimal blood).

The *ASSASSIN'S CREED* games belong to a game genre that covers all kinds of subjects: adventure, science fiction, fantasy, etc.). Most of these games do not rely on particularly violent plots (except, of course, those with a horror story) and the greater part of them is not set in history. Players of the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* games do not play them because it is cool to be an assassin and kill people. They play because they love the historic setting, the great stories and the many mysteries which the games include. For most of them Ezio is their favourite protagonist because his motives to kill are entirely credible, especially as he starts of as a trouble-free youth of 17 who did not choose to become an assassin; his destiny is thrust upon him the day his father and brothers are hanged before his eyes. But throughout the game his thirst for revenge lessens as he grows older and wiser and in the end he does not kill the man responsible for the cruel fate of his family.

The only game genre that actually is about weapons and killing is the shooter, of which *MEDAL OF HONOR: FRONTLINE* is an example. The natural environment for these kinds of games is a warzone and the two most popular series in this genre, the *MEDAL OF HONOR* series (1999 – present) and the *CALL OF DUTY* series (2003-present) both started with a game set in World War II. Of the two, the early *MEDAL OF HONOR* games seem to be more historically accurate. This is not strange seeing that the well-known film producer and director Steven Spielberg originated the series. But as the years passed their players became less interested in historic battles. Consequently, we see that both series became less about the historic setting and began to focus more on fighting and warfare itself. The latest games in both series are therefore set in present-day warzones such as Afghanistan and Somalia and the stories now revolve around counter terrorism. Other popular series in the genre such as *GEARS OF WAR* (2006 – present) and *HALO* (2001 – present) are not about history at all, but play in the future.

Playing with history

One of the major pastimes of today is playing computer games. Therefore it is quite understandable why games are used more and more to interest a younger audience in history. And as the success of the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* games show 'playing' with history does not necessarily have to be boring. But successful commercial games centring on history will not always suffice, as the accuracy of their historic data varies. Fortunately, alternatives such as Alternate Reality Games are possible. Their appeal lies not only in the fact that they are social games that can combine present and historic time, data and images; their scalability also makes them feasible to create tailor-made games centring on specific heritage sites.

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