

Playing with the past: the role of Digital Games in how we understand History

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Digital Games are most often considered about their entertainment dimension instead of their learning possibilities. In this paper we explore how digital games can change our points of view about History and the ways we learn about it. From an initial approach about what "History understanding" is, our aims here is to clarify the rich and complex relationship between digital games, a young phenomena, and the larger cultural processes of understanding history, as well as to highlight the potential of digital games as an entertainment and educational mass media.

Keywords Digital Games; History; Mass Media; Learning History models.

1. About our idea of History (and its representation)

The term History is cursed with a dual identity. On the one hand, History is an *event*, the things that happens in the past. On the other hand, it refers to "the attempt to order and interpretate the things we know about the past" [1]. In this sense, History is the *representation* of the past as the historians offers us. Complementing this point of view, theorists such as Elizabet Ermath have pointed "History is the most powerful construction of realistic convention as we have known them since about 1400" [2]. This explanation is made in a different way like a physician explains the gravity rules; historians give us one representation of the past but not "the" representation.

In this way to the representation of the history, the historians always distrust about the representation of the history in the audiovisual media. In the beginning, at the born of the cinema, historians were worried about how the cinema represents the History. Is highly revealing about this when, in 1935, Louis Gottschalk of the University of Chicago wrote to the president of Metro-Goldwyn Mayer the following letter: "If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes to its patrons and ist own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it" [3]. Nowadays, this framework has changed a bit about cinema but, as we are going to do, if we consider Digital Games as a source of historical representation is easy to conclude that them, in sharp contrast to media such as print, photography, film or television, are somehow incapable of being deployed for purposes of historical accuracy, documentation, learning and thus representation.

Not surprisingly, some historians and educators, as we did in the past with the cinema, have attacked the game industry for its inadequate engagement with the facts and its inapropiate irreverence for the past. And not surprisingly the industry has claimed "it's only entertainment" and pointing the positive effects about the players are rendered so enthusiastic about history that they actually read about it. In the other way, Digital Games have been used in education for years, especially at the elementary level, where there are thousands of software titles. At the high school and college level, though, strategy games are generally limited. As Robert Appelman noted "the computer games and simulation field today is a multi-billion-dollar industry with very sophisticated technological support [...] I would certainly rather have

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this type of game be authentic, but the developers don't always have this option if they want to sell the product" [4].

So, the purpose of the present article is explore the relationship of computer games to history in the broad field of the larger cultural processes of understanding and learning models of the history.

2. About Digital Games. An essential approach

What we know about Digital Games? First of all, there are loads of terms to refer the same reality: Videogames, Computer Games, ... and surely each of us knows what a videogame is. However, this is the actually one of the hardest question to answer with any degree of precision, and is impossible to find a definition that satisfies everyone. What are "exactly" *our* Digital Games? For the purposes of this article, I will use the term "digital games" broadly and do not go deeper in the theoretical discussion, si, focus on the scenario surrounding the "Digital Game" in the purest sense of the term –that of a single person playing at a computer/console screen using mouse and keyboard or a pad. Anyway, I have to note the previous concepts are quite weak and, as Espen Aarseth pointed, "notoriously hard to define in an interesting way. Do we include digitized versions of traditional board games? What about chess played by email? Programmed opponents for traditional games (artificial chess or checkers-players, say) dilute the concept even further. Could we identify a genre of intrinsic computer games that will help us exclude the games that are only trivially and *uninterestingly* digital, such as *Who wants to be a Millionaire* on CD-ROM? Perhaps it would be best to drop the term "computer game" altogether, and instead try to find a more suitable name for the phenomenon that interests us" [4].

Other point of interest is the time Digital Games have need to be taken as something "serious" in the academic field. Film, as the nearest example, was not considered an entirely valid research field until the 1960 and this change was evolved with two paralel process: first refers to mass comunication. The born of the television and the critics to the new media, allow the cinema to be considered a high cultural event. The second fact was the change about the clasic conception about the culture content. In this way, and to make it short, the terms *popular* and *culture* was contradictory and excluding each other. Only when the culture meaning was considered in a broad perspective, it includes the cinema between other manifestations like folksong, comic, ... [5]. So, we are in the need again to justify why we have to take the videogames seriously. Here is useful to briefly examine just three reasons: the size of the videogames industry, the social impact of the videogames and the interaction human-computer happens at digital games.

Over their short history, about 30 years, the digital games industry has grown from individual developers and small companies into a global entertainment business. Nowadays, we speak about an industry that is refered as bigger than Hollywood is. "An opening day that's greater than any motion picture has ever had in history" was the Bill Gate's words in the US launch of *Halo 2* on XBOX which took over 100 million of dollars on its first day of release and had over 1.5 million pre-orders [6]. In 2005 the Spanish Digital Games industry recorded sales in excess of more than 800 millions of euros surpassing Cinema industry. Considering the sales above, it might seem unnecessary to claim the popularity of the medium, only note that Digital Games consuming not only enormous amounts of money, Digital Games playing also consumes enormous amount of time. From this issue, some critics alerts about the "addictive" risk of Digital Games. At last, other theorists consider Digital Games as the most sophisticated and certainly most persuasive example of high-level human computer interaction presently available and, as such, provide a useful environment to learn about, and become proficient with, technology.

If we understand the clear economic, social and technological impact of videogames, it is surprising to note that academics, particulary scholars of media and mass communication research, have neglected them. There are two firstly points of touch about this issue: First, videogames are seen as children's toys,

the “only fun” label we speak before. Second, videogames have been considered some kind of low communication phenomena, without the credibility of the traditional media.

The first years of Digital Games studies were often conceived as a discussion between *narratology* (games as stories) versus *ludology* (the rules of the games). The narrative theorists understand Digital Games as extensions of other media (mainly literature or film) and describe them using the tools of narrative analysis. In contrast, ludologists analyze the dynamism of videogames and focus on games as simulations and how they adapt to the input and actions of the players in ways that narratives cannot. The discussion between these two fields has alternated between a superficial battle of words and an exploration of meaningful concepts. The open point is if Digital Games are interactive stories or are they something you play? I think there is a sensible middle ground between these two fields.

3. History on Digital Games

“It's the 1930's, and you have just been elected president of France on a promise to rebuild the French economy. But you learn that Germany is rapidly building its army, and your advisers are urging you to do the same. What will happen if you break your campaign pledge and divert resources and attention to building up the French military? Or you're the British prime minister in 1938. Diplomats in Munich have reached a deal: Germany will be allowed to annex the Sudetenland if it promises that its expansion will go no further. What will the consequences be if you refuse to sign the agreement?” [7]. The principal argument this text highlight us is digital games are bound up in a process of historical simulation, by contrast, traditional media are primarily bound in a relationship of historical representation. So, the complexity of the Digital Games appears in the process of historical simulation rather than the representation of the historical moment; so, players to success have to take difficult decisions about managing resources. Sid Meier, one of the most famous designer of historical based digital games, confirms in a *New York Times* interview: “We are not trying to duplicate history. We are trying to provide you with the tools, the elements of the history and let you see how it would work if you took over“[8].

What kind of history we perceive from Digital Games? That is the question. We can consider two possible simulations of historical themes with different historiographic appeal. One sort, such as *Medal of Honor Series* or *Call of Duty*, is specific in the way that they represents a particular historical event – Second World War- allowing the user to confront a “what if“ environment. These games maximize the historical accuracy using real facts and a historical environment. One example, *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, recreates the D-Day landing scenes of the film *Saving Private Ryan*. The game reproduces closely the opening of the film, as the player's avatar joins troops disembarking from landing craft and making their way up Omaha Beach under punishingly heavy fire.



Fig. 1. A) *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002/Electronic Arts, 2002) The parallelism with the beach-landing sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* is shot by the “subjective” mode of the point of view and create a feeling of “immersion” in the action. B) *Making History* (Muzzy Lane Software, 2006). The use of the cartography describes the geographical environment where the plot happens.

At the other side of the Digital Games, a different approach to play appears in those games structured around historical eras rather than particular historical moments. Famous Digital Games such as Sid Meier's *Civilization* or Microsoft's *Age of Empires*. These games takes in account some relevant historical parameters, but no claims to be historical specificity. These kind of simulation games follow the lines of strategic genre: smart management of resources, investments, and populations in order for the player to progress to next stage of the game. In a first view, they seems to differ from the particular historical events based ones in terms of accuracy and historical details. In the other side, nonhistorical specific simulations are abstracted from the particularity of historical event, allowing the decisions making in countless worlds. The process here works about a wider range of interrogations about theoretical engagements of historical understanding. In the *Age of Empires III* deals with the conquest and colonization of America; taking the role of a European power helps the user to understand the motivations and planning behind the conquest and invasion. Joe Ehrlic, a former high school teacher, explains how "The Age of Empires III pack is targeted at high school students and the social studies curriculum, tied into the national standards for world history and American history. We created activities based on the game that introduce students to the great civilizations of that time. The students are put in the position where they imagine they are a world leader making crucial decisions and they are challenged to rethink events and analyze how they might have changed history" [9].

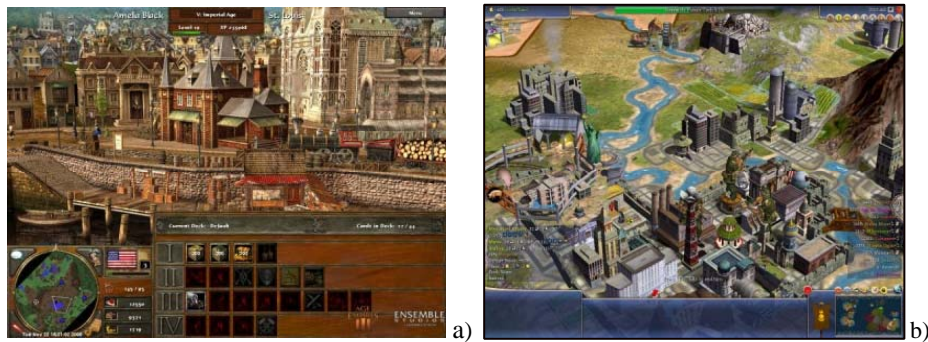


Fig. 2. A) *Age of Empires III* (Ensemble Studios/Microsoft, 2006). B) *Civilization IV* (Firaxis/2k Games, 2006).

In short, that means users of this kind of broadly historical digital games have to take strategic decisions about allocations of limited resources, and confronting the player with the consequences of their actions. Even if one accepts this insight, it leads to more questions: what kind of historical representation is it? Although games of this sort focus in the particular visions of long-term historical development. However, *Civilization* series use a serie of game concepts like Absolutism, the invention of writing, Budism, Nuclear energy... that you need to understand to improve your performance in the game. At last, this kind of games works with relationships among geography, politics, economy, history and others abstracts interdependencies that are easy to learn in a game. As Joe Ehrlic quoted "We do the same thing with The History Channel, A&E, all the major movie studios and the TV networks. Rather than learn from a textbook, people can learn from Spielberg or HBO. You have a much better chance with kids by involving them with TV, film or videogames." [9].

4. Digital Games on History

Words are not enough to show how audiovisual media are a challenge in a time of shifting historical paradigms. To change the history in the computer screen includes add interactivity to the traditional audiovisual speech. Is to rethink the way we understand the History. Digital Games are given us a new context for human interaction, in a game, things are not always what they seem. If its new world can't be taken literally, Digital Games creates rich images, sequences, and visual metaphors that help us to see

and think about what has been. Its truth is metaphoric and symbolic, not literal. Digital Games based on history not only challenges traditional History, but helps return us to a kind of “new level”, a sense that we can never be sure about the better ways to learn our past, but can only continually play with, reconfigure, and try to make meaning out of the clues it has left behind.

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