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The Current State and Key Areas of Research on Historical Digital Games

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***Abstract.** This paper provides a structured overview of the principal research directions in the field of historical digital games, with particular attention to how scholars critically analyze the ways in which these games represent, reconstruct, and engage with the historical past. It applies a qualitative comparative methodology, drawing on a wide-ranging corpus of international academic literature to identify key themes, conceptual frameworks, and ongoing scholarly debates. By synthesizing findings across disciplines—including history, media studies, cultural theory, and pedagogy—the study highlights how historical games function not merely as entertainment, but as complex cultural texts that actively shape historical knowledge and public memory.*

The paper explores how researchers address issues of historical accuracy, authenticity, and realism, especially within the context of games designed as historical simulations. It discusses the aesthetic and narrative strategies used by developers to balance factual representation with gameplay mechanics, and how these choices influence players' perceptions of historical events, processes, and identities. A significant strand of the literature is devoted to the pedagogical uses of

digital games, examining their potential to foster historical thinking, empathy, and critical engagement in both formal education and informal learning environments. Further attention is given to the socio-political dimensions of historical games, with a focus on how they convey ideological messages, reinforce or challenge dominant narratives, and function as tools of cultural interpretation. The paper surveys a growing body of postcolonial critique that interrogates the reproduction of imperial ideologies and colonial power structures in game design. In addition, it analyzes how games participate in the construction of individual and collective identities through the representation of ethnicity, race, gender, nationalism, and historical memory.

Overall, the study demonstrates that historical digital games constitute a vibrant and multifaceted domain of academic inquiry. It argues that sustained interdisciplinary dialogue is essential for deepening our understanding of how games mediate the past and contribute to broader conversations about history, culture, and identity in the digital age.

Keywords: *digital games, video games, historical games, popular culture, historical sources, digital sources, methods of research, multidisciplinary, history of science and technology, information technology, computer science.*

Сучасний стан та ключові галузі досліджень історичних цифрових ігор

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Анотація. *У статті представлено структурований огляд основних напрямів досліджень у галузі історичних цифрових ігор, з особливою увагою до*

того, як науковці аналізують способи репрезентації, реконструкції та взаємодії цих ігор з історичним минулим. Застосовано компаративну методологію, що ґрунтується на аналізі широкого корпусу міжнародної академічної літератури з метою виявлення ключових тематичних векторів, концептуальних підходів і актуальних наукових дискусій. Синтезуючи результати міждисциплінарних студій — зокрема історичних, медіа-досліджень, культурології та педагогіки — автор розглядає історичні ігри як складні культурні тексти, що не лише розважають, а й активно формують історичне знання та суспільну пам'ять.

У центрі уваги перебувають питання історичної достовірності, автентичності та реалізму, з особливим акцентом на ігри, що позиціонуються як історичні симуляції. Аналізуються наративні й естетичні стратегії розробників, спрямовані на баланс між фактичним відтворенням минулого й ігровою привабливістю, а також те, як ці стратегії впливають на сприйняття гравцями історичних подій, процесів та ідентичностей. Значну частину досліджень присвячено педагогічному потенціалу цифрових ігор — зокрема їхній здатності сприяти розвитку історичного мислення, емпатії та критичної рефлексії як у формальній освіті, так і в неформальному навчальному середовищі.

Окрему увагу приділено соціополітичним вимірам історичних ігор, включно з аналізом ідеологічних послань, які вони транслюють, та їхньої здатності як підтримувати, так і підважувати домінантні історичні наративи. Розглянуто також зростаючий масив постколоніальних досліджень, які критикують відтворення імперських наративів і колоніальних структур влади у дизайні геймплею та наративу. Крім того, досліджено роль ігор у формуванні індивідуальних і колективних ідентичностей через репрезентації етнічності, раси, націоналізму, гендеру та історичної пам'яті.

У підсумку зазначено, що історичні цифрові ігри становлять яскравий і багатовимірний об'єкт академічного дослідження. Автор стверджує, що для поглиблення розуміння того, як ігри моделюють минуле і долучаються до ширших дискусій про історію, культуру та ідентичність у цифрову добу, необхідний постійний міждисциплінарний діалог.

Ключові слова: *цифрові ігри, відеоігри, історичні ігри, масова культура, історичні джерела, цифрові джерела, методи дослідження, міждисциплінарність, історія науки і техніки, інформаційні технології, комп'ютерні науки.*

Problem statement. The rapid growth of historical digital games as a popular medium for engaging with the past has prompted increasing academic attention. However, existing research remains fragmented across various disciplines, with differing terminologies, frameworks, and focal points. While individual studies have explored aspects such as historical accuracy, authenticity, pedagogy, political ideology, postcolonial representation, and identity construction, there is a lack of comprehensive synthesis that brings these strands together into a cohesive understanding of the field. This research addresses the need to consolidate and critically evaluate current academic approaches to historical digital games in order to better understand their cultural, educational, and ideological implications.

This study offers practical value by providing a structured synthesis for both scholars working at the intersection of history, media, and game studies. By consolidating fragmented research areas into a unified analytical framework, it facilitates more coherent academic dialogue and offers a reference point for future interdisciplinary collaboration. Unlike previous overviews that typically focus on narrow aspects—such as game-based learning, authenticity, or postcolonial critique—this paper bridges multiple thematic and methodological domains, offering a broader comparative scope. In doing so, it contributes a novel meta-

perspective on the field's evolution, highlights current gaps, and identifies promising trajectories for applied and theoretical research.

Purpose statement. This paper aims to provide a structured overview of the current academic research on historical digital games, identifying key themes, methodological approaches, and areas of scholarly interest, with the goal of clarifying the field's scope and outlining directions for future interdisciplinary study.

This paper focuses specifically on various aspects of representing the historical past in digital games. It does not engage with broader philosophical, social, or political implications of gaming that lie beyond the sphere of depiction of historical past, nor does it examine the role of games in modern society beyond their treatment of historical content.

To achieve the stated purpose, the paper must begin by surveying and systematizing the existing academic literature on historical digital games, emphasizing how scholars approach the representation of the past within this medium. It must identify and describe the primary themes that emerge in current research—such as historical accuracy, authenticity, realism, and player engagement with historical content—while distinguishing the dominant methodological approaches used, including textual analysis, empirical classroom studies, procedural rhetoric, and postcolonial critique. The study must also trace how the field has evolved chronologically, noting key shifts in focus and the increasing interdisciplinarity of research efforts. In addition, the paper must analyze areas that remain underexplored or insufficiently addressed, such as non-Western histories, developer practices, and long-term player reception. By synthesizing this information, the paper should delineate the current boundaries of the field and suggest concrete directions for future interdisciplinary inquiry that remains grounded in the historical content of games rather than broader sociocultural issues.

Analysis of the recent research and publications. Scholarship on historical digital games has evolved significantly over the past two decades, gradually expanding from foundational qualitative inquiries to more diverse, interdisciplinary, and theoretically nuanced approaches. Early studies primarily focused on pedagogical uses and basic narratological analysis, but more recent work reflects an increasingly sophisticated integration of empirical, critical, and postcolonial methodologies.

One of the earliest influential directions was pedagogical. Kurt Squire's work [41, 42] in the late 2000s and early 2010s emphasized the potential of video games to function as learning systems. He advocated for interactive and student-centered environments that could replace traditional instructional models. Around the same time, Jeremiah McCall [23, 24] proposed a design-based research approach tailored to history education, integrating commercial and custom-built games into the classroom to assess how students engage with historical content. His work pioneered methods such as collecting artefacts, conducting pre-/post-tests, and coding reflective assignments to track changes in historical understanding and empathy.

Parallel to these developments, a strand of empirical research emerged to assess how players perceive historical authenticity. Wannes Ribbens and Steven Malliet [35] conducted early psychometric studies to identify the structural components of perceived realism in digital games, such as narrative coherence and sensory fidelity. Ribbens further refined this approach by testing three alternative models to explain the interplay of individual and contextual factors in realism perception [36].

Qualitative methodologies also gained traction around this time. A landmark publication, *Playing with the Past* (2013), edited by Andrew Elliott and Matthew Kapell [18], assembled a range of case studies examining how historical games simulate the past. Its contributors employed comparative narratology to dissect mechanics, visuals, and paratexts, analyzing them through the lens of

historiographical models. In the same volume, Salvati and Bullinger [37] advanced the concept of “selective authenticity,” using procedural-rhetorical analysis to demonstrate how developers construct historical meaning through rule systems and design constraints. Trevor Owens [33], meanwhile, explored how discussions among modders—especially in the context of Sid Meier’s *Civilization*—reflect values embedded in game design, thereby contributing to the broader conversation about authenticity and intent.

As the field matured, critical-theory perspectives began to reshape the analytical landscape. Adrienne Shaw [40] introduced ethnographic methods that examine how industry logics and player communities shape the historical narratives that games choose to tell. Her multi-site studies of developers and players interrogate the power structures behind content production and consumption. Soraya Murray [32] added visual culture to the analytical toolkit, interpreting aesthetics such as color, framing, and animation styles as ideological markers, often gendered or racialized.

A particularly significant development was the integration of postcolonial critique into game studies. Souvik Mukherjee [28] began this line of inquiry with his 2016 article on “playing subaltern,” analyzing how games reconfigure imperialist narratives. He deepened this work in his 2017 monograph *Videogames and Postcolonialism* [29], where he examined how game mechanics themselves reinforce or resist colonial ideologies. His scholarship marked a turning point, embedding postcolonial theory directly into the study of game form and player agency.

By the late 2010s, research began branching into more specialized historical periods and themes. Davide Secci [38] examined how antiquity is depicted across game genres, considering the cultural logic of reception and reinvention. Building on this, Ross Clare [4] presented a comprehensive study of ancient Greece and Rome in digital games, framing them within broader transmedia narratives and cultural

discourse. These later works not only draw from previous methodological developments but also demand period-specific analytical approaches based on available historical sources and popular imaginaries.

Thus, over time, the field has transitioned from foundational pedagogical and structural studies toward a more interdisciplinary, critical, and historicized practice. This evolution is reflected not only in the variety of methods employed—ranging from psychometrics and classroom studies to procedural rhetoric and postcolonial discourse—but also in the expanding temporal and thematic scope of the scholarship.

Not yet fully researched aspects of the topic. Despite the growing body of scholarship, several key areas in the study of historical digital games remain underexplored. First, while there has been substantial work on how games depict Western history—especially antiquity, medieval Europe, World War II, and the Cold War—non-Western histories remain significantly underrepresented both in game design and in academic analysis. Histories of Africa, Southeast Asia, South America, and indigenous peoples are rarely the focus of either mainstream games or critical inquiry. There is a pressing need for more research on how marginalized or silenced historical narratives could be integrated, represented, or contested in games, particularly through collaborations with local scholars and communities.

Second, while the ideological functions of historical representation are now more widely acknowledged, very few studies have systematically examined how players of different cultural, political, and educational backgrounds interpret these representations. Most empirical studies focus on Western university students, leaving open questions about global reception, cross-cultural interpretation of historical content, and the impact of localization strategies on meaning-making.

Third, although some scholarship touches on developer intent, this remains a relatively shallow area of research. Interviews with developers often appear in

isolated case studies and are rarely linked to broader questions about development pipelines, institutional constraints, or the influence of publishers and funding models on the portrayal of history. Further research is needed on how economic, technological, and labor conditions shape the historical content of games—including how deadlines, budget constraints, or licensing agreements may dictate historical simplification or distortion.

Fourth, modding communities have been discussed as sites of historical reimagining, but there is little systematic research into the types of historical interventions modders make, how modding practices differ by region or game genre, and what ideological or educational functions these modifications serve. Similarly, community-created content, such as fan fiction, historical scenario design, and lore expansions, is largely ignored in favor of official content, despite its potential to reflect grassroots engagements with history.

Fifth, current literature insufficiently addresses the long-term effects of interacting with historical games on players' historical understanding. While short-term learning outcomes and impressions are sometimes measured in classroom settings, longitudinal studies on how repeated exposure to historical narratives in games influences historical literacy, political attitudes, or cultural memory over time are virtually nonexistent.

Sixth, while the incorporation of AI-generated content and procedural generation technologies is beginning to reshape how games represent history, there is little academic literature examining how these tools affect historical fidelity, narrative structure, or interpretive control. As games increasingly use these technologies to generate dynamic or branching historical narratives, there is a need to understand what this means for historical accountability, authorship, and player agency.

Finally, the archival and preservation challenges posed by historical digital games are only starting to be addressed. Many games, especially those developed in

earlier decades or by now-defunct studios, are no longer playable due to software obsolescence, licensing issues, or hardware dependencies. This raises concerns about how historians can study, cite, or preserve digital historical artifacts in the long term.

The main material of the paper. Historical digital games have become an increasingly significant medium through which the public engages with the past. These games, which reconstruct and reimagine historical events, cultures, and figures, play a profound role in shaping contemporary perceptions of history. With their immersive narratives and interactive design, they offer players not just entertainment but also an avenue for learning and reflection on historical themes. Consequently, researching historical digital games is crucial for understanding their cultural, educational, and societal implications.

The intersection of authenticity and accuracy in digital historical games has been an area of growing academic interest, particularly as games increasingly serve as mediums for engaging with history. In particular, they provide a case of interaction between the broad audience and an interpretation of historical sources, thus becoming secondary or tertiary historical sources in their own right. Scholars have debated the tension between the need for historical accuracy and the creative liberties taken by game developers to craft engaging gameplay experiences, while pursuing or discarding the view provided by a historical source. One of the defining features of research on the matter of accuracy of representing any historical entity, identity, or process in games is the recognition of possible biases included in a particular game and shaped by the cultural context of its production and the contemporary developments in the gaming entertainment industry [39, p. 216].

Research on perceived digital game realism investigates how players assess the authenticity and believability of game experiences, focusing on the subjective and multifaceted nature of realism in digital environments when put against the

background of academic view of the historical past reconstructed based on historical sources. Wannes Ribbens and Steven Malliet quantitatively explored the structural dimensions of perceived game realism, identifying key components such as sensory fidelity, narrative coherence, and social interaction that contribute to players' perceptions [35, p. 590]. Building on this work, W. Ribbens tested three alternative models of perceived realism, examining how different theoretical frameworks explain the interplay between individual player characteristics and game-specific factors in shaping realism perceptions [36, p. 32].

Trevor Owens further explores the conceptual divide between accuracy and authenticity, noting that while accuracy concerns the factual correctness of historical elements, authenticity reflects the emotional and cultural resonance of those elements for players [33, p. 519]. This duality has led to the acknowledgment that games are not neutral historical artifacts but rather interpretative media shaped by modern ideologies and commercial objectives.

Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger introduced the notion of "selective authenticity," which examines how game developers intentionally curate certain aspects of history to align with players' perceptions of the past rather than adhering strictly to factual accuracy [37, p. 154]. This approach highlights the subjective and constructed nature of historical representation in games. Their chapter in *Playing with the Past* underscores the balance between creating an immersive experience and maintaining historical verisimilitude. Further complicating the discussion, Douglas Dow examines the interplay of simulation and anachronism in *Assassin's Creed II* [9, p. 219], noting how the game uses a historical veneer to enhance immersion while deliberately integrating modernized elements. Tara J. Copplestone provides a critical perspective on how creators, consumers, and critics perceive accuracy differently in cultural-heritage games. Her analysis underscores the varied expectations and roles within the gaming ecosystem, where creators balance historical constraints with creative vision, consumers seek engaging

narratives, and critics evaluate the educational and cultural merits of these portrayals [6, p. 427-432].

The study of historical accuracy and authenticity in digital games as historical digital sources may consider not only developer intentions but also the ways in which players engage with historical material. Gareth Crabtree explores how modding functions as a form of historical reenactment, highlighting how fans of the *Battlefield* series actively construct and reshape historical representations, sometimes reflecting ideological interpretations or an aspiration toward greater realism [7, p. 206]. In parallel, Tom Apperley's analysis emphasizes how players navigate and negotiate historical codes within the game world, making historical games sites of cultural interpretation rather than strict simulation [1, p. 188]. Michał Mochocki discusses heritage sites in video games, analyzing the questions of authenticity and immersion. He highlights how games use digital reconstructions of historical sites to create engaging and educational experiences, while also critiquing the simplifications and artistic liberties that can sometimes distort historical understanding [26, p. 960]. Alexander Vandewalle et al. investigate the interplay between perceived realism and enjoyment in historical video games, revealing how players value a balance between accurate representations and engaging gameplay [47, p. 656]. Andreas Hellerstedt and Peter Mozelius presented a case study where students' preferences for digital and non-digital games themed with history were analysed. This study led authors to the conclusion that technology tree games could be used to better effect to teach history from a structural perspective, whereas RPG's provide a subjective historical experience and thus can strengthen students' interpretative approaches [17, p. 383].

The discussion of authenticity and accuracy in historical digital games in this paper draws on a set of authors who have made foundational and conceptually influential contributions to this area. Scholars such as Trevor Owens, Andrew J. Salvati, Jonathan M. Bullinger, Wannes Ribbens, Steven Malliet, and Tara

Copplestone [33, 37, 35, 6] represent distinct but complementary approaches to understanding how games mediate the historical past. Their work collectively illustrates the major methodological currents that have shaped this subfield: procedural rhetoric (Owens; Salvati & Bullinger), psychometric modeling of player perception (Ribbens & Malliet), and critical heritage and cultural interpretation frameworks (Copplestone). It is important to note the depth of their individual analyses but also their roles in advancing key theoretical distinctions—particularly between *accuracy* as factual correctness and *authenticity* as emotional or experiential resonance. They help map out a conceptual terrain in which historical games are understood not as neutral reconstructions of the past but as interpretive and culturally situated media. Their contributions exemplify the shift from traditional content evaluation toward a more nuanced investigation of how historical meaning is constructed, selectively emphasized, and emotionally validated within game environments. Categorically, these authors span three intersecting domains: media studies with a focus on meaning-making through form and rules; empirical reception research concerned with how realism is perceived; and digital heritage studies that interrogate the responsibilities and limitations of representing history in playable form.

While scholarly discussions have clarified the conceptual distinction between historical accuracy and authenticity in games, the field still lacks consistent criteria for evaluating either concept across genres and platforms. Much of the existing research remains focused on Western-centric narratives and AAA titles, with less attention paid to indie games or non-Western representations of history. Moreover, studies often privilege developer intent or textual analysis over systematic investigation of how players actually interpret historical fidelity, leading to a gap between design perspectives and audience reception.

Using games to teach history is a developing area of study that looks at how digital games—used as digital tertiary sources—can help students learn about the

past, think more critically about history, and stay engaged in the learning process. As part of the wider use of information technology in education, this approach shows how games can make history more accessible and interactive. At the same time, researchers also point out problems such as historical mistakes, simplified or misleading content, and the way visuals, sound, game rules, and stories might distort the past or lead to confusion.

The use of digital games in history education builds on earlier approaches to gamification, which include board games, competition, and other interactive methods to boost student engagement and understanding. Now adapted through information technology, these practices form part of a multidisciplinary methodology combining pedagogy, game design, and cognitive science. The Games-to-Teach Research Team highlights key design principles for educational digital games, emphasizing the importance of narrative, interactivity, and situated learning to enhance student engagement and knowledge retention [44, p. 19]. Kurt D. Squire further explores how video games can be designed as learning systems, advocating for a shift from traditional instructional methods to more interactive and student-centered learning environments [41, p. 3-6, 12-18]. Meanwhile, Sara de Freitas provides a comprehensive review of educational games, assessing their effectiveness in various learning contexts and emphasizing the need for rigorous research to evaluate their impact [13, p. 80]. Sean Gouglas et al. discuss how games can engage students through active participation, allowing them to experiment with historical scenarios and make decisions that influence outcomes [16, p. 127-132].

One approach in this field is to explore how historical games function as “serious games,” a term used to describe games designed for purposes beyond entertainment, often including educational goals [14, 15]. Serious games focus on leveraging game mechanics to convey historical contexts and conflicts in ways that align with learning objectives. However, critics argue that while these games are engaging, they often prioritize entertainment, which can lead to historical

inaccuracies or an oversimplified view of complex events [42, p. 108-110]. For example players/students' perception and interaction with the past may be illustrated by their attitudes to the game, including their resistance to engage with certain game play mechanisms or the way they treat their mistakes and failures and adapt in the next game run based on the conclusions they made previously [43, p. 509]. "Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology" presents a range of case studies on how history can be taught using interactive technologies [19]. Research by J. McCall [24] specifically focuses on the concept of "historical empathy," which is the ability to understand the perspectives and motivations of historical figures within their historical context.

Woo Hyun Lee, Sang Yong Park, and Won Hyung Lee propose frameworks for assessing educational outcomes when historical games are implemented in classroom settings, advocating for assessments that go beyond factual recall to include critical thinking and historical analysis [11]. Some researchers not only highlighted the potential of digital games as digital sources for presenting interactive educational opportunities, but also constructed a course framework with the idea of integration of this course into the broader conventional educational agenda for students of history [23, p. 143-150; 48, p. 580-584].

One particular area of researching digital games in terms of their pedagogical value is their ability to reconstruct speculative past, more precisely the past that we today know did not happen or the past that possibly happened but today we cannot reconstruct it due to the lack of source material (for a broad overview, see Laura V. Radetich & Eduardo Jakubowicz [34]). Digital games enable players to explore alternate historical paths, making them valuable tools for understanding complex historical processes and the impact of contingency on historical outcomes [46, p. 327]. Moreover, studies have indicated that using digital games to explore counterfactual history can aid in developing critical thinking skills by encouraging students to question deterministic narratives and consider alternative viewpoints [23,

p. 25-30]. These experiences can potentially lead to greater empathy for historical figures and a more nuanced understanding of historical complexity, particularly when games are combined with guided reflection and discussion in a classroom setting [14, p. 14-16].

The authors who research the educational use of historical digital games—such as Kurt D. Squire, Jeremiah McCall, Sara de Freitas, Sean Gouglas, the Games-to-Teach Research Team, Woo Hyun Lee et al. [41, 23, 24, 13, 16, 44, 11] — are widely recognized and often referenced for their contributions to the study of how games can support historical learning in both formal and informal educational settings. These scholars represent a pedagogically focused area of research that explores how digital games can promote historical thinking, critical reflection, and student engagement. Squire and McCall have played a leading role in framing video games as learning environments that encourage active participation and interpretation. Their studies frequently combine classroom-based implementation with methods such as learning artefact collection, student reflection, and pre/post-testing to examine how players process historical narratives and develop empathy. De Freitas and Gouglas, in turn, provide analytical overviews and case studies that assess the effectiveness of games in different instructional contexts, highlighting both potential benefits and challenges. Together, these authors can be grouped within a strand of research that combines educational theory, digital pedagogy, and applied classroom practice. Their work forms the foundation for understanding how historical digital games can serve not only as supplementary learning tools but also as structured environments for developing disciplinary competencies and reflective approaches to the past.

Despite increasing interest in the pedagogical potential of historical games, research remains uneven in terms of scope and evaluation methods. Most studies are limited to short-term interventions in formal educational settings, often involving small, homogenous student samples. Longitudinal research on lasting cognitive or

attitudinal effects is rare, as is work addressing how different types of learners engage with historical narratives. Additionally, there is limited guidance for educators on how to critically integrate games into curricula while addressing historical inaccuracies, ideological framing, or representational biases.

One major strand of scholarship explores the use of digital historical games as tools for ideological reinforcement. Authors like Ian Bogost in *Persuasive Games* argue that games, by their interactive nature, can convey ideological messages more effectively than traditional media forms [2, p. 3-6, 40-45]. This concept has been elaborated upon by A. Chapman who suggests that games serve as “procedural rhetorics” that subtly shape players' understanding of imperialism, colonisation, and progress through gameplay choices and consequences, while consciously or subconsciously embedding certain historical viewpoints that often resonate with present-day political ideologies [3, p. 72, 109].

Contrastingly, other scholars emphasise the subversive potential of digital historical games as tools of critique. In their influential analysis, Claudio Fogu [12, p. 103-107] and William Uricchio [46, p. 334-336] discuss how some games deliberately question dominant historical narratives, presenting alternate perspectives on contentious historical topics. Jess Morrissette [27, p. 4-7] and Torres-Toukoumidis et al. [45, p. 6] analyzed games such as *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) and *Democracy* series (Positech Games) for their capacity to highlight structural and ethical issues of state bureaucracy and civil institutions, as well as moral ambiguities behind them. These games resist idealized portrayals of history, instead engaging players in morally complex situations that challenge simplistic interpretations of “good” versus “evil.”

Research on the socio-political aspects of historical digital games has expanded notably in recent years, with significant attention paid to how games represent colonial and post-colonial themes, often in relation with themes of war and violence in a broader context of popular culture (for example, see Alex McAuley's

overview of depiction of ancient Roman warfare in film [22] in the context of modern global politics). Scholars have increasingly examined digital games as cultural products that reflect, reinforce, or challenge historical narratives of colonialism and power dynamics. Though the field of post-colonial studies in popular culture is not new, academic papers about digital games started to appear only relatively recently. For instance, Shoshana Magnet explores the implications of depicting landscape in digital games within a particular ideological framework [20, p. 142-146], along with the dangers of such depiction, such as the trope of “tropicalization” employed to frame the landscape of the game as the “othered” space. Similarly, Fede Peñate Domínguez analyzes the implications of depicting Spanish colonial architecture in the period of the Spanish overseas empire [8].

The portrayal of colonial histories and racial dynamics is also scrutinized in Paul Martin's work on *Resident Evil 5*, where he examines the game's controversial depiction of African characters and landscapes. Martin argues that the game's imagery and plot evoke longstanding racial stereotypes that echo colonial representations of Africa and African people as “primitive” or “dangerous” [21, p. 572-578]. Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens provide another critical lens on colonialism in games with their analysis of *Sid Meier's Colonization*, a game that allows players to control European powers in their quest to dominate the New World. The researchers argue that the game's mechanics inherently promote a colonialist worldview by rewarding conquest, resource extraction, and the exploitation of indigenous populations [25, p. 97-100]. Outlining another area of research, Souvik Mukherjee in *Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism*, further interrogates the role of the player in these games, exploring how postcolonial theory can reshape our understanding of player agency within historically situated narratives [28, p. 510]. One foundational work in this area that summarised and conceptualized the previous research is S. Mukherjee's *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, which investigates how digital games

perpetuate or contest colonial ideologies through gameplay mechanics that encourage exploration, conquest, and resource exploitation — elements that resonate with historical colonial agendas [29]. Further exploring these ideas, Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar's "Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies" extends the discussion to a broader academic context, framing colonialism in games as a pervasive influence that demands scholarly attention [30, p. 4]. This special issue highlights the need for critical multidisciplinary methodologies that unpack the cultural politics embedded in digital games, underscoring the role of academic inquiry in questioning narratives that have traditionally marginalized non-Western perspectives [30, p. 6].

Digital games have become powerful tools in constructing and perpetuating national identities. Through their narratives and mechanics, games often emphasize particular historical events, figures, and achievements that align with nationalistic ideologies. Just as with other media forms of popular culture, selective representation that a game presents is able to reinforce a sense of pride and belonging while marginalizing alternative perspectives or contesting historical narratives.

Iskandar Zulkarnain's case study explores how Nusantara Online, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), reconstructs Indonesian national history through gameplay [49, p. 37-45]. He argues that the game operates as a form of "playable" nationalism, in which historical narratives are selectively adapted to foster a sense of national identity among players. As Andrés Muñoz argues in his analysis of Civilization V, the game presents a "great man" theory of history, where the progression of civilizations is driven by the achievements of notable leaders and pivotal events. This framework prioritizes certain narratives while sidelining others, crafting a version of history that resonates with dominant nationalistic ideologies. For instance, the portrayal of historical milestones in Civilization V often aligns with Western-centric values, emphasizing technological advancement, territorial expansion, and military prowess as hallmarks of success. Such representations

perpetuate hegemonic narratives that valorize specific nations while relegating others to the periphery of historical significance [31, p. 851-856].

Soraya Murray highlights the visual politics of gender representation in historical games, emphasizing how these portrayals intersect with broader cultural discourses. In many games, women are relegated to peripheral roles or are depicted through reductive archetypes, such as the damsel in distress or the supportive companion. For example, games set in medieval or early modern periods often depict women in domestic or subordinate roles, reflecting patriarchal structures of the time. However, these representations may fail to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences and their active participation in historical events [32, p. 47, 99].

Conversely, games like *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Assassin's Creed: Origins* adopt a more inclusive approach by incorporating complex female protagonists and side characters. Richard Cole discusses Kassandra, one of the protagonists in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, emphasizing her role as a fully realized character navigating a male-dominated world. Kassandra's depiction allows players to explore a nuanced interpretation of femininity and power, blending historical inspiration with contemporary feminist ideals [5, p. 200-204].

Sexuality is another critical aspect in the portrayal of historical identities. Jane Draycott examines Cleopatra's representation in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, noting how the game negotiates her historical persona and modern perceptions of sexuality. Cleopatra's portrayal blends elements of seduction and political acumen, reflecting her complex legacy while avoiding some of the more overtly sexualized tropes common in earlier media depictions. The game presents her as a strategic leader, complicating traditional narratives that reduce her to a mere object of desire. Furthermore, the experience of gender in games extends beyond visual representation to the mechanics and interactions within gameplay. For instance, gendered power dynamics are often embedded in game mechanics, such as the roles available to male and female characters or the narratives tied to their arcs [10, p.

170-172]. These dynamics not only shape the player's engagement with the game but also reinforce or challenge contemporary understandings of historical gender relations.

Authors such as Ian Bogost, Adam Chapman, Claudio Fogu, William Uricchio, Jess Morrisettez, Souvik Mukherjee, Soraya Murray, Adrienne Shaw, Rebecca Mir, Trevor Owens, Paul Martin, and Fede Peñate Domínguez [2, 3, 12, 46, 27, 29, 32, 40, 25, 21, 8] stand out for their diverse yet complementary approaches to uncovering how games communicate, reinforce, or challenge ideological messages. Their methodologies span procedural rhetoric (Bogost, Chapman), media theory and historical epistemology (Fogu, Uricchio), postcolonial critique (Mukherjee), and visual-cultural and ethnographic analysis (Murray, Shaw). Each provides tools for understanding how ideologies are embedded in game design—not only through narrative and aesthetics but also through rules, mechanics, and player agency.

A significant portion of this body of work focuses on how games reproduce colonial and imperial narratives, often through tropes of conquest, civilizational hierarchy, and territorial expansion. Mukherjee's work stands out for systematically applying postcolonial theory to both mainstream and independent games, revealing how empire is naturalized through gameplay logic. His analyses are complemented by studies such as those of Mir and Owens on Sid Meier's *Colonization*, and Martin's critique of racialized representation in *Resident Evil 5*, which illustrate how colonial and racial ideologies are projected onto digital landscapes and character models. Domínguez and Magnet further extend this critique by analyzing how architectural and environmental design in historical games reflect Eurocentric spatial politics, often "tropicalizing" or othering colonized regions.

Closely tied to these ideological analyses is the research on identity construction in historical games, particularly regarding race, gender, nationalism, and sexuality. Scholars like Shaw and Murray focus on how identity is framed visually and structurally within games, analyzing both the limited roles available to

marginalized characters and the cultural assumptions embedded in design. The work of Cole and Draycott on female protagonists, such as Kassandra in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* or Cleopatra in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, highlights how games both reproduce and subvert traditional gendered and sexualized archetypes. Zulkarnain and Muñoz, meanwhile, explore how historical games participate in nation-building projects, embedding specific forms of nationalism and historical glorification into their design. These studies together reveal how historical digital games not only depict the past but also contribute to contemporary debates over identity, inclusion, and collective memory.

While this field has grown rapidly in recent years, it still presents notable gaps. Research continues to be dominated by analyses of high-profile Western-developed games, with insufficient attention to ideological and identity dynamics in games developed in Latin America, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, or the Middle East. Empirical studies of player reception remain rare, particularly regarding how players interpret identity portrayals, colonial ideologies, or nationalistic narratives in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, while race and gender are receiving increasing attention, other identity markers such as class, religion, disability, and non-binary gender expressions remain underexplored. Finally, the influence of industry practices—including marketing strategies, localization, and funding structures—on ideological and identity representation has not yet been systematically addressed. Expanding this line of inquiry would require intersectional approaches, global case studies, and greater methodological diversity that combines textual analysis with production and reception research.

Conclusion

The study of historical digital games has emerged as a dynamic and multifaceted field situated at the intersection of history, media studies, game studies, and cultural theory. Key areas of research include the representation of historical

accuracy and authenticity, the pedagogical use of games in formal and informal learning environments, the role of games as socio-political and ideological tools, the legacy of colonialism, and the formation of historical identities through race, gender, and nationalism.

Despite the field's considerable expansion, the academic discourse remains uneven, with considerable variation in focus, methodology, and disciplinary engagement. There is still a need for greater integration between theoretical and empirical approaches, as well as a more consistent critical vocabulary that can account for the unique formal, interactive, and experiential characteristics of the medium. Looking ahead, future research on historical digital games should aim to expand in several key directions. First, more attention should be given to player reception and interpretive practices, including how diverse audiences engage with historical content, how interpretation varies across cultural and educational backgrounds, and how long-term exposure to historical games influences players' historical thinking, memory, and political attitudes.

Second, interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, educators, designers, and cultural theorists should be strengthened. This includes both analytical cooperation and practical partnerships—for instance, involving historians in the development of historically themed games or integrating game-based scenarios into classroom instruction with support from educators and learning scientists. Joint projects could help ensure historical rigor while also enhancing accessibility and engagement.

Third, there is a critical need to explore underrepresented historical periods and global regions. Future research should address the persistent dominance of Eurocentric and militarized historical narratives by investigating games that depict histories of the Global South, indigenous communities, and marginalized social groups. This involves not only analyzing existing titles but also advocating for the

creation and support of games that bring these perspectives into mainstream discourse.

Fourth, scholars should continue to investigate the economic, industrial, and technological factors shaping historical representation in games. This includes how development budgets, market demands, corporate interests, platform constraints, and modding cultures influence which histories are told and how they are framed.

Fifth, the emergence of new technologies presents both challenges and opportunities for the field. Virtual and augmented reality platforms introduce new dimensions of embodiment and spatial immersion that require novel analytical frameworks. Similarly, the growing use of AI-generated content and procedural storytelling in historical games demands critical examination of how automation affects narrative coherence, historical accountability, and authorial control.

Finally, the question of digital preservation deserves more focused attention. As many games become obsolete or unplayable due to changing hardware and software ecosystems, researchers must consider how historical digital games can be archived, documented, and studied as cultural artifacts in their own right.

In sum, historical digital games constitute a powerful medium for public engagement with the past. Their continued study will require careful methodological innovation, cross-sector collaboration, and sustained critical reflection on how interactive media construct, contest, and circulate historical knowledge in the digital age.

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