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History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past (2020)
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Review

Robert Houghton

Abstract

A book review of *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past (2020)* edited by Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann.

Keywords: History, Video Games, Authentic Past, Historical Authenticity, gameenvironments

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This volume represents the selected and expanded proceedings of the *History in Games* strand at the 2019 Clash of Realities conference. The editors (Lorber and Zimmermann 2020) and contributors should be applauded for their swift development of the volume which addresses a range of important themes about the core issue of historical authenticity within and around computer games. This is an incredibly timely topic given the extensive, casual and contested construction of history through this medium visible across social media and within academic and political spheres.

The editors divide their book into three sections: *History as told by the Game*, *Authenticity in and of History*, and *The Politics of Authenticity*. While there is certainly overlap between the subject matter of the chapters in each of these sections, the distinction is clear and forms a suitable spine for the volume. Broadly speaking, the arguments and analysis presented by the individual authors create a coherent whole and ascribe closely to the thesis presented by the editors: historical authenticity is complex, fluid and infinitely debatable – and that authenticity is an issue which extends well beyond that of history (Lorber and Zimmermann 2020, 17–18).

The chapters address a cornucopia of issues around this theme. Brandenburg develops the well-trodden discussion of the defence of sexism and racism in fantasy games on the grounds of the *historical accuracy* of a misogynist and exclusionary past to demonstrate and underline that many of the counters to this defence accept the same assumptions. Nolden (2019) builds on Chapman’s (2016) work on player-historians and developer-historians to consider the importance of multiplayer interaction in the construction of history and historical authenticity within games – showing a number of important similarities with the discussion of counterplay as a learning tool presented within Mol’s chapter. Drawing on emergent areas of Musicology, Ivănescu considers the place of music as embodiment of or challenge to notions of historical authenticity in several contexts. In their chapters Elliott and Horswell, Keilbart, and Winnerling provide important, intelligent and innovative discussion of the use of a diverse range of tropes (crusading/medievalism, queerness and colonialism respectively) in the construction of history and authenticity within games – a theme of growing importance within the academy and industry. Schwarz (in two chapters), Pfister, and Brandis define and explore a series of new frameworks for the discussion and analysis of authenticity and other issues within historical games and in doing so contribute strongly to the growing range of approaches within the

There are however a few limitations to the volume and areas which could have been developed further. The most basic and visible of these are the proofreading and editorial errors and inconsistencies in many of the chapters. This is perfectly understandable, especially given the multilingual nature of the endeavour and the swift production of the volume, and does not substantially undermine the utility of the book but the effect is rather jarring and makes a few of the sections difficult to navigate. The volume also skews slightly towards male and significantly towards white authors reflecting a broader, almost endemic, issue within the field.

Beyond this, while the volume makes important progress through its introduction of German work to an Anglophone audience, several of the chapters demonstrate the ongoing divisions along linguistic lines without addressing them. The English speakers cite almost exclusively English works while a number of the Germanophone authors refer primarily to German research. Again, this is understandable and reflects underlying issues within the field, but it feels a missed opportunity. Indeed, a number of chapters omit key authors from their bibliographies seemingly because of this linguistic divide. For example, Brandis’ strong consideration of game mechanics and procedural rhetoric as explorations of history is embedded heavily and effectively within the German tradition but would speak well with recent developments in Anglophone research.

Finally, the volume includes a few chapters which would benefit from deeper engagement with other works in the field. For example, Schwarz’s first chapter defines a useful and logical framework categorising ludic use of history but makes limited engagement with the literature addressing the construction of similar frameworks. This absence is particularly stark on account of Schwarz’s well

established position in the field. These chapters present important arguments, but sit in isolation from the broader literature.

In sum then, this is a hugely important volume which represents a confluence of ideas and disciplines around a timely and significant theme. The chapters are impressive in their breadth and innovation and the editors do incredibly well to present such a multitude of perspectives from within and outside the academy and from across linguistic boundaries. There are a handful of issues which limit the work – many of which could be resolved in a second edition – but this does little to diminish its educational or scholarly value.

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