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Report

Understanding Modern Views on the Middle Ages Through Research-Led Learning: A Teaching Report

Philipp Frey and Joana Hansen

Abstract
This report brings insights from a course in Medieval game studies held at Kiel University from April to July 2023. In games, the medieval era is often depicted as a dark and cruel time on the one hand and a romanticized time on the other. One of the main focuses of the course was to look behind these narratives and how to examine games as an object of research further than just looking for historical inaccuracies. This shows some important methods for teaching game studies and discusses opportunities and representative results, as well as possibilities to improve this type of course embedded in regular studies of history without a gaming focus. We hope to demonstrate some approaches to involve game studies in curricula in which it was not included previously. This teaching report focuses on the research-led learning aspect of the course, which had a high amount of individual space for the students to create their research process, discusses some results that evolved out of the seminar, highlights the problems of teaching game studies to an audience which is not familiar with researching modern media and propose some solutions to these problems.

Keywords: University Teaching, *Stronghold*, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, Research-Led Learning, Middle Ages, Game Studies, Narratives, Digital Games, Historical Games, gamevironments

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Although history games and gaming have been a topic in teaching for a while now, there has been a greater focus on how games can be used in school rather than university-level teaching. However, the literature on both topics is expanding, and a

strong interest in discussing games in the context of contemporary issues remains. In addition to war games, which often center around the 20th century, the Middle Ages remain a popular setting for games across various genres.

Games that aim to depict a specific era often face scrutiny for the underlying narratives they convey about that time period. When it comes to the Middle Ages, these narratives typically fall into two categories. On one hand, there is a tendency to portray an era of darkness and cruelty, with themes of violence, societal hierarchies, oppression, corruption within the church, and religious fervour. On the other hand, there is a tendency to romanticize medieval life, portraying it as a simpler time with traditional gender roles, devoid of modern problems, innovation, and technology. These narratives are not mutually exclusive, as games and other popular media often combine elements from both and others. However, the complexity increases when certain themes and tropes are either omitted or overly emphasized, whether in the name of authenticity, accuracy, or for the sake of game mechanics.

Instead of solely exploring what we can learn about history and how we can reflect on it through games, university-level teaching places more emphasis on teaching students how to formulate research questions related to games and providing them with the necessary analytical methods. *Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games*, edited by Robert Houghton (2022), is a recent publication that offers numerous excellent examples of incorporating games into history courses.

This report aims to contribute to these examples by sharing our course concept and our experiences teaching two classes during the summer term of 2023 at Kiel University. Our course heavily relied on the concept of research-led learning, which involved encouraging students to develop their own research questions and pursue

them through small projects. This approach allowed them to reflect on the knowledge they needed to deepen their understanding of their research topics. After outlining the structure of the course and discussing our overall observations during the teaching process, we will share two examples of student projects and their reflection.

Course Structure

The seminar was designed to deliberately break with the usual flow of this type of course. Usually, a constant discussion of literature and sources occurs during seminar time and mostly in plenary. This format often means that the majority of the course does not actively engage with the content during seminar time, with only a small number of students taking part actively.

A challenge for a course about game studies arose from the fact that, unlike with typical historical topics, students had no prior knowledge of the methodology of game studies. While the foundations for the usual historical work had been laid in preliminary courses, the Medieval Game Studies course had to introduce, discuss and reflect on basic working concepts. However, contrary to our expectations the number of students with no prior experience with digital games was about equal to those who were gaming regularly.

Finally, the aim of the course was to encourage students to actively engage with the object of study. As a result, the course material would be more deeply embedded in the students' minds and would therefore have a greater learning effect. At the same time, our aim was to create a more sustainable work product that would ideally be of use to the students in their future careers. We wanted to encourage this active

engagement by breaking away from the standard way of teaching and assessing. Instead of retracing previous research in the area of study as is often done in seminars based on literature reviews and comparisons with original sources, students should actively choose a research area *before* turning to the literature. The examination formats prescribed by the subject examination regulations are term paper, oral examination or active participation, the latter often being demonstrated by a presentation. Unfortunately, we could only replace the latter with our intended examination format in the form of a project paper, as the first two did not allow equivalent examination. For this reason, students were given the opportunity to link their oral examination or written work to the results of their project. In this way, regardless of the form of examination chosen, the project also provided direct preparation for the examination for all students.

Due to the subject matter of digital games, instead of the usual written or oral product, we focused on a media product as a learning outcome. The specifications were that it should be about ten minutes long and visually supported. It was up to the students to decide whether the product would be mainly audio or visual. It was important to us to allow a great deal of freedom not only in the design of the final product, but also in the thematic orientation and timing of the work phases. As a result, for example, one group designed their learning product in the form of a podcast sequence that had visual support from game sequences. In total, four out of eleven groups broke away from the typical presentation of text and images and designed creative products that heavily incorporated short videos. Overall, we found that opening up the exam format in a creative way led to more varied and creative products. Their quality was in no way inferior to the average result of previous exam formats, but rather better. Finally, we wanted to give appropriate credit to the final products, something that is often missing in standard examination formats such as

presentations or term papers.

Based on these considerations, we divided the semester into three parts. The course began with an introduction to the theoretical concepts of (historical) game studies and possible research methods. Since historical games about the Middle Ages usually say much more about contemporary assumptions of the Middle Ages than about the Middle Ages themselves, we began the introduction to theoretical concepts with typical ideas about the Middle Ages. Thus, we approached the master narratives of the Romantic Middle Ages on the one hand and the Dark Ages on the other (Geary 2019, 108-111). On this basis, we wanted to avoid the students interpreting the aim of the seminar as a search for and discussion of historical errors in the games. Instead, we wanted students to be aware of modern ideas and prejudices about the Middle Ages in games. Then, for example, they would be able to point out the interactions between these creative receptions. The second session was devoted to the development and reflection of an own understanding of the methodological concepts of mediality, performativity and authenticity, drawing especially from the literature (Pirker and Rüdiger 2010, 12-21, Nolden 2019, 316-324). Furthermore, presentations by us gave students insights into research areas currently strongly represented in game studies like gender studies and researching performativity or atmosphere (e.g., Zimmermann 2023) and working methods like close playing (e.g., Inderst 2020) or evaluating authenticity by interviewing players.

The evening talk *Playing the Middle Ages? Medieval Approaches to Game Studies* by Aurelia Brandenburg and Peter Färberböck (2023), who used examples from *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020) to demonstrate the scientific work of game studies researchers, provided the perfect transition to the following work phase. Furthermore, students remarked positively on having two experts sharing their recent research.

As mentioned above, in the research phase we deliberately did not start from previous research, but instructed the students to define their own area of research. This was supported by the following four questions, which the students were asked to answer at the beginning:

1. What narratives/topoi about the Middle Ages interest me?
2. Which game(s) interest me?
3. Which approach interests me (game study vs. recipient study vs. mixture of both)? Which concepts and methods would be the most helpful?
4. What questions can I formulate from this?

This was followed by a so-called *topic speed-dating* session. In this, students had one minute to introduce their own research interests for the project to the person sitting opposite. The other person then introduced their idea. After that, people had a brief opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss synergies before the line moved on and a new pair of speed-daters started the process from the beginning. This teaching method was beneficial on several levels. First and foremost, it ensured that the students converse with each other. Without this, many of the synergies for the projects described above would not be achieved. Talking to each other also helped to break down interpersonal barriers. The result was a more open and familiar atmosphere in the seminar, as well as the formation of several teams breaking up the regular peer groups. Last but not least, this led to investigations that would otherwise not have been carried out with such an approach. Simultaneously, the results of each survey were impressively diverse, as the multiple ideas of all those involved accumulated. Furthermore, there was no overlap between the group projects in the focus of the study, but only similarities in the games that were analysed. While in other cases the students are often given a topic and have to find a group to work on

it, these investigations are born out of the intrinsic interest of the individuals. Following this intrinsic interest, it was easy to form a working group for the project.

Then, the research phase began. In this phase the groups started to plan their research project in terms of time and content. To do this, the students now turned to the research literature on their previously chosen topic. When designing the learning product, we wanted to give the students a lot of time and flexibility to plan their research process and to shape their product. So, they had to work on and complete their project mainly on their own over a period of six weeks. During these six weeks, there were two face-to-face sessions, one in the second week, the other in the fifth week. In these, the students received feedback from their peers and from us, the lecturers, on their previous findings and the progress of their work. All groups were required to submit a preliminary project outline, including the research question, the timeframe in which they planned to execute their analyses, and three key references, by the first face-to-face session. This project sketch provided the basis for the first feedback, which was deliberately intended to come primarily from the peer group. The feedback was given by a student who had a similar working method in their own group, e.g., conducting a player survey, or a similar research focus, such as the representation of discriminatory elements in the media. On the one hand, peer feedback created a safe and low-threshold space for any necessary revision; on the other hand, it also strengthened all feedback-givers to identify relevant issues for the projects and to formulate feedback accordingly. In doing so, they were trained in skills that will prove important both for their own projects and for their professional futures. A handout introducing the *critical friend method* and containing guidance questions was given to the feedback-givers to support them in their role (a German overview of this feedback method can be found at Institut für soziale Arbeit e.V. n.d.).

The lecturers were always available as contact persons during all of the weeks. This offer was used to varying degrees. The face-to-face sessions showed that the groups worked on their projects in unequal intensity and speed. One group in particular spent a long time refining their topic. They changed their research question in the second half of the research phase and therefore started to investigate their question in the digital game at a very late stage. The other groups, however, made continuous progress. In the end, the final product of all groups was clearly passed, and in some cases, particularly well and precisely developed.

All groups uploaded their final results and, before the final meeting of the semester, the students and us looked at them asynchronously at a time of our choice before the meeting (based on the flipped classroom concept by Fähnrich, F. and Thein, C. n.d., and suggested by the students). Using an anonymous feedback form, the students gave individual feedback to their peers on the final results. This mainly concerned the structure of the presentation and the coherence of the argument. In addition to the evaluation of this form, each group also received written feedback of about 200 words from the lecturers. This covered both content design and the basic and structural organisation of the final product. It concentrated on how well the working terms were used and also on research approaches that were only partially fulfilled. Further thoughts that had not been considered were also included in this feedback.

Based on these insights, it would be conceivable to modify the course design. For example, we think it would be beneficial to add a second revision round after the detailed feedback. Although, this would lead to a shorter period of time for the intermediate products, which might be too tight for us. This change would only be truly feasible if the presentations could be assessed as a full equivalent to the

normally written exams and not, as was the case here for legal reasons, only as an equivalent piece of work for active participation but not as an equivalent piece of work for a term paper or an oral exam.

The last session itself then served also to reflect on the working process, this examination format and the results. Students confirmed that they found this to be much more productive than the usual examination format. The motivational effect of the large amount of creative freedom and the high degree of self-directed work was also reported in a very positive way. Occasionally it was noted that this led to time problems because the process of working was started too late or was too unfocused. Even though the students clearly saw the origin of this problem in themselves, it would be worth considering offering and teaching even more techniques for self-structured working at the beginning of the research phase in order to minimise these risks.

Outcomes and Students' Reflections on them

In this section, we would like to share to examples of group projects our students handed in at the end of term. The first group we will discuss was interested in exploring how a game's historical setting can be built and immersion enhanced within a cinematic episode, where gameplay is less significant. This group analysed the introductory sequence of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020), questioning how a short video and gaming experience like this introduces a Viking setting. After further research, they chose mythology, language, narration perspective, and cultural practices such as music and dance as categories for their analysis. From these, they identified the key components used to introduce a Viking world in a relatively short time frame.

The group presented their findings in a video essay, overlaying their voice-over on the game's cinematic trailer. They began by defining their group's understanding of immersion and authenticity, thereby establishing the basic terms for their analysis. While narrating, they referenced relevant literature to support their arguments. Next, they explored the topic of mythology, as the game's intro sequence begins with a retelling of the Nordic creation myth. Due to the students' research, they realised that the intro narrates a much shorter version compared to narrations that can be found in historical sources. The shortened version actually focusses primarily on how Ymir, the giant, was killed, and the students concluded this firstly, actually suffices to introduce the cultural and historical frame of the game, and further, feeds into the narrative of brutal and war-driven Vikings, since this is, according to the myth, how the world came to be.

After this intro sequence, the player controls Eivor, the game's protagonist, for the first time. In this scene, Eivor is still a child, instructed by their father to fetch a gift for their new king. He explains what the gift represents and the significance of the festivities. The group noted that experiencing the game through a child's perspective mirrors the player's knowledge – explaining social norms to a child is more believable than explaining them to an adult, and this exposition also introduces the game's Viking society to the player.

The next point of analysis for the students was language. They noticed that Nordic words, such as *drengr* or *skal*, were repeatedly used in the dialogues. The group came to the conclusion that these are intended to contribute to immersion, as the player experiences an insight into the interpersonal closeness of Viking society.

Finally, the group analysed cultural practices. Since the scene shows a Viking feast,

this included music, dance, and food and drink. Again, the students benefitted from their research on literature about Viking cultural practices. They concluded that besides some historical inaccuracies or things we do not know about due a lack of historical sources, the depiction in the game was fairly fitting, and more importantly prompted an immersive exposition for a Viking world the game is set in. Ultimately, they remarked that surveying other people to have a greater dataset of opinions on the level of immersion and perceived authenticity of the game could be fruitful.

Another group of students conducted a survey among 12-14-year-old pupils from one class at a high school (*Gymnasium*) in Hamburg. This number may seem to be small for a survey, but for the scope of the project work it was more than sufficient. In the following, only a few aspects of the survey will be discussed in order to give an insight into this form of project work.

The survey was structured in such a way that the pupils were first asked to name their own associations with the Middle Ages. The naming of “king”, “peasants” and “knights” revealed typical associations with the Middle Ages, which were also reflected in the discussion of the system of estates in the previous lessons. In addition, the use of associations such as “dirty” or “famine” showed that the pupils had previously been influenced more by the idea of the Dark Middle Ages. Finally, associations with Christianity were identified, such as “Martin Luther”, “Christianity” or “monastery,” which can be clearly traced back to the school curriculum and at the same time highlight the problem of concentrating on European-Christian Middle Ages.

The children were then played audio sequences and shown screenshots from *Stronghold* (2001) and *Stronghold 2* (2005). These games had not been taught

previously and were therefore completely new to the pupils. In the music section, harp music from the game *Stronghold* was played to the class. While this music was perceived as authentic by the respondents (17 out of 20), it was also stated as less appealing and not suitable for arousing interest in the Middle Ages (10 out of 20). In the subsequent question about the reasons for the pupils' perception of the authenticity of this music, there were strong references to the influence of popular representations of the Middle Ages, such as films, TV series or medieval markets. Again, a clear interweaving of popular representations and their reproductions is evident.

When asked about the visual presentation, 10 out of 20 students agreed that the presentation of the screenshots was realistic for the Middle Ages; six students were neutral and four were negative. The positive responses to the question emphasised in particular that the visual representation helped the students to imagine the Middle Ages. This was vastly linked to economic factors such as the levels of food storage or the economic buildings. Students who rated the screenshots as inauthentic criticised in particular the lack of depiction of the Dark Middle Ages. They felt that the game was too one-dimensional. What is interesting about this observation is that the lack of the Dark Middle Ages is criticised, with one screenshot showing the conquest of a castle, while the lack of the Romantic Middle Ages is not criticised, even though such elements as clearly recognisable castle ladies or even a tournament ground, are completely absent from the screenshots. Ultimately, these observations are also a clear indication that realistic is not the right term to use when discussing the test results, but that the students have clearly assessed the authenticity of the game.[i] The graphics and the bird's eye view were also mentioned as a hindrance to realism. This means that the students also consider immersion to be important, which they feel is negatively affected by these issues.[ii]

What was particularly important to us about this form of assessment was that our students carried it out conscientiously and then reflected on it intensively. For example, when this group analysed the results, they did not point out the predominance of the pop-cultural influence of the Dark Middle Ages, nor did they classify the equation of realism and authenticity. However, the group did reflect very well on the content and methodology of their study and made suggestions for improvement. For example, the sample size was considered to be too small and unreliable because all the students were from the same class, and the group felt that a larger and more diverse sample would have been preferable. The fact that the pupils were unfamiliar with the game and could not play it themselves, and so were only presented with images and audio material, was also seen as potentially biasing. In particular, the immersion study might have yielded other interesting results if the children had actually played the game. It would also become much clearer that elements of the Dark Middle Ages, such as torture, are part of the game mechanics. Finally, some of the questions were critically reflected upon and suggestions were made to improve them. In order to be able to categorise the results more precisely and reconstruct their genesis, questions about the content of previous school lessons were also considered necessary.

In particular, the obligatory accompanying reflection seems to have brought great benefits. These self-identifications of areas for improvement will be in the students' long-term memory and will be useful for their future studies. This course has shown that examination formats and culture need to be strongly reconsidered. If the aim is to achieve lasting learning, which is limited with current examination formats, then a clear case must be made for change. If the reflection that triggers this learning effect were already part of the examination, it would be much more present and important in everyday student life.

Conclusion

The concept of research-led learning proved to be much useful in a project-oriented style of seminar like this. Overall, we wanted the students to engage through all phases of research process: finding a research question, deciding on the topic and the framework, consulting the literature, planning and analysing and finally presenting their outcomes to their peers. While students would have benefitted from a little more time in some phases, especially those sessions dedicated to understanding key concepts like authenticity, they overall did exceedingly well with the allocated time frame.

While almost all students were mainly interested in questions of authenticity, it proved to be the most difficult for them to use as a framework for analysis, within the group projects as well as for the individual papers. And while this led several groups to make small surveys to find out what the general public thought about the authenticity of history games, others came up with working definitions to shift the focus of analysis to other topics. Mediality was the second most used concept with the leading question of what elements in a game transported specific aspects of medieval history, how it overlapped or disagreed with modern expectations. This resulted in a few outstanding papers, e.g., on the topic of gender and sexuality or on narratives about the medieval European church.

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[i] Authenticity would be the more appropriate academic term here. Due to the age of the subjects, the group decided not to use the term *authentic*, as it was suspected that the pupils did not understand the term or did not understand it correctly.

[ii] In the following, questions were asked about the general familiarity with video games and the perceived value of games with a medieval setting for teaching history. These results will not be discussed further here.