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Special Issue

Peripheral Religions and Games

edited by

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Issue 22 (2025)

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Review of Robert Houghton's *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism*(2024)

Markus Eldegard Mindrebø

Abstract

A review of Robert Houghton's book *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism* (2024).

Keywords: Medieval, Middle Ages, Medievalism, Video Games, Representation, gamevironments

To cite this article: Mindrebø, M. E., 2025. Review of Robert Houghton's *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism* (2024). *Gamevironments* 22, 215-219. Available at https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/.

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The Middle Ages in Computer Games (Houghton 2024) is a highly necessary book. Even though the field of medievalist game studies has been growing at a rapid pace for years if not decades, there has not yet been any Anglophone monograph providing a full overview of the topic, restricted instead to diverse and stimulating but unconnected chapters, articles, and conference papers, by numerous contributors from different disciplines and backgrounds. The key works in the field have been a series of edited volumes, including at least two with this book's author as main editor, but these have of necessity been rather chaotic, with a wide variety of authors researching a wide variety of themes (Houghton 2022, Houghton 2023). For those

scholars who, like the present reviewer, are both researching and supervising theses within the field, this book will be invaluable.

An ambitious attempt at providing a focal point for an adolescent field, the main argument of The Middle Ages in Computer Games centres around the idea that the Middle Ages in computer games as a phenomenon is different both from alternative forms of medievalism in other media, and from other forms of historical representation in games. This argument is laid out over the course of the book's first three chapters. It is particularly developed in the first chapter after the introduction to partially centre on the role of interactivity, or as the author puts it, of the "coauthorship between creator and player" or the "discussion between player and designer" (Houghton 2024, 35). It is immediately clear that Houghton makes a strong case, and that the construction of historical contexts in games is unique when compared to the construction of historical contexts in other media. One limitation of the book's approach lies in its rejection of narratological approaches in favour of studying only the interactivity, losing a possible literary edge in favour of added focus on the elements only found in games. But given the rather massive scope necessary to produce an overview of this topic, it is hard to find any great fault with this approach.

Arguably the most considerable strength of *The Middle Ages in Computer Games* is its excellent engagement with an exceptionally broad range of existing scholarly literature on game studies both within and outside the medieval sphere. Such engagements range from large and helpful surveys aided by lavish footnoting to critical revisions of key game studies theses, adapting them for a medievalist ludohistorical context. An example is the author's discussion and integration of the influential work of Adam Chapman (2016) in his book *Digital Games as History*.

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Houghton uses one of Chapman's important contributions to the field, a division of historical games into realist simulations and conceptual simulations, as a solid foundation from which to successfully build an updated medievalist model acknowledging the presence of specifically medieval versions blending both types, for example medieval fantasy games and their distinct ludic approach. This argument forms the basis for much of the book's second chapter, but it is followed by many other such useful revisions creating the theoretical groundwork for further studies not of historical games generally, but medievalist games specifically.

One might point out that the book functions rather more like an overview of existing game representations of the Middle Ages than a contribution driving medieval game research significantly forward. This is acknowledged by the author, who does point out that the (conscious) focus on breadth rather than depth causes a loss of detail and nuance in the discussion (Houghton 2024, 29). Nevertheless, it is a particularly valuable contribution as a holistic analysis of medieval computer games, and will serve as a brilliant starting point for future discussion, exactly as intended by Houghton's approach.

These outcomes are very much supported by the book's structure, with a division into

thematic chapters, each examining an area of medievalist representation, functioning as a gateway for the reader into particular kinds of medievalism in games. While certain chapters are heavily reliant on specific earlier works for considerable portions of their content, they all serve as orderly and well thought-out walkthroughs of research and representation both. Often, these chapters point out specific pitfalls in medievalist game representation, as in the combat and warfare section, where the author rightly calls out the representation of the Middle Ages as both a dark age of all-encompassing violence, and a heroic age of noble heroes, with romanticized and

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grotesque violence often appearing in the same titles – as well as *more* violence appearing in medieval games (Houghton 2024, 81-83, 87-89). Similarly widespread, it is argued, is the idea of developmental stasis as a key characteristic of the medieval, often positioned at the tail end of a more advanced fallen empire, and potentially prior to a more dynamic and advanced modern era (Houghton 2024, 106). These are not new observations, and have been noted by others before, including the book's author, but the book does an admirable job explaining all the historical and literary trends behind these inspirations, from long before the first video game saw the light of day.

The book's ambitions lie in scope rather than in argument, but those ambitions are successfully realised. Houghton's seminal volume will be particularly useful for classes taught on medievalism, and the connections between video games and history, and will no doubt become the primary reference work for any graduate student embarking on a thesis project involving medievalism and the Middle Ages in modern video games. Further, it provides the most thorough summary of what has today become a vibrant field of historical, literary, ludic, and interdisciplinary research. It is difficult to comment on the viability of future research springing from *The Middle Ages in Computer Games*, as the possibilities are almost endless. The breadth of topics and immense variety of examples leaves room for a flourishing of the field across disciplines, themes, and case studies, and finally we have a book weaving the divergent threads of medievalist game studies together.

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