
Gaming Communities

Issue 06 (2017)

articles

reviews

report

Authentic Historical Imagery: A Suggested Approach for Medieval Videogames

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Abstract
In recent years, medieval videogames have come under increased academic scrutiny. This includes both videogames set in the historical Middle Ages and those that place themselves in fantastical medieval worlds inspired by Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons*. These medieval videogames mix the demands of an interactive entertainment medium with elements of medieval history and fantasy. As a result, analyzing how these videogames represent and more importantly, re-imagine the medieval past has become rather difficult for historians. Therefore, this article will propose an alternate approach to do justice to the creative ways videogames depict and transform the medieval past, one based on how gamers relate to 'authentic historical imagery'. To showcase the workings of this particular approach, the medieval fantasy videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) will be used as a short case study.
Keywords: Videogames, Medievalism, Authenticity, Imagery, Cultural history, gamevironments

To cite this article: Wolterink, J., 2017. Authentic Historical Imagery: A Suggested Approach for Medieval Videogames. *gamevironments* 6, 1-33. Available at http://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de.

Introduction

Assassin's Creed I (2007) is an action-adventure videogame set in the Levant during the Third Crusade. It follows an open world style of play, meaning that the player can explore and interact with a large digital world freely, instead of being limited to levels as in other videogames. This digital world contains historical simulations of cities such as Jerusalem and Damascus, which players experience through the character of

Altaïr, a member of a secret society of assassins locked in a centuries-old struggle with the Knights Templar. The game's sequel, *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), continues this Dan Brown-esque narrative in 15th century Italy, providing simulations of cities like Rome and Florence during the start of the Renaissance.

One would assume the existence of a consensus among scholars regarding the historical accuracy of these videogames. The reality is very different, as scholars have varying opinions on whether videogames like *Assassin's Creed I* and *Assassin's Creed II* have the capacity to represent the (medieval) past in a meaningful way. For example, Douglas N. Dow (2013) uses the writings of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to argue that *Assassin's Creed II* simulates the city of Florence as a 'hyperreality'. In Dow's mind, the videogame's simulations of Italian cities are dangerous, because they are imperfect and anachronistic. Likewise, Rolfe Peterson, Andrew Miller and Sean Federko (2013, 41) go as far as to exclude a videogame like *Assassin's Creed II* for its fictional setting, declaring that "a fiction does not simulate any genuine historical concept". This stands in contrast to Alex Hussey (2015) and A. Wainwright (2014), who claim the opposite: *Assassin's Creed II* re-imagines the past to give an impression or 'feel' of 15th century Italy. It is authentic as opposed to accurate.

The examples above are not intended to show a dichotomy between historical accuracy and historical authenticity, but are indicative of some of the issues faced by many historians when they research videogames about the past, medieval or otherwise. Videogames play with, re-imagine, subvert and recreate the past in a myriad of forms, employing a wide range of cultural and historical references, possible hidden agendas and ideologies, along with ideas of nostalgia, memory and heritage.

This has many consequences for how the medieval past is represented in videogames. When the past can be simulated, subverted, re-created and played with, historians can no longer apply traditional methods of inquiry. The period is re-imagined to fit the demands of an interactive medium, or used as inspiration by game designers who wish to use the trappings of the period to create fantasy worlds that look and feel authentically medieval, yet have no tangible link to the medieval past. Above all, medieval videogames are not made to conform to academic standards, but are made by game designers, who select facts and create a narrative not to inform, but to entertain gamers.

As such, 'fact-based approaches' to medieval videogames have limited utility, but appealing to historical authenticity has the capacity to address how medieval videogames communicate a sense of the medieval period to players. A good example of this is shown by Derek Fewster (2015). Fewster mentions that the story of the fantasy videogame *The Witcher 3* (2015) is set in a medieval bricolage, a 'designed medievalization', heavily inspired by medieval Polish history and Slavic mythology. As a result, while the videogame directly mirrors events found in Polish history, it also re-imagines it by including supernatural and fantasy elements. Fewster postulates that these a-historical occurrences paradoxically add to *The Witcher 3*'s medieval authenticity, as they capture "the spirit of an age" (Fewster 2015, 169) by focusing on the superstitious mindset of the medieval period. *The Witcher 3* re-imagines the medieval past, yet also seemingly provides a more authentic and entertaining medieval experience than many strictly historical interpretations of the period.

This historical 'feeling' or atmosphere experienced by gamers as authentic is

primarily evoked through historical imagery associated with a certain time period. The concepts of historical iconography and authenticity are not new to the literature about historical and medieval videogames. However, they have frequently only been mentioned briefly or discussed in abstract terms. The purpose of this article thus is to explore how historical imagery creates historical authenticity for gamers, how they relate to it and how this 'authentic historical imagery' can be used as a specific tool for analyzing the playful ways videogames re-imagine the medieval past. In other words, this article suggests an approach emphasizing the feeling of authenticity by gamers as a means to gauge the historicity of medieval videogames.

This article has therefore been divided into several sections. First, the article will discuss the related field of Game Studies and the role authenticity plays in historical films and videogames. Secondly, this article will show how authenticity relates to medieval history in videogames and formulate a tentative approach. Finally, it will use the videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) as a case study.

Historians, Gameplay and Narrative

If a historian wants to study videogames, he must be aware of a very important debate within the academic discipline of Game Studies. This debate focuses on two distinct methods of studying videogames. Daniel Kline (2015, 94) and Jan Simons (2007) show that scholars like Brenda Laurel (1991), Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) and Janet Murray (1997) among others first approached the subject of videogames using theories from film and literature studies. They believe that videogames must be studied as a narrative and therefore narratologists see videogames foremost as an interactive story. An alternate paradigm soon followed, as academics such as Jesper Juul (2001), Markku Eskelinen (2001), Espen Aarseth (2001) and Gonzalo Frasca

(2003) argued that videogames ought to be analysed first and foremost as games. They have become known as ludologists and believe that videogames are closer to tabletop games than film or literature, due to their interactive and playful nature. As such, the ludologists focus on the ludus, or "play-aspect" of videogames.

A dominant aspect of ludology seems to be a resistance to the textual analysis favoured by narratologists. Ludologists wish to establish (Computer) Game Studies as an independent academic field dominated by their particular methodology, noted by Marie-Laure Ryan (2006). As a result, there is a strong rivalry between the two methodologies, even leading to accusations of 'academic imperialism'. For example, Espen Aarseth (2001) fears that a 'colonization' by media, film or literary studies would make videogame studies part of those particular fields, a notion further elucidated by Simons (2007) and Christopher Simpson (2012). This fear can clearly be read in the editorial for the first issue of the Game Studies journal, in which Aarseth declares that:

> "Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonizing attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again. And again, until computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field." (Aarseth 2001, paragraph 9)

Ryan (2006) states that narratologists logically regard narrative as the most important aspect of a videogame. That a videogame can be read as a story is hardly surprising, as it shares many of the basic elements of a narrative: there are main characters, levels that correspond to chapters of a book and a linear trajectory from beginning to end. Indeed, game designers have turned to complex storytelling as a means to boost sales and engross players in fictional settings, a strategy notably employed by videogames from the role-playing-game genre. Furthermore, videogames allow

players to generate their own stories, as each player experiences the narrative of a videogame in a unique way depending on his actions during play. These stories can be the direct result of actions taken by players in the videogame, or a narrative created inside the player's imagination.

It is obvious that both approaches highlight different aspects of videogames. This means that ludology and narratology can produce vastly different conclusions about the same videogame. Tobias Winnerling (2014) uses the videogames *Counterstrike* (1999) and *Call of Duty* (2003) to show these differences. Both videogames are from the "FPS" or "shooter" genres, where the player looks through the eyes of a character and uses a variety of weapons to shoot at computer-controlled enemies. For ludologists, both *Counterstrike* and *Call of Duty* are more or less the same on a mechanical level. These videogames offer the same gameplay, in other words, the same method for interaction pre-programmed by the game designers. For narratologists, the videogames are quite different however. *Counterstrike* is set in modern times and lacks a coherent story, as it is played for its competitive online component, while *Call of Duty* has a clear narrative and intentionally places itself during World War II.

A narratological study of *Call of Duty* might focus on how players are engrossed in a narrative in which fictional diary entries of Allied soldiers are used to tell a story. For example, players take on the role of a Soviet soldier named Alexei Ivanovich Voronin. His story (or diary) starts in Stalingrad with each subsequent level being similar to chapters of a book, ultimately ending with the storming of the Reichstag in 1945. A ludological study of *Call of Duty* on the other hand would stress gameplay. It might examine the various differences in gameplay between the levels. The same Soviet story has a level where a scripted event (something the player cannot change) forces

the player to play without any weapons, while later levels feature simulations of sniper combat and tank warfare. These gameplay differences and their relation to gameplay found in other videogames are typical for the ludological approach.

The rivalry between the two methods has lessened in recent years and alternate positions have been suggested, such as the “ludo-narrative” coined by Clint Hocking (2007) among others to form a 'middle ground' in the debate. One might assume that historians have a predisposition towards the narratological side of the debate, since historians create historical narratives. However, Andrew Elliott and Matthew Kapell (2013, 17-19) argue that historians should take a different position entirely. Historians may write historical narratives, but they are not interested in the stories of all videogames. Instead, their focus lies on a specific type of videogame, namely those that deal with history.

These is why Elliott and Kapell propose that historians take up a new position in the debate entirely as both the ludological and narrative approaches, while helpful, are insufficient for historical analysis. As historical facts become irrelevant due to historical videogames re-imagining the past, historical imagery becomes a suitable alternative to discuss the historicity of these videogames. This imagery can form the basis for a new approach for historians to analyse how medieval videogames present a 'feeling' of historical authenticity to players.

Historical Authenticity and Historical Films

The idea that videogames create a 'sense of the past' with historical imagery and not with historical facts has its antecedents in studies about historical films. Scholars such as Richard Burt (2006), Andrew Elliott (2011) and Robert Rosenstone (2006)

demonstrated that historical films tend to make use of popular imagery and tropes associated with a time period by the general public because they have to translate historical facts into an entertaining film narrative. This historical imagery can be anything from historical clothing to historic locations. The imagery also has audiovisual aspects; costumed actors using old-fashioned speech or scenes with 'period' music can also serve to create a 'feeling' of the past alongside appropriate images.

It might seem unusual and counterintuitive for a historian to distance himself from historical accuracy; however, it is far more important for a historic film to feel, look and sound authentic to its audience, regardless of actual historical facts. After all, historical films (and videogames) have to present an entertaining view of the past that is recognizable and familiar to non-historians with only a basic understanding of history. What is considered 'historic' in historical films is therefore no longer determined by facts. Accuracy becomes completely irrelevant in such films because even though historical facts are distorted, the end result remains within the basic frame of reference possessed by the audience and is thus accepted as an authentic interpretation of the past. Historical films therefore create a re-imagining of the past familiar to the preconceived notions audiences have about a given time period.

As Kapell (2010) shows, popular images and tropes can also just as easily refer to a science fiction franchise such as *Star Trek*. Viewers have an expectation of what a science-fiction future should look like and the correct image or trope can communicate this future just as easily as one that refers to the past. An example would be how the city of Dubrovnik is used in the television show *Game of Thrones* (2011) and the yet-to-be-released *Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* (2017). *Game of Thrones* decorates the historic city with medieval imagery such as banners,

merchant stands and more to make it look like the fictional mediaevalesque city of King's Landing. The upcoming *Star Wars* movie on the other hand, places science-fiction imagery associated with the *Star Wars* universe (round doors, panels and electronics) to transform Dubrovnik into a city on an alien world.[i]

The process of using popular imagery to give an authentic re-imagining of the past in film has been named the "cinematic aesthetic of authenticity" by Marvin Dupree (2014, 23). By creating an authentic atmosphere people associate with the past; historical films create an alternative reality made up of historical building blocks (imagery) as it were, to give an interpretation of the past that works for the medium of film. Scholars have used a variety of terms to denote authentic imagery in historical films. For example, William F. Woods (2004, 39) and Richard Burt (2006, 1) call them "authenticating devices" and "history effects" respectively. Nor do they seem limited to historical films, as Clemens Reisner (2013, 248) similarly speaks of a "set of conventions that have been socially agreed upon as being historically accurate" in regard to imagery in videogames. In the same vein, Daniel Reynolds (2013, 50-55) makes reference to "objects" such as ruins that can make the game world of a videogame look "old". Other scholars, such as Cecilia Trenter (2012), Josef Köstlbauer (2013), and Joseph A. November (2013) also note that videogames make use of imagery, which communicates a sense of the past. The cinematic aesthetic of authenticity seems to apply to historical videogames as well, be they set in medieval times or any other time period.

Collective Imaginations

Authentic medieval and historical imagery are therefore central to how medieval videogames transform and re-imagine the past. Andrew Wackerfuss (2013) asserts a

similar idea in regard to videogames set in WWI, claiming that an accurate depiction of the war would lead to a rather boring form of gameplay. Players want videogames that are enjoyable and conform to their expectations of what a WWI videogame should look like, just like audiences expect entertaining historical films. Authentic imagery provides a good alternative, as it is based on the popular cultural and mythic afterlife of certain historical events, in this case WWI. This is why videogames such as *Darkest of Days* (2009) and *NecroVision* (2009) can provide players with an authentic WWI-experience, despite containing science fiction and supernatural elements. They are not factually accurate, but they place themselves in the cultural memory of WWI using the correct authentic imagery, just like historical films.

One can ask where authentic historical imagery comes from. Reisner (2013) states that society's understanding of the past is shaped by the representation and retransmission of (visual) codes and signifiers produced by the media. The media draws imagery from a cultural archive, which can be seen as a collective historical consciousness, filled with nostalgia, popular perceptions of the past and cultural memory. This also includes earlier depictions of the past, which act like intermediaries for later products. This historical consciousness functions as a sort of cultural databank, according to Jillian Scharr (2012), from which game designers subconsciously use imagery and tropes associated with certain past events to create interactive and entertaining re-imaginings of the past. Within this context, a videogame like *NecroVision* draws imagery from a collective imagination of WWI as a 'hell' of depersonalized industrial slaughter. Instead of using this to create a factually accurate videogame, the historic imagery is used to re-imagine a supernatural physical hell for players to experience that feels historically authentic, because it uses imagery people have come to associate with the war.

Several medieval historians argue specifically for the existence of a medieval cultural databank that acts as the source for most popular imaginations of the medieval, similar to the cultural databank proposed by Reisner (2013) and Scharr (2012). A. Keith Kelly (2004, 16) and Richard Osberg (2000, 194–224) call this the "communal medievalism that exists in western culture". This is repeated Trenter (2012, 7-8) in her analysis of the fantasy medieval videogame *Dragon Age* (2009). Trenter believes *Dragon Age* prompts associations with the medieval by referencing artefacts and images that belong to a "collective cultural memory". Most interestingly, Tom Henthorne (2004) argues that the existence of medieval-themed restaurants in the United States such as Round Table pizza parlours and White Castle hamburger stands as well as tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are evidence that medievalist imagery does not exist in a separate database, but is ingrained in mainstream American culture (just like many medieval videogames).

A. Keith Kelly (2004) expands upon the idea of a popular medieval databank by stating that the Middle Ages has the ability to convey certain ideas better than any other historical period, because western culture has appropriated the medieval to such an extent that a fictitious Middle Ages exists (as a databank), with ready-made medieval themes and imagery for any possible media product. This has made a wide proliferation of medieval imagery in modern media that re-imagines the Middle Ages in a variety of different ways possible. In the words of Kelly:

> "The Middle Ages succeeds in being many things for a modern audience: a mythic world where archetypal individuals or even archetypal cultures can take believable form, a realm where spirituality and even magic can be accepted without question, a time of uncomplicated heroism, of visceral violence, of injustice, of moral rigor and of depraved fanaticism. The Middle Ages can be all of these in addition to a period of history to be explored on a critical and scholarly level." (Kelly 2004, 16)

The idea that multiple representations of the Middle Ages exist is derived from the writings of Umberto Eco, particularly his essay Travels in Hyperreality (1986), in which Eco concludes that western society has appropriated, re-imagined and re-invented the idea of the Middle Ages throughout the centuries. Eco even defined ten different Middle Ages that exist simultaneously in modern society, be it scholarly, romantic, violent or occult. It is this afterlife of the Middle Ages that produces untold 'medievalisms', which are elements that are associated with the Middle Ages (such as knights and castles), but have been applied in such a way that they no longer have any connection to the actual historical period. Medievalisms can be found anywhere, be it in books such as *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *Lord of the Rings* (1954), but also in medieval films, which frequently use medievalisms to hold up a mirror to the present and redefine the Middle Ages to reflect on contemporary concerns. Nickolas Haydock (2008, 134-136) elucidates this with the film *Kingdom of Heaven* (2004), which uses medievalisms to raise questions about the War on Terror and Islamic and Christian relations. Medievalism can also be adopted by non-historical films, as seen with the *Jedi Knights* of the *Star Wars* films.

Juan Alcázar (2009) has extensively explored the collective imagination of the medieval in regard to videogames. Alcázar claims that a popular imagination or database of the medieval has existed for centuries in western society. He calls this collective medieval imagination the “medievo”. According to Alcázar, the medievo “gestated” in the 16th and 17th centuries and was defined in the 19th century in the form of medieval romanticism, which is in the process of being adapted and transformed by people from the 20th and 21st centuries for entertainment purposes. The medievo has its own “iconography consolidated by the historical novel and the cinema (..) A corpus built from images shown as symbols” (Alcázar 2009, 305). This

iconography is clearly an example of authentic imagery and likewise, the function of the medievo is to familiarize and immerse the player in a fictitious setting, something especially relevant for fantasy medieval videogames.

Alcázar uses the medieval videogame *Mount and Blade* (2007) to elucidate the role that medieval images play in creating familiarity for players. *Mount and Blade* is set in the fantasy medieval world of Calradia, itself a pastiche of 13th century Europe. As the player wanders around the map, he can be attacked by Viking-like raiders. While Vikings would be anachronistic for the 13th century, Viking raiders are perhaps the most iconic and memorable example of medieval savagery, especially when compared to generic bandits. As these bandits are an important gameplay element in *Mount and Blade*, it stands to reason that Vikings are used as authentic imagery to invoke a "medieval" atmosphere of uncertainty and danger.

Applying Authentic Imagery

Authentic imagery is implied in some academic publications about medieval videogames. These use a variety of different terms, such as 'icon', 'trope' or 'imagery'. For example, Oliver Traxel (2008, 125-128) speaks of "medieval iconography" and "pseudomedieval objects" in regard to authentic images. Kline (2014, 93,101-102) prefers the term "medieval tropes". Similarly, Simpson (2015, 12-17) suggests both "medieval cultural tropes" and "medieval elements" as being apt descriptors for medievalist influences on popular media. Alcázar (2009, 305) prefers the aforementioned "established iconography", which is echoed by Serina Patterson (2014, 352-354) with "medieval iconography". Cecilia Trenter (2012, 7-8) and Hedda Gunneng (2012, 14) respectively refer to "associations with ancient and medieval culture" and "visual, musical and textual associations", while Jennifer Stone, Peter

Kudenov and Teresa Combs (2014, 148-150) employ the phrase “application of medieval culture and aesthetic” and “medieval images, objects and values” in regard to medievalist videogames. Finally, Michelle DiPietro (2014, 288-289) references the “application of medieval culture and aesthetic qualities”.

In its most basic form, authentic imagery is little more than the usage of an audiovisual iconography derived from a cultural database by videogames to present a re-interpretation of the past. In the case of medieval authentic imagery, the iconography is presented as a historical ensemble that fits preconceived notions of the Middle Ages. This ensemble provides a common aesthetic to make the medieval past feel familiar and authentic to players. The diverse terms used by scholars indicate that they are aware of authentic imagery to some degree, but they appear to be foremost incidental observations to categorize medievalisms in relevant videogames. Neither have they specifically focused on how these images relate to notions of the past held by gamers. Interestingly enough however, the publications do near- unanimously reject the idea that medieval videogames can accurately display the medieval past.

As a result, they regard both medieval videogames set in the historical Middle Ages and those that take place in Tolkienesque fantasy worlds as fundamentally similar, as they both use the same medieval images to create authentic medieval-like worlds for their players. Kline (2015, 94) for example, believes that all medieval videogames are “neo-medieval simulations of high fantasy universes”. Stone, Kudenov and Combs (2014) state that most medievalist games take place in “contemporary versions” of the medieval world. Oliver Chadwick (2014) argues that gaming medievalisms are re-imaginations of medieval culture mixed with the contemporary present, while Cecilia Trenter (2012, 8) asserts that an “imaginary mimesis” mixes spectacular fantasy with

realistic elements (derived from medieval history).

The publications are also divided on what the end result of medieval authenticity is for medieval videogames. As the medieval atmosphere re-imagined by authentic imagery does not reach back to the actual medieval period, some scholars have argued that the imagery only creates a hyperreality, a simulacrum that tries to be 'more medieval than the medieval'. In other words, the re-imagined depiction of the medieval in videogames offers nothing more than an artificial construct based on our perceptions of the Middle Ages. This is comparable to Dow's stance in regard to *Assassin's Creed II* and it is also the conclusion Angela Weisl and Keven Stevens (2014) reach in their analysis of the videogame *Dante's Inferno* (2010). According to Weisl and Stevens, *Dante's Inferno* claims a connection to the medieval past, with expectations of authenticity and responsibility, but instead of properly representing Dante's medieval hell, the videogame offers a bricolage of the medieval past that acts as a mirror for the present. The videogame and others like it present a generic depiction of the Middle Ages, devoid of actual time and historic meaning, wherein everything is placed into a simulacrum of the 'past'.

Other scholars have taken a different approach towards the artificial nature of medieval videogames. Instead of being an artificial construct, they see medieval videogames as a transformative space, which re-imagines and preserves the medieval for modern audiences. This is elucidated by Angela Tenga (2014) in her article on the 1990s' videogame series Gabriel Knight (1993-1999). Tenga asserts that the Gabriel Knight series uses medieval authenticity to model itself on medieval grail romances. The tropes and imagery of the medieval romantic tradition are re-imagined for a new medium and transformed to better suit the expectations of a new American audience.

The idea that medieval videogames create a hyperreality stresses its artificial nature and inadvertently puts it in a negative light. This leaves medieval videogames open to being dismissed as artificial simplifications that are somehow less relevant than proper academic depictions of the medieval past. This is evident with Dow's characterization of *Assassin's Creed II*'s Florence as a "theme park version" (224-225) of what the historical Florence looked like. However, as Eco (1986) asserts, responsible academic analysis of the Middle Ages can equally be seen as a fictional construction, as the Middle Ages belongs to the past and can thus never be known in a truly accurate manner. Therefore, it is far more beneficial for historians to focus on how medieval videogames act like transformative spaces for the medieval past via authentic imagery. This allows medieval videogames, particularly those set in fantasy universes to be placed in a long tradition of medievalisms. In the words of Stone, Kudenov and Combs (2014, no pagination) medieval videogames do not create meaningless artificial constructs of the Middle Ages, but show "the continuing historical impact of the historical Middle Ages in the present".

Skyrim

The videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) serves as an excellent example for elucidating how medieval videogames transform and re-imagine the medieval past. *Skyrim* is set in the fictional world of the Elder Scrolls, a Tolkienesque medieval fantasy universe. It is the fifth videogame taking place in this fictional world, preceded notably by *Oblivion* (2006) and *Morrowind* (2002). *Skyrim* contains about 300 hours of gameplay and as such, giving a detailed analysis of the entire videogame would go beyond the confines of this article. Therefore, this article has chosen to focus on a single aspect, namely the fictional medieval landscape

presented in the videogame.

Skyrim takes place 200 years after *Oblivion* and is set in a region similar to Early Medieval Scandinavia, where a civil war rages between the ruling authority of the crumbling Septim Empire and Nord rebels known as the Stormcloaks, whose leader, Ulfric Stormcloak wishes to secede from the Empire on religious grounds, as the Empire has forbidden the worship of Talos, the most important God in the region. The player is thrust into this civil war and as the story unfolds, he becomes the legendary warrior known as the "Dragonborn". The story of *Skyrim* contains many historical references, as it uses historical accounts of the Viking era, but also literature such as Beowulf and popular conceptions regarding the fall of the Roman Empire. This is an especially strong association, because the Septim Empire is directly based on ancient Rome. Characters from the heartland of the Empire have Latin-sounding names, are called Imperials and their army is the Imperial Legion, which possesses weapons and armour inspired by authentic Roman referents.

As demonstrated by Cecilia Trenter (2012), fantasy videogames create fictional narratives by mixing with historical associations, similar to authentic imagery. To make *Skyrim* look and feel like the home of the Nords, the game designers (unconsciously) used authentic imagery to give players an impression of the medieval past. The game world of *Skyrim* is thus filled with a complex set of medievalist referents that showcase a deep understanding of medieval history and the Viking era. What makes *Skyrim* especially interesting as an example is that these referents are used as authentic images within the landscape of *Skyrim*.

This is what Tom Cutterham (2013) calls the "historyscape" and refers to a process of adding authentic imagery to the landscape of a game world in order to present a

realistic and authentic digital space. This can be done with historic videogames, as the name implies, but it can also be used for videogames set in fantasy and science fiction game worlds. Cutterham demonstrates this with the videogames *Fallout III* (2008) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), post-apocalyptic videogames inspired by 1950s Cold War paranoia and culture. While these videogames are set in the future, it is a future based on the cultural memory of a past era and as such, the videogames present post-apocalyptic landscapes filled with the remains of 1950s civilization, such as art-deco billboards, posters and architecture, not to mention cars that look like the Ford Nucleon, a proposed nuclear-powered car from 1959. These elements function as authentic imagery to present a satirical look at the "atomic future" imagined in the 1950s and include modern exaggerations of what the period was like. While the world of the *Fallout* series is not factually historic, it does use authentic imagery and the concept of a collective database to present a game world drenched in the cultural memory of the 1950s.

Fallout III and *Fallout: New Vegas* are apt examples. They were produced by Bethesda, the same game developer that made *Skyrim*. The *Fallout* videogames are also similar in terms of gameplay. *Skyrim* and the *Fallout* videogames are so-called 'open world games', in which players are allowed to progress freely through a game world, instead of having to play levels. Players can walk through a detailed digital landscape filled with cities, villages, caves and other places to explore. This is combined with the typical gameplay of an rpg or 'role-playing game', where players create a character, detail his or her appearance as well as various attributes and skills. This is directly inspired by tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. The player takes on the role of a character and is driven to explore new areas filled with medieval authentic imagery, where new quests and opportunities await him, which in turn lead to exploration of other areas that provide new quests.

While authentic imagery is primarily brought to the player in a visual manner, it also has an auditory component. As stated earlier, period music in film and television can equally serve to evoke a sense of the past alongside authentic imagery, which is also true for *Skyrim's* soundtrack, created by videogame composer Jeremy Soule. As expected from a fantasy videogame, the music is orchestral and appropriately mediaevalesque. This is most notable with the music that plays when the player visits taverns. These musical pieces are not factually medieval, but are collections of melodies and sounds of what people commonly associate with the medieval past, something Juan Alcázar and Gerardo Rodríguez (2013, 308-310) also point out. Atmospheric sounds and ambient effects like animal noises, wind, rain or the sounds of a busy town likewise play a similar role in strengthening the authentic imagery the player experiences, further evoking the medieval atmosphere of the videogame.

Music and sounds are also used in the *Fallout* videogames to stress the post-apocalyptic atmosphere. The music of *Fallout* is primarily influenced by Western and Cowboy sounds. This is especially notable in *Fallout: New Vegas*, which takes place in the Mojave Desert. The player experiences authentic imagery that invokes a Post-Apocalyptic atmosphere, augmented by sounds of distant gunfire, radio static and desert wind, creating an sense of ruin and desolation appropriate for the videogame's setting. Unlike *Skyrim* however, the videogames also heavily feature licensed music from the 1950s music, owing to its foundations in 1950s culture. This also serves as a subtle reminder that the progress of Western civilization has stopped; similar to popular conceptions of the Middle Ages (Alcázar 2009 and Rodríguez 2013, 314-315).

The authentic imagery contained in the historyscape of *Skyrim* also influences

gameplay and the narrative, as noted by Scharr (2012). For example, some quests force the player to talk to the local nobleman or 'Jarl' of a settlement. Via this authentic imagery, the player gets a (conscious or subconscious) indication of where to find this nobleman, frequently in the most elaborate 'Viking-esque' building of a settlement, often a castle or a Scandinavian-like longhouse placed in a dominant position in a given location.

This is especially apparent with Dragonreach, the palace of Jarl Balgruuf. The palace dominates the town of Whiterun and functions as authentic imagery to suggest a medieval Norse setting and place of singular importance. Dragonreach and Whiterun are excellent examples of how authentic imagery makes use of a cultural database comprised of earlier historical depictions. The architecture of Dragonreach is clearly based on Norse stave churches, particularly the Borgund stave church in Norway, however most gamers would not have an intimate knowledge of historical Scandinavian architecture.

This is why Whiterun greatly also resembles the depictions of Tolkien's Edoras seen in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*-trilogy, as both towns are built around a hill and use a horse as their emblem. The designers may have thought it necessary to employ Jackson's version of Edoras and the Meduselt as a popular image to ensure the proper medieval atmosphere was present. In comparison, Whiterun is depicted as regular medieval town in *The Elder Scrolls I: Arena* (1994), though the technical limitations of the time may also have played a factor.

The effects this detailed medievalist world has on players and on the conception of the medieval should not be underestimated, as Simpson (2012) articulates:

> "That game developers can construct a digital environment which allows thousands of players to explore as they take on the role of a character in the game world can be seen as the ultimate triumph of medievalism." (Simpson 2012, 16)

The result is a lived-in world that looks (and sounds) authentic, which is experienced by players as medieval due to strategically placed authentic images that familiarize players with the fictional setting of *Skyrim* and make smooth gameplay possible. (In the same vein, players experience and are made familiar with the 1950s post-apocalyptic world of Fallout). The digital medieval world of *Skyrim* can thus be understood as a bricolage of the Dark Ages and Viking Scandinavia. It uses a variety of historical imagery in its landscape as authentic imagery to create its medieval atmosphere. This is mentioned in an interview with Todd Howard, the lead designer of *Skyrim*:

> "We do try to skew toward whatever historical references there are. That grounds it in a reality for what it is. When you enter the world and you see this farming village, it feels real to you. We try to keep the fantastical elements so that when they arrive on the screen, they feel special. One of our touchstones was this idea of epic reality, things that humans on earth could've built, like the pyramids. But you look at them and still go, "How did somebody build that?" We looked at this idea of this ancient Nordic society that built these giant temples to dragons. And they feel authentic for what they are, as opposed to some very high-fantasy, super-magical structures." (Ohannessian 2011)

The context behind this quote can be understood by the criticisms placed upon *Skyrim*'s predecessor *Oblivion*, which was deemed as a "too generic" fantasy setting by fans. *Skyrim* seemed to address this fact by greatly increasing the medieval (and Viking) 'feel' or atmosphere of the entire videogame. Indeed, recognizing our own Middle Ages in the game-world is quite important, according to Hedda Gunneng (2012). It motivates players to continue playing by intensifying their playing

experience with historical baggage and weight. As implied by *Skyrim*'s lead environment design artist Noah Berry (2015), 'details' (authentic imagery) are crucial to reinforce the specific aesthetic direction a videogame wishes to take. They make the world seem grander, feel more alive and become extensions of the world itself.

Landscape thus plays a crucial role in the creation of medieval authentic imagery, specifically geared towards a Germanic or Nordic medieval atmosphere. Even if players do not know what is being referred to with authentic imagery, certainly the overall impression is more than enough to give significant weight to the medieval atmosphere *Skyrim* wants to achieve. It is this atmosphere or 'feeling' created by authentic imagery and associated sounds that ultimately makes *Skyrim* and other videogames like it look and feel medieval in the eyes of players.

Conclusion

This article shows that focusing on historical accuracy is insufficient for historians looking to analyse how videogames represent the medieval past. Medieval videogames re-imagine and transform the medieval past, making historical facts irrelevant, because medieval videogames re-imagine and transform the medieval past to meet the demands of an interactive medium. This is particularly relevant to medieval videogames that place themselves in fictional worlds, yet still use the trappings of the medieval due to their reliance on intermediaries such as Tolkien or *Dungeons & Dragons*. At the same time, the methodologies proposed by Game Studies are insufficient for the study of the past, as historians are not concerned with narrative or gameplay. How the past is represented is the focus of their inquiry.

As a result, this article suggests an appeal to authentic historical imagery to

showcase how medieval videogames make use of the past to shape medieval game worlds. While the term of authentic imagery is not explicitly used in the relevant publications, its workings have been described indirectly by a variety of scholars, without clear application. Elements of authentic imagery can be found in studies about historical films and publications about digital medieval worlds, with highly diverse terminologies being used to roughly mean the same thing: that people's conception of the medieval past is based on the use of medieval tropes, images, sounds, icons and signifiers derived from a popular medieval imagination. Analysing how these authenticating effects operate within the medium of videogames and relate to the gamers that experience them is central to understanding how videogames re-imagine, transform, alter and recast the past, as shown by the short analysis of *Skyrim*. Authentic imagery is not just limited to depictions of the medieval. It can and has been used to denote how a post-apocalyptic videogame series like *Fallout* plays with the cultural legacy of the 1950s and the Cold War. As such, the authentic imagery approach can be used to analyse a wide range of historical tropes and signifiers in videogames, not only those that reference the medieval.

Historians who study historical videogames should not dismiss these videogames for their perceived inaccuracies. They use the past in a manner different than that of a historian. Instead, historians should take note of authentic imagery as a means for discussing the ways in which videogames re-imagine the past to fit a digital medium. In doing so, historians avoid the pitfalls of historical accuracy. Moreover, videogames, regardless of their historical settings, should certainly not be cordoned off from traditional historical studies, as was the case with historical films. Videogames approach the past, medieval or otherwise on their own terms, transforming and recasting historical knowledge to fit the demands of an interactive medium. By studying how videogames play with the medieval past, we gain new insights into

how the rest of society looks back at certain time periods. More importantly, we can discover clues as to how these depictions might change in the future.

The scope of this article remains limited unfortunately. A single case study on how a medieval videogames depict the past via authentic imagery is not enough. The authentic historical imagery represented in the landscape of *Skyrim* is merely one aspect of the game. More medieval references and representations can certainly be found when one looks at *Skyrim*'s dungeons, plot, characters, items and fictional texts. Other medieval videogames, such the *Dragon Age*-series or *The Witcher*-franchise also merit attention. One must also consider the role of game-designers and gamers in relation to depicting the past via imagery. How aware are game-designers of the role historic imagery can play in their games? How do gamers interpret this imagery? Further study is needed as this article has merely scratched the surface.

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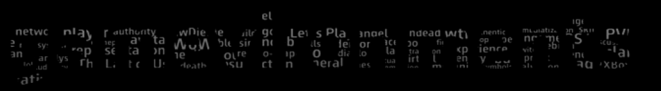

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[i] In 2016, I presented this interesting dichotomy during a guest lecture for the Student Association *Homo Ludens* in Amsterdam.