REPRESENTING THE PAST: VIDEO GAMES CHALLENGE TO THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The rise of digital media is changing the classroom and influencing our understanding of traditional academic subjects like history. Movies, blogs, YouTube videos, and digital games are creating new narratives that transform conceptual and visual representations of the past. But how does this new media fit into the history classroom and how can it be used as academic content?

Traditionally, the study of history has involved the use of primary and secondary sources, visual images, and other material that have helped students better understand past events. Yet by allowing the participant to influence events and take an active role in the shaping of history, historical video games fall outside the parameters of accepted historical representation. Some have argued that video games are not history and thus should be dismissed as sources of historical information. While acknowledging that the player involvement does give the individual the ability to change outcomes, create new contact spaces, and rearrange historical chronology, this perspective fails to consider that games reflect certain cultural attitudes and reveal patterns of historical thinking.

In considering these attitudes and in analyzing these ways of thinking, the class was asked to consider how digitization has changed the dissemination, representation, and consumption of history. Which digital sources represented new perspectives and which reformatted established practices? One area that was given close attention was the concept of space. Readings were introduced that helped students think about the significance of moving from a textual to visual history. Some sources argued that new mapping devices and geographical information systems provide the best means for giving access to a visual mapping of the past. For instance, Google Maps has the capability of allowing a researcher to navigate the streets of Rome, Istanbul, or Beijing in search of historical sites without ever leaving home.

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1 Alexander Galloway, Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)
Discussion also centered on the fact that these systems did not provide cultural, historical, political, or social background. Commenting on the problem of spatial mapping, David Bodenhamer notes that:

...scholars leery of the technology argued that it rested on a positivist epistemology that assumed an objective reality discoverable observation, measurement and replication. But society and culture could not be measured with such precision.2

In lieu of the lack of certain data, students were asked to seek out textual sources that could provide not just geographical coordinates but also social information. Primary textual sources were important in helping students gain information as to where different groups of people lived in cities, such as medieval Cairo and Baghdad. With this information, they were assessed on their ability to design maps or other illustrations of medieval Islamic cities that included important historical information. Some focused on mapping neighborhoods that were inhabited by particular religious groups, some created maps illustrating the relationship between those in power and their subjects, while others sketched out the different agricultural spaces that existed in pre-modern Islamic cities.

Spatial representation and mapping are also an important element in video games. Games such as Civilization (MPS Labs, 1991) and Age of Empires (Ensemble Studios, 1997) are based on narratives that ask the player to build larger and larger empires. Success is based on territorial gains, control of resources and development of better political control. These issues are central to the player’s success not only in expanding her or his state but also in maintaining power. Discussions after playing the game Civilization V (Firaxis Games, 2010) focused on elements of state building: the acquisition of technology, the development of an army, the creation of alliances and the establishment of settlements. Students commented that the game helped them understand how these different components of empire building were connected to one another.

Contingency was introduced as an aspect of historical outcomes. Students learned that certain decisions had consequences that could affect their civilizations economically, politically and socially. Foreign relations, internal stability and conquest all played a role in their decision-making.

While one could argue that these factors are central to the historical narratives of imperial states, they also raise questions as to the feasibility of perpetual expansion and to the motivations of different historical actors. One student noted that having the Alexander the Great confront the Iroquois was “bizarre.” How could an empire expand over such a long historical period? Students also questioned the idea that empires had standardized ways of thinking about expansion.

Sources were brought in to consider different examples of expanding states and to emphasize the importance of thinking about various cultural interpretations of development and colonization. Two readings, Bruce Trigger’s *Understanding Early Civilizations* and K.V. Flannery, “The Cultural Evolution of Civilizations,” helped students navigate the problems of thinking about the politics of expansion. Herfried Münkler’s *The Logic of World Domination from Rome to the United States* was introduced to consider the questions of expansion and domination over a long time period. Münkler’s book also brought up the issue of the changing imperial model. The readings helped student consider whether the games accurately reflected the complex relationship between acquiring resources, developing trading relationships, creating an ideology, and using force in building an empire. All of these areas have been central to recent historical research about expansion. Primary sources from Mesopotamia and Egypt were passed out in class to give students a sense as to how historians analyze the motivation and limitations of states looking to gain more territory.

Along with space, the question of time was considered to think about how historical circumstances affected a state’s decision to grow. The work of the medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn Khaldun was also introduced to take into account cyclical notions of history. Khaldun believed that all civilizations have a limited life span. He posited that a “group feeling” existed amongst nomadic people that allowed them to organize and to ultimately conquer settled civilizations. Once in power, though, this group feeling was lost because sedentary peoples developed attachments to luxury and to other material belongings. Ultimately, a civilization would fall because other nomadic people would rise who possessed a sense of solidarity that would allow them to overrun declining states.³

Khaldun’s writing was a valuable companion to the game *Civilization V* because it questioned the notion of unrestrained growth and expansion. Students were able to ask questions such as: What are the limits to growth? How can a central government satisfy the demands of a very diverse population? What types of ecological issues are connected to expansion?

The other issue raised in Khaldun was the relationship between nomadic and settled peoples. *Civilization V* refers to nomadic peoples as “barbarians.” Clearly, this term demonizes people who live outside of settled society. It also endorses a particular system of social organization over another without any inquiry. Even graphically, nomadic people appear (they pop up almost magically, out of nowhere, making their presence even more threatening) as both a threat to a civilization’s desire to expand and also to its existence. Success in the game is not achieved by negotiating with nomadic people but instead by destroying them. One of the students noted that the game entices the player to just eradicate “the barbarians.”

This historical pattern stands in opposition to the Khaldun’s idea that nomadic and settled societies both compete and engage in constant exchange. Discussion focused on the origins of Islam, the rise of the Mongols, and on different Turkish groups who came from central Asia. In

assessing the value of the game as a historical source, students were asked to write a paper on how the game could be used to understand expansion and to comprehend the creation of an empire. Some students wrote about expansion as a historical phenomenon and credited the game for its emphasis on the desire of states to accumulate more territory and more resources. This impetus seemed to fall in line with a variety of empires at different times.

Other students thought the game was engaging but lacked historical credibility. They felt that the false chronology created situations in which groups had access to technology and weapons that did not exist during the historical periods in which they lived. A point was raised that the game might be more interesting if the game included a component that allowed players to adapt to the existence of fewer resources and less territory. Thinking in Khaldunian terms, an interesting addition might be an algorithm that allowed a player to fight off decline.

If *Civilization* and *Age of Empires* present a macro view of the world, games such as *Close Combat: First to Fight* (Destineer, 2005) and *Kuma War* (Kuma Reality Games, 2004) offer a perspective of life on the ground during times of conflict. The premise of First to Fight involves the sending of American troops to Lebanon to counteract the influence of the Iranians and the Syrians during a crisis that is sparked by the Lebanese prime minister falling ill. While Kuma War has a variety of different episodes, many of the scenarios are in Iraq and focus on particular American led missions during the period after the invasion in 2004.

Both games involve shooters in which the player is asked to fight against various enemies who are portrayed as insurgents and terrorists (other shooter games are *America’s Army: Special Forces* [United States Army, 2004] and *Full Spectrum Warrior* [5th Cell, Mass Media Inc., Pandemic Studies, 2004]). Johan Höglund notes that the military shooter confronts “a world that appears to obey the same natural laws as the universe our physical bodies inhabit.” He adds that “[t]he notion of a real Middle East is much more problematic . . . most importantly from a political and theoretical point of view.” 4 The idea of a virtual space that seeks to recreate the physical world while including a narrative on military intervention creates the illusion of a tangible, actionable reality that fails to consider historical and long-term political factors. The consensus within the class was that questions needed to be asked, such as: Why were Syria and Iran so interested in having influence in Lebanon? What circumstances led to the American invasion of Iraq and produced the types of battles that pitted certain groups in Iraq against the United States?

Students were asked to read Edward Said’s book on how Muslims are depicted in the media, the Höglund article and another short piece by Vit Sisler on the ways Arabs are represented by video games. 5 These texts questioned the role game players adopt when they take on the

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avatar of the military shooter. What does it mean to act in a military role without having an understanding of the long-term politics in the place that they patrol the streets? How is the enemy depicted? And is this depiction inherently Orientalist?

The students also watched portions of the video “Reel Bad Arabs” to gain a further understanding of how media creates stereotypes. Discussion centered on comparing the types of Orientalism inherent in film and news coverage with that in video games. *Kuma\War* Youtube videos that emphasized the reality of the games by matching coverage of actual events with re-enactments were used to illustrate the ways in which the narrative of the game mirrored political and military discourse.

A reading from Philip Reichmuth and Stefan Werning raised the idea that video games are a “neglected media” in considering Orientalist stereotypes. Focusing on consumer demands, video games content is designed with the intention of marketing it to the widest audience possible. Stereotypes are perpetuated because they mirror other representations of Middle Easterners and Muslims.  

But as opposed to other media, players are asked to participate in the conflict, raising the questions: By participating are game players agreeing with the premise of a military occupation? Can a military occupation take place without demonizing the local population? Does a video represent a primary source on certain cultural attitudes towards how one participates in war?

Other questions were raised about the types of confrontations that took place on the ground. The battle of Fallujah (*Kuma\War*) was mentioned as an example of the United States’ need to deal with insurgents who were disruptive to the process of democratization in Iraq. Sentiment existed that if the United States had made a commitment to bringing stability to the country, individual soldiers seemed to have a responsibility to fulfill this duty.

The reality of combat seemed to be a player’s principal concern. At times, the game involved small groups of American soldiers fighting against large number of insurgents. One’s role as shooter was justified by the need to stay in the game. In this case, macro issues such as the war’s morality, creating a democracy and state building had to be sacrificed in the interest of survival. Readings from soldiers were brought in to help the students compare primary source material with game playing. Did the soldiers’ memoirs correspond to the experiences of the shooters? How did the games fail to address the trauma of war?

The issue of survival was discussed as a post-9/11 phenomenon. How did an on-going war (the threat of terrorism) promote media that focused on the different ways that Americans were threatened? By providing examples such as the television program 24 (FOX, 2001) (clips were viewed both in and outside of class), students could better understand how the promotion of fear worked to amplify the scope of the threat. 24 included episodes in which the president’s

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*Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, SAGE Publications, 2008, pp. 203-220,  
http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=1704

plane was attacked and nuclear weapons were placed in American cities. In contrast, the games tried to re-create scenarios of what might have happened or what could happen.

In giving presentations, some students posited that the United States had a duty to protect the lives of citizens, and thus the soldier could have a positive impact. Avatars were representative of soldiers as peacekeepers. Others wondered whether ultimately American troops were protecting certain interest groups over others, and thus constituted just another faction in the fight. The variety of presentation perspectives was helpful in that they indicated that shooters could represent different signifiers.

Part of the problem of working through the problem of reified notions of East/West was finding a game that complicated the notion of geography and the idea of borders. The game that was chosen was Crusader Kings II: Swords of Islam (Paradox Development Studio, 2012). This choice was made with the understanding that Orientalist tropes were present. In an interview, the project manager Henrik Fähreus commented: “in the case of the Sword of Islam the main gameplay changes (from other Crusader Kings games) revolve around Decadence, Polygamy (with its multitude of sons) and the Open Succession Law. Easy come, easy go . . .” Fähreus’s comments reveal that in developing this iteration of the game, the use of Muslim stereotypes could be used to promote new features. These additions were thought of as major selling points. But while Islamicizing the Crusader Kings II was done to appeal to western sensibilities and led to a reductionist way of thinking, others aspect of the game provided good background information on the Muslim society during the time of the Crusades. (I use the Crusades as a reference point. One could argue that though game is called Crusader Kings, it de-emphasizes the Crusades in lieu of other political developments).

One of the major strengths of the game was the existence of maps that broke down territories into different emirates, imperial domains, and contested areas. Readings from Marshall Hodgson study on the history of the Islamic world and other scholars were included to emphasize the connections between Christians and Muslims.\(^7\) The physical representation of connectivity made it easier for students to understand intra-civilizational conflict and to comprehend shifting alliances within a political rather than a cultural context. Final papers were designed to have the students discuss the ways in which a game such as Swords of Islam can enhance our understanding of pre-modern history and can help us better visualize Muslim and Christian social and political geographies.

In conclusion, while the digitization of the humanities continues to grow, video game use in the history classroom presents a challenge to a discipline that depends on evidence-based representation. Video games challenge this narrative by allowing a player, within certain parameters, to construct her or his own version of events and of different historical periods. While on the one hand, this approach seems to act at cross purposes to historical


\(^8\) See syllabus below
reconstruction, on the other hand, games give the player the opportunity to explore historical possibilities and to consider the issue of historical contingency.

Any introduction of games though must include compatible readings and assignments. In this regard, video games can serve as an enticing introduction to important questions about empire, civilizational conflict, and cross-cultural exchange. The experience of playing the game provides an interactive and visually engaging opportunity for further exploration of sources that provide alternative viewpoints.

OVERVIEW

The university history classroom has begun to change in recent years with the availability of different types of media. Popular films and YouTube videos now serve as possible pedagogical options. They not only bring entertainment into the classroom, but they also raise questions as to how to use popular culture in dealing with complicated historical questions. A film like 300 (Zack Snyder, 2007) can serve as an entry into a discussion about Herodotus’ Persian Wars, and the film Troy (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) can provoke a discussion about the Iliad and the nature of warfare in the ancient period.

In presenting these topics, films and other forms of popular culture create the possibility of thinking about the different types of sources that represent the past. While academic texts have been considered the gold standard for historical analysis, less attention has been focused on the ways in which popular sources, such as the landing on the beach scene in Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998), leave indelible impressions of past events.

New forms of entertainment have taken also embraced historical narratives, and increasingly computer video games raise tantalizing possibilities of thinking about new ways to create excitement and to advance new learning strategies for historical subjects. Games like Europa Universalis (Paradox Development Studio, 2004), Crusader Kings and Civilization address key historical questions, contain excellent maps, and provide important factual information. They also make history interactive and allow students to participate in historical decision-making. This participation helps to make history more relevant and more accessible. Yet important challenges exist in overcoming some of the game’s pedagogical limitations. Games tend to be Euro-centered, focus principally on elites, serve to reinforce hard fast stereotypes, and in certain cases promote reductionist thinking.

In lieu of these issues, certain types of inquiry can seek to evaluate video games as sources of historical representation and historical discourse. Different issues need to be considered: 1) The new alliance: history and digitization; 2) What we are playing; 3) New technologies and Orientalist tropes; and 4) Alternative responses. These issues need to be covered both to understand the nature of games as historical narratives and also to consider how games might fit into future classrooms.
The readings have been placed on Moodle and library reserve, and all of the games are loaded on to a computer at the history department. These measures have been taken to limit student costs. To play the games, students should sign-up for an available time. The history office is open between 8:30-4:30 from Monday to Friday. While this course is recommended for gamers, graduate students (who are gamers) will provide training for students who have never played a particular game or who feel they need extra instruction.

**SECTION ONE. GOING BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL TEXT: DIGITAL MEDIA AND HISTORY. (TWO WEEKS.)**

The first section will examine the ways in which digitization is changing how we present, think about, and analyze history. Different issues will be considered such as the availability of new types of material and the challenges surrounding the visualization of sources. Given that the class will meet twice a week, the assignments will be structured in the followed manner.

**WEEK 1. THE DIGITIZATION OF HISTORY**

Tuesday

*History in the Digital Age*, ed. Toni Weller (London, Routledge, 2013) the following chapters:


Thursday


**WEEK 2. VISUALIZATION**


Tuesday, pp. 3-59

Thursday, pp. 91-131

Assignment: Take a historical primary source and make it into a visual representation. This can include creating a map, drawing a series of illustrations or describing how to represent the
source graphically. Also in two pages using at least two of the reading from the first two weeks, discuss the ways in which the visualization of history through the use of your map can present a new historical perspective. The assignment is due next Tuesday.

SECTION TWO. WHAT ARE WE PLAYING? LOOKING AT TWO HISTORICAL GAMES. (FOUR WEEKS.)

Students will play two video games with historical content. They will play the games to gain a sense as to how the games represent history and to consider how games re-shape the way we think about history. Different readings will be used to consider how the themes that appear in the games coincide with traditional historical narratives.

WEEK 3. GAMES AND CIVILIZATION (START PLAYING CIVILIZATION V)

Tuesday: Video games and history


Map Assignment Due

Thursday: Understanding what we mean by the term civilization


WEEK 4. CIVILIZATION V, REFLECTIONS (START PLAYING AGE OF EMPIRES I)

Tuesday: Discussion of playing Sid Meier’s Civilization V


WEEK 5. EXPANSION AND AGE OF EMPIRES I

Tuesday: Expansion in different contexts


Thursday: Discuss and play Age of Empires I

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**WEEK 6. CONTINUE AGE OF EMPIRE I, NON-LINEAR HISTORY IN KHALDUN’S MUQADDIMAH**


Thursday: Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. N.J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 91-263. Assignment: Write a five page essay describing one way in which one of the games, Civilization or Age of Empires, provides a framework for a discussion about the expansion of empires and civilizations. You might also talk about the problems of perpetual expansion, and how a writer like Khaldun finds it historically Make sure that your essay includes supporting evidence from at least three of the readings. Due next Thursday

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**SECTION THREE. RECASTING ORIENTALIST TROPES: VIDEO GAMES IN THE AGE OF AMERICAN MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST. (THREE WEEKS.)**

This section of classes will examine the role of video games in furthering Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims and other Middle Easterners. The students will play two games in which they will assume the role of American soldiers engaged in combat, and then consider the ways in which a military occupation reinforces notions of civilizational/national superiority and reifies the idea of the threatening “other.”

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**WEEK 7. WAR AND THE MIDDLE EAST (START PLAYING CLOSE COMBAT: FIRST TO FIGHT AND KUMA WAR**

Tuesday: An Occupation


S. Graham, “Remembering Fallujah: Demonizing Place, Constructing Atrocity,” *Society and Space*, 23 (1), pp. 1-10

Paper Due

Thursday: Orientalism and Media


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**WEEK 8. SHOOTER GAMES, DISCUSSION**

Tuesday: Participating in an occupation


Andrew Kurtz, "Ideology and Interpellation in the First Person Shooter" in *Growing Up Postmodern*. Ed. Ronald Strickland

Thursday: Discuss and play *First to Fight*

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**WEEK 9. CONT. SHOOTER GAMES**

Tuesday: Discuss and play *Close Combat*

Assignment: In a 15 minute PowerPoint or Prezi presentation (given to the class) demonstrate the ways in which you as the avatar (soldier/shooter) assume Orientalist ideas in order to be more successful at the game you have chosen. What are the implications for adopting this role? Make sure to embed video clips in your presentation.

Thursday: Deconstructing the shooter: Student presentations

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**WEEK 10. CONT.**

Tuesday: Student Presentations

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**SECTION FOUR. MOVING FORWARD: THE ALTERNATIVE VIEW, NEW NARRATIVES. (THREE WEEKS)**

In this section we will look at ways that a video game (Swords of Islam) can help us better understand period history, mapping and the importance of factional interests in the creation of cross-cultural historical narratives. This approach will be taken to find alternative strategies for
thinking about choices in historical decision making and for gaining insight into cultural, political and social geographies.

Thursday: Games as Narratives: (Start Playing Crusader Kings: Swords of Islam)


Grant Travinar, The Art of Video Games (Malden Ma: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), chapter 6, Video Games and Narratives, pp. 110-129.

WEEK 11. CONNECTIONS AND GEOGRAPHIES

Tuesday: Connections across boundaries, geographies


WEEK 12. GAMING THE MIDDLE AGES


Thursday: Discuss and Play Crusader Kings

WEEK 13. PAPER DUE

Assignment: In a 10-12 page paper, discuss the ways in which Swords of Islam serves as useful source in explaining cross-cultural connections and geographies. Questions to consider: How does the game allow us to better understand historical decision-making? What role does
religious difference play in the articulation of political interests? How does control of space—geographical, political and economic—affect political options?