A framework for the analysis of populist nationalist rhetorics in historical games

Sebastian Hageneuer (ORCID) *based on peer reviews by* **Angus Mol**, **Aris Politopoulos** *and 1 anonymous reviewer*

Cite this recommendation as:
Hageneuer, S. (2024) A framework for the analysis of populist nationalist rhetorics in historical games. *Peer Community in Archaeology*, 100408. 10.24072/pci.archaeo.100408

This paper by Visonà and Cassone (2024) looks on historic video games and populist national rhetoric of the past with the goal of understanding the political implications of historical games today. Based on the works of Chapman et al. (2017) and Reinhard (2018), the paper focuses on political rhetoric and the possibility to provide forms of friction or alternative historical experiences. The paper wants to present an analytical framework to investigate these possibilities in video games and is structured into four parts.

Part 1 (history and digital games) gives a short introduction into the topic of archaeogaming and the development in researching different aspects of video games. It also briefly introduces into the mechanics of knowledge transfer (see also Giere 2019). Part 2 (populist nationalism and the construction of the past) explains the dynamics of populist nationalism of the past and how these same mechanisms are on the rise again today. This makes this paper extremely relevant to today's political situation. Populist movements try to construct a past to form identity, a past that never really existed. These movements then use these identities to justify their political goals.Part 3 (analytical framework) describes the authors framework for analysis. It is structured into a matrix of three dimensions (Identitarian mythopoesis, Unavoidable conflict, Western teleology) by three procedures (Perspective, Connection, Selection), each with distinct questions to ask and answer for the researched video game. Part 4 (implementation) finally discusses how the framework works and presents some practical examples with the help of the games Assassin's Creed III and Civilization V. The conclusions summarize the paper once more very briefly.

The proposed framework is a very welcome tool in reflecting on video games in terms of the political dimensions represented. The matrix provided can give a hint on what questions to ask and how to analyze the answers. Nevertheless, a little more explanation on how to work with these questions might be helpful,

especially for students wanting to utilize this matrix. The two provided examples help a lot, but it might not be clear to everyone how to use the framework. If one does however, this framework can help tremendously in video game analysis with a political focus. This is especially important today with raising populist narratives all over the world. This paper presents a very good starting point on an analytical framework for the analysis of historical video games.

References:

Chapman, A., Foka, A., and Westin, J. (2017) Introduction: what is historical game studies? 499 Rethinking History, 21(3), 358-371. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638

Giere, D. (2019) Computerspiele - Medienbildung - historisches Lernen. Zu Repräsentation und Rezeption von Geschichte in digitalen Spielen. Forum historisches Lernen. Frankfurt am Main: Wochenschau.

Reinhard, A. (2018) Archaeogaming - An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games. New York - Oxford: Berghahn.

Visonà, M. M. and Idone Cassone, V. (2024) The Games of our People. Analysing Populist Nationalist Rhetorics of the Past in Historical Games. Zenodo, ver.5 peer-reviewed and recommended by PCI Archaeology https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8309653

Reviews

Evaluation round #2

DOI or URL of the preprint: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8309653
Version of the preprint: 2

Authors' reply, 28 August 2024

Dear all,

We have just uploaded the final version of the paper. We apologise for the long wait. We have had some inconveniences over the past few months, but still wanted to be sure to make all the changes suggested by the reviewers.

- You may notice that the title has been changed: we removed the term 'archeogaming', as suggested, and took the opportunity to reword it to make it more coherent with the content of the article. We hope this will not be a problem;

- The text of the analysis has been removed from the appendix and integrated into the body of the paper;

- The suggested references have been added;

- We have made it more explicit that the focus is *Western* populist nationalism.

We would like to thank you all once again for your time and the effort spent on the review, your suggestions significantly contributed to improve the final result,
all the best,
Marvin&Vincenzo

Decision by Sebastian Hageneuer ⓘⒹ, **posted 15 March 2024, validated 15 March 2024**

Last minor changes

Dear authors,

thank you very much for reworking the paper as you did, which in my opinion did improve quite well. There are some last minor suggestions of the two reviewers and I would like you to give them a thought. Especially the comment on the term "archaeogaming" should be at least explained and the text checked for typos. I will not let your final version be reviewed again, but rather recommend it for publication after you submit it with the last changes.

With regards

Sebastian Hageneuer

Reviewed by **Aris Politopoulos**, 11 March 2024

The new version of Playing for high stakes is much improved and should definitely move forward for publication. I only have a few minor points to address:

1. There are still some typos/syntax errors, not many, but worth doing a good edit review of the text

2. In the abstract, the authors mention that they discuss the "foundation of historical game studies and archaeogaming". I don't think this is done in the paper, but I also don't think it's something that needs to be done. There is good engagement with the published material and the authors review several key publications, and there is no need to assess the "foundation" of the discipline. As such I suggest to remove it simply from the abstract.

3. In section 2.3 "Which Past?" the authors review a good number of approaches to the question. There is one more to discuss I think, the idea of "authentic" pasts see Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022, Archaeology, Nation, and Race: Confronting the Past, Decolonizing the Future in Greece and Israel and a take on game and authentic pasts in games Mol and Politopoulos 2021, Persia's Victory: The Mechanics of Orientalism in Sid Meier's Civilization.

4. The only truly critical remark I would have is that the summaries of findings for the games are pretty short and don't go into any real depth as to what that means that the games perpetuate PN narratives. It would be best I think if the authors would include the tables in the main text rather than the appendices, and discusses them a bit more, as it really is the application of their framework.

Reviewed by **Angus Mol**, 11 March 2024

This version of *Playing for High Stakes* is an expanded and much improved resubmission of an earlier version. The review of the field coming directly after the introduction was already of high quality, but has been sharpened even more. The only suggestions I have here is:

(1) instead of looking at Chapman's take on resonance, to go directly to the source: Apperley's *Gaming Rhythms* (2011). I think that this original concept and Apperley's work in general will fit better than Chapman's focus on History, with the aims of this paper as a politically engaged argument.

(2) Critical scholarship on Civilization goes back further than Kapell 2002 (line 115). See e.g. Friedman 1999, Civilization and its Discontents.

The matrix to guide analyses and extended case studies are very welcome. What I would advise is to bring more of the analysis that now is happening into the main text. The way it is represented currently asks quite a lot of the reader: annex tabletext is small and the reader needs to retrace the separate points in this annex to see how they form the very short conclusions under 4, implementations. While the review is strong,

reviewing of this kind has been done before (even if not brought together under this explicit strand), this framework and implementation is where the text brings its most original interventions. In short, show more of or do more with 'the second axis of the framework' (as defined under lines 236-242) in the implementation section.

Aside from these remarks to improve the quality of the paper even more, there are two elements that need work, in my opinion. One is new (regarding axis 1), the other (archaeogaming) is left over from my previous review:
- Are the vectors of analysis of axis 1 (identitarian mythopoesis; unavoidable conflict; and Western teleology) indicative of PN? Are they exclusively/exhaustively so? In specific, what about non-Western PN and games in regards to Western teleology? Or do the authors suggest that any PN is by definition Western in its historical outlook? I can see how this framework could be very extensible, but it cannot 'catch 'em all" can it? It is of course fine if this is just one step in a larger project to shore up game study analysis of PN. In short, it seems like some statement on the scope and scale of the framework (and the paper as a whole) is missing or otherwise it needs to be brought to the fore more strongly.

- What is the archaeogaming in this piece? This is a point that is more or less unchanged from my previous criticism. It it is, of course, fine if most of what this paper does is not archaeogaming per se, but in that case it seems prudent to change the title. If the authors think this *is* part of the field of archaeogaming, it would be good to look at and explicitly describe some angles on why this specifically is derived from theory and method and adds to the thinking in this field, rather than game (or even cultural/media) studies as a whole. In short, what does archaeogaming add that other studies of games haven't?

Notwithstanding my suggestions and these critical points above, I commend the authors on their extensive changes and thank them for working seriously with my previous feedback.

Evaluation round #1

Authors' reply, 26 January 2024

Dear Prof. Hageneuer, dear reviewers,
thank you again for your precious feedback on the paper. After reading carefully your reviews we decided to work again on the paper from the ground up, modifying it extensively in order to address all the issues and make it closer to our original vision.
Because of this, unfortunately any form of tracked change proved illegible, since many parts have been moved or extensively re-written.
We hope that this won't cause further inconvenience,
best regards,
Marvin

Decision by Sebastian Hageneuer [iD], posted 14 October 2023, validated 15 October 2023

Please revise the article

Dear authors,

although you paper is of high interest, I and the reviewers agree that there is more work to be done. Please have a closer look on the comments made by both reviewers and rework you paper accordingly. I highly suggest to create in that process a protocol that documents your changes to the text according to the reviewers remarks with your own comments/answers to them. This protocol makes reevaluating the revised version of your paper much easier and faster and it can be submitted through the PCI Archaeology platform. Again, we all agree that you paper is of high interest and all comments are meant constructively, not personally. We are looking forward to your revised version.

Reviewed by anonymous reviewer 1, 04 October 2023

Overall this is a good paper. There are, however, some disconnects in the argument. I have pointed it out in several of my comments (see pdf), where the authors are making some logical jumps between describing games and talking about populist movements. One particular thing that is lacking is the following: at no point do we see examples of populist movements actually using games for propaganda. This weakenss the case, as the 'populist movements' become a bit of a strawman in the text, while there are plenty of examples where representation in games have caused actual harm (see for example gamergate, or the representation of women in battlefield). Finally the text would greatly benefit from some images.
Download the review

Reviewed by Angus Mol, 13 October 2023

The "Playing for High Stakes" paper by Visonà Marvin Mara and Idone Cassone Vincenzo addresses an important topic at the intersection of studies of games and the past: nationalism and political agendas dressed up as 'fun history'.

Aside from the general laudable aim to understand and provide applicable insights into this important topics, this paper has several strenghts, but, as it stands, these strenghts are outweighed by its current weaknesses.

On the strength side, we have a clear, concise but still suitably broad introduction of both heritage politics and politics in games.

As an explicitly archaeogaming paper, the discussion is notably too light, referring to the standard work by Reinhard (but not in particular how this connects to the politics of games, in my opinion this work itself is too light on this topic). The authors do not refer to archaeogaming works that have much more directly explicitly addressed this, e.g. the PhD work on games and ethics by Meghan Dennis or the work on the representation by Aris Politopoulos and - with an apology for the self-reference - my work on informal politics and authenticity in Minecraft reconstructions ("Toying with History").

The referenced works from game studies are in much more direct discussion with how politics work in and through games. This certainly provides a nice introductory view into this important topic. Yet here too there would have been a few (not many) studies that much more directly refer to nationhood in games, e.g. Gamer Nation by Wills, Bijsterveld Munoz has a recent paper on national identity in Civilization V, and, as a historical game study of national identity, Esther Wright's work on Rockstar and Americana should not have been missed.

Omissions in the literature review can happen and don't invalidate the argument that this topic is important and needs more study as well as handholds. In that sense, it is great that the authors suggest to develop a framework to tackle this with an aim to anchor this topic in the future of archaeogaming. The call to offer more tools to increase historical compentce is especially a welcome one.

It is, therefore, a pity that this framework itself is both rather unspecific and not clearly actionable. The framework does not in any direct way make more of the strenghts of archaeogaming, game studies, or critical heritage studies. Perhaps this is because it approaches it through the well-worn 'accuracy debate', which seems a poor fit for the current 'popular heritage' discourse in which accuracy has surely taken a backseat to questions of identity.

The three foci areas (lack of contexts of, resource development as, Western teleology and history in games) are interesting first touch points for this much larger project. Here, it would be advisable to make much more of an actual analysis using these three vectors to show how an archaeogaming tool to discuss how populist nationalism works (through games) and how it can be countered. This section of the paper, where it could really have put practice to theory, is undercooked.

As a final, smaller point, I am unsure of the intended audience of this paper? Is this speaking to heritage professionals/archaeologists? Game designers/scholars? Scholars of populism and/or nationalism? I suggest that picking a target audience, could really help make this a much more targeted paper.

In short, this paper seeks to provide and makes first steps towards a welcome contribition to the important theme of past, play, and politics, but both the contextualisation in the fields it seeks to connect (to) and the actual analyses that could lead to showcasing actionable tools and insights needs more attention in the paper and, potentially, more work.

If the authors have questions for and would like to communicate directly with me, the editor can pass on my e-mail contacts directly.