

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

Playing for high stakes. Archaeogaming and the deconstruction of populist nationalist reappropriations of the past

Visonà Marvin Mara*¹, Idone Cassone Vincenzo²

¹ Università del Salento – Lecce, Italy

² Ritsumeikan University – Kyoto, Japan

*Corresponding author

Correspondence: mara.visona@studenti.unisalento.it

ABSTRACT

Nationalist and populist movements and parties have often exalted or distorted historical events and elements so to create a representation of the past that could fuel their propaganda. Recently, they have been using popular media such as TV shows, movies and video games, by reinterpreting these works to support their political messages and nationalist rhetorics.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on how game dynamics and narratives in historical games may be prone to pretextual reinterpretations of history for political propaganda, and vice versa how they may oppose or deconstruct those rhetorics. This paper aims to contribute to the development of archaeogaming (Reinhard 2018), by focusing on the mostly unexplored discussions on limits and potential of archaeogamings to address and deconstruct populist and conservative propaganda.

Keywords: archaeogaming, videogames, nationalism, populism, propaganda.

33 Politics has always looked to history for legitimacy. This process has evolved over the centuries, by using
 34 different tropes and media forms, by exalting or distorting historical events and elements so to create a
 35 representation of the past that could fuel the propaganda of parties and movements. This is particularly clear
 36 in nationalist and populist movements and parties, which have often used the newest media available as tools
 37 to gain consensus and broadcast propaganda (Mazzoleni 2008). More recently, their propaganda has been
 38 circulating over the internet, with several studies highlighting the use of social media and popular culture
 39 (movies, TV shows, comics, digital games) as a tool for self-promotion, recruitment and mobilisation (Devries,
 40 Bessant and Watts 2021). In this way, works of fiction have been reinterpreted and decontextualised to convey
 41 or support political messages through nationalist rhetorics.

42 The aim of this paper is to reflect on how game dynamics and narratives in historical games may be prone
 43 to pretextual reinterpretations of history for political propaganda, and vice versa how they may oppose or
 44 deconstruct those rhetorics. This paper aims to contribute to the development of archaeogaming (Reinhard
 45 2018), by focusing on the mostly unexplored discussions on limits and potential of archaeogamings to address
 46 and deconstruct populist and conservative propaganda.

47 In the first part, we will briefly mention the dynamics of the relationship between politics and cultural
 48 heritage; we will then summarize the debate in game studies over historical games and how they contribute
 49 to shaping the perception of the past. Finally, we will focus on three specific ludic dimensions of the past
 50 represented in digital games, discussing both how they may facilitate certain nationalist forms of propaganda,
 51 and how different game dynamics can instead address or contrast them.

52 **The rise of new populist nationalisms and the representations of the past**

53 The relationship between politics and archaeology, and in more general terms the relationship between
 54 politics and the perception of the past, develops regardless of political circumstances (Hamilakis and Yalouri
 55 1996).

56 The quest for the legitimisation of political power through the exaltation, reworking or even distortion of
 57 historical facts has ancient origins (Patterson 2010). In Europe, this phenomenon became particularly
 58 prominent with the rise of the Fascist and Nazi regimes. In the first half of the 20th century, the interest of
 59 politics in archaeological research took the form of substantial funding for research (particularly fieldwork),
 60 the ultimate aim of which was to help create modern mythologies on which propaganda could draw (Nelis
 61 2007; Arnold 2006).

62 Even today, politicians still look to history for legitimacy, mainly searching for elements that can be
 63 instrumentalised in favour of conservative and nationalist demands (Niklasson 2023).

64 Starting from the mid-1990s we assisted to a consistent increase of scientific literature regarding the
 65 relationship between archaeology and politics. Most of these studies merely reduced the issue to the
 66 instrumental use of archaeology by nationalist currents of thought and intellectuals (Yalouri 1999). From this
 67 perspective, archaeology within the political discourse was relegated to one of many instruments used to
 68 promote certain political choices. The issue was thus raised, but in most cases missing the opportunity to
 69 investigate and reflect on the complex relationship between nationalism, the perception of the past and its
 70 representation (Hamilakis 1996).

71 Although under dictatorships and totalitarian regimes this link is intensified, the mutual influence between
 72 political ideologies and our understanding and representation of the past is evident even in democracies
 73 (Galaty & Watkinson 2004).

74 But which past is proposed - and often re-imagined - in this kind of propaganda? These historical narratives
 75 present an unchanging past, where elements of 'otherness' (or supposed so) are downplayed or artificially
 76 eliminated. Within these narratives, national identity (or sometimes supranational, as in the case of Europe,
 77 the United States, etc.) is presented as pure and unaltered, something that must be defended against external
 78 forces (De Cesari 2023).

79 In such a crystallised past, recent social dynamics are taken for granted and considered as belonging to the
 80 origin of societies, regardless of modern accepted evidence and interpretations. Furthermore, the relationship
 81 between human communities and the surrounding environment is interpreted through a predatory

82 perspective, where the degree of civilisation is measured by the ability to exploit resources (Phillips 1998,
83 Merriman 2000).

84 Lastly, in order to legitimise supposed hierarchies between societies, the evolution of human communities
85 is evaluated on the basis of a comparison with European history, which becomes a yardstick for judgement
86 and evaluation of all the other societies (Kennedy 2023).

87 This is often based on a narrative relying on historical-archaeological elements that are decontextualised
88 to better suit the needs of propaganda.

89 Historical awareness and competence among the public plays a crucial social role, materialising in political
90 choices and adherence to different social models. The search for historical legitimisation by movements and
91 parties spans across European history and is still one of the founding elements of political propaganda today.
92 In particular, the proposals of nationalist and conservative models systematically make use of historical
93 elements, at the cost of decontextualising and distorting them to better suit propaganda. The steady increase
94 in popularity of populist nationalist movements (Singh 2021), therefore, calls for reflection on the level and
95 spread of historical skills among the non-specialist public and on how to provide tools that enable individuals
96 to critically analyse the historical elements that are disseminated through political propaganda.

97

History and digital games

98 Digital games have an increasingly relevant role in the contemporary system of media, being the most
99 consumed medium, together with streaming (Fandom 2013). Since their inception, they have been openly
100 using historical settings (e.g. Western, medieval, classic Rome, etc.), often in relation to specific game genres,
101 such as the strategy games (e.g. *Age of Empires* or *Civilization* series). The interactive nature of the medium
102 sets digital games apart from other media in the ways in which they make it possible to experience history:
103 while games include both textual and audio-visual content such as novels and movies, their interactive nature
104 due to algorithm-based simulation makes it possible to experience the historical content in a procedural way
105 (Bogost 2008): that is, by making choices, acting and experiencing the results of those actions within the game
106 itself.

107 Over the last twenty years the discipline of game studies reflected on the dynamics of the historical
108 representation in digital games, following different perspectives and lines of research. As noted by Chapman
109 et al (2017), these researches were “at least partly motivated by the idea that popular cultural forms/products
110 are capable of meaningful engagement with the past and have the potential to both determine and reflect
111 how we both collectively and individually think about, understand, negotiate and talk about that past in the
112 present”.

113 Furthermore, these investigations highlighted two inter-related issues, which are at the heart of the
114 complex and layered interaction between the medium of games and the representation of the past:

115 On the one hand, historical games may easily reiterate simplified and stereotypical representations of the
116 past: for instance, sometimes reproducing colonialist, nationalist or capitalist rhetorics, by means of game
117 narratives and gameplay dynamics (e.g.: focus on exploiting resources, accumulating goods, war against other
118 nations etc) (Dyer-Whiteford and De Peuter 2009, Lundblade 2019);

119 On the other hand, games have the potential to critically approach and subvert stereotyped rhetorics of
120 the past, including the above-mentioned colonialist, nationalist or capitalist rhetorics (Lammes 2010, Flanagan
121 2009) by using gameplay and narratives to communicate history in a systemic, dynamic and engaging way to
122 a broader audience (McCall 2016).

123 This dualism can be observed since the roots of the recent investigation of historical game studies
124 (Chapman et al. 2017) and traced back to Kapell (2002), who identified in *Sid Meyer's Civilization* (1991-, 2K
125 Games) a dualism between the rich systemic understanding of the past through ludic interactive dynamics,
126 and the risks of an inherently Western-centered reproduction of certain historical dynamics. Similarly, Uricchio
127 (2005) stated the importance of analysing historical games going beyond the sole focus on their historical
128 faithfulness, such as for books and movies; instead, he suggested considering them as a new peculiar mode of
129 expression and interaction with historical dynamics, conveyed through the very act of playing with historical
130 settings, elements and events.

131 Over the course of the years, many researchers developed close readings of the historical representations
132 of historical games, subgenres, or historical periods represented in games, highlighting how game dynamics
133 may foster or subvert specific historical rhetorics (Grufstedt 2022); from a different perspective, several

134 scholars discussed the intersection between historical games, learning and education, evaluating the benefits
135 and limits of game-based representations of the past (Squire 2004, McCall 2011). Further researches have
136 investigated the complex relationship between cultural and collective memory and digital games (Begy 2015);
137 the use of games for the simulation of historical conflicts (Sabin 2012) or for dissemination of cultural heritage
138 (Champion 2016). Lastly, most recent efforts have investigated the potential of counterfactual historical
139 narratives in games (Ferguson 1997) as a way to produce meaningful and thought-provoking historical
140 reflections and interpretations (Peterson, Miller and Fedorko 2013; Idone Cassone and Thibault 2016).

141 The above-mentioned research studies pointed out how the experience of history through video games is
142 a complex integration of narrative and gameplay, one in which the faithfulness of single historical elements is
143 less relevant than the way in which the past is represented and interacted with as a whole.

144

Methods

145 Although games specifically created and financed by populist nationalist movements or parties are few
146 and often small-scale, the dynamics and experience of the past that result from commercial historical games
147 may be more prone to historical reinterpretations and predispose to an easier reception of nationalist and
148 populist propaganda. In the following pages we will critically analyse and compare different dynamics and
149 representations of the past of historical games, highlighting their criticalities and strengths in relation to the
150 nationalist reappropriation of history. It is important to stress how we are not going to evaluate or discuss the
151 following games in terms of historic appropriatedness or potential for historical dissemination, but merely how
152 the resulting ludic experience may be more prone or resistant to the reception of right-wing propaganda. The
153 point is not to evaluate individual games but to reflect on the effect of certain dynamics on the public's
154 historical representation.

155 The aim is to add a piece to the reflection on the future of archaeogaming, combining the debate on the
156 accuracy of the representation of historical settings with a deeper reflection on the need to offer tools to
157 increase historical competence and not just the dissemination of data.

158 Game studies consider digital games as meaning-making artifacts (Arjoranta 2015), whose communicative
159 and cultural dynamics rely simultaneously on narrative and gameplay: that is, on their diegetic and audiovisual
160 dimension (e.g. storytelling, graphics art and style, perspective and camera, dialogues etc) and on their
161 procedural or interactive dimension (game rules, algorithm, simulated elements, gameplay, user experience,
162 degree of interactivity, game genre, etc.) (Juul 2011). Following Umberto Eco's (1979) theory of *interpretation
163 as textual cooperation*, any complex meaning-making artifact (a book, a movie, an advertisement) can be
164 considered as a necessarily incomplete device (a text), one that requires the cooperation of its users (readers,
165 players etc) in order to generate meaning. Texts do not contain all the 'instructions' (i.e. codes) to read and
166 interpret them (grammar rules of the original language, social norms, knowledge about geography, history,
167 moral and ethical models, knowledge about genres and context, etc.), which have to be supplied by the user
168 in order to be able to interact and interpret the text.

169 Users may apply different or diverging codes unwillingly, or (in the case of *non-cooperative interaction*)
170 they may decide to apply specific codes so to 'force' certain interpretations. Doing so, they take advantage of
171 the open nature of a text by overlooking other portions of the text and emphasizing others, or re-interpreting
172 the specific meaning of some portions as a more general and universal one. Texts, on the other hand, may
173 pose a certain degree of resistance, depending on how explicit or internally coherent some elements may be;
174 or *vice versa* may be relatively prone to certain interpretations because of their open structure.

175 In light of these theories and findings, we highlighted three dimensions of the historical experience in
176 digital games, that result from the interaction of narratives and gameplay, which may be evaluated in relation
177 to the potential reinterpretations and rhetorics of right-wing movements and parties. We tried to highlight
178 how certain dynamics may be prone to these rhetorics or *vice versa*, how they make them more difficult or
179 contrast them. The dimensions are:

- 180 • the focus on single uncontextualised historical elements;
- 181 • the exploitation of resources as the sine-qua-non condition for development;
- 182 • the Western-based linear representation of progress.

184 Focus on single uncontextualised historical elements over dynamics

185 The first dimension to be investigated is the focus on uncontextualised historical elements: those cases in
186 which the historical setting of games centers on specific events, characters, and places with little to no focus
187 on the broader historical context. In digital games, this logic of representation may go as far as a proper
188 uncontextualisation (lack of) or decontextualisation (removal of context), representing historical elements in
189 an abstract and vague an-historical setting.

190 This representation of history has many common elements with the genre of the **chronicle**, insofar both share
191 the underlying idea that the past and human development across time have been made mainly by important
192 people, key events, and central places that shaped history as we know it (e.g. royal families, war and
193 successions, life in the capitals etc). This leads to an understanding of history as a collection of facts that
194 overlooks the complex and layered historical dynamics (in their overlapping of economic, cultural, political,
195 climatic, geographical and social dimensions).

196 The focus on historical elements over historical dynamics may potentially lead to an instrumental
197 interpretation of those events, because of their separation from the broader historical contexts, by glorifying
198 specific moments in time (events or characters) and by de-contextualising their actions and roles. It is easier to
199 legitimise contemporary political claims, highlighting similarities across very different historical phases (e.g.
200 invasions, defence of national borders).

201 An example of focus on historical elements over dynamics can be proposed by looking at the *Assassin's Creed*
202 series (Ubisoft, 2007-; from now on, *AC*), an action-adventure series that is set across different epochs,
203 recreating past cities or regions in an open-world setting. The series is famous for its recreations of Italian cities
204 during the Renaissance (Florence or Venice in *AC II*), events such as the American or French Revolutions (*AC III*
205 and *AC Unity*) and recently for the recreation of Egypt during the Ptolemaic Period (*AC Origins*) or Greece during
206 the Peloponnesian War (*AC Odyssey*). The series is recognised and acknowledged for the detail and scale of
207 historical faithfulness, especially for what concerns the urban layout of the cities, (Shaw 2015), and the recent
208 addition of Discovery Tours (Poiron 2021) as a gamified and playful historical documentary.

209 At the same time, however, the narrative of these games puts all these detailed worlds as the background of
210 a plot that is largely, at its core, element-based: even omitting the fictional plot inspired by conspiracy theories
211 about the millennial-old Illuminati and Assassin's sects, the narratives in *AC* games unfold because of the
212 actions of famous characters (e.g. Lorenzo il Magnifico or Cleopatra), determined by the result of specific
213 isolated events (the storming of the Bastille) in the contexts considered the centre of human activities at the
214 time (Florence, Athens, etc).

215 The single recognizable elements of the historical setting may be more or less accurate, but this representation
216 supports an implicit understanding of history as made by 'Greats': iconic figures, events and places that may
217 thus inspire improper parallels between the past and the present, by focusing on the abstract narrative tropes
218 (wars, invasions, fight for freedom) made possible by the lack of a broader understanding of the historical
219 dynamics surrounding the past.

220 A different and opposed focus can be observed by looking at games such as *The Patrician* series (Kalypso, 1992-
221 2010), a trading simulation set in the historical setting of the Hanseatic League during the Early Modern Age.
222 The player controls the mayor of one of the cities in the League, mostly deciding the trade routes and
223 exchanges of goods between the cities so to gain wealth and improve the city itself. The game is mostly focused
224 on the economic aspect alone, and is often described as one of the most complex economic simulations in
225 video game history.

226 What's relevant to our discourse, however, is that the game does not represent the history of the Hanseatic
227 League by retelling its successions of events, important figures and key cities; the historical phenomenon of
228 the Hanseatic League is simulated through an interactive system comprising many dynamics, which includes

229 the economic exchange of goods (the most prominent), as well as the diplomatic activities and the political
230 dynamics that are tied to it.

231 In this kind of historical representation, historical events develop as the result of the multiple dynamics at
232 work, and through the act of playing users come into contact with a representation of the dynamics and
233 processes that shaped that setting in the past, leading to a systemic understanding of the historical process.

234 This type of historical representation, which focuses on dynamics more than identifiable characters, events
235 and places, is not to be considered better, more faithful or coherent in terms of historical discipline; they,
236 however, have the advantage of being more resistant to populist re-interpretations of the past, since they do
237 not focus on specific historical figures nor provide abstract narrative tropes that can be used to establish
238 improper correlations between the past and the present.

239

240 **Resources exploitation as a necessary condition for development**

241

242 The second dimension is related to representing the exploitation of resources as a necessary condition for
243 historical development. Certain historical strategy games provide only functional ways to interact with the
244 surrounding environment or with other human groups, translating everything in terms of resources that are a
245 necessary condition for the development of the faction. Fauna, minerals, other tribes and enemies, relics of
246 the past or cultural heritage become part of the game system because they can be looted, accumulated and
247 exploited, in a competitive race to extract and exploit them to make the faction develop historically (which is
248 testified by the label of the sub-genre known as 4X strategy games: eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXtenuate).

249 This implicitly connects the historical development of societies to the ability to take advantage and use the
250 environment, or make use of other human cultures, or the past itself through a logic of direct accumulation
251 and productivity. These dynamics easily reiterate colonialist and capitalist rhetorics (Hammar et al. 2021), in
252 which the players are tasked with exploiting and owning new lands for their benefit; moreover, this
253 representation tightly links the acquisition/exploitation of resources to the idea of competing against others
254 for the same objectives, whereas the ability to fully use resources also means prevent others from using them,
255 and conflict arises because of or in relation to the necessity to obtain or defend resources necessary for the
256 societal development.

257 These representations of historical development have many similarities with the nationalist and populist
258 concept of identity as ownership of a place (land, resources, peoples and even cultural heritage); this
259 ownership is often contested or endangered by other societies, that are considered as stealing or spoiling
260 them. From this, the common rhetorics of 'defending our country' or 'there are not enough resources for
261 everybody', as well as the common colonialist rhetorics that 'those who can make better use of the resources
262 deserve them more'; all are easily considered as natural and unescapable dynamics of human history.

263 For example, in many real-time strategy historical games, such as the series *Age of Empires* (Microsoft,
264 1997-) the acquisition and exploitation of material resources is necessary for the growth of the faction, in
265 competition with other civilizations. Furthermore, the game dynamic through which settlements 'progress'
266 through ages, the so-called Age advancement, (e.g. from the Dark Age to the Feudal Age) is tied to the
267 acquisition of a certain number of material resources (wood, stone, gold, etc.). Once acquired, the
268 advancement grants the faction new discoveries: technology, units, buildings, etc., as well as increasing the
269 settlement limits (number of settlers etc.). Simply put, exploiting resources is necessary for societal
270 development.

271 Since there are no dynamics of renewal and regeneration of resources, be it animals or minerals, the game
272 pushes players into acquiring and exploiting resources faster than the other players, obtaining and defending
273 their new lands and their possessions, giving no mind about potential positive forms of interaction with the
274 landscape (which is only a background for harvesting), with other factions (which only grant economic benefits
275 in forms of trade exchange) and with historical heritage, such as relics (which grant gold once obtained!) or
276 wonders (which grant victory if built and defended for a certain amount of time).

277 This is thus a representation of historical development completely detached from any idea of ecological
278 interaction between humans and the environment, and with different human groups. Ecological here means,
279 etymologically, the systemic interactions and balance between societies and the environment, that results in
280 historical development because of a process of understanding and mutual adaptation.

281 This perspective may be observed in a few historical simulations, such as the survival city-building game
282 *Dawn of Man* (Madruza Works 2019). In this game, players control a group of prehistoric settlers ensuring
283 their survival from the Paleolithic until the Iron age. The game represents the historical process of acquisition
284 and management of resources by hunter-gatherers by focusing more on the dynamic relationship between
285 human communities and the environment.

286 Players build a settlement where they have to provide a sufficient and relatively constant supply of basic
287 resources (e.g. food, water, hides) as well as a more complex set of secondary resources (fabrics, flowers,
288 tannins, etc.). Resources may be more or less scarce depending on the environmental conditions; each
289 resource has different time cycles and regeneration, which should be understood in comparison to the size
290 and actual necessities of the settlement. Furthermore, resources are used first and foremost for the sustenance
291 of the group, not against others. Players have to balance their acquisition of resources so as to be able to
292 manage them (avoid hoarding them and making them spoil, or completely extracting them destroying their
293 cycle) according to the size and needs of the groups, in relation to seasons, as well as looking for natural
294 disasters or potential natural threats.

295 In this way, the game shows a different form of relationships with the landscape and with other human
296 communities, one that represents historical development as the result of a systemic interaction and not as a
297 necessary progressive exploitation of resources in a competitive perspective, which further fuels the 'us
298 against them' rhetorics.
299

300 **Linear Western-based representation of historical development**

301
302 The final dimension is linked to the way in which the historical development of societies is represented and
303 managed through the game. Many historical games (often strategy ones) make it possible for the player to
304 control characters and human groups over decades and centuries, making choices that will influence historical
305 events and the evolution of the faction itself. However, the choices and results of this temporal progress are
306 often very linear, directly imitating the general development of Western society. This means for instance that,
307 independently from the user's actions, technological progress is discovered and pursued in the same order as
308 the ones of European countries, or that the historical ages are always the same and based on certain
309 inescapable events of Western history (Roman Age, Middle Age, Modern Era, etc.). Game mechanics such as
310 Technological trees and Age advancement thus mirror this Western-based perspective, with its implicit
311 positivist idea of historical development as a linear, oriented evolution towards a better version of the present
312 society, in a predetermined teleological perspective.

313 This logic of representation is easily accepted and employed by populist and nationalist movements, which
314 consider Western countries as the paradigmatic form of all historical development; thus underestimating any
315 different societal setting, and historical development, as an inferior form, or straight as a form of non-
316 development (i.e. barbarity). Those countries or groups that do not follow the path traced by scientific and
317 societal development are easily considered less civilised, primitive and underdeveloped; as a consequence, not
318 deserving treatment as peers or equals.

319 An example of this predetermined and linear representation of historical development can be seen in a
320 strategy game such as the *Empire Earth* series (Sierra, 2001-2007). The game is a real-time strategy series that
321 makes players control factions over the course of 14 different epochs, from the Prehistoric Age to the
322 Nanomachine Age. The game is based on resource acquisition, faction development and battles against other
323 players. In a similar way to the age advancement system from Age of Empires, in order to progress from one
324 Age to another it is necessary to build two contemporary technology/structures and to pay a specific amount
325 of resources; the advancement makes it available new buildings, units and technology which could not be
326 accessed before, which have to be built to advance to the following era, and so on. By looking at the technology
327 tree it is easy to observe how the order of ages and the buildings/units are modelled according to the Western
328 idea of development, with a progression from Prehistory to Dark Age to Renaissance, the Imperial age, then
329 the Industrial Age; similarly, it is easy to see how specific technologies are considered necessary for the
330 development of others, who are considered as the 'natural improvement' of technology (e.g. from archers to
331 arbalests to muskets).

332 On the other hand, the interactive nature of games makes it possible for historical simulations to represent
333 the historical development not as an already established and necessary set of events, but as an open process

334 where one among many potential paths emerges, as a result of a complex system of historical dynamics
335 (economic, cultural, political, climatic, geographical and social). The actions and decisions of players thus may
336 determine the historical development, leading to counterfactual history, which makes players explore
337 alternative developments and thus reflect on the past as a result of many interacting dynamics that shaped it.

338 For example, a series such as *Europa Universalis* (Paradox, 2000-), is well known for its approach to
339 simulation in terms of sandbox dynamics: despite its initial Western-centered focus, it starts with a relatively
340 accurate representation of European states in Early Modern Age (expanded to the whole world through the
341 game DLCs). On the basis of the player and computer choices during the match, the game can lead to very
342 different historical developments, with potential counterfactual and fictional scenarios that may present very
343 different paths of historical development, still within the coherency and limits of the historical engine of the
344 game.

345 The elements that contribute to the development of societies are so many and interconnected that they
346 can't be linearly predicted during a match, and may bring a completely different balance in terms of the
347 economic power of East-west countries, nations that lead the technological advancement and even the order
348 of those discoveries.
349

350 Conclusions

351
352 The close relationship between politics and the perception of the past has often materialised in the use of
353 historical and archaeological elements, often distorted and decontextualised, for propaganda purposes. In
354 doing so, movements and parties have made use of every means of communication available, adapting to the
355 development of the media. Various studies have shown that it is particularly those parties promoting populist
356 nationalist views that seek legitimacy in the past for their political programmes.

357 At the same time, it has been shown how some of these groups do not only make use of original content
358 specifically created for propaganda, but often utilise pre-existing works, decontextualising some of their
359 elements to support their ideas. In particular, elements present in some video games, created for purely
360 recreational purposes, have been used within propaganda discourses, exploiting the popularity of video games
361 as a medium.

362 With regard to historically themed video games, we have identified three elements that could lead to a
363 distorted perception of history:

- 364 1. the hyperfocus on single historical elements over dynamics;
- 365 2. the exploitation of resources as a sine-qua-non condition for development;
- 366 3. the representation of historical development as predetermined and linear.

367 At the same time, we highlighted how the representation of long-term emergent phenomena, the
368 separation between resources and exploitation, and the simulation of non-linear historical development, may
369 provide meaningful tools for a different understanding of the past.

370 Considering what is at stake, we believe it is of utmost importance, for the future of archaeogaming, to
371 combine the analysis of historical accuracy with the understanding of the historical experience mediated by
372 games.

373 Future research should not just look at improving the dissemination of historical data and facts to the
374 public, but also stimulate their historical awareness and critical thinking, thus providing the tools to critically
375 evaluate the historical narratives proposed by the political propaganda.

377

Appendices

378

Acknowledgements

379

Data, scripts, code, and supplementary information availability

380

Conflict of interest disclosure

381

382

The authors declare that they comply with the PCI rule of having no financial conflicts of interest in relation to the content of the article.

383

Funding

384

References

385

Arjoranta, J. (2015). Real-time hermeneutics: meaning-making in ludonarrative digital games (No. 250). University of Jyväskylä.

386

387

Arnold, B. (2006). 'Arierdämmerung': race and archaeology in Nazi Germany. *World archaeology*, 38(1), 8-31.

388

389

Begy, J. (2017). Board games and the construction of cultural memory. *Games and Culture*, 12(7-8), 718-738.

390

391

Champion, E. (2016). *Critical gaming: Interactive history and virtual heritage*. Routledge.

392

393

Chapman, A., Foka, A., & Westin, J. (2017). Introduction: what is historical game studies?. *Rethinking History*, 21(3), 358-371.

394

395

de Cesari, C. (2023). Heritage, Memory, Race. *Polarized Pasts: Heritage and Belonging in Times of Political Polarization*, 8, 24.

396

397

Devries, M., Bessant, J., & Watts, R. (Eds.). (2021). *Rise of the far right: Technologies of recruitment and mobilization*. Rowman & Littlefield.

398

399

Dyer-Witheford, N., & De Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. U of Minnesota Press.

400

401

Eco, U. (1979). *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts* (Vol. 318). Indiana University Press.

402

403

Fandom (2023) Inside Gaming 2023 Report, available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w_oLrXBFkIBoLOQM5_yIVHT39L0VYsO/view (last accessed: 31/08/2023)

404

405

Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical play: Radical game design*. MIT press.

406

407

Galaty, M. L., & Watkinson, C. (Eds.). (2004). *Archaeology under dictatorship*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

408

409

Grufstedt, Y. (2022). *Shaping the Past: Counterfactual History and Game Design Practice in Digital Strategy Games* (Vol. 7). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

410

411

Hamilakis, Y. (1996). Through the looking glass: nationalism, archaeology and the politics of identity. *Antiquity*, 70(270), 975-978.

412

413

Hamilakis, Y., & Yalouri, E. (1996). Antiquities as symbolic capital in modern Greek society. *Antiquity*, 70(267), 117-129.

414

415

Hammar, E. L., de Wildt, L., Mukherjee, S., & Pelletier, C. (2021). Politics of Production: Videogames 10 years after Games of Empire. *Games and Culture*, 16(3), 287-293.

416

417

Idone Cassone, V., & Thibault, M. (2016). The HGR framework: A semiotic approach to the representation of history in digital games. *gamevironments*, (5), 49-49.

418

419

Juul, J. (2011). *Half-real. Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. MIT Press.

419

Kapell, M. (2002). Civilization and its discontents: American monomythic structure as historical simulacrum. *Popular Culture Review*, 13(2), 129-136.

420

421 Kennedy, R. F. (2023). 'Western Civilization', White Supremacism and the Myth of a White Ancient Greece.
422 Polarized Pasts: Heritage and Belonging in Times of Political Polarization, 8, 88.

423 Lammes, S. (2010). Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games and postcolonial culture. *Eludamos: Journal for*
424 *Computer Game Culture*, 4(1), 1-6.

425 Lundblade, K. (2019). How the West (was) won: Unit operations and emergent procedural rhetorics of
426 colonialism in *Europa Universalis IV*. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 11(3), 251-270.

427 Marrone, G. (2021). Introduction to the Semiotics of the Text. In *Introduction to the Semiotics of the Text*.
428 De Gruyter Mouton. Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the media. In *Twenty-first century populism:*
429 *The spectre of Western European democracy* (pp. 49-64). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

430 McCall, J. (2011). *Gaming the past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History*. Abingdon: Routledge

431 McCall, J. (2016). Teaching history with digital historical games: An introduction to the field and best
432 practices. *Simulation & Gaming*, 47(4), 517-542.

433 Merriman, N. (2000). The crisis of representation in archaeological museums. In *Cultural Resource*
434 *Management in Contemporary Society* (pp. 316-325). Routledge.

435 Nelis, J. (2007). Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of "Romanità". *Classical World*,
436 391-415.

437 Niklasson, E. (Ed.). (2023). *Polarized Pasts: Heritage and Belonging in Times of Political Polarization (Vol. 8)*.
438 Berghahn Books.

439 Patterson, L. E. (2010). *Kinship myth in ancient Greece*. University of Texas Press.

440 Peterson, R. D., Miller, A. J., & Fedorko, S. J. (2013). The same river twice: Exploring historical
441 representation and the value of simulation in the total war, civilization, and patrician franchises. *Playing*
442 *with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history*, 33-48.

443 Phillips, R. (1998). *History teaching, nationhood and the state: A study in educational politics*.

444 Poiron, P. (2021). *Assassin's Creed Origins Discovery Tour: A behind the scenes experience*. *Near Eastern*
445 *Archaeology*, 84(1), 79-85.

446 Reinhard, A. (2018). *Archaeogaming: An introduction to archaeology in and of video games*. Berghahn
447 Books.

448 Sabin, P. (2012). *Simulating War: Studying Conflict through Simulation Games*. London: Continuum.

449 Shaw, A. (2015). The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin's*
450 *Creed III*. *Loading...*, 9(14).

451 Singh, P. (2021). Populism, nationalism, and nationalist populism. *Studies in Comparative International*
452 *Development*, 56(2), 250-269.

453 Squire, K. (2004). "Replaying History: Learning World History through Playing Civilization III." PhD diss.,
454 Indiana University.

455 Uricchio, W. (2005). Simulation, history, and computer games. *Handbook of computer game studies*, 327,
456 338.

457 Yalouri, E. (1999). Sacralising the Past: Cults of Archaeology in Modern Greece. *Archaeological Dialogues*,
458 6(2), 115.

459