

A Link to the Past

The Role of Videogames in Conveying and Generating Historical Information

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the purpose of videogames in two primary roles related to the field of historical scholarship through examining the virtual worlds of *Assassin’s Creed II*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima*. The first of these is the teaching role, where this thesis argues that videogames are an attractive option for delivering historical information to future generations as long as certain epistemological and ethical considerations are made in employing them. The second one of these roles is the role of videogames as source material for historians to use in the past and in the present. In this regard, this thesis argues that history-based videogames are and will be important source materials for future historians to use about the past and explores some of the considerations that historians have to make when employing them for such a purpose.

Keywords:

Kingdom Come: Deliverance, Assassin’s Creed II, Ghost of Tsushima, historical sources, videogame, historical narrative, virtual environment, gamification, ethnography, historiography.

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1 Introduction

I believe that we should all be terrified. It appears to be more and more evident to me as the days pass that people are becoming less interested in the words of professionals and those who are in the know. Instead, the vast majority of people learn what they know from the media they are engaged with, in their daily lives. This is media that is often intended for entertainment, but it carries with it informational messages that can be taken as truths. The reliability of such media is of course questionable, and people are led astray by what they hear and see. This, however, is not a new phenomenon. So, you might be wondering, why should we be worried now? Because it's just getting started.

We are living in a time where different forms of entertainment media are rapidly gaining more popularity. Social media apps like TikTok and different streaming services host videos for millions, if not billions of people, to watch every day. Videogames are not far behind, rising from a niche pastime in the 90's to a mainstream leisure activity.¹ This terrifies me, because it means that entertainment media is slowly monopolizing time away from other forms of communication. And to make matters worse, we who are engaged in the field of academia are not reacting nearly fast enough to the situation. It appears to me that we are far too stuck in our way of rearranging letters on either physical or digital paper until our compulsive desire to create an expression that leaves no room for false interpretation is quenched. Meanwhile, we forget that those people who would go to a library and pick up an academic text to read as a pastime are few and far between compared to the ones who would rather sit at home and play Old School Runescape.

Apologies for the scare, but I had to get your attention somehow. I have heard that you only have five seconds to capture a viewer's interest at the beginning of at least some forms of digital media, so I figured I would experiment with the same concept here. Now that we have established a cause for concern, what could a historian like me do to help my fellow academics get their well thought-out and researched opinions out there in a more appealing way? I do not think we will be beating entertainment media anytime soon, so perhaps it would be wise to just make use of it in spreading our messages. This is where the subject

¹ Engelstätter & Ward 2022, 1-2.

matter of this study comes into the picture. Out of all the forms of entertainment media that are currently growing in popularity, it appears that videogames would be one of the most receptive to historical information. This is because already at the time of writing this thesis there exists a vast plethora of videogames that have incorporated historical scenery and information within them. Plenty of museums are also experimenting with videogame components to their exhibits² and there are already videogames that have been created for the purpose of teaching.³ Something seems to be missing, however, since the pull of such projects isn't anywhere near on the level of some of the major games currently on the market. I would argue that it's the fact that these games and projects are often created by people who don't have a solid understanding of what makes a videogame or a virtual world appealing. This, of course, isn't always directly the fault of the people engaged with such projects. They may, for example, lack the funding to make a game in collaboration with people who understand videogames on a deeper level than they do. So, here's hoping that this thesis, along with the ones that have been written and will be written about similar topics in future, can help that situation.

1.1 Research questions

I believe the biggest reason why games that are created for the sole purpose of teaching are not well received is because they are simply not fun. I have had this intuition for most of my life and in fact it is one of the major catalysts for this thesis paper. I also seem to not be alone in feeling this way, since some of my fellow academics have also dedicated time to wondering about what it is precisely that makes learning fun in the context of educational videogames, even in their infancy.⁴ This brings us to the subject(s) of this study. I aim to answer the question of what makes some of the videogames that are built on a historical basis or heavily make use of historical themes appealing. Secondly, I aim to answer any questions that might arise from the solutions or discussions I find on this topic. In order to achieve this aim, I will analyze the world-building, storytelling, and playability of history-based videogames to create a fuller understanding of what it is exactly that has made some of these games so appealing. The reason I have decided to analyze these three elements specifically is because they seem to encompass most of the main components that games are

² Camps-Ortueta et al. 2021.

³ Guardia 2019.

⁴ Malone 1980.

broken down into in the field of game studies.⁵ Thus, this study will be helpful to anyone who is going into the process of creating a game that explores or takes advantage of historical themes. I aim to make this study helpful to creators of educational games, creators of museum exhibits, and to serve as an aid to historians who will be working in collaboration with game studios in creating games that have a historical basis. Since we are talking about one specific form of media, I will of course also occasionally veer off into discussions about the general structure of videogames, which means that some of the discussion within this thesis isn't strictly linked to games with a historical basis. Through isolating these elements, I hope to give myself and my colleagues a better perspective of what sorts of things they might want to consider when partaking in the process of creating a videogame that employs historical elements. Even though it is not typical for academic texts, I have decided to use some personal anecdotes and humor in this text in a way that I hope serves to both improve the reading experience and highlight the importance of making educational material interesting.

The second primary research question of this thesis concerns the current state of videogame analysis within the field of historical study. It appears to me that the majority of the analysis of videogames that gets conducted within the field of history currently concerns two things. The first of them appears to be some variation of "How accurate is everything that is depicted within this videogame to the historical reality it is trying to depict?". The second one is harder to pin down directly, but it seems to be some variation of "How is X depicted within this game, why is it depicted in this manner, and how are the relevant parties reacting to it?". This means that most historical study of videogames typically appears to concern the authenticity of the virtual environments depicted within them and the cultural debates that surround these environments. This analysis is typically very thorough and rigorous, but whenever I find myself stumbling onto material that covers these topics, I cannot help but feel that these are beautiful skyscrapers built on top of rickety old shacks. It appears to me that not enough groundwork has been done on the smaller individual elements that make up a virtual environment and what the implications of that groundwork are for the analysis of videogames when it comes to historical research. Thus, the other primary research question I aim to answer in this thesis is Is it justifiable to ignore the elements of history-based virtual environments that often are overlooked or not seen as important enough for analysis in the

⁵ Freyermuch et al. 2015.

field of historical research? I understand that a research question in this vein threads the line between historical research and game studies, to some maybe even scarily so, but I still believe it is incredibly important to undertake this analysis specifically in the field of historical research. This is due to the fact that videogames (and media in general) by nature create sensory environments for the player (or viewer) to explore and experience. These are virtual environments that are created by humans, for human consumption, using past, present, and imagined future ideas. Thus, history as a discipline is in a unique and important position in terms of explaining, conveying, and cataloguing the virtual worlds of videogames for present and future generations. It is my hypothesis that in order to achieve those three goals in an acceptable manner, you have to examine the aforementioned details.

As I mentioned before, partaking in discussions about how to make a history-based virtual world appealing will naturally result in secondary considerations. As we do not have a time machine, it is not possible to create a historical environment exactly as it once may have been. This of course means that when creating a historical environment, historians must stretch what they can know to suit their needs. And this, of course, leads to epistemological and sometimes even moral questions about how much possibly incorrect information or flat-out fictional information we are allowed to add to what we already know to be true. This naturally means that I will be grappling with and trying to provide answers to these questions during the course of this study. Epistemological discussions will be at the forefront of such considerations, but it seems very important to also dedicate some time to discussing the morality of using historical information. This is due to the fact that for some, a fun videogame that is at least somewhat based on historical information can seem like an extremely tempting and effective propaganda tool, for example.

1.2 Primary Sources and Methods

The primary sources of this study will be the virtual worlds of three history-based videogames. Since there are so many different videogames that have been created with a historical background, even ones that are highly popular, it becomes an increasingly large task to narrow down which ones should be the subject of this study. The metrics I have used in determining which game worlds might be worth taking a look at would be the sales volume, the user reviews, and the longevity of the games. I have chosen these three metrics specifically because it appears that when videogames are discussed in relation to how

engaging, memorable, and appealing they were to their audience, these are some of the most commonly used metrics by aggregator sites like Metacritic⁶ and SteamDB.⁷ It should be mentioned that the metrics provided by these sites are not perfect, as they do not and could not account for every review or sale of a specific game, but they are still reliable enough to get an excellent sense of my chosen metrics.

The reason I chose sales volume as a metric for which games to consider is if a game sells many copies, there are probably qualities about it that people find appealing. However, these numbers don't necessarily always come from the fact that the game itself is enjoyable. Other factors, like the marketing team really killing it or the numbers being overreported are always possible. This is why using user and game journalist reviews as another metric seemed important. If both the critics and players unanimously like or dislike a game, there is a high chance that there are some elements that might be worth taking a look at within its world. However, when it comes to critic and user ratings, it is worth keeping in mind that one of these metrics alone might be unreliable. For example, if only the critics scored the game highly, it could very well be that they had a financial or social incentive to do so. This is why it seems important to take a look at both the reviews of critics and users, side by side. Lastly, I believe longevity is something that one should consider when picking which games to learn from. In the context of this study, longevity means two things. Firstly, it means the amount of time that a game has been relevant within the game industry. Secondly, it means the number of sequels a game has been given over the years. A videogame does not get a single sequel if people did not leave the experience with the feeling that they want more. Thus, it seems appropriate to consider the longevity of a game in this way as well when deciding which games should be placed under the magnifying glass for this study. I recognize that longevity in the way in which I have described it is hard to quantify. However, I believe the repeat appearances of sequels to game franchises on websites like Metacritic and SteamDB and their favorable reviews point to a significant enough cultural impact for me to be able to make an estimation on their longevity in tandem with other sources, should it become necessary.

In addition, to extract better results from my sources, I have decided that the three games that I choose must have genre overlap, in order for their analysis and comparison to be easier. The

⁶ Metacritic. *Best games of all time.*

⁷ SteamDB. *Top currently global selling steam games.*

three qualities that all three of these games have in common are that they are all open-world games, they have an emphasis on sword fighting, and they are situated in the distant past. I have also chosen to exclude repeats from the same series in order to get a wider range of developers for these three games. I think this choice will make the differences in the games more pronounced, which in turn also makes the similarities more easily noticeable.

With these qualifiers in mind, for this study, the first game I have chosen to analyze is *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), which was developed by Ubisoft Montreal. *Assassin's Creed II* is a game where the protagonist, Ezio Auditore, wages war against the templar order after they have multiple members of his family killed. He does so by assassinating more and more of the conspirators in the plot against his family, while simultaneously discovering more about his family's ties to the templar order. The game takes place in 16th century Italy, mostly in urban environments. When *Assassin's Creed* was originally released, it was so popular that people demanded a sequel. Now, almost 18 years after the launch of the original *Assassin's Creed*, the series has not only garnered one sequel, that being *Assassin's Creed II*, but at least 10 different mainline and spin-off games.⁸ Out of all these games, based on the reviews of both the critics and the general audience, it seems like *Assassin's Creed II* specifically has been the most popular.⁹ When it comes to sales figures, *Assassin's Creed II* is one of the best-selling *Assassin's Creed* games ever, with over 10 million copies sold.¹⁰ Considering when the game was originally released, it's quite a feat that it is still one of the best-selling *Assassin's Creed* games, despite the continuously rising popularity of videogames over the past couple of decades.

The second game I've decided to incorporate into my study is *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020), which was developed by Sucker Punch Productions. The plot of *Ghost of Tsushima* follows a similar vein to that of *Assassin's Creed II*. The protagonist, Jin Sakai, is tasked with protecting and saving the island of Tsushima from Mongol invaders. Along the way, he takes vengeance for his fallen samurai compatriots and attempts to save his uncle from the grasp of the invasion commander, Khotun Khan. *Ghost of Tsushima* has been given high praise from players and critics alike.¹¹ It was even nominated for the game of the year in 2020; however,

⁸ Metacritic. *Best games of all Time*.

⁹ Metacritic, *Assassin's creed II*.

¹⁰ Metacritic, *Assassin's creed II*.

¹¹ Metacritic, *Ghost of Tsushima*.

it ended up not claiming the title.¹² Despite being a recently released game, it already has a sequel, *Ghost of Yotei*, which was published on the 2nd of October, 2025.¹³ The game sold incredibly well on all consoles, despite only being playable on one console for multiple years after it launched.¹⁴ With all these accolades, I believe *Ghost of Tsushima* absolutely deserves a spot within this study.

Lastly, the third game I have chosen to analyze in this study is *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), which was developed by Warhorse Studios. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the protagonist, Henry, loses his parents in a brutal attack by Cuman forces, after which he enters Lord Radzig Kobyla's service, pursuing revenge for the death of his parents. Along the way, he gets entangled in various difficult situations and ends up participating in the royal affairs of the Kingdom of Bohemia. The game has been popular among its players and reviewers, who often cite its depth and realism as one of their favorite parts about it.¹⁵ This game is relatively new, with it having been published in 2018. However, despite this it already has a sequel for players to experience.¹⁶ The game has also sold very well within its lifespan, being among the highest selling games on Steam¹⁷ and selling more copies through multiple different platforms.

When it comes to the material contained within these games, it seems important to highlight that all three of these games have had content added to them after their original release. For this study, I will be ignoring any downloadable content (DLC) that was added to the game later or came with a different version of the game.

Of course, when using a world that does not physically exist as a primary source, you are bound to run into some interesting questions about how to do research on them. I think the best mix for doing research on videogames is a combination of first-hand experience and theoretical work. Firstly, getting the same experience a player would and seeing what the videogame is like first-hand seems crucial to this type of research.¹⁸ This is because playing

¹² Sergio 2020.

¹³ Metacritic. *Ghost of Yotei*.

¹⁴ Statista, *Lifetime unit sales generated by Ghost of Tsushima worldwide as of September 2024*.

¹⁵ Metacritic. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

¹⁶ Metacritic. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*.

¹⁷ SteamDB. *Top currently selling global Steam games*.

¹⁸ Lammes 2017, 25.

the game instead of watching someone play it helps you get a better understanding of the structure and feel of the game, among other things. You need to experience the game to be able to make any observations about it at all, so playing the game is a necessary first step for this study. In addition, simply playing the game and being attentive should give one a pretty good idea about what works and what doesn't within its world, allowing for further thought when it comes to the aims of this thesis.

Secondly, utilizing different branches of academic historical study will be useful for this project. Historical theory will allow us to further understand the epistemological and ethical questions associated with the creation of the game world. Utilizing insights from the field of museology will also be helpful in terms of understanding historical representation during the course of this study. The field of museology grapples with questions about how to create appealing historical experiences using different senses and levels of visitor engagement.¹⁹ This means that there is cross over between some of the topics museology is interested in and the subjects of this study. Museology, conveniently, also grapples with epistemological and moral questions that are associated with historical representation. When it comes to academic historical study, it's also good to keep in mind that I will be analyzing games from multiple different time periods and as such, I cannot be an expert in all these historical time periods. I think that for the intent and purposes of this study, that should not be an issue.

Lastly, outside of the field of historical research there are also some other branches of scientific study that will be useful in dissecting the game worlds of my chosen games. The field of media studies, and especially the field of game studies within it, seems particularly important for the purposes of this study. I will be using different tools from its arsenal to gain a better understanding of videogames and some of the considerations that go into making them. These include tools for the analysis of different components of videogames, like the ones I have previously mentioned, and tools for understanding what makes a videogame appealing.

Now that we have described the multidisciplinary nature of this thesis, we should briefly examine the specific ways in which I conducted my research. The nature of this work is autoethnographic, as the core of this research will deal with interpreting and connecting my

¹⁹ Haywood & Cairns 2005.

personal experiences with these videogames to broader, mostly cultural and social, phenomena.²⁰ The typical weakness of autoethnographic research is that it has limited generalizability, as my subjective experiences will be at the forefront of discussion within this study.²¹ However, I have tried to incorporate academic sources into this study that support my findings in these matters and point to there being a more objective quality to them. In addition, I added a quantitative element to this study in the form of analyzing three different videogames as to give a more objective basis for my conclusions about what sort of details players seem drawn to within them. Autoethnography is an established method of conducting research that has been explored in multiple different scientific works, such as *Autoethnography* (2015) by Tony Adams et al., which I consulted while conducting this study. The process of researching this thesis boiled down to a simple process of close reading, which I adapted for analyzing the videogames I was playing. As I was playing through each of the three games I have chosen for this study, I paid careful attention to what, how and when you could do within the game world. In addition, whenever I felt like it was pertinent, I made notes on what I had thought about or experienced during the game. Then, either as I was playing or after each session, I used my noted thoughts and conclusions and compared them to research that had been done on this topic and topics similar to it. I continued this pattern all the way until I was finished with each of the games, after which I transitioned to only looking into and interpreting academic sources I could use for this thesis. Whilst I would not consider my notes an official study diary, it seems important to point out that during the process of reading and writing these notes, they also became objects of study themselves.

1.3 Readability and Important Terms

Considering the type of research I'm about to embark on is relatively new in the field of historical study, conventions on how to refer to virtual environments as sources haven't yet been cemented in the discipline. After exploring some ways my colleagues have referred to these environments, such as using pictures, excerpts and approximate footnotes, I felt that none of these methods really worked for this particular thesis. This is due to the fact that the specificity and quantity of data I'm analyzing does not allow me to easily represent it in any

²⁰ Adams T. et al. 2015.

²¹ Adams T. et al. 2015.

of these forms. Seeing as this was the case, I have decided to embed all of the references to my primary sources within the text itself, carefully laying out how I will be referencing these sources at the start of different headings. This should also improve the readability of this thesis in comparison to the alternatives. Another consequence of this will also be that I will not be placing any references to my primary sources within the footnotes of this study.

Now that we have discussed what the subject of this study will be and how I plan to go about analyzing my sources, lastly, I think we should clearly define some of the terms that will be used in this study. First and foremost, the term “videogame” does not yet appear to have a single, unanimous definition in the field. However, the one I have decided to use for my study is Jesper Juul’s definition, in which “A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable”.²² This definition is in harmony with the core goal and questions of this thesis, and it stems from the scientific work Juul has done in the field of game studies. During the course of this paper, I will be using the terms “videogame” and “game” interchangeably to signify the same thing.

Another term that I will be using a lot during this study is “virtual environment”. A virtual environment specifically refers to the audio-visual and tactile environment of the videogame that I am currently analyzing. If it is specifically stated that I mean virtual environment as a broader term, then it can refer to other elements of the videogame as well, such as the games’ narrative or the characters within it. When referring to a “historical virtual environment”, I distinctly mean a virtual environment that is crafted by or in tandem with professionals. In these instances, I’m speaking of a virtual environment that would be more historically accurate in comparison to a commercially produced one. Both the terms “virtual environment” and “historical virtual environment” and their definitions were created by me during the course of this study. I felt that using these terms and the ways I used them allowed me to approach the research questions of this study in a more productive and flexible way than other similar definitions in the field of game studies.

²² Dase 2021.

Lastly, it should be noted that whenever I am referring to a historian's perspective, I am positioning the analysis into the perspective of a historian who would be involved with whatever the current topic of discussion is. Entering the historian's perspective in this case gives me the opportunity to more freely relay how a professional historian might feel about some of the topics being discussed and to ponder what we could take away from their analysis. As there is no template for a historian, I will be detailing what sort of considerations the historian whose perspective we are following will be the most interested in making whenever it becomes relevant.

2 The Narrative of a History-based Videogame

Here's where I have to take you to the scary world of Finnish primary education. After an especially tired morning, you manage to drag yourself to school and to your first class of the day, history. Today, however, the energy of the whole class seems a little bit off. This is of course because today, the class will be continuing on the topic of the Winter War. It's a mixed bag before the teacher arrives. Some students are making jokes, probably as some sort of juvenile coping mechanism. Others are just looking around anxiously, which is caused by either the topic at hand or the desire for the lesson to start, so that it can eventually end.

What catches your interest, however, is the beginning of what looks to be a scuffle between two of your fellow students. You home in on what they're arguing about and hear something very interesting. One of the students is relaying to the other, that the whole point of the lesson we're about to embark on is to indoctrinate us to believe that Finland is the mightiest country in the world and to instill in all of us some sort of false national pride and camaraderie. The other, of course deeply offended by this, retorts by saying that there is valid reason to be proud about our national achievements and the heroic sacrifices of the men who fell in that awful war. In fact, he is so offended by the first student's statements, that he begins winding up a punch aimed at the other student. Luckily, before the swing goes through, the teacher calls out for the student to stop from the door of the classroom.

The lesson starts after some time, and for the entire duration of the lesson you are entirely enthralled by the way your teacher is relaying information to the class. It's almost like he's reading from the pages of an intense novel or at times a movie script as he explains the events that unfolded between the years 1939 and 1940. You feel as though you're hanging onto every single word that escapes from his lips. The lesson ends much sooner than it feels like it should, but before leaving the classroom you find yourself starting to mirror the conversation of your peers to the lesson you just heard. Of course, lacking the maturity to fully understand all of the different dynamics at play you don't get far into your thoughts, but you do get far enough to realize that what is said, at what cadence and tempo it is said, and how it is phrased affects how people listen and relate to it. Weighing the way your teacher was telling the class about the Winter War against this newfound revelation, after some

thought you come to the conclusion that while the way he was explaining it to the class was intense, he was not to be found guilty.

2.1 Comparing the Narratives

As you might have inferred by now, the following chapters are going to deal with the role of storytelling within the videogames I have chosen to analyze. The primary themes of this discussion will be what sorts of similarities and differences their narratives have, what historians should keep in mind about the narratives on an epistemological and ethical basis, and what useful information I can glean from this analysis for my colleagues. In this chapter specifically, we're going to be comparing the differences and similarities between the narratives of each of my chosen games. The storytelling, or what I will also refer to as the narrative, is an important point of intrigue for all history related media. Apart from videogames, projects like movies and series that incorporate historical elements or are based on historical events also place major emphasis on their stories.²³ Therefore, it seems relevant to analyze the story of my primary sources as one major component of what creates their draw. This becomes doubly important when we're analyzing any media that has a connection to historical themes, considering there are a lot of nuances when it comes to discussing narrative in a historical context.²⁴ In addition we will do a quick overview of what kind of things historians should be mindful of when dealing with the details of narratives in history-based videogames.

Before we begin to dissect these narratives however, a quick explanation of the flow of storytelling in my three chosen videogames seems appropriate. These three games, much like books, are dissected into different chapters, with a flash card, a theme, or a new virtual environment indicating the transition from one chapter to another. However, these chapters don't consist of paragraphs or pages, but rather what are referred to as missions. These missions consist of one or multiple objectives that a player must complete by playing the game. When a mission is completed, the player progresses onto the next one, until the entire chapter comes to a conclusion. When the final chapter is completed, these games are

²³ Weinstein 2001.

²⁴ Foster W. et al. 2017.

considered to be finished. There is a caveat to this formula however, that being that each of my three chosen games are divided into main missions and side missions, of which the main missions are the primary storyline of the game. Side missions have their own storylines. In the case of my three chosen games, they typically serve to supplement the game's primary storyline (the main missions) or enhance the appeal of the game in one way or another. In the case of my three chosen games, you can consider them completed whenever the player reaches the end of the main missions within them. Out of my three chosen games, the exception to this rule is the game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance (2018)*, in which the completion of a couple of side missions is required to progress the main story. After the main story is complete, the player can choose whether or not he wants to complete all of the optional side objectives as well.

These different missions, and sometimes chapters, have a name embedded within the game that separates them from one another. When introducing and analyzing the narratives of my chosen games, I will be referring to these mission names as sources of information for the entire heading. I will mainly be focusing on the main missions of my chosen games in order to keep my experience more along the lines of a typical playthrough. It also bears mentioning that missions and chapters typically have their own terms within games. For example, in *Assassin's Creed II (2009)*, missions are called *Memories* and what could be conceived of as chapters are called *Sequences*. To avoid confusion going forward, I will be referring to missions only as missions and chapters only as chapters when discussing each of my chosen games, ensuring the missions and chapters themselves are identifiable by the name they are given within the game.

2.1.1 Recurring elements

Across the stories of *Assassin's Creed II*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima (2020)* there are many recurring story elements. This in itself is an interesting find, because there are many core similarities that these beloved games share. The main missions and thus the main story of each of the three games revolves around revenge. In *Assassin's Creed II*, during the mission *Last Man Standing*, the protagonist of the game, Ezio, is forced to watch as much of his family is hanged. Most of the game after this event revolves around Ezio tracking down and eliminating the people who were responsible for the death of his family members, the first of which, Uberto Alberti perishes during the mission *Judge, Jury,*

Executioner. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the protagonist of the game, Henry, is forced to watch as his parents meet a brutal end at the hands of the advancing Cuman army at the end of the mission *Unexpected Visit*. After surviving the original onslaught, much of the game afterward is dedicated to him seeking vengeance for the death of his family in the form of reclaiming the sword he and his father made for Sir Radzig during the aforementioned mission. Reclaiming this sword is very important for Henry, as delivering it to Sir Radzig was the final promise he made to his father before the bloodshed. This journey begins with a lesson in sword combat during the mission *Train Hard, Fight Easy*. Lastly, in *Ghost of Tsushima* the protagonist Jin Sakai embarks on a quest to kill as many Mongol invaders as he can while simultaneously trying to rescue his uncle, Lord Shimura, from Khotun Khan. These events are set into motion as he and his fellow samurai are overpowered during the first mission of the game, simply called *Prologue*. Even after he manages to rescue Lord Shimura during the mission *Shadow of the Samurai*, he chooses to continue hunting down the Mongol leader, intent on making him pay for what he has done to his home and his community.

Another major theme of storytelling that these narratives share amongst themselves is what I would call self-discovery. Each of our three protagonists are very much thrust into a situation where nothing about their new life seems familiar to them and they have to adapt and change as people in order to survive. This theme is especially prevalent in *Ghost of Tsushima*, where for most of the game Jin Sakai is struggling with the dissonance between the samurai code of conduct and the new way he has to approach and brutalize his enemies from the shadows, using what the samurai would consider cheap tricks. Despite Jin saving his uncle, Lord Shimura, the shift in his philosophy causes his uncle to attempt to take his life for the dishonor he's brought upon the samurai code in the game's last mission *The Tale of Lord Shimura*. Mirroring these developments, in *Assassin's Creed II*, Ezio is forced to very quickly adapt to his new life on the run after the events of *Last Man Standing*. After fleeing from Florence with his remaining family during the mission *Arrivederci*, he seeks to find refuge, also conveniently with his uncle, at Monteriggioni. Before they arrive, however, they are ambushed by co-conspirators in the assassination plot of Ezio's family during the mission *Roadside Assistance*. Luckily, Ezio's uncle arrives at the scene in time to rescue them and bring them back to his villa, where he explains the reason Ezio's family was targeted and begins introducing him to the way of the assassins during the missions *Casa Dolce Casa* and *Practice Makes Perfect*. Ezio is thus introduced quickly into a new way of life that he

grapples with for the entire duration of the game, before being officially initiated as an assassin much later on during the mission *Play Along*. Following along a similar vein, the protagonist of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, Henry, struggles with the shift from being a blacksmith's son to entering Sir Radzig's service in order to fulfill his last promise to his father. Whilst the focus on transformation doesn't come through quite as clearly on *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* as it does in the other games, it is still a noticeable part of the game's narrative from the mission *Awakening* onward. In addition to this, the revelation that Henry is in fact Sir Radzig's son towards the end of the game during the mission *The Die is Cast* brings this theme back in full force, as Henry now not only has to grapple with the new direction his life has taken, for the second time, but also with the very real ramifications of his birth status.

Finally, the last core similarity between the narratives of these three games that is worth paying special attention to is the sheer volume of differently written and interesting characters. In the narratives of *Assassin's Creed II*, *Kingdom Come Deliverance*, and *Ghost of Tsushima*, there are characters who come from high places and characters who come from low places, each carrying with them at least a somewhat unique disposition, that makes the encounters between different characters within the narrative feel intriguing. In *Assassin's Creed II*, these would be characters such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Rosa. From the moment Ezio properly meets Leonardo during the mission *Practice What You Preach*, his excitable and eccentric behavior brings light into the narrative. Rosa, on the other hand, brings a respectively no-nonsense and angry attitude befitting a thief, from the mission *That's Gonna Leave a Mark* onward, as she helps Ezio reach his goals in Venice. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, characters like Kenji, a farmer and sake seller who gets in trouble for trying to swindle others and Lady Masako, an angry, fierce and sometimes unpredictable leader of the Clan Adachi bring a similar flair to the storytelling. Jin meets both of them for the first time during the missions *The Broken Blacksmith* and *The Tale of Lady Masako* respectively. It is especially worth pointing out that the majority of the side quests in *Ghost of Tsushima* have to do with the personal stories of these side characters, further enriching and developing their stories. Characters that serve a similar function in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* are characters like Sir Hans Capon and Father Godwin. The first time Henry really gets to know Sir Hans Capon better is during the mission *The Prey*, where as punishment for squabbling with Henry they are sent hunting together. This is where Sir Hans Capon's flippant and arrogant attitude really comes to light for the first time. Father Godwin, on the other hand, who Henry meets

during the mission *Mysterious Ways*, turns out to not be a very good priest at all, but one that would rather partake in earthly pleasures and cause all sorts of havoc within his community. Like in *Ghost of Tsushima*, there is a lot of optional and side content in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* that has to do with the characters you meet along the way, further cementing the significance of this diverse cast of characters within the game.

2.1.2 Key differences

With so many core similarities between the three of these games, it seems worth considering whether or not there are any key differences between them. Thematically, *Assassin's Creed II*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* are on very similar wavelengths. It appears to me that the primary way the storytelling of these three games is different from one another comes down to how they tell their stories. The key differences in how the stories of these games are told come down to the tone and pacing of their narrative, which I believe warrants some further inspection.

Let's start with the pacing of the narratives within these three games. In *Assassin's Creed II*, the speed at which the story progresses from one location, theme and person to another is the fastest among my three chosen games. The first chapter of the game, *Ignorance is Bliss*, introduces the meta-layer of the narrative, where Desmond is introduced to be strapped into a machine called the animus, which allows him to see the memories of his ancestors, those being the memories of Ezio, inside the animus. From here, the next three chapters, *Escape Plans*, *Requiescat in Pace* and *The Pazzi Conspiracy* see Ezio leaving Florence to seek the help of his uncle in Monteriggioni, being introduced to the way of the assassin, tasting his first bit of vengeance in Tuscany and eventually returning to Florence to seek further answers for the death of his family members. The pacing of the narrative of *Assassin's Creed II* does slow down after the sixth chapter, after which the game mostly takes place in Venice between chapters seven, *The Merchant of Venice* and eleven, *Alter Egos*. During these chapters, much of Ezio's time is spent unraveling the conspiracy against his family within Venice.

Comparing this to the pacing of *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* these games obviously have a much slower cadence. After the first battle in the mission *Prologue*, the pacing of *Ghost of Tsushima's* narrative immediately slows down. Instead of being rushed from one situation to another, each of the game's three chapters have a much more concise narrative. The first chapter of the game, *Rescue Lord Shimura* is spent introducing the new

state of the island of Tsushima, which has been invaded by the Mongols, and creating a plan on how rescue Lord Shimura. The game takes it's time to set all the pieces into place before lighting the fuse in the latter two chapters, *Retake Castle Shimura* and *Kill Khotun Khan* as well. This is done in a similar way to the first chapter, where the new problem is introduced, and a plan to solve it is slowly formed and executed. The slowest of the three games, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* develops its plot very slowly after the first mission of the game, *Unexpected Visit*. After a blistering start where Henry is forced to watch as his family perishes, and his hometown is razed to the ground, the game slowly develops Henry's story between main missions *Awakening* and *The Die is Cast*. The game introduces new elements to its narrative at a leisurely pace, leaving plenty of room for detail, intrigue and even for mundane things as Henry slowly helps unravel the mystery of why his hometown was attacked. The pacing only picks up for the last three main missions before the *Epilogue*, these being *Cold Steel*, *Hot Blood*; *Family Values*, and *An Oath is an Oath*.

Then there is the issue of tone within the narratives of each of these three games. A clear outlier from the other two games in this regard is *Ghost of Tsushima*. The tone of the game is overall serious, even poetic. This is exemplified by the fact that in addition to main missions, most of the side missions have to do with serious personal stories of the characters you meet in the game, like the aforementioned Lady Masako. Each of the side missions involving her, known collectively as *A Masako Tale*, deals with serious personal themes of loss and grief. Findable side missions in *Ghost of Tsushima* also carry with them a certain highbrow and serious feel, as exemplified by *Haikus*, which, as the name implies, task you with writing a haiku concerning different themes of Jin Sakai's story. In contrast to this, both *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Assassin's Creed II* take themselves less seriously. In the case of *Assassin's Creed II*, this is noticeable in the sometimes cartoonish way that most women Ezio comes into contact with seem to inexplicably fall for him, as exemplified by Rosa from almost the first moment Ezio meets her during the mission *That's Gonna Leave a Mark* and the different women Ezio seems to immediately win over during chapter nine, *Carnevale*. In addition to this, as discussed earlier, some of the characters in *Assassin's Creed II*, like Leonardo da Vinci, offer humor to the story by virtue of the way they are. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, much of the same is true for the aforementioned Sir Hans Capon and Father Godwin. Whilst there are far fewer specific instances you can point to when it comes to calling the narrative of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* more lighthearted than serious, the continued presence of characters like Sir Hans Capon from the fourth main mission to all the

way to the end of the game makes the game's narrative have a much more lighthearted tone compared to a game like *Ghost of Tsushima*, where humour is very rarely sprinkled into the overall serious storytelling of the game.

2.2 Narrative from a historian's perspective

Now that we've consulted and compared the storytelling of our primary sources, it seems appropriate to investigate the narratives of my chosen games from a historian's perspective. In the context of this chapter that means analyzing the epistemological and ethical possibilities of creating similar narratives within serious educational projects that intend to incorporate videogames as teaching tools. It is good to keep in mind that the opinions of historians might vary greatly in these topics, but in order to approach the questions that are relevant for this study, our imaginary historian is someone who is preoccupied ensuring that all the details presented within these narratives are historically verifiable. In addition, this historian is particularly concerned with the ethics of spreading historical narratives within the context of videogames.

I will be assessing some relevant elements of the narrative of *Assassin's Creed II*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* from a historian's perspective and analyzing what sort of thoughts a historian might have after hearing them. In addition to being a story, it's also crucial to keep in mind that from a historian's perspective, narrative isn't simply about the story of what happens within a game, a book, or a study but rather also about the intentionality of how said narrative is crafted²⁵, whose voices are being heard within it and, whose voices are left out of the it.²⁶ In addition to narrative concerns, we will be partaking in discussions about what sort of information the narratives of videogames could provide for a historian about the past and to what extent the details of these narratives are relevant for current historical research that deals with the narratives and messages embedded within videogames.

For the intents and purposes of this chapter, we will be treating the narratives of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* as if they were presented as

²⁵ Foster W. et al. 2017.

²⁶ Foster W. et al. 2017, 10.

actual historical stories. Whilst we are employing this counterfactual, it is crucial to remember that the creators of all of these three games emphasize that the games are merely inspired by historical themes, and they cannot and should not be taken as historical fact. There are disclaimers for this embedded in each of my chosen games.

2.2.1 Informational concerns

Assessing the stories of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* within the context of how possible it would be to use the narrative of each of these games within an actual historical project from a purely epistemological standpoint. This means that we will analyze the narratives of each of my chosen games to see what sort of reservations a historian would have about presenting their narratives as valid, or at least partially valid, historical information.

First, let's tackle what seems to be the most obvious issue when it comes to using videogames as a component of spreading historical messages. This is the fact that the games themselves are playable, instead of being experienced in a relatively static way. This applies to all three of my chosen games, considering all of them incorporate environments that you can freely walk around in, but let's use *Assassin's Creed II* as an example. During the mission *Beat a Cheat*, Ezio is tasked with roughing up his sister's (now ex-) partner, who had been unfaithful to her. Pretending this mission is trying to convey a historically true story, it would fall apart immediately when the player is given control of Ezio. This is due to the fact that there are multiple different streets and paths Ezio can take to reach the target location, and multiple different ways the beatdown itself might play out. For instance, one player might be worse at controlling Ezio than another, which would lead to one getting punched two times while apprehending the cheating boyfriend, while the other manages to avoid all of the retaliatory punches. This naturally causes an issue for the purpose of conveying a believable historical narrative, since no matter what some unnamed sources of propaganda might want you to believe, two different stories of an event cannot simultaneously be the exact truths of how they played out.

Another important consideration is the specificity of information that a videogame would provide. In all of my three chosen games, the narrative unfolds in a very calculated and detailed way. Most cutscenes, which would be short animated sequences where characters

speak to one another without the player being able to control them²⁷, everything down to the character's facial expressions is intricately and precisely conveyed to the player. This once again applies to all three of my chosen games, but let's use the previously mentioned mission *The Tale of Lady Masako* from *Ghost of Tsushima* as an example. When Jin first meets Lady Masako during the mission, a cutscene of the two reuniting and sharing what they know about the state of Tsushima and their family members plays. During this cutscene, there are multiple close-up shots of both Lady Masako and Jin Sakai. If this was portrayed to be accurate historical information, it would be impossible to verify that these were the specific facial expressions that these two people had during their conversation. This is because during the time the Mongol empire still existed, there existed nothing that could have captured the interaction in such detail. This is merely one of the countless examples of information that would be too specific to be touted as historically accurate. Even in cases where sources could verify that the narrative is at least partially correct, historical sources could never yield information that would verify the historical accuracy of such a detailed digital depiction to be completely accurate.²⁸

A third thing to consider when analyzing videogames within the context of relaying historical information is the level of anachronism that comes with the medium. In the context of a videogame this means that when we are injecting things like emotions into the historical narrative of a videogame, we have to keep in mind that there are historians who would argue that the way people felt and experienced emotion and thought about the world in the past is entirely different to how people feel and think about these things in the present.²⁹ This once again is applicable to the subject matter of all my three chosen games, but let's use the character of Father Godwin from *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* as a reference point. During the mission *Mysterious Ways*, he presents what could be characterized as a rockstar's attitude towards fulfilling his earthly duties. He's much more interested in having fun and engaging in earthly pleasures than worrying about the sermon he has to deliver to his congregation the following day, leading Henry to have to pick up the slack for him in the morning to help him get through the day. Now, depending on the historian, they could argue that due to the way people thought and felt in the Middle Ages, especially in relation to God³⁰, that the reasoning

²⁷ Riha 2024.

²⁸ Courtney M. & Courtney A. 2008.

²⁹ Boddice 2017.

³⁰ Brown 2016.

and emotions that are assigned to Father Godwin's decision making are anachronistic and thus not historically valid. The same argument could naturally be extrapolated to concern all of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance's* characters in different contexts.

Lastly, it bears mentioning just how much historical data and how many different sources a historian would require creating even a 30-second-long conversation in a videogame that is bulletproof from a historian's perspective. Without even considering the environment that the narrative takes place in, which we will discuss in the upcoming main chapter, a historian would need to have extensive personal records on any given human being to know what sort of things they might have been passionate talking about, how they would have felt and thought about it in that specific context and how they wanted to proceed with the conversation they were having. And, unless the situation is a monologue, this would need to be the case for at least two different people. And to make matters even worse, historians don't really even agree on which sort of source could provide a historian with good enough information to make such inferences from.³¹ Suddenly, it's starting to seem impossible to even consider the possibility of storytelling that would hold up a historian's scrutiny in any videogame. I feel as though all is not lost, however, which we will return to after some ethical considerations.

2.2.2 Ethical concerns

In addition to epistemological questions, a historian would surely have some ethical qualms about using videogames to teach history in different professional contexts. In order to examine some of those qualms, let us explore what sort of ethical questions a historian might have about the narratives of *Assassin's Creed II*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima*, as if they were to be presented as historically accurate. Naturally, ethical questions cannot be completely separated from epistemological ones. A part of creating a coherent and professionally acceptable historical narrative is making sure that it meets certain ethical requirements that have been discussed in the academic community.³²

Let us start by using one of *Assassin's Creed II's* core story elements, the struggle between the assassins and templars, as an example for evaluating the issue of whose voice is being

³¹ Howell 2001.

³² Berlatsky 2011.

heard within the narrative. In the case of *Assassin's Creed II*, a historian should recognize that the narrative is written from a perspective that favors the assassins over the templars. This partiality manifests itself through many different ways, but one good example of this is that the majority of the time there is a templar character on screen, they are portrayed to be selfish, ruthless and morally Machiavellian. This is especially well exemplified in the chapters Ezio spends in Venice, which are the chapters from chapter seven, *The Merchant of Venice*, to chapter eleven, *Alter Egos*. During these acts the templars have a very utilitarian attitude towards not only the rest of the world, but also towards one another. And while our protagonist Ezio isn't on his journey for the noblest of reasons, it's framed as having a morally virtuous purpose beyond a thirst for power, which seems to be the primary preoccupation assigned to the templars. A historian could draw from this that the primary voice in that narrative being heard is that of the assassins. This would not be acceptable to a professional historian, as they cannot favor one side over the other in their research. They would have to ensure that the voices of both parties are represented in a manner that provides as full of an understanding as possible of the motives and actions of both sides.³³ In addition, if a historian wanted to argue that the templars of the story were actually as corrupt and evil as the perspective of the assassins paints them to be, they would need to lean on other sources of information as well. This is because a singular voice claiming that the templars were bad people does not mean that this is the historical truth of the matter. Before this issue is addressed, the story of *Assassin's Creed II* would not be usable in a teaching context.

This idea ties well into another concept a historian would have to be weary of whenever they are considering which interpretation of the historical narrative is more accurate than the other. This would be whether or not the historical narrative being presented to the historian is clearly promoting certain values or appealing to them. In the story of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* the main goal of Henry is to fulfill his father's final wish and bring the sword they had forged together to Sir Radzig, with it being very much implied that the only way he would get that sword back is to pry it from the cold dead hands of the man who took it from them. From mission four, *Awakening*, to the very end of the game's narrative, the primary characters with whom Henry comes into contact seem to be on board with this idea. These include are highly stationed men, like Sir Radzig and Sir Hanush. With important, powerful and recurring figures within the narrative being supportive of Henry's goal, at least tacitly, a

³³ Berlatsky 2011.

trained historian should have some alarm bells ring in their head. They should recognize that the narrative of the videogame appears to be pushing vengeance as an acceptable social action. This could indicate that it was made with the goal in mind of attracting people who think similarly to be more receptive to the source material, or even to promote this message to those who come into contact with it. As we have established, this is something historical narratives written by trained historians should never do, which in turn should lead the historian to question the validity of the information presented. When a historian comes into contact with a narrative like this within historical source material, they have to seriously question what the motive for its creation was, as it could have even been created purposefully to try and manipulate the general public.³⁴ It is not quite as clear that the narrative of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* would not be usable in the context of an educational history-related videogame due to this issue specifically, as the line between intentional manipulation and inclusion of fact is blurry. However, the other issues we have already discussed in relation to videogame narratives would ensure that this is the case.

Out of all my three chosen games, *Ghost of Tsushima*, with its brutal visuals of war and serious tone would probably be the first game to catch a historian's eye on the emotional front. After watching Khotun Khan mercilessly burn a samurai alive in the *Prologue*, kill Jin Sakai's friend in front of him during *A Reckoning in Blood*, and force someone else to set fire to a prisoner tied to a stake during *Shadow of the Samurai*, a player will most likely be emotionally affected by what they are seeing. More specifically, the player will most likely experience anger toward Khotun Khan for his brutal and merciless ways, which causes them to think more negatively of him. Should a historian come into contact with source material like this in the videogame they are analyzing, they should stop and realize that the historical narrative that they are currently engaged with, with its visceral descriptions of horrible behavior, is purposely crafted to elicit an emotional response from them. How different events and situations are presented within the narrative affects how the person viewing them reacts to it. When a narrative adds detail that is designed to manipulate the historian into feeling a certain way, it no longer holds up to scientific scrutiny. This in turn would render the story of *Ghost of Tsushima* unusable in an educational setting.

³⁴ Jenks 2006.

Lastly, it bears mentioning that whilst none of the narratives of my three chosen games deal with historical narratives close to the present, a historian should always take into consideration whether the information they are placing into a game, or an exhibit, could have negative repercussions for someone who is currently alive.³⁵ Seeing as this issue of recency would apply to all of my three chosen games, should the stories conveyed by them not be fictional, none of their narratives could be used in a teaching context today.

2.2.3 The Significance of Narrative Details for Historical Research

In addition to the epistemological and ethical issues that a historian might have about the narratives of my three chosen games, they might think about what the details themselves mean for historical scholarship. This train of thought has a few dimensions to it. The first one them being, if the narrative they are currently engaged with is from a game that was made far in the past, it could contain information about what sort of ideas and events were important to people in the past. As all of my three chosen games are fairly recent, they would probably not yield much information in this vein. However, as complex videogames are a fairly new medium, it seems important to consider what sort of information their narratives might be hiding for future historians. It appears that even in their relatively new state, videogames are already hiding information about past ideologies.³⁶ For the time being, it appears that the popularity of videogames is only increasing. This in turn could mean that they will become a valuable additional source of what I would consider written information in the future and thus, more work along the lines of this thesis needs to be done on the nature of videogames as sources of historical information. The reason I consider them to be sources of written information is that while information itself is conveyed through speech, videogames, like any other history-related media have a script that they follow. While it appears that the cadence and the tone of the narrative in my chosen games does not affect how the players relate to them much by themselves, they seemed worth pointing out as they could be potential sources for past human experience in the future.

Following this line of inquiry, what is there to be gleaned from the narrative of videogames and its relation to the current cultural discussions that surround videogames in the field of historical academia? First, it appears to me that there is somewhat of a misunderstanding

³⁵ Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK. *Guidelines for ethical review in human sciences*. 2021.

³⁶ Belyaev D. & Belyaeva U. 2022.

between the medium that the historian is examining and the medium itself. In his article “*Kingdom Come: Deliverance and the Aesthetics of Authenticity (2024)*”, James Cook discusses an element he perceives as a romanticization of the protagonist’s journey through the game. He implies that the journey our protagonist, Henry, goes on would have been extremely unlikely and perhaps only barely believable with the suspension of disbelief that the narrative allows for.³⁷ This is mostly due to the degree of social climbing Henry does during the game, in both social status and personal wealth.³⁸ And whilst from a strictly historical standpoint he is completely correct, I believe he does not fully grasp the implication that he is analyzing a videogame. Videogames have to embed their narratives into a form that allows for player interaction, as the interactivity of a videogame is in itself the main draw of playing one. The romanticization that Cook perceives would be to me more akin to the necessary gamification that developers have to embark on to fulfill the requirements of the medium. Even when making a historical environment with the sole purpose of having it be as historically accurate in relation to the historical period it is trying to depict as possible, the freedom given to the player will always result in the narrative having to accommodate for that. In the case of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* the fact that the player is given control of Henry necessitates that he has the capacity to gain personal wealth and status, as the player is in complete control of his actions. What sort of liberties are given to a player in each specific game is obviously up to the developers, but harshly limiting player options in one direction without opening them up in others will surely lead to an inferior player experience.

This logic can of course be applied to various criticisms that have to do with the messaging of videogames. For me, this is part of the reason why it is important to analyze the stories of videogames on such a detailed basis. For example, as we now understand, all three of my chosen games’ narratives revolve largely around personal revenge. If more games that are within a similar genre tend to also use such narrative details in their stories, we can more firmly deduce that it is not the development team that is trying to push a certain idea or predilection onto their videogame, but instead it could be one of the only types of narratives that allow for the creation of the game in the way that the developers want to make it. When historians have a firmer grasp on how to use videogames in conveying their messages and

³⁷ Cook 2024, 32.

³⁸ Cook 2024, 32.

about what the details within the medium might actually mean, we can hopefully avoid more instances of historians overanalyzing the messaging of videogames. To finish this thought, it bears mentioning that when using singular elements of videogame narratives to bolster their arguments, historians will probably be right in doing so after briefly considering whether or not the medium itself could have affected the way the narrative they are engaged with was formulated. However, making historians aware of all the different ways the details in games can be related to the medium will take some more time and digging.

2.3 Finding a Narrative Middle Ground

Now that we have a greater understanding of some of the core similarities between the narratives of my three chosen games and what sort of considerations a historian might have when employing a narrative as a tool within an educational setting, what sort of possibilities do we have for uniting the two? Strictly speaking, if we followed the strict doctrine our imaginary historian employs when they are engaged with this subject, i.e. a historical narrative, we would be mostly out of luck in trying to bring a story that incorporates the key elements of my chosen games into life. However, I believe there is a reasonable middle ground between a historical fantasy narrative and an academic historical narrative that can be explored within the framework of a videogame.

2.3.1 Possible Plotlines

The recurrence of a revenge plot within all three of my chosen games is the first thing to stand out to me. A historian who is in the process of, or taking part in, the creation of a game for an educational environment should pay special attention to this fact. In my opinion, the fact that the theme of vengeance is shared among all three of these games doesn't just point to the fact that stories of personal revenge are popular, but also that stories that incorporate everyday concerns of human beings are popular. These would be stories that have to do with love, loss, and other struggles human beings face in their daily lives. What can be said for certain is that from the year 2009, when *Assassin's Creed II* was released, to the year 2020, when *Ghost of Tsushima* was released, these themes seem to have intrigued audiences. However, I would even go so far as to say that from an evolutionary standpoint these are themes that have intrigued humans for centuries and will probably continue to do so for many to come. Proving this would be an enormous multidisciplinary undertaking that has not yet been attempted; however, there have been some scholars working in the field of literary

theory that have come upon similar observations.³⁹ To extrapolate this thought further, if it is not these themes specifically that people will be drawn to in the future, the analysis of my primary sources appears to indicate that they will be drawn to narratives that are relatable to them within their temporal contexts.

When it comes to creating a plot about human sensibilities and making it work within the context of an educational game, there are challenges in determining how one would go about doing it correctly. If we were to swap a theme like revenge for love, we would still be falling into the trap possibly appealing too strongly to the audiences' values or emotions. This is because it might distort the message of the story in an unwelcome way. But when we're dealing with a topic like love, we have to stop and ask ourselves how much harm there truly is in it. Making someone feel emotionally attached to a revenge plot, or presenting revenge as somehow desirable through the narrative has ethically harmful implications. A love story is at least less likely to have them. Therefore, it seems possible for historians to create what is, if not completely ethically sound, at least ethically conscious historical narrative about human sensibilities for a videogame. In this instance, I believe that a historian who is acting in an ethically conscious way both when choosing the topic of their story and how they implement it is good enough. A part of the process of creating a cohesive historical narrative presupposes a certain degree of emotional attachment. This is true for both the historian themselves⁴⁰ and for the topic with which they are engaged, as we have already discussed in relation to ensuring all the relevant voices are heard within the context of a historical narrative.

I believe the line for what is and what isn't ethically conscious depends on the videogame project the historian is engaged with. The closer to the present the subject matter of the videogame is, the ferocity with which it appears to be spreading some sort of message, and the methods it uses in conveying that message should all be mental checks for the historian during the project. A key thing a historian should consider when determining whether or not something holds up to ethical academic scrutiny is intentionality. The more intentional the narrative seems in spreading its message, the more cautious of it the historian needs to be. Powerful emotional moments, beautiful storytelling, and detailed personal narratives are

³⁹ van Peer 2002.

⁴⁰ Carr E. & Evans R. 2001.

perfectly fine from an ethical standpoint, but they need to be scanned through the lens of ethical consciousness first.

2.3.2 The Problem of Complex Narratives

Beyond ethical considerations on what sort of plots are appropriate to be embedded within serious historical projects, we should also take a look at the problems more complex narratives pose for a historian that is trying to incorporate them into a videogame. As we discussed earlier, one consistently reoccurring theme within all my three chosen games that appeared to add to the draw of it was the presence of multiple different and likeable characters, especially ones that come from different social standings. When trying to create a scientifically bulletproof historical narrative, this appears to pose a major issue for a historian. This is due to the wealth of different informational sources a historian would require on all of these different people. There are some well-known people, such as national icons, that a historian could perhaps create some sort of historical profile for.⁴¹ However, creating a similar profile for a street thief that would be incorporated into a videogame as if they were a real person would be significantly harder. This is because the likelihood that a source detailing the life of such a person exists in any given time or place is significantly lower.

There are also the issues of source material in general. If a historian was attempting to incorporate multiple characters of different origins into a serious historical videogame, how possible would this be? There are some historians that would reject the idea at the outset as impossible, but I believe their incorporation is possible. Firstly, not every character within the game world needs to have a historically accurate parallel. So long as we know that people like thieves have existed and that being a “thief” currently means the same thing as it did in the past, I believe we can epistemologically fairly incorporate one as a side character, one that doesn’t even need to be named. This is obviously applicable to various different archetypes that one would need in the process of creating a narrative for a videogame. When it comes to more in-depth character creation from a historical standpoint, creating one seems possible if we follow the aforementioned doctrine of ethical consciousness and try to leave out all unnecessary details from the character description that are not pertinent to the

⁴¹ Lukacs 2002.

narrative being told. Naturally, the number of sources needed for a deeper, historically sound character portrayal is vast and case specific.⁴²

Lastly, I want to briefly touch on the recurrent element of self-discovery within the narratives of my chosen games. It is interesting that self-discovery as a theme was something people resonated with, because the nature of a videogame in itself supports the possibility for the player to become someone else for a period of time. Specifically in the context of history-based videogames, it could be assumed that the person who would be interested in playing one already shares an affinity for history. From this, we can draw the interesting conclusion that the player who is engaged in playing a history-based videogame can just be playing the game for the cultural experience of being someone else in a different time. Which in turn means that even games with less complicated narratives could suffice in creating interesting historical experiences in the form of videogames, as people would be there to experience something different for themselves, rather than experience the story of someone else.

⁴² Lukacs 2002.

3 Environmental Design Elements

Imagine that you are young Finnish primary school student who is about to partake in the second class of the day. Now imagine that after only having five hours of sleep during the night, which was induced by that fact that you stayed up late playing with your Nintendo DS in secret, you are forced to partake in some P.E. This notion is already enough to send a shiver down anyone's spine. However, the final shock truly arrives when the teacher loudly proclaims in front of the class that for today's lesson, instead of playing a game or doing something fun, we will be jogging around in the nearby neighborhood.

You drag yourself outside into the cold, uninviting environment as you begin to drag one foot in front of the other as fast as you can. It takes you a little while to get properly going, as some part of you absolutely despises that fact you were put into this situation to begin with and wants to rebel. You try to distract yourself from the absolute misery of the jog by looking around the neighborhood as you go. You see buildings, vegetation, and people going about their everyday lives. Being bored out of your mind and slightly loopy from the lack of sleep, you home in on interesting details in the environment in order to get through the jog. The twisting asphalt paths interlaced with the backdrop of lush northern forests begins to almost seem inviting to you.

Suddenly, you find yourself wondering if someone had specifically designed the path you were currently running on to give you such a varied view of your surroundings, as everything begins to seem more and more intentional. Surely that cannot be true, how could the designer have known which trees and bushes to keep in place and which to cut down to protect the privacy of the surrounding neighborhood and the livelihoods of the animals living within it so far into the past? For now, you're at least satisfied with the realization that the environment you're running around seems to be at least somewhat pleasantly crafted as you listen to the chirping of birds that you can't quite identify within the nearby forest. The asphalt has turned to crunching gravel by this point, which is causing an unpleasant disharmony with the sounds of nature. At least this change in ground composition means that you're almost back at your school. Distracted by this change in cadence and by your thoughts, you don't realize the fact that you are about to run into a traffic sign.

3.1 Analyzing the Virtual Environments

As you might have gathered from this introduction, the following chapter of this thesis focuses on themes of environmental design in *Assassin's Creed II (2009)*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance (2018)* and *Ghost of Tsushima (2020)*. All of these three games have multiple types and sizes of locales that make up the entirety of their map, or maps. The importance of this virtual environment cannot be understated in the context of videogames in general, as everything that happens within the game happens within these virtually crafted environments. If they are poorly designed or don't meet the players' prerogatives, the end result will be a poor experience.⁴³ This is specifically why I have decided to place the environments of my three chosen games under the microscope. Naturally, we will also be partaking in conversation about what a historian should keep in mind during the process of designing or analyzing a virtual environment. This is due to the fact that historians are sure to have a lot of epistemological questions about the creation of a historically accurate virtual environment within serious projects that intend to convey accurate historical information to the player. In addition, this chapter will point out some details that historians should pay more attention to when working with videogames in general.

Before we begin dissecting these virtual environments, however, we should briefly go over how I will be referencing the different locales within these three different games. Much like in real life, the best way to refer to a specific place is by name. If you were taking a taxi to go see the Colosseum in Rome for example, you would tell the driver the specific name of the location you are going to. In some instances, you may even show them a picture of your destination. However, to keep this section of the heading neat, I will not be showing specific pictures of any locations within my three chosen games. Primarily, whenever I'm going to be talking about the design of a specific location, I will make sure that I name said location in order for the information to be easily findable. In it were to be the case that I need to give a closer proximation, I will first name the primary area the location is placed in and then proceed to give a further detailed description of it, making it as identifiable as possible.

In addition to visual environmental design, I will also be assessing the auditory environmental design of my three chosen games. This includes several different categories of

⁴³ Vu 2024.

sounds, such as the soundtrack, background sounds and sound effects of the game. Whenever I am referring to a sound within the virtual environment, I will be doing it by referencing the real-life counterpart of the sound that I hear within the game. When it comes to the soundtrack of the game, should there be a specific track that I would like to make reference to, I will make reference to it by name, after which it can easily be located from the official soundtrack of the game.

3.1.1 Commonalities in Visual Design

Let's start by analyzing some of the commonalities that *Assassin's Creed II*, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* share amongst themselves when it comes to visual environmental design. Firstly, it seems important to point out that each of these games employs a similar variety of different virtual environments. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* place a heavier emphasis on nature when it comes to their environments, employing multiple different vast areas of natural scenery between cities and other points of interest. Most of the environments of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* that are not a part of the twelve major settled locations consist of beaten down country roads, fields and forests. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, the situation is much the same, except that the natural elements of the different environments have a slightly more artistic feel to them. The structures that are dotted around the map of *Ghost of Tsushima* are things like camps, castles and places where survivors of the Mongol attacks have gathered to help each other out. *Assassin's Creed II*, on the other hand, places a heavier emphasis on cities as the primary environments the player is engaged with. Whilst there is some nature present within the locations of Romagna, Tuscany and the brief moment the player spends in the Apennine Mountains, most of the game is situated within the cities of Florence and Venice. Despite this emphasis, there are also a substantial number of areas with buildings and other structures in both *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima*. Some of the major cities of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* are places like Rattay, Ledetchko and Sasau. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, castles, like Castle Kaneda, temples, like Jogaku Temple and small towns, like Omi Village make up most of the built environments within the game. Primarily, these games focus on city environments and the nature surrounding them.

Another element that all of my three chosen games appear to have in common is the attention that is paid to detail in all of my three chosen games. By this I mean two different things. The

first one, which warrants more discussion, being the way, the environments themselves are built and how objects are placed within them. In all three of my chosen games when entering a settlement, a stronghold or a big city, in addition to these environments having just streets and similar looking buildings, they have a great variety of other objects jotted around the map with the purpose of making these environments seem like there is actual human life within them. In the case of *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* these are things like everyday objects used for working, laundry, carriages and stockpiles of different supplies. These objects are usually around areas that would be associated with them, for example, dry laundry being left to dry at a riverside. These would be locations like Rattay in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and Castle Shimura in *Ghost of Tsushima*. In *Assassin's Creed II*, there isn't quite the same level of detail paid to the environment as in the previous two titles, but it can be assumed this is due to hardware limitations as the game is older.⁴⁴ The locales of this game are brought to life with more simple means, like adding benches, balconies and structures that set themselves apart from the others into the environment. This is apparent in both Venice and Florence. Taking into account the year all of these games were released, *Assassin's Creed II* being the earliest, they comparatively have a similar amount of attention paid to the environment. The nature environments of these games follow much of the same pattern, with nature locales being brought to life by scattering elements like rocks, flowers and different elevations into environments that are not settled. The second thing to note about the attention to detail within these games is the high graphical fidelity. Considering these games are all commercial projects made with a very large budget, it's safe to say that their graphical fidelity was cutting edge at the time of their release.

The third major environmental design element that I believe is worth taking a look at is the sheer number of what are known as non-playable characters that are dotted around each of these three games' environments. Non-playable characters are characters that the player does not control, which move around the environment.⁴⁵ In all of my three chosen games, these are mostly human beings loitering or walking around the cities, talking with one another or going about their daily activities. I feel like this is a key element in bringing the worlds of these three games to life and making them feel like an actual, immersive representation of the historical past. Should the player be walking around alone in the city of Rattay in

⁴⁴ Metacritic. *Assassin's Creed II*.

⁴⁵ Warpefelt 2016.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance, Florence in *Assassin's Creed II* or Omi Village in *Ghost of Tsushima*, they would feel more like three dimensional representations of past locations rather than lively historical environments. It's worth mentioning there are also non-playable characters in the form of animals within these games, which further adds to the authentic feel of these virtual environments. Horses, for one, are something findable in each of my three chosen games.

3.1.2 Similarities in Soundscapes

The other major part of the design of any particular videogames' virtual environment is audio.⁴⁶ Considering audio is such a major part of all three of my chosen games, it seems pertinent to investigate some of the core similarities that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* share in this regard. It appears that there are a couple of ways the audio design is similar between all three of these games. Firstly, the way these three games use sound effects stands out to me. By sound effects specifically, I mean sounds that come from the player doing a certain action within the game world, such as walking around or hitting something with their sword. In all of my three chosen games, each action the player character takes appears to produce some sort of auditory feedback, such as the aforementioned actions. This adds to the immersion of the virtual environment, making it feel like the player is actually colliding and interacting with the environment, making them feel more like a part of it. Another thing to pay attention to is the sheer amount of different sound effects within the game. In *Assassin's Creed II*, even things like switching the player character's held weapon causes a metallic unsheathing sound. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima*, things like mounting a horse and the sound of the character's body hitting the wall make appropriate sounds, respectively. Lastly, it bears pointing out that the sound design of these sound effects is very satisfying. When you're battling foes in any of these three games, the sounds of swords clashing against one another and hitting the armor of any given foe have a gratifying edge. These sounds stand out to the player in a way that certain sound effects seem emphasized for increased player enjoyment and immersion.

Moving on from sound effects, another area of audio design that receives emphasis in all three of my chosen games seems to be the background sounds of the environment. What I

⁴⁶ Collins 2008.

mean by these sounds specifically, are sounds that occur in the environment without the player's input. These would be sounds like that of birds chirping in nature environments, non-playable characters conversing with one another and different object collision sounds. In *Assassin's Creed II*, for example, when you're traversing around the densely populated cities of both Florence and Venice, sounds of conversation between people can be heard. This conversation is typically non-descript, but it adds to the overall ambience of the different environments. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, sounds like the wind at the player characters back is emphasized in nature environments and the sounds of working can be heard within populated areas, like the Golden Temple. When it comes to the sounds of conversation and working, the situation is much the same in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Sounds like the wind is given less prominence within the nature environments of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, but they are still livened up by sounds like the aforementioned chirping of birds.

Lastly, when it comes to the environmental design of my three chosen games in terms of sounds, I think they all share a very well-crafted soundtrack. They consist of multiple, beautifully written and executed pieces of music that enhance the immersion of specific moments within the narratives, various activities and different locations within the game's virtual environment. These would be tracks like *Rattay Feasts*, *A Reckoning in Blood* and *Venice Rooftops* in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II*, respectively. The first track, *Rattay Feasts* plays when the player character is within the city of Rattay. It's an upbeat track that uses a lot of high-pitched wind instruments, which add to the bustling atmosphere and experience of the city. The second track, *A Reckoning in Blood*, plays during a swordfight between Jin Sakai and Ryoza, his childhood friend. It serves to elevate the encounter between Ryoza and Jin Sakai to a more climactic state and adds to the impact of it. The third track, *Venice Rooftops* plays during events known as *Races* in *Assassin's Creed II*. During these events, the player's goal is to free run to specific locations around the map before a timer runs out. The high-tempo, upbeat instrumentation of the song adds to the pressure of the moment, giving an almost ethereal feeling to running around the rooftops of Florence and Venice. Apart from these examples, all of these three games have a dense, high-quality catalogue of different soundtracks that play during various situations within the game world.

3.1.3 Differences in Visual Design and Sounscape

So far, we've been taking a look at some of the significant core similarities between the audio design of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II*. It also appears to be worth exploring whether or not there are some key differences between the overall environmental design of these three games. What stands out to me first is the difference between the level of realism within all three of these games. I am not simply talking about realism from a technical standpoint, as obviously the older game, with its higher technical limitations, is going to lose to the younger ones in this regard. Both *Assassin's Creed II* and *Kingdom Come Deliverance* seem to share a proclivity for making the environments appear as realistic as possible. This is evident in the fact that the design of the environments and the people within these two games appears to try to mimic real life to a high degree. *Ghost of Tsushima* also has a very realistic angle to the overall visual design of the game, but it appears to have a more artistic flair to it, especially within the nature environments of the game. There are locations in *Ghost of Tsushima*, such as flower fields, where the design of the environment feels to veer more onto the side of artistic. Not much attention is paid to the specific details of any given flower within the field, as they look more akin to an ethereal, homogeneous, cell-shaded masses of flowers that sway with the wind. This tone of beautifying nature is also present in other environments of *Ghost of Tsushima*. In addition, when comparing the visual design of *Assassin's Creed II* to the other two games, it seems to have a more brutalist and blocky tone. Not much can be drawn from this however, since the most likely explanation for this is merely the rising quality of graphical fidelity from the within the industry after the release of *Assassin's Creed II*.⁴⁷

When it comes to the environmental design of these three games, it bears mentioning that it's relative to the historical place and time it is trying to depict. When it comes to visual design, this is kind of a given, because your depiction will always be relative to what it is you are trying to depict, but the same can't be said for the audio design of these games, specifically when it comes to the games' soundtrack. The composition of the soundtrack of these three games appears to be more along the lines of the culture and place in the world it is trying to depict. Whilst another option would have been to set the tone of the soundtrack by using a certain type of music, which is the case in many contemporary games, it appears that the

⁴⁷ Sathyanarayana, K. et al, 2008.

developers of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II* opted for the more immersive option. Much of the soundtrack for these games carries with it what appears to be more culturally and historically immersive music, at least from a current popular culture standpoint. This is achieved with a heavier focus on different instrumentation based on the place the game is trying to depict. In the case of the European environments within *Kingdom Come Deliverance* and *Assassin's Creed II*, the instrumentation and score carry with a more orchestral tone, while the more Eastern contemporary, *Ghost of Tsushima*, has a heavier emphasis on simplicity and wind instruments.

Lastly, another key difference between these three games when it comes to environmental design has to do with the openness of the areas within them. In this regard, it appears that *Assassin's Creed II* is a clear outlier from the other two. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* the player has much less in the ways of vertical surfaces, structures and other obstructions that get into the way of the player moving forward. As already discussed, the game worlds of both of these two games are more open and filled with nature than that of *Assassin's Creed II*, this in turn leads to a greater emphasis on both freedom of movement and greater distances the player has to travel in order to get to points of interest, especially in regards to the main storyline. This is most likely one of the key reasons that both *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* have a more in-depth fast travel network than *Assassin's Creed II* does. A fast travel network in this context is the ability of the player to warp around different key locations that they've been to before. This in turn leads to the fact that, while *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* have a slower cadence when it comes to moving around and exploring the environment, the player still retains the option to move quite quickly between points of interest within all three games. In allowing the player to do this, the more prominent differences these three games retain in this regard are the feeling of moving greater distances and a heightened sense of exploration. To put it simply, whereas *Assassin's Creed II* favors speed and constant engagement regarding its environment, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Ghost of Tsushima* more often take their time, allowing the player to explore around the open scenery.

3.2 Virtual Environment from a Historian's Viewpoint

So, how would a historian feel about the recreation of such an environment within the context of a serious historical or teaching project? What sort of concerns might they have? It

appears that in the case of recreating an environment these concerns would be mostly on the epistemological side, meaning questions of how sure we can be about their historical accuracy. There are some ethical considerations to be mindful of as well, but for the most part the difficulty for a historian in accepting the representation of a videogame world as historically accurate would be in its sizable, incredibly detailed, environment. In trying to enter the historian's perspective, we will be analyzing what sort of issues a historian might have in the event that the developers of my three chosen claimed that the depictions of the historical environments within these games were realistic, which of course, they are not. We will merely use this counterfactual disposition for the purpose of analysis. It is also worth noting that the opinions of historians might vary greatly in these considerations. So, in order to have the conversation that is important to the subject matter of this study, the imaginary historian that will engage us in conversation for the next heading of this study will be concerned with how accurate the world being created would be to its historical counterpart, first and foremost.

After we have explored these considerations in order to better inspect the tension between accuracy and enjoyment later, we will explore a different kind of significance details in videogames might have for a historian. By this I mean we will explore what sort of historical information can be stored within these often overlooked small details. In addition, we will be considering the significance of details in virtual environments for the conversation that surrounds them. Some of these considerations will be related to the tension between academic work and the often commercial history-based virtual environments of videogames have. I believe that in some instances the details within these games are overlooked to the detriment of academic historical research, while in others they aren't as relevant as I originally thought they might be.

3.2.1 Historian's Approach to Details

First, let's tackle the issue of the details. Using the game world of *Assassin's Creed II* as an example, it's not difficult to realize why a historian might have some major qualms about what they are seeing on a visual level. The environments of Florence and Venice are attempted to be captured fully, but they are also portrayed in a staggering amount of detail, down to different shades of wood on the windows of people's homes. To be able to create a rendering in such a detailed way of any historical city can be said to be unequivocally

impossible. Even if the city was able to be photographed, the chances of a historian finding sources for the color, size, shape and position of every single building within it is definitively zero. This is part of the reason why the models of historical places or buildings are typically small-scale, and even then, mistakes are allowed for.⁴⁸ Just the process of creating some sort of approximation of how many buildings there were in a city and a rough layout of it, a historian needs a wealth of information. This process becomes even more complicated the further back into the past a historian travels, as the amount of intact and reliable source material dwindles more and more.

And that only applies to the settled portions of the environment. Vast areas of the environments of these games are forests and fields, which in turn means that a historian should have some sort of source that would indicate to them not only that the proportion of settled areas and nature are correct, but also detailed descriptions of what the forest looked like and sort of foliage it consisted of. Historically, at least from the Middle Ages to the present, forests have been taken stock of in European environments.⁴⁹ Despite this, this documentation would most likely never allow any sort of historically accurate digital rendition of these forest environments. In my opinion it is safe to assume that these natural environments have undergone less and fewer types of documentation than urban environments, leading to even fewer sources a historian could pull from in their case.

When it comes to the sound design in a virtual environment, I think most historians would be able to accept both the background sounds and the sound effects that accompany the game worlds of each my chosen games, with the caveat that the sounds that come external to the player match the actual historical time being depicted. This means that sounds like birds chirping in the background actually match the fauna of the virtual environment being depicted and the sound of people working are actually proportionally accurate to the kind of work that would have been done in the context of those environments in the past. Source materials for this kind of information should generally not be too difficult to obtain, as only a couple instances of an act, an animal, or nature sound within any given environment would give it cause to be used within the virtual rendition of it. Naturally, the limit for this is the scale of the environment being created, as the amount of any specific sound should be

⁴⁸ Ludwig 2017.

⁴⁹ McGrath M. J. et al. 2015.

proportional to the area that it is used in. However, where some historians might have an issue with the auditory environmental design of a videogame is in its soundtrack. If the historians wanted to keep the virtual environment historically accurate, a soundtrack would more or less only be acceptable in the context of a performance of some kind that takes place within the virtual world. When it comes to adding a soundtrack as background music to an activity or a place, it would obviously not be very historically accurate, considering headphones are not a medieval invention. However, it could work in the context of games that are set during times in history when the player character has access to this technology.

Another important thing to note would be the inclusion of animals and people within the virtual environment. Should there only be a couple of people dotted around a city, or a few horses at the stables, I think most historians could accept the portrayal as historically accurate, as long as their sources back up that the area being depicted was settled and wealthy enough to have horses within their stables. This is the case with 16th century Venice, which is one of the main locations in *Assassin's Creed II*, for example.⁵⁰ However, where this gets more complicated is when we dive into the detail at which something like the city of Rattay in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is depicted. This is because this locale portrays a vast variety of people roaming around it. The historical accuracy of these vast groups of people would be hard to verify, as we would need to have a better understanding of exactly how many people lived within a city and how likely it is that there were a certain quantity of people in a certain area of the city at any given time. Data that would at least give a historian some sort of idea about the total population of a city or what the hot spots of it were would not be impossible to come by, but depicting the daily movements of masses of people with historical accuracy would not be possible. When it comes to the people walking around virtual cities, verification of the authenticity of their outfits, for example, would also be required. This could actually be possible for certain groups of people in different historical periods and locations. For example, it would perhaps be possible to accurately depict the outfits of European peasants in some areas of Europe.⁵¹ However, establishing how many percent of any given city's population could afford more luxurious clothes, what sort of accessories (if any) they wore, and what color combinations were possible begins to seem more and more impossible. Much of the same applies to the animal presence of these virtual

⁵⁰ Pezzolo 2013.

⁵¹ Richardson 2016, 137-141.

cities, apart from the clothing of course. Tracking down sources that verify the presence of specific quantities of animals and their placements within any given settlement would be notable extra work for a historian, just for the sake of adding some detail. Again, in some instances, verifying these details would not even be possible.

Whilst ethical considerations would not be the main cause of concern for a historian in trying to recreate the historical environments of my three chosen games, it bears mentioning that while depicting certain environments a historian pay attention to doing it in a respectful way.⁵² Whilst the buildings themselves don't have feelings, or so I hope, I do not think very many Italians would appreciate the depiction of a square Colosseum. The same considerations are also applicable to the composition of the soundtrack, especially when it's trying to replicable sounds of cultural heritage, and the general way the non-playable characters are depicted. When it comes to ethical concerns, things like storytelling and narrative have much more ethical baggage connected to them, which we have already unraveled.

3.2.2 The Significance of Environment Details for Historical Scholarship

In addition to the tension I have described above, I believe the details of virtual environments hold often overlooked information that is sometimes relevant to a historian. This applies both to instances where the content depicted within the virtual world is itself designed to represent historical reality and to instances where the game only deals with historical themes very loosely. These would be instances where the game either appears ahistorical to the player or instances where different historical motifs are used as inspiration for the virtual environments. I would argue, as some of my colleagues have in the past, that the virtual environments of videogames themselves become valid sources of information about the past,⁵³ especially as they age. As an example, should a historian be missing information about Europe in the 15th century, they might supplement their research by using *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* as an extra source. Of course, if a historian were to do this, they would have to verify that the game they are using is at least somewhat based on what the historical reality of the time it is trying to depict. This idea can be extrapolated to many different locations and time periods around the world. Considering the virtual environments of

⁵² Matthes 2016.

⁵³ Spring 2015.

videogames are typically rich in detail, as we have discussed, they will prove to be useful sources for historians in multiple different avenues of historical inquiry.

It appears important to explore the implications that the tension between the nature of videogames and academic historical research has. As we have discussed, each of my three chosen games has decided to depict the virtual environments within them in such a vast amount of detail that not all of this detail can be reliably confirmed to be historically accurate. It can be assumed that they have chosen to do this in order to create a more immersive, interesting, and complete experience for the people who decide to play these games. This is where I believe some historians can make a mistake when they decide to analyze the details of videogames. To tie this in with my source material, let us explore the way that Saint Mark's Cathedral is implemented into the game. The cathedral is one of the many locations known as tombs that a player can explore during the game. The purpose of these tombs is typically to get from the starting position to a location where the player will earn a seal. In the case of Saint Mark's Cathedral, this means doing a series of timed free running challenges that eventually lead to the opening a secret room in which the seal is stored in. The way this cathedral is depicted within the game places emphasis on the intricate design of its interior elements, beauty and size. When analyzing the details of this environment, a historian participating in a culture debate could mistakenly read the inclusion of this cathedral, especially in the way that it is depicted, as glorifying Christianity. I believe in this instance the historian wouldn't have a complete grasp of videogames as a medium. It is quite typical that the developers of videogames want to add or emphasize specific details or locations because they know that the player would be interested in visiting them.⁵⁴ Moreover, some developers could want to add specific details and locations to their games based on the simple merit that they are beautiful. When historians are exploring the medium of videogames, where one of the primary vectors of their appeal is how fun they are, they should be careful not to look deeply into why the games they have decided to analyze have opted to use certain visual and auditory elements while discarding others. Overanalyzing details like the one we have described above can lead them to incorrect outcomes both when using history-based videogames as sources and when they are analyzing the messaging of different videogames.

⁵⁴ Carvalho N. & Silveira L. 2024.

This leads me to a broader point. How safely can we say anything about the virtual environment's relation to history if the environment itself and the different elements in it contain imperfections in the form of choices made for the purpose of making the game more entertaining to play? This is a broader conversation that warrants more analysis in the realm of historiography and historical theory. However, a good guideline to follow in the meantime is that if a historian uses a singular audio or visual element from a videogame to support a broader argument based on multiple different sources, they are most likely safe in doing so. However, if a historian uses the virtual environment of any given game as the only or one of the only sources for their conclusions, they must do rigorous analysis on the details themselves. One of the benefits of the type of analysis I am conducting in this study is that it will help historians make the appropriate considerations when it comes to using details of videogame environments as sources for their academic pursuits. Furthermore, this kind of information will be useful for historians doing restoration work. There has been a rumor that has persisted for some time that the model of Notre-Dame Cathedral from the game *Assassin's Creed Unity* was used as an aid in the reconstruction efforts of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, which does not hold any actual merit.⁵⁵ However, this does not mean that videogames cannot be used for restoration purposes in the future. This will be another instance where understanding the nuances of video game details will help the restorers make the correct decisions during the course of their work. Details such as the hidden room in the middle of Saint Mark's Cathedral are best left out of its real-world reconstruction.

3.3 Creating an Appealing Virtual Environment

Now that we have gone over some of the things the virtual environments of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II* have in common and analyzed the sort of reactions a trained historian might have about them in the context of creating a serious, educative historical project, it's time to try and find a compromise. What sort of things could we incorporate from the historical environment of my three chosen games into future projects in a way that holds up to a professional historian's scrutiny? I believe the answer lies in what I would call the doctrine of approximate accuracy.

⁵⁵ De Rochefort 2024.

3.3.1 Filling in the Gaps in Visual Design

In the case of the visuality of virtual environments within videogames, I believe we ought to turn to museums for guidance. Modern museums often have turned to the use of small-scale models, such as dioramas, in recreating how certain buildings used to look in the past.⁵⁶ This is so that they may more easily illustrate them to their audience. When employing a model like this the museum has to come to the conscious realization, with the aid of relevant professionals, like archaeologists, that not every single detail in the small-scale model will match the historical reality of what the original used to look like.⁵⁷ The way museums reconcile these differences is with the understanding that a lot of the professional historians in the field of academics also operate within the 21st century, that being that there is no such thing as perfect science when it comes to history.⁵⁸ When a museum embarks on the creation of a new exhibit, it goes without saying that they do their due diligence in verifying whatever information they are about to present to the public from professional sources. After consulting with multiple different sources and professionals, they begin working on whatever each specific exhibition requires, filling in some of the missing information by deducing from the information that they already have what the most likely answer to the blank is.⁵⁹ This is to say that if a museum has a rough idea about what the medieval castle (or any other culturally significant object) they currently reside by used to look like, they will deduce what kinds of materials it used to be made out of and what the color of said materials was like, among other things. In my opinion, this approach would also work when it comes to buildings and other landmarks in a virtual environment. This would enable the historically acceptable recreation of at least some of the environmental elements that reside within my three chosen games into a digital form.

However, being able to reproduce singular elements of the visual design of *Assassin's Creed, II, Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, and *Ghost of Tsushima*, leaves us sorely lacking. As we discussed earlier, it appears some of the major visual draws of these games are the complex, detailed and vast environments that the games share amongst themselves. Whilst the type of detail and the exact amount of walkable space don't appear to be crucial in creating an enjoyable historical virtual environment, the general presence of environmental details,

⁵⁶ Ludwig 2017.

⁵⁷ Ludwig 2017.

⁵⁸ Courtney M. & Courtney A. 2008.

⁵⁹ Ludwig 2017.

varied explorable environments and the presence of other life within them do. It appears that one possible way of breaching the gap from singular replicable elements to wider environments would be stretching the concept museums use to recreate singular elements to a wider canvas. In some contexts, if a historian was able to locate sources about two adjacent cities and the relative distance between them, they could infer that most of the area in between these areas is not settled. From there, the historian could find possible records of the type of flora and fauna that resided within the real-world equivalent of the environment they are trying to create a virtual replica of and work from there.

This idea makes me a little bit uneasy, however, since that means that a historian would have to stack at least two layers of uncertainty on top of one another in order to get to their desired outcome. One possible way to try and avoid this cascading effect would be to turn to multidisciplinary help. For example, if a historian was charting what sort of flora and fauna there existed between the towns of Rattay and Ledetchko in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, they might seek extra assurance from turning to geography for their best guesses on the matter. This would help a historian approach the problem from both sides, as one side would consider what the most likely answer to the question is through history and what it definitely isn't through geography. Obviously, different locations would require different kinds of multidisciplinary work, but approaching the problem this way would further minimize the risk of historically inaccurate information. To be realistic here, this would still leave open the possibility of incorrect or missing information to slip into the virtual recreation of a vast historical environment, but these would be mostly smaller environmental fixtures and details that within the profession of history appear acceptable to let slip through the cracks. This is again due to the fact that the current understanding of history posits that most historical information deals with probabilities to begin with.⁶⁰

The last thing I would like to advocate for in this regard is something that would come in handy when depicting different non-playable characters and structures within a virtual environment: the underrepresentation of detail. What I mean by this specifically, is that if Kaneda Castle was known to have at most 500 people stationed within it at one time, a historian is more likely to be presenting accurate information if he shows no more than 300 people in and around the castle at any given time. This same logic can be applied to the

⁶⁰ Courtney M. & Courtney A. 2008.

animals that are depicted within the virtual environment as well. In addition, let's say that if a historian knows of at least three different types of historically accurate doors, windows and walls for buildings that existed in historical Venice, they have no reason to add unnecessary and possibly incorrect information to the virtual environment depicted within *Assassin's Creed II*. This is due to the fact that you can create a decent variety of different buildings from these variables, keeping the environment interesting and simultaneously avoiding adding potentially incorrect detail. In this case underrepresenting detail within the environment leads to a higher probability that the information presented in the game is correct.

3.3.2 Hearing the Historical Environment

As previously stated, I believe in the area of auditory environmental design a historian will most likely have much less objection about the usability of different sounds within it. For background sounds like the aforementioned chirping of birds or light conversation, the only proof you would really need is the existence of environment specific animal and human life. The only time a historian would have serious issues doing this is if they are traveling very far back into the past or intend to create a more complex picture of the soundscape.

In the case of sound effects the situation is much the same. It is highly unlikely that the sound of gravel beneath the player character's feet or the sound of a metal hitting metal is much different now than it was 2000 years ago. As long as the historian can prove that the ground of this virtually depicted real world location truly consisted of gravel and that metal objects were used there during this time period, this proof should be sufficient. However, the area of sound effects that historians might want to pay attention to in this regard is the variety that is exaggerated for the purpose of making the auditory experience of the game more satisfying. As the visuals of different objects colliding into each other are not as clear within videogames as they are in real life, I believe most historians would accept compromising the lack of real collision by means of allowing for different levels of collision sounds. However, there are instances in both *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II* where the sounds of combat are made to sound more visceral than they would in the real world purely for the purpose of entertainment. As long as these exaggerated sound effects remain in the boundaries of realism in both quantity and quality, I believe their usage should not be a problem within the context of a serious educative history-related project. Within these

parameters using even slightly exaggerated sound effects should be acceptable, as they only serve to make the project more appealing.

The area where historians will want to pay the most attention to, however, is that of the soundtrack. I believe there are two possible ways of meeting the auditory demands of a virtual environment and the standards of historical experts in this regard. The first one, which I would consider myself an advocate for, would be to let the implementation of the soundtrack remain similar to the way it is in commercial projects, but with a stricter ethical guideline. What this means specifically, is that whenever a historian is engaging in the production of a historical virtual environment, they need to make sure that whatever music is added into the soundtrack is accurate to the cultural environment it is played in.⁶¹ Personally, I believe that in most cases the soundtracks of these games do not really teach anything, so there isn't really a need to verify their historical accuracy. They serve more as an additional layer in the multi-sensory experience of playing a videogame, which appears to be something that enhances the historical experience, at least as far as current museum practices seem to suggest.⁶² Through this lens, I feel like the soundtrack of a videogame is something that adds to the enjoyability of it through the form of a popular cultural experience without subtracting from the historical value of the project.

The second option would be to not include a soundtrack as a part of the historical virtual environment. Instead, you could substitute it for spotty moments of music being played by pedestrians or dedicated musicians in populated areas, as long as the type of music and the people with the knowledge to play it can be proven to have existed. I believe this is the worse option of the two, but it seems like an acceptable compromise between enjoyability and realism for those academics who would prefer to keep the environment purely historical.

⁶¹ Matthes 2016.

⁶² Luo, D. et al. 2024.

4 Playability

One last time, let me take you back to a cold and dark place, Finnish primary education. You and your friends are sitting in class, waiting for your afternoon lesson to begin, but it's taking an unusually long time. You and the other pupils are slowly starting to grow worried, or excited, about the fact that the teacher has not yet arrived to begin the biology class. After all, this could mean that the class is cancelled. Before long, however, your teacher shows up with a bizarre looking individual you've never seen before. Your teacher, along with this strange man, explain to you that today, instead of your regularly scheduled programming, you will be going to the computer lab for a fun activity. In fact, you'll be playing a game. Everyone is excited, and you cannot wait to see what it is about.

When you finally get there and have your computers open in front of you, you are presented with what are words falling out of the sky. "Quick", your teacher ushers you, "You have to finish typing the words before they reach the ground. So, you get to work, rapidly typing words like "reptile" and "mitochondria", until the words eventually turn into sentences. After about five minutes have elapsed, you begin to feel worry creeping up your spine. Surely, we won't have to keep doing this for much longer, you tell yourself. I mean, this was a fun momentary distraction, but the absolute lack of variance along with the simplicity of the game itself are starting to wear on you. In addition, you could swear the game isn't even properly registering your inputs on the keyboard.

That is when your inner peace is shattered by your teacher shouting "We'll be doing this for the rest of class, try and get as many points as you can!". As all hope seems to be lost, you have a realization. The browser of your computer most likely works, giving you access to games that are way more fun than the one you're currently playing. It doesn't take very long for you and your friends to turn to a much more engaging and interesting form of biological education, the browser game *Swords and Sandals II*. The human anatomy is on full display as you and your friends gather around, watching gladiators fight each other to death, losing limbs, blood, and organs in the process. This is of course until the teacher walks by and with a horrid expression on her face condemns you all for playing such a violent game. She is so appalled in fact, that you are all sent to the principal's office, where you learn that you will be

-serving a 45-minute prison sentence in the school cafeteria before being allowed to go home after school.

4.1 Gameplay

So far, we've discussed elements of creating a compelling historical environment that could also be applicable to, with some caveats, to other forms of historical media. Keeping this in mind, it's pertinent we examine the element of creating a compelling virtual historical environment that is specific to videogames, which is the interactivity of the project. This chapter will address the most important considerations a historian needs to make when partaking in creating an educational history-based videogame. Thus, we will examine the different elements of playability. It would appear to me as if these particular considerations have not gotten enough attention from the field of academia, at least when it comes to using videogames in the process of teaching any given subject. After playing through each of my chosen games, the elements of playability I want to put under the microscope are the gameplay, game feel, and the way the game presents educational information to the player. I will be further defining these terms and their use during the course of this thesis. As we're mostly going to be dealing with matters in the realm of actions and reactions within the game worlds, they have less to do directly with the field of historical academia. Because this is the case, I will be baking any concerns historians could have about these issues and their possible solutions into the analysis of these chapters. In addition, when it comes to the exact content of the different missions we will be discussing, most of the recommendations on how to handle them would have to be considered on a case-by-case basis. This further removes the use of a dedicated chapter that discusses gameplay through a historian's lens. The discussion within this chapter is still extremely relevant when it comes to creating engaging historical experiences in the form of videogames,

We will begin by examining the topic of gameplay. For the purposes of this study, gameplay is the process through which the player achieves the objectives that are presented to them.⁶³In this study, I have split gameplay into two levels, which would be a micro level and a macro level. This felt natural, as I wanted to cover both the minor movements a player makes in order to move their character around and the goals that the player is trying to accomplish. The micro level of gameplay consists of all the inputs and actions a player has at

⁶³ Walsh 2010.

their disposal to achieve the goal of the game. The amount and complexity of these inputs vary from game to game. In the case of *Assassin's Creed II (2009)*, when fighting a foe, the player only has a few inputs at their disposal. On the other hand, in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance (2018)*, the number of different inputs and sequences of inputs a player has at their disposal when fighting their foe is much more vast. The macro level of gameplay on the other hand consists of the range of tasks the player can accomplish with the actions at your disposal, culminating in the player finishing the game. These tasks are different forms of progression through the game. For example, when you play *Assassin's Creed II*, you will be spending most of your time running around the open world, gathering resources, dispatching enemies, and completing missions that are assigned to you. This is the core of *Assassin's Creed II's* macro gameplay. However, these activities also have internal variance. This variance gives these simple actions a layer of depth and intrigue for a much longer time. The end goal of the game depends on the player, but in most cases, it ranges from completing the main missions of the game to completing every single task within the game world.

4.1.1 The Micro Level of Gameplay

Let's begin by analyzing the micro level gameplay elements of *Assassin's Creed II*, *Ghost of Tsushima (2020)* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. I played only two out of these three games on a personal computer, but for the sake of simplicity I will use the keyboard and mouse controls as reference for each of my three chosen games going forward. Having specific keys I can refer to makes it easier to explain what makes the gameplay of these games interesting.

Firstly, the movement within all three of these games is very similar. Whether the player character is on horseback or not, the primary way that the movement works within these games is through one sequence of inputs determining what direction the player is walking into and another set of inputs determining which direction the player is looking into. The first of these, being the movement, is controlled with the W, A, S, and D keys. The second, being where the player is looking into, is controlled via moving the mouse around to face different things within the environment. These simple controls allow for a relatively quick to learn, satisfying and intuitive understanding of how to move within the game worlds of my three chosen games. In addition to these basic functions, all three of my chosen games allow the player some sort of extra movement options that they can use to traverse around the

environment. These would be things like using the left-most shift key for the ability to sprint in *Ghost of Tsushima* and the keys space bar and C for jumping and crouching in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* respectively. These additional movement options allow the player more freedom in traversing the environments of each of my three chosen games and work to make moving around the virtual environments more natural.

Another important element of the micro level of gameplay within all three of these games is the way combat is handled within them. This is due to the fact that *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* have a heavy focus on combat as one of the core elements of the macro level of gameplay. Whilst *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* typically offers the player more ways to solve different situations, it also has an in-depth combat system that the player has to interact with during the course of the game. The combat systems of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* have a heavy emphasis on countering the opponents' strikes against you and then punishing them afterwards. A counter is done by pressing a specific counter key, which depending on the attack can either be a dodge or a block. If the player executes a well-timed block in relation to the attack, they parry instead, allowing them to quickly strike back at their opponents. This added layer of timing and variety makes sure that the player stays engaged with the fight, as buttons and timings at which the player has to press them vary, allowing for variety in micro-level gameplay. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the combat system also revolves around dodging, parrying and striking, but there is an added layer of complexity added to it through the system not working through singular button presses, but rather the positions at which the player holds the mouse. This means that to block an attack coming from a certain direction, the player has to position their mouse to match the position of the incoming attack. The same applies to striking back at the opponents, but in addition, the player is able to execute combinations of different strikes leading to a rock-paper-scissors like situation, where certain strikes supersede others. These combinations are executed by striking while the mouse is in a specific position for many attack inputs in a row. The combat in this game is complicated and even after playing through the game I do not fully understand the nuances of how it works.

What can be said based on the analysis of these three games is that players appear to appreciate relatively simple, intuitive, and dynamic combat systems that keep them engaged in the moment. As for historians, they might take issue with the realism of the fighting being

portrayed⁶⁴, especially in the cases of *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II*. The middle ground would be to remove flashy or excessive finishing moves that the player characters do in order to keep the combat more along the lines of its historically accurate counterpart. In addition to combat, in the cases of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima*, players have access to certain gadgets, like throwing knives, that they can use with dedicated button pushes to help them in their objectives.

The last micro gameplay element in these games that seems pertinent to pay attention to would be the know-how needed in order to navigate many of the different menus within them. In all of my three chosen games, there are different ways the player can navigate purchasing new equipment for themselves and view items that they have already acquired into their personal inventories. In *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II*, these menus are relatively simple to navigate. When the player is either trying to purchase better equipment for themselves or upgrade the effectiveness of the gear within *Assassin's Creed II* or *Ghost of Tsushima* respectively, it's usually a simple matter of moving up and down on the selection screens with the W and S keys, then pressing the designated interact button to select what they want. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the menu system is slightly more complicated. Many of the basic inputs are the same as with the aforementioned games, but the game uses a transferring system in most menus, where selecting an item moves it back and forth from the player to a chest, for example. There are also more complicated menus in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, but for the most part players will be engaging with this system. All three of these menu systems are easy and mostly intuitive to learn, which ensures that the player can store, use and view the things they've acquired during their journeys conveniently. Before moving on, it seems important to emphasize that micro inputs work as a basis for everything else the player does within the confines of these virtual environment, which means that their role in creating and shaping the experience of the player cannot be understated.

4.1.2 The Macro Level of Gameplay

Now that we've established some of the elements that all three of my chosen games share and that thus seem to be attractive to audiences, it's time to take a better look at the just what exactly are some of the macro gameplay elements that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II* share. There are two distinct kinds of macro level

⁶⁴ Ekers 2024.

gameplay within all three of my chosen games. The first of them are narratively driven, detailed main missions that start when the player travels to a specific area within the game world, which we already touched on in the previous chapters. These missions typically have great importance for the story and development of the game world and thus are typically the most exciting and unique among all the activities that a player can partake in within a videogame. These missions are the primary way of bringing the narrative forward in all three of my chosen games. These missions are typically filled with spectacle, which is why they appeared to be some of the main draws within these games. The evaluation of whether or not what is being displayed during the missions holds up historical scrutiny or not needs to be done on a case-by-case basis. One particularly egregious example of a main mission that would not hold up to a historian's scrutiny is the mission *Infrequent Flier* from *Assassin's Creed II*, where after having seen Leonardo Da Vinci's flying machine in his shop, Ezio immediately requests to use the unfinished prototype to fly onto the roof a well-guarded palace, using randomly placed massive bonfires around the city for lift, the existence of which no one seems to contest. In the process of creating a serious historical environment within a videogame, these missions would naturally need to not be quite as extravagant. Following my previous logic, there are plenty of possibilities within the realm of storytelling and environmental design that leave open the possibility for creating interesting main missions in a more historically accurate way. Considering that there are missions with such a degree of liberally used fantasy within videogames, a historian should keep in mind that whenever they are analyzing a videogame as source material that the activities that they are gathering information from might have been specifically gamified or altered to make the video game itself more appealing.

The second level of macro gameplay I would consider to be the side missions within any given virtual environment. These range from fun activities like the previously mentioned *Races* jotted around the different virtual environments of *Assassin's Creed II* to short, more narratively driven extra missions like those in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. All three of my chosen games have a vast selection of additional and optional side content the player can partake in, should they feel like it. These narratively driven extra missions, that are commonly referred to as side missions⁶⁵, provide the player further insight into some of the character and ongoing stories within the worlds of *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Kingdom Come:*

⁶⁵ Thompson 2018.

Deliverance. These typically don't have the flashiness and significance of the main missions within these two games, having a more basic objective such as dispatching a bunch of foes or tracking down a lost person. An example of a mission like this in *Ghost of Tsushima* would be the collection of side missions known as *An Ishikawa Tale*, where Jin Sakai helps Sensei Ishikawa track down his former student. However, such as in the case of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, they may offer the player experiences that are almost completely separate from the main story of the game. An example of a side mission like this would be *Playing with the Devil*, which sees Henry on a quest that deals with the themes of witchcraft in the Middle Ages. Thus, in addition to enriching the main narrative of the game, side missions provide a fun distraction for the player within the virtual environment, should they find themselves in need of variety. Many of the same objections can be levied against these kinds of side missions as can be levied against the main missions from a historian's standpoint. However, in general terms side missions typically have less egregious elements within them than main missions do, making it easier for them to be added into a historical virtual environment. Furthermore, as is the case with *Playing with the Devil*, these side missions offer a historian the chance to explore different topics relevant to the historical time in question without needing to them it into the primary narrative of the game.

Lastly, let's take a look at what function of activities, like the *Races* in *Assassin's Creed II*, or the *Haiku* in *Ghost of Tsushima* appear to be within these virtual environments. I am using the term activities, as they do not feel significant enough to warrant the title of side quests, and they do not have singular defined term they are referred to within the contexts of these videogames. Activities, like the *Races* and *Haiku*, are dotted around the different cities in *Assassin's Creed II* and prefectures in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Whilst *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* has by far the smaller number of missions that could be considered as activities, I would lump missions like the tournaments that the player can partake in between set intervals of time into the category of activities as well. In addition to activities that task the player to complete a challenge of some kind, there are more passive activities as well, such as different collectibles the player can find jotted around the virtual environments of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima*. In the case of three of my chosen games, there are also niche activities the player can partake in outside of the mission structures within the game. For example, in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* the player can choose to go hunting and gain in game currency by selling animal parts to the townsfolk. Following my previous logic, the implementation of collectibles and activities within serious educational projects should be a

fairly straight forward process. This is due to the fact that adding an activity, like a rooftop race, into a serious educative historical project would only require the knowledge that such an event was held around the same location in the past. As for collectibles, it appears easy to apply a narrative reason for why the player is collecting a certain time-appropriate item within the game world. Where historians might run into trouble is in the fact that similar activities and missions are placed in multiple different locations around the game world. If we were to incorporate this into a serious educational project, we would need to have proof that the activity used to be decently popular within any given historical environment. Luckily, I think the solution to this is adding fewer activities but keeping them more varied. Whilst the the quality and variety of side missions is typically something that people appear to appreciate within a virtual environment, the quantity appears to be less important, especially when we're dealing with what are essentially the same missions located around different parts of the game world. This is supported by statistics on each of my three chosen games that seem to indicate that the majority of players did not complete all of the optional content within them.⁶⁶

4.2 Game feel

The second important component in the playability of the game that appears to be worth a closer look is game feel. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II* all appear to place an emphasis on how playing the game feels. Within the context of this chapter, game feel is essentially the degree of responsiveness between the player and each of my three chosen games.⁶⁷ However, for the purposes of this study this responsiveness is not only in terms of how well the game reads and reacts to the inputs you feed it, but rather how the game reacts and adapts to the actions you take in the game world and how fluidly the game lets you keep interacting with it. Game feel thus relates strongly to the gameplay elements of a game, but it entails a deeper level of interconnectivity between the player and the game. For the following analysis, we will be calling these different elements of game feel input feel, environmental game feel, and play feel.

The reason I believe these games place such a heavy emphasis on game feel is that whilst these games remain works of fiction, they are based on the real world. That is to say, they

⁶⁶ Steam hunters. Serch for *Assassin's Creed II*, *Ghost of Tsushima DIRECTOR'S CUT* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

⁶⁷ Mikkelsen R. & Wirman H. 2024.

tend to try and bring a realistic historical environment to life. This means that typically we are dealing with concepts and entities that are very natural to us, like humans, buildings and nature. Thus, if we are walking down a street in a virtual environment and start pushing people around and they do not react to it in any way, the world immediately feels more hollow and less immersive to us. This is specifically because we are used to what these virtual entities are trying to represent behaving and reacting to our presence in a certain predictable way. Secondly, we are used to being able to manipulate the world around us. So, if we pick up a rock and place it somewhere else, we expect it to be there when we go back and check on it. Thus, we expect the worlds of games that are based on the real world to also respond to our attempts of manipulating it in different ways. This is why I consider it especially important to consider different aspects of game feel in connection with this study.

4.2.1 Input Feel

To further illustrate what I mean by input feel, let us return back to the world of *Ghost of Tsushima* for an example. In the process of playing *Ghost of Tsushima* the player is feeding the game thousands of different inputs. Between my three chosen games, there were vastly different levels of fluidity when it came to how well the game responded to and handled those inputs. Let us consider two different scenarios to illustrate how different game feels can affect the playing experience of a player. In the first one, whenever you jump, dash or hit an opponent with a sword, which is something you'll be doing a lot of when playing *Ghost of Tsushima*, the character on screen responds swiftly and smoothly to the inputs you feed the game. In the other, however, when you press a button, there is a noticeable delay to Jin Sakai moving around. Furthermore, even the directional inputs of the movements seem inconsistent. In practice, this could mean that when you hold down the movement key in the exact same way as you held it last time, the direction of where your character walks will be slightly different nonetheless. This of course is an extreme example, but it gets the point across. Between these two hypothetical scenarios, the second version of the game would be a lot less intuitive to play and the feel of the game would be worse.

When it comes to the input feel of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Assassin's Creed II*, it's a mixed bag. Out of all three of these games, *Ghost of Tsushima* seems to respond to the players inputs in the most consistent way. During my time with it, I barely ever had the sense that the game was not responding properly to the inputs that I was

feeding to it. However, in the case of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Assassin's Creed II*, this was not exactly the case. In *Kingdom Come Deliverance*, when it came to movement and interacting with different objects within the environment, the game felt smooth and intuitive to play. However, when it came to the combat of the game, it felt as though the game was not properly registering the directions I was swinging my sword from. Now, as I mentioned previously, the combat system of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is complicated, so it is possible that I have not fully grasped it yet. However, after getting to the end of the game and still feeling like the combat was lackluster, I do not think I was the only problem. In the case of *Assassin's Creed II*, we're dealing with a situation opposite to the one in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. The sword combat of the game felt great, and it felt as though the game responded to my inputs very well and precisely. However, when it came to the movement of the game, there was a lot to be desired. Simply running around the streets of Venice did not appear to cause any issues. The problems started whenever I had to make precise jumps to different places within the environment. I repeatedly felt as though Ezio was not climbing in the directions I indicated for him to climb, both vertically and horizontally.

However, with the issues that certain elements of both *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and *Assassin's Creed II* had, the overall experience with input feel in these games was still acceptable. It appears that if there is anything to be drawn from comparing these three games in terms of input feel, it would be that fact that if the other elements of the game are interesting enough, the player is willing to put up with some weirdness in regard to input feel. In addition, it appears that the requirement for precise input feel depends on the type of game. In a more puzzle focused than a combat focused game, like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, it is acceptable for the feel of the combat to slightly lackluster in comparison to everything else, as the player will spend most of their time interacting with other systems within the game. However, in the case of *Assassin's Creed II*, having one of the core elements of the game, which is free running around its different virtual environments, be imprecise, deducts significantly more from the experience.

4.2.2 Environmental Game Feel

Another component of game feel is the environmental reactivity of the game. More specifically, this means the feel of how different elements of a game world react to the presence of the player within it. After playing through each of my chosen games, I think that

this variety of game feel is particularly important when it comes to games that have a historical basis. This is because the environmental reactivity of a game can really bring it to life. Let us go to the game world of *Assassin's Creed II* for a simple to understand example. When moving around the open world of *Assassin's Creed II*, whenever Ezio is running into people or climbing up environmental fixtures while there are other non-playable characters present to witness him, they react to Ezio's presence by moving their heads in the direction that Ezio is moving or yelling obscenities at him. They may also appear worried or scared if Ezio has a sword out in an area where he is not supposed to have one. This allows the player to infer that these other characters are worried about getting caught in the crossfire of a brewing conflict. And if you do the unthinkable and swing your sword at these innocent bystanders, they will jolt up in shock at the terrible crime you have just perpetrated upon them (or someone nearby) and run away in fear. This is the game's way of responding to the actions a player takes within its world and showing said response to the player.

This, of course, is only one form of environmental reactivity, and in the case of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* this reactivity goes a lot deeper. It does so in the severity of consequences for the player's transgression but also in the variety of different environmental reactions. Out of my three chosen games, I would say that the environmental game feel, which I will shorten to environment feel from now on, of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* resemble each other in many ways. Firstly, there are no major changes the player can cause by their actions in the game world either in terms of personal consequence or narrative consequence. Beyond just that, most of the environmental reactions within these two games closely resemble one another. As discussed earlier, both games share sound effects and at times visual effects while running, climbing and exploring around the environments of their virtual worlds. These effects very often work in tandem to create a sense of responsiveness from the environment. In practice this means that things like leaping from one side of tile roofed buildings to the other in *Assassin's Creed II* creates chalky and heavy thuds that make the player feel as though they are intertwined with the environment. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, you can even notice small particles of dust emerge from some of the cliffside surfaces that Jin climbs on.

A similar pattern is noticeable in how *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* handle fighting opponents. Whenever you are engaged with an enemy in either of these two games, landing hits on them makes them appear more bloodied and bruised. In *Ghost of Tsushima*

this is especially noticeable as the opponents you are fighting get progressively more covered in their own blood during the fight, sometimes even to a humorous degree. After a fight with one particular foe comes to a conclusion, in both of these games the character is likely to do some sort of swift, performative finishing move that ends the opponent. From the realist perception of a historian, this obviously is excessive and would not be done in the course of any real sword fight. However, seeing as this level of visceral detail was well received by the audience of all of my chosen games, I would advocate for incorporating these flashy elements into educational videogames as well, since they add a layer of gratification to the combat of these games in terms of environment feel. There are ethical concerns that a historian would have to address in this regard, especially when it comes to showing violence to a younger audience, but I do not think the flashiness in itself is reductive. If anything, exaggerated effects and actions like this could also be applied to different activities within the game world of a history-based videogame and thus would not need to revolve around violence.

In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the situation is much the same as it is within the two previous games. In terms of making the player feel like they are colliding with the environment and adding gratifying and visceral sound effects to certain actions within the game, it resembles *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima* completely. However, where *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* appears to be taking an extra mile is in the way the player's actions have repercussions within the virtual environment. Within the game, actions like pickpocketing someone lead to Henry's reputation being lowered within certain cities of the game, or a bounty being placed on them. Instead of being the tactile variety of environment feel that we've discussed previously, this variety of environment feel is something that I would categorize as narrative environment feel. Having your actions within the game world come with noticeable consequences can deepen the amount of information that a historian can incorporate into the virtual historical environment of a videogame. In addition, it can assist with making the player feel more interconnected in the judicial and ethical systems of the game world and with it, the past. Considering that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* made it into this study, it's safe to assume there is also a sizable market for players who want more of this type of realism in their virtual historical environments. When it comes to *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, it bears separately mentioning that the crime and punishment system is not the only added layer of environment feel within the game. For many of the missions within the game, the player can affect how well or poorly they turn out. For example, I had a

whole village of people perish within the context of the quest *Pestilence*, because I was not quick enough to deliver a cure for the disease to them. Whilst this is an engaging and interesting concept for a more serious historical project, it is most likely not executable in the way that it was within *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. As discussed in the chapter on narrative, alternate endings in this form within the context of a historical virtual environment appear impossible for epistemological reasons.

Lastly, as a footnote to environment feel, I would like to add that having interactivity with the objects within the players environment appears to be desirable. In all three of these games, the player can either pick up, move or destroy objects by colliding or interacting with them. This appears to be an important factor in adding to the immersion of the virtual environment that the player is currently engaged with. This is most likely due to the very thing I stated at the start of this chapter, that being that people expect objects within the game world to react in a similar way to being manipulated as they would in the real world. If the player runs into a box or a human being and they do not even appear to acknowledge the player's presence within the game world, it would significantly detract from the environment feel of the game.

4.2.3 Play Feel

Play feel within the context of this study refers to the component of game feel that has to do with how fluidly the player is able to keep playing the game through different informational and narrative elements that the game throws their way. There are multiple different ways a game can present the information it has for the player. Among other options, it can choose to make the player read tooltips that pop up on the game screen, convey information about the game through narrative means, or passively allow the player to explore around and find things out for themselves. The way a game presents information to a player can have a huge impact on the experience a player has with the game.

There are two specific areas of play feel that I would like to pay attention to within the context of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Ghost of Tsushima*. The first one is the way that these games present historical information to the player. During the process of creating videogames with the purpose of teaching, I believe there is a high chance that developers might miss out on how to make the information they are presenting attractive

to the viewer. For example, *Assassin's Creed II* has a database of information that keeps filling up as Ezio meets more people and visits more locations during the different missions he partakes in. Whenever new information is added to the database about any given structure or person, there is brief mention of it on screen. This lets the player pick and choose when and if they want to further engage with the historical information the game is providing to them in their own time. In the case of *Ghost of Tsushima*, the game tries to evoke the interest of the player in the history of Tsushima (and beyond) with the intrigue of the different themes and the artistic visuals present within the game world. I believe within professional projects that try to teach historical themes, this is definitely the way to go as well, because it appears that players appreciated having the option to explore further details about the history of the game worlds being depicted at their leisure. When you lay out information for the player constantly, interrupting their gameplay, it would most likely deduct from the pleasant fluidity of playing a videogame. While we are on this topic, it appears important that the gameplay is also not constantly interrupted by different explanations about the game world and game mechanics that force the player to stop playing, as whenever I felt like I was taken out of the experience whenever this happened to me during my playthrough of each of my chosen games. The key is to find a balance where the player does not feel frustrated about the lack of structure given, but also not overwhelmed by it.

5 Conclusions

After going over all my sources, I believe there are a couple of key takeaways that we can formulate based on what we have discussed. It appears we can separate elements from the environments, narratives and playability of *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), and *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) that we can use in the context of making historical virtual environments that are engaging to player experiencing them. In addition, after discussing these elements in detail within the context of academic historical scholarship, I have located some important takeaways for future research of videogames in the field.

First, what have we learned about the creation of compelling narratives within videogames that have a historical basis? When it comes to narrative details, it appears that stories concerning human affairs are popular, at least within the context of games that are situated in the far past and place an emphasis on exploration and sword fighting. The theme of self-discovery also appears to be intriguing for people who consume this genre, which appears to be partially brought on by the fact that videogames themselves are an exploration of the player's own identity. Beyond just having these results be applicable to the strict genre that these games follow, there appears to be evidence in the realm of academia that supports their wider application, at least to a certain degree. When it comes to the narrative style of the game, the cadence and the tone of it seems to be less relevant when it comes to how drawn the player is to the narrative. However, the tone and cadence of the game can tell us something about past social conventions in the future, much like the rest of the narrative elements of these games. When a historian is working with a videogame as a source, they should be mindful that the narrative of the game is shaped by the medium that it is placed in and the narratives of games are not necessarily trying to promote certain ideologies or historical misconceptions purposefully. In addition, as the popularity of videogames keeps increasing, historians will be able to lean on the narratives of past videogames as additional source material about the past.

In the realm of environmental details within the genre of my three chosen games, it appears that the level of detail, variety, and immersion added through the existence of artificial life are important in creating an engaging experience. In addition, the use of different sounds, sound effects, and soundtracks seems to create a more immersive experience for the player.

There are problems with using some of these elements within historical virtual environments, as they lean too heavily on the side of fiction. In the case of this study, specifically the use of soundtracks and the high level of detail within the visual design of these three games were identified as problematic. However, it seems that some of those issues are solvable by modifying the use of these different elements to be more in line with the historical environment the games are trying to recreate. When it comes to the use of these three games and games like them as source materials in the future, there is a wealth of knowledge a historian can gain about the past from the visual elements of the game. There is some information to be gained from the sound design as well, but visuality appears to be more important in this regard. Once again, historians should be careful when analyzing specific elements of these video game environments for their research, as the medium they are embedded in shapes their implementation.

Lastly, when it comes to making a historical virtual environment appealing, there are also some considerations about the medium itself that historians and other professionals in the field have to make. Chiefly, the playability of a game appears to be an important part of how it was received by audiences in the case of each of my three chosen games. It appears that the quantity and variety of activities within the game world of a virtual historical environment is important for player engagement. This poses issues, as implementing different activities requires work in their historical verification. When it comes to the types of activities in each of my chosen videogames, however, it seems like their implementation would be possible after some compromise and thorough research. Consequently, however, future historians can learn details about specific past activities through videogames, after analyzing these details within the context of the medium itself. In addition to variety, making the game feel satisfying to play through testing the game feel is important in making engaging historical virtual environments. The chief considerations that need to be made in this regard appear to congregate around how fluid the game feels to play, how well the interplay between the player and the game has been executed and how gratifying it is to accomplish tasks within historical virtual environments. These considerations have a weaker link to historical scholarship itself but are an important part in making sure that the spread of historical information is done correctly through the medium of a videogame.

Now that we've gone over some of the key results of my study, what remains to be done in the future? Well, for one, a study similar to this one could be conducted in the future as a part

of a bigger project where thousands of different videogames from multiple different genres that have a heavy historical influence are compiled into a database. This database would host information on key details about the games, how well-received they were and what their release year was. From there the data would be fed through an algorithm which would find overlap between the different elements of all the games within the database and rank them in regard to how popular they were by different element combinations. In a study like this you could acquire a fuller sense of what kinds of games seem to resonate with audiences in multiple different genres and get a better understanding of the kinds of things players care about in regard to these specific genre combinations. Hopefully this study can also be helpful in determining the qualitative elements that these games should be sorted by within such a study.

Should a large scale study like this not be possible for some reason, smaller scale alternatives are also possible. Within this study, I've analyzed a very particular type of game, that being one that has an open world and a heavy emphasis on swordplay and exploration.

Theoretically, numerous studies of similar make could be carried out for different genres of games that incorporate historical themes within them. One especially popular genre of game that makes heavy use of historical themes is strategy games. With hugely popular games like *Civilization IV*⁶⁸ and *Hearts of Iron IV*⁶⁹, there is certainly enough material for a similar study within the genre.

This study has worked under the assumption that people learn from the media that they consume during the course of their daily lives. For me, this is a self-evident fact that needs no further explanation. However, a follow-up study to this one could also go further in-depth about the quantity and quality of information that people learn from the history-based videogames that they are engaged with. This kind of study would give a historian a better sense of what kind of things they would need to focus on in order to get their point across to the audience. However, here it is good to keep in mind that creating a videogame that tries to teach its audience as much and as efficiently as possible does not lead to good results, as this study has argued. Thus, the primary help such a study could provide the historian would be in when and how to teach the audience.

⁶⁸ Metacritic. *Civilization IV*.

⁶⁹ Metacritic. *Hearts of Iron IV*.

One thing that I've briefly alluded to already within this study that is worth considering is that if videogames were to be taken as a part of the teaching curriculum of schools and universities, would there be enough financial interest to supply the creation of these kinds of games? The answer to this question is twofold. In the short term, I have a tough time seeing a world where historians get the ability to create historical games for the purpose of teaching people. This is because the production cost of videogames of the caliber we have analyzed is still very high, and they require a vast team of talented individuals to bring to life. However, in the long term, I see a possibility that new technologies and ever growing interest make it possible for historians to create educational historical videogames. This is due to the fact that with the help of developing technologies like artificial intelligence historians might be able to offload much (if not all) of the actual development and coding of a history-based videogame to programs that will do it for them. This would not only open doors for easier access for historians to include themselves into the process of making history-based videogames but also for them to possibly make their own. As we have discussed, videogames do not necessarily need to be incredibly beautiful or incredibly elaborate to be enjoyable, but with the help of artificial intelligence it is possible that even games made by single individuals will be so in the future.

Now, as this thesis is drawing to a close, I would like to request a moment more of your time so that I can finish the parable I have been telling. For this, I would like to request you enter your thoughts one last time. Picture this, you have finally made it through the afternoon class and the detention that you were served following it. You are irritated, having served a sentence the cause of which you do not even understand. It's finally time to start heading back home.

As you gather your belongings and start making your way home, you are excited at the prospect of messaging your best friend and finally being able to spend some time with him doing the things that you two love to do. However, as you make your way home you can't help but ponder all the different experiences you've had during the course of the day. Combining different thoughts in your head, you begin to see patterns where there might not even be any. But the more you think about it, the more you begin to feel as if there are certain unwritten rules that guide your everyday existence. If you do one thing, you can expect there

to be a punishment for your actions. If you do another, you can expect to be praised and rewarded for them.

Being young, you don't fully understand why this is the case, but what you do understand is that sometimes it feels like the conventions of the world around you are somehow warped, and that actions that should be praised are ignored and actions that should not be punishable are treated as horrible crimes. Confused and overwhelmed by your thoughts, you think to yourself that it is time to go looking for answers. Determined as ever, you keep pushing forward, until you come home.

As you step through the front door and see your mother in the kitchen, you are filled with a sense of hope. She must have all the answers you so desperately seek. She greets you as you walk in through the door, but the reunion is sharply interrupted by the flood of questions that you direct at her, still wound up about the injustice you just suffered at school for merely playing a game with some friends during a lesson that was supposed to be free-form anyway. Your mother does her best to explain to you the nuances of your misconduct and the very complicated set of hidden rules that life has in store for you. Whilst you don't fully accept everything she is trying to convey to you, you begin to feel more peaceful as most of your fears are allayed.

No longer angry or terrified of the prospect of everything you have thought about today, you begin to wait for your friend to arrive. After some time, your doorbell finally rings and you find your best friend outside, waiting to come in. After settling in for a brief moment, you two decide to head to your room, where your PlayStation 2 is practically begging for you two to turn it on. You take your seat and begin the grueling task of trying to deal with Ripto's four-legged minion, Gulp, who was tearing you and your best friend to shreds for the last 30 minutes of the previous play session. Hearing the excited yelps and disappointed sighs coming from your room, your mother decides to come and see what's going on. She peers at you and your best friend through the open crack in the door, making sure everything is fine. She notices the controller in your hand and your best friend's unrelenting forward gaze. As she stands there, taking in the sight of you two playing, everything begins to make so much sense to her.

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