

SEEING AND PLAYING THE MIDDLE AGES: PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS IN THE VIRTUAL AND VIDEO-PLAY RECONSTRUCTION OF THE MEDIEVAL PAST

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to study the way in which the medieval past is represented in video games. To do this, it will study three elements: the type of source selected, the playful design and the visuality of the works, along with a large number of examples that illustrate each of the types and subtypes elaborated with the intention of determining how the past is deformed in order to adapt it to a specific form and what potential consequences, favorable or harmful, this deformation can generate for the knowledge and social impact of the past.

KEYWORDS

Middle age, Videogame, Visual Culture, New Media, Digital Humanities.

CAPITALIA VERBA

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1. Previous aspects

The purpose of this work is to analyze the internal conditioning factors: sources, design and visual references of the video play adaptation of the medieval past. Knowing the way in which the history of the Middle Ages is adapted, deformed and even invented to fit into the video game format seems increasingly necessary given the increasingly evident relevance of the medium¹.

We could talk about distribution, sales and consumption data², but perhaps it is more relevant to pay attention to another aspect: the references.³ There are not a few players who take artistic works destined for mass culture⁴ as the main reference for their relationship with the past and base their knowledge about the period on the content of said works. However, this reference, as we will have the opportunity to see, has been deformed to fit a specific shape, for which it has even been invented. In addition, it will be presented, depending on the occasions and always when

1. According to different statistics and studies, the hours invested in front of the interactive and video-play screen continue to grow (Anderton, Kevin. (2019, March 21). *Research Report Shows How Much Time We Spend Gaming*: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinanderton/2019/03/21/research-report-shows-how-much-time-we-spend-gaming-infographic/?sh=468a098e3e07>) a situation that has grown during the pandemic and moments of confinement, especially among the little ones (Richtel, Matt. (2021, January 17). *Children's Screen Time Has Soared in the Pandemic, Alarming Parents and Researchers*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/16/health/covid-kids-tech-use.html>) causing the video game industry to already exceed in 2018, in terms of hours invested and financially and economically, the rest of current cultural industries: EFE (2019, May 10). *La industria del videojuego en España sigue floreciendo: mueve el doble que el cine y la música*: https://www.abc.es/tecnologia/videojuegos/abci-industria-videojuego-espana-sigue-florenciendo-mueve-doble-cine-y-musica-201905081019_noticia.html.

2. An example is the video game *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (Ubisoft, 2020. <https://www.ubisoft.com/es-es/game/assassins-creed>), which is among the four best-selling video games for new generation video consoles and is set in 9th century Britain (Grubb, Jeff. (2021, February 21). *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla pushed the franchise to record revenues*). A title that represents a medieval past completely deformed by the internal conditions of the work but that has reached more than 1.8 million players (Romano, Sal. (2020, November 17) *Assassin's Creed Valhalla is the biggest Assassin's Creed game launch in history*: <https://www.gematsu.com/2020/11/assassins-creed-valhalla-is-the-biggest-assassins-creed-game-launch-in-history>).

3. According to Manuel Castells: "We can affirm that the most important influence in the world today is the transformation of people's mentality. If this is so, the media are the essential networks, since they, organized in oligopolies global networks and their distribution networks are the main source of the messages and images that reach people's minds": Castells, Manuel. *Comunicación y poder*. Barcelona: Alianza, 2009: 55. The video game is part of the network of the media and its messages end up permeating its users since, again according to Castells, "people recognize themselves in what they read or what they see": Castells, Manuel. *Comunicación...:* 270. Therefore, the more we see the same past, even if it is deformed, the more likely it is to take it for granted by the very repetition of these deformed moments of the past housed in the media that we call "backward" (Venegas Ramos, Alberto. "Retrolugares, definition, formation and repetition of places, settings and imagined scenes from the past in popular culture and video games". *Revista de Historiografía*, 28 (2018): 323-346).

4. This situation is perfectly illustrated by the differences between the video game units sold and the historical essay units prepared by professionals to verify this reality, the popularity of cinema or television in relation to the historical discipline in today's society. As Raphael Samuel commented in his work *Theaters of memory*: "Today, television must occupy the place of honor in any attempt to map unofficial sources of historical knowledge" (Samuel, Raphael. *Teatros de la memoria*. Valencia: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valencia, 2009: 33), a place that is being, if it has not already been, usurped by the video game.



betting on a specific genre of video game, as we will see later, decontextualized. It will be a fossil reference extracted from its place of origin without taking into account what was around it.

That is why the analyses about the authenticity or not of what is shown, the most common, run the risk of becoming fatuous exercises if the way in which the past becomes a video game is not taken into account⁵ since they are understood as a representation of the past that shares intention, scope and form with historiographic literature, equating the video game designer with the historian, as Adam Chapman does in his fundamental work on the field *Digital games as History*⁶ following the previous works on the cinema of Robert Rosenstone.

We do not share this perspective on the medium, but we are committed to understanding the video game as a form of memory⁷ distant, although related, to the historian's profession but that serves other purposes, as pointed out by Todorov in his work *Fear of barbarians*: The collective memory of every group bases its culture. But memory is in itself necessarily a construction, that is, a selection of events from the past and their arrangement according to a hierarchy that does not correspond to them by themselves, but is given to them by the members of the group⁸. The choice of the facts [that constitute the collective memory] and their hierarchical arrangement is not carried out by specialist scholars (...) but by influential groups in society that seek to defend their interests. The primary objective of these groups is not to know the past exactly, but to make others recognize their place in the collective memory, and therefore in the social life of the country⁹.

As we will observe in the first section of the article, the selection of the sources that will give content to the events selected by the video game designer is a fundamental decision that will completely alter the representation of the chosen moment. In addition, the same relevance will not be given to some other moments, as we will also have the opportunity to study, but they will be the moments that, in some way, most directly address our time the most selected.

The objective of history video games in general is not to know the past exactly, as many people in charge of video games have shown on previous occasions¹⁰, but to present the player with a fun and attractive experience, as well as profitable for the

5. César San Nicolás Romera, Miguel Ángel. "Video Games Set in in the Middle Ages: Time Spans, Plots, and Genres". *Games and Culture*, 13/5 (2018): 521-542.

6. Chapman, Alan. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New-York: Routledge.

7. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. "Aesthetic uses of the past and limits in the reconstruction of historical spaces inside a videogame". *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 1/9 (2020).

8. Todorov, Tzvetan. *El miedo a los bárbaros*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2008: 93.

9. Todorov, Tzvetan. *El miedo...*: 93.

10. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. "El videojuego como forma de memoria estética". *Pasado y Memoria*, 20 (2020): 277-301.



development studio itself¹¹, although titles have recently emerged that challenge this general trend¹².

2. Concepts and Delimitations

Before continuing with our endeavor, we must stop for a moment to establish and define basic concepts such as, for example, the video game. According to Jesper Juul it is a game played using a computer and a video screen¹³. In this definition of Juul, discussed and debated later¹⁴ it is still relevant for us due to the importance given to two aspects of capital importance: the computer and the screen. In the first element, the computer, is where a series of rules are executed that give meaning to the game and where the game itself is executed and controlled by an external device (keyboard, mouse, controller, etc.). In the second element, the screen, is where the images that illustrate the game itself occur and where the player sees reflected the consequences reflected of his decisions for the challenges proposed by the game and the established rules.

This is a succinct and excessively general definition. This is not the place to enter into the broad debates about the nature of the video game. It in turn serves to define the history video game, since it could be defined as a virtual creation composed of interactive images and ludonarrative elements that try, voluntarily, to represent the past. Uses of the past, ludonarrative design and interactive images created with digital methods that give rise to virtual spaces would therefore be the main internal elements that condition the representation of past times in the video game environment.

This article has voluntary delimitations. It will focus on the aspects mentioned above, selected fonts to use the past, design decisions to adapt the past to a video game, and selection of fonts and visual references to illustrate that past. Aspects such as the study of verisimilitude¹⁵, authenticity¹⁶, public uses of the past, as well

11. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. "El videojuego...": 277-301.

12. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. "El videojuego como forma de memoria literal y memoria ejemplar". *Historiografías*, 18 (2019): 30-54.

13. Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005: 8.

14. Arojanta, Jonne. "Game Definitions: A Wittgensteinian Approach". *Game Studies*, 1/14 (2014).

15. On this aspect, in the case of video games based or set in the Middle Ages, see the interesting and useful works by Jiménez Alcázar (Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "Videogames and the Middle Ages". *Imago Temporis: medium Aevum*, 2 (2009): 311-365; Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. "The other possible past: simulation of the Middle Ages in videogames". *Imago Temporis: medium Aevum*, 5 (2011): 299-340); Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco. *From the Age of Empires to Total War: Medieval and Video Games*. Murcia: Centro de Estudios de la Universidad de Murcia, 2016).

16. On this aspect, together with the following, the public uses of the past, see the book *Digital gaming re-imagines the Middle Ages* (Kline, Daniel. *Digital gaming re-imagines the Middle Ages*. London: Routledge, 2013).



as the external elements of the video game and its insertion in the artistic culture of the masses will escape our consideration.

Another of the great deformations that the medieval past undergoes in its conversion to a video game will also escape our attention: the inclusion of a narrative. On this subject, which we will address in future works, we will only consider that all history video games have a narrative that tries to fill in the blanks about the selected period. These spaces will be completed through the actions of the historical subject considered for each occasion, which can vary and be a dynasty, in the case of *Crusader Kings 2*¹⁷, a merchant, *Anno 1404*¹⁸, an infantryman, *For Honor*¹⁹ or a peasant family, *Medieval Dynasty*²⁰. All of them have a plot, imposed or self-imposed, that the player must go through designed from the beginning by those responsible for the video game. It is development studios that create this targeted freedom²¹ for the player to navigate. Before starting to play, everything is already established following the plans of the creators of the title. History, however, does not have that teleological narrative sense designed from origin to destruction, but is the sum of thousands of possibilities that converge at one point that gives rise to the next. Unless we consider some supernatural explanation, History does not progress according to any divine plan as it does in the digital medium.

3. Sources Selected to Represent the Past

With sources we refer to the material selected by the designer of the medieval history video game to later build his/her playful work and illustrate it with different images, which will also have their own sources. In addition, we also wish to refer in this first section to the documents consulted by the person responsible for the title to build his proposal.

In accordance with these delimitations we have proposed three different types of sources: primary, those contributed by the selected period; historiographic, those works made by historians or professionals of the past; and media, those contained and reproduced by artistic works of masses present in the mass media.

Regarding the first typology, those contributed by the selected period, there are no fully built video games. The primary sources manage to appear in the video game reproduced in a photorealistic way as part of the material culture coinciding with the time represented. This is the case of the aforementioned video game, *Assassin's*

17. Paradox Interactive, 2013.

18. Ubisoft, 2008.

19. Ubisoft, 2017.

20. Render Cube, 2020.

21. "The video game involves its reader as no other form of discourse has done before. The designer creates margins of freedom that the player uses according to his will, in an exercise that we here call" directed freedom "and that turns both parties into co-creators of this discourse": Navarro Remesal, Víctor. *Libertad dirigida: una gramática del análisis y diseño de videojuegos*. Santander: Shangrila, 2016: 12.



Creed: Valhalla. For the development of this work, its managers went to different museums and study centers to observe and photograph different objects that they later reproduced in the virtual world created digitally with the intention of providing verisimilitude²². Beyond this usual use, to provide verisimilitude²³, there is no direct approach to the sources of the period by video game designers.

Regarding the second typology, the historiographic sources, there are titles although as a general rule they are usually mixed with the later source. In these titles their authors have consulted specific literature on the period, such as *Crusader Kings III*²⁴. Those responsible for this title of strategy have been including throughout their development diaries the different consulted works, the collected materials and the consulted books to reconstruct its Middle Ages²⁵ and, however, the person in charge of the design of the video game stated during an interview that: “when we have to make a difficult decision about doing something historical or fun, we generally choose to make it more fun and interesting for the player”²⁶.

It is not the only title that has opted for historiographic materials and the help of professionals but that, again, has had to deform that material in order to adapt it to a video game, in addition to other reasons. This is the case of the Czech video game *Kingdome Come: Deliverance*²⁷. Its creators promised an “authentic historical experience” and to achieve this they hired historian Joanna Nowak²⁸ as an integral part of the team and through photogrammetric methods they represented a large number of real buildings of the time, the Bohemia of the beginning of the fifteenth century²⁹. However, this search for historical “authenticity” collided with three main problems, the first is the problem associated with sources in video play reconstructions with which we will close this section, the second is its adaptation to

22. In an interview with Ryan Lavelle, a historian hired by Ubisoft to work on the video game, he stated that his job was to “fill in the gaps to create a credible game world”: Burrows, Adrian. (2021, Genaury 21). *Interview: Historian Ryan Lavelle on the historical research that helped build Assassin's Creed Valhalla*: <https://www.the-sixth-axis.com/2021/01/23/assassins-creed-valhalla-history-interview-ps4-ps5-xbox-series-x/>. The figure of the historian, therefore, serves as a mark of authenticity of what is shown, even when in the relationships between historian and video game designer it is the latter's word that usually prevails (Venegas Ramos, Alberto. “El videojuego como forma...”: 277-301).

23. A use that Salvati and Bullinger have already studied for the case of World War II video games in their chapter of the book *Playing with Past* (Salvati, Andrew; Bullinger, Jonathan. “Selective authenticity and the playable past”, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, Andrew B.R. Elliot, eds. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

24. Paradox Development Studios, 2020.

25. Nelva, Giuseppe. (2020, May 14) *Crusader Kings 3 Interview: Product Manager Discusses Features, Accessibility, Wacky Events, & More*. <https://twinfinite.net/2020/05/crusader-kings-3-interview/>.

26. Groux, Christopher. (2020, March 9) *Crusader Kings III' Devs Discuss Making History a Personal Playground*: <https://www.newsweek.com/crusader-kings-3-ck3-history-personal-playground-gameplay-1529271>.

27. Warhorse Studios, 2018.

28. Webster, Andrew. (2018, February 2) *Kingdom Come: Deliverance is an RPG that trades fantasy for historical accuracy*: <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/2/16964080/kingdom-come-deliverance-history-rpg-ps4-xbox-pc>.

29. Webster, Andrew. (2018, February 2) *Kingdom Come...*: <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/2/16964080/kingdom-come-deliverance-history-rpg-ps4-xbox-pc>.



a video game as studied by researcher Martin Bostal³⁰, and the third the treatment of the selected sources.

Regarding the last problem, and according to different criticisms of the game³¹ it suffered from a basic problem: the selection and treatment of events that occurred in the past. According to these critics, this selection showed a partial and biased past in favor of a nationalist vision of the history of the Czech Republic and the supposed authenticity of what was shown only served to provide legitimacy to said representation, as Anthony Smith already pointed out in his work *Nacionalismo*³². A criticism that has had a journey within the reception of the work in the form of different controversies³³ and that helps us to illustrate the problems regarding the use and selection of both primary and historiographic sources as a means of raising the “historicity” of the work for marketing or propaganda purposes.

However, in the representations of contemporary history there are works that manage, through historiographic or memory sources, to problematize the past and offer the player the necessary tools to confront it and extract, through the reflection of the consequences of their decisions, a critical and significant reading of history³⁴.

On the third typology, media sources, most of the medieval history videogames are built. The aforementioned title, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, perfectly illustrates this typology since its managers hired those in charge of the historical setting of other works of art for mass culture such as the television series *Vikings* (Michael Hirst,

30. Bostal, Martin. “Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: A look at kingdom come: Deliverance and its Historical Claim”, *Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea*, Rafael Fernández Sirvent, Rosa Ana Gutiérrez Lloret, eds. Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 2019: 380-394.

31. Haske, Steve. (2016, October 10). *How “Kingdom Come” Doubles down on History*: <https://www.inverse.com/article/22754-kingdom-come-deliverance-history-interview>; Inderwildi, Andreas. (2018, March 5). *Kingdom Come Deliverance's quest for historical accuracy is a fool's errand*: <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-historical-accuracy>.

32. According to this theorist of nationalism, the search for authenticity in nationalist discourses about the past always serve the same purpose: “This leads without us realizing it to the notion of authenticity as originality and, in the nationalist context, to the myth of the origins and descent: “who we are” is a function of “where we come from” in time and space; character is determined by origin. But this overlaps with another meaning: the idea of being original or indigenous, that is, not only being the first of its kind but also being indigenous, born on earth. This in turn leads us to another sense of the authentic as something pure and unmixed, in which the genuine “we” constitutes a pristine original, however mixed our present sorry state is. But perhaps the most common sense in which nationalists use the adjective “authentic” is to refer to what is “wholly ours” and no one else’s, and p Therefore it is unique but also indeterminate. Here, the concept of authenticity overlaps with that of autonomy: the ‘true’ community is also the nation that is self-determined”: Smith, Anthony. *Nacionalismo*. Madrid: Alianza, 2004: 46.

33. Grayson, Nathan. (2018, February 3) *Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To ‘Realism’ And Conservative Politics*: <https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208>; McCarter, Reid. (2018, March 2). *Deliverance: Myth-making and Historical Accuracy*: <https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/>.

34. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. *El videojuego como forma...*



2013-2020) or *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2021)³⁵ and the actors of the latter to put their voices to the protagonists of the video game³⁶.

Going to mass artistic works is a common decision in the history video game, medieval or not. Most of the titles go to the aesthetic memory³⁷ of the time already present in the media to build their proposals with the intention that they are not strange to the viewer, since he/she recognizes them for having seen them on numerous previous occasions. It is not the only reason, since we do not have audiovisual testimonies prior to the invention of machines capable of capturing them, we do not have images in which individuals from the 15th century appear walking, moving or doing any activity, which is why it is necessary to go to works historical fiction to reproduce.

This recurrence to media sources is not exclusive to the video game, resorting to media sources instead of primary or historiographic sources is a shared characteristic between the formation of images of the past in media as different at first glance as history painting and the history video game. Tomás Pérez Viejo clearly exposes this idea: "All the great themes of history painting, those that appear again and again in paintings, had previously been theatrical or romantic successes"³⁸. In the same way, all the great themes of the history video game had previously been film or television successes: the Wild West, World War II or the moments chosen by Ubisoft to set the scene for its renowned *Assassin's Creed* saga: the Crusades, the Renaissance, the American War of Independence, the piracy of the Caribbean, the French Revolution, Victorian England, the end of Ptolemaic Egypt, Ancient Greece or the Viking peoples. All of them are great themes frequently visited by cinema or television. Which have managed to be represented by great works of fiction that have managed to establish themselves as media references of the moment and have had to be captured and reproduced later by the video game to be recognized as a representation of that same moment. The main sources of the most popular history painting and video game have to be sought not in the primary sources or historiographical works but in the previous works of fiction that have already reaped a certain success.

Synthesizing what has been examined so far, medieval history videogames to construct their proposal for the representation of the past, they turn to primary, historiographic or media sources. No video game that we know of makes exclusive use of primary sources and the vast majority of them make use of different sources, although one of them always prevails, although one of them always prevails, the last being, the media, the most relevant of all due to the number of video games that go to it to create their virtual world. However, the final object that manages to

35. Hafer, Leana. (2020, November 23). *Assassin's Creed Valhalla owes a lot to TV's Vikings*: <https://www.pcgamer.com/assassins-creed-valhalla-owes-a-lot-to-tvs-vikings/>.

36. Trepanier, Zoe. (2020, April 30). *The Last Kingdom Actor Voices Male Eivor in Assassin's Creed Valhalla*: <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-valhalla-magnus-bruun/>.

37. We can define aesthetic memory as the representations of the past reproduced in the mass media that due to their own repetition have ended up being accepted as true among the audience.

38. Pérez Viejo, Tomás. *España imaginada: Historia de la invención de una nación*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2015: 31.



be reconstructed with them always presents the same problem: the reconstruction without fissures, in a complete and coherent way between its parts of the past world. This is a problem because there are many places that the historical discipline has not yet been able to illuminate from the past, which forces designers to go to extremely well-documented moments and carry out a strong research task, an aspect that, as we have tried to demonstrate, does not it usually happens, or resort to invention.

In the video game, even more than in literature or cinema, the gaps imposed by our knowledge of the past are filled by invention, since the narrative within the video game medium no longer only provides discourses about our relationship with our objectives, as explained Pérez Latorre³⁹, also provide discourses, and visual representations, of our relationship with “worlds”, that is, with certain cultural, social, natural and historical environments. The invention within the video game is not only literary but also visual and even spatial. The player who travels through the 9th century Britain imagined by *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* will not contemplate dead places in which nothing is represented, but the entire work will present a complete spatial and narrative continuity that totally reconstructs the period represented to such an extent that allows the player to walk through it, interact with it and even photograph it. Therefore the invention for the reconstruction of the past is not only an option in the case of the video game, but an obligation, a fact that further deepens the gap between the historiographic work and the history video game. However, this gap does not dissolve its possibility to elaborate and offer a new relationship with the past to the player. According to LaCapra:

The comparison of historiography with fiction can be made with a very different orientation from that which is apparent in White's work. It could be argued that fictional narratives can also imply claims of truth at a structural or general level, since they provide insight into phenomena such as slavery and the Holocaust, offer a reading of a process or a period, or generate a “sensitivity” to experience and emotion that would be very difficult to achieve through strict documentary methods⁴⁰.

The video game, by its own configuration, allows the approach to historical phenomena in a way that no other medium can carry out. It does not need to be considered history or historiographical work to generate readings of processes or periods that generate sensitivities and emotions different from those offered by literature or cinema. In fact the creators themselves flee from this label. The capacities of the medium must stand up for themselves since fiction, and art in general, has a series of elements that history cannot emulate. It is not necessary to convert the first into the second in a vain effort to give prestige to one form over another or to emphasize the relevance of one medium above the rest. Each of them has strengths and weaknesses that allow us to relate to the past in many and very different ways, as we will point out in the conclusions of this work and

39. Pérez Latorre, Óscar. *El lenguaje videolúdico: análisis de la significación del videojuego*. Barcelona: Laertes, 2012: 21.

40. LaCapra, Dominik. *Escribir la historia, escribir el trauma*. Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión Argentina, 2005: 38.



as we have considered in our conception of the environment not as history but as memory.

4. Video Play

After selecting the historical moment to represent and compiling the sources from which the information will be extracted to create the medieval history video game, the next step is to convert all that data into play, adapting it to a ludonarrative⁴¹ form. For this, we will have to take into consideration numerous decisions, although we, to facilitate the process and the development of the article, are going to study three: the genre, the design patterns associated with said genre and the mechanics as a form of interaction between the player and the generated virtual world. Three elements that coincide, in a brief way, with the so-called central-system of the video game, since all the elements are articulated around it.

The genre is, according to the researcher and doctor of *game studies* Navarro Remesal, “a classification by groups of a set of works according to common features”⁴², these common features being the design patterns, that is to say: “basic configurations of different elements that delimit the general operation of the game or the problems and solutions that these present”⁴³. The genre offers a framework of experiences to the player, a reference to enter the work since all genres are referential⁴⁴. The selection of a genre will bring with it a whole series of subsequent decisions base on perspectives, objectives, rules or obstacles.

For example, the video game *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings*⁴⁵ belongs to the genre of real-time strategy. The perspective of this genre is zenith, it is observed from above and the subject that the player controls is a supposed State that must be managed through the achievement of different objectives that are reflected through a variation of four essential factors: exploration of the territory, expansion of the State, exploitation of natural resources and extermination of the enemy. These four steps, commonly known as “4x” are associated with the genre of strategy since its inception and completely conditions the representation of the past both in this title and in the rest of the works belonging to that genre, as other works study⁴⁶.

41. We cannot forget that, according to Navarro Remesal: “a video game, then, is a relationship in constant movement of functional and fictional elements, according to a potentially narrative form. This is what we call” ludonarrativa “and this relationship can result balanced and coherent or dissonant.”: Navarro Remesal, Víctor. *Libertad dirigida...*: 129.

42. Navarro Remesal, Víctor. *Libertad dirigida...*: 233.

43. Navarro Remesal, Víctor. *Libertad dirigida...*: 130.

44. Konzack, Lars. “Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis”, *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*. Frans Mäyrä, ed. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002: 89-100.

45. Ensemble Studios, 1999.

46. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. “El videojuego como hiperhistoria”. *Pasado interactivo: memoria e hstoria en el videojuego*. Alberto Venegas Ramos, ed. Vitoria: Sans Soleil, 2020:160-169.



Most history video games have rules; these define the objectives and give the reasons for pursuing them to fiction. Even the most open titles, such as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, *Crusader Kings III* or any other open title have objectives, big or small, intermediate or final, to meet and for which the game offers stimuli or rewards if they are achieved. Titles like *Civilization VI* force the State created by the player to maintain its growth without being able to go backwards. The same happens, as we have already mentioned, in the popular *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* or in any other strategy game.

These rules create challenges that demand effort from the player and establish the mechanics⁴⁷, the verbs that the player employs to interact with objects always in a prescribed, fixed and casual way. The mechanics are of radical importance to interact with the past playable world and its narrative. It does not have the same consequences for the representation of the past that the main verb with which the player relates to it is "read", as in the case of *Crusader Kings III*, or "hit", as in the case of *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*⁴⁸. The first must provide the player with relevant historical content to read and make subsequent decisions based on what has been read and the second must provide the player with elements to hit, completely changing the way in which the rest of the configurations of the game are established.

In addition, when betting on the action of hitting as the main mechanics, the video game is generally ascribed to the action genre and this is associated with other design patterns linked to other genres such as "first person shooters" or "video games. of first-person shots "in which the photorealistic reconstruction of the past predominates, the relevance of the war material culture, the dehumanization of the enemy in order to turn it into a target, the adaptation of the space to a gallery of shots or blows and the instantaneous images, spectacular and light⁴⁹.

These decisions not only influence the construction of the player's relationship with the represented past, but they also influence the representation of that past itself⁵⁰. Due to the very gameplay, Medieval Renaissance Rome represented by *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*⁵¹ is restricted to an amusement park where everything is arranged for the player. As one of the main mechanics of jumping and climbing, many of the houses and buildings are arranged so that the player can ascend to the roofs and walk on them. In fact, the historical buildings represented are also

47. According to Navarro Remesal: "the mechanics are verbs, the actions that the player executes and are possible thanks to the rules. They link video game objects with consequences for the *game state* in a prescribed, fixed and casual way. When the player executes a mechanics, he knows that the rules of the game will determine particular consequences. Using mechanics is to modify the attributes of objects and even the *gameworld*": Navarro Remesal, Víctor. *Libertad dirigida...*: 68.

48. Torn Banner Studios, 2012.

49. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. "La construcción de la guerra virtual: estudio de la representación bélica en los videojuegos de estrategia histórica", *Humanidades digitales y videojuegos*. Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar, Gerardo Fabián Rodríguez, Stella Maris Massa, eds. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia. Servicio de Publicaciones, 2020: 137-176.

50. Venegas Ramos, Alberto. *Pasado interactivo: memoria e historia en el videojuego*. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Sans Soleil, 2020.

51. Ubisoft, 2010.



deformed by mechanics since they are considered as architectural landmarks whose discovery and subsequent ascent to its summit is rewarded with a portion of the map and a trophy. The city, in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* is a set where the main actor must carry out his role. Everything around it is built and raised for his enjoyment. Despite this, we cannot fail to admire the work of representation and evocation of the best-known buildings of the period in all the titles of the saga.

Of course there are many types of players and each of them will obtain a different experience in their interaction with the video game, but we must not forget that as Pérez Latorre pointed out: "game creators directly design the rules of the game but also, although indirectly, they design an implicit experience of the player, a prototypical experience of the game or *gameplay*"⁵². Therefore, what we are considering here is that prototypical experience in which the player will enjoy a playable world, coherent, complete and endowed with narrative, to which it is necessary to add to understand how the story is represented in the video game rules, challenges and mechanics that allow the player to interact with the proposed world. A narrative and a playful part that would be nothing without the audiovisual envelope.

5. Setting in Pictures

After selecting the historical moment, gathering the sources and designing a game experience, the next step is to illustrate it with images that allow us to capture them on the screen and offer the player a past virtual world with which to interact.

In this section we will observe the images from two points of view: the relationship established between them and the sources from which they are extracted. We have divided each of these points of view into subtypes, the first has three forms of relationship between images: allusion, imitation and interpretation⁵³, and the second has two sources: primary or media sources.

Regarding the relationships established between the images, the first type that we will address is the allusion, which "is characterized by omitting the direct reference to a specific work and focuses above all on the iconographic aspects of the visual arts"⁵⁴. The most prominent example in this work is also a good example, the figures that appear in the first promotional image of *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* make a clear allusion to the Vikings television series, with which, as we have already mentioned,

52. Pérez Latorre, Óscar. *El lenguaje videolúdico...*: 53.

53. The relationships that we have established for the images have been extracted from Monterde's work *La representación cinematográfica de la historia*. In this book, Monterde established these three relationships for the contacts between painting and cinema, however, we are going to use them as relationships that are established between the images contained in the different artistic works of the masses, both within a specific medium and between them.

54. Monterde, José Enrique; Selva Mosoliver, Marta; Solá Arguimbau, Anna. *La representación cinematográfica de la historia*. Madrid: Akal, 2001: 97.



they share team. There are dozens of examples that illustrate this relationship whose function is similar to the previous one: to increase the feeling of “historicity”. A way of introducing the images you have in medieval history works such as *A Plague Tale: Innocence*⁵⁵ is a good example. This title used artistic works such as different films, *The Name of the Rose*, *Black Death*, *McBeth*... to create its interactive scenarios as well as different pictorial works such as those made by Zdzisław Beksiński⁵⁶ to achieve that same feeling of “historicity”. There is no direct reference, it does not imitate other representations but it does allude to visual configurations extracted from these films and paintings to achieve resemblance to them.

Imitation, on the other hand, “is an instantaneous allusion, directly recognizable in its model and confessed, where what is precisely sought is identification”⁵⁷. Imitation is the most frequent, since the media image, that reproduced from the mass media, is the predominant one in history video games, the most popular both in number and in distribution and purchase. This method tries to incorporate the historical-visual references in a complete and easily recognizable way for the player. This is the case of the video game *For honor*⁵⁸, a medieval historical pastiche in which different soldiers from different times and cultures must face each other within a closed space. Each of these characters is reconstructed in a photorealistic style and imitates the figures represented in mass media such as comics, movies or television. It is not the only case the aforementioned *Total War* saga is committed to imitating the great pitched battles that appear in the cinema on a recurring basis⁵⁹, even though we know that these were not common in the period represented⁶⁰. In fact, the cinema is the most imitated medium in the case of the medieval history video game since the visuality⁶¹, that is, the management of the imaginary represented, is very similar between the two⁶² and there are many films that they have their own video game adaptation.

And finally the interpretation, which “avoids the simple delight or the mere cultural guarantee, giving way to the reflection of the ideological atmosphere of the time”⁶³. This last relationship is the most significant, the one that most shuns the media past and the one that has a greater relationship with primary and historiographic sources, which makes it the least represented in the video game

55. Asobo Studio, 2019.

56. Morgans, Matt. (2019, May 27) *Exclusive: How Asobo Studios Designed A Plague Tale: Innocence*: <https://www.vgr.com/asobo-studios-designed-a-plague-tale-innocence/>.

57. Monterde, José Enrique; Selva Mosoliver, Marta; Solá Arguimbau, Anna. *La representación...*: 98.

58. Ubisoft, 2017.

59. Barrio Barrio, Juan Antonio. “La Edad Media en el cine del siglo XX”. *Medievalismo*, 15 (2005): 241-268.

60. Keen, Maurice. *Historia de la guerra en la Edad Media*. Madrid: Antonio Machado, 2005.

61. We understand visuality as “the social construction of vision and, at the same time, the visual construction of the social”: Martínez Luna, Sergio. *Cultura visual: La pregunta por la imagen*. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Sans Soleil, 2019: 38-39.

62. Barrio Barrio, Juan Antonio. “La Edad Media en el cine de Estados Unidos”. *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, 2 (2008): 426-452.

63. Monterde, José Enrique; Selva Mosoliver, Marta; Solá Arguimbau, Anna. *La representación...*: 99.



environment. However, there are small works that manage to avoid the reproduction of back-places associated with the different moments and choose to represent a medieval period closer to the ideological atmosphere of the time, such as the title *Banished*⁶⁴ developed in its entirety by Luke Hodorowicz.

This title adopts the genre of strategy but eliminates some of the established design patterns such as the extermination of enemies, although it maintains the exploration of the territory, the exploitation of natural resources and the expansion of the rural nucleus on which the work is developed. It also adopts as its own the mechanics assigned to the genre, the verbs that the player can carry out during the game but differentiates the objectives. In *Banished* the main objective is to survive the winter and properly manage the demographics of the medieval village. The inhabitants of the village will be born, grow up, have offspring and die. Controlling these cycles and working relationships with the various jobs that can be carried out in the village will be essential. A work that brings us closer to microhistory.

Keeping the population alive and growing by overcoming famines, frosts, diseases and infections will be the main task of the player. Objectives that are not found in any other medieval strategy video game. There are no more goals to achieve except these. This change in the objectives, in addition to the visuality of what is shown and the visual relationship that it establishes with other media along with other considerations linked to the image, completely changes the configuration and scope of the work and achieves, to the extent that a video game can achieve this, capture the ideological atmosphere of the time. However, this video game, which can stand as the best example of the interpretive relationship, is not born in a vacuum and is committed to a genre from which it inherits a whole series of design patterns, as the creator of the work himself recognizes during an interview offered to the PC Gamer portal⁶⁵.

Other similar titles are *Foundation*⁶⁶, which shuns any media or primary visual reference to the era represented to interpret it in its own way, trying to reflect, with it, the ideological atmosphere of the era, or *Expeditions: Vikings*⁶⁷, whose leaders have voluntarily tried to avoid any retrol place associated with Viking history and reception by investigating primary sources and reading historiographic works about the period⁶⁸. All of them are works that achieve, thanks to their decision not to imitate or allude to artistic works of previous masses, but to interpret the period itself and try to capture what, according to them, was the ideological atmosphere of the time, significant readings of the chosen historical moment.

64. Shining Rock Software, 2014.

65. Birnbaum, Ian. (2013, September 4). *Banished interview: player choice in an indie city builder sandbox game*: <https://www.pcgamer.com/interview-banished-developer-talks-player-choice-in-the-indie-city-builder-sandbox-game/>.

66. Polymorph Games, 2019.

67. Logic Artist, 2017.

68. Sinha, Ravi. (2017, May 23). *Expeditions Viking Interview: Changing With The World*: <https://gamingbolt.com/expeditions-viking-interview-changing-with-the-world>.



The sources of the visuality of medieval history videogames, as we have been advancing during this section, can be constructed through primary sources or media sources. For other periods there are other sources such as journalistic ones, but in the case of the Middle Ages this source would be unlikely.

Regarding the first type, we must affirm that there are no video games, except in exceptional cases, built entirely on the visuality of the selected period developed during the same period. The exceptions are works such as the avant-garde titles *The Procession to Calvary*⁶⁹ or *Four Last Things*⁷⁰ that animate scenes and characters extracted directly from Renaissance paintings, establishing a relationship of direct imitation with the primary visual sources of the selected epoch. Images to which the designer later applies all the conditions that we have listed throughout this article.

The media sources, on the other hand, are the most common. The visual references contained in works of art for previous mass culture such as, for example, history painting, television, cinema or video games are the main sources to build the visuality of medieval history video games. This, as we pointed out previously, is not a singularity of the video game since a large part of that visuality was produced during the 19th century⁷¹ and was perpetuated in 20th century history cinema⁷², later moving from the big screen to the small and interactive one.

The use of these media sources manages to create a media past far removed from the historian's profession and I only live in the media that, by mere repetition, can end up becoming unavoidable references for the reconstruction of those same moments in later artistic works.

6. Conclusion

The interrelationships between all these factors give us different configurations that we have called a problem history video game and a media history video game, and there is another, the testimony history video game, for representations of the more recent past. Each of them is the result of the combination of each of the elements and although there is no pure type, as we have wanted to make clear through the referencing of all the titles named in this work, since they all share more than one characteristic, we are still allowed to have useful categories for the study of the history video game and its possible use for critical or didactic readings about certain moments in the past.

The first category, the problem story video game, will be the result of the majority use of historiographic sources, mechanics that bet to be significant by offering the consequences of the decisions made by the player and images that have an

69. Joe Richardson, 2020.

70. Joe Richardson, 2017.

71. Pérez Viejo, Tomás. *España imaginada...*: 118.

72. Barrio Barrio, Juan Antonio. "La Edad Media en el cine...".



interpretive relationship with the chosen moment. In summary, the story-problem video game is one that wishes to propose a historical question as the nucleus of its playable proposal and whose sources for the elaboration of its images, rules, mechanics and narratives come from historiographic works or debates about the past.

The second category, the media history video game, will be the result of the majority use of media sources, spectacular mechanics linked to the tradition of the genres that hide the consequences of the player's decisions and actions and images taken from previous mass artistic works that keep an imitation or allusion relationship with said works. In summary, the media-history video game is one based on the aesthetic memory reproduced in the mass media whose sole objective is attraction, fun and profitability to offer the player immediate satisfaction and pleasure.

It remains to say that, as we have been examining, the second prevail over the first, which should lead us to question the medium and the type of messages that it disseminates about the past in addition to the use they make of it. But also, and this is the main objective of this article, it should make us reflect on how medieval history video games are built and what elements we must take into account when using or criticizing them for different activities, such as examining authenticity of the work both on a discursive and visual level.

