Chapter Three

Playing in a 'real' past: Classical action games and authenticity

Tristan French & Andrew Gardner (London)[1]

Archaeogaming[2] and the developing agenda

A decade ago, when computer- and videogaming began to be a subject of scholarly research and writing within archaeology, history and related fields, it was commonly felt to be necessary for authors to begin with a lengthy justification of why games were worthy of investigation. Comparison with the output of Hollywood, the growing and developing demographics of gamers, and serious study in other fields might all be used to make this argument. This is no longer the case[3]. There is no need for any special pleading about the cultural relevance of gaming when the gamification of many aspects of 21st century society is widely discussed[4]. Furthermore, while it is perhaps still a small, and divided, field, research into computer and video games in historical disciplines is well-established and can now begin to chart a more adventurous agenda than the initial commentary on games as representations of popular pasts. This was, and remains, a worthwhile endeavour, but just as games themselves have become ever-more sophisticated, so we too can start to pose more involved questions about the nature of the past and our relationship to it, which games help us to think through. That is to say, we can make games a means to broader intellectual ends, rather than have their critique be an end in itself. There are several ongoing research projects and groupings exploring these issues[5], and one particular theme – the nature of past reality presented in games, and how 'authenticity' comes to be of importance to players – is the focus of this paper. This is a theme that is not confined to gaming – it might be as relevant to live re-enactment, heritage reconstruction, or indeed the very nature of the

archaeological imagination – but games have particular utility in helping us to develop our ideas about it.

This is precisely because of the uniquely interactive character of games, which is of course a major factor in their increasing popularity and central to much discussion in games studies. Here, this aspect is relevant in allowing us to encompass not only authenticity of representation, but also authenticity of experience, in our consideration of popular engagement with the past. As we will see in our two case-studies, the former is an important theme, and not only to historical or archaeological commentators, but also to the wider gaming public, and to gaming journalists. It may be, though, that authenticity of representation – that is to say, accuracy of material features of a particular past context, and historical integrity with respect to depicted events – is significant because it helps to facilitate a further level of 'authenticity' – that of experiential immersion into a past which 'feels real'[6]. This in turn has interesting implications for the nature of cultural definitions of 'reality' in the 21st century[7]. Games are interesting in this regard because while they may be regarded as inherently inauthentic in relation to experience, in that the immersion of a gamer in a game is manifestly a different phenomenon to the life of an ancient Roman (or whatever), paradoxically they do at least require an active engagement with a perceived world in ways which no other media demands. This is in fact closer to the lived realities of the past than watching a film[8]. In addition, therefore, to the gamification of teaching[9], historical research[10], and public engagement agendas in archaeology and heritage[11] – among other developing applications – we can consider use games as tools to think with when addressing fundamental questions about our orientation to the past, in the classical or any other period. In this paper, we will develop this argument via two case-studies, both of action/adventure games. We have chosen this genre both because of its inherently more experiential perspective, compared for example to strategy games which take a 'god's eye-view', and because authenticity, particularly of representation, is much discussed in relation to recent titles. Indeed, our first case study–*Ryse: Son of Rome*–illustrates how the inclusion of fantastical story elements does not give a

games developer a 'free pass' to ignore historical context, in the eyes of players and reviewers. Our second case-study, the *Assassin's Creed* series, shows how greater investment in representational authenticity creates greater immersion and greater gameplaying satisfaction – and therefore greater experiential authenticity – such that successive iterations of the game are making more and more of this feature. This in turn shows that archaeologists, historians, and games developers can be allies in exploring playable pasts.

Fantastic pasts: *Ryse: Son of Rome*

When a game is set against a historical backdrop and the developers choose to diverge from the archaeological/historical record as it is widely understood, gamers and reviewers notice. Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of this is the historical action/adventure title, *Ryse: Son of Rome*. A launch title for Microsoft's Xbox One in November 2013, *Ryse: Son of Rome* was criticised for its historical (in)accuracy, as well as for its linear, level-based design (as opposed to the open-world model favoured by other games of the genre). Indeed, while these might seem to be separate points of critique, they may in fact reveal relationships between different forms of authenticity. The game is set during the reign of the Emperor Nero, and the player takes control of a fictional Roman soldier, Marius Titus, on a quest for vengeance following the murder of his family. Whilst praised for its rendered environments and overall presentation, *Ryse: Son of Rome* was critically panned for its storytelling and obvious warping of a period of history that is very well-documented[12]. The fictionalised lineages and confused mythologies, as well as limitations in the gaming experience, led to a backlash for the title, which sold very poorly within its first month of release (at approximately 30,000 units). As of July 2018, the game has sold just 1.47 million units[13] which is not particularly noteworthy when compared to other releases of that year or other games within the genre – *Grand Theft Auto V* for example sold 26.75 million units worldwide, and *Call of Duty: Ghosts* 12.71 million[14]. *Ryse: Son of Rome* highlights a key issue which has less to do with developers choosing to 'alter history' but more that these choices were

noticed by gamers because they failed to enhance the game's story and had very little bearing upon the gameplay itself[15]. Indeed, beyond the deeper implications of the inter-relation of different forms of authenticity here, we might draw some encouragement from the negative response of gamers to a title that failed to justify its fictionalisation of a well-known historical period.

Distortion of historical figures and conflict of setting

Ryse: Son of Rome is set against the backdrop of an invasion of Rome by Celtic barbarians, during the reign of Nero. Starting *in medias res* during a siege carried out by the characters Boudica and Damocles, the protagonist Marius, and the emperor, take refuge within Nero's concealed vaults, whilst Marius recounts the actions that had led him to the point of the siege (Nichols, 2014). One of the most jarring inaccuracies noticeable in this opening tutorial and cinematic of the game, is the fact that Nero is depicted as an aged emperor who has fathered two sons. As is well-known to Roman historians, Nero fathered no children and also died at the age of 30, meaning that *Ryse: Son of Rome* seems to present some form of fictionalised timeline following the year 68 CE, after Nero's historical death[16]. As Nichols also points out, it is also very well-known that while, during his reign, Nero did face an uprising from Boudica and the Iceni tribe, this rebellion was confined to Britain and quelled by Nero's general Paulinus. The British rebels had not attempted to reach mainland Europe, let alone Rome.

Nero is not the only historical figure to be portrayed in a wholly inaccurate way in *Ryse*. Queen Boudica is portrayed in the game as the daughter of a barbarian chieftain, King Oswald. Within the game Boudica assumes command of her tribe following her father's death at the hands of Nero's son Commodus during a ceremony of peace, eventually leading Boudica to storm Rome's centre with elephants and fully-fledged siege equipment[17]. Whilst Boudica's depiction in *Ryse: Son of Rome* maintains some elements of her historical background, it is all-too apparent that many liberties have been taken when adapting the warrior queen for the game.

Historically, Boudica did assume control over her tribe, the Iceni. However, this was assumed from her husband, Prasutagus, following his death, and the subsequent treatment of the Iceni by the Roman state led to the revolt against Rome, though there are also a range of other long-term factors[18]. Not only have known details been ignored by Crytek, but the character's motivations for a rebellion against Rome have been altered to suit the title's fantastical story[19]; it seems that a recognizable character name was the only aspect of Boudica relevant to the developer.

The fact that the in-game 'Celtic' barbarians have access to a full arsenal of siege equipment, as well as war-mounted elephants and even gunpowder and explosives further illustrates the liberties taken by developers Crytek in order to suit *Ryse: Son of Rome*'s action-driven gameplay. Indeed, this points to an overlap between gaming and cinematic representational tropes[20], which enfolds one of the other Roman characters in the game. Nero's in-game son Commodus obviously stands out as a further fictionalisation. Historically, of course, Commodus was the son of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, eventually becoming emperor himself. Nichols highlights the fact that the character of Commodus would be familiar to fans of the award-winning 2000 film *Gladiator*, as the film's central antagonist, and he suggests that this is the main reason for the character's inclusion in the game[21]. This would echo the way in which elements of 'Brand WW2' come to be transposed between movies like *Saving Private Ryan* and games like *Medal of Honor*[22].

It is not just the game's protagonists that were highlighted in some of the critical reaction that *Ryse* received. The environment of the game has also been highlighted as containing various elements which are out-of-place within the relevant time period. Probably the most prominent example of this is the presence of both Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall, constructed from the years 122 CE and 142 CE respectively. Of course, while some of the game's critics recognised that there are bound to be inaccuracies in games set in historical time-periods, they have argued that a basic level of sympathy for the time period must be adhered to when presenting this material to the public[23]. Another spurious inclusion, highlighted by Nichols, is the construction of

a giant wicker man, built in the game as the method of Commodus' execution by the Caledonian barbarian tribe. Whilst there is a brief (and probably derivative) reference to this in Caesar's account of Gaul, there is no corroborative evidence of any such practice, and this seems to be another cinematic reference-point, not least to the eponymous classic horror movie set in an isolated pagan community in modern times.

The depiction of the Northern British tribes themselves is another point of contention. Nichols[24] discusses the Caledonian tribes, who occupied what is now Scotland, and their depiction in the game as bone-wearing, club-wielding, brutish barbarians. Whilst it is known that Caledonia (or the region named so in the game) was not densely settled at the time of *Ryse*'s setting, it was far from the dense, dark woodland that is rendered in the game. Interestingly, Nichols suggests – perhaps charitably – that this might be based on Roman opinion about Caledonia at the time, as Roman writers were obviously working mainly with certain stereotypes about the lands and peoples of Britain[25]. The clothing worn by the Caledonians in *Ryse*, featuring goat/cow skull helms and armour of leather and bone, is also part of this, and again echoes cinematic conventions in films like *King Arthur* and *The Eagle*, now reiterated again in the Sky tv series *Britannia*. Overall it is apparent that major liberties were taken with the historical setting of the game, from anachronistic siege equipment, to fictionalised character depictions and landscapes derived from deep-rooted stereotypes. Though extreme in this case, such inaccuracies are perhaps to be expected in an action/adventure game that treats a historical period as somewhat of a fantasy setting. What is interesting, however, is how these inaccuracies enfolded with poorly designed gameplay into a mixture that was not too popular with the gaming public.

Gameplay and player limitations

The action/adventure genre often deploys a 'sandbox' map[26]. Unlike more open-ended role playing games (such as *Assassin's Creed: Origins*; see below), a sandbox map contains elements of open-world environments to encourage exploration and discovery of new locales, but also limits

the area of play so that the player cannot veer too far from the tasks and missions at hand[27]. However, *Ryse*'s gameplay could not be further from this model, with each game's stage following a very linear chain of operations, combined with a predictable, repetitive combat system[28]. During each stage of the game, players are presented with waves of enemies, which can only be reached by defeating previous waves, comparable to games developed by Capcom, such as *Bayonetta* and the acclaimed *Devil May Cry* series.

Despite being set during an intriguing historical period, Crytek chose to limit player exploration with *Ryse*, having the player reach wing-emblazoned overhead markers to complete objectives, rather than allowing the player the freedom to explore and develop an immersion in the time-period that might be turned to their advantage in later missions[29]. *Ryse* also utilised cinematics and quick-time events (interactive moments within cut-scenes/cinematics), that can only be executed by specific button prompts, for much of its combat, and this has been highlighted by critics as damaging to the game itself by removing key elements of player involvement. Jenkins mentions this as a major drawback for the game, as well as noting the historical inaccuracies, and explains that the limitations to player engagement and interaction with the surrounding terrain/areas, including monuments such as the Colosseum[30], lead to a system of 'player hand-holding', as they are constantly given instructions throughout the game. Walton expands on this, stating that whilst *Ryse* may have been marketed as having a larger scale environment in the lead-up to the game's release, it was soon evident from player and professional reviews reveal that the final product presented gamers with a much narrower scope[31].

While evaluating the precise balance between gameplay limitations and historical inaccuracy in accounting for the poor response to the game would require detailed audience research, the way these two themes have been highlighted by different critics shows both some of the problems historical games can pose, but also ways forward. The heavily fictionalised historical interpretations are obviously likely to draw scorn from specialist critics, but they can also be

detected by a wider audience of players, and Crytek's effort is conspicuous by its lack of more in-depth knowledge presented in other games of the historical fiction genre (Stuart, 2010). The limited representational authenticity is more significant, though, when linked to the lack of player involvement and influence in both the story and ultimate outcome of the game. As highlighted by Nichols, Hoggins, and Walton[32], the narrow scope offered by *Ryse* presents players with iconic historical surroundings, but considerably curtails the parameters for exploring the regions of Rome and *Britannia* in-game. It is apparent that players are not able to deviate from a given path in the game, and whilst cinematics and quick-time battle animations may have showcased the graphical capabilities of the Xbox One, *Ryse* did not aim to depict both the chosen period of the game nor serve to engage players beyond a storytelling level[33]. Whilst games such as *Ryse* might be seen as justifying dismissive treatment of gaming by scholars, the responses to the game, and its poor sales compared to games like the *Assassin's Creed* series, starts to indicate that the public is alert to more nuanced forms of authenticity in other games, and that this is revealing of deeper trends. *Ryse*'s problems are thus more effectively observed when compared to other titles of historical fiction and the action/adventure genre, which have succeeded where Crytek's model did not.

Modes of authenticity

As discussion of the nature and utility of games set in historical periods has developed, so authenticity has become an understandably key issue. Hitherto, traditional disciplinary boundaries have somewhat siloed the debate in history, archaeology, and classics, but – as this volume as a whole will demonstrate – there is much common ground in the concerns of scholars across these fields. As noted in the introduction, the initial focus on critique of authenticity of representation has developed in new directions, though the example of *Ryse* illustrates why this is still worthwhile. Some of the ways in which *Ryse* fits into a wider pattern of particular conventions of representational (in)authenticity have already been mentioned in the foregoing. Use of cinematic

tropes, for example, is clear, and as Salvati and Bullinger have shown with games set in World War 2[34], this is a common feature of historical games. In itself this raises some interesting questions about whether people are judging the authenticity of representation with respect to a 'real' past, that they have experienced from visiting actual places or museums, or academic sources, or a past mediated by the creators of other visual media[35]. Of course, in reality there is no such thing as an unmediated past[36], and this is precisely where we reach the limits of the representational mode of authenticity, on which more below. Other conventional tools which games developers use to convey authenticity in representation, which are highlighted by Salvati and Bullinger, include 'technological fetishism', which typically applies most to weapons and military equipment in both action/adventure and strategy games[37]. Certain aspects of the material world are highlighted which are important in gameplay but which also have well-documented real-world referents. This, along with the documentary authority conveyed by real historical figures[38], is an area that *Ryse* did not particularly succeed in, and which laid its developers open to criticism, as gamers do indeed notice problems in these areas. This is why modification of games by users ('modding') is often done to create more technically accurate graphics rather than fix more ambiguous issues, though the former are perhaps easier to address from a technical point of view[39]. Again, though, even with very well-documented periods, we soon run into the problem that representation of the past is always mediated and can never be perfect, and indeed that this was also true in the past itself. Past people had a patchy understanding of the world they lived in and its historical composition[40]. This realisation actually takes us closer to the virtue of the unique quality of games: players don't just want to represent the past, but to relive it.

Authenticity of representation is thus an important part of the story when it comes to the successful creation, and enjoyable playing of, historical games, but it is only a part. The other major element is authenticity of experience, which builds upon reasonably accurate material world-building but also has a lot to do with gameplay mechanics. *Ryse* failed on both counts, whereas games in the *Assassin's Creed* series, as we will shortly discuss, have succeeded in both

areas – and indeed got better at it as the developers have realised what players want from the game. What this seems to constitute, for a lot of gamers, is an experience which transcends the passivity of watching a film or tv show set in a historical period – as accurate and/or entertaining as this might be – and moves closer to something like re-enactment[41], but might actually be felt to be even more 'real' than the latter, because it takes place in a fully real 'past' world with fewer jarring abutments against contemporary life. As long as the game presents an environment which is 'real enough'[42], which means not only that it conveys a sense of historical accuracy but also that its gameplay mechanics, modelling of physics and so on are plausible to the player, then the gamer can be immersed in the environment to the exclusion of the outside world. Beyond this, Hong has argued that gamers are seeking in the digital past an escape to 'authentic' living – in the sense of being alive at a time, and doing the kinds of activities within that time, when something significant was at stake[43]. Thus to fight in a battle in the ancient world becomes a more 'real' experience – because life and death is at stake – than the humdrum safety (or everyday stresses) of much modern living. Games are thus in some ways part of new relationships between people and their pasts, but at the same time replicating much of the function of mythologies and ritual acts of previous cultures[44]. How they do this can be effectively demonstrated by the example of games from the *Assassin's Creed* series.

Realism and representation: *Assassin's Creed*

'Who are we, who have been so blessed to share our stories like this? To speak across centuries?'

Ezio Auditore de Firenze, *Assassin's Creed II*

The *Assassin's Creed* series, as a mainstream gaming title, has become a household name in the past decade. With the game reaching a clear milestone with its ninth canon release, it is useful to view the arc of the series' development. The inaugural title was released in 2007, by developer/publisher Ubisoft, to widespread critical acclaim. The popularity of the series has arguably climbed since, with each main title in the series exploring a different period of history (Table 1).

Game Title/Release Year	Historical Setting
Assassin's Creed (2007)	The Third Crusade, 1191 CE
Assassin's Creed II (2009)	Renaissance Italy (15th/16th Century CE)
Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood (2010)	Renaissance Italy (16th Century CE)
Assassin's Creed: Revelations (2011)	Constantinople, 1511 CE
Assassin's Creed III (2012)	American Revolutionary War, 1754-1783 CE
Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag (2013)	Golden Age of Piracy, 1715 CE
Assassin's Creed: Unity (2014)	French Revolution, 1789 CE
Assassin's Creed: Syndicate (2015)	British Industrial Revolution, 1868 CE
Assassin's Creed: Origins (2017)	Ptolemaic Egypt, 49 BCE
Assassin's Creed: Odyssey (2018)	Ancient Greece, 431 BCE

Table 3.1: *The Assassin's Creed* series

As of 2014, the franchise had sold over 73 million copies worldwide (which is thought to have increased to 100 million in 2016)[45]. However, with global recognition comes a wider scope for criticism, with the historical accuracy and potential educational benefit of each release in the series being called into question on online message boards/forums and gaming blogs[46]. This is where the overarching storyline of the series comes into play, as each historical setting must slot

into the grander narrative. Each game is focused on a (seemingly never-ending) conflict between the revolutionary order of Assassins and the reactionary faction of the Knights Templar, or their antecedents, as both chase after artefacts dubbed 'Pieces of Eden'[47]. Due to the game's fantastical setting in the modern world, with a virtual-reality machine called 'the Animus' enabling the reliving of ancestral memories, the developer Ubisoft have been able to explore a wide range of historical timeframes, and allow for playful creativity as well as both modes of authenticity[48]. As a mechanic that allows the player to move into different past horizons, the Animus enhances the sensation of exploration within the games and is an interesting and indirect way to bring an archaeological approach to the series[49]. The gameplay of the series, coupled with the continuous narrative between games, is of vital importance to consider when discussing the place of the series in the wider context of the relationship between archaeology and the virtual world.

Gameplay, exploration and customisability

Whilst the *Assassin's Creed* releases are set against a vibrant historical backdrop, the central facet of the gameplay is based around stealth and adaptive exploration. The mechanics revolve around the location of targets and their subsequent termination, allowing the player to choose the most effective method of doing so. Meyers highlights that this mechanic, whilst appearing simple, is central to the potential educational prospects that the *Assassin's Creed* series might hold. Although the foremost thought for most players is the elimination of the target, through the element of free choice and exploration, the games indirectly allow players to adapt to their historical surroundings, to recognise and utilise the architecture and major landmarks to their strategic advantage. This in turn can generate a subliminal form of learning about the historical setting of the game[50], further contributing to the use of history as a key game element[51].

It is here that we introduce the series' arguably most acclaimed and inventive entry so far (at the time of writing), in 2017's *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, which is also directly relevant to the Classical context of this volume. Unlike previous releases in the franchise, which purely focused

on reaching objectives and eliminating targets, *Origins* expands upon the explorative nature of the series, rewarding innovation over completion. Set in Egypt during the Ptolemaic period, *Origins* focuses on the beginnings of the Assassin Order and the sparks of their battle against the Knights Templar. As a result, many of the series' previous tropes and signatures are gone, allowing Ubisoft to manipulate the origin story framework to introduce new game mechanics. Perhaps the most striking is the re-invention of the 'Eagle Vision' ability. In previous games, players could select a button to initiate a vision skill that would allow them to detect guards, enemies and targets, as well as explore key points in their surroundings[52]. However, in *Origins*, this mechanic is replaced by the pet Bonelli's eagle ('Senu') belonging to the main protagonist, Bayek. Not only is this bird of prey native to the Egyptian area, but it is utilised almost like a scout drone, to carry out reconnaissance from the sky (quite similar to the owl from fellow Ubisoft title, *Far Cry: Primal)*. Senu is not only used for spotting, attacking, and distracting enemies and targets, but also for tracking wild game and pin-pointing map locations in order to secure resources for armour and weapon upgrades[53].

This leads on to another fresh element in *Origins*' reimagining of the series, in the now customisable weapons and armour mechanic, introduced in this release. Players can now carry multiple handheld weapons such as swords, pikes, bows, shields and the Egyptian khopesh (curved blade) which can be purchased from merchants or looted from guards and enemies[54]. These items can all be upgraded through completing side quests and hunting tasks, or using resources gathered from the indigenous wildlife, such as crocodiles and hyenas and hippopotami. Whilst this mechanic existed in its infancy in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, in the game's whaling missions, these were used to unlock specific sets of clothing and armour, and it is only in *Origins* that we see this depth of customisability for individual player elements.

Fig. 3.1: Protagonist Bayek explores Alexandria in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017, *Ubisoft*)

This level of crafting and character-building draws in a role-playing element to the series' action/adventure moniker, similar to other titles in the genre such as the Playstation 4 exclusive *Horizon Zero Dawn***,** and Nintendo Switch launch title, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. This new customisability allows players to become truly connected to the protagonist, their surroundings and in the case of *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, the time period in which the game is set. It is this level of connection that some have highlighted as being useful for educational purposes, as the player truly feels enveloped and attached to the environment which inhabits them[55].

Archaeological sites and integration into gameplay

Considering each title's historical setting, it is to be expected that each *Assassin's Creed* entry will depict respectable renderings of key historical monuments. According to Nielsen[56], developer Ubisoft's research team provides the skeletal framework of the each game and its historical setting. This is especially evident in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and *Assassin's Creed: Origins*.

Black Flag presents players with an in-game rendering of the Mayan site of Tulum. In the game, Tulum is where the game's protagonist, Edward Kenway, is stranded with pirate captain Charles Vane. Following an in-depth exploration of the ruins, and the introduction of a series of puzzles centred on Mayan stelae[57], the player discovers that Tulum functions as the spiritual home of the titular Assassins in the area, and also houses the game's chief artefact and goal. The aforementioned Mayan stelae puzzle side-quest is also fascinating, as the player utilises actual architectural artefacts in order to complete mapping and puzzle-solving stages, giving the protagonist themselves an archaeological focus (not that we would go so far as to call the Assassin's Order an archaeological group of course!). The inclusion of such a prominent archaeological site and its integration into the story is yet another example of *Assassin's Creed*'s apparently seamless ability to merge representational authenticity with fictional gameplay[58].

Origins of course expands on this greatly, as players are essentially given freedom to roam over the landscape of Ptolemaic Egypt and its many prominent sites. Arguably, the most spectacular locations featured in *Origins* are the Pyramids of Giza. As part of a key explorative side quest in which players are required to gather items from tombs, they can not only climb the Pyramids, but also explore their inner networks, these being depicted with reasonable accuracy[59]. This is due to Ubisoft not only utilising their in-house historians, but also from working with external archaeologists, including Egyptologists Jean-Claude Golvin and Mark Lehner. Golvin in particular was apparently very involved in mapping key locations in the game, and provided drawings, schematics and maps, including of the Giza Plateau and its iconic monuments[60]. Not only is this a key example of crucial interactions between archaeologists and game developers, but shows the aspirations of some developers to provide players with as authentic a historical representation as possible. This in turn helps to generate an immersively authentic experience.

Franchise historian Maxime Durand and game director Ashraf Ismail both explained, in a recent interview, that the *Assassin's Creed* series, and *Origins* in particular, might not be the most accurate of historical portrayals among digital games, but that Ubisoft and each subsequent

development team aims for each entry to be as authentic a player experience as possible[61]. This can be seen most clearly in Ubisoft's latest downloadable content (DLC) for *Origins*, the aptly named 'Discovery Mode'[62]. This newly developed game mode essentially transforms *Origins* into a fully playable virtual museum. The mode removes the story, combat and mission objectives, leaving the player to roam the landscape and view iconic monuments and archaeological sites at their own leisure. The DLC currently features 75 guided tours for players to experience, each peppered with checkpoints. Players can also utilise this mode in order to learn about practices such as mummification, or to explore the hidden rooms of the Great Library of Alexandria[63]. The value of this mode as an educational tool is deliberate, and is being recognised widely. Ubisoft supplied secondary schools with early versions of Discovery Mode in order to collect feedback, which was overwhelmingly positive from younger students, allegedly helping them retain greater amounts of information about the time period[64]. Durand also states that this Discovery Mode is simply the start of a greater effort to use the *Assassin's Creed* games as an immersion tool, taking their value above simply enjoying the series' already intricate plotlines[65].

The fact that Durand recognises this is vital, as when a series as prominent as *Assassin's Creed* gains global recognition for its historical settings, it is also placed under more detailed scrutiny. An example of this is an article by Sawula[66]. Writing for the online blog 'Play the Past', Sawula is one of the few authors[67] that has held *Assassin's Creed* up to critical standards, utilising the third (*Assassin's Creed III*) and fourth (*Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*) entries as prime examples. Durand and Ismail's own statements, to the effect that they aim with each entry for an authentic experience which does not always equal complete historical accuracy[68], do need to be borne in mind. However, writing of *Black Flag*, Sawula states that '*Assassin's Creed* is not good history', highlighting as problematic the focus on a singular historical perspective, which developer Ubisoft appears to present as fact. In *Assassin's Creed IV*, the player controls fictional sailor-turned-pirate captain Edward Kenway, who chooses to rebel against the naval forces of Britain and Spain, depicting piracy and its Golden Age as a key bastion of freedom and liberty[69].

While it is clear that sailors and civilians alike turned to piracy for a variety of reasons, the game instead portrays pirates as a rather democratic force – again, a recognizable trope (cf. the tv series *Black Sails*), but of questionable authenticity, at the intersection of both representational and experiential modes.

The central issue that Sawula highlights is that Ubisoft claim to be presenting 'true stories' against the backdrop of historical fiction. Combining this with the overarching narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* series, it is implied that the player is replaying events as they occurred, and that their presence has no true bearing on history in the grander scheme of the game's narrative[70]. Connecting this with the overarching framework of revolutionary good vs. authoritarian evil, Sawula claims that each game confirms popular opinions of each era and that player's expectations are never challenged. However, we need to bear in mind Hussey's remark that the *Assassin's Creed* series are certainly not the first games to utilise historical and archaeological settings, but that they are arguably the most popular[71]. Why are they so successful? Harris highlights that whilst the series may at times function on a superficial level of engagement, it is still dangerous to dismiss them as 'just games', and class them as lower than historical literature/film/television[72]. Harris, Nielsen, and Hussey all share a common view, that in representing and rendering our world and the human past, video games must be considered seriously, as the narrative driving force of the digital age[73]. Indeed, the developers of the *Assassin's Creed* series are perhaps among the first to take this role seriously, and start to leverage it to do precisely what Sawula demands, and challenge expectations as the series moves on.

This balance between their striving for authenticity, and the critical questioning of accuracy, is also perhaps why Ubisoft have chosen time periods that are slightly more ambiguous and unfamiliar, to allow greater manipulative potential. Whilst the Ptolemaic Egyptian setting of *Origins* might include some of the more iconic monuments of world archaeology, the era itself was chosen for its relative lack of familiarity, which in turn allows the developers greater creative freedom[74]. However, this is not to say that Ubisoft have run roughshod over this ancient setting,

as is displayed by their collaboration with leading experts in the field, as well as a solid grounding in factual research before enveloping this into the wider *Assassin's Creed* narrative.

Conclusion: the value of critical gaming

The two contrasting case-studies that we have examined in this paper highlight that different games help us to think through the interactions between authenticity of representation and of experience, and what these mean for the relationship between contemporary people – including archaeologists – and the past. These insights are helpful for archaeologists and historians in considering their own imaginative reconstructions of past worlds, and indeed their own practices[75], of research as well as of teaching. Beyond the academy, there is room for optimism about the direction of travel which the *Assassin's Creed* series seems to point towards. A decade ago, when games studies in archaeology were taking off, it was easy to feel that it was a sub-field destined not only for the scorn of many peers, but also for being completely ignored by the commercialised behemoth of the global games industry. Yet the recent developments in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise show that there is a wide, and critical, public out there to whom software companies want to direct increasingly 'authentic' (representationally and experientially) games. Those companies are therefore also increasingly interested in engaging with archaeologists and historians. That makes it all the more important that we nurture a sympathetic, but also of course critical, attitude to games more widely among the scholarly community. At the time of writing, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* is forthcoming as the next instalment in the series, to be released in October 2018. What that game brings to the debate, and how, or if, other major commercial games take up some of the challenges that the series has laid down, remains to be seen. There can be little doubt, though, that gaming will be a crucial narrative form in the 21st century; as much as new archaeological techniques or theoretical paradigms, and therefore, they should be seen as the future of the past.

Notes

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[2] For the term, see Reinhard 2018 and cf. Rollinger, this volume.

[3] Cf. Chapman, Foka & Westin 2017.

[4] E.g. McGonigal 2012.

[5] E.g. the Interactive Pasts network, which originated in Leiden, http://interactivepasts.com/.

[6] Cf. Holtorf 2005, 135-44; Rollinger 2017; Winnerling 2014.

[7] Hong 2015.

[8] Cf. Fogu 2009; Uricchio 2005.

[9] E.g. Graham 2014.

[10] E.g. Spring 2015.

[11] E.g. Gardner 2012.

[12] Nichols 2014.

[13] VGChartz 2018.

[14] Fiscal Times 2013.

[15] Nichols 2014.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Hingley and Unwin 2006.

[19] Nichols 2014 and cf. Beavers, this volume.

[20] Cf. Salvati and Bullinger 2013.

[21] Nichols 2014.

[22] Salvati and Bullinger 2013.

[23] Nichols 2014; cf. Lowe 2009.

[24] Nichols 2014.

[25] *Ibid.*; cf. Woolf 2011.

[26] Antunes 2013.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Hoggins 2013.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Jenkins 2013; cf. Maiberg 2014. Nichols 2014.

[31] Walton 2013.

[32] Nichols 2014. Hoggins 2013. Walton 2013.

[33] Walton 2013.

[34] Salvati and Bullinger 2013, 159-60.

[35] Cf. Copplestone 2017.

[36] Cf. Dow 2013.

[37] Rollinger 2017. Salvati and Bullinger 2013, 158-9.

[38] Salvati and Bullinger 2013, 160-1.

[39] Gardner 2007. Graham 2014. Sotamaa 2010.

[40] Dow 2013.

[41] Cf. Uricchio 2005. Vowinckel 2009.

[42] Hong 2015, 42-6.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] *Ibid.*, 50-1.

[45] Makuch 2016. Seibert 2014.

[46] Stuart 2010.

[47] Hussey 2014a.

[48] Cf. Gardner 2007.

[49] Hussey 2014a. Sawula 2013.

[50] Meyers 2011.
[51] Stuart 2010.
[52] Parkin 2017.
[53] Tapsell 2017.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] Tamayo 2018.
[56] Nielsen 2017.
[57] Campbell 2013.
[58] Hussey 2014a.
[59] Nielsen 2017.
[60] *Ibid.*
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] MacDonald 2018.
[63] *Ibid.*; Tamayo 2018.
[64] MacDonald 2018.
[65] Nielsen 2017.
[66] Sawula 2013.
[67] Cf. Hussey 2014b.
[68] MacDonald 2018.
[69] Sawula 2013.
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] Hussey 2014b.
[72] Harris 2015.
[73] *Ibid.*; Hussey 2014b; Nielsen 2017.
[74] Nielsen 2017.
[75] Cf. Chapman 2016.