



A Review of *Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games*

Morgan Pearce <morgan_dot_pearce_at_uleth_dot_ca>, University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1768-4501>

Davide Pafumi <davide_dot_pafumi_at_uleth_dot_ca>, University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada & the Humanities Innovation Lab  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1113-187X>

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Abstract

This review considers Houghton’s edited volume, *Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games* (2022). The collection explores how games — ranging from historical simulations to fantasy-inspired narratives — can effectively be used to teach various aspects of the Middle Ages. By analyzing the theoretical underpinnings, pedagogical strategies, and practical case studies presented in the volume, this review contributes to the debate on how to innovate educational practices as well as the discussion on the legitimacy of games within the context of higher education.

About the Collection

In its 311 pages (306 pages plus five prefatory ones), the volume presents an overview of “a series of approaches to the use of historical games as learning and teaching tools for Medieval Studies and Popular Medievalism” [Houghton 2022, 16]. Through the experience of educators in different settings, the volume contains twelve essay-chapters, divided into five sections, which cover different topics and domains. Although the focus of the book seems predominantly historical, this collection’s themes extend to adjacent fields, such as research methods (Houghton’s chapter 13), sociology (Klaassen’s chapter 11), and even literature and the arts more broadly (López, Hardin, and Wan’s chapter 12; Champion, Nurmikko-Fuller, and Grant’s chapter 9, all in [Houghton 2022]). The volume emerged from a conference panel at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds in 2019 and it has expanded over the years, incorporating contributions from reviewers and numerous scholars.

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This collection is part of a series of similar works focusing on the view and understanding of the Middle Ages through gaming by the same author, which include *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potentials in Modern Games* [Houghton 2023], *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism* [Houghton 2024] and the upcoming *Routledge Companion to Video games and History* [Houghton, Cook & Kempshall (eds.) (forthcoming)]. These works are in dialogue with broader discussions on the issue of historical representations in video games and the importance of critical analysis of games, the possibility of teaching and the frameworks used for teaching video games in university settings, and the political implications of medievalism in video games (see e.g., [Kline 2013]; [McCall 2011]; and [Elliott 2017]).

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Houghton’s introduction synthesizes the latest research on the entanglement between history and gaming. It appears to respond to Heinze’s book on the modelling of history in computer games [Heinze 2012], though this is only implied rather than explicitly stated (see [Houghton 2022, 16]). That interdisciplinary field is rapidly expanding, with growing academic interest in how games represent history, whether accurately or not. Several chapters in this book explore the concept of historical accuracy and question its very existence. Houghton emphasizes this aspect, noting that a “game’s mechanics represent an abstract and truncated model of reality, which is nevertheless functional, internally consistent,

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and extensively explorable” [Houghton 2022, 7]. Games have thus been analyzed through frameworks from different angles — as discussed above — leading to new methodological approaches. Houghton underscores how the repurposing of video games as learning tools is not unheard of:

The potency of games in this regard has contributed to their employment as elements of a growing range of educational programmes at almost every level of study, a development which has been accompanied by a corresponding emergence of a vibrant field of pedagogical research [Houghton 2022, 4].

However, Houghton does not present video games for teaching — as any other tool — as unproblematic. He highlights how educators who employ them risk being ineffective if they merely “gamify classrooms” without sufficient planning [Houghton 2022, 5]. To avoid being ineffective, he warns of the need to carefully assess “what games can teach and how” [Houghton 2022, 6], stressing that games provide a more dynamic way to engage with history than traditional methods [Houghton 2022, 8] while cautioning that games need to be approached with “a degree of historical and ludic literacy” (Houghton’s chapter 13 in [Houghton 2022, 293]) like any legitimate historical source.

The issue of historical accuracy affects all representations of the past, but it is particularly pressing for the Middle Ages. Unlike other periods, medieval history in video games is often subject to greater exaggeration that tends towards “eurocentrism and a white, male, and heterosexual world” [Houghton 2022, 14]. According to Houghton’s introduction [Houghton 2022, 15], the Middle Ages are frequently portrayed through simplified tropes of a violent Dark Age, coupled with a misleading depiction of gender and ethnic homogeneity — an issue exacerbated by the general neglect of medieval history in school curricula. Fantasy elements further complicate matters, introducing highly fictionalized narratives that audiences often mistake for historical fact. Rather than dismissing the use of video games in education, Houghton then advocates for a deeper interrogation of these materials.

Structure and Themes of the Chapters

The volume brings together a diverse group of contributors, including historians, game designers, digital humanists, and educators. Their backgrounds reflect a strong interdisciplinary approach, incorporating methodologies from history, pedagogy, digital media, and game studies. Their contributions are structured into five distinct sections, each addressing different dimensions of using historical games as educational tools ranging from broad discussions on learning through gaming to specific case studies on game design, modification, and application beyond the classroom. The sections and the essays within them move naturally from one topic to the next, as if each essay builds upon ideas brought before it.

Part I establishes a foundation by examining how players learn history through video games outside formal educational settings. It focuses on students as active participants in historical interpretation. Part II shifts to analyzing how commercial video games - such as *Assassin’s Creed*, *Skyrim*, and *Crusader Kings* — can be employed in teaching, with an emphasis on their historical framing and pedagogical potential. Part III explores custom-built educational games, presenting examples of bespoke digital and tabletop games designed for historical instruction. Part IV investigates student-led game design and modification as a learning method, emphasizing the role of interactive storytelling and historical simulation in the learning process. Part V concludes the volume by looking beyond the classroom and discussing how games can be used for research, historical simulations, and public engagement. This choice seems to be very well suited as it allows readers to first situate themselves within the theoretical concerns before encountering the various case studies.

In the first chapter, the authors explore how gaming could help to inform “immersive teaching and learning experiences in history” (Stirling and Wood’s chapter 2 in [Houghton 2022, 41]). Drawing on data from the survey, the authors present a speculative design fiction that examines what students thought they had learned about history through playing “historical” video games in their free time, how they believed they had learned it, and why they engaged in historical gameplay. Particularly interesting is the discussion on historical accuracy, often ensured by academic advisors hired by game developers, but who reinforce certain dominant historiographical interpretations over others — a natural consequence of the medium being used whose narrative and mechanics are often privileged over considerations of

historical accuracy. The chapter also discusses the benefits of encyclopedic resources available to students within the framework of the game and their aesthetic appeal in turning students into active agents in the learning process.

The next section complements the contents of the first by expanding upon the discussion of historical accuracy by offering considerations of how to deal with the idea within the classroom. Horswell's essay on *Assassin's Creed* discusses the tension between historical accuracy and historical plausibility and how these ideas can open up conversations within the classroom. They also discuss the importance of games' technical features "structure and limit images of the past", which "helps us see how history is being reflected and made beyond the academy" (Horswell's chapter 3 in [Houghton 2022, 64]). The next two chapters are more focused on the implementation of video games in a classroom environment. DeVine's essay has practical recommendations for how to use games in relation to a case study of using *Skyrim* in a first-year composition course. Students were asked to make arguments for various characters within the political landscape of the game, thereby "translat[ing] gameplay ... into the classroom" (DeVine's chapter 4 in [Houghton 2022, 70]). On a similar note, Tozoğlu and Kuran's essay on *Crusader Kings III* contains feedback from students about their experience of using the game within the classroom to "achieve a higher understanding of the contemporary social, political, economic, and technological context of a given era for different cultures and civilizations" (Tozoğlu and Kuran's chapter 5 in [Houghton 2022, 87]).

The above essays form the groundwork from which the next sections work off of. While they discuss *how* to use games within the classroom, the next sections focus on the *creation* of games — either from the ground up or as modifications to previously existing games. Through the creation of games, "students must condense a range of complex historical arguments ... into a simple, elegant mechanic" (Klaassen's chapter 11 in [Houghton 2022, 230]). The subsequent essays focus on creating and modification as a pedagogical tool for students. Essentially, by interacting with games and learning their mechanics, students are "effectively interrogating these arguments ... as they would a monograph or academic article" (Houghton's chapter 10 in [Houghton 2022, 202]). This is because the author is interpreting player interactions with the game as a form of historical argument. In other words, students can engage in historical debate through the creation and modification of game elements.

The Need for this Volume

Houghton's edited volume *Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games* provides plenty of examples of ways to interpret and use historical games within classroom environments and in an educational context in general. The structure of the collection allows each chapter and section to build off of one another, leading from critical considerations towards historical games to the pedagogical purposes of creating and modding games, to the implementation of educational games outside of strictly classroom environments. As such, by developing and using both existing and new frameworks to examine historical games, the usage of video games in academic contexts can be more seriously considered. As Houghton states, "ultimately all that is required is a greater flexibility in what we see as valid approaches to history and a fundamental change to the academic respect we assign to games" (Houghton's chapter 10 in [Houghton 2022, 220]).

One of the key strengths of the book lies in its implicit connection to the broader discourse on critical digital pedagogy, particularly Cathy N. Davidson's vision of a "student-centred class" [Davidson 2020]. That is a very timely topic, as student-centred methods have gained significant momentum in recent years, especially within the field of digital critical pedagogy. By advocating for the strategic use of technology in ways that align with instructors' goals, the volume aligns with Davidson's call for a flexible and inclusive approach to education. This approach not only empowers instructors to maintain control over their pedagogical methods but also encourages students to take an active role in their learning, fostering a dynamic and engaging educational environment. The integration of games into this framework offers a unique opportunity to blend historical content with interactive and immersive experiences, making learning both effective and enjoyable.

Overall, the breadth of materials sourced represents a comprehensive literature review and may be beneficial for students approaching the topic for the first time, particularly those interested in conducting their own research in the field of game studies and game adaptations. In addition to the extensive literature, a ludography (appended below) of only

the games we mention in this review spans a diverse range, covering various genres, themes, and historical epochs. Strategy titles like *Sid Meier's Civilization*, *Europa Universalis*, and *Crusader Kings* emphasize grand historical simulation, while real-time strategy series such as *Age of Empires*, *Hearts of Iron* and *Total War* focus on tactical warfare across different civilizations and time periods. Role-playing games, including *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Skyrim*, explore rich narrative-driven experiences, often set in fantasy or post-apocalyptic worlds. Some games engage directly with historical events, such as *Attentat 1942* and *Svoboda 1945: Liberation*, which attempt to present educational perspectives on World War II and the transatlantic slave trade. The selection also includes games that blend entertainment with academic or cultural critique, such as *Lost & Found: Order in the Court*, which is a tabletop game. Many games analyzed throughout the collection overlap in their categorization, such as *Assassin's Creed*, which coalesces realistic cityscapes and historical events with narrative-driven gameplay.

Most importantly, the collection has the potential to foster further a much-needed discussion surrounding the benefits of computer games in the classroom. Beyond the pedagogical level, Houghton closes the volume by discussing the various ways in which each essay might contribute to “research through games” (Houghton’s chapter 13 in [Houghton 2022, 281] through various methods. The most compelling argument by far is that video games can construct and deconstruct historical arguments through their mechanics, play, and modifications to those elements. This volume indicates that we must “consider [games’] potential as tools for the communication and development of historical research” (Houghton’s chapter 13 in [Houghton 2022, 292]). By doing this, what we are really looking at is “medievalism” more than the Middle Ages itself — a concept to be understood as the way we contemporary people (mis)interpret it by embedding our own beliefs and experiences into the interpretations around the epoch.

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Notes for Future Research

While the collection is clear about being at a preliminary stage (partially due to the field of game studies being relatively new), as a result, there are some missing viewpoints (such as the global south) and some terminology used needs clarification. Such limitation is evident in the author’s working definition of “education,” which is presented in a broad and undifferentiated manner, distinguishing only between “pre-university, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels” [Houghton 2022, 16] without further elaboration. As a result, some of the contributions come across as impressionistic, which makes them feel separated from the rest of the book. For example, McCall’s contribution [McCall 2016], which is referred to more than once in the book, is directed at high school students while most of the chapters actually focus on classrooms in post-secondary institutions. In addition, while the volume appears to be mainly about video games as the “modern games” title implies, an analysis of tabletop games and virtual reality historical simulation is included. López, Hardin, and Wan’s chapter on “The Soundscapes of the York Mystery Plays” uses virtual reality for historical simulation, which they claim in this case is “not a game in itself” (López, Hardin, and Wan’s chapter 12 in [Houghton 2022, 257]).

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Furthermore, it is clear that many of the essay authors are used to viewing games from a historical lens rather than a game studies perspective. This is both a valuable addition to the field of game studies, which is still developing consistent terminology and approaches to studying games, but also a potential point of confusion for readers. The approaches discussed in the last portion of the book (termed “Gamic”, “Simulacrum”, and “Roleplaying”) are potentially tenuous in distinction from one another (which is acknowledged by the author) but they do present a series of approaches that can be used to analyze the specific forms that historical games take and how games have developed over time and alongside our current pedagogical practices (for example, the “Roleplaying” school of thought mirrors the growing emphasis on exploration-as-learning). The approaches listed “share core characteristics with teaching methods currently in use” [Houghton 2022, 292]. As with any pioneering work, it remains to be seen whether these terms will be used outside of their original essays and this book due to their “emergent nature” (Houghton’s chapter 13 in [Houghton 2022, 292]).

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The idea of “education” in the book is only partially theorized as it is shown by different references about “a well-established pedagogy of learning through [analogic] play” ([Houghton 2022, 6]; and see [Kirschenbaum 2014, 202]; [Sabin 2016, 424]) together with others on digital gaming (see [McDaniel2000]; [McCall 2016]). A concrete suggestion in this sense would be to develop a unified, original pedagogical framework tailored for distinct educational levels. They, in fact, demand tailored strategies, tools, and skill sets from educators, which have been described as if they were

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fragments throughout the collection. Another mark of the book's preliminary nature is its predominant adherence to Anglophone discourse. Including a more global perspective — particularly engagement with continental European scholarship (especially pertinent given the author's apparent response to a German work) — as well as contributions from the Global South would have broadened its scope. We hope the author will be developing these ideas further in future research, as their implications have the potential to shape the debate surrounding video game studies and critical pedagogy. While these limitations do not diminish the book's valuable insights, they highlight opportunities for future research — whether by the author or others — to address gaps in representation and mitigate the risks of a one-sided debate as well as to further develop the terminology here proposed.

Ludography

- Age of Empires*. 1997. Ensemble Studios.
- Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*. 2019. Xbox Game Studios.
- Age of Empires: Castle Siege*. 2014. Smoking Gun Interactive Inc.
- Assassin's Creed*. 2007. Ubisoft.
- Attentat 1942*. 2017. Charles Games.
- Crusader Kings II*. 2012. Paradox Interactive.
- Crusader Kings III*. 2020. Paradox Interactive.
- Dragon Age: Origins*. 2009. Bioware.
- Empire: Total War*. 2009. Activision.
- Europa Universalis*. 2000. Paradox Interactive.
- Europa Universalis IV*. 2013. Paradox Interactive.
- Hearts of Iron IV*. 2016. Paradox Interactive.
- Lost & Found: Order in the Court*. 2017. MAGIC Spell Studios.
- Medieval: Total War*. 2002. Creative Assembly.
- Playing History 2: Slave Trade*. 2013. Serious Games Interactive.
- Sid Meier's Civilization*. 1991. MicroProse.
- Sid Meier's Civilization II*. 1996. MicroProse.
- Sid Meier's Civilization III*. 2001. Infogrames.
- Sid Meier's Civilization IV*. 2005. Firaxis Games.
- Sid Meier's Civilization V*. 2010. Firaxis Games.
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Houghton 2024 Houghton, R. (2024) *The Middle Ages in computer games: Ludic approaches to the medieval and medievalism*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

Houghton, Cook & Kempshall (eds.) (forthcoming) Houghton, R., Cook, K., & Kempshall, C. (eds.) (forthcoming) *The Routledge companion to video games and history*. London: Routledge.

Kirschenbaum 2014 Kirschenbaum, M. (2014) "Contests for meaning: Playing King Philip's War in the twenty-first century" in Kee, K. (ed.) *Pastplay: Teaching and learning history with technology*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65swr0.13>

Kline 2013 Kline, D.T. (ed.) (2013) *Digital gaming re-imagines the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge.

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McDaniel2000 McDaniel, K.N. (2000) "Four elements of successful historical role-playing in the classroom", *The History Teacher*, 33(3), p. 357. <https://doi.org/10.2307/495033>

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