An “Alternative to the Pen”? Perspectives for the Design of Historiographical Videogames

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Abstract
This article presents how the tools of videogame design can be used to convey historical arguments, and to what extent historians could benefit from creating such videogames. We begin by positioning our argument within the literature on the writing of history, linking it to formal and writing issues, which leads us to delve into various definitions of what “videogames for history” could be, and what operational frameworks could be derived from those definitions. We then confront some key principles of design to a selection of actual videogame projects to discuss the possibility of “historiographical game design” to be considered as “an alternative to the pen” (Chapman, 2013, p. 329) for historians. Our goal is to identify general principles in the design of historiographical videogames, to provide an improved and refined definition of these games from a design perspective and to formulate general guidelines to inform further explorations through research-creation projects.

Keywords
historiography, game design, videogames, mediation, historian
Introduction

Since their inauguration (Chapman et al., 2016), the field of historical game studies has continued to expand the realm of its investigations regarding computer games and the representation of the past. Yet, some important paths remain under explored. While there is a certain lack of documentation regarding the inner workings of the games’ design and production process in general, due in part to a lack of source material and the relative secrecy in which major industries operate, we note a tendency to keep records and reflections among the creators of what we will call “historiographical videogames” (HVG), or to put it another way, “computer games for history” (Kee & Bachynski, 2009).

This article presents how historians could use the tools of videogame design as “an alternative to the pen” (Chapman, 2013, p. 329) to say to convey historical arguments, and to what extent they could benefit from creating such videogames. After providing a theoretical review of the current literature on the subject, we confront some of its key principles to a selection of actual videogame projects in the prospect of formulating guidelines for future explorations in “historiographical game design.”

Our intention is to identify general principles at play in the design of HVG, to provide a more refined definition of these games from a design perspective as well as to express general guidelines to inform further explorations through research-creation projects. We hope to address some of the main expected benefits that such videogames could provide while acknowledging some limitations that may appear.

Historical Writing: From Academic Text to Videogames

Before considering to what extent the videogame medium could be an “alternative” to classical historiography, we will remind what the medium could be an alternative to, and for which reasons.

The forms of historical expression have not drastically changed over time. The main evolutions within the historical discipline over the last decades lie essentially in its methods, approaches, and objects of study. Following Grafton (1997, p. 231–232; quoting Goldstein, 1977, p. 44), we think an important distinction should be drawn between the infrastructure of history (the sphere of intellectual activity and “methods of knowledge”) and its superstructure (the plane of the formal expression of knowledge, “the finished literary product”). While the former has drastically evolved, the latter remains unchanged: overall, the literary text is the default medium for historical writing.

Whether it is by virtue of tradition or convention (Rosenstone, 1995, p. 11), historical thought is expressed though literary form. The consensus surrounding “history as prose,” however, is not arbitrary. Granted, the “literary prose” is particularly well suited for argumentative exposition, since it is a “one-dimensional medium” in which words and sentences “unfold in a one-dimensional, sequential line” (Staley, 2013/2014, p. 3, 18). As a writer, the historian maintains control over the demonstration,
like a fiction writer keeps control over the narration process. However, since the historian’s narration is no fiction, the historical text is designed to set the reader on a reading course that has more to do with a museum than a fantasy amusement park: a path on which “texts and objects” are disposed, where commentary, notes, citations, and references meet literary figures, effects, and tropes (Pomian, 1989, p. 5–6). There has not been much search for alternative means of historical expression for a long time since the literary quality of historical writing was a given. Sometimes seen as the “force” (Jablonka, 2014) or the “weakness” of history (Boucheron, 2011), the classical literary text ought not to be “replaced” nor “fixed.” The problem was not to figure out “whether the historian writes literature or not” but at best “what kind of literature he writes” (Rancière, 1992, p. 203).

Thus, why should formal evolutions in the writing of history be questioned or more so provoked? First, because reflecting on history’s “means of communication in multiple forms” is a part of the “duties” conferred to the historian (Thullier & Tulard, 1991, p. 83–84, 100). Not only because the historical production has to reach and please a larger audience that is already engaged with the past through a variety of forms going way beyond the literary text (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998): questions of readership engagement are not solely tied to a pursuit of popular approval but can also benefit the way historical works are received and discussed within the academic community itself.

**HVG from Conceptual Definitions to Operational Frameworks**

The games studied within this article have multiple designations. Whether they are called “scholarly game” (Clyde et al., 2012, p. 2–3; Spring, 2015) or “history game” (Kee & Bachynski, 2009), those productions are to be distinguished from the bulk of “historical videogames” (Chapman, 2016, p. 11; Éthier & Lefrançois, 2018). While the latter merely refers to the genre of productions that happen to contain depictions of the past, the former describes a rarer variety of games designed with the explicit purpose of conveying historical arguments.

We will use the term HVG to refer to videogames designed, if not by historians, at least: (a) with the main objective of communicating a historical argument and (b) whose gameplay is designed in accordance with the methodological criteria of the historical discipline. The prime objective of their conception is not only the depiction of a certain perspective about the past, but more so the translation of “reasoned historical arguments” (Clyde et al., 2012, p. 3) into a game form, taking those arguments from a “textual mode” to a “ludic mode.” More than a simple act of creation, this design project aims to develop true narratives and justified statements (“reasonably justifiable truths”) but also their presentation in a “playful mode,” by means of which the “reader explores historical argument through meaningful decision making and adopting a playful attitude” (Clyde et al., 2012).
The project behind HVG is best summed up by Dawn Spring: with those games, “the historian can engage research questions, incorporate primary and secondary source evidence, explore historical themes, present a thesis and make historical arguments” (2015, p. 208, 271). This definition encompasses the games’ purpose, the content they might include, and type of message/take-away they could provide. However, Spring’s idea that some media can encourage a player/reader to go “beyond passively receiving a narrative” was not brought by videogames. It must be noted that the idea of “passivity,” as presented by Spring, must refer to some inability of the receptor (e.g., the reader) to engage in an interactive process, a feedback loop involving a configuration of the text (an input) followed an appraisal of the effects of that configuration, as communicated by the text (an output). Research on the design of interactive forms for historical scholarship goes back at least to the early 2000s with Ayers’ and Thomas’ works. While not mentioning videogames, their contribution sets up some of the major conceptual stakes of the debate, especially regarding the conciliation of authorship, integration of reference material and user’s interaction. It is also the one of the earliest reflexive pieces examining their creators’ own experiment in digital historical scholarship, a “digital article” titled The Differences Slavery Made (Ayers & Thomas, 2003). Some years later, Kee et al. produce the first major theoretical work on the subject of “History-through-gaming” (2009, p. 306), along with an analysis of an experiment in historical videogame design proposed by historians Kee and Bachynski, Outbreak (2009).

From those early stages, there has been very few recommendations for the conception of historiographical videogame. Adam Chapman’s work (Chapman, 2016), while being an essential theoretical milestone that introduces the notion of “developer-historian” to link the practice of game design to that of historiography, does not give specific design directions. However, by being focused on categories and typology, it opens a fruitful path for comparing and connecting various aspects of the traditional writing of history and videogame design. Subsequently, the intertwine of game studies and historiography lead up to the study of videogames as a tool for the communication of archeology (Copplestone, 2017) and history (Clyde et al., 2012; Carvalho, 2017) as a complement to well-established formats. From the perspective of education and cognition studies, Jeremiah McCall’s proposed with his “historical problem space” framework (McCall, 2012, 2020) a more thorough set of guidelines inspired by his own videogame, Path of Honors (2018).

More recently, Yang (2021) derives his framework for the design of HVG from the Value at Play framework (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). The three-step process (“Discover–Translate–Verify”) resumes previous prescriptions and highlights the need for the historian-designer (a) to clearly set his or her intentions regarding the meaning of the game, (b) to come up with the relevant game features to effectively communicate that meaning, and (c) to test the efficiency of those features. That general outline is somewhat analogous to the MDA framework proposed by Hunicke et al. (2004) and followed by Kee and Bachynski (2009): the historian-designer proceeds from the determination the game’s aesthetics (its goals in terms
of emotional response) to the definition of dynamics (“the behavior of the game”) that may generate those aesthetics, which finally informs the mechanics (“rules for the game”) that are best suited for that purpose.

Looking at previous works, it is critical to give directions on the respective prerogatives of historians and game designers in the context of historiographical game design, and all the more important to answer those questions by learning from practical experimentations in game design. The goal of the following section is less an attempt to argue for and promote HVG design projects but rather an examination of expected features both in the games and in their production process.

For Historiographical Game Design

**Historical Mediation and Ludic Mediation**

Discussing the mediation of historical thought via videogames leads to an important distinction between two overlapping but distinct mediation processes. The first process is one of “ludic mediation,” identified by Genvo (2006, 2013) as the attempt, through game design, to communicate the object’s gameplay and its ludic purpose to a player. That mediation process refers to the “good gaming” purpose in the creation process (Kee et al., 2009), the pursuit of an efficient and engaging game system that provides clear and consistent rules. Ludic mediation is concerned not only with convincing the players that the object presented to them is indeed a (video) game, but also to trigger and maintain a playful attitude, a degree of interest, curiosity, and challenge directed at the object.

The ludic mediation process is distinct from a “historical mediation” process, the latter dealing with the designers’ goal to communicate a depiction of the past or express an argument about the past. Looking after this particular mediation process, the designer seeks “good history” though game design (Kee et al., 2009), thrives toward the best “scholarly standards” (Spring, 2015, p. 207) in order to formulate a rigorous historical narrative. Under these definitions, HVG design is therefore understood as the instrumentation of the ludic mediation (efficiency in the communication of gameplay and generation of a playful attitude) to benefit the historical mediation (efficiency in the depiction of the past in relation to the methodological standards of the historical discipline).

In HVG design, historical mediation supersedes ludic mediation. The historian (as an entity, either embodied by an individual, a group, or an institution) leads the game, which means that he remains the ultimate decision maker in terms of creative direction and project management. Prevalence does not necessarily mean interference in every aspect of the game’s development. Major sectors such as level design, artistic or narrative direction can be both subject to specific instructions and somewhat autonomous in the effectuation of the mandate they are given.

In other words, the production of HVG involves a deep reorganization of the current power relationships and decision process within it. In the production of mainstream
historical videogames, irrespective of their quality, historical expertise is but an added-value and consultants hold a subordinated position with little to no power (Éthier & Lefrançois, 2018, 2021). By contrast, historical experts will become the center of gravity in a HVG project: they lead the project and ensure that it satisfies to both historical and ludic mediation, preventing conflicts between the two. They do not get to make every historiographical decision or game design choices, but to guarantee that the two correlate and/or do not collide. If historically-themed videogame designers can fall under the label “developer-historians” (Chapman, 2016, p. 101) since their decisions eventually impact the games’ historical content, historiographical videogame designers in contrast are “historian-designers”: they are not just designers engaged in history, but historians engaged in game design, operating according to an historiographical agenda.

The writing of history is, overall, a more solitary activity than the creation of a videogame, a collective if not world-wide enterprise. However, far from being a disconcerting adventure, the development of HVG would only follow the trend initiated by digital humanities projects, where historians connect with interdisciplinary teams to learn about and exploit the advantages of computing technologies for historical research, data visualization, and expression. Likewise, the design, production, and instrumental use of videogames present historians with a choice between “programming” or “being programmed” (Rushkoff, 2011, p. 12–13), just as any other technological mediation. Fortunately, judging from the existing projects, the need for the acquisition of a minimal degree of computer-game literacy has been taken into consideration, as historians actively engage in the design process. For instance, historian Kevin Kee acted as project manager, researcher, and writer for Outbreak (Kee & Bachynski, 2009, p. 5), while Jeremiah McCall used the quite accessible Twine engine coding language to transpose his own historical works into the game Path of Honors (McCall, 2018).

The key for creating (or analyzing) HVG lies in the acquisition of a meaningful literacy of videogames and their language, understood both as computer programs and as ludic objects. As for the latter, an important point must be raised: stating that ludic mediation is instrumented in no way mean it is expandable. On the contrary, the game itself must efficient as a medium given the goal is “to use [it] as effectively as possible” to fulfill historiographical expectations (Thomas & Ayers, 2003). When Kee and Bachynksi state that “the primary goal of Outbreak is not fun” (2009, p. 11) they do not mean that the creation of engagement is optional, but that the engagement in play is not autotelic or gratuitous.

It has been noted in game studies that “fun” is a somewhat ill-defined notion, not easily assessed or encapsulated by a comprehensive listing of intrinsic qualities. Following the early elucidations of the notion (Malone, 1980, p. 49–64; Malone & Lepper, 1987, p. 229), we find that what “fun” refers to is a more operational concept when used as “interesting, captivating, enjoyable, and (...) motivating,” and as a result when understood in terms of personal motivation (“challenge,” “fantasy,” “control,” and “curiosity”) and interpersonal motivation (“cooperation,” “competition,”
and “recognition”). For now, we will only focus on some aspects of personal motivation, since we are going to be looking at those games as artefact produced in a non-specific and simplified communicational context (the historian builds the game, then the player plays the game).

For instance, HVG projects aim to create fun to the extent that they provide players with a challenge to overcome, or a problem to solve (Kee & Bachynski, 2009; McCall, 2020). To that end, they aim to activate the players’ empathy to spark their desire to overcome said problem, or at least try to. The depicted historical world itself provides “fantasy” via immersion, understood as the “feeling of being drawn into the game world represented onscreen” via different dimensions of involvement (Calleja, 2011, p. 43–44). As seen in existing projects, not only HVG are not in opposition to “fun,” but they rely on a more complex use of the notion that exceeds the description of a mere superficial gratification. Player’s engagement in (and enjoyment of) the videogame involves exploration and disorientation, trial and error, success and failure, all of which being constituents of the games’ expressive potential (Juul, 2013). Various designers of HVG are open to leave a place for the experience of failure (Kee & Bachynski, 2009, p. 8–9), since their goal is to simulate a complex historical setting, let the players assess their understanding of the situation and see the effects of their proposed solution. As illustrated by Kee and Bachinsky’s example, the players are not merely presented with a narrative of the solution, but with a simulation designed to experience the difficulties inherent with finding one. An historically inspired ludic experience does not need to be facilitated or rewarding to be ludic and engaging.

**Linear Exposition versus Playful Interaction**

Let us examine specific examples of design issues in HVG projects, beginning with the conciliation of linearity, as offered by traditional texts, and digital formats’ interactivity. To begin with, one of the most discussed pitfalls regarding the expression of a historical narrative through videogame can be summed up as follows: every measure of control gained by the interactor (reader, player) appears somehow lost by the author. Hence, the more gameplay (the player’s engagement, agency, and multiple choices), the less history (author’s unique steering and guidance). In HVG projects, how can an historical argument be presented through « multiple sequences, multiple voices, multiple outcomes, multiple implications » (Ayers, 2001)?

The “linearity versus interaction” framing is more fruitfully addressed when formulated solely as a design issue. From the reception’s point of view, every reading or playing experience, even reiterated, can be seen as “linear” since only one path is followed (one paragraph read, one sequence played, one choice taken) at a given time. Irrespective of the players’ ability to produce different sequences of actions and choices, those remains linear sequences.

The relevant HVG design question is to secure multiple paths, all resulting from the effectuation of choices, that are both coherent with said choices and from the historical
(e.g., choosing to go to war in ancient Rome must lead to death, as depicted in *Path of Glory*). While setting the rules and anticipating the variety of paths to be taken, HVG designers must seek their *ludic coherence* (player’s perception of fairness and balance between choices and results) as well as their *historical validity* (author’s will for correspondence with the current state of historical research).

Overall, when designing HVG videogames, authorship must not be seen as indivisible not be claimed by the author alone. As previously stated by Janet Murray (2000, p. 74, 81, 129), “authorship” in digital environments is shared, supposes a partition between an “author” in charge of tuning the system’s parameters and a “reader” whose role is to explore that system. In other words, any choice actualized by the latter is necessarily contained within a set of virtual choices defined by the author. That partition is well understood in some prominent HVG projects. In Kee and Bachynski’s *Outbreak*, the historian-designer choses the background and the characters (2009, p. 7) while also setting the goals, mechanics, winning conditions, or lack thereof (2009, p. 10).

It must be noted that HVG are *games*: they differ from “simulations” or “visualizations.” The two terms may apply to some extent, but neither convey the specificity of the media, nor are precise enough. Games depicting the past are certainly simulations if they rely on a system emulating certain aspects of a pre-existing system. Disease propagates in Kee and Bachynski’s *Outbreak* in a fashion that is analogous to the historical Montréal; the climbing of the social ladder in McCall’s *Path of Glory* obeys to specific game rules that imitate historical rules. Similarly, some games can also be seen as visualizations if they rely on some visual content. In this case, while *Outbreak* shows a simplified version of the city’s map, along with character’s portraits, *Path of Glory* is a text-only experience.

From a formal perspective, a videogame is a system able to generate distinctive states recognized as “winning” or “loosing.” No matter how or by whom those states are defined, an interactor generally engages with a game with the motive of seeking to reach or maintain some positively perceived (“winning”) state and/or to avoid some negatively perceived (“loosing”) state. In this context, “winning” does not refer to the game’s (and thus the designer’s) intended goal, but what the player assesses as his or her goal to reach. Hence, our, purposely, oversimplified distinction also applies to games in which apparently objective “loosing” states can be sought by players. In other words, players can try to win or “choose to lose,” that is, to not seek “the indicated win state” (Tornqvist & Tichon, 2021, p. 16).

This motivation to “win” leads the player to elaborate strategies, introduce calculation, engage in expectations regarding the games’ “behavior,” the rewards and sanctions it offers. Fundamentally, (historical) depictions and narratives offered by videogames are contingent on certain game states that can be inaccessible because of the player’s skills, choices, or due to random processes (Malaby, 2007). Given that games must allow for difficulty or failure in the following of certain paths, a proposed design solution is to purposefully restrict interaction, in a way that neither disrupt historical narrative (*historical validity*) nor eliminate the exercise of choice
(ludic coherence). This, for instance, can be achieved by the displaying of “information capsules,” “short texts and images” that “have a fundamental role in previous and after the game activities, but not during the game itself” (Egea-Vivancos & Arias-Ferrer, 2021, p. 392).

Preventing players to access certain sections of the argument of can trigger a reflection about the choices that caused this restriction and be a motivation to replay the game and look for different paths. Replayability is itself a useful feature both for ludic and historical mediation, as the game structure will allow for the exploration of multiple angles of interpretation on the same evidentiary and historiographical material (Thomas & Ayers, 2003). In addition, while some sections of the game are more difficult to access, others can be unavoidable irrespective of the players’ skill or choices. For instance, passages that lay down key components of the argument, introduce important key concepts, or display evidence and reference material.

**Display of Evidence versus Fictional Immersion**

A clear and effective display of the evidence supporting the argument is instrumental to reach scholarly standards. The presence of reference material in the text is one key element that sets an historical production apart from the rest of the written media. Elements such as the footnote, the index and the appendix therefore “augment and extend” the narratives (Ayers, 2001). In academic texts, displaying the evidence helps to establish the work’s scientific value by pointing to a supporting material located outside of the text itself (Grafton, 1997, p. 22–23), indicating that the medium is not self-sufficient for the conveying of an argument.

In the context of a videogame, however, the display of evidence can affect the players’ immersion by blurring the “magic circle,” the metaphorical space where new “meanings (…) emerge as cause and effect of the game as it is played” (Zimmerman, 2012). The players might pause the interaction process, take a step back and dissociate from the ludic experience as they are reminded of their position. How can videogames, as interactive media, offer « new ways of making arguments and associations, of arraying evidence and documenting our assertions » (Ayers, 2001) while still being considered, and engaged with, as videogames?

Some solutions have been proposed to resolve this tension. We will put aside solutions revolving around keeping the reference material as an autonomous addition, outside of a game structure designed to be played in concert with a book, or a movie (Kee & Bachynski, 2009, p. 10). If looking for an historiographical game were “the links to evidence and supporting materials are clearly stated” and also “closely connected to the argument” (Clyde et al., 2012, p. 12), how can we visibly manifest those links? First, the game itself can direct to a distinct section containing the relevant evidence, making it available and easily accessible but not always displayed. A feature of this type is observed in interactive dissertations such as Hinegardner’s *Purchasing the American Dream: Buying a Home in 1960 Chicago*.
(2006), in which hyperlinks lead the reader to a bibliography section outside the current displayed passage.

However, setting up distinct passages symbolizing “article sections” such as the introduction, conclusion, discussion, acknowledgement, or reference has its limitations. Undoubtedly, those passages are physically part of the game (the software, the website), but are they part of the play (the ludic attitude and playful engagement)? Jeremiah McCall’s Path of Honor does not display the notes and references on a separate screen but rather allows the player to look at the primary sources for the current game section by clicking on a dagger symbol (†) located at the bottom of the screen. Future developments in HVG level design will certainly have to deal with the spatial organization of various types of information, namely information about the game situation and gameplay possibilities (supporting the ludic mediation) as well as information about the argument made by the game (supporting the historical mediation).

Exploiting the properties of the classic text form seems a promising path to follow. Explaining his use of the Twine game engine, McCall states that it provides the historian with a set of tools that are both familiar and less so, as they can make use of both the “descriptive precision of text” and the engaging potential of “choice-making” (McCall, 2018). In Path of Honor, choosing to display the reference material (and reading it) results in both a better understanding of the historical argument and its grounding (what we named historical mediation), as well as an increase in information relative to the current game state and the availability of choices (ludic mediation) (McCall, 2016).

Visible Design versus Seamless Design

Finally, let us look at the conciliation of visibility and “seamlessness.” Paradoxically, the hallmark of a good videogame design is its invisibility: it is true for various forms of expression, such as painting or cinema, where part of the author’s work is sometimes to erase all perceptible traces of his presence (Meunier & Peraya, 2010, p. 303–304). However, while being sought in game design, seamlessness, understood as the tendency to conceal the author’s presence to create a more pleasant game experience, can be detrimental to an efficient HVG.

Even though it may contribute to immersion, it makes the historian’s role as mediator vanish, leaving the game’s content as a seemingly unauthored and uncommented representation (Joutard, 2013, p. 150–151), where it is especially difficult to distinguish the source material from its commentary, the factual and the fictional, elements of rhetoric and evidence material.

This issue is relevant when considering the possibility to peer-review HVG. To our knowledge, only one of these creations has been peer reviewed, Thomas and Ayers’ (2003). As the author questions their work’s status (“Can it be called an article? Is it suited for peer review?”), they underline the need to draw a distinction between rhetoric components (elements designed to persuade via text, image, and sound) and evidential components (to prove, via sources and references).
Our proposed design direction is to plan for the disassembly of HVG. This can be achieved by giving the choice to display the entire content the game absent the gameplay components, for instance by toggling a special mode analogous to the one used by game developers and testers to access specific parts of the game’s content. However, while temporarily deactivated, all the rules governing gameplay, style and formatting would still have to be accessible to be reviewed as well. Since a videogame is a machine for the production of ludic experiences, and if a thorough scientific review is sought, the authors could be expected to account for its (mal)functioning by submitting its blueprints, design documents, or commented code. For instance, Thomas and Ayers’ (2003) digital article relied on the emergence of Extensible Markup Language and worked separately on their text’s structure and presentation, two closely related sides of the project that can be offered for review.

HVG projects have moved from the pursue of seamlessness and embraced the display of “seams,” visible elements that testify to the author’s presence, position, and interpretation. According to us, to be both effective as a game and efficient as a tool of historical mediation, it is crucial for the HVG to rely on some sort of code that allows players to better understand what is displayed and, more precisely, to detect the elements’ differences in status.

Historiographical game design needs some aesthetic convention to express uncertainty, doubt, and nuance, as those are expected features of academic voice and historical prudence. For example, incomplete volumes in visual simulation, variations in style and image resolution be used as a way to express “a form of intellectual honesty” (Rocheleau, 2011, p. 253–254; Vergnieux, 2011, p. 40) and discourage unfruitful confusion between the game as a historical narrative and the game as an objective, exhaustive recreation the past itself.

Problems of that type has been remarked in previous experiences in interactive media for history. The Who Built America project, developed by The American Social History Project in 1994, consisted in a “CD-ROM of film, text, audio, images and maps” (Thomas, 2004, p. 62–63). Unfortunately, the unprecedented access given to the public “to a greater number of primary and secondary documents” was not accompanied by a sufficient commentary and contextualization The sources “rarely appear in their original form, but as neatly typed, edited text” as users “are neither asked to struggle with, nor are they made aware of, the difficulties of deciphering poor handwriting, older grammatical styles, or weathered documents.” The capital and yet difficult design lesson to be learned from such a project, may be that good HVG design should not have the players leaving the game “believing that they have been exposed to the totality of sources,” of “failing to appreciate the politics behind which documents get included” (Darien, 1998).

If videogame design can provide historian-designers with the fundamental parts for a “language of exposition” (Ayers & Thomas, 2003), it remains their prerogative to define how they intend to use that language. Graphic and aesthetic conventions need to be subtly and yet unequivocally established as such in order to be interpreted by the players as elements attesting to the game’s historical quality. If we elaborate
from McCall’s or Ayer’s use of textual conventions, we could imagine textual HVG relying on word formatting (size, font, color, or transparency) to help with the differentiation between the examined reality and the interpretation, or to express various levels of confidences between interpretations, from well-established to hypotheses. To be looked at as an element of the scientific conversation, a HVG must demonstrate its position within the existing scholarship (Carvalho, 2017, p. 811) and expose elements to situate the debate and assess the author’s position, its partiality or relevance, within the current state of the historical discourse.

Some historian-designers also pointed out the benefits from embrace the videogame genre codes, conventions, and stereotypical depictions. Kee and Bachinsky favor minimal, iconic depictions, logos, and simple visual indications for the player to assess the state of the game and evaluate what options are given to them (Kee & Bachynski, 2009, p. 9).

HVG can accommodate a high level of simplicity, even to the point that they can remain incomplete prototypes, as long as they are playable. Just as deep maps, historical simulations, or visualizations, HVG are ultimately meant to be “conversation starter” (Kee & Rockwell, 2011), as scholarly games express arguments “framed as a conversation, not a statement” (Bodenhammer, 2013, p. 271; Staley, 2013/2014, p. 127). Videogames have a great participatory potential, not only because the ludic experiences require an active involvement from the players’ part, but also because those experiences can be compared, confronted, and commented. Such extensions could “equip this new historiography with a kind of mass scrutiny unheard of in traditional research” (Carvalho, 2017, p. 817)

**Conclusion**

This contribution examined usually opposed principles of game design to reconcile them and open the field for future developments. We looked at some features of HVG as they relate to processes of historical mediation and/or ludic mediation to solve seemingly conflicting traits, as seen in oppositions such as linearity versus interactivity, the display of evidence versus the maintaining of fictional immersion, and finally visibility versus invisibility of the design process.

It must be stressed that this article is, at best a call, for the enrichment of practices, not eradication nor replacement (Chapman, 2016, p. 282), just like other examinations of the videogame medium for historiography. As it requires nothing less than the learning of an unconventional expression language, we concede that the investment will likely be heavy, and the medium (dis)regarded as a very specialized and confidential tool to exploit (Carvalho, 2017, p. 818). HVG, if they ever come to existence, will operate not only on a different scale compared to today’s industry, but also according to a set of radically different principles and goals. Kee et al. sum it up best when they concede that their game’s development process, and final production, was “not up for industry standards (...) nor should it have been” (Kee & Bachynski, 2009, p. 10).
To sum it up, historiographical game design will have to be an effort directing at letting the player control the game, and the historian control the game design. If the HVG path is to be further explored, we follow Thomas & Ayer’s advice to go beyond single iterations and develop “templates” (2003). Even if such explorations do not result in the construction of a lasting “alternative” in the form of a sharable ludic object, the search for HVG may be its own reward if it urges historians to keep thinking about strategies to communicate their work, spark the interest of their audience and support engagement with historical narratives.

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