

## Historical Game Didactics: Mental Health Awareness and other Social Issues in History based Video Games

Flavius Virgil Grindean 

<sup>1</sup> Graduate Student (2020); Department of Modern Languages, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Ciudad Real, Spain; FlaviusVirgil.Grindean@alu.uclm.es

Academic Editor: Javier E. Díaz Vera

Received: 18 May 2020; Accepted: 10 July 2020; Published: 1 October 2020

*Feeling Europe* 1 (September 2020): 17-28

**Abstract:** The main aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate how video games are cultural artefacts that can be of great didactic value to both players and scholars. The methodology that has been utilized to perform this task was based on diverse ideas present in the field of Historical Game Studies coupled with analytical methods that have been utilized by other scholars for analysing digital games. What makes this analysis different is the dual focus that comprises both didactic qualities and social value of videogames. My research deals mainly with the didactic functions of video games and how they enable players to receive social education with ease due to the interactivity that digital games are characterized by. The two specific methods selected are based on the technical aspects of video games and are ultimately linked in this research with the didactic side of Historical Game Studies to exemplify the social and didactic functionality of video games. As the development and design of videogames becomes more complex, so do their technical functions and their social depth. In the same light, as video games become more relevant for society and more popular, they become an interesting topic of research and as will be demonstrated through this research, there is much importance in analysing video games and realizing what specific uses can be given to these digital artefacts aside of entertainment.

**Keywords:** Historical Game Studies, didactics, learning, video games

---

### 1. Introduction

The main purpose of this dissertation is to analyse various aspects of the educational potential of non-educational (i.e. commercial) video games; I am especially interested in formalizing how commercial video games offer experiences that can be as entertaining as useful by considering the fact that they possess intrinsic educational qualities. In order to identify and describe these qualities, I will take into consideration a set of guidelines within the methodological framework of Historical Game Studies, as described in numerous research papers and reports focusing on the educational potential of video games. By following an outline of standards (as described in my methodological introduction), I will be able to show how these video games can act as powerful, informal educational tools for players.

There exist a variety of reasons why analysing the learning effects of popular video games on users has become paramount for our understanding of the immediate future of education. Firstly, it is more than obvious that video games occupy a most prominent position on the list of leisurely activities preferred by Europeans of all ages (ISFE 2010 report), which means that the knowledge conveyed by video games reaches many more individuals than the knowledge conveyed by, for example, literature, cinema or television. Furthermore, the dramatic popularization of virtual learning environments for every level of our educational systems, which has strongly benefited from the COVID19 crisis and the lockdown of all teaching activities all over our continent (Alberti, 2020), has contributed to the creation of new dialogue between education and the video game industry, shortening further the distances that have traditionally separated these two notions. Within this framework of dramatic changes in our learning styles, it is vital (i)

to recognise the actual nature of the learning processes triggered by non-educational video games (characterised by an enormous degree of informality and learner's autonomy, relatively large lack of scientific veracity and frequent absence of objectivity, among others); and (ii) to identify what specific elements present in these video games trigger processes of acquisition of knowledge and what other elements seem less relevant to these processes.

With these aims in mind, I will propose here an analysis of two popular video games, namely *God of War* (2018) and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), and of some of the ways how these cultural artefacts can be conceptualised as actual learning tools that are not only educating, in a more or less subtle way, generations of learners/players, but also potentially promoting the acquisition of knowledge that learners would have probably never even wondered about, for video games may awaken the interest of the players by providing them with pieces of information that they would have not otherwise even considered looking for in the first place (a similar process which Public Education attempts, often failing because of the little motivation that the systems in place provide to students). By bridging the gap between entertainment and education, video games utilize the concepts of immersion and motivation to capture the attention of a player and make the transportation of information into their brains seem voluntary enough for them to keep learning.

## 2. State of the Art: Historical games as history

### 2.1. What is a historical video game?

During the last few years, a variety of researchers have contributed to the formalization of a brand-new branch of study, known as *Historical Game Studies* (hence HGS). One main topic of debate and discussion among these authors has been the description of the role of historical games as powerful learning or teaching tools. Among the most important representatives of this debate is Jeremiah McCall, an American Historian specializing in Roman History who has extensively contributed to this field with a wide variety of monographs and papers on historical video games.<sup>1</sup>

The methodology applied in this dissertation largely relies on McCall (2019), which provides with a detailed description of how History is normally represented in historical video games. McCall (2019: 29) starts by attempting to define what a historical game actually is. Thereafter (McCall, 2019: 45), he addresses *agency* (See Appendix I, entry *Agency*) in these video games, which is presented here as an essential factor for our understanding of historical games. Thereafter, he includes a most illuminating debate on some of the different ways some famous video games deal with history. This research uses direct examples as ancillary tools, which facilitates the explanation of the main topics and, consequentially, by using video games as examples, the topic is expanded to other conclusions and themes of discussion, such as comparisons between historical texts and historical video games or the importance of accuracy or authenticity of historical representations.

McCall's research is very relevant to my dissertation, in as much as it arises significant questions and arguments that are necessary for the identification and understanding of HGS, as well as for some of the elements which this field operates with. Furthermore, McCall (2019) also includes a technical analysis of the main characteristics shared in common by these commercial video games. He also devotes the last two sections in his article to the use of video games in the classroom and to the societal approach to video games, considering issues such as sexism and racism. There is much to learn from video games and McCall provides a realistic approach to video games when he considers them to be efficient tools for teaching relevant information about historical events, historical figures or cultural elements of the past and recent present. The text is not void of a modern perspective when it comes to considering cultural and social issues, McCall goes back and forth by relating these social topics with some of the technical analysis elements which were explained in earlier parts of the article such as *authenticity* and *accuracy*.

### 2.2. Historical video games as public history

In many of his studies on HGS, McCall argues that there is a certain significance in the bias of the designers of historical games, which is another minor factor that must be taken into account when performing or exercising a proper analysis of historical games. The way designers perceive history and their opinions of historical events or eras are reflected in their designs, just like personal opinions are present in all other forms of art and entertainment. McCall's (2019) approach is very useful in that it attempts to introduce a clarification on the use of historical games as teaching tools. That approach to education is followed by an assessment of how video games are perceived by either the general public, critics and players, which is accompanied by some arguments on how some critiques of video games in contemplation of historical accuracy can sometimes be just a veil to cover harmful attitudes (such as misogyny or racism).

---

1. See, for example, McCall 2011 and 2019, among many others.

Considering the last assessment, designers are not exempt from judgement on the same basis, a point that the author addresses, providing examples of how certain video games are perceived as unfaithful portrayals of history. Ultimately, the article ends with some thoughts on whether video games can (or cannot) be considered history or not and on whether they possess any sort of relevance or not. McCall (2019) starts this part of his discussion by claiming

that film, painting, theater, sculpture, toys, music, even social media can and often do communicate aspects of the past and, when they do, they are history. So, historical video games certainly qualify as a medium that can do history (McCall, 2019: 29).

This statement is just the gate to open the discussion as to whether video games can actually present historical events in an adequate manner or not. Historical education, either institutional or autodidactic, has been dominated by non-interactive media and, in most cases, historical texts are the main form of history taken into account by scholars. Therefore, the idea that other types of media, which are not the common academic sources, can represent history, would imply that there is no invalid form of history (unless that source or item is ahistorical). McCall (2019: 30) also refers to games as *public history*, a concept originally defined by Kelley (1978) in the following way:

In its simplest meaning, Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice. Public Historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process (Kelley, 1978: 1).

### 2.3. *Towards a working classification of historical video games*

Considering historical games as public history automatically means that they can reach a wider audience (compared to academic texts) and that they are able to efficiently convey general and specific information with ease to this wider audience. This conveyance is also aided by the interactivity and immersion of video games, in as much as it is easier to learn about a certain topic if the learner participates directly in the events or the flow of information. In other words, by enabling a framework of action in which players take part, video games allow their minds to absorb information in a direct way (see, among many others, Griffiths 2002; Tang, Hanneghan and El Rabili, 2009).

As for what classifies as a historical game, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007: 204) assume that “the game has to begin at a clear point in real world history and that history has to have a manifest effect on the nature of the game experience.” Therefore, based on McCall’s (2019) choice of definition, such video games as *Wolfenstein* (1981-2019) could not be categorized as historical on the basis of their divergence in the portrayal of history, as much as the game depicts an alternate universe in which “Nazi Germany conquers the United States in 1948” (McCall, 2019: 30). In a sense, video games provide with a tonality of variety, as in certain cases they can provide the audience with various of the potential consequences of a specific historical event, which changes the way history is perceived by applying historical hypotheses. Yet, when a game narrative tramples over important and documented historical events, it cannot be classified as a “historical game”. For historical games which include fictional characters or fictional stories, as pointed by McCall (2019: 31), they can merely allow “players decide some of the in-game protagonist’s actions but do not change the larger historical narrative” and, by abiding by that value, they would enter the category of historical games.

It must be stated here that historical games do not always offer the same perspectives when it comes to the adaptation or representation of history. As stated by Chapman (2016: 79) “the realist and conceptual styles of simulation clearly offer very different ways to represent the past within the umbrella term of ‘digital historical games’.” By dividing historical games into these two categories, a more adequate analysis can be performed by realizing the two divergent natures of historical games. According to McCall (2019), on the one hand there would be *realist historical games* (See Appendix I, entry *Realism*); in these, designers attempt to not only be faithful to documented history but also portraying it with the proper graphical design to give an impression of *resonance* (See Appendix I, entry *Resonance*) both in terms of *game-world* (See Appendix I, entry *Game-World*) design and in the physical and narrational setting. Considering historical games as public history automatically means that they can reach a wider audience compared to academic texts and that they are able to efficiently convey general and specific information with ease to this wider audience:

designers present a visually verisimilitudinous environment, the past as it arguably appeared and as a world the player can navigate through the game’s protagonist. Much like historical novels, these games

center on fictitious characters who act in historically documented setting but do not alter conventionally accepted larger historical narratives (McCall 2019: 31).

On the other hand, McCall (2019: 31) categorizes *conceptual games* as games that “focus not on showing how the past looked but telling how the systems and processes of the past functioned.” This is accomplished through the use of “stylized and sometimes abstract symbols and graphics” (McCall 2019: 32). In essence, when utilized as teaching tools or even when they happen to be used for autodidactic purposes, these video games would not only provide the player or the learner with specific and general data about historical events or historical figures, yet they would also be tools for developing critical thinking and would eventually aid in creating a learning tool which would be essential for understanding and analysing history, hypothesis. Video games would be successful in elucidating on different perceptions of historical events or divergent outcomes for specific events. In other words, many video games are capable of portraying non-fixed historical perspectives (Radetich and Jakubowicz, 2014). They perform this task by presenting the past as what could have been instead of basing an entire setting or the representation of a historical event on the only vision that history books attempt to show. These games do this in a cautious fashion, for many historical and history-based video game developers would not only possess a certain knowledge of history, yet they in many cases would be aided or working side by side with historians during the development or ideation of a video game.

As a zenith, video games can teach history and, at the same time, by providing different possibilities (with a certain scientific foundation of historical hypothesis), they become educational materials for the development of critical historical thought (McCall, 2016). On another note, it would be proper to state as well that fictitious characters or fictitious events (that may not alter history in the game to a great extent) would not be a learning barrier for players or students, instead these fantastic contraptions or elements would be another aid for developing critical thinking by discerning fantasy from history. By drawing distinctions between fantastic and historic characters and by drawing distinctions between possible and impossible perspectives of historical hypotheses the active learner is able to tap into greater sense of critical analysis of history.

### 3. Research aims and methodology

Among the several purposes of this paper, first of all I want to demonstrate that the ideas that McCall and other researchers have formulated in relation with Historical Games as learning tools can also be applied to History-based popular games, even if they may not be strictly “historical” but have been the fruit of distinct cultural influences. Even though one of my main aims would be the analysis of a set of video games by applying notions provided the aforementioned authors that are prominent in HGS, as a secondary aim these games will be conceived of as modern items, namely as sources not only of knowledge in the educational sense but also in the human sense. Video games are not mere entertainment devices, they are in most cases pieces of art, sources of knowledge and tools to learn about emotions and human life.

In order to appeal to clarity, I have included a Glossary (Appendix I) and a set of Illustrations (Appendix II) which will be cross-referenced throughout the text. By doing so I will hope to facilitate the proper understanding of some of the concepts that I will be using to explain and demonstrate what I have proposed. Illustrations have also been included due to the nature of the elements which will be analysed (digital video games with visual qualities). This glossary of terms has been created by taking into account the ideas and descriptions of McCall (2011).

Ultimately, this research is a contribution to the field of Historical Game Studies; by taking into account games that may not be strictly classified as historical video games by HGS scholars, but are deep, thorough and informed portrayals of cultural elements that may be considered atemporal because the events or figures that these elements are inhabited by are based on abstract beliefs. These beliefs do not have proved historical references (in this case it would be the consideration of mythological elements which there is scholarly-accepted historical evidence for as beliefs but not as historical events) but are still part of history nonetheless. This task will be performed by the enactment of a practical analysis of historybased video games which would be realized by linking the cultural origins and influences of a particular number of games with their narratives by using the afore-stated framework based on McCall’s (2019) ideas.

Two specific research questions have been formulated here; these two questions will guide my piece of research towards an adequate conclusion:

1. Which elements in these two video games can be considered relevant for the teaching and learning of solidly-grounded pieces of knowledge related to such areas as Culture, History and Mythology?
2. Which elements in these two video games can be considered useful in the process of instilling social values or educating about serious social matters (to wit, familial issues and the visibility of individuals that suffer from conditions that are detrimental for their mental health)?

In order to perform this analysis two different methodologies have been merged in order to create a suitable methodology for properly explaining the links between the games' elements and learning: the *layer-based approach* (See Appendix I, entry *Layer Approach*; Konzack 2002) and the *levelling approach* (See Appendix I, entry *Level Approach*; Arseth, 2003). Given the complexity of these two methodological approaches, I have added a glossary of video game critical analysis terminology by the end of this dissertation (see Appendix 1). Based on these two methodological approaches, here is a step-by-step description of how I will proceed to analyse my materials. To start with, I will identify what elements present in the *gameplay* (See Appendix I, entry *Gameplay*; Aarseth, 2003, 2-3; Konzack, 2002, 93-94) are meant to enhance learning of solid knowledge and augment acquisition of social values. *Gameplay* is a very relevant factor in the didactics of video games, for the mechanics that are established for a player can be tied treated almost as learning methods. *Gameplay*, as understood by Konzack (2002, 93), is the interaction between the player and the game. Moreover, as stated by Aarseth (2003, 3) "every game involves a learning process...". Thus, in a sense, the *gameplay* of a game supplies the functions that teachers have in classrooms. These *gameplay* elements will be identified by understanding that interaction is an intrinsic quality of videogames and it is what guides the learning process. As discussed by Fabricatore (2000, 4) "Play, together with exploration, implies a learning process..." and concluded as "Videogames are not to be considered mere pedagogical tools ... but rather it is necessary to acknowledge their importance as phenomena that naturally engender learning activities.". Thus, the identification of these *gameplay* elements shall be conducted in relation with the meaning behind them and their educational qualities. Thereafter, I will identify what elements present in the *game-world* (Aarseth, 2003, 2-3) and the *story* (See Appendix I, entry *Story*; Aarseth, 2003, 2-3) of each game are meant to enable education per se of both social values and solid knowledge (History, Culture, Mythology, etc.). These two analytical purposes will be performed by taking into account the relevance of *Position* (See Appendix I, entry *Position*; Konzack, 2002, 93 and why it matters, the *Goal* (See Appendix I, entry *Goal*; Konzack, 2002, 94) which is intrinsically related to the *story*, *Obstacles* (See Appendix I, entry *Obstacles*; Konzack, 2002, 94) and how they may interfere in positive and negative ways for the learner. *Transience* (See Appendix I, entry *Transiency/Transience* Konzack, 2002, 92) and how it is meant to be present in these games. Finally, I will analyse how the combination of elements belonging to the *structure* (See Appendix I, entry *Structure/Game-structure*; Aarseth, 2003, 2) and the *worlds* (Aarseth, 2003 2-3) of these two games can be made able to work together to efficiently teach the aforementioned matters.

This shall be done by looking at elements of *referentiality* (See Appendix I, entry *Referentiality*; Konzack, 2002 96) in relation with literature or psychology and *meaning* (See Appendix I, entry *Meaning*; Konzack, 2002 95) and how it is intrinsically tied to the social matters that will be discussed across this paper.

#### 4. My corpus of history-based video games

The two video games that I have decided to analyse in this dissertation are two games that have had a large sales output, which bear within an incredible amount of content regarding both setting and background meaning. The teams that developed *God of War* and *Hellblade* decided to utilize Germanic elements to create the setting, the foundation for the plots is strictly tied to Norse Mythology with distinct influences from both the general corpus of creatures, deities or entities that this system of belief holds within and specific mythological events present in written texts such as the Poetic Edda (Benjamin Thorpe, 2004).

*God of War* happens to be the fourth instalment of a saga that was centered around Greek Mythology, therefore *God of War* (4) could be understood both as a reboot and a sequel, for it offers a plot which is the continuation of the story presented in the previous games but the setting is completely new and dedicated to Norse Mythology. The game follows Kratos, a Spartan warrior who has migrated to the north after devastating the Greek world, and his son Atreus who resembles a young version of Loki from Norse Mythology. Their main objective throughout the game is to reach the highest peak in all the Norse realms and scatter the ashes of Laufey, also known as Faye, the mother of Atreus and the wife of Kratos, a heroine belonging to the Jotunn race.

*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* offers another outsider's perspective of Norse culture, for even though part of the setting is devoted to Norse mythology, the main character is a Pict warrior from the Orkney Islands who is required to start a journey which bears the main objective of saving his husband Dillion who is trapped in Helheim (the version of Hell which exists within the Norse Mythological universe and is dominated by the Goddess Hel). These two video games were selected not only because of the way their developing teams and writers have dealt with the subject of Norse Mythology, but also because they are games that have received splendid critiques and because they have been global blockbusters.

These two video games are characterised by two distinctive features, which were considered prior to their election:

1. their *background* (the setting, the characters and what they are based upon, their origins and the influences which guided the developers in the creation of said elements), and
2. their *foreground* (what the games are able to express in relation with human emotion and social issues, which are both topics that modern society has to deal with on a daily basis in any corner of the Earth; King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2009).

*God of War* deals with both the inability of a widowed Father to develop a healthy emotional relationship with his son and at the same time with the main cause of the instability of the familial unity, the absence of a secondary parental individual, in this case Atreus' mother. As for *Hellblade*, this video game is deemed by many critics, players and experts to be an excellent depiction of psychological issues or illnesses such as psychosis and trauma. This last statement can be realized both by the response of those that played the game and by gazing through the complex team that was behind the game which did not only include writers and game developers but psychologists and neuroscientists.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. Discussion

Starting with *position*, both games offer a perspective that is meant to be a quintessential factor for their teaching capabilities. In *God of War*, the player takes control of Kratos and roams the Norse world on a journey filled with adventures. This perspective is veritably linked with the social values that the game is capable of instilling. For while the player has bodily control of Kratos, the player can only give commands to the secondary character who in this case is the son of Kratos, Atreus or Loki. By giving commands and pointing directions but not being able to directly control Atreus, the player gets a glimpse of what it means to be a parent. These commands are an essential part of the *gameplay* as they are not only meant to support the main character in combat but also aid by finishing some enemies off.

In the case of *Hellblade*, the player's *position* is meant to give them control of Senua, a Pict warrior in search of her lost husband that happens to suffer from hallucinations and other sorts of mental issues. The *obstacles* in this game are tied to the *story* and the *meaning* in certainly intricate ways, as most of the enemies that Senua faces happen to be outlandish creatures manifesting through Senua's visions and hallucinations. The player is meant to fight off these distorted shadows which she cannot ignore and this gives the player a glimpse of what it would feel like to suffer from psychosis (the main mental issue which was discussed in the game's development). These *obstacles* are tied to the meaning of the game because they sort of give sense to the *story* and enhance the journey towards the *goal* by not only challenging the player but reflecting what Senua has to go experience due to her conditions (as illustrated in Figure 1 in Appendix II).

Both *game-worlds* are filled with elements thoughtfully placed that are based on informed conceptions of Norse mythology. In *Hellblade*, Senua is meant to reach Helheim. As illustrated by such authors as Fordham and Ball (2019) and Brierly (2019), to bargain for her lover's soul with Hela, the goddess that rules the Norse version of Hell. This would be the *goal* of the game and one of the two main reasons that would motivate the player to continue playing the game. The other main reason is tied to the *story* and the *gamestructure*: the game is structured in a progressive way, for as the player progresses through the levels defeating *obstacles*, the narrative proceeds to unravel the tormented past of Senua and by doing so the game is slowly revealing the traumatic events that shaped Senua's illnesses (As illustrated in Figure 2 in Appendix II).

When it comes to the concept of *agency*, both games offer the player a great amount of freedom in combat and while roaming the *world* but a very limited freedom in the narrational sense, for the player cannot alter the *story*. While the player is able to choose how the game would be played (within the *gameplay* framework provided by the game), the player is also guided through the plot in a compulsory manner. This sort of mixture between freedom of *gameplay* and limitation of choices in the thread of events is what brings the game to similarities in process when compared to common educational practices. This realization was made on the basis provided by Xhemajili (2016, 32),

who states that interactive learning requires the teacher to play the role of a trainer and an assistant, who use their real experience and at the same time are supposed to have patience or expectations that pupils will achieve a certain level of quality.

In *God of War*, the player sees the *game-world* through the eyes of Kratos which essentially means that the vision is limited, as there are elements related to Norse mythology that Kratos cannot interpret and the game assumes that the player will not be able to either. Hence why the game cleverly utilizes Atreus to unravel some of the mysteries hidden in the game's environmental features. For instance, Kratos can neither

---

2. As illustrated by such authors as Fordham and Ball (2019) and Brierly (2019).

read runic inscriptions nor interpret the drawings on caves related to mythical events and to attempt to understand them he seeks the aid of his son who is versed in reading that tongue. This element of the game's design sort of places in the spotlight the realization that, just as it was pointed at hereinbefore while discussing the *gameplay* elements that link Kratos and Atreus, that father and son are dependent on each other for different reasons (as illustrated in Figure 3 in Appendix II). This is not only relevant because of the educational link between father and son but also because the whole plot is an exemplification of how parenthood is affected in terrible ways by a vision of masculinity presented as coldness and toughness.<sup>3</sup>

This is also an evidence because of the counterpart of Atreus and Kratos, Freya and Baldur: While Kratos intends to teach his son how dangerous the world is and survival tactics, Freya could have been more centered in protecting her son Baldur from all detriments. Although this is a terrible example of the gender binary, it is true that in modern society more than often toughness is associated with male individuals, while empathy is linked to female individuals. While Atreus is afraid of life in general, Baldur has no fear of death and at times he even expresses a desire of feeling pain. This dual perspective that the video game offers would be of didactic value for players to learn the limits of parenthood.

The *transience* of both games is based both on the *story* and the *structure* of the games' levels. The combat and roaming are both real-time, meaning that there is no major transition between one place or another within one level. Yet the *transience* of the game is also limited due to the *game-structure* of both pieces, since the player cannot progress through the *story* unless they work their way through the *obstacles* of the games, both enemies and puzzles. The way that *transience* is designed in both games resembles lessons given or taken in educational facilities, namely how the learner progresses through time and exercises in real-time but cannot go on to the next lesson unless certain obstacles are dealt with.

The *referential* layers of both games are especial solid and many links with the references or origins of certain elements can be drawn. In the case of *Hellblade*, *referentiality* is eminent when considering the psychological elements that afflict the main character who the player is in control of and how they are represented in the *game-world* by the *obstacles* and the *aesthetics* (see Appendix I, entry *Aesthetic Description*). As for *God of War*, *referentiality* is more solid for the mythological elements which fill the *game-world* and some of these are subject of *resonance* for they are faithful to the original myths to a great extent. The last fight of the game would be a perfect example of the *resonance* of the game: the final boss is Baldur and, just like in the original mythological texts, he is invulnerable to any damage and does not feel pain – in the last fight against him the player is meant to expect Atreus to shot an arrow imbued in mistletoe in order to make Baldur vulnerable so the player as Kratos can damage and defeat Baldur (As illustrated in Figure 4 and Figure 5 in Appendix II)– after Baldur meets his demise at the hands of Kratos, Freyja steps into the scene and weeps while holding her son's body in her arms (as illustrated in Figure 6 in Appendix II). This is intrinsically referential to the events described in the Poetic Edda (stanzas 32-34), the references linked with the mistletoe and Freyja's mourning are probably the most resonant. These events are parallel in origin with the myths depicting Loki aiding Hodr to defeat Baldur with a weapon enhanced by mistletoe which was the only thing that could harm Baldur as exemplified in the *Völuspá* (stanzas 31-35).

## 6. Concluding remarks

In the above pages, I have proposed an enlargement of the definition and scope of the brand-new concept of Historical Video games. Thereafter, I have provided with a fine-grained analysis of two examples of historical video games, both of which invite players to immerse into the early history of the Germanic tribes and in Germanic Mythology. I describe these two games as pieces of art and technology. My study takes into account both the historical background and the psychological foreground of the video games under scrutiny. The conclusions extracted from my analysis are summarized in the next paragraph. First and foremost, I have been able to show that, even though it is frequently assumed that video games are nothing but very simplistic means of providing entertainment, these cultural artefacts are not as simple as the naked eye of an outsider could discern. For example, one of the simplest games in the history of video games (namely Tetris, launched in 1984), which consisted in just a combination of numbers programmed into a device to display geometrical figures that the player would play around with, embodies a meaning or intention deeper than a mere pursuit of entertainment.<sup>4</sup> Among the games studied here, *God of War* and *Hellblade* possess an intricate setting, which has been carefully woven with materials resembling both direct and indirect links with Norse Mythology. With this setting set, the developers and writers would set out on a journey to create a fictional plot which has 4. This game has actually been analysed by a wide variety of

---

3. According to Ammari (2015: 3), "traditional perspectives on fatherhood have defined fathers as authority figures, breadwinners, and emotionally distant."

4. This game has actually been analysed by a wide variety of researchers, some of which have defined it as a means to convey a critique of consumerism, yet Tetris is a game which did not require the work of artists and writers This would mean that even less complex games can have a deeper meaning and that they are worth being analysed.

researchers, some of which have defined it as a means to convey a critique of consumerism, yet Tetris is a game which did not require the work of artists and writers. This would mean that even less complex games can have a deeper meaning and that they are worth being analysed. The ability of not only conveying a complex story of a magnitude which might as well be called novelistic in matters of literary power. At the same time, as these video games can be considered pieces of collective art, they also possess an outlandish ability of conveying more than just a plot or providing entertainment. These two games, as it has been stated earlier in this project, use a historical narrative in order to express ideas, emotions and thoughts that are veraciously linked to modern-day issues, such as psychological trauma or familial instability. Therefore, video games are important elements for modern society that can be exploited in an extraordinary way for purposes as important as providing an informal education for the general population. Ultimately, due to the social qualities that have been analysed in this project, it can be concluded that video games can be used not only to provide learners with knowledge, but also to help them develop skills related to the social and emotional aspect of human life, which converts them into an ideal complement to the more formal educational styles.

## References

- Aarseth, E. (2003). Playing research: Methodological approaches to game analysis. Paper presented at DAC 2003. Melbourne, Australia. DOI:10.7238/a.v0i7.763
- Alberti, S. (2020, July). Three ways COVID 19 is transforming learning and development. HRD Connect: Curators of the New Business Landscape. <https://www.hrdconnect.com/2020/06/01/3-ways-covid-19-is-transforming-learning-and-development/>
- Ammari, T., Schoenenbeck, S. (2015). Understanding and supporting fathers and fatherhood on social media sites. *CHI '15: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* DOI:10.1145/2702123.2702205
- Brierley, C. (2019, September 12). *The Pict warrior fighting her inner demons*. University of Cambridge. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/hellblade>
- Chapman, A. (2016). *Digital games as history: How videogames represent the past and offer access to historical practice*. Routledge. 290
- Fabricatore, C. (2000). Learning and videogames: An unexploited synergy. Annual Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/28000/>
- Fordham, J. & Ball C. (2019). Framing mental health within digital games: An exploratory case study of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. *JMIR Mental Health*. 6. DOI:10.2196/12432.
- GameVision Europe (2010). *Video Gamers in Europe: Prepared for the Interactive Software Federation of Europe ISFE*. Interactive Software Federation of Europe. [https://www.isfe.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2018/11/isfe\\_final\\_combined.pdf](https://www.isfe.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2018/11/isfe_final_combined.pdf)
- Griffiths, M. (2002) Excessive online computer gaming: implications for education *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 18(3) 379-380 <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0266-4909.2002.00248.x>
- Griffiths, M., Delfabbro, P. and King, D. (2009) Video Game Structural Characteristics: A New Psychological Taxonomy. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. 8 90-106 DOI:10.1007/s11469-009-9206-4
- Kelley, R. (1978). Public History: Its origins, nature, and prospects. *The Public Historian*, 1(1), 16-28.
- Konzack, L. (2002). Computer game criticism: A method for computer game analysis. In F. Mäyrä (Ed.) *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures* (pp. 89-100).
- McCall, J. (2011). *Gaming the past: Using video games to teach secondary history*. Routledge.
- McCall, J. (2016). Teaching History with digital historical games: An introduction to the field and best practices. *Simulation & Gaming* 47(4) 517-542. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1046878116646693>
- McCall, J. (2019). Playing with the past: History and video games (and why it might matter). *Journal of Geek Studies* 6(1) 29-48.
- McCallum-Stewart, E., Parsler, J. Controversies: Historicising the Computer Game. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*.
- Olejniczak, P. (2016). Educational Content in non-educational video games. *Ars Educandi* 13 57-66.
- Radetich, L. & Jakubowicz, E. Using Video Games for Teaching History. Experiences and Challenges. *Athens Journal of History* 1(12) 9-22 DOI: 10.30958/ajhis.1-1-1
- Stephen, G. (2020). *Online learning to the rescue*. Daily Maverick <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-05-06-online-learning-to-the-rescue/#gsc.tab=0>

- Tang, S., Hanneghan, M. & El Rhalibi A. (2009) Introduction to Games-Based Learning. *Game- Based Learning Advancements for Multi-Sensory Human Computer Interfaces: Techniques and Effective Practices*. 1-17  
DOI:10.4018/978-1-60566-360-9.ch001
- Thorpe, B. (2010). The *Poetic Edda (the Elder Edda)*. Digireads.
- Xhemajili, A. (2016). The role of the teacher in interactive teaching. *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education* 4(1): 31-38.

### **Ludography**

- Sony Interactive Entertainment. (2018). *God of War*. Los Angeles: SIE Santa Monica Studio.
- Ninja Theory (2017). *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, Cambridge: Ninja Theory.

**APPENDIX 1: Glossary of Videogame Analysis Terminology**

*Aesthetic Description: A concept which refers to the audio-visual design of a game and how this design is related to history.*

*Agency: The amount by which a player possesses freedom of choice or action within a game.*

*Gameplay: A concept that is used to express the way a game is meant to be played.*

*Game-world: A concept that is used to define the features present in a game.*

*Goal: The requirements for winning or completing a game.*

*Layer approach: An approach of game analysis based on the examination of several layers. Each layer describes a particular aspect of a game in a general and specific manner.*

*Level approach: An approach of game analysis based on the three main levels of description of a game: Gameplay,*

*Game-world and Game-structure.*

*Meaning: The significance of a game in terms of semiotics and semantics – referring mostly to the narrative of a game or the events that occur in the game. Obstacles: Elements in the game that offer a challenge and deter the player from reaching the main goal.*

*Position: A concept referring to the perspective from which a game is perceived. It is often used to point at the roles of the player.*

*Realism: An approach in game design or game analysis in which special care has been taken for designing a historical game in visual terms. Mainly referent to the way a game is simulated.*

*Reconstruction: An approach in game design or game analysis which refers to games that have been developed by considering factual history and give a feeling of reality.*

*Referentiality: The background of a game, referring mainly to the setting and the elements present in said setting.*

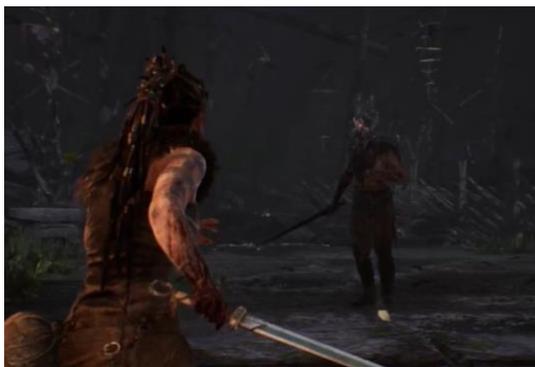
*Resonance: A concept which refers to the amount of relation between a game's plot or design and history itself.*

*Story: The plot or narrative of a game and its ramifications.*

*Structure/Game-Structure: A concept that refers to the way the levels of a game are designed in terms of functionality.*

*Transiency/Transience: The way a game is paced in terms of gameplay or narrative.*

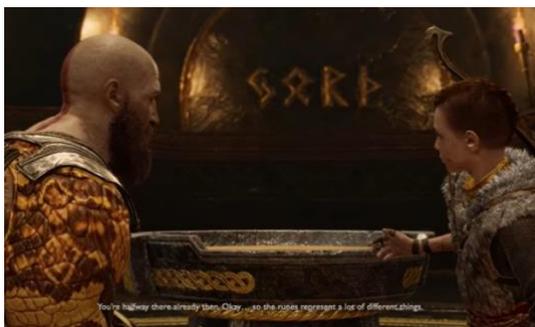
**APPENDIX II: Selected illustrations analysed for this research**



**Figure 1** Senua facing her hallucinations (Obstacles) which were shaped in the form of what she thinks a Viking looks like.



**Figure 2** Senua suffering hallucinations that remind her of her father's abuse.



**Figure 3** Atreus teaching Kratos about runic inscriptions.



**Figure 4** Atreus receiving braided mistletoe arrows.



**Figure 5** Baldur hurt by a braided mistletoe arrow.



**Figure 6** Baldur is defeated by Kratos.



**Figure 7** Freyja mourning her son Baldur.



© 2020 by the author. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).