

MIDDLE AGES ON THE JOYSTICK AND OTHER STRANGER THINGS¹

IDADE MÉDIA NO JOYSTICK E OUTRAS COISAS MAIS ESTRANHAS

Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar

Universidad de Murcia
jimenezalcazar@um.es

Lidia Raquel Miranda

Universidad Nacional de La Pampa
mirandaraq@gmail.com

Gerardo Fabián Rodríguez

Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata
gefarodriguez@gmail.com

Abstract: The Middle Ages, unlike many areas of the past, offers very clear and defined references for many in our globalized world. Everyone knows and identifies that distant past through certain images exported by mass entertainment media; and, until recently, it was mainly through literature, cinema, and television series. However, now we must also consider video games to be another of these formats.

Also, we have to take into account that cross-media narratives of the 21st century are immensely facilitated by the increase of platforms and mediums through which a story can be formatted and disseminated compared to a few decades prior, thanks to the impact of digital technologies. This has facilitated a reproduction of historical knowledge that is no longer exclusively at the reach of massive companies and institutions anymore, as the users themselves can partake in its diffusion. Taking these circumstances into consideration, this paper aims to reflect on the ways video games contemplate the

Resumo: A Idade Média, ao contrário de muitas áreas do passado, oferece referências muito claras e definidas para muitos em nosso mundo globalizado. Todos conhecem e identificam esse passado distante por meio de certas imagens exportadas pela mídia de entretenimento de massa; e, até recentemente, isso ocorria principalmente por meio da literatura, do cinema e das séries de televisão. No entanto, agora também devemos considerar os videogames como outro desses formatos.

Além disso, temos de levar em conta que as narrativas de mídia cruzada do século XXI são imensamente facilitadas pelo aumento de plataformas e mídias por meio das quais uma história pode ser formatada e disseminada em comparação com algumas décadas anteriores, graças ao impacto das tecnologias digitais. Isso facilitou a reprodução do conhecimento histórico que não está mais exclusivamente ao alcance de grandes empresas e instituições, pois os próprios usuários podem participar de sua difusão. Levando em consideração essas

¹ We express our gratitude to M^a Emilia GARCÍA MIRANDA (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina) and Juan Francisco JIMÉNEZ ABAD (Universidad de Murcia, España) for their linguistic observations and stylistic contributions to the writing of this article.

Middle Ages, as well as what contributions they can make to both teaching and researching them.

Keywords: Middle Ages, video games, playing

circunstâncias, este artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre as formas como os videogames contemplam a Idade Média, bem como sobre as contribuições que eles podem oferecer tanto para o ensino quanto para a pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Idade Média, videogames, jogar

Insert coin

The revolution in communications resulting from the development of digital technology has provided those of us who work in the humanities with enormous possibilities, which are still difficult to gauge, as there seems to be no horizon in sight: a new application opens up new paths and, in turn, generates many other solutions. Analyses of questions of the past, observed from a very transversal perspective, such as the combination of History and Literature, Language or Philosophy, have been affected by what has come to be known as the Digital Humanities, which are none other than the use of the tools originated by this technological evolution.

Of all the epochs of the past, the Middle Ages has been one of the most propitious for crossmedia and transmedia phenomena to have taken shape in different works and productions, and these are the ones that have brought to the table the question that is the subject of this paper. The aim is to address the reality of these digital humanities on the reality of a medievalism that looks carefully, sometimes with concern —unfounded— at how current society perceives that period, a past that has been defined by a series of icons and models closely identified with those civilisations, and which have represented a basis of national, regional and local consolidation for the European and, therefore, American sphere, throughout the 19th century. At a time when globalisation is a reality, the concept of "medieval" taken to areas outside the space where it was conceived is seen as a simple exercise in comparison; in other words, it is a question of answering the questions of what was happening in a given territory in this or that century. An example is the Japanese Genpei Wars, which took place in the 12th century, and which, from a medieval

Eurocentric perspective, we place in that period. For the American case it is simpler, as historians solved it a long time ago with the outline of the concept of "pre-Columbian".

Therefore, the aim of this work is to raise questions rather than to solve problems, and to present to the whole of medievalism a series of reflections that arise from another current reality, which is the success of the video game as a channel of communication and cultural expression. The Middle Ages now belongs to those who assimilate it culturally, and not only to those of us who dedicate ourselves to researching it. In fact, one of the most visible consequences of this phenomenon, which for the last couple of decades has become a space of mass consumption, is the growing social demand for content set in the period we identify as medieval, sometimes with an entirely legendary and fantasy inspiration, others with a clear historical evocation, and some others, probably the least numerous, more attached to an authenticity that we assume to be more real, extracted from rigorous research. The most interesting thing is that they all fit in as cultural consumer goods, from videogames to historical novels, documentaries, films and television.

We have used the icon used in the old arcade machines, where you had to insert a coin to play, as a starting point for this study, as Dirk the Bold and his search for Daphne in the game *Dragon's Lair* (1983), a laserdisc arcade game, is a starting reference for this approach, which is not the first and will not be the last, to the phenomenon of video games and their embodiment of the icons with which we define the Middle Ages.

Let us not think that this kind of semiotic crossover is a creation of the present millennium: to do so would be very naïve, or very arrogant. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Ken Follet's *The Pillars of the Earth*, with their projections in cinema and television, are paradigmatic examples of the functioning of the filmic spectacle from previous phases that build the narrative model that has served, in this case, for the development of video games, such as *La abadía del crimen* (Paco Menéndez and Juan Delcán, 1987), *The Abbey* (Alcachofa Soft, 2008) and *Ken Follet's The Pillars of the Earth* (Daedalic, 2017). These models of the "Middle Ages", from the monks to the warriors and women of different social groups, to the behaviours,

attitudes, reactions and responses, have served to bring a large public closer to that period. Behind these works, because they were chosen as models, there was an exhaustive process of documentation, which allowed them to enter university classrooms almost as an incentive that brought sometimes drier content to students and, best of all, to people outside the field of history who ended up becoming interested in the Middle Ages. The emergence of historical novels is not new, nor has the numerous film productions since the very beginning of the 20th century. If the period of Richard and John *Lackland*, with Robin Hood as protagonist, supposed a reference from the works of Sir Walter Scott for that image icon of the medium, and the movie starring Errol Flynn we refer, a first digital leisure productions also had its reflection on that time: *Defender of the Crown* (Cinemaware, 1986).

If for many generations of the 20th century, the Middle Ages was what was seen and heard on cinema screens, the irruption of television, including series and documentaries on generalist or specific channels, the 21st century has seen the development and universalisation of the video game as this "bastard" communication channel that has chosen elements from other channels, such as narrative, icons, sound and visual language, without ruling out coexistence with them. Examples include *Vikings* (TM Productions and Take 5 Production, 2013-2020), where as much as we may criticise the series from a historical perspective, there is no doubt that, for the first time, the general idea that the Normans wore helmets adorned with horns has been dispelled; *The Last Kingdom* (Stephen Butchard et al., from 2015), set in the time of Alfred the Great, based on the novels of Bernard Cornwell; *Medici: Masters of Florence* (dir. Sergio Mimica-Gezzan, 2016-2019); *The Tudors* (Eric Fellner et al., 2007-2010); *Burgundy* (dir. Andreas Prochaska, 2016)... and with equally clear reference in cinema with *Braveheart* (dir. Mel Gibson, 1995), *Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh, 1989, which continues the 1994 and the 1927), *Joan of Arc* (dir. Luc Besson, 1999), *The Kingdom of Heaven* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2005), or the more recent *The Last Duel* (also dir. Ridley Scott, 2021), among others —some with more or less success—. Many of these images seen on the big or small screen were models for developers, and one only has to look at a wall of shields in *A Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia* (The Creative Assembly, 2018) and

compare it to some of the sequences in the aforementioned *Vikings*. Or in terms of narrative, from the campaign-tutorial in *Age of Empires II* (Ensemble Studios, 1999) with William Wallace or the videogame *Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc* (Enlight, 2004). The references are many and varied, and this study does not attempt to deal with a catalogue of cinema, television, comics or even video games, but it was appropriate to allude to these titles in order to bring us closer to a palpable reality, which responds to a growing demand from a public attracted by "the medieval".

In the face of this taste for the period, partly revived by 19th century Romanticism, which contrasts with the pejorative nature that the Middle Ages still have for our society, a wide range of offerings have been opened up by producers and developers seeking to satisfy this demand. We are referring at all times to titles that embody a certain verisimilitude, to varying degrees, but which are closely related to authentic phenomena of medieval fantasy, originating with Tolkien, followed by Lewis and culminated by George R.R. Martin (*Game of Thrones*) and Andrzej Sapkowski (*The Witcher*), and all of which also represent references for different video games of great commercial success, as in the case of the latter, with the third title in the saga marketed in 2015 and developed by CD Projekt RED.

All of them have required consultation and research about the period, about what may or may not exist, then made available to the creativity of screenwriters, directors and developers. It is at this point that the "medievalist",² the person who gives his or her opinion, with or without judgement, on what he or she has seen or read about these productions. And this is also where the "medievalist gamer"³ is reflected, as opposed to the casual gamer, who contrasts precisely with the former in terms of the degree of knowledge or interest in delving into the contents offered by a video game set in the Middle Ages in particular.

But it is the productions resulting from the crossmedia narratives of our century that have increased in number, both because of these possibilities that we

² JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. Medievalist: el medievalismo en la encrucijada de la revolución digital. *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea*, 11, 1, 2022, pp. 51-67.

³ JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. *Medievalist gamer*. Un nuevo tipo de historiador. In JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. *De la Edad de los Imperios a la Guerra Total: Medioevo y videojuegos*. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2016, pp. 195-218.

perceive after all the previous allusions, and because of the very activity involved in the creation of these titles, since they are no longer only in the hands of large corporations or companies, but, through the *indie* phenomenon, private initiative enters the scene, as does the mod phenomenon, to which we will refer later on.

The way of looking at the period we agree to call the Middle Ages is the focus of our reflection. If the historian's task is to understand the past and expose it to its social context, on few occasions has this task been so full of complexity, both because of the difficulties inherent in the research itself and because of those generated by a digital society, immersed in a communications and information revolution that seems to have no limits. Medievalists, in particular, are plunged into a field which, from the outset, may appear rough due to the pressure of the discipline's own orthodoxy, as well as the separation that a digital divide creates between other, more sober fields of study like Engineering, and the field of the Humanities.

The role of humanists has always been to think globally and to explain the meaning of humankind in all its facets and in relation to the world. This role remains the same even today.

The challenge for both historians and philologists, as two of the most defined humanists disciplines, has to focus on the question of identifying the "true expert", on study as the best path to understanding facts and processes and, in short, on specifying future actions and strategies, as was clearly demonstrated by the fateful years of the pandemic.

One of the most evident situations is an ever-changing education, as it must be assumed that pedagogical standardisation, which is by no means restricted to the classroom anymore, has broken down, and there is no basic or magic solution.

The lifelong learning required by the expert from the application of ever-improving technologies is already more than embedded in the definition of the digital society. And that is where we find the gap: when these facts are not accepted.

Nowadays, different formats of cultural dissemination and mediums of knowledge provided by the technological and, therefore, the communications and information revolution, means that the "Middle Ages" are within reach like never before. Medievalism thus faces the challenge of confronting a discipline that can

withstand the pressure of a society that demands versatility, functionality, and explanation of its context.

The Middle Ages, like few other areas of the past, presents very clear and defined references for a large part of our global society. Everyone knows and identifies that past through certain images exported by these mediums of mass entertainment. Literary works, films and television series were the main agents of these icons in the past, but now we must also include video games among them. So let us take advantage of this human curiosity that leads us to wonder about the veracity and verisimilitude of what we see and experience virtually; after all, if technology makes it possible, why not use it?

Playing...

The rise of these new technologies has undeniably marked the behaviour of today's societies, to such an extent that we are witnessing a the true change of to an era⁴ in which the means of entertainment, stimulated by the process of digitalisation, also have an impact on the ways to access historical knowledge and on the universe of cultural expression, so its apprehension is amplified in the most diverse ways.

The tensions between innovation and tradition are tangible, given that the technologies of the 21st century profoundly affect the production of cultural content, related both to changes in written culture and to new spaces for the consumption of cultural products, which implies new types of text and new types of readers, all framed in a multimedia world. The great challenge facing teachers of the Humanities in general, and of History and Literature in particular, in the classrooms of the various educational levels, is that the students belong almost entirely to the Alpha generation.⁵ In this context, the Digital Humanities have come a long way since their initial approaches, when we wondered whether the disciplines would

⁴ JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. Cambio de época versus época de cambios. Medievalistas y nuevas tecnologías. In: RODRÍGUEZ, Gerardo and NEYRA, Andrea Vanina (Dirs.). *¿Qué implica ser medievalista? Prácticas y reflexiones en torno al oficio del historiador*. Mar del Plata: Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, vol. 1, 2012, pp. 39-52.

⁵ LONNA OLVERA, Ivonne. Gen Alpha's digital culture. *Economía Creativa*, 17, 2022, p. 237.

respond to such challenges. We can say that they now constitute a consolidated space, with a growing presence in publications, scientific meetings, platforms and websites, as well as in associations that provide a backbone for the teachers and researchers who promote them.

The multiple links between technologies, the humanities and education provide meeting places and stimulate creativity to face new enterprises and challenges. One of these digital spheres of socialisation is generated by game-based learning strategies and the use of video games for educational purposes.⁶ It is here that the teaching and dissemination of the Middle Ages faces its most important challenges, as it is a question of finding a niche between leisure and recreational productions, such as video games, the object of analysis of this work, and the knowledge of the period itself.

The mark left by the new tools and channels of communication on our profession and also on those who approach medieval subjects out of simple curiosity or interest is very palpable, from the use of a computer to the information handled by an average user in a video game with a historical background contextualised in the medieval period. If cinema has made its way as a cultural medium and today no one even discusses the scientificity of studies on historical cinema, it is possible that there is no longer any room for debate on the same possibility; but the same is not true of video games, fundamentally because in each of the productions a much more considerable amount of information can be seen and heard than in films, and with greater impact, due to the immersive nature of video games, and the popularity they have acquired among users in recent years, especially among the younger generations.⁷

⁶ RODRÍGUEZ, Gerardo, JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco and MASSA, Stella Maris (Dirs.). *Videojuegos, gamificación y realidad virtual: de las consolas al aula y vuelta*. Mar del Plata: Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 2021; and HOUGHTON, Robert (Ed.). *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022.

⁷ RODRÍGUEZ, Gerardo Fabián and JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. La Edad Media jugada: investigar, enseñar y comunicar cuestiones medievales a partir del juego. *Scriptorium. Desde las cátedras*, Año X, 30, 2022, pp. 41-53. RODRÍGUEZ, Gerardo Fabián, JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco and MASSA, Stella Maris (Dirs.). *Videojuegos, gamificación y realidad virtual: formas de socialización del siglo XXI*. Mar del Plata: Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 2022.

Within the wide world of video games, our usual work as historians focuses mainly on historical video games, i.e. those that offer veracity, verisimilitude, information and freedom to be played,⁸ which make them, precisely for these reasons, a highly qualified resource in the field of our discipline. Likewise, as the concept of "time" also intervenes in this type of virtual media, it is understood that the teacher-historian has found in the video game a digital tool with immense potential for the learning-teaching of the historical discipline and others that are linked to it in the vast field of the Social and Humanistic Sciences.

The interplay between past and present, between truth and fiction, between perception and experience and between history and technology puts our own ideas about individuals and society today in tension with those of the Middle Ages⁹ and, in this sense, materialises new contexts for the expression of medievalism, a trend that can be synthesised, following Sanmartín Bastida,¹⁰ as the integral study of the Middle Ages, the application of medieval models to contemporary needs and the inspiration of art and thought in the Middle Ages.

The most interesting aspect of the video game lies on the sociological and anthropological level, since it is the gameplay, the attraction for novelty and technology, the prejudice about the destiny of leisure itself and the potential of the new element for communication that are considered fundamental for its development and evolution.

Constant innovation and the abundant supply of digital content have made this industry one of the most dynamic and changing in the ICT environment. The cultural and creative industry continues to undergo the so-called digitisation process, in which the different links in the value chains are undergoing a process of

⁸ JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. La Historia vista a través de los videojuegos. In SUÁREZ PASCUAL, Pilar, GASCÓN UCEDA, M^a Isabel, ÁLVAREZ, Luis Alonso and JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco. *Juego y ocio en la Historia*. Valladolid: Ediciones de la Universidad de Valladolid-Instituto Universitario de Historia Simancas, 2018, pp. 141-170.

⁹ JIMÉNEZ ALCÁZAR, Juan Francisco and RODRÍGUEZ, Gerardo Fabián. Novela, cine (TV) y videojuegos: *El Nombre de la Rosa y Los Pilares de la Tierra*. *Quaderns de Cine*, 13, 2018, pp. 49-62. RODRÍGUEZ, Gerardo Fabián and MIRANDA, Lidia Raquel. The medieval-themed video game as a sensitive experience. *Online Conference "The Middle Ages as a Digital Experience"*. Budapest: Central European University, 2022.

¹⁰ SANMARTÍN BASTIDA, Rebeca. De Edad Media y medievalismos: propuestas y perspectivas. *Dicenda. Cuadernos de Filología Hispánica*, 22, 2004, pp. 229-247.

dematerialisation, i.e. a phenomenon of substitution of physical media by new digital media. Technological possibilities mark the drift in the video game sector. The phenomenon of independent (indie) productions, the consolidation of the role of publishers as distributors of titles, the emergence of gamification and the growth of portable devices, Cloud Gaming-Game as a Service, multi-screen games, the rise of serious games and the social component of gaming on new generation consoles are all factors that, in one way or another, affect the generation, distribution and consumption of this digital leisure content.

The challenges presented by the digital society are many and varied. The concept of "digital society" is not a recent sociological contribution, as there have been studies on the subject since the mid-1980s. But today we have the possibility to make divisions concerning access to information, a clear symptom of the effects of the digital revolution.

However, the most generic groups are not defined by their economic or social potential, although it may seem otherwise, but by their generational potential. So much so that the term "Generations" has come to be defined according to their own experiences in parallel with the technological and social development inherent to it. Thus today we speak of Generations X, Y, Z and Alpha.

Certainly, in addition to commercial video games, we can use virtual reality, gamification and serious games to provide meeting and socialisation areas that allow an approach to the past through interpretations and practices that lead to suggestive, valuable and effective historical learning.

Virtual reality immerses us completely in virtuality, allowing us to simulate a complete sensory experience within an artificial environment without seeing anything outside. To "get inside" this virtual world requires both glasses, called "goggles" or "helmets", and special headsets, not always accessible due to their high cost, which leaves many users out of the possibility of participating in this simulation environment.

The term gamification, or gamification, is increasingly used in a multitude of everyday scenarios: in fact, we can talk about gamification of business interactions, personal interactions, gamification of educational methods, among many others. As

a teaching and learning technique, gamification is very operational as it appropriates the mechanics of games and entertainment in order to introduce knowledge, strengthen skills and encourage participation in specific activities, in a synergy between teachers and students that also shortens the digital divide.

The simulation possibilities offered by digital technologies, due to their immersive and interactive nature, have generated another unprecedented product: serious games. These games prioritise educational aspects rather than entertainment and pastime, with clear objectives of training, improving teamwork and problem solving.

Truthfulness, verisimilitude, fiction, falsity, misrepresentation, authenticity are concepts that constantly assail us whenever we think of medieval times today. For this reason, it is important not to lose sight of the values that the Middle Ages have, or can have, for contemporary societies,¹¹ in which the impact of digital technologies on knowledge of the Middle Ages and on medievalism has two very distinct aspects, and a third point that is a generic reflection for those of us in the field of the Humanities. Firstly, it is necessary to point out the relationship between medievalists and the use of these tools to carry out our activity. Secondly, it is necessary to take into account the way in which we distribute the results of our research and teaching and, in parallel, the way in which society as a whole apprehends the processes, images and diverse contents of "the medieval". The third point of reference is the conceptualisation of our work for the digital society by society as a whole in the context of our tasks as historians.

At this point, it is essential to take into account the meaning of the game experience in this environment, as it will define the perception of the "lived history" we have referred to.

José Luis González Sánchez¹² proposes the characterisation of the player's experience of a video game based on gameplay, identifying which attributes and properties are necessary to analyse the "player experience":

¹¹ MIRANDA, Lidia Raquel. Middle Ages *à la carte*: meanings, tensions and challenges of medievalism. *Antíteses*, 14, 27, 1, 2021, pp. 29-54.

¹² GONZÁLEZ SÁNCHEZ, José Luis. *Jugabilidad y Videojuegos: Análisis y Diseño de la Experiencia del Jugador en Sistemas Interactivos de Ocio Electrónico*. Madrid: Editorial Académica Española, 2011.

- Effectiveness: the degree to which specific users (players) can achieve the proposed goals with accuracy and completeness in a given context of use, as provided by the video game.

- Efficiency: the degree to which specific users (players) can achieve the proposed goals by investing an appropriate amount of resources in relation to the effectiveness achieved in a specific context of use, the one provided by the video game. This factor is determined by ease of learning and immersion.

- Safety/Prevention: acceptable level of risk to the player's health, or the player's data, in a specific context of use, that provided by the video game.

- Satisfaction: degree to which users (players) are satisfied in a specific context of use, that provided by a video game. In this factor we consider different attributes such as: pleasant, attractive, enjoyable, comfortable, reliable, motivating, exciting and sociable.

- Flexibility: the degree to which the video game can be used in different possible contexts or by different player and game profiles.

It is also essential to understand the progression of the game, i.e. the rules and rewards that make games challenging, fun, satisfying or any other emotion.

These elements are presented through missions or challenges, which try to make the participant feel that the game has a purpose, a goal and to achieve the epic feeling of acting for a specific purpose, represented by awards that are classified as trophies, medals or achievements, visible to other participants, thus giving the awardee recognition and fuelling the motivation of the other players.

Leaderboards in video games serve to relativise scores and generate the comparisons that give us a different vision. They enhance an aspect that is in human nature: competitiveness.

Most games created throughout video game history have implemented a high-score ranking. This mechanic creates a desire for aspiration, fame and for the player's name to be highlighted above others. It is also an indicator of how the user is doing in comparison to other players.

Video games most often feature levels, structured hierarchies of progress, usually represented by ascending numbers or values. They provide a sense of

progress, growth, recognition and respect, once certain milestones have been reached; they also allow access to new content. They are one of the strongest motivators for players.

Finally, they present rules and traps. While in most traditional games the rules are clear or agreed before starting (e.g. chess or football), in video games we tend to discover them as we investigate or try out what we can do, what is allowed and what is not.

Most video games today incorporate elements in their design that allow for advantages, whether these are hidden and available to the player, or involve exploring certain "back doors" in the system. are hidden and available to the player, or involve exploring certain "back doors" in the system.

In this context, an *Easter egg* is a hidden message or capability contained in films, series, compact discs, DVDs, Blu-ray, software or video games. The origin of the term can be traced back to the 1979 video game *Atari Adventure*, which contained the first known virtual Easter egg, introduced by programmer Warren Robinett.

Among programmers, there seems to be a motivation to leave a personal mark, almost an artistic touch on an intellectual product, which is by nature standard and functional. Warren Robinett's motive seems to have been to gain recognition for his work, because at the time video game programmers were not given credit. It is an action analogous to Diego Rivera's inclusion in his murals, or to Alfred Hitchcock or Stan Lee's placing himself as an extra in their own films (what would later be called cameo), intrusions not unlike Diego Velázquez's brilliant painting of himself in *Las Meninas*, a 17th century masterpiece that allowed Michel Foucault, in 1966, to explain how the spectator, in this case the author himself, dynamically participates in its representation.¹³

Cheat codes are codes that give the player advantages over the default game strategy. Sometimes they are a combination of keys or controller buttons pressed in a certain sequence. These codes are distributed through websites or magazines and

¹³ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Las palabras y las cosas: una arqueología de las ciencias humanas*. Trans. Elsa Cecilia Frost. México: Siglo XXI, 2010.

are part of the player's own experience.

This brief approach to what the video game means in its technological and experimental facets gives us the opportunity to see how it influences the reflection of productions set in the medieval period at a time when every concept is proposed from unprecedented perspectives in a new world.

...the Middle Ages

In this context, the phenomenon of the historical video game is here to stay. The impact of video games on digital natives is now indisputable, and one of the most immediate results has been to generate a new way of apprehending historical content: what Jiménez Alcázar calls "lived history". The large number of productions and titles in various video game genres means that "playing the Middle Ages" has become one of the most important leisure phenomena among these young users: suffice it to mention those belonging to the *Total War* saga or *Assassin's Creed*, a predisposition that we teachers can take advantage of in our work.

Playing has always been a good way to learn. Today, digital tools offer us the opportunity to develop much more complex games to simulate situations of the present, recreate realities of the past or invent those of the future. Given that the medieval world has a strong attraction for all kinds of audiences, we have a magnificent opportunity to turn games into an educational and dissemination tool with infinite possibilities.

Our biggest challenge, in short, is to fight against the idea that we can do nothing about the digital divide, that we are at best "immigrants" in a digital world, or worse, mere analogue assets. One of the characteristics of this digital society is immediacy. The level of patience is inconceivable: everything is summed up in an image, 280 characters or a few seconds of video. But we have sufficient tools and training, as well as a willingness to work, to successfully adapt to the new scenarios that the current reality proposes to our discipline as a field of study and to ourselves as humanists of the 21st century.

Video game titles based on any of the historical periods quickly emerged, and in any of the possible game modes. There were three very recurrent periods, mainly

because of the ease with which users could identify what they were seeing and playing: the ancient Roman world, the Middle Ages and the Second World War,¹⁴ the latter because it was a relatively recent conflict and, therefore, a recognised one.

In the case of Rome and the medieval period, the explanation lies in the consolidation of a widespread generic idea of what those periods were like — classical architecture and its clothing to signal Roman antiquity, and a knight or a castle to identify the image of "medieval"— whether or not it has much to do with what the reality was. The developers sought such easily recognisable models for users.

Little by little, in parallel with the rapid evolution of technology in terms of image and sound as well as the memory available in the devices, the titles multiplied, a process that has not stopped growing and which anchors its scripts in Prehistory, in classical Greece, in ancient Egypt, in the late Antique world, in all the Chinese and Japanese eras, in the American colonisation, in the European wars of religion, in the European Enlightenment, in the complex 19th century..., in Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine...¹⁵ These are productions that are growing day by day through the initiatives of large and small companies.

But focusing on the Middle Ages, the developers have sought those resources in order to make it easy for users to identify what they want, what they want to play. And one of the fundamental elements used has been the application of a concept that allows "time travel" through the videogame.

Gameplay is the factor used by designers and scriptwriters to ensure that the game is not boring or cumbersome. In the case of strategy titles, those that make it possible to add a remarkable amount of content, the gameplay is linked more to the developer's desire to generate a product that facilitates the evolution of the game, with the sacrifice of veracity and historical rigour to varying degrees. A very significant case is that of the Spanish faction in *Medieval II Total War* (The Creative Assembly, 2006), which includes Castilians and Aragonese, something that did not

¹⁴ VENEGAS RAMOS, Alberto. *La II Guerra Mundial y el videojuego*, Cáceres: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Extremadura, 2022.

¹⁵ *Death From Above* (Rockodile, 2023).

happen in the first title of the saga. The interesting thing is that there is a possibility of increasing this historical rigour when the designers do not do so, and it is generated by the users themselves through the mod phenomenon.¹⁶ These are small software "patches" to the original programme that adapt it to the tastes of the users who make them and share them with others -they are usually free-; here we find, on occasions, true historical game encyclopaedias made by people who want "their favourite historical game" to comply with maximum rigour.

However, the developers themselves also expand their original titles with expansions that address specific moments or characters. This is the case of "Charlemagne" for *Total War: Attila* (The Creative Assembly, 2015), where we can repopulate Leon or Valladolid in the early medieval centuries with the Astur faction or lead the armies of the Eastern Roman Empire with Belisarius in "The Last Roman".

But it is the section on the information provided to progress in the game that interests us the most. It is impressive how much content is added at the technological, cultural and military development points, depending on the game, to explain to the user the need for this factor. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse, 2018) we can find very clarifying information about different aspects, characters, institutions and everyday issues of the late medieval period, although focused on the area where the video game takes place, which is the early 15th century in Central Europe. It should be borne in mind that these are titles that are played by all kinds of users, and not only by specialists in the history of Middle Age. A case in point is *Age of Empires IV* (Relic Entertainment and World's Edge, 2021). The possibilities of the hardware, especially the memory components, have made it possible to include this amount of information, although some of it is already concentrated in the cloud and does not need to be on the player's terminal. In many of these games, in addition to the factions that actually existed, it is also possible to play armies in historical battles. The approach is set out at the beginning, as in *XIII Century: Death or Glory*

¹⁶ JIMÉNEZ ABAD, Juan Francisco. Mods. Cuando el juego no es suficiente. *e-tramas*, 12, 2022. Available in: <http://e-tramas.fi.mdp.edu.ar/index.php/e-tramas/article/view/104>, access: April 25, 2023.

(Unicorn Games Studio, 2008), and it is up to the player to decide the evolution and outcome of the battle, which may or may not coincide with what actually happened. Let's not forget: this is a game at all times, where anything is possible.

In the case of adventure games and role-playing games, information is usually conveyed through icons and images, where the investments of the development teams are usually very high, hence the limitation for individual initiatives is much more significant and the results more limited. The case of the various *Assassin's Creed* titles (Ubisoft), in the case of adventure games, and *Medieval Dynasty* (Render Cube, 2021) for role-playing games, to choose a few examples, are exemplary.

The investment made by the Canadian multinational Ubisoft in graphics is enormous. The results have been so spectacular that the marketing is very numerous, and there is no better example of this than the economic profitability of the productions. The company has also decided to produce specific titles that specifically aim to take us on a museum tour of Ptolemaic Egypt (*AC Origins*, 2017), classical Greece (*AC Odyssey*, 2018) or the Viking world (*AC Valhalla*, 2020). On our screens, we don't have to imagine anything: we see it. Whether or not it corresponds to reality is a different matter. Since the second title in the series, Ubisoft has been attentive to the detail of historical advice, but it has had no problem in sacrificing this veracity for the sake of a pretended gameplay, with varying degrees of success.

Another issue is that of the game that expressly seeks veracity and verisimilitude by the desire of its developers. An excellent example is the aforementioned *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018). With an important cast of Czech historians who have collaborated as advisors, Bohemia in 1403 is the historical context of the game, and we can find a wide variety of written information on various topics: what the cities were like, the condition of women in that period, municipal finances, tithes, hygiene, guilds, education, and a long etcetera. The interesting thing about the title is that it has been developed with the premise of rigour and historical accuracy within the virtual parameters possible in a videogame: weapons are broken, but first they are made, you have to sleep, rest, heal wounds, eat, the horse gets tired if it gallops and human reactions are taken into account. The late Middle Ages seen in a different light, no doubt.

The success of titles set in the medieval period, whether we link it to more historical elements or to legend and fantasy, is very high. It is enough to look at those labelled as "medieval" on the Steam platform to see that the number offered is very high: 2,834 productions as of 14 July 2023. Therefore, in this review and exposition of what video games and the Middle Ages represent, it is a very significant example that shows the need to address the phenomenon as something inescapable for specialists.

Other stranger things: the narrative

The creative possibilities of video games, as ways of recovering and/or imagining the past, do not end with the conditions and characteristics we have outlined in the previous pages, because the technological spectrum of our days is so prodigious that it enables innumerable cross-media and transmedia links that, as humanists, we can take advantage of for the benefit of our disciplines.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that today video games have also come to constitute significant and significant elements in the plots of certain fictional productions, especially series, which have earned a highly preferential position in the ranking of popular cultural consumption.

Today, just as the historical novel masks its intervention on the present by dealing with the past, many films and TV series also turn to medieval stories and characters as a metaphorical way of reflecting on people, the social sphere and its problems and dynamics today. Thus, by going beyond the anecdotal level, the reading of the image becomes more complex and the viewer's creative function increases the greater the multiplicity of meanings and the indeterminacy or ambiguity of the image: films and series constitute a gateway to the understanding of historical content through the experiences of enjoyment and cognitive challenge involved in decoding an iconic text.

A primary objective of the series is to create an illusion of truth and a parallel world in which the viewer can see himself or herself reflected or challenged. This objective is served by the configuration, mainly corporal and sensorial, of the characters. Here we are more interested in analysing the problematisation of time,

both experiential and historical, and of space achieved in serialised products thanks to the aesthetic and actancial resource of video games and Augmented Reality, as they often take on a central role in the plot alongside the characters for the development of the narrative sequences.

In the 21st century, American productions occupy a very large and notorious space in television fiction and, even more so, in the streaming platforms that are watched all over the world, similar to the monopoly that Hollywood cinema had during the second part of the 20th century. This explains why serialised narratives establish relations with history from the American point of view and must be analysed from that position. Although it is true that European series are capturing the attention of an increasing number of viewers with productions of high technical and plot quality, it is also true that in both cases the historical basis remains in the Western perspective. In fact, it is the right thing to do when approaching the study of the Middle Ages is to take this question into account.

So, although this is not the first time we have examined series and their links to other cultural and semiotic products, such as video games, literary works and films, and analysed specific cases, this time we want to go a little further. Our attention has been drawn to a South Korean series and the ways in which it depicts medieval characters and uses the logic of video games and virtual reality. We consider it relevant to investigate how medievalism manifests itself in a culture far removed, as in this case, from the more traditional spheres in terms of its links with the medieval centuries, such as the Ibero-American one, to which we, the authors of this article, belong.

The series also presents other challenges for analysis, as it raises, as part of the story it tells, the complex and vital links between experience and video games, between reality and fiction, between history and the present, between literary genres —among themselves and with other artistic manifestations— and between some cities in Spain and South Korea. If there is one cultural product that crosses all borders, it is *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*,¹⁷ a South Korean television series that takes

¹⁷ Series broadcast by TVN from December 1, 2018 to January 20, 2019 and distributed internationally by the Netflix streaming service. It was produced by Studio Dragon and Chorokbaem

its title from the guitar piece composed by the Spaniard Francisco Tárrega.

Possibly the most interesting aspect of the series are the time jumps, which occur thanks to participation in the video game, an immersion that is so deep that it prevents the users, from leaving the fiction. In fact, they don't even enter or leave, they live in the fiction, concomitantly with real life, and at certain moments they pass from one to the other without any solution of continuity. We could say that it is an organisation in Chinese boxes, although the limits between one and the other are not clear: the only ones who have any certainty are the spectators, because we know that we are watching a series, a fictional story, but we are also confused by the overlaps between "the lives of the characters" and "what they experience as users of the game".

If there is a text that might resemble it, it is the story by Jorge Luis Borges, *El brujo postergado*,¹⁸ which is based on one of the stories in *El Conde Lucanor*. In Borges' story, the Dean of Santiago asks Don Illan de Toledo to teach him necromancy, for which, for fear of the Dean's ingratitude, the magician creates a prospective fiction in which the canon rises through the hierarchy until he becomes Pope. When the dean does not fulfil what he had promised if he were to occupy such a high position, Don Illan sends for the partridges he had had prepared for dinner, the dean's illusion vanishes and he finds himself back in his underground cell in Toledo, as subordinate and ignorant as before, or worse.

Fiction within fiction is the order of the day in this story by Borges, because the magician creates a fictional story to test the dean, and the partridges act as the transitional element that allows the passage from that fiction to the reality of the characters —first fiction, for the receivers of the story, which contains the other—. In the case of the Korean series, the piece that allows the transition from the characters' reality to the experiences in the game is the melody of the guitar piece entitled, precisely, *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. Every time the characteristic tremolo of the work is heard, the characters —and also the spectators— know that they are

Media, with script by Song Jae-jung, directed by Ahn Gil-ho, and starring Hyun Bin, Park Shin-hye, and Park Hoon.

¹⁸ BORGES, Jorge Luis. *El brujo postergado*. In: BORGES, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas 1, Historia universal de la infancia*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2007, pp. 361-363.

in the game and must watch over their lives, get their weapons, fight or die. In both cases, the senses anticipate or close the transition from one fiction to another. In the story, as is to be expected in a written text, the reference to food and, therefore, to taste, is barely allusive, because we have no chance, as readers, to taste those partridges. In the series, the melody as a sign of a change of fictional setting creates a characteristic soundscape, which the viewer experiences by ear: it is no more than a basic conditioning, like the bell that stimulated the appetite of Pavlov's dog, but it certainly implies a sensory immersion that the story is not in a position to provide.

The leaps in time are possible thanks to fantasy but, fundamentally, to technology, which is the other great protagonist of the series. The virtual reality in which the characters enter, which, as we said, becomes an integral part of their "real reality", corresponds mostly to the Middle Ages and the Hispanic environment. The videogame is set in 1492, in the so-called reconquest of the territories occupied by the Muslims. Castilian knights and Nasrid contenders; swords, daggers, spears, bows and arrows; surprising events, quests and persecutions in different parts of Granada and the Alhambra appear in the lives of those who put on the necessary contact lenses to enter the game. Even the legend of the hand of Fatima, the daughter of Mohammed, participates in the plot, as the hand of Hee Joo -a key character in the game to whom her brother gave his appearance- strums on the guitar the chords of *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* as part of the "lived history".

Conclusions

Historical research is not only necessary, it is essential so that, at a later stage, those who design these video games can use it for the benefit of the product they want to make; it is the same as what a novelist or a film or television scriptwriter has to do. In this process, the role of the user is fundamental, as it is their demand that leads developers to make these efforts: Lope de Vega already said in the *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*, in 1609,¹⁹ that if the public is the one who

¹⁹ ROZAS, Juan Manuel (Ed.). Lope de Vega. *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*. Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2003. Available in: https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/arte-nuevo-de-hacer-comedias-en-este-tiempo--0/#I_1, access: November 16, 2022.

pays, they must be pleased. It is not strange that in some titles the *History Channel* logo appears as a mark of quality, with the intention of giving it a seal of presumed historical rigour.

We share Peter Burke's²⁰ view that one of the most important functions of the historian is that of "rememberer". The historian's communication with society is defined as one of its basic pillars, since the fullness of the historian's work must be linked to the explanation of the essence of society and that the individual, in his awakening, knows where he is at all times, because he remembers where he was. To ensure that this memory is not lost, crossmedia narratives can be an excellent resource for evocation, both for historians, philologists and teachers and for the recipients of their work, all of whom are committed to understanding our reality and our history based on the technical and aesthetic possibilities of representation and interpretation of today's world, which we cannot and do not want to avoid and which also allow us to interact with History, Literature and Semiotics.

We use technology in order to do science in an orthodox way, according to the most academic criteria and canons. Of course it is absurd not to do so, because the production of historical and literary discourses must not only continue, but must increase as a result of these tools.

We may sound very transcendent with our discourse, but reality is very complex and should not be treated with disdain. We do not know whether or not there is an abuse of the issues of the past, and it is possible that, if there is, Margaret MacMillan may have a point when she speaks of a sacralization of history. She alludes to the fact that it offers simplicity in the face of today's chaos, for since there is a tendency to the immediate, to the digested, the solution is clear: History offers a time that is already "done" and easy to assimilate. The same could be said of Literature: the works of poets, narrators and playwrights have already created, in the course of so many centuries, the models of person, actions and conflicts that, with a few touches here and there, are maintained as schemes that are repeated, on each occasion, in the particularized texts. The types of characters, the literary

²⁰ BURKE, Peter. *Historias y Memorias: un enfoque comparativo. Isegoría. Revista de Filosofía Moral y Política*, Nº45, julio-diciembre, 489-499, 2011.

genres, the types of intrigue, already fixed in the imaginary and which, therefore, determine the ways of consuming the different fictions, bear witness to this. Everything we can imagine, one might think, has already been written by someone else and, therefore, it is not worth reading too much. That is why it is so important to undo this possible conclusion that, surely, more than one person will have.

Because of the supposed ease that both disciplines entail, they serve as a convenient escape route from the current context, and since there are no recognized or recognizable heroes, what better than to turn to those of the past. The strengthening of identities, with discourses recurring to past events, has become the reference point even for members of the ruling class, thus reaffirming the reality of the simplification of discourses. It is paradoxical that this is one of the worst times for historians when, undoubtedly, it is one of the best for the dissemination of the historical past: is it possible that in search of rigor and scientific excellence we have cultivated an inaccessible discourse, completely distant from the majority of possible receivers? Have we fallen into the same trap as the late antique and early medieval literati, whose communication functioned increasingly unilaterally until reaching an irreversible linguistic crisis, which left the learned on one side and the illiterate on the other? If our "sin" has been that, we have the same ways of redemption as in those centuries and also before, in Antiquity with the advent of writing, and later, when the printing press was invented: to adapt our objectives to the technical and technological requirements and to the cultural and social demands of our historical moment, but without sacrificing the excellence of our field of study, which is based, above all, on humanistic and humane premises for the construction and dissemination of knowledge.

Our criterion, according to what has been written and collected in this work, is that we must prepare and make the new generations aware that, of course, they should not abandon the concept of continuous training, of ubiquitous and permanent learning. Thus, with this basis, they will be able to assume communication tactics with the versatility that will allow them to adapt to the changes that will surely take place.

The main task of the medievalist is guaranteed because he will find his place

in social complexity. When faced with the question of what History and Literature are for, it will be much easier to answer that their usefulness and relevance lie in the possibility of contributing to the construction of a diverse thought that admits the difference of individuals. Technology, as an expression of the tools, tools and procedures used by a civilization, is the maximum exponent of its culture. We are not only part of it, but also contribute in an outstanding way to define it.

The objective of the medievalist has remained unchanged since the discipline was first outlined, which is none other than the understanding of that period in the history of mankind in a specific space and territory. For us, the challenge is not to present the global past but to expose and raise awareness of the importance of the past as the origin of our own culture.

We have the advantage of the iconography fixed by digital contents, even by those who draw the Middle Ages as a period of delay, magic and legendary characters, animals and landscapes, because they assume in this way a place from which to start. From there, it is up to those of us who make up the human and intellectual capital of the universities, with the possibilities of scientific dissemination, not to feed self-complacent discourses, but attractive and challenging ones, because only through this path will it be possible to make the individual know and recognize, reflect and act accordingly. We use technology in order to research and teach in an orthodox way, according to the most academic criteria and canons, but the current tools will contribute to increase, in quality and quantity, the production of historical and critical discourses of relevance.

At all times, the creative perspectives offered by the crossing of semiotic systems for the historical and aesthetic resignification of works originally composed in different genres or media have been formidable, and there are numerous productions that can vouch for this, impossible to review here. However, there is something that characterizes the crossmedia narratives of the 21st century, as we have indicated: it is the exponential increase of platforms and supports through which a story can be formatted and disseminated thanks to the gravitation and impact of digital technologies on the forms of access and enjoyment of content of historical and literary origin, reproduction to which the users themselves

contribute, which gives rise to a mass media propagation almost ad infinitum and without borders.

Artigo recebido em 31/03/2023

Artigo aceito em 15/07/2023

