Honour, Deliverance, Legacy: Representations of the Middle Ages in Digital Gaming

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Abstract

Permeating into all aspects of modern media, the Middle Ages occupy a significant place in popular culture. Film and television have long kept the period in the public eye, but, at the turn of the century, the Middle Ages was to find a new home: the digital game. Over the past two decades our medieval past has been digitised and reformatted into a playable experience, garnering considerable popularity (and capital) along the way. Like the gaming industry itself, representations of the Middle Ages in this time have changed. Advances in technology have enabled developers to embrace new ludic structures and create ever-more visually appealing worlds. Accompanying such change is a disparity in representation that cannot be ignored. This is the focus of this thesis. Using the analytical framework of Adam Chapman, it examines representations of the medieval found within three games: *For Honor* (2017), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) and *Ancestors Legacy* (2018). Analysis of their ludic structures is accompanied by analysis of their content, revealing what type of Middle Ages is represented and how.

Introduction

In his 1986 assessment of the West's renewed interest in its medieval past, Umberto Eco wryly remarks, 'it seems that people like the Middle Ages'.[1] Now, in 2020, this assertion is more appropriate than ever. The permeation of the medieval into all aspects of the modern media – cinema, television, radio – has continued into the new millennium where, accelerated by the influence of the internet, it has expanded even further into popular culture. This modern representation of the Middle Ages has come to be known as medievalism. The term has a complex semantic history, complicated further by the creation of new terminology. Neomedievalism, for example, is now used by some to describe the medievalism of popular culture.[2] For others, this differentiation is unnecessary as 'the "-ism" suffix is sufficient and marks the mediated nature of all medievalism'.[3] This study has no interest in semantics and therefore will simply use the term medievalism to denote any 'creative interpretation or recreation' of the European Middle Ages.[4] The use of medievalism in popular culture has become far more frequent and, as Andrew Elliott points out, considerably more 'banal', with even memes and advertisements (see Figure 1) now

Figure 1. Screenshot of the *medievalreacts'* Instagram page, popular for its memes.

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[1] Eco, U. (1986). Dreaming of the Middle Ages. *Travels in Hyperreality* (W. Weaver, Trans) (pp. 61-72). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

[2] Emery, E., & Utz, R. (2014). Making Medievalism: A Critical Overview. In E. Emery, & R. Utz (Eds.) *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*. (pp. 1-10). Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

[3] D'Arcens, L. (2016). Introduction: Medievalism: Scope and Complexity. In L. D'Arcens (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*. (pp. 1-13). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] D'Arcens, L. (2016). pp. 1-13.

appropriating the period.[5] These 'unintentional medievalisms' have 'infiltrated the architecture and fabric of modern life', but so too have the more deliberate medievalisms.[6]

Of particular interest and significance are the (re)creative interpretations of video games. This industry has arguably been more successful at commercialising and popularising the Middle Ages more than any other. One needs only look to the revenue generated by the popular fantasy-medieval games *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011) and *World of Warcraft* (2004) to get a measure of this success, with both of these having made billions of dollars in sales.[7] These two examples represent a category of medieval games that prioritise fantasy over historicity, whereas on the opposite end of the spectrum there are those that attempt the opposite, such as *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018). There are also those that can be placed somewhere in the middle, making equal use of both fantasy and historicity, such as *For Honor* (2017).

This disparity in gamic representations of the period prompted the writing of this thesis. Having played these games, I came to question how they can claim to offer a medieval experience and yet at the same time be so dissimilar from one another in appearance, narrative and gameplay. I have set out to study how the gamic form is used to build representations of the medieval, especially with regard to the concept of authenticity and, more importantly, how exactly the Middle Ages is ultimately being represented and (re)created. I have selected three recent examples of medieval games as case studies for the three central chapters: *For Honor* (2017), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) and *Ancestors Legacy* (2018). I will analyse these via a methodology that combines the approaches used by scholars of both game studies and medievalism, resulting in analysis that considers both a game's ludic structures and content.

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[5] Elliott, A.B.R. (2017). *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.

[6] Elliott, A.B.R. (2017). pp. 13-14.

[7] *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* has grossed an estimated $1,390,000,000 in revenue, whereas *World of Warcraft* has grossed almost $10 billion as of 2017. See: Statistic Brain Research Institute. (2015). *Skyrim: The Elder Scrolls V Statistics*. Retrieved from https://www.statisticbrain.com/skyrim-the-elder-scrolls-v-statistics/; Leak, J. (2017). *World of Warcraft Leads Industry With Nearly $10 Billion In Revenue*. Retrieved from https://www.gamerevolution.com/features/13510-world-of-warcraft-leads-industry-with-nearly-10-billion-in-revenue

My analysis of each of the games will first use the analytical framework conceived by Adam Chapman to better understand how developers have used the internal structures of their games to best represent their Middle Ages.[8] From this I am able to determine a game's representational and epistemological style, its approach to time and space within and outside the game world, and its narrative structure.[9]

Next my analysis deals with the games' content, split into five categories: authenticity (imagery and selection), further sites of representation, gender, race, and community. I have chosen these categories because they seem most fruitful for analysis, but this is by no means an exhaustive list of themes and issues raised by the games. I will argue that the games' representations can be viewed in a simpler fashion that better delineates how the Middle Ages is recreated and represented in modern games. Following careful analysis, I will demonstrate that medieval video games can be classified as (and distinguished by) attempting to recreate or create the period, whether that be *the* Middle Ages or *a* Middle Ages.

The three main games have been chosen for their variety of gameplay, genre, narrative, mechanics and imagery. My approach focuses on determining the nature and implications of those representations, rather than a simplistic assessment of historical accuracy. But on occasion it will be appropriate to compare and contrast the games' interpretations of the medieval past with modern scholarly approaches, given the claims which some developers have occasionally made about the accuracy of the medieval settings they have created.[10] They were also selected for their recent release. Having all entered the market within the last three years, they have not been the subject of any substantial scholarship to date, unlike games such as *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (1999), *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *The Elder Scrolls: Skryim* (2011) which have all been considered by scholars. Therefore, my original approach and focus contributes towards bringing the

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[8] Chapman, A. (2016). *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. London: Routledge.
[9] Chapman, A. (2016).
[10] *Kingdom Come Deliverance in particular has been touted as "accurate" by Warhorse Studios, with the game's melee combat even marketed using this phraseology. See: Kickstarter. (2014). Kingdom Come Deliverance. Retrieved from* https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1294225970/kingdom-come-deliverance

field of medieval game studies up-to-date. A brief overview of each game follows, including release, content and critical reception.

For Honor is an action-fighting game developed and published by Ubisoft in 2017, releasing on all platforms (PC, Xbox One, PlayStation 4) in the same year. Its basic premise is melee-based combat between three factions of warriors: the Knights, the Samurai and the Vikings. The game is set in a fictional post-apocalyptic medieval world, 1000 years following a cataclysmic event that devastated the Earth. These 1000 years were filled with endless war between the three factions. With peace looming in the present, the warlord of the Blackstone Legion (a branch of the knight faction), Apollyon, plans to maintain an age of total war by forcing the Vikings to fight each other over food shortages, and eventually the Samurai out of desperation. Her plan succeeds, but she is killed by the Orochi (the protagonist of the Samurai campaign) in the final mission. Despite further talk of peace, the war inevitably continues, forming the basis of the multiplayer "faction war" of which every player participates. Downloadable content (DLC) has been made available since launch, one of which (*Marching Fire* in October 2018) includes a new faction, the Wu Lin. These heroes, based on warriors from Chinese history, can be used in multiplayer, but they do not get their own territory in the faction war, nor do they factor into the single-player campaign.

Sales statistics are not readily available for the game, but a report in 2017 suggests it was a financial success, selling over 700,000 copies.[11] Critically the game was also a success, being generally well received by players and critics alike, although the single-player campaign has been described by some as 'insufferable' and 'contrived'.[12] The combat system, on the other hand, garnered significant praise and is generally regarded as its best feature. The "Art of Battle" system (as it is referred to in promotional materials) offers simple and fluid combat dubbed 'exemplary' by one critic and 'awe-inspiring' by another.[13]

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[11] Dunning, J. (2017). *February 2017 Digital Sales Report: For Honor Sells Over 700,000 Copies, Places in 7th*. Retrieved from https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2017/03/28/february-2017-digital-sales-report-honor-sells-700000-copies-places-7th/

[12] Aubrey, D. (2017). *For Honor Review – Earning an Honorable Discharge*. Retrieved from https://wccftech.com/review/for-honor-honorable-discharge/; Smith, T. (2017). *For Honor Review*. Retrieved from http://www.impulsegamer.com/for-honor-review/

[13] Lowe, M. (2017). *For Honor review: The must-have multiplayer for 2017*. Retrieved from https://www.pocket-lint.com/games/reviews/ea/140323-for-honor-review-the-must-have-multiplayer-for-2017; Espineli, M. (2017). *For Honor Review*. Retrieved from https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/for-honor-review/1900-6416619/

Likely due to its explicit fantasy setting, reviewers have rarely mentioned the game's use of actual history. It has therefore avoided the critiques of accuracy usually reserved for historical games. One reviewer, Andy Kelly of PC Gamer, sums up attitudes to the game's use of history rather well. 'It makes no sense,' he writes, 'for these chronologically distinct factions to be fighting for control of the same continent, but it doesn't really matter'.[14]

Kingdom Come: Deliverance (*KCD* hereafter) is an action role-playing game (RPG) developed by Warhorse Studios and published in 2018 by Deep Silver for all platforms. It was originally conceived by Czech game developer Daniel Vávra, who, after securing a possible investor for the game in billionaire Zdeněk Bakala, formed Warhorse Studios in July 2011 to develop it.[15] To prove to their investor there was an appetite amongst consumers for an open-world medieval RPG, the studio began fundraising the game on the crowdsourcing website *Kickstarter.com* in January 2014. Asking for £300,000, by February of the same year they had raised £1,106,371 from 35,384 backers.[16] The result: a 'realistic single-player RPG', with 'period accurate melee combat' – 'Dungeons & no Dragons,' as Warhorse Studios refer to it.[17] Its narrative is heavily influenced by the team's Czech heritage, with Vávra in particular acting on the impetus that this heritage deserved to be noticed by the rest of the world.[18] His personal involvement in the decision to represent this particular history and culture, a history and culture that he vehemently views as his own, is crucial. The use of his face for the character model of Sir Hanush of Leipa is evidence enough of that. The game is set during the early 15th century in a rural region of (then) Bohemia, now the modern-day Czech Republic. The game follows a lowly blacksmith's son named Henry as he looks to avenge the death of his parents following the destruction of his village (Skalitz) by the invading army of King Sigismund of Hungary. In doing so, he becomes involved in a resistance effort to restore the rightful king Wenceslaus IV to the throne, who had been captured by Sigismund prior to the events of the game. Gameplay places an

[14] Kelly, A. (2017). *FOR HONOR REVIEW*. Retrieved from https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/for-honor-review/
[15] Purchese, R. (2013). *Care for a next-gen medieval RPG with no fantasy?* Retrieved from https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-12-19-care-for-a-next-gen-medieval-rpg-with-no-fantasy
[16] Alois, J.D. (2014). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Closes on Kickstarter at £1.1 Million*. Retrieved from https://www.crowdfundinsider.com/2014/02/32470-kingdom-come-deliverance-closes-kickstarter-1-1-million/
[17] Kickstarter. (2014). *Kingdom Come Deliverance*. Retrieved from https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1294225970/kingdom-come-deliverance
[18] Digital Dragons. (2018, May 25). *DD2018: Dan Vavra - Designing historical open world RPG* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puXwyIDCQCg

emphasis on exploration and melee combat. An in-game codex offers insight into various aspects of the period. In terms of DLC, the game offers more quests and adventure for Henry, including coming to the aid of his friend, Sir Hans Capon, in a bold mission to woo (and one assumes bed) yet another "wench". *KCD's* final DLC, *A Woman's Lot* (May 2019), takes a different direction though, allowing the player to take control of Henry's love interest, Theresa, and experience life before the destruction of Skalitz as a woman.

The game has proven to be a big success for Warhorse Studios, selling over 2 million copies by February 2019.[19] However, it received mixed reviews from players and critics. It was praised for its visuals and the experience it provided, described as 'lush and dynamic', but was criticised for its bugs and, at times, 'overly exacting mechanics'.[20] Designed to reflect the difficulty of the period, some of the mechanics weigh too heavily on the gameplay, making some aspects, such as unarmed combat and saving the game, feel 'too frustrating and archaic' to be enjoyable.[21] The game has also taken criticism for its representation of minority groups. There are no people of colour in the game, leading some to accuse the developers of racism.[22]

The final case study is the real-time strategy (RTS) game *Ancestors Legacy*, released in May 2018 for PC and on Xbox One and PlayStation 4 in August 2019. It was developed by Polish independent developers Destructive Creations and published by IC Company. The game sees the player directing battles and armies from a bird's-eye perspective, whilst at the same time managing their resources and planning strategies. It has four campaigns: Viking, Anglo-Saxon, Slav and German. These are split into eight "stories" of five chapters focused on specific figures and events from the Middle Ages. Ulf Ironbeard's raid on Lindisfarne in 793 and the family disputes of the Varangian chief Rurik in 860 form the Viking stories. The Anglo-Saxon stories include Edward the Confessor's resolution of Earl

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[19] Jones, A. (2019). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance has sold two million copies*. Retrieved from https://www.pcgamesn.com/kingdom-come-deliverance/kingdom-come-deliverance-sales-numbers

[20] Todd, B. (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review: The Past Comes At You Fast*. Retrieved from https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/kingdom-come-deliverance-review-the-past-comes-at-/1900-6416861/; Lane, R. (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance review – impressively detailed medieval life sim*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/feb/15/kingdom-come-deliverance-review-medieval-rpg

[21] Fox, G. (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review*. Retrieved from http://www.pushsquare.com/reviews/ps4/kingdom_come_deliverance

[22] Examples of these accusations are too numerous to list here, but some will be later explored in detail when analysing *KCD's* representation of race.

Godwin's rebellion in 1051 (dramatized as a massive battle) and Harold Godwinson's defeat at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The Slav stories feature the military campaigns of Mieszko I and Bolesław I the Brave, whilst the German stories focus on Rudolf I and Herkus Monte. These stories are told through cutscenes before playing a chapter. A paid DLC was also released for the game in May 2019 that added a new campaign to the game, that of Saladin and the Saracens.

Although no sales data is available for *Ancestors Legacy*, it can be presumed that the game was a financial success given its porting to consoles a year following its release on PC. However, it likely never came close to the profits accrued by *KCD* and *For Honor*, both of which were developed by much larger studios with superior budgets. Still, the game boasts mostly positive reviews from critics. Its tactical options and visuals garnered considerable praise, with the latter being described as a 'feast for the eyes' and 'visceral quality'.[23] The majority of complaints focused on bugs and performance problems, but also the issue of 'historical inaccuracies'.[24] One reviewer describes it as 'frustrating' that the Lindisfarne raid is portrayed as a 'drawn out attack on a fortress' given that Lindisfarne was actually an undefended monastery.[25] One can only wonder, what did this reviewer expect? There would not be much strategy or enjoyment in slaughtering unarmed monks, after all. Simply pointing out such inaccuracies has little value. Instead, it is important to consider not just how the medieval past is represented in these games, but why it is represented in these ways. This involves considering decisions made by the developers, which are sometimes (but not always) justified by reference to "historical accuracy" or "truth". These issues have formed the focus of a growing body of scholarship on historical video games and we shall examine this in the next chapter.

[23] Banas, G. (2019). *Ancestors Legacy Review*. Retrieved from http://www.pushsquare.com/reviews/ps4/ancestors_legacy; Baird, S. (2019). *Ancestors Legacy PS4 Review: War In The Dark Ages*. Retrieved from https://screenrant.com/ancestors-legacy-ps4-review/

[24] Hafer, T.J. (2018). *Ancestors Legacy Review*. Retrieved from https://uk.ign.com/articles/2018/05/31/ancestors-legacy-review

[25] Burrows, A. (2019). *Ancestors Legacy Review*. Retrieved from https://www.thesixthaxis.com/2019/08/23/ancestors-legacy-review/

Historiography and Literature Review

Scholarly interest in medieval video games has been somewhat lacking, likely due to the field's relatively recent inception. The works that do exist within the field, although few and far between, are useful in that they provide theoretical perspectives that differ widely in the issues they tackle and the sources they utilise.[26] As well as these works, this study will look beyond simply the historiography of medieval video games. To formulate a more nuanced methodology, the broader discipline of historical game studies will be considered here first. Then analysis of the field of cultural medievalism will provide an aid to understanding how the Middle Ages is being re-represented in contemporary culture and to what ends. The combination of this scholarship provides the conceptual platform on which my own analysis of medieval video games will be based.

Historical Game Studies

Adam Chapman defines historical game studies as 'the study of those games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it'.[27] The field attracts academics from numerous historical disciplines, most notably from gender, cultural and social history. Chapman contends that those who study historical video games are often not even directly concerned with the games themselves, but their 'potential applications to different domains of activity and knowledge, and the practices, motivations and interpretations of players of these games and other stakeholders involved in their production or consumption'.[28] The diversity apparent within these areas of analysis makes for a complex and varied historiography. Given the broad nature of the field, it would be far too large an undertaking to detail every perspective here. Instead, only the applications most appropriate to this study will be considered: form, simulation, masculinity, narrative and discourse, along with the relevant theories that accompany them.

Before any discussion of perspective, however, a reference must first be made to Johan Huizinga's 1938 work, *Homo Ludens*, and Espen Aarseth's 1997 *Cybertext*. *Homo Ludens* is one of the earliest contributions to the field of play studies and, more recently, historical game studies. In it, Huizinga contends that play is 'interwoven' with culture and is

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[26] Specific examples are discussed below.
[27] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 16-17.
[28] Chapman, A., Foka, A. & Westin, J. (2017).

'one of the main bases of civilization'.[29] This relationship between play and culture, he suggests, has changed over time, with the play element being far more apparent in some eras than others. For instance, while 'mediaeval life was brimful of play', he writes, 'the 19th century seems to leave little room' for it.[30] These ideas have had a significant influence on the work of academics in the field of game studies. Adam Chapman, for example, rigorously applies Huizinga's theories in his most recent piece, "Representing the Play Element in Historical Video Games". Here he asks the question, are games 'more or less suited to the representation of particular historical cultures, periods and practices (or interpretations thereof), dependent on the claimed strength of the play element in these contents?'[31] Using Huizinga's ideas regarding the 'agonistic element' of warfare and chivalry, he argues that this is likely the case, with a consideration of 'the wider playfulness of various historical activities and cultures that games represent' likely to be particularly useful in future studies.[32]

Another scholar to cite Huizinga as a major influence for their work is Daniel Kline. In his most recent piece, Kline details the 'spectrum of participatory neomedievalisms' within role-playing and digital gaming, with analysis of tabletop RPGs, Medieval/Renaissance Fairs, Live-action role-playing and medieval video games.[33] Central to his analysis is the concept of the 'magic circle', a term first mentioned in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.[34] According to Kline, the magic circle defines notions of 'game' and 'play'; it 'separates the game world – the fantasy world, the world of play – from the outside world or 'real' life'.[35] For Kline, roleplaying is 'key' to participatory medievalism, the essence of which is found by 'stepping inside the magic circle of play'.[36]

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[29] Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1st ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. pp. 5-6.

[30] Huizinga, J. (1949). pp. 179-191.

[31] Chapman, A. (2020). Playing Against the Past?: Representing the Play Element of Historical Cultures in Video Games. In A. von Lünen, K.J. Lewis, B. Litherland, & P. Cullum (Eds.) *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*. (pp. 133-154). Oxon: Routledge.

[32] Huizinga, J. (1949). pp. 95-96; Chapman, A. (2020). pp. 133-154.

[33] Kline, D.T. (2016). Participatory Medievalism, Role-playing, and Digital Gaming. In L. D'Arcens (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*. (pp. 75-88). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[34] Huizinga, J. (1949).

[35] Kline, D.T. (2016).

[36] Kline, D.T. (2016).

Aarseth's *Cybertext* is arguably as important to the field of play studies as Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. This work introduces the idea that games, as '*cybertext*', are '*ergodic*' – to traverse them means the use of 'nontrivial effort' and the 'physical construction of a semiotic sequence'.[37] Put simply, games cannot simply be read to be understood, they must be actively produced by the player. Tom Apperley equates this notion to 'interactivity', which he refers to as the 'physical, cognitive process of producing the digital game, rather than the reflexive process of negotiating a meaning'.[38] Chapman develops the concept further, making clear the distinction between *reading* and *doing*.[39] For him, ergodic interactivity is '*configurative*', helping to decide some aspects of representation through the 'playful *doing* of players, as well as the designing activities of the developers'.[40]

Huizinga and Aarseth have helped shape the fields of play and game studies, with the work of the latter demonstrating an early distinction between digital games and traditional texts. This distinction is extremely important. It is essential to recognise what makes games different, not just as source material, but also as a tool for analysis. Understanding how they operate and how they are structured is crucial for investigating the issue of historical representation. This is acknowledged by Chapman, who, through numerous publications on the subject, has devised a method for doing just that. For him, the content of historical games is secondary. His focus instead lies with historical form, what he describes as: 'a particular game-structure's operations'.[41] Although now the most well-known, Chapman was not the first to suggest such an approach. As he frequently attests, William Uricchio laid the foundations for further research on the matter as far back as 2005, with his chapter in the *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, "Simulation, History and Computer Games".[42] Here, Uricchio makes the case that developers and historians alike should rely less on 'narratives of truth', and instead focus their attention, respectively, on the implementation or study of 'historiographic epistemologies as structuring agencies, in

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[37] Aarseth, E.J. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 1-2.
[38] Apperley, T. (2010). *Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures. pp. 11-12.
[39] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 32-33.
[40] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 32-33.
[41] Chapman, A. (2012). Privileging Form over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames. *Journal of Digital Humanities*, *1*(2).
[42] Uricchio, W. (2005). Simulation, History, and Computer Games. In J. Raessans & J. Goldstein (Eds.) *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (pp. 327-338). Cambridge, MA: MIT.

order to more coherently address history's rich complexity and relevance'.[43] He recognises that games are more than just their content; internally there exist structures, ludic and historical, that must be acknowledged if they are to be used for research purposes. He identifies some of these structures (namely simulation and narrative) but stops short of producing an analytical framework.

In the absence of any further research into the matter by Uricchio, Chapman has been the one to take up the mantle. His monograph, *Digital Games as History* (2016), provides the most comprehensive and analytical exploration of video games as historical form to date. The work's main focus is the examination of 'five core formal structures' by which to analyse historical games: simulation and epistemology, time, space, narrative and affordances.[44] It is on Chapman's analysis of these particular structures that this project will draw. Each one is complex and multifaceted, but through careful study and application, will be vital to understanding the conceptual side of historical representation in (medieval) video games. Although these structures will be later discussed when addressing the chosen case studies, a general definition and discussion of their key concepts is required here first.

Firstly, simulation style refers specifically to the 'stylistic variations in the *ludic aesthetics of historical description*'.[45] The variations Chapman identifies allow for the categorisation of games in a way that highlights the distinctions in their methods of historical representation. He proposes, using a number of criteria, their simulation styles be viewed as a 'spectrum', bookended by the terms *realist* and *conceptual*.[46] These terms are of Chapman's own formulation, but as he points out, Uricchio was the first to identify such divisions between historical games. 'In one sort…' Uricchio writes, 'efforts are usually taken to maximise the accuracy of historical detail, allowing the setting and conditions to constrain and shape game play. At the other extreme are the games that deal with historical process in a somewhat abstracted and structural manner'.[47]

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[43] Uricchio, W. (2005). pp. 327-338.
[44] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 266-267.
[45] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 59-60.
[46] These criteria are discussed when addressing the simulation styles of the individual case studies; Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 59-60.
[47] Uricchio, W. (2005). pp. 327-338.

The first of these is evidently what has become Chapman's *realist* simulation, which he defines (at its most basic), as a simulation that 'generally work[s] by aiming and/or claiming to *show* the past "how it was"', with the '*aesthetics of historical description* mainly operat[ing] through the *audio-visual aspect*'.[48] A *realist* simulation does not have to be historically accurate, nor does it have to be necessarily "realistic" – i.e. reflecting real world processes. Uricchio's second division has clearly formed the basis of the *conceptual* simulation style, which Chapman defines as a style that '*tells* us about the past without purporting to *show* it as it appeared', with 'representation built through *procedural rhetoric*'.[49] The term *procedural rhetoric* is an important aspect of the *conceptual* style, but it is not an original concept. Ian Bogost was the first to coin this term in 2007, defining it as 'the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures'.[50] For Bogost, video games are uniquely persuasive; using the power of 'expressive computation', they bear 'cultural meaning'.[51] It is logical that some games, those with more complex rulesets, utilise this power more than others (that lean instead towards a more visual method of persuasion) to do so – a division that works well in Chapman's categorisation of style.

The epistemology of a historical game is described by Chapman as being either one of two terms, *reconstructionist* or *constructionist*. These concepts were defined and debated most notably in 1997 by Alun Munslow (along with a third, *deconstructionist)* as, at their most basic, epistemologies of 'empiricist tradition' and 'social theory', respectively.[52] Munslow's ideas have since been further developed by scholars and by Munslow himself.[53] When applying these two concepts to historical games, Chapman uses the arguments and discussion of others as tenets or criteria to better define the terms. For instance, central to *reconstructionism*, according to Douglas Booth, is the principle that 'history exists independently of the historian and that discovering the past is an objective process,

[48] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.
[49] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 71-72.
[50] Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp. ix.
[51] Bogost, I. (2007). p. ix.
[52] Munslow, A. (2006). *Deconstructing History* (2nd ed.). Oxon: Routledge. pp. 20-21.
[53] Booth, D. (2005). *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History*. Abingdon: Routledge; Munslow, A. (2007). *Narrative and History*. Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Munslow, A. (2010). *The Future of History*. Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

uncontaminated by ideology'.[54] Chapman expands on this idea and applies it to the medium of digital games – like with *reconstructionist* histories, *reconstructionist* games attempt to hide the historian's (or the 'developer-historian's') role in meaning creation.[55] His tenets of *constructionist* history are presented in much the same way. For example, Munslow contends that *constructionist* histories acknowledge 'the intellectual commitments of the author-historian to their particular story space vision *for* the past'.[56] Chapman uses this as part of his definition; he identifies such commitments in developer interviews and even the titles of some games.[57]

Chapman's approach to epistemology, then, brings together multiple ideas and perspectives to neatly assemble the core principles of *reconstructionist* and *constructionist* histories, whilst also expanding upon them to ensure they are analytically useful when attempting to interpret the inner workings of historical games.

When referring to the temporal structures of historical games, Chapman uses the original terms *realist* and *discrete*. *Realist time* he generally defines as an equal relationship between *fictive time* (the passage of time in-game) and *play time* (the passage of time in reality).[58] *Discrete time* involves a more fluid passage of *fictive time* that does not equate to that of *play time*.[59] This term Chapman attributes to the temporal 'segmentation' and 'co-ordination' identified in turn-based games by Zagal *et al*.[60]

With regard to spatial structures, two more terms require a degree of explanation – *narrative gardens* and *narrative canvas*. The former Chapman develops from the work of Bettina Lamm, whose 2002 work established a comparative link between the 'organised', 'sequenced' and 'staged' aesthetics of garden design, and the digital spaces seen within virtual reality artworks.[61] *Narrative gardens* are a 'designed aesthetic experience' that a player is able to explore and, through embedded narrative elements, infer historical

[54] Booth, D. (2005). pp. 9-10.
[55] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 67-68.
[56] Munslow, A. (2007). pp. 18-19.
[57] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 78-79.
[58] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 93-94.
[59] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 93-94.
[60] Zagal, J.P., Fernandez-Vara, C., & Mateas, M. (2008). Rounds, Levels and Waves: The Early Evolution of Gameplay Segmentation. *Games and Culture, 3*(2), 175-198.
[61] Lamm, B. (2002). Explorative Space: Spatial Expression and Experience in Gardens and in VR Works. In L. Qvortrup (Ed.) *Virtual Space: The Spatiality of Virtual Inhabited 3D Worlds*. (pp. 215-237). London: Springer.

meaning.[62] The discovery and exploration of the embedded narrative information acts as what Don Carson first described as 'environmental storytelling'.[63] This is how developers tell 'specific histories' and drive the narrative forwards.[64]

Space is arranged differently in games that utilise the *narrative canvas* structure. Chapman seems to have conceived of this term through the play and study of certain *conceptual* simulations, specifically historical strategy games. He describes this structure as 'a partially filled canvas awaiting the player to complete it by inscribing their own representation upon it'.[65] Narrative is dictated by the players actions, while the telling of specific histories (and narratives) works 'in conjunction with the developer-historian, who decides elements of the procedural rhetoric' and 'what it is possible for players to do'.[66]

The final structure Chapman recommends for analysis is narrative. He posits three categories by which the arrangement of narrative in digital games can be understood: the *deterministic*, the *open-ontological* and the *open* story structures.[67] To understand what these entail, however, an explanation of terminology is once again required, namely of the two concepts *framing narrative* and *ludonarrative*. These ideas were first conceived in essence by Rune Klevjer in 2002 but were only used in opposition to each other by Tom Bissell in 2011. Originally a literary concept, a game's *framing narrative* can be understood as being a narrative layer that acts as an overarching story, 'framing' the gameplay within.[68] According to Chapman, it can be described as being made up of *narrative fragments*, 'sections of narrative that are defined and written solely by the developer.'[69] The *ludonarrative,* on the other hand, is 'unscripted and gamer-determined'; it is the player 'advancing through gameplay' and creating an 'emergent narrative'.[70]

[62] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-105.
[63] Carson, D. (2000). Environmental Storytelling: Creating Immersive 3D Worlds Using Lessons Learned from the Theme Park Industry. *Gamasutra*. [Accessed April 2020]. Retrieved from: https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131594/environmental_storytelling_.php
[64] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-105.
[65] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-105.
[66] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-105.
[67] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 119-121.
[68] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 119-121; Klevjer, R. (2002). In Defense of Cutscenes. *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings, 1*, 191-202.
[69] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 119-121.
[70] Bissell, T. (2011). *The Art and Design of Gears of War*. Cary: Epic Games Inc. pp. 37-38; Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp. 383.

Chapman's categories can now be understood. The *deterministic* story structure privileges the *framing narrative* in the 'construction of the overall game narrative'.[71] It can best be described as sequential and linear, with the player's *ludonarrative* decisions/choices having little to no impact on a fixed and rigid *framing narrative*. The *open-ontological* structure, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. Here the *framing narrative* is weak, existing only as an "outline" within which the player creates their own narrative through their *ludonarrative* choices. A high degree of player agency facilitates this narrative production.[72] Similarly, the *open* structure is also characterised by considerable player agency, as well as consequential *ludonarrative* choices. However, what sets it apart from the *deterministic* and *open-ontological* structures is 'the presence of a significant *framing narrative* that is nonetheless still subject to decisions made in the *ludonarrative*'.[73] The *framing narrative* is malleable and is shaped by the player's actions, namely the selection or omittance of certain *narrative fragments* from the *framing narrative*.

While Chapman's methods provide the tools for the analysis of digital games and their form, his antipathy towards historical content is disappointing.[74] Such an issue seems almost unfashionable now, but questions of accuracy and authenticity (two very different concepts) are certainly still worth asking – providing focus is not lost attempting to either justify or deride a game's historicity. Instead of ignoring it, historians should take the issue and approach it from a different perspective, just as Robert Houghton does. His approach is a unique one.[75] By moulding the fundamental aspects of video games into a method of research-based analysis, he is able to explore a game's functionality and operations, as well as its content. For him, a game's world presents an opportunity for the collection of data, its rules a conduit for analysis and the way it is subsequently played as the facilitator for debate and interaction. This is an inclusive approach to a game's content that takes into account the importance of form and does not get lost in the trappings of historical accuracy. Questions of historicity are viewed through the lens of 'emergent arguments', becoming

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[71] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 128-130.
[72] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 128-130.
[73] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 128-130.
[74] It should be noted that Chapman does not view content as redundant. He simply believes it should not be privileged over form, which is required to fully understand the content. See: Chapman, A. (2012).
[75] Houghton, R. (2018 October 8). *World, Rules, and Play: Digital Games and Researching the Medieval World.* Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tljrLLDf6SE.

debates of historiography dictated by worlds and mechanics.[76] Although it is right to privilege form over content, it is not right to ignore it all together. One cannot exist without the other; they are intrinsically linked, and as such, both will be considered here.

Authenticity is a particularly valuable concept. Games that are not intentionally realistic, or even necessarily historical, can still possess a link to the real world by way of, what Salvati and Bullinger identify as, 'selective authenticity' – specific representations of the past blended with 'generic conventions and audience expectations' to form a synthesised historical realism.[77] Johannes Koski demonstrates this with his study of the Japanese fantasy roleplaying game, *Valkyria Chronicles*.[78] Echoing Salvati and Bullinger's work on the recreation of the Second World War in popular culture, Koski analyses the game in terms of its imagery and historical signifiers, concluding that the game's authenticity is in fact 'a collection of historically tinted references and metaphors, and it links its representations to a global textually mediated popular nostalgia or collective memory of the Second World War, built and sustained through narrative texts and the collective sense of the past they bring about'.[79]

The term itself – authenticity – has accrued a variety of meanings over the years. The definition this study will use, and the one I deem most appropriate with regard to Medievalism, is its most recent form proposed by Pam Clements, 'authenticity as believability or verisimilitude, a sense of the genuineness of the "medieval" in a modern setting'.[80] It can be distinguished from accuracy as the fulfilment of a certain 'experience and expectation' of the past, Kapell and Elliott write, rather than an attempt to get 'the historical facts correct'.[81] With this distinction made, it should be mentioned that another, confusingly similar term exists when describing representation: realism. Rather than getting

[76] Houghton, R. (2018 October 8).

[77] Salvati, A.J., & Bullinger, J.M. (2013). Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past. In M.W. Kapell, & A.B.R. Elliott (Eds.) *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. (1st ed., pp. 153-168). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

[78] Koski, J. (2017). Reflections of history: representations of the Second World War in Valkyria Chronicles. *The Journal of Theory and Practice, 21*(3), 396-414.

[79] Koski, J. (2017). pp. 396-414.

[80] Clements, P. (2014). Authenticity. In E. Emery, & R. Utz (Eds.) *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*. (pp. 19-26). Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

[81] Kapell, M.W., & Elliott, A.B.R. (2013). Conclusion(s): Playing at True Myths, Engaging with Authentic Histories. In M.W. Kapell, & A.B.R. Elliott (Eds.) *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. (1st ed., pp. 357-366). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

lost in a semantic argument, I will give a brief definition of what I intend it to mean in this context. When referring to a game as "realistic" (not to be confused with Chapman's term *realist*), I do not refer to its accuracy or its presentation of facts, or even its attempts at authenticity. I am instead referring to its ability to reflect real-world laws and processes in its gameplay. For instance, in DICE's *Battlefield 1*, if a player is using a rifle with a scope, other players are able to see the glinting of that scope in the sun. A more medieval example of realism would be *KCD's* helmets. When wearing a helmet with a visor, the player's vision will be impaired as the display narrows to reflect their limited line of sight. The inclusion of such elements can be seen as attempts at realism – a key part of *realist* simulations.

It is also worth noting a perspective in the politics of representation. There is a clear, what Kevin Schut terms, 'bias' in the way that video games present history. According to Schut, this bias produces 'masculine, systematic, and spatially oriented interactive versions of history'.[82] Systems and virtual spaces are features of the gamic medium that certainly aid in the modern presentation of history, but it is the privileging of masculine values that has the most visible impact. Although certainly an understudied topic, this issue of masculine dominance frequently makes headlines outside of academia. The release of *Assassin's Creed Unity* for example was accompanied by a furore surrounding the game's all male co-op mode, branded rather tellingly by one article as 'Assassin's Creed Bro-op'.[83] The little work that has been done regarding the topic points to a clear connection in terms of video games, identity and masculinity. In his thesis, Long Trinh makes the case that video games, through their agency and influence, can act as 'agents of socialization into hegemonic masculinity'.[84] Derek Burrill goes further, contending that digital technology produces a 'strain of masculinity' that is almost a 'type of technology' in itself – typically cultivated through in-game violence.[85] The male utilises this technology in the object world to 'navigate, comprehend and dominate'.[86] While these views are likely to come under scrutiny, it is simply impossible to refute the fact that remedial violence and an emphasis on traditional

[82] Schut, K. (2007). Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History. *Games and Culture, 2*(3), 213-235.

[83] Meer, A. (2014). *Yes All Men: Assassin's Creed Bro-op Controversy Escalates*. Retrieved from https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/06/12/assassins-creed-unity-characters/

[84] Trinh, L. (2013). *Masculinity in the Virtual World of Videogames: A Question of Agency* (Honours Thesis). Retrieved from https://scholarship.richmond.edu

[85] Burrill, D.A. (2008). *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*. London: Peter Lang. pp. 14-15.

[86] Burrill, D.A. (2008). pp. 14-15.

masculine virtues dominate video games, historical or not.[87] The past serves as a convenient setting from which to espouse these virtues, with the justification being that "this is just how it was back then" – violent, bloody and male-dominated. Even with this pretext, games seek to enhance the idolised masculine form to almost comedic levels. Dante, the eponymous hero of Visceral Games' *Dante's Inferno*, is one such example of this. Lorenzo Servitje's critique of the game and his characterisation make apparent how hypermasculine he is made to appear.

> For much of the original *Inferno,* the poet is weak, sensitive, and too compassionate… the remediated Dante is a figure of tremendous power, strength, and ferocity… he has the physique of a contemporary body builder.[88]

In the pursuit of presenting history, no matter the historical context of a game, masculine ideals are always likely to be at the forefront of this presentation. Implicit or explicit, intentional or not, they exist in the world, mechanics and even the aspect of play itself. It is important to take this into account when analysing the games this study will focus upon, both for its relevance with regard to representations of the Middle Ages, and for its effect on the construction of gender and femininity within these.

Through the consideration of the approaches detailed above, a broader context to the world of historical games becomes apparent.

Medieval Video games

Historical game studies, then, is a highly diverse field. Unfortunately, due in part to its recent nascence, many areas of research within it are understudied. Medieval videogaming is one of these areas. There are few publications on the subject, with no singular monograph dedicated to the analysis of medieval game studies. The scholarship that does exist tends to only be short contributions: articles, case studies and the like.

Housed within David Marshall's *Mass Market Medieval* (2007), a collection of essays examining the Middle Ages in popular culture, is one of the first examples of medieval

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[87] Audiences for the more violent genres of videogames are overwhelmingly male. Within the tactical shooter genre, for instance, Quantic Foundry's study revealed 96% of players were male, and only 4% female. See: Yee, N (2017). *Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down The Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre*. Retrieved from https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre
[88] Servitje, L. (2014). Digital Mortification of Literary Flesh: Computational Logistics and Violences of Remediation in Visceral Games' Dante's Inferno. *Games and Culture*, 9(5), 368-388.

videogame analysis. This essay, Daniel Kline's "Virtually Medieval: The Age of Kings Interprets the Middle Ages", provides an early examination of the gamic form as well as an in-depth analysis of a modern medieval videogame.[89] The piece explores a number of ludological and historical concepts while using the real time strategy game *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (*AOE2*) as the focal point for its analysis. Kline's methods are concise, thoughtful and didactic. His pedagogical approach to the Middle Ages is one many future scholars have taken to when examining video games, and although the focus of his piece is very much on demonstrating the 'historical lessons' of *AOE2*, he shows an awareness and careful consideration of wider issues such as periodisation and the debate surrounding accuracy vs authenticity.[90]

Kline's conclusions are also highly insightful, laying the groundwork for future studies in medieval video games. For him, their value within research and education lies with their ability to present the past in a meaningful and provocative way whilst acting as 'digital simulacra' of *a* Middle Ages, rather than accurate representations of *the* Middle Ages.[91] Kline's conclusions have led him to publish two further works on the subject. The first of these, *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*, is a collection of essays edited by Kline and is the first work of its kind dedicated to medieval game studies. Its main concern lies with how the medieval has been transformed through digital gaming, and how it is reimagined and reinterpreted for contemporary audiences.[92] Split into six parts and eighteen chapters, the work is highly comprehensive, considering a variety of issues ranging from narrative and gender to maps and technology. Most relevant to this study are those considered within "Part V: Theoretical and Representational Issues in Medieval Gaming". Here, four scholars shed light on some of the least acknowledged issues of medieval representation in gaming. Thomas Rowland and Michelle DiPietro's essays analyse the use of maps as narrative spaces and the place of medievalism within the texts of *The Elder Scrolls*, respectively. Despite being an integral part of almost all modern video games, maps

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[89] Kline, D.T. (2007). Virtually Medieval: The Age of Kings Interprets the Middle Ages. In D.W. Marshall (Ed.) *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Contemporary Culture* (pp. 154-170). London: McFarland.

[90] Kline, D.T. (2007). pp. 154-170

[91] Kline, D.T. (2007). pp. 154-170

[92] Kline, D.T. (2014). Introduction, "All Your History Are Belong to Us": Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages. In D. Kline (Ed.) *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*. (pp. 1-14). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

have been scarcely examined for their ludological potential and use, let alone for their representational value. Rowland does both. For him, the videogame map is a space used to organise and undertake narrative experience, but it is also a reflection of medieval maps in that it is styled in a similar way. They share the same purpose, 'to reveal the world as a created object, to show themselves as objects of beauty for gazing and deliberation, and to contain narrative as an enticing, spiritual pilgrimage'.[93] DiPietro's work is equally revelatory. She reveals that within *The Elder Scrolls*, beneath the layers of medieval fantasy, there exists deeper parallels with the Middle Ages that can only be identified by reading the in-game texts and stories. These texts are themselves purely fictitious but serve to enrich the game's representation of *a* Middle Ages through explicit and implicit references to actual history. DiPietro gives the example of *Skyrim's* Norse-influenced tales and runic alphabet – an explicit and intentional use of a past culture and history.[94] Beyond the content of these books and out into the game world, there is a much more implicit and perhaps unintentional parallel with the Middle Ages. The manner in which texts are distributed throughout the world, with no single library or shop containing them all, according to DiPietro, 'parallel[s] relationships between status, literacy and possession of books in the Middle Ages'.[95] As well as providing unique perspectives, *Digital Gaming Reimagines the Middle Ages* is also extremely useful for its case studies. The work encompasses a plethora of medieval games, including *Crusader Kings*, *Medieval: Total War*, *World of Warcraft*, *The Elder Scrolls* and *Dante's Inferno*. There are also pieces dedicated to tabletop RPG's, what can be considered the precursor to medieval gaming, and mobile games. Overall, such a work is invaluable to a study of this kind.

Kline's most recent ventures into the world of medieval gaming are much smaller studies, one of which is contained within Gail Ashton's *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*. While broad in nature, this piece is concerned with a very specific issue. Titled "Contemporary Neo-Medieval Digital Gaming: An Overview of Genre", it is, as the name suggests, focused on the different genres of medieval gaming and how each one lends itself

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[93] Rowland, T. (2014). We Will Travel by Map: Maps as Narrative Spaces in Video Games and Medieval Texts. In D.T. Kline (Ed.) *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*. (pp. 189-201). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
[94] DiPietro, M. (2014). Author, Text, and Medievalism in *The Elder Scrolls*. In D.T. Kline (Ed.) *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*. (pp. 202-213). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
[95] DiPietro, M. (2014). pp. 202-213.

to the Middle Ages.[96] The other study, found within *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, provides a survey of various medieval video games and their potential for participation, arguing these games (RPG's in particular) 'traffic through other forms of medievalism to create simulacra of medieval periods that never existed'.[97]

Although the majority of studies concerning medieval gaming are pedagogical in their aims, there are other issues upon which scholars have chosen to frame their research. The issue of gender, for example, is the focus of three studies by Kim Wilkins, Amy Kaufman and Lauryn Mayer, all of which use massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) as the centrepiece for their analysis. Wilkins' argument centres around the concept of the 'genred body' and the flexibility of performative gender, as well as the creation of what she terms as 'queer performance' enabled by the incongruous setting of a Middle Ages.[98] Mayer takes a similar approach, demonstrating that within the digital communities of medieval MMORPGs lies a level of gender fluidity and irrelevance unmatched outside of the virtual world. Kaufman differs in that her work is concerned only with femininity and female power. While masculine ideals dominate the videogame world, it is clear from the work of these scholars that either the medieval setting or the MMORPG genre (or both) can challenge these ideals and provide a space in which gender is explored freely and, at the same time, disregarded in favour of ability, personality and community.[99] Wilkins recognises the conventionally masculinised elements within *World of Warcraft* (arguably the most successful medieval MMORPG) but makes it clear that these elements are no longer the sole 'viewing pleasure' of a heterosexual male audience.[100] She concludes that within the digital Middle Ages of *World of Warcraft*, 'bodily limitations are eased and possibilities for dynamic, contingent gender performance are opened up'.[101] Kaufman's study of *Neverwinter Nights* on the other hand is a stark reminder that early attempts at MMORPGs did little to ease the limits of gender, and judging by Kaufman's damning analysis

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[96] Kline, D.T. (2015). Contemporary Neo-Medieval Digital Gaming: An Overview of Genre. In G. Ashton (Ed.) *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*. (pp. 93-102). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

[97] Kline, D.T. (2016).

[98] Wilkins, K. (2014). "Awesome Cleavage": The Genred Body in *World of Warcraft*. In D.T. Kline (Ed.) *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*. (pp. 119-132). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

[99] Mayer, L.S. (2008). Promises of Monsters: The Rethinking of Gender in MMORPGs. In K. Fugelso, & C.L. Robinson (Eds.) *Studies in Medievalism XVI: Medievalism in Technology Old and New: Medievalism in Technology Old and New*. (pp. 184-204). Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd.

[100] Wilkins, K. (2014). pp. 19-32.

[101] Wilkins, K. (2014). pp. 19-32.

of feminine power within the game, nor did they fully gauge how to better represent their female consumers.[102] Only in recent years has this been realised.

Unlike gender, issues of race have been largely ignored by scholars of medieval gaming. While journalists and game reviewers have sought to draw attention to the potential pitfalls of historical re-representation, namely "whitewashing" and "blackwashing", academics have chosen to remain mostly silent.[103] The only scholarly work available on the subject is Victoria Cooper's. Completed in 2016, her PhD thesis provides an analysis of ideas of identity, race and fantasy in medieval video games. Using *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* as a case study, Cooper examines how these ideas intersect, concluding that whiteness is privileged through fantasy and is 'mobilised to maintain ideas of white, Western supremacy as pre-written by history'.[104] From her analysis of the game she also finds evidence of racial politics and stereotypes that mirror the struggles of marginalised real-world peoples. Although highly informative, this is concluded on the basis of research into *Skyrim* only. The question of whether this occurs within other games invites further study.

A final work which must be considered for its unique approach is Julian Wolterink's article, Authentic Historical Imagery: A Suggested Approach for Medieval Videogames. In it, Wolterink makes the case that the approaches proposed by game studies are insufficient as historians are 'not concerned with narrative or gameplay' and therefore a focus on what he terms 'authentic historical imagery' is necessary.[105] In his article, Wolterink uses the landscape of *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* to demonstrate the significance of authentic imagery. He highlights comments made by the developers of the game that seem to suggest that an intentional focus on authentic historical imagery (in this case Nordic temples and structures) produces a greater medieval 'feel' and 'motivates players to continue playing by intensifying

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[102] Kaufman, A. S. (2008). Romancing the Game: Magic, Writing, and the Feminine in *Neverwinter Nights*. In K. Fugelso, & C.L. Robinson (Eds.) *Studies in Medievalism XVI: Medievalism in Technology Old and New: Medievalism in Technology Old and New*. (pp. 143-158). Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd.
[103] Lotte. (2018, October 15). *Blackwashing/whitewashing*. Retrieved from https://digmedia.lucdh.nl/2018/10/15/blackwashing-whitewashing/
[104] Cooper, V. (2016). *Fantasies of the North: Medievalism and Identity in Skyrim* (PhD Thesis). Retrieved from http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/16875/
[105] Wolterink, J. (2017). Authentic Historical Imagery: A Suggested Approach for Medieval Videogames. *Gamevironments*, (6), 1-33.

their playing experience with historical baggage and weight'.[106] As Wolterink goes on to say, however, the landscape is not the only authenticating element of the game. Sound, plot, characters and texts also have a part to play.[107] Wolterink calls for further study to analyse this imagery and to apply this approach to other medieval and non-medieval games.

Although the scholarship surrounding medieval video games may be limited, the works discussed here show a burgeoning field with a range of differing perspectives. These works are also part of the wider field of Medievalism, the nature and significance of which will now be discussed.

Medievalism

The term "medievalism", originally considered as a way of describing an engagement with the Middle Ages, is now more widely used to denote any 'creative interpretation or recreation' of the European Middle Ages.[108] It has become a global phenomenon, as well as a growing historical discipline. This discipline, medievalism studies, encompasses a wide range of media, ranging from books and opera to music and film. It is the more "modern" of these that this study is most concerned with. Alongside video games, the theoretical perspectives provided by studies of medieval film, television and internet culture will be of great value due to the similar (but not identical) approaches taken in each. Here these will be discussed with reference to their usability, beginning first with a short analysis of Medievalism in modern mass media as a whole.

Cinema, television and radio have, for the last century, provided an outlet for the recreation and use of the Middle Ages, broadening its appeal and expanding it into the realm of popular culture. As Andrew Elliott has shown, the twenty-first century, with all its technological and societal changes, has seen this expansion grow rapidly to the point that medievalism has become a part of everyday life.[109] Social media, streaming services and the videogame industry have catapulted the Middle Ages into the public eye like never before. The consequences of this are twofold: 1. The reduction of the Middle Ages to a series of medievalisms or tropes has become more apparent and much more banal in nature. 2. Mass

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[106] Wolterink, J. (2017). pp. 1-33.
[107] Wolterink, J. (2017). pp. 1-33.
[108] D'Arcens, L. (2016) pp. 1-13; Emery, E., & Utz, R. (2014). pp. 1-10.
[109] Elliott, A.B.R. (2017).

media has made the appropriation of the Middle Ages by individuals and groups much easier.

Medievalisms did exist before the digital age. Umberto Eco first showed an awareness of this with his "Ten Little Middle Ages". For him, the Middle Ages has been continually 'messed up' through the years 'to meet the vital requirements of different periods', reducing it to a cliché set of tropes, namely the perception of the Middle Ages as a *pretext;* a *barbaric* age; an *ironical revisitation*; of *Romanticism*; and of *national identities*.[110] Similarly, political appropriation of the medieval is not a new phenomenon. Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl demonstrate this with their analysis of cultural imagery and chivalry in the U.S. South, using the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as evidence. The Klan adopted medieval models of knighthood and, according to Pugh and Weisl, sought to make this connection explicitly clear, especially within literary history.[111]

The new age of modern media did not create these concepts, it has merely exaggerated and changed them. The internet has altered the way the Middle Ages is consumed, received and perceived, tempering it further and creating a new form of medievalism in the process. This resulting medievalism is what Elliott terms 'banal' – medievalisms devoid of any historical meaning that 'often pass unnoticed as references to the past' that are 'usually accepted as innocuous or atemporal references to a phenomenon understood by all'.[112] The now creative culture of the web and the emphasis on user-generated content (*Web 2.0*) makes the medieval highly accessible and, through "memes" or similar creative mediums, relatable, as it is 'expropriated from any historical context and inserted into a modern setting'.[113] These banal medievalisms exist alongside more overt medievalisms deployed by groups and individuals for political or ideological reasoning – the aforementioned Ku Klux Klan would be an example of this, although in more recent times a more apt comparison would be Sarah Palin's use of the medieval Christian term 'blood libel'

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[110] Eco, U. (1986). pp. 68-69.
[111] Pugh, T. & Weisl, A.J. (2012). *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. Great Britain: Routledge. pp. 142-144.
[112] Elliott, A.B.R. (2018). Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages. *History Compass, 16*(3), doi: 10.1111/hic3.12441
[113] Elliott, A.B.R. (2017). pp. 13-14.

in defence against those that criticised her political rhetoric against Gabrielle Giffords, the congresswoman shot in 2011.[114]

The internet has made the Middle Ages highly accessible through memes and user-generated content, as well as providing an online option for medieval video games. Its impact extends beyond just that, however. The internet is (and has been for almost two decades) the home of "fandom", 'the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text'.[115] This consumption is characterised mainly by fanfiction, fanart, music, discussion and roleplaying. Here, films, television and video games (medieval or not) are immortalised as avid fans support and continually create new content for their given 'narrative or text' through the modes listed above. The open, participatory culture of fandom and the creative licence that comes with it allows for creators – fans of any artistic level or expression – to craft works involving any character, any relationship and most importantly, any time period. The Middle Ages is often the setting of many fan works, regardless of whether the source material is medieval or not. A simple search on the fanfiction site *Archive of Our Own* shows this to be true: the tag "Alternate Universe – Medieval" returns 3951 works, whilst "Alternate Universe – Fantasy" returns 32,605 works (these are specific tags, other works may exist that fulfil these criteria but the author has either tagged them differently or not at all).[116] Fandom presents what Amanda Allen describes as a 'realm of possibility'; creators can mould and shape the Middle Ages into whatever they desire, whilst fans that consume their content (fanfiction, fanart etc) readily engage with and experience others' popular perceptions of the medieval.[117] Allen best encapsulates the possibilities that digital fandom brings by quoting Ashton and Kline: creators and consumers (fans) 'interrogate the various directions through which

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[114] Pugh, T. & Weisl, A.J. (2012). pp. 142-144.

[115] Sandvoss, C. (2017). The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture. In J. Gray, C. L. Harrington, & C. Sandvoss (Eds.) *Fandom, Second Edition: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. (2nd ed., pp. 29-44). New York: New York University Press.

[116] Archive of Our Own. (2019). *Works in Alternate Universe - Fantasy*. Retrieved from https://www.archiveofourown.org/tags/Alternate%20Universe%20-%20Fantasy/works; Archive of Our Own. (2019). *Works in Alternate Universe - Medieval*. Retrieved from https://www.archiveofourown.org/tags/Alternate%20Universe%20-%20Medieval/works

[117] Allen, A.K. (2015). Social Networking, Participatory Culture and the Fandom World of Harry Potter. In G. Ashton (Ed.) *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*. (1st ed., pp. 277-290). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

medievalism reinterprets and reconceptualizes the medieval and is compelled to reconstitute a past that is once familiar and profoundly different'.[118]

Medievalism in modernity, then, has been projected through the creative mediums of television and film, before being refracted further still through the power of *Web 2.0*. The same can also be said of video games. With the above approaches in mind, I will now turn to exploring the games I have chosen to study.

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[118] Ashton, G., & Kline, D.T. (2012). Introduction: Now and Then. In G. Ashton, & D.T. Kline (Eds.) *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*. (pp. 1-12). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

For Honor

Of the three games this thesis will look at, *For Honor* is likely to be the one traditional historians hold in the most contempt, with little value likely to be placed on its highly fantasied setting. However, as we shall see, the game's representation of the Middle Ages is of great value indeed. Through its ludic structures – simulation style, time and space, narrative – the game has the tools by which it presents players with an authentic medieval experience. I will demonstrate that this authenticity comes from its imagery and use of referents, both of which are blended with fantasy elements and inaccuracies to create *a* Middle Ages that feels as though, in the developers' words, 'could be'.[119] It appears to have worked, so much so that some players have taken to debating the game's own history and lore in a format reminiscent of academic debate. This will be discussed when examining the game's community, following analysis of its ludic structures and content.

Style of Representation

Although *For Honor* contains some *conceptual* variation in its ludic aesthetics, it can undoubtedly be considered a *realist* simulation, fulfilling all but one of Chapman's criteria. Firstly, the game '*shows'* the past 'in a way that relates to notions of authenticity', even if the world and setting are entirely fictious.[120] It achieves this through the detail afforded to character designs and locations. The real-world cultures behind the Knight, Samurai and Viking factions are at the forefront of this 'visual specificity' and are evident in this design, but in a way that is familiar to the "average" player.[121] By average I refer here to a gamer's likely knowledge of the history of these cultures, rather than a demographic average. Admittedly, without conducting some form of sampling, this is something of an assumption. It is, however, fair to say that the majority of players may not possess intimate knowledge of the past cultures of central Europe, Japan and Scandinavia, and so must rely on more basic signifiers to be convinced of authenticity. For example, the locations contained within the Samurai homeland, The Myre, are defined by *sakura* trees and *torii* gates, as well as the instantly recognisable Japanese *shiro*, or castle. With their steep stone walls and ornamental keeps, this style of castle is unique to Japan and its culture. Its inclusion, and the substantial

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[119] BouseFeenux. (2017, May 12). *For Honor: Exclusive Developer Interview with Roman!* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh5FHtPbLTQ

[120] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.

[121] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.

detail afforded to recreating it, reflects the desire for "realism", at least in the sense of 'producing a representation of the past that imitates human experience'.[122] This realism is also achieved through audio as well as visual specificity. *For Honor* ensures this by having each character bark soundbites in their native tongue, whether that be Latin (the Knights), Icelandic or Gaelic, (the Vikings) or Japanese (the Samurai).

The game further proves itself a *realist* simulation with its use of, what Chapman terms, 'familiar audio-visual codes and tropes of Western cinematic realism'.[123] *For Honor* is, to coin the phrase the game's creative director has used, a 'cinematic adventure'.[124] Its single-player campaign mode is littered with examples of the stylistic techniques used in Western cinema that audiences have learnt to imply meaning from. This is so apparent that some gamers have even taken to creating films simply from the game's cutscenes – the most prominent of which has been viewed over 3.8 million times.[125]

As well as these audio-visual elements, the rules of the game also conform to the *realist* simulation style in that they attempt to *show* the past 'as it is claimed to have appeared to agents and to align with the everyday logics of the world in which we live'.[126] This is most evident within the game's combat mechanics, the "Art of Battle" system. When beginning a duel, the player enters a state known as "guard mode", locking them onto their opponent. From here, the player has full control over their avatar's movement and weapon. This is designed to allow the player to feel the weight of their avatar's weapon in their hand. The weapons themselves also play a part in this. For example, the Raider (Viking) character utilises a long, two-handed Dane axe to attack. It is slow and cumbersome, offering few opportunities for clever combo play. The Centurion (Knight) on the other hand uses a gladius. The size of the blade allows for quick thrusts and stabs, as well as alternate melee or punch attacks that can be chained for difficult to interrupt combos. The way the Centurion fights may not be truly realistic, but it is *shown* to be and *feels* realistic thanks to the rules and behaviours of combat that make it appear logical, even if some elements of

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[122] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.
[123] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.
[124] DualShockers. (2016, December 14). *For Honor Interview: Creative Director Jason VandenBerghe and Telling a Story of Combat* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlxhVZciX7o
[125] Izuniy. (2017, February 15). *For Honor All Cutscenes Movie* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yacXJqRFzj4
[126] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.

gameplay would not be physically possible in the real-world. This is summed up rather aptly by one of the game's directors, Roman Campos-Oriola, when he said '[about players experiencing sword fighting and combat in the game] we wanted them to feel like it's not realistic, it's not actually two people fighting, *but hey, it could be…* it still is a videogame, the goal is to not simulate actual sword fighting, but we wanted it to feel right, both in terms of control and feeling of contact etc, and also visually'.[127] As a *realist* simulation, *For Honor* is played, simulated and experienced from the 'diegetic level of the agent'.[128] The player only ever controls one character and each of the three campaign chapters are told and narrated from the perspective of an individual. For the Knights that is the Warden, the Vikings the Raider, and the Samurai the Orochi.

On a final note, *For Honor* fulfils the most important of Chapman's *realist* criteria in that 'the aesthetics of historical description mainly operate through the audio-visual aspect'.[129] This is the centre for the construction of historical representation – without a tight focus upon this aspect the game would lose the ability to effectively convey historical authenticity and meaning. *For Honor* relies on visual fidelity to be authentic; its main premise is one-on-one fighting and as a result, visual aesthetics, and the historical description contained within them, are more important as they are more obvious when viewed on the micro level. While this is more than apparent in the game world and character designs, it is also seen within combat animations. The Warden, when entering guard mode, possesses side stances that are based upon the *pflug* (plow) guard action originally taught by the fourteenth century German swordmaster, Johannes Liechtenauer.[130] This may not be relevant to those outside of a medieval re-enactment or fencing club, but it adds a layer of historical description that appears authentic to the average player. It also conveys meaning, demonstrating the precision and training required to effectively wield the medieval broadsword. The same can be said for one the Warden's execution moves. When the opponent has been finished with a heavy attack, the player has the option to finish them with a "Hilt Strike", whereby they will grab the blade of their longsword and proceed

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[127] BouseFeenux. (2017, May 12).
[128] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 63-64.
[129] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 63-64.
[130] Ringeck, S. (2001). *Secrets of German Medieval Swordsmanship: Sigmund Ringeck's Commentaries on Liechtenauer's Verses*. (C.H. Tobler, Trans/Editor.). Wheaton: Freelance Academy Press (formerly Chivalry Bookshelf). (Original work published c. 1389 to 1440). pp. 76-77.

to bludgeon them to death with the hilt and pommel. This technique was described in the sixteenth century Codex Wallerstein to highlight an alternate use for the longsword.[131] *For Honor* has essentially done the same thing. The inclusion of this purely cosmetic manoeuvre (executions require the pressing of a single button) teaches players through its visual component (historical description) that swords were versatile weapons effective for more than just slashing and cutting (historical meaning).

For Honor, while mostly *realist* by nature, possesses a feature that seems almost out of place in a simulation of this kind. The "Faction War" multiplayer mode, in which every player must participate, can be considered *conceptual* in that it is less visually specific and takes a more abstract, macro perspective. It is reminiscent of a historical strategy game – the player chooses a faction and earns war assets (by playing multiplayer matches), using them then to attack enemy territories on a large segmented map. However, it is only *conceptual* by way of its visual simplicity, there exists little, if any, historical description within its ludic aspect. Despite the inclusion of this feature, there is little else to suggest that the game would fit a conclusion of *conceptual* style.

Although *For Honor's* style of representation is decidedly *realist*, its epistemological stance is difficult to define. This is due to Chapman's criteria being geared more towards games that are more overtly historical, making them less useful when looking at a game that can be considered more fantasy than history. Defining whether this history, the historical representation in question, is either *reconstructionist* or *constructionist* is not an easy task as this type of game is unlikely to conform singularly to the principles of one or the other. For instance, the task of *For Honor's* developers – who were not necessarily historians – was to 'referentially reconstruct' the past, which they achieve through the specifics of its visuals, but their 'intellectual commitments' and 'decision-making' are also evident in the 'construction' of their representation.[132] Attempting to faithfully recreate the attacks and movements of a Shaolin monk is *reconstructionist*, basing swordplay on the experience-led

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[131] Zabinski, G., & Walczak, B. (2002). *Codex Wallerstein: A Medieval Fighting Book from the Fifteenth Century on the Longsword, Falchion, Dagger, and Wrestling*. United States: Paladin Press. p. 5.
[132] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 66-76.

notion (often expressed in interviews) that 'combat is an artform' is, on the other hand, *constructionist*.[133]

However, as a *realist* simulation it is natural that the game will display less *constructionist* tendencies than *reconstructionist*. *For Honor* does not focus upon theory and abstraction, nor does it 'deal in collective behaviour' and nor does it 'address the issues of narrative representation'.[134] What it does possess, in a sense, is an 'effect of reality'.[135] The game's visual specificity achieves this to a degree, conveying to the average player an environment and cast of characters that feel authentic, but falls shorts of 'subsuming itself as a representation'.[136] It is too highly fantasised to convince anyone of historical accuracy (not that it intentionally attempts this) and considering the scepticism and nature of the modern gamer, it is unlikely to ever do so. *For Honor's* epistemological position, although blurred by the fantasy in which its actual history sits, can be considered both *reconstructionist* and, to a lesser degree, *constructionist*.

Temporal and Spatial Representation

For Honor constructs time using the *realist* structure, rather than the *discrete*. Real and fictive (in-game) time are balanced at a 1:1 ratio, with a minute of game time corresponding to a minute of real time.

Part of the construct of time is tense. Tense in historical games is complicated and *For Honor* is no exception. As a *realist* simulation it favours the present tense, at least in terms of its presentation of gameplay, but there are certain elements of the game that prevent this from being entirely the case. The player may experience gameplay from the perspective of the characters in real-time, whether that be the Warden, Raider or Orochi, but the campaign is narrated by these characters in the past tense, as if the events of the story have already occurred. This is done deliberately to fit with the game's overall narrative – the events of the campaign are supposed to precede the events of the multiplayer faction

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[133] Electric Playground Network. (2015, July 2). *For Honor Game Developer Interview* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhXZUvjTDL0

[134] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 76-79.

[135] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 68-69.

[136] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 68-69.

war, providing it with context and its own history. The game, therefore, can be considered both past and present tense in its temporal representation.

Spatially, *For Honor* can be considered, again besides the faction war multiplayer mode, a *narrative garden*. Defined by their aesthetic experience and environmental storytelling, *narrative gardens* use space to embed narrative elements that both drive the creative story forwards and allow the developer to 'tell specific histories'.[137] Now despite being a game that does not espouse accuracy nor claim to tell an actual narrative from history, its use of space is still in line with the characteristics of a linear *narrative garden*. This is particularly true when it comes to environmental storytelling. The game makes use of 'staged areas', physical spaces marked by narrative elements, but goes one step further with its "observables" system – points of interest on the map that once examined return some narrative voiceover regarding its importance to the world and story.[138] For instance, early during the third mission of the Knight campaign, the player comes across some deserters hanging either by their necks or in cages from trees. This staged area tells the player of the Blackstone Legion's brutality, giving them more reason to doubt their morality and question their choice of joining them. This is further enhanced by the voiceover that reads "*In the West, punishments like the cage have been outlawed. In Ashfeld, however, we were less reluctant about using brutality to make a point.*" As well as driving the narrative, this environmental storytelling also possesses another, more subtle role. While *narrative gardens* within historical games may use space to tell 'specific histories', it is apparent that games like *For Honor* can use it to tell "unspecific" histories. By this I refer to lessons of the past that are more obvious and less specific to a particular historical narrative. The staged area with the gibbeted knights, for example, may not teach the player about a specific event or its implications in the past (there are no historical events within *For Honor*), but it does offer some meaning with regard to the period it is trying to represent as a whole, whether it be accurate or not. From the sight alone, the player can easily infer that medieval law was brutal and unforgiving, especially for deserters. They may also begin to associate the practice of gibbeting to the Middle Ages, despite it being a punishment that was carried out

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[137] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-102.
[138] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-102.

from antiquity to the early 19th century, and mostly for other crimes rather than desertion.[139]

Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of *For Honor* is easy to gauge thanks to its linearity. It can be considered *deterministic*, characterised by the 'privilege of *framing narrative* (narrative fragments and goals written by the developer) in the construction of the overall gaming narrative', with the game's *ludonarrative* remaining only 'spatial and combative'.[140] Replete with cutscenes and scripted events, *For Honor* is certainly that. Its multiplayer, on the other hand, is closer to the *open* narrative structure – a structure defined by the heavy influence of the *ludonarrative* upon the *framing narrative*.

Representing the Middle Ages: Authenticity, Imagery and Selection

At the very core of *For Honor's* design is the intentional desire for fictive and historical balance. It is neither historical nor fantasy, but a deliberate amalgamation of the two. History and fantasy are cleverly woven together in an attempt to create a world that is both recognisable *and* different, conforming to player expectations whilst also providing an original twist on familiar material. The result is a medieval experience based upon established iconography and tropes, combined with authenticating historical referents and veiled in a layer of fantasy.

This can be seen in the game's characters. Fantasy elements are balanced with those from actual history, creating sufficiently medieval looking characters (and experience), whilst also succeeding in the developers' explicit goal of 'differentiating For Honor's heroes from the purely historical' but with an eye for a 'real medieval' aesthetic.[141] The Warden, for instance, is characterised by his virtue and unwavering sense of honour – he embodies the well-known, typical traits of knighthood and chivalry, 'the purest archetype of what a knight is supposed to be' according to character artist Guillaume Menuel.[142] This is a common trope of any medieval knight; it is familiar to any player and therefore makes the Warden

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[139] Tarlow, S. (2015). *The Golden and Ghoulish Age of the Gibbet in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 5-6.
[140] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 128-129.
[141] Menuel, G. (2015, September 21). *The Art of For Honor - The Warden*. Retrieved from https://forhonor.ubisoft.com/game/en-us/news-community/152-217023-16/the-art-of-for-honor-the-warden
[142] Menuel, G. (2015, September 21).

ideal as the first character to be introduced. The majority of the game's characters aim to fulfil general expectations like this in some way: the Raider is a bloodthirsty Viking with a love for raiding and freedom, the Orochi is a loyal ninja-like assassin, and the Kensei (Ayu) a proud and principled daimyo. It is within their actual designs that the developers chose to make use of historical referents. The Warden wears a fourteenth century *barbuta* helmet and partial plate armour, as well as wielding a two-handed (perhaps German) longsword.[143] These elements, despite their exact provenance being unknown to the average player, give the character a recognisably medieval, more authentic appearance. The same can be said of the Conqueror's (Stone's) twelfth or thirteenth century great helm, commonly associated with the crusades, as well as the Warlord's (Stigandr's) round shield and the Orochi's (Okuma's) katana. Each of these have been removed from their historical context and deliberately selected; even with the somewhat abstract and fictious setting, they define each character as being medieval, anchoring the player to the period – *a* Middle Ages. This occurs in spite of the fact that these characters are also highly fictionalised in terms of design, with some aspects of their appearance being intentionally inaccurate or fantastical. The Samurai's wooden armour is an example of this, as is the Conqueror's flail. The inclusion of characters from antiquity, the Centurion and Gladiator namely, are also questionable given their non-medieval origins. History and fantasy work alongside each other, making for an experience that is authentic enough to convince, as well as different enough to be creatively original.

This sentiment is echoed in the landscape. The game world is split into three recognisable and distinct locations that are representative of the cultures behind the Knight, Viking and Samurai factions. Ashfeld, the home of the Knights, is characterised by its forests, hills and bocage typical of medieval Europe. Castles and ruins dot the landscape, many of which are said to have been built by the Great Empire, a Roman-like precursor to the Knight faction. The most prominent of these castles is the Blackstone Fortress, featured in the last level of the Samurai campaign. It epitomises *For Honor's* blend of medieval fantasy and fact, fusing familiarity, historical authenticity and fantasy to create a structure, and visual experience, that gives the impression of *a* Middle Ages. With its rounded towers and

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[143] DeVries, K., & Smith, R.D. *Medieval Military Technology* (2nd ed.). New York: University of Toronto Press. pp. 88-89.

concentric stone walls, it appears reminiscent of a later medieval castle, perhaps thirteenth or fourteenth century, containing both Romanesque and Gothic architecture. Alongside these familiar stylings are historical referents from actual castle warfare – wooden machicolations, large portcullises, catapults and battering rams. As well as adding to the medieval aesthetic, these elements are part of the narrative, giving players an active and playable demonstration of siege warfare. Atop these is the thin layer of fantasy deliberately preventing the game from becoming purely historical – the fortress is impossibly huge and lays at the base of an active volcano, for example.

The game's setting, while appearing at first to be almost entirely reliant on fantasy, follows the same principles as the character design and landscape. Beneath its post-apocalyptic veneer lies a narrative that mirrors real world history – or at least popular perceptions of it. Established in the opening cutscene, the events of the game are set a thousand years following "The Cataclysm", an apocalyptic catastrophe that decimated the planet and its population, leaving only a handful of survivors to inhabit a darkened, desolate Earth. The millennium that followed was marked by ceaseless conflict, "a thousand years of war" as Apollyon remarks. This period is reminiscent of how the Middle Ages appears in (popular) public consciousness, a millennium characterised by conflict, brutality and desperation. *For Honor* takes that perception and exaggerates it, creating a quite literal dark age of struggle and strife. The parallels are even more obvious when the fate of the Great Empire is considered. This generic but clearly Roman inspired empire was known to be the greatest and largest nation in antiquity, but following The Cataclysm it all but disappeared, its legacy known only by the forts and ruins it left behind. This is much like the actual Roman Empire, whose fall, albeit not due to an apocalyptic event, created a period of great instability across the continent that began a new age now popularly, and erroneously, defined by its economic, political and cultural deficiencies – a Dark Ages.

For Honor builds its Middle Ages using a combination of established iconography and historical referents, as well as parallels with and popular perceptions of the medieval past. It does not attempt to recreate *the* Middle Ages with its use of referents. The developers were firm in their intention not to do so. Instead, we can say with certainty that they attempted to, and succeeded in, creating *a* Middle Ages.

<u>Further Sites of Representation</u>

Given that open-world games tend to offer more opportunities for deeper and less obvious sites for representation, it is no surprise that *For Honor*, with its linear level-based gameplay, contains few of these. The only one of note is the previously mentioned observable system, whereby the player can "observe" certain features of the landscape and be given a verbal account of their significance in the game's lore while continuing to play. The system not only allows the player to maintain focus on their mission objective, but it also, perhaps unintentionally, parallels the Middle Ages in terms of the importance of the spoken word. While the period undoubtedly saw great strides in lay literacy rates and advancements in the use of the written word, the oral medium of communication remained an important part of European society.[144] Many literary works, in particular chronicles and histories, were dependent on the oral accounts of previous generations. Notker of St. Gall's *Gesta Karoli* is one such example of this, being based upon accounts of life under Charlemagne, who had been dead for over three-quarters of a century at the time of writing.[145]

The accounts provided by observables in *For Honor* act in very much the same way, orally recounting to the player in the present (real-time) what happened in the past (events of the campaign) and the distant past (events preceding the campaign). They are spoken in a manner, by either the heroes or Apollyon, that suggest they are dictating to an author like Notker, who has asked them a question regarding a certain aspect of their story. For example, at the beginning of the Knight's campaign, during the first level (Warlords and Cowards), the fort which you are defending from the Blackstone Legion is observable, and when observed reads, "*That fort had belonged to ten warlords in ten years. Daubeny was just the most recent. He joined the Blackstone Legion and then tried to leave us. That would not stand unpunished.*" Instead of a wall of text or a generic voiceover informing the player of who the fort belonged to, it is instead Apollyon who tells us, whilst also adding her own perspective on the matter. The manner in which she speaks and the opinion (bias) she

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[144] Briggs, C.F. (2000). Literacy, Reading, and Writing in the Medieval West. *Journal of Medieval History, 26*(4), 397-420.

[145] Innes, M. (1998). Memory, Orality and Literacy in an Early Medieval Society. *Past & Present, n/a* (158), 3-36.

expresses highlights the oratorical and informal nature of the observable system and reflects the oral traditions of the Middle Ages.

Further evidence of this parallel can be found in the *Journals of Heathmoor*, an official recounting (presumably written by a member of the *For Honor* development team) of the events of the player-driven faction war. This "official" history is written almost like a medieval chronicle; it is highly descriptive in nature and contains quotations from figures that would likely, if written in an actual chronicle, be considered dubious given their apparent context. The Black Prior whispering at the end of a battle, "They shall fear us, and we Knights shall rule," for example, is a line more akin to the additions and embellishments made by medieval scholars to either fill in gaps in their given histories or to reinforce a positive (or negative) opinion of a certain figure.[146] With regard to orality, the journal, while entirely fictious, hints at its sources with a direct quotation from an unknown soldier present at the Battle of Eitrivatnen, "…I tried to run away, but I was too scared… That grim Knight was like Death itself soaked in blood... T'was a nightmare, I tell you. A nightmare we all Knights [*sic*] would never wake up from."[147] It is clear that the author's intention was to convey the possibility that this account had been written with direct oral consultation with actual participants in the battle, making it appear more believable *and* medieval. Oral traditions were strong in the Middle Ages and this is reflected in *For Honor*; the now popular, but erroneous, perception that the period held high levels of illiteracy further makes this use of orality in the game a smart one, as it plays on audience expectations of the period in order to, intentionally or unintentionally, make the game more medieval.

Gender

For Honor is built upon the premise of violence. War and fighting are at the very heart of the experience and narrative, as well as the core of the gameplay. The masculine ideals inextricably linked with this violence do come to dominate as expected, however, these elements are checked somewhat by an abundance of feminine power. The women of *For Honor* are equal to, if not more powerful than, their male counterparts, with even the exclusively female heroes being some of the most dominant. The main antagonist of the

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[146] Ubisoft. (2019, March 14). *The Journals of Heathmoor*. Retrieved from https://forhonor.ubisoft.com/game/en-us/news-community/152-345479-16/the-journals-of-heathmoor
[147] Ubisoft. (2019, March 14).

Figure 2. Apollyon during the final mission of *For Honor*.

campaign, Apollyon, is a woman and arguably the strongest character in the game (see

Figure 2). She is the ultimate warrior, portrayed as the embodiment of war and death. In the

multiplayer, seventeen of the currently available heroes are playable as female (out of a

possible twenty-five) and are given looks and abilities equal to that of the men. Here, the

gender of the player becomes as irrelevant as that of the characters. They need not be male

to play as a female, nor do they need to be female to play as a male. With the power to be

equally successful as either gender, the game offers gender fluidity and performance similar

to that which Mayer and Wilkins have recognised in MMORPGs.[148] The game's

representation seems so diverse that it becomes almost inconsequential, and intentionally

so. One can only speculate, but perhaps the balance between male and female power was

done deliberately as to make gender a non-issue, ensuring it did not detract from the

game's primary experience of combat. Inevitably there have been some individuals to

criticise the developers for what they see as a 'SJW [social justice warrior] stunt'.[149] It must

be said, however, that this criticism is small scale in comparison to the backlash games such

as *Battlefield V* have faced. This is probably due to the fact *For Honor* does not explicitly or

implicitly claim to be an accurate portrayal of history. Its heavy fantasy element has likely

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[148] Mayer, L. S. (2008); Wilkins, K. (2014). pp. 19-32.
[149] Steam Community - For Honor. (2018, August 26). *Why is the protagonist female?* Retrieved from
https://steamcommunity.com/app/304390/discussions/0/1734336452593606935/?ctp=4

protected it from the wrath of historical "purists" who desire only to experience histories that conform to their own expectations of male dominance and female subservience.

Race

Race, like gender, holds little metaphorical significance in the world of *For Honor*. The three factions we see in the game (four, including the multiplayer only Wu-Lin) are culturally and ethnically distinct, but this is never brought into the narrative as an issue of contention. This was likely a conscious decision by the developers. Moreover, the choice of Knights, Vikings and Samurai seems a safe one, with the real-world cultures behind them unlikely to have ever actually encountered one another, making comparisons or inferences to real-world events near impossible.

With this in mind, can it still be said that *For Honor* demonstrates a privileging of whiteness? Determining this is difficult. One way that medieval fantasy games privilege whiteness, Cooper argues, is through player character creation. This process has a tendency 'towards lighter skin tones and a set of hair styles that limit racial diversity, and implicitly uphold white norms of beauty'.[150] *For Honor* is not a roleplaying game and therefore does not allow for the creation of characters, but it does allow for the customisation of the pre-set heroes created by the developers, whether that be the Vikings, Samurai, Knights or Wu-Lin. Skin tone is a part of this customisation, with a palette of six colours (ranging from very dark to very light) to choose from that all heroes share. It should also be noted that their default skin tones reflect the ethnic origins of each culture. All of this seems rather inconsequential, though, considering the majority of heroes are clad from head-to-toe in armour. The Lawbringer, for instance, shows no skin whatsoever, leading some players to joke he may simply be made entirely of metal.[151] The customisation options for armour are far more extensive, with 373 different colour schemes.[152] Rather deliberately, it seems, the colour of one's skin is of far less concern in the world of *For Honor* than the colour of one's armour.

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[150] Cooper, V. (2016). p. 126.
[151] Reddit, User: Its-Me-CoMa. (2018, May 8). *If Lawbringer really is just a hollow set of armour then why does he have this?* Retrieved from
https://www.reddit.com/r/forhonor/comments/8hfofj/if_lawbringer_really_is_just_a_hollow_set_of/
[152] Reddit, User: The_Filthy_Spaniard. (2019, Jan 19). *A Comprehensive Colour Palette Analysis and Database*. Retrieved from
https://www.reddit.com/r/forhonor/comments/ahoeji/of_the_373_colour_palettes_in_for_honor_130/

Cooper also argues that privilege is made more apparent by the inclusion of stereotypes drawn from 'long-standing racial tropes and contemporary race politics'.[153] She uses the example of the Khajiit in *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, a race of humanoid felines whose representation 'bears an uncomfortable similarity to the unfavourable ways Middle Eastern people are typically represented in the West'.[154] *For Honor* possesses no similar use of metaphor nor does it use racial tropes to build its characters. The only hero that is arguably based upon a racial trope is the Samurai's Shugoki. With his large, stocky physique and distinct mannerisms, the Shugoki bears resemblance to a Japanese sumo wrestler. This representation, however, is not a negative one. His weight is not a source of comedy, but a source of strength – he has the highest health of any hero and can deal massive damage with his heavy attacks. Regarding racial politics, *For Honor* possesses none of this either. The story has the main factions warring over territory, resources and honour, rather than ethnicity or religion. There are no references, subtle or otherwise, to contemporary issues of race.

For Honor does not seem to privilege whiteness through its use of fantasy – quite the opposite, in fact. The use of a fantasy setting brings a number of cultures and ethnicities together in *For Honor* that a purely historical game would not allow. The game's ambiguous post-apocalyptic world quite literally brings the peoples of East Asia, for instance, to the lands of medieval Scandinavia. The development team at Ubisoft Studios used the creative license provided by fantasy to create a fictional world where race can be fairly represented to the point that it becomes a non-issue.

Community

For Honor has a very active fandom and online presence. Across the forums and message boards of Reddit, Ubisoft and Steam, players discuss everything from exploits and glitches to strategies and reworks.[155] However, amongst the many threads there exists considerable discussion concerning the game's lore and, unsurprisingly, historical accuracy. In particular is the question of the Knights' religion, namely a debate surrounding whether

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[153] Cooper, V. (2016). p. 101.
[154] Cooper, V. (2016). p. 101.
[155] Reddit. (2015). *For Honor*. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/forhonor; Ubisoft. (2015). *For Honor General Discussion*. Retrieved from https://forums.ubisoft.com/forumdisplay.php/869-General-Discussion; Steam. (2015). *For Honor General Discussion*. Retrieved from https://steamcommunity.com/app/304390/discussions/. [All accessed 2019].

they are, and should be, polytheistic or monotheistic. While this has no significance to the narrative, nor is it ever explicitly mentioned, it has generated considerable argument amongst members of the community. This debate of theology is wrought by the historical, real and fictional, as players attempt to piece together the events preceding the game, creating alternate histories in the process.

> …so Knights/Iron Legion believe in Roman Gods that's obvious, meaning that Chriastianity [*sic*] is probably prosecuted and everyone related is considered a pagan… The only explanation or the most reasonable for the For Honor lore at least for me would be the following:
>
> The SPQR never switched to Christianity maintaining their own Gods and the SPQR never fell, now throughout the years the Roman provinces either gained independence or negotiated treaties with Rome (Spain, Portugal, France etc..) giving birth to the Knights and the medieval era, that would explain why they have the Roman Gods as their religion, the SPQR and the Knights continued prosecuting Christians, Christians probably fled up north as that's their only choice now if we are around the 700's in the timeline the Viking Age would start to exist…[156]

Here, user *Anchorage349* (Reddit) makes the case for polytheism by attempting to explain the narrative as an alternate timeline to our own, following a similar trajectory but divergent at certain points in history – the Roman Empire's continued presence in the West for example. Similarly, user *Phanelly* interprets the beginning of the game's narrative (The Cataclysm) as the point of divergence, recognising that the Knights, while Christian prior to this given the Edict of Thessalonica, must have undergone some kind of theological change during the thousand-year war that followed.[157] These interpretations are moulded and shaped by a fictional narrative but they are informed by actual history. The issue of the Knight's religion is an example of Rob Houghton's 'emergent arguments', questions of historicity arising from a game that become historiographical debates amongst its community.[158] Further evidence for this can be found in a post made by a user (username

[156] Reddit, Unknown User. (2019, April 26). *Explaining the For Honor lore and the religion of the Knight Faction from my point of view*. Retrieved from
https://www.reddit.com/r/forhonor/comments/bhnnws/explaining_the_for_honor_lore_and_the_religion_of
[157] Reddit, User: Phanelly. (2018, July 2). *So, about knight's religion*. Retrieved from
https://www.reddit.com/r/forhonor/comments/8vgyv7/so_about_knights_religion/
[158] Houghton, R. (2018 October 8).

now deleted) that considers both sides of the debate using evidence collected from within the game itself.

> Recently, in a discussion regarding the Knights' religion, someone presented a quote by Apollyon in the campaign:
>
> *"The Vikings worship gods of wood, of storms and of stone. The Samurai gods are of fire, wind and of thought, the gods of the Knights are iron, steel and gold. But power? That we agree on."*
>
> But I decided to dig a little deeper, and found a little more evidence that suggests otherwise.
>
> So, for my first line of evidence, a rather subtle clue to the knight's religion.
>
> 1.3 - Blackstone Legion: *"We seven leaders of the Blackstone Legion took demon names. It is both as a warning to others, and a reminder to ourselves. We are strong, and we must be sure of what we choose to do with that strength."*
>
> Now as mentioned before, Apollyon and her second in command, Holden Cross have demon names, the names being Apollyon and Asmodai respectively…
>
> …So not to completely reject the idea that the knights were polytheistic, but their belief system (at least when it comes to demons), seems to line up with Abrahamic religions quite well.[159]

This is an extraordinary piece of analysis (worth reading in full) that considers the arguments of others and, using both research and evidence, attempts to highlight the ambiguous nature of such an issue by disproving and justifying the theories made by both sides. Quotations from figures within the game, the citing of sources (even if it is simply Wikipedia) and the apparent application of historical theory and practice shows an unparalleled level of historical engagement for a game deliberately detached from actual history. Clearly players are able to infer meaning that goes far deeper than developers intend. This merits further study.

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[159] Reddit, Unknown User. (2017, September 27). *The Knights may have been monotheistic (or religiously diverse)*. Retrieved from
https://www.reddit.com/r/forhonor/comments/72ry5u/the_knights_may_have_been_monotheistic_or/

<u>Concluding Remarks</u>

For Honor utilises a *realist* simulation style as well as a mainly *reconstructionist* epistemology to build its Middle Ages. Time is constructed in the *realist* structure, whilst space is cleverly arranged in a number of *narrative gardens*, guiding the player through levels and allowing them to infer meaning along the way. The single-player narrative can be considered *deterministic*, whereas its multiplayer is closer to the *open* structure.

The game presents players with a very distinct Middle Ages: one of fantasy and familiarity. It achieves this through a combination of historical referents and established iconography, consciously picking and choosing which elements of the period to include in order to represent the period authentically – epitomising Salvati and Bullinger's theory of selective authenticity. We can define *For Honor's* representation as a creation of *a* Middle Ages. Referents and iconography are blended and applied to a fantasy world devised in the creative minds of the developers. Made to resemble our medieval past and not replicate it, we get a version of the Middle Ages coloured by fantasy that never tries to convince its audience that it is *the* true Middle Ages.

The next game analysed here, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, shuns *For Honor's* blend of fantasy and history, instead making substantial claims that it represents the true Middle Ages – 'Dungeons and no Dragons' as the developers put it.[160]

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[160] Kickstarter. (2014).

<u>Kingdom Come Deliverance</u>

From fantasy to accuracy, we now turn from one end of the spectrum to the other. *KCD* claims to be the most historically accurate game on the market, boasting unprecedented 'historical precision' and a 'realistic medieval Europe'.[161] The intent is certainly there, but does it actually achieve this? The answer, even after hundreds of hours of gameplay, remains uncertain. However, this is not the main focus of this study. Assessing whether the game is accurate or not is of little practical relevance; what is important is how and why the developers implemented their vision of accuracy, and similarly how and why inaccuracies were inevitable. The impact of style and structure upon this will be explored in the following discussion of the game's ludics. How it represents the Middle Ages will then be assessed, including detailed analysis of its depiction of gender and race, and how some members of the game's community have responded by generating their own medieval content.

<u>Style of Representation</u>

KCD exemplifies the *realist* simulation style perhaps better than any other. It explicitly aims to show the past 'as it appeared to historical agents of the time' by providing an authentic experience, central to its appeal, through the use of visual and audio specificity.[162] This specificity is used to create a world that is as close to reality as possible, and through fidelity to physical evidence, as close to the past as possible. It is perhaps most obvious in the landscape and locations within the game, with towns like Rattay and villages such as Skalitz offering immersive medieval environments that feel authentic thanks to the detail afforded to their recreation (Figure 3). With such a heavy focus on graphical detail, it was inevitable that *KCD* would draw from the stylistic techniques of Western cinema, as most modern games do. The long and often gruelling cutscenes, which can last upwards of six minutes, are evidence of this. Due to being prerendered, they are graphically superior to gameplay and therefore, in themselves, offer an additional layer of visual "realism".

The everyday logics of reality are represented as accurately as possible in *KCD* in ways that are rarely seen in other games. The developers placed a heavy focus upon

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[161] Warhorse Studios. (2019). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Making Of*. Retrieved from https://www.kingdomcomerpg.com/en/movies/making-of

[162] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.

imparting much of the real world on the fictional, taking processes and logics that are considered non-essential in other games and making them an important part of gameplay. For instance, clothes become visibly bloodier if the player engages in combat, making them appear more threatening to others. NPC's may be too intimidated to talk with the player if this is the case. This can be used to the player's advantage however, making it easier to coerce some of them into giving up information. The player must wash themselves to appear approachable again. A similarly overlooked aspect in many games is the clothing itself – *KCD* allows for four layers to be worn at once (gambeson, chainmail, plate armour, tabard) with each layer providing additional benefits. Other items can also be worn, such as a helmet. Even these conform to real world logic in that if the helmet has a visor, the player's visibility will be drastically decreased as the display becomes narrowed.

As with all *realist* simulations, it is within *KCD's* audio-visual aspect where the majority of data lies.[163] So too do the aesthetics of historical description. As previously mentioned, the research conducted by Warhorse Studios was done to ensure the visuals appeared as authentic as possible, taking examples from galleries and museums, as well as archives and libraries, and implementing them (where technically possible) in the game. Castles, houses, books, furniture, greetings – they are all (mainly) cosmetic in their function, serving as historical descriptors that make for a more authentic representation.

Figure 3. Screenshot of the Rattay Rathaus in *KCD*.

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[163] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 64-65.

KCD also favours the *realist* predilection for a narrative focused on small groups or individuals, 'tied to the diegetic level of the agent'.[164] The narrative of the game is very much driven by Henry's personal quest for vengeance and everything is seen and perceived by him as an individual. However, the inverse relationship described by Chapman between realist detail and the scope of historical representation is not truly evident within the game. The opposite is perhaps true, and although the focus is very much on Henry and his own quest, there is also a wider focus on events that cannot be ignored. For instance, the opening cutscene when loading the game (which cannot be skipped) informs the player of the background to the conflict gripping Bohemia, including the apparent causes and complexities of the struggle between Wenceslaus IV and his half-brother Sigismund of Hungary. These broader events are intertwined with Henry's quest, as well as being repeatedly mentioned throughout the game in NPC dialogue and cutscenes, offering multiple perspectives on these wider issues.

KCD displays a *reconstructionist* epistemological approach typical of *realist* simulations. The 'primacy of referentiality' Chapman refers to is very much at the forefront of the developers' thinking, and indeed the game's appeal.[165] Visual fidelity is achieved through this referentiality, with the use of physical evidence from the past made explicitly clear in promotional materials. *KCD*'s website for instance claims it offers 'real historical European sword fighting', 'decoded' from work with 'experienced swordfighters'.[166] In one of many promotional videos uploaded to Warhorse Studios' Youtube account, the game's creative director Daniel Vávra speaks of how the team studied medieval manuscripts to aid with their research – research that totalled 'thousands of hours' according to the video's description.[167] The developers' role is emphasised as minimal in the creation of meaning, as they are simply and referentially reconstructing the past as faithfully as possible whilst maintaining the true narrative. However, this task is near impossible for the historian, and even more so for the developer. On the surface a game's visuals and apparent authenticity are enough to hide the developer's role in meaning creation, but it is certainly still present.

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[164] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 64-65.
[165] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 67-68.
[166] Warhorse Studios. (2019). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Combat*. Retrieved from https://www.kingdomcomerpg.com/en/game-features/combat-mechanics
[167] Warhorse Studios. (2015, August 12). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Sword Combat Presentation* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0sK7Xqfvpc&t=257s

The demands of this form of media and the technological limitations, even in this modern era, mean the developer must make concessions when it comes to the implementation of certain historicisms. For example, a limitation of the gamic form is the player's slow reaction time. This is in direct contention with the workings of medieval swordplay, where combatants would train to be 'lightning fast to catch their opponent off guard'.[168] Therefore, the developers at Warhorse Studios had to programme the combat to be slower and strikes to be broader to 'telegraph where you're going to strike next'.[169] Technical demands evidently influence gameplay as much as the history itself. Finding a balance between the two is where the challenge lies, but however successful, the developer is always going to have a role in the creation of meaning. Similarly, history itself imposes limitations on the developer that forces them to take a more active role. The lack of records and documentary/physical evidence is a problem that plagues developers as much as historians. Although much evidence does remain, it is often not enough to recreate a full picture. Developers and historians can only work from fragments of the past, leaving them to interpret and speculate. *KCD*'s world was rebuilt as faithfully as possible, with an extraordinary attention to historical detail, but certain aspects simply had to be created by the developers. Tobi Stolz-Zwilling, PR Manager at Warhorse Studios, describes in an interview the limitation they faced, '…we also had to interpret a lot, we had to rebuild stuff. There were churches completely destroyed with no notes of what they actually looked like'.[170] Even regressing buildings that still exist back to the 15th century involves a degree of interpretation.[171] Recreating a church in its original style is indeed *reconstructionist*, but the interpretation of concept artists, creative directors and historians is always going to be required to fill in the gaps left by the passage of time and the scarcity of evidence.

Given that these problems are universal, impossible to rectify and even sometimes necessary (in the case of technical demands), it would be wrong to consider them in argument against *KCD*'s *reconstructionist* epistemology. Therefore, a candid assessment of

[168] Warhorse Studios. (2015, August 12).
[169] Warhorse Studios. (2015, August 12).
[170] Clubit. (2017, December 11). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Developer Interview* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXWd91GOpq0
[171] Warhorse Studios. (2015, June 1). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Video Update #11 about Building the Church* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAyc_mBkjXA

the game's epistemological stance would be that it was decidedly *reconstructionist*, with a *realist* simulation style.

Temporal and Spatial Representation

As is favoured by a *realist* simulation, *KCD* constructs time using the *realist* structure. However, being of the open-world RPG genre, problems arise when attempting to determine a definitive temporal ratio. Real-time and fictive time are balanced in the sense that player inputs correspond to an immediate response in-game, but this is complicated by the fact that fictive time also appears to be passing at an accelerated rate. Common among open-world RPG's is a day and night cycle which, in the interest of game speed balancing, often presents time within the game world as operating differently to the laws of our own. For instance, *KCD* employs a day and night cycle that, in real-time, takes ninety-six minutes to complete. So, one minute of real-time equates to fifteen minutes of in-game time.

Like most historical games and films, the present tense is favoured in *KCD*. The narrative is driven by gameplay that is experienced from the current perspective of the protagonist. The present tense is also maintained through the majority of cutscenes, the only exception being the dream sequence at the beginning of the fourth mission, "Awakening", in which Henry finds himself back in Skalitz during its destruction. Curiously, however, entries in the codex appear to be told in the past and future tense, almost like a history textbook. The codex is not read from Henry's perspective in the present tense, but by the player's in the past. If it was written in the present tense then many of the details included in the entries, such as those mentioning future technologies and events, would appear inconsistent and anachronistic, and would have to be omitted for the purposes of authenticity and continuity. Therefore, to ensure the codex was more comprehensively informative, the decision was likely taken to have this element of the game told in the past tense.

Spatially, *KCD* exhibits the qualities of an open-world *narrative garden*. Unlike in a linear *narrative garden*, there is far more space within *KCD*'s playable area, making it one large garden, rather than a series of them that the player navigates with only a local sense of agency. That does not mean *KCD* does not employ the staged areas that are seen within linear gardens. On the contrary, they are used in the same manner and with just as much, if

not more, frequency. For instance, when fleeing from Skalitz following the attack by Sigismund's forces, the player comes across a group of Cuman mercenaries attempting to assault Theresa, Henry's eventual love interest. The player can try to rescue her or ride straight past to Talmberg. If they attempt to help, given their low-level stats and basic knowledge of the game (having just completed the tutorial), they are almost certainly going to be killed. This scripted encounter (in an area of the map the player is forced through) aids in telling both a story and a specific representation of history. The futility of the situation, which becomes apparent if the player attempts to help and dies, makes Henry's plight much more believable, even potentially imposing upon the player a feeling of guilt when they are inevitably forced to flee. This creative use of (interactive) space is accompanied by a specific history – Cuman brutality. The Cumans were a nomadic people of Turkish origin that had settled in Hungary following the Mongol invasion of their lands in the 13th century. Although some medieval chroniclers did reference and indeed exaggerate their apparent savagery, their representation in the game, as cruel, almost inhuman barbarians, is maintained throughout.[172]

As an open-world *narrative garden*, *KCD* allows the player to discover and infer meaning freely. Producing spatial narratives is the prerogative of the player, at least outside of the *framing narrative*.[173] Here they are free to explore and navigate the broader arguments of 'how the world of the past was'.[174] 'Sequenced stories' are still told through the constraints of questlines (the *framing narrative*) however, limiting spatial narrative creation for the player as they follow the developer's chosen path(s).[175] Specific histories, like that of the Cuman mercenaries, are told both inside the space limited by the *framing narrative*, and outside of it.

<u>Narrative Structure</u>

KCD's narrative structure is easy to determine given the genre to which it belongs. As an open-world RPG, it conforms to the *open* narrative structure, a structure characterised by a strong '*framing narrative* that is nonetheless still subject to decisions made in the

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[172] Bártfai, I (2018). *Cumans in Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Retrieved from https://www.medievalists.net/2018/02/cumans-kingdom-come-deliverance/
[173] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 103-104.
[174] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 103-104.
[175] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 103-104.

ludonarrative'.[176] The *framing narrative* acts as a journey with a clear destination, but it is down to the player and their choices to determine how exactly they reach that destination. Players' *ludonarrative* choices affect the arrangement, emplotment and presence of *narrative fragments*, allowing for a branching narrative and greater player agency.[177]

Representing the Middle Ages: Authenticity, Imagery, and Selection

KCD attempts to present an authentic experience of the Middle Ages through its ludic elements and visual detail. It can be argued that it succeeded in doing so if the reviews of critics are to be believed. 'Verisimilitude is the order of the day,' We Got This Covered's Edward Love writes.[178] 'An incredibly authentic experience,' Destructoid's Dan Roemer concludes.[179] Despite this, it should be noted that this authenticity is not necessarily tied to historicity. The developers altered history where and when it was appropriate, with historicity often sacrificed in favour of creative decisions or forfeited out of the necessity to comply with technical demands.

KCD's gameplay attempts to represent medieval society as it was for agents at the time. Many of the ludic features present in the game have been rarely used elsewhere (likely due to the difficulty or necessity of implementing them), making *KCD* unique in its commitment towards providing a medieval experience that is more than visual in its representation. One of these features is the effect of clothing upon the player's charisma. This is common among most RPG games, but in *KCD* it is implemented in a fashion that ensures it is representative of social status in the Middle Ages, all the while maintaining the role-playing aspect of an RPG. For instance, if the player wears a pair of footwraps and soles, "*the most primitive form of medieval footwear*", they do not receive any charisma bonus, whereas if they were to wear decorated riding boots, "*high boots worn primarily by the wealthier classes*", they would gain a charisma bonus of eighteen. Without wearing items that give high charisma boosts, the player will be unable to complete speech checks (attempts to persuade a character) with those of a higher standing in society, or in some cases be unable to even speak with them. The importance of social status and appearance

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[176] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 130-131.
[177] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 130-131.
[178] Love, E (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review*. Retrieved from
https://wegotthiscovered.com/gaming/kingdom-come-deliverance-review/
[179] Roemer, D (2018). *Review: Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Retrieved from
https://www.destructoid.com/review-kingdom-come-deliverance-490605.phtml

during this period is therefore imposed upon the player through the game's roleplaying mechanics. A similar lesson regarding literacy rates is also made apparent through creative use of mechanics. At the beginning of the game Henry is unable to read, so any books the player finds will be completely illegible. Books are not simply cursory objects in *KCD*, but functional items that can enhance certain skills when read. In order to learn how to read, the player must seek out a scribe and complete the quest *Mightier Than the Sword*, after which they will possess basic reading skills. During the quest, the player will learn of the relative scarcity of lay literacy, with the tutorial explicitly (over)stating, "*being able to read was a very rare skill in the Middle Ages*". The scribe, when asked to teach them, also remarks that Henry does not *"look like the makings of a priest or clerk"*. Although lay literacy rates may have been low during the period, the use of the written word was becoming much more common in the 15th century – a fact the game seems to address when the scribe agrees to teach Henry, remarking *"why not? I've taught all sorts"*. With the incentive of skill enhancements and a questline, the game uses mechanics to prioritise and teach the player of an often overlooked (in video games) aspect of medieval life.

Visually, *KCD* offers a representation of the medieval world that attempts to be as close to "accurate" as possible. The thorough research conducted by Warhorse Studios to make it so becomes apparent when browsing the game's codex. The design of wagons and carts, the layout of kitchens, the workings of water-powered grain mills – all are reconstructed with visual fidelity. Such minor details – how many axles a cart had for example – may seem inconsequential, but as a whole, and coupled with the reaffirming, didactic nature of the codex, they serve the wider purpose of fulfilling players' expectations of historicity. This masks the fact that true historicity is unattainable and also helps to maintain a sense of authentic immersion for the player. Although it is true the developers do sometimes explicitly highlight the need for interpretation, in some codex entries and update videos for example, this does not detract from the historical experience as such instances become buried under the blanket of authenticity (and often accuracy) provided by the visuals and mechanics.

As previously mentioned when discussing the game's epistemology, the constraints of the past and of the gamic form ensured an inevitable level of inaccuracy that led to their representation of the medieval being one of necessary compromise. Adding to these

pressures is the necessity for ludic gratification. The game has to be fun to play and look visually appealing, making it both marketable and enjoyable as a form of entertainment. To achieve this the developers had to make further concessions when it came to historicity. For instance, the appearance of the Cuman raiders in the game skews somewhat from reality. As Imre Bártfai points out, their armour is presented as 'rather Timurid in fashion', which, by the fifteenth century, the Cumans would not have adopted given they had 'lost their connection to the [Eurasian] steppe'.[180] The developers likely chose this earlier style of armour from the Cumans' history in order to make them appear tougher and more menacing. This armour is also highly appealing in its appearance given its unique and threatening design, a stark contrast to the lighter armour worn by actual Cumans during this period. As well as taking liberties for the purpose of visual attraction, *KCD's* developers had to do the same to ensure certain gameplay elements were stimulating enough for the average player. An excellent example of this is the quest *The Madonna of Sasau* (part of the DLC *A Woman's Lot*), in which Henry aids a young woman, Johanka, in proving her innocence in the face of a heresy trial conducted by an inquisitor of the Papal Inquisition. Here the developers used 'artistic licence' to make what would be a secretive and somewhat dull affair interactive and engaging. Trials of the inquisition were complex and lengthy, involving legal procedures seen in canon law courts and doctrines unique to their profession.[181] *KCD* simplifies the entire trial into one easy to manage questline, as well as shortening the process to prevent it from becoming tedious and boring for players – two qualities a game should not possess if it wants to be marketable. Moreover, the developers had to remove an element quintessential to the inquisition trials, secrecy.[182] This was necessary to allow the player to interact with and have an impact upon proceedings. If the developers had not, there would have been little for the player to see, let alone do.

The Middle Ages Warhorse Studios wanted to present was one of accuracy, but ultimately, due to certain constraints – technical, creative and historical – the one it truly represents is one of compromise. Nevertheless, the intention of *KCD* was to recreate *the* Middle Ages, to rebuild the period as it would have appeared to those at the time.

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[180] Bártfai, I (2018).
[181] Peters, E. (1989). *Inquisition*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 66-67.
[182] Peters, E. (1989). pp. 66-67.

Further Sites of Representation

  KCD's representation of the Middle Ages runs deeper than the more obvious visual and ludic elements referred to above. Other aspects of the game, explicit and implicit,

Figure 4. Screenshot of a portion of *KCD's* main map.

invoke the medieval past in more subtle ways. This can best be seen in the game's map, art, books and music.

  KCD's map, seen in Figure 4, has an innate "medieval appearance". For those that are unfamiliar with medieval cartography (likely the majority of players) the prominence of aesthetic detail over topographical detail is enough for this association to be made, simply because this is the complete opposite of how modern maps (which focus exclusively on topography) appear. Moreover, the colours and detailed figures in *KCD*'s map are actually a prominent feature of renaissance cartography.[183] The majority of players are unlikely to know the differences between medieval and renaissance art, but given how distinct and antiquated the style appears, it is still enough to convince given the authority of its context. The game is set during the Middle Ages and so players are unlikely to question the map's authenticity providing it fits a certain "medieval standard". In reality, though, *KCD's* map contrasts greatly with the medieval maps that survive today. The very concept of a map was very different in the Middle Ages in comparison to what it means in the modern world; what

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[183] Piontek, C. (2019 October 7). Personal Communication.

we would consider essential to cartography today – geographical lines, scale, even any sort of graphical detail – was scarcely included in maps from this period.

Despite this dissimilarity, *KCD's* map does exemplify a quality that is shared by the majority of videogame maps and, more importantly, medieval maps. This quality is narrative, an intention of medieval maps that, according to Thomas Rowland, acted as 'an enticing, spiritual pilgrimage' for the reader.[184] *KCD* makes this a feature of its map using its fast travel function. While normally a simple case of teleportation in most games, *KCD* instead opts to craft a narrative experience using a combination of visible routing and chance. When the player selects a destination, the game creates a route by which they will travel and displays it as a series of dots. The player, represented by a small avatar, moves along these dots to the point of their destination. However, at certain points along the route there is a possibility the player will encounter a random event – bandit traps, pilgrims, wayfarers that require directions – forcing them to actively participate in the journey, whether they choose to stop or not.

Although the majority of maps in the Middle Ages were simple and purely functional, there are surviving examples that suggest otherwise. For instance, we can liken the comprehensive marking of settlements in *KCD's* map to that seen in the Gough Map of Britain.[185] Furthermore, its elaborate artistry is also a feature of maps such as Matthew Paris' strip map of London to Jerusalem, and the Hereford World Map.[186] Whether a map was simple and functional or an 'object of beauty for gazing and deliberation' was likely decided by purpose, users and the ingenuity of the mapmaker or cartographer.[187] This also applies to videogame maps, but the pressures of digital gaming seem to have the heaviest influence when it comes to this choice. The developers are pushed towards making their maps comprehensive and broad (due to the demands of the open-world genre and player engagement), as well as making them highly visual (detail is essential for appeal and exhibiting the superior graphical quality expected from a *realist* simulation). This demonstrates the difficulties faced by the developers of historical games when attempting

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184 Rowland, T. (2014). pp. 199-201.
185 British Library. (c. 1400). Gough Map of the British Isles [Map]. Retrieved from https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-gough-map
186 Rowland, T. (2014). pp. 199-201.
187 Rowland, T. (2014). pp. 199-201.

to reflect experiences of, or recreate artefacts from, the past. Ludic necessity will always, it seems, take precedence over the will for "accuracy", however strong that will may be.

Another site of medieval representation can be found within *KCD's* in-game texts. These texts exist in the form of books (of only a few pages) that can be found throughout the world, though the majority are sold by vendors or found in specific places associated with medieval learning, such as the home of a scribe or the town monastery. As previously mentioned, the skill of reading is used to educate the player regarding social status and literacy rates in the Middle Ages, but it should be noted that the books themselves offer further interpretation. They do this through their content, discourse and distribution, offering parallels to the Middle Ages similar to those seen within *The Elder Scrolls*. DiPietro found that books within *TES* enriched the game's medieval experience through implicit references to Norse history, as well as providing 'rigorous discourse' and a 'climate of energetic debate'.[188] They are also distributed in a way that ensures no library or shop contains every book, 'paralleling relationships between status, literacy and possession of books in the Middle Ages'.[189] The same can be said for *KCD*. The game's texts are replete with references to history. For example, the book *On the Papal Schism* tells of the events that led to the Western Schism in 1378. Given that the game is not fantasy based and is designed as an authentic reflection of the past, it is unsurprising that it makes explicit rather than implicit reference to actual events as there is no need to conceal reality beneath a veil of fiction or metaphor.

Gender

KCD's representation of medieval gender relations adheres to the basic but admissible rationale of 'womanly submission and manly governance'.[190] While this may be a fair, general assessment of masculinity and femininity in the Middle Ages, it was not that simple. As Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras go on to say, the reality was far more nuanced, with Medieval Europe articulating the assumption of male dominance and female subservience 'inconsistently and applying it ambivalently'.[191] *KCD* makes no attempt to

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[188] DiPietro, M. (2014). pp. 202-213.
[189] DiPietro, M. (2014). pp. 202-213.
[190] Bennett, J.M., & Karras, R.M. (2013). Women, Gender and Medieval Historians. In J. M. Bennett, & R.M. Karras (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*. (pp. 1-20). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[191] Bennett, J.M., & Karras, R.M. (2013). pp. 5-6.

display this. Instead, it relies solely on the belief that men dominated and women served, diluting its representation of gender to the point that it becomes indistinguishable from modern stereotypes. For some male gamers, this is part of the escapist attraction of the Middle Ages. They desire and come to expect such masculine superiority; to live vicariously through a medieval avatar is a way of reaffirming their masculinity and adopting a hegemonic form of masculine identity that they do not embody in real life. The game does, however, offer an alternative construction of the masculine and feminine in places, intentional or not, that likely reflects the variation in gender identity during the period. They are well hidden beneath a veneer of contemporary thinking and perception, but these links can still be made.

With regard to its representation of men, *KCD* exhibits a type of masculinity that is typically defined by physical strength, sexual vigour and heavy drinking. All three are inescapable when playing the game. Physicality is, for one, essential in and out of combat. Typified by the strength stat, it determines how effectively the player can fight with heavy weapons, as well as how intimidating they appear to others – both of which can be used to bully and coerce. Sex on the other hand is not defined by a particular stat but is nevertheless a prominent feature of the game. When the player visits any bathhouse – which is frequently given the need to launder garments – they may choose to make use of the service provided by the "bathhouse wenches" for a fee. Upon availing themselves of this service (simulated by a black screen and heavy moaning), the player will receive a buff entitled "Alpha Male", granting them a charisma boost of two. One of the two romance options in the game also involves sleeping with the wife of the man (Sir Divish) who provides Henry with sanctuary following his village's destruction. This venture provides no noticeable benefits aside from the "Casanova" achievement (achievements are additional objectives that may be earned on the respective platform, referred to as trophies on PlayStation), indicating that she is merely a (literal) trophy for the player to collect. Arguably more important is drinking, which does have its own stat. Aside from the novelty of having Henry drink himself into oblivion, drinking is in fact an essential component of gameplay. It plays a role in a number of quests, namely *Mysterious Ways* (in which Henry must get blackout drunk with the local priest to obtain information) and *Next to Godliness* (in which Henry must drink into the night with Lord Hans Capon to attain his favour). Critically, drinking is

used to save the game. Such an essential function is only achievable either by sleeping in a player-owned bed, which are few and far between, or drinking an alcoholic beverage known as "saviour schnapps".

This clichéd view of masculinity is a modern construct. The excess to which the game promotes physicality, sex and drinking as masculine norms is not representative of medieval society (as a whole) but is perhaps more akin to the stereotypical Western ideals of masculinity that were encouraged and entrenched in the last quarter of a century. These ideals are now synonymous with "laddism" – a trend that saw 'exponential growth' during the 1990s.[192]

That being said, it is possible to draw some links between the game's representation and actual views on masculinity during the period, albeit links that were likely not the intention of the developers. In the Late Middle Ages, according to Ruth Karras, 'different segments of society adopted different understandings of what it meant to be a man', with a 'core component' of all of these being the need for one 'to test himself and prove himself against other men'.[193] Karras uses three models within which masculinity was viewed differently: that of the knight, the university scholar and the craft worker. Each attempted to prove himself in a different way. When the excesses of *KCD* are stripped back, it becomes apparent that at least two of these are exhibited in one way or another. The protagonist, Henry, may not be any of these by profession, but he is made to prove himself according to their masculine ideals.

The knight, for instance, achieved dominance over other men through 'violence and through control of women'.[194] Henry does the same. The military activity he embarks upon, as a man at arms for a Lord, provides the necessary violence to validate his masculinity, while the competition of the Rattey Tourney, a combat tournament, acts as a literal proving ground.

The university scholar, on the other hand, chose a different weapon for proving himself – his rationality. Education gave him 'the skills to compete verbally against other

[192] Edwards, T. (2006). *Cultures of Masculinity*. Oxon: Routledge. pp. 22-23.
[193] Karras, R.M. (2003). *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 10-11.
[194] Karras, R.M. (2003). pp. 10-11.

educated men, and to prove his superiority over the uneducated'.[195] His power to dominate came not from martial prowess, but from his intellect. This is reflected heavily in *KCD* with the reading skill. If the player does not educate Henry and hone his reading skill, he will be unable to read and study skill books, therefore making it much more difficult to boost his stats. Without these improvements, Henry will be intellectually and physically weaker.[196]

Curiously, the closest profession to which Henry can be tied is perhaps the one he displays the least association with, at least in terms of masculine ideals. The independent craft worker looked to prove himself a man by proving himself not a boy, mainly through the economic domination of other men – defined in part by the 'ownership of an independent workshop'.[197] Henry is the son of a blacksmith and yet, even at the beginning of the game prior to the destruction of his village, shows little interest in remaining with the craft. Artisanal masculinity seems to of be little consequence to him. In fact, his outlook on life, centred around adventure and seeing the world, seems the opposite of what is expected of him as a man. It is necessary, however, as Henry's life would not be as appealing or heroic if he wanted to remain a blacksmith.

The knightly and scholarly models are much more evident within the game. The formation of masculine identity is centred around the principles of each; violence and control, as well as intellect and rationality, form the basis of the game's construction of medieval masculinity.

Unsurprisingly, the representation of femininity within the game suffers as a result of the developers' approach to masculinity. This approach, defined by the physical and sexual superiority of the male, is mirrored by the fragility and subservience of *KCD's* women. It can be argued that the oppression women faced during the Middle Ages, either sexual, social or political, did indeed make them subservient to men, with women 'understood as less' and female attributes seen simply as 'less good than male ones'.[198] They were, more often than not, 'viewed as inferior to men as a group'.[199] However, *KCD's* representation

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[195] Karras, R.M. (2003). pp. 67-68.
[196] Some skill books present in the game even boost Henry's physical stats, such as his strength and fighting abilities.
[197] Karras, R.M. (2003). pp. 109-110.
[198] Bennett, J.M., & Karras, R.M. (2013). pp. 5-6.
[199] Bardsley, S. (2007). *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages*. London: Greenwood Press. pp. 1-2.

seems to go beyond that, with women presented as nothing more than objects of male sexual desire, as well as being physically weak, unskilled and in most cases, completely irrelevant. This is at odds with the scholarship that shuns this overly simplistic belief. Medieval women are now understood to actually have been far more 'capable and independent' than the game portrays.[200]

The most prominent role women take in the game is that of sexual objects. This is demonstrated shortly after starting the game, with the opening cutscene showing Henry's father embracing his wife before promptly slapping her backside as she walks away. Not long after, Theresa arrives at the forge to collect some nails. As she is leaving, the camera pans down to her behind, with Henry seen staring intently after her – despite the fact he is still romantically involved with another woman (Bianca) at this point. These displays of objectification set the tone for how women are treated throughout the course of the game. They are at the mercy of men's sexuality, a fact exemplified by the "Troubadour" perk. Once the player reaches level eight in the speech skill, they are able to take this perk, allowing them to persuade women more easily and "avail of bathwenches' services for free". Essentially, Henry can have sex with any woman he chooses, whenever he chooses. The unnamed bathwenches are made to give up their bodies for free, even if the pretext is that Henry somehow charms them into not charging for their service. Sex seems to be one of the few things women of the Middle Ages were apparently skilled at – a stereotype of medieval women that the game promotes heavily. It is alluded to that women could take up different jobs in society, but again, these are mostly based upon well-established stereotypes. According to the game, they could be herbalists and, if a widow, traders. The herbalists are portrayed as "wise women" or witches, living in small huts in forests well away from the towns. One of these women is Gertrude, who, during the quest *Dance with the* Devil, is revealed to be selling "magic ointment" to those wanting to summon the devil. Only widows being able to conduct trade is less of a stereotype and more of a misconception, wives could in fact sell produce and 'sometimes spend their earnings as they wished, despite their husband's legal authority'.[201]

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[200] Mount, T. (2014). *The Medieval Housewife & Other Women of the Middle Ages*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing.

[201] Mount, T. (2014).

However, the overwhelming feeling in the game, made most apparent in NPC dialogue, is that women were looked down upon as unskilled, weak and stupid. For instance, during the quest *Aquarius*, when finding jobs for the refugees of Skalitz, Theresa recommends the job of water-carrying go to a woman named Antonia because of how difficult it is for women to find work. When informing the Bailiff of the decision, he remarks, "What, a woman? It's a long walk with a heavy load. Man's work." This perceived weakness may be a feature of medieval (and indeed modern) misogyny, but the game takes this further with some NPC dialogue that appears to suggest that women held a conscious view of their own inferiority. Figure 5 supports this, with the townswoman admitting to not

Figure 5. Screenshot of a "stupid" woman in *KCD*.

understanding political matters because she is "stupid", which she seems to attribute to her being a woman.

After playing the game for a considerable amount of time, it becomes apparent that the presence of women is rarely felt – to the point that it is almost negligible. This general irrelevance is coupled with a treatment of women that is highly dismissive in nature. For instance, one of the activity givers in the game does not have a name but is instead labelled as "Old Whore".[202] She has her own questline (an activity is essentially a smaller side quest) and was deemed important enough to not simply be labelled "villager" or "townswoman"

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[202] "Old Whore" is not the only female character to be nameless. Henry's own mother, to my knowledge, is also never referred to by name.

(labels given to generic NPCs), yet she is apparently not relevant enough to be given an actual name. The misogyny underpinning this suggests that the setting of the Middle Ages somehow makes it "acceptable" to denigrate women. There is no historical basis for this. Attitudes to women during the period are used as a justifiable excuse but they are inflated and overemphasised resulting in a Middle Ages tainted by a modern brand of misogynism.

It can be argued that the game's representation of medieval women described above is countered by its fourth and final DLC, *A Woman's Lot*. In it, the player controls Theresa prior to and during the raid on Skalitz. She is able to use swords, bows and stealth like Henry, but cannot ride a horse or wear armour. 'Armed with fortitude and dignity', this portrayal of a medieval woman is unlike anything that is presented in the base game.[203] It is, however, not the only inconsistency in the developers' representation of women. A prime example of another can be found when examining the game's codex entry entitled "Women in the Middle Ages". Here it is presented as fact that "a woman in the Middle Ages would from the beginning of sexual maturity be pregnant virtually every year - it was not unusual for one to be a mother three or four times over by the age of twenty". Such a sweeping generalisation is contradicted by the fact that Theresa, presumably nearing the age of twenty, has no children and is seemingly more experienced than Henry when it comes to sex, suggesting perhaps he is not her first lover and potentially indicating the use of contraceptives. Theresa is not the only woman to not conform to the "facts" of the codex. There is not a single pregnant woman in the entire game, nor is there any children. This was likely due to ludic constraints and ethics rather than the actuality that 'medieval women often showed positive attitudes towards the possibility of control of their fertility', however (although we cannot know for certain).[204] It seems as though the developers had little interest in portraying the realities of women's lives, hence the heavy contradictions and reliance on sexist stereotypes.

The representation of women, then, is intrinsically linked to that of men. There is an attempt to present the hardships women faced during the period, but it falls short of what could have been an enlightening experience. Instead of demonstrating the oppression of

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[203] Steam. (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Royal Edition*. Retrieved from https://store.steampowered.com/sub/368776/
[204] Stuard, S.M. (1976). Introduction. In S.M. Stuard (Ed.) *Women in Medieval Society*. (pp. 1-12). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

social and political restrictions, the game portrays women as weak and incapable, as well as good for little except the sexual gratification of men. These attitudes are not shown to be 'indications of a restrictive, misogynist society, but as good-natured jokes – the lads out on the town' as *Unwinnable's* Reid McCarter aptly puts it.[205] Sadly, the DLC *A Woman's Lot* is merely an afterthought, with Theresa's strength of character being exclusive to her – none of the other female characters come close to matching her for substance, skill or relevance. The game's representation of women illustrates a number of modern (mis)conceptions of the medieval. Their over-sexualisation, consciously accepted inferiority, irrelevance and denigration are all part of a Middle Ages that the developers misconstrue and distort, but players come to expect. With this expectation delivered on, any questions of the realities of women in medieval society are quietly hidden and 'conveniently sidelined'.[206]

Race

Ever since its launch *KCD* has been mired in a racial controversy that it seems unable to escape even now. The crux of the matter lies with its representation of people of colour, or lack thereof. There is not a single black, brown or Asian character in the entire game, leading some to accuse the developers of whitewashing. There are numerous articles and forum threads discussing the issue. One such article on the game-reviewing website *Eurogamer* describes this as a 'big problem' that results in a game that 'feels like a glossy pamphlet advertising an escape into an oddly romanticised past', rather than 'notes in the margin of a history book'.[207] Reid McCarter of *Unwinnable* echoes this in his article, branding *KCD's* selection from history as best serving 'an exclusionary, xenophobic vision of Czech history – one that considers ethnic and linguistic minorities a historical detriment'.[208] Defences of the game's portrayal of race appear more on forums and message boards, with opinions ranging from reasoned to racist.[209] Notably, some of these have taken the discussion and politicised it, in particular the far-right. 'SJW's' (social justice warriors) and

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[205] McCarter, R. (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy*. Retrieved from https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/
[206] Lane, R. (2018).
[207] Purchese, R. (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance review - History is a Double-edged Sword*. Retrieved from https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review
[208] McCarter, R. (2018).
[209] Steam, User: Jaypi3. (2018, February 25). *Why were people complaining about this game being racist?* Retrieved from https://steamcommunity.com/app/379430/discussions/0/1693788384135878909/; Historum, User: The General. (2018, March 8). *Is Kingdom Come: Deliverance racist?* Retrieved from https://historum.com/threads/is-kingdom-come-deliverance-racist.134562/

'the radical left' wishing to 'demonize and rewrite history' is a common theme in many of the forum threads that exist on the matter.[210] An article published on the white supremacist website *American Renaissance* demonstrates this politicisation better than any other. Its description of the game as 'entertainment that speaks to [white] identity', however, is unlikely to convince anyone of anything but racism.[211] This is an extreme example, but it is unfortunately representative of a far-right minority whose interest in the Middle Ages stems only from a need to affirm their racist rhetoric.

The fundamental arguments of both sides of the controversy can be broken down into simpler, more general terms: there are those that believe the game's representation is presumptive, false and borderline racist, and those that believe that it is the opposite, touting the game's dedication to historical accuracy and its extensive research.

Some claim that Warhorse Studios' exclusion of minorities is baseless and founded upon nothing more than the developers' white privilege. They point to the comments and views of their creative director, Daniel Vávra, as evidence. Vávra came under heavy criticism in 2017 for wearing a shirt during *Gamescom* (a highly publicised trade fair for gaming companies) that depicted an album cover by the band "Burzum", a Norwegian black metal

Figure 6. A tweet by KCD's creative director, Daniel Vávra, in defence of the game's whiteness.

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[210] Kingdom Come Forum, User: bear93. (2016, May 12). *About the alleged racism in the game*. Retrieved from https://forum.kingdomcomerpg.com/t/about-the-alleged-racism-in-game/28131; Steam, User: Jaypi3. (2018, February 25).

[211] Hood, G. (2018). *The Racial Politics of 'Kingdom Come: Deliverance'*. Retrieved from https://www.amren.com/features/2018/03/the-racial-politics-of-kingdom-come-deliverance/

band founded by convicted murderer and outspoken neo-Nazi, Varg Vikernes. Vávra has also been involved in numerous Twitter exchanges in which he has attempted to defend *KCD's* representation of race, many of which were conducted in a manner that seemed to add credence to the accusations of his critics. Figure 6, for instance, displays a conceited and assumptive view on a highly recondite issue, leading one reviewer to claim Vávra justifies his position 'with a nationalistic stance with an anti-imperialistic reflex'.[212] Being born in the region, they say, is why 'he purports to know more about the history of the region than any historian who may come along: a history which he appears to perceive as *his histor*y'.[213]

The group rallying behind Vávra and *KCD* contend that the game prioritises historical "accuracy" above anything else, and that the developers' research has "proven" their interpretation is the correct one. Critically, the game is set in a limited area in the modern-day Czech Republic, just 16sqkm, meaning this research was done at local level, giving the developers access to 'entire family trees and property rights' from which to base their representation.[214] As well as this, broader 'knowledge of historical events' gave them reason enough to include, 'besides Czechs, Germans and Jewish residents, the largest grouping in the game, the Kumans'.[215] According to Vávra, 'the nationality of other characters reflects what we know about Bohemia around 1403' and that their research supports the notion that this particular area of Bohemia was likely as homogeneous in its ethnic composition as the game represents.[216] Vávra has also since apologised for his previous actions and conduct, categorically denying any allegations of racism and defending Warhorse Studios' research based approach.

Is *KCD* a 'white man power fantasy game' as some believe, or an accurate portrayal of medieval Bohemia's homogeneity?[217] To label the game racist would be unfair, but to use "accuracy" to defend it does not work given that the wish for accuracy clearly does not

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[212] Let's Play History. (2018). *The "Most Authentic" History Game Ever?! The Phenomenally Skewed Case of Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Retrieved from https://lepetitcapo.wordpress.com/2018/01/13/das-authentischste-historienspiel-aller-zeiten-die-gewaltige-schraeglage-von-kingdom-come-deliverance/

[213] Resetera, User: Dictator. (2018, January 18). *Separating Games from their Creators - Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Retrieved from https://www.resetera.com/threads/separating-games-from-their-creators-kingdom-come-deliverance.17250/

[214] Resetera, User: Dictator. (2018, January 18).

[215] Resetera, User: Dictator. (2018, January 18).

[216] Resetera, User: Dictator. (2018, January 18).

[217] Taylor, L (2018). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Still Fails to Deliver Representation*. Retrieved from http://newnormative.com/2018/02/07/kingdom-come-deliverance-still-fails-deliver-representation/

extend to all aspects of the game, as we have seen with the game's portrayal of gender. Their representation of race, though, whether it is accurate or not, does seem to have been influenced by historical intent rather than ideology. Vávra aside, there is no evidence to suggest any other members of the development team held personal views that may have influenced how race was to be represented. However, this does not mean the original concerns over ethnic diversity are unfounded. The Cumans aside, ethnic groups present in Bohemia around the time are notably absent from the game. The Romani people, as one reviewer points out, had a small presence in Bohemia during the Middle Ages (and still do).[218] Their inclusion would not have broken from Czech history. Even if there is no evidence for their presence in and around medieval Skalice, including them in some manner may have been beneficial in the pursuit and portrayal of history. Because *KCD* is a work of historical *fiction*, there is opportunity to reflect a wider history whilst remaining authentic. Any arguments in opposition to this, especially ones grounded on the principle of "accuracy", are made defunct by the fact the developers included both entirely fictional and visibly anachronistic elements to the world and story. If the game can have an entire questline based on the Necronomicon (a fictional grimoire of H.P. Lovecraft's creation) and an antagonist (Markvart von Aulitz) that, in reality, had died a year prior to the game's events, why should it not include minorities that were known to have inhabited other areas of Bohemia at this time?

What such a charged debate can tell us about gamic representation is significant. Any attempt to recreate the past, especially one as distant as the Middle Ages, is bound to be fraught with the difficulty of representing not just history, but the interests of modern society as well. The furore caused by *KCD's* whiteness demonstrates a public concern developers must address when dealing with the past: that an all-white video game reinforces a narrative of whitewashing that is only now being contested. This narrative can always be avoided. Even if, like with *KCD* and the Romani, minorities are not known to have inhabited a specific area, there is still adequate scope (and call) for their inclusion. This inclusion would not be made at the expense of authenticity either – the power of the modern videogame allows developers to focus on more authenticating aspects of the game,

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[218] Fandomentals, User: Barbara. (2018, February 20). *Kingdom Come, Representation, And Layers Of Privilege*. Retrieved from https://www.thefandomentals.com/kingdom-come-representation/

such as environment and visuals. Developers looking to represent the past, therefore, should continue in their pursuit of authenticity with an awareness that the flexibility and fictionality of video games provide opportunity for richer, more inclusive representation.

Community

  KCD's community, like that of *For Honor*, is filled with players that come together on message boards and forums to discuss a variety of game related issues. This includes, but is not limited to, gameplay strategies and guides, comedy (memes), glitches and workarounds, speculation on a potential sequel, and historical accuracy.[219] Discussion regarding accuracy was always likely for a game of *KCD's* historical intent, but there is a lot less of it than expected. Much of the debate on its Reddit forum is more concerned with the game's difficulty level. Whether this means players take its claims of accuracy at face value or are in fact aware of the impossibility of recreating an accurate Middle Ages and therefore rarely discuss it, remains to be seen.

  Debate and discussion are far from the only products of *KCD's* fandom. Most intriguing of all, perhaps, is the emergence of fan works and art depicting a homosexual relationship between the protagonist, Henry, and his eventual friend, Lord Hans Capon. The imagining of homosexual relations between (often) heterosexual males – known as slash ships – is very common within fandom, in particular for forms of media set within the Middle Ages. *Assassin's Creed*, for instance, possesses over 8000 fan-written stories on the fanfiction site *Archive of Our Own*, 3432 of which contain male/male relations as their main theme, with 831 of those imagining a relationship between the protagonist of the first game, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, and his friend, Malik Al-Sayf.[220] *KCD* possesses far fewer written works to its name but is no different. Figure 7 is just one example of the dozens of posts on the blogging website *Tumblr* that endorse a Henry/Hans relationship. At first glance it seems surprising, given the game's cliched representation of masculinity – a representation that rejects any traits or beliefs traditionally considered feminine, including homosexuality. It is compounded by the fact that two of the game's three gay characters – the nefarious villain Istvan Toth and his lover Erik – are presented in a way that dismisses and makes fun of their

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[219] Reddit. (2018). *Kingdom Come*. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/kingdomcome/hot/
[220] Archive of Our Own. (2019). *Works in Assassin's Creed - All Media Types*. Retrieved from https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Assassin's%20Creed%20-%20All%20Media%20Types/works

sexuality and relationship. Reid McCarter highlights this in his review of the game, going as far as claiming their treatment 'reads as outright malice', with Toth 'appearing primarily in dimly lit nighttime scenes where he tortures Henry or sneaks his way into a castle to hold a defenseless Lady hostage', while Erik is 'blackmailed by sniggering lords when they find out his sexuality'.[221] The third gay character, Novice Lucas, is only approachable during the monastery questline. His treatment is a little more nuanced in that he can be seen visibly grappling with his sexuality, but this is hidden away behind a difficult side quest most players will not bother to complete.
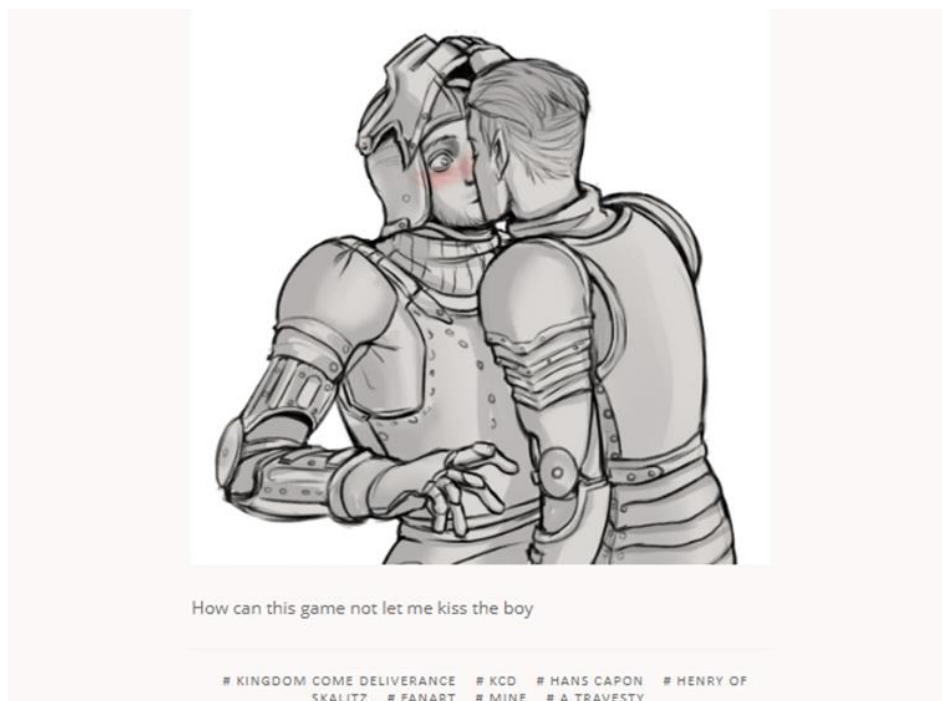

How can this game not let me kiss the boy

KINGDOM COME DELIVERANCE   # KCD   # HANS CAPON   # HENRY OF
SKALITZ   # FANART   # MINE   # A TRAVESTY

Figure 7. A screenshot of a *tumblr* post depicting an imagined romantic relationship between Hans Capon and Henry.

How is it then that some fans have taken to drawing, writing and "shipping" (a fandom term for desiring a romantic relationship between a pair of characters) Henry and Capon? The answer, perhaps, lies with the stricture and oppression the Middle Ages is typically known for. The period was characterised by a growing intolerance, with church law developing 'rapidly and homophobically after [the year] 1000' and 'savage penalties ordained' for sodomy after 1250.[222] Homosexuality was widely condemned and linked with heresy, to the point that it could be used as, what Louis Crompton terms, an 'instrument of

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[221] McCarter, R. (2018).
[222] Johansson, W., & Percy, W.A. (2013). Homosexuality. In V.L. Bullough, & J. Brundage (Eds.) *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. (pp. 155-190). Oxon: Routledge.

fear'.[223] The Knights Templar, for instance, were persecuted, discredited and executed on the (likely) false pretext of sodomy. Stern secular attitudes towards homosexuality, coupled with the repressive ideals of monastic life and the severity of punishment, make for an appealing setting upon which to base a piece of romantic fiction. The breaking of taboos and laws in the pursuit of forbidden love is a powerful, creative concept that is facilitated perfectly by medieval society. The close but purely platonic bond between Henry and Capon, therefore, stirs the imagination of many looking for a more significant representation of homosexuality in the game. Evidence of this can be found within the tags authors and artists use to denote the themes of their work. Of the few written works that do exist for *KCD*, the tags "emotionally repressed", "closeted character" and "homophobia" appear frequently.[224] One piece in particular, entitled *Lost in the Trees*, takes it one step further and makes use of the setting provided by the monastery questline in the game. According to its summary, the work depicts how 'Henry uses his time in the monastery to reflect on his life/sexuality/environment/relationship with Lord Capon'.[225] The oppression he faces, as well as the crippling self-doubt imposed upon him by his newly chosen life with God, are indicative of the struggles homosexual men faced in medieval society, but heightened by an even stricter backdrop.

Clearly the Middle Ages provides an ideal setting for romanticised homosexual relations, with Henry and Hans' imagined relationship a product not just of the "bromance" between the two, but of the resonance the period seems to have with some fans and content creators. Homophobia and sexual oppression are still very much part of the world today; the drawing of parallels between past and present creates the resonance from which fans are inspired. Moreover, having a game set during the Middle Ages provides an opportunity for issues like sexuality to be explored within the context of the past, addressed from the enlightened perspective of modernity, and, most importantly of all, be visibly represented. The medieval setting of *KCD* was ideal for accomplishing this and the desire from fans for it to do so was apparently always there. Perhaps this also demonstrates a change in who the medieval now appeals to. It is unlikely that the few fan works written and

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[223] Crompton, L. (2006). *Homosexuality and Civilization*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge. pp. 196-197.
[224] Archive of Our Own. *Works in Kingdom Come: Deliverance (Video Game)*. Retrieved from https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Kingdom%20Come:%20Deliverance%20(Video%20Game)/works
[225] Archive of Our Own, User: rednightmare. (2019, April 19). *Lost in the Trees*. Retrieved from https://archiveofourown.org/works/18524197?view_adult=true

drawn for Henry and Hans are done so by heterosexual males. This suggests the period is resonating not only with the game's intended audience – straight, masculine and heterosexual – but with those that may not identify or agree with the attitudes (towards sexuality and gender) it is made to represent. Perhaps this is a sign that developers in the future will have to consider the desires of an audience that is more diverse, one that yearns for a Middle Ages that better represents them, and one that is decidedly less straight and likely more female.

Concluding Remarks

KCD, with its impressive visuals and extensive referentiality, is decidedly *realist* in its simulation style and *reconstructionist* in its epistemology. Its use of time also adheres to the *realist* structure. Space is structured as a large open-world *narrative garden* filled with smaller gardens the player can navigate at will. Its narrative can be considered *open* due to a strong *framing narrative* that is subject to the player's *ludonarrative* choices.

Using its *realist* structure *KCD* aims to represent the Middle Ages as accurately as possible. Its attempt is admirable and to a degree successful, but ultimately this quest for accuracy melts away into one for authenticity. Compromise must be had, with technical demands and other constraints taking precedence over historicity. Overshadowing what is, at its core, a highly authentic medieval experience, are the issues of gender and race. Women in particular are grossly misrepresented as nothing more than cliched stereotypes, suggesting the developers were perhaps more invested in their research of other areas, rather than women's lives. Its representation of race remains a thorny issue even to this day. Although there was unlikely to be any racial prejudice behind it, the game could have benefitted from further diversity, especially given that the Middle Ages now seems to appeal to those who are not just white, male and straight – as we have seen with *KCD's* community. It also would not have detracted from the game's authenticity, or indeed perceived accuracy, had they included other peoples known to have inhabited Bohemia at the time, such as the Romani.

Without question, the intention of Warhorse Studios was to recreate *the* Middle Ages. Although this task is arguably impossible, they attempted to achieve it in both their gameplay and visuals, supported by (the claims of) considerable research. Their goal,

whether they achieved it or not, was to rebuild the "true" past from the evidence available to them.

While *KCD* attempts to focus on historical accuracy and *For Honor* upon historical fantasy, the next game for analysis, *Ancestors Legacy*, seeks to represent a Middle Ages that can be considered a mid-point between the two.

<u>Ancestors Legacy</u>

Ancestors Legacy contains traces of what makes *For Honor* and *KCD* unique. *For Honor's* predilection for fantasy and fiction is reflected in its overdramatization of historical events, while *KCD's* wish for accuracy can be found to some degree in Destructive Creations' attempts at referentiality. The result is a middle ground between the two that is authentic enough to convince and fictional enough to entertain. How it achieves this balance will be explored in the below discussion of its ludic structures. An analysis of the Middle Ages it produces will then follow.

<u>Style of Representation</u>

The simulation style of *Ancestors Legacy* is difficult to define. The game is unique in that it possesses the qualities of both the *realist* and *conceptual* styles. Historical strategy games – *Sid Meier's Civilisation* and *Age of Empires* for example – have always been typically *conceptual*, however, with the continued development of technology, more modern strategy games are no longer restricted to abstract visuals and solely ludic historical description. *Ancestors Legacy* and other modern RTS games, such as *Company of Heroes*, now possess a level of visual competency that gives them, at least in part, a *realist* edge.

The most notable departure from the *conceptual* style becomes apparent almost immediately upon entering into any of the game's campaigns. Instead of a simple map with minimal detail, *Ancestors Legacy* takes place in rich, three-dimensional environments that embrace a level of visual specificity rarely seen in games of the strategy genre. Locations such as the Lindisfarne monastery are vividly illustrated and exceptionally well rendered. Their fidelity to physical evidence, however, is loose, as we see with Lindisfarne. Its massive stone walls and endless battlements are a fabrication, even the castle built on the island in the 16th century is indistinguishable from that which is presented in the game. Still, this is visual specificity at work; only a degree of fidelity is required to convince, providing it *shows* the past 'in a way that relates to notions of authenticity', in this case it is the castle-like monastery that most will associate with the medieval.[226] Moreover, the game's audio-visual style aims to 'imitate human experience' in an attempt to be "realistic".[227] For example, battle animations appear much closer to reality in comparison to strategy games such as

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[226] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.
[227] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 61-62.

Civilisation V and *Europa Universalis IV*. Battles are contested with visible man-to-man fighting in a prolonged engagement, similar to those within other real-time strategy games of this (sub)genre, such as the *Total War* series. It is common for this type of game to feature cinematic battle scenes, but they are usually conducted separately away from the more abstract main map. *Ancestors Legacy* takes it a step further by having these battles fought, in real-time, on its (albeit smaller) main map, keeping the player grounded in the action and allowing them to witness, in detail, the progress and consequences of their conflicts.

Aesthetics are not the game's only site of representation. Being of a genre that is traditionally *conceptual* in style, much of its representation is hidden behind a layer of metaphor and interpretation, built mainly through *procedural rhetoric* – the use of rules, processes and mechanics to persuade and argue a particular representation of the past.[228] For instance, when playing *Ancestors Legacy* for the first time, it becomes apparent during the Viking campaign (the only one available at the beginning) that unit armour upgrades are an expensive investment, costing a considerable amount of iron. However, when later playing as the German faction, the player finds this less of an issue, with upgrades costing a mere twenty iron (after the technology Imperial Steel Supply has been researched) in comparison to the Vikings' sixty, the Anglo-Saxons' fifty, and the Slavs' forty. This rule, discovered through play, subtly argues that the Germans were more efficient armourers than the rest of Europe at the time. This is *procedural rhetoric* in action, made possible by the complex rules and systems indicative of *conceptual* simulations. Another example can be found with the Anglo-Saxon faction. They can build traps with a reduction in cost of forty percent, they have no cavalry, and their unique unit, the slinger, can learn the upgrade "guerrilla tactics". These rules force the player to think and adapt to a certain style of play, whilst in the process arguing that, in the past, the Anglo-Saxons were somehow freedom fighters in their own lands. This was likely a creative decision by the developers used to embellish and expand the Anglo-Saxon portion of the game, as seen during Harold Godwinson's third chapter, "We Are the Resistance", in order to make the Anglo-Saxons feel and appear more distinctive, even if portraying them as guerrillas at this time is wholly inaccurate. Perhaps it also reflects longstanding ideas about the Normans as an oppressive

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[228] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 71-72; Bogost, I. (2007).

force in England after 1066.[229] The subsequent rebellions and Norman reprisals almost certainly influenced the developers' decisions to reimagine the Anglo-Saxons as resistance fighters. It is within the ludic aspect of the game, then, that much of its historical representation is constructed.

Ancestors Legacy can be considered an anomaly when it comes to Chapman's criteria. As well as demonstrating both audio-visual and ludic representation, the game also 'create[s] arguments about complex and large scale historical processes', as well as keeping a 'relatively narrow focus on events'.[230] Conflicts across the Middle Ages, from the 8th to the 13th century, are explored in eight stories, with each of these containing five chapters (not including Saladin and the Saracens). The game's historical scope is large, but its focus becomes very narrow when entering into a story's chapter. For instance, the final chapter of Edward the Confessors' campaign focuses on a single (albeit fictional) battle, with its individual events visibly played out by the player and dictated by certain rules and objectives. The player even has control over Edward himself, who often engages in dialogue with others as events unfold. *Ancestors Legacy* epitomises the changing relationship between a game's *realist* detail and historical scope. This relationship has traditionally been inversed – with developers forced to choose *either* detail or scope – but as Chapman points out, it is changing with investment and technology.[231] *Ancestors Legacy* is a prime example of this.

Another aspect of the game that places it between the *conceptual* and the *realist* simulation styles is its method of diegesis. As to be expected of a strategy game, *Ancestors Legacy* 'abstract[s] to a macro scope', allowing the player to look down upon the world from a bird's eye perspective – the diegetic level of the historian.[232] However, during combat the player may press a button or key to shift perspectives and bring the camera much closer to the action. It is now that *realist* detail becomes important as individuals and man-to-man fighting are made visible. As well as this change to a more intimate perspective, a number of the chapters within each story possess narratives that are focused not on large armies, but

[229] Chibnall, M. (1999). *The Debate on the Norman Conquest*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 14-15.
[230] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 63-73.
[231] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 63-73.
[232] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 63-73.

either small groups or individuals. For instance, the second chapter of Ulf Ironbeard's story (Viking) sees the player take control of a single unit consisting of three men. Later in the first chapter of Rudolf's story (German) the player is forced to use only a single man to infiltrate and sabotage a village. Here narrative is tied to the diegetic level of the agent, rather than the historian. *Ancestors Legacy* has a capacity for both methods of diegesis, but it is apparent, with its mainly macro scope, that the game is closer to the broader diegetic level of the historian than the individual.

The game's epistemology is just as difficult to define. Despite demonstrating some *reconstructionist* tendencies, it can, for the most part, be labelled as *constructionist*. The reasoning for this is twofold. Firstly, the 'primacy of referentiality' seen within games of the *reconstructionist* epistemology is not present within *Ancestors Legacy*.[233] Historical referents are explicitly made use of, but the developers make no claim to be authentically representing the past. They seem reluctant to do so, intentionally skirting around the subject. In much of the promotional material for the game they instead prefer to emphasise its tactical and strategic elements, with authenticity/historicity only getting a passing mention – usually a line or two confirming that the single player campaign is 'based on historical events'.[234] This focus on strategy and tactics, rather than referentiality, forms part of my reasoning for a mainly *constructionist* epistemology. It is within these two ludic aspects of the game that 'rules… work as theory by arguing historical dynamics of the past'.[235] This 'emphasis on theory as the way to explain the past' is naturally *constructionist*.[236] As Chapman affirms, a *constructionist* 'representation [is] weaved of underpinning theoretical rules, with rulesets working across multiple events in history'.[237] This is an apt description of *Ancestors Legacy* and its epistemological stance. Rules governing how specific units fight and how resources are managed and spent, offer representation through theory that works across the game's Middle Ages, from the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 to the German victory during the Battle on the Marchfeld in 1278.

[233] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 66-67.
[234] Destructive Creations. (2019). *Ancestors Legacy - About the Game*. Retrieved from https://destructivecreations.pl/ancestors-legacy/
[235] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 76-77.
[236] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 76-77.
[237] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 76-77.

It should, however, be noted that the linear narratives of the single-player stories and their chapters make a *constructionist* evaluation somewhat tenuous.

Temporal and Spatial Representation

As a real-time strategy game, *Ancestors Legacy* allows for free-flowing *play time* unhindered by the systems seen within turn-based strategy games. The passage of *play time* is matched in equal measure by *fictive time*, at a 1:1 ratio. Despite some processes working at an accelerated rate, such as the construction of buildings, the game can be definitively considered as following the *realist* temporal structure.

The game's use of tense is similar to that of *For Honor's*, with gameplay grounded in the present tense and cutscenes narrated in the past. Its narrative is therefore presented as a past event retold in the present by a contemporary witness. This fits well with its narrative style, reinforcing the story-like presentation the developers were aiming for with each specific (hi)story contained within the four campaigns. *Past time* has no real influence over the events of *Ancestors Legacy*. The developers play very loosely with actual historical events, in some instances fabricating entire battles and figures, so it is unsurprising that *past time* seems so insignificant.

With regard to space, the game follows the *narrative garden* model, 'embedding narrative elements' in the environment 'to tell specific (hi)stories'.[238] Objectives direct the player through each chapter or mission, with paths generally laid out to be obvious. Even in the larger-scale missions, where the player seemingly possesses far more agency in terms of how to go about winning a particular battle, the area in which they must do so is limited. Particularly in the earlier missions, or the chapters in which the focus is on a few individuals, space is dictated to the player by very specific objectives, such as burning a certain village to cause a distraction. Such linearity, which is unusual for a historical strategy game, ensures the player reaches specific (and all) areas sequentially. These areas contain narrative elements the player is compelled to navigate, being staged this way to tell 'the fixed historical narrative that the developers want to communicate and the one we create through play'.[239]

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[238] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-102.
[239] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 101-102

For instance, during the second chapter of Ulf Ironbeard's story (Viking), the player comes across a group of Vikings that have been captured by the Anglo-Saxons and are being burned at the stake. This area, along with the heavy exposition when approaching it, serves to further the historical narrative, however erroneous, pushed by the developers – that Anglo-Saxon resistance to the Viking raid at Lindisfarne was heavy, with reprisals swift and brutal. The Vikings' execution is particularly revealing. Burning at the stake was far more common in the later Middle Ages and for vastly different crimes (heresy, for example); its inclusion here was to convey the above point regarding the nature of Anglo-Saxon resistance, as well as to play on the audience's general expectations of the Middle Ages in order to convince them of authenticity. The area also serves to further the player's own narrative. The area signals to them that the enemies here must be numerous and strong, and that saving their comrades will require thought and planning. They then adapt their play, and their own narrative, accordingly.

The degree to which the player can create their own spatial narratives is determined on a chapter by chapter basis. As previously mentioned, the earlier missions tend to be much more linear, whereas the later ones do offer larger areas with more opportunities to use space to craft narratives. Regardless, *Ancestors Legacy* can be considered to be of the *narrative garden* spatial structure.

Narrative Structure

Ancestors Legacy, like *For Honor*, conforms to the *deterministic* narrative structure. The story is characterised by linearity and 'fixed emplotment', with *ludonarrative* decisions 'not significantly alter[ing] the broader narrative trajectory and structure'.[240] *Ludonarratives* can still be formed, they just have little to no effect on the outcome of the narrative. For instance, during the final chapter of Edward the Confessor's story (Anglo-Saxon), the player may choose how to go about winning the battle – how to arrange their armies, what buildings to construct, when and where to attack – but events remain fixed. Wilburg, for example, always shows up with an additionally army regardless of how the battle is fought. The outcome too remains the same, with Edward's victory or the player's failure. This prioritising of a strong, fixed *framing narrative* ensures a *deterministic* story structure.

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[240] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 128-129.

Like many other games that possess a *deterministic* single-player campaign, *Ancestors Legacy* also has a multiplayer mode that is closer to the *open* story structure. This is due to the outcome of the (very basic) *framing narrative* being influenced by the *ludonarratives* created during play. Put simply, what the players do determines who wins. Aside from this, the game can be considered of the *deterministic* structure.

Representing the Middle Ages: Authenticity, Imagery and Selection

Ancestors Legacy exhibits authenticity through its visuals as well as more implicitly through rules and mechanics. What makes it unique, however, is its commitment to, and method of, creating a Middle Ages that fits a singular and oversimplified representation of the medieval – that it was characterised by bloody conflicts that culminated in huge, epic battles.

Being at the crossroads between *conceptual* and *realist*, *Ancestors Legacy* achieves medieval authenticity both through its visuals and mechanics. Looking to its imagery first, it is clear that visual specificity (a convincing and realistic visual style) does not necessarily equate to historicity. The closeups provided by the action camera mean considerable detail is required to convince the audience of authenticity, but does that detail have to be referentially historical? As previously mentioned when assessing the game's epistemology, referentiality was not the main focus of the developers, but it did still have a place in its development. Tomasz Gop of Destructive Creations clarifies this with the assertion that the team, when designing their Vikings, 'based character designs off how Vikings looked those days, how berserkers looked, the design of their wear, and so on'.[241] Clearly referentiality held some value for the developers, but its importance is rarely stated in promotional materials, with Gop's interview being a notable exception. This begs the question of to what extent historical referentiality is even needed to convince an audience that what they are playing is medieval. It is telling that much of the game's promotional material uses phrases such as "based off/upon" or "inspired by", suggesting that historical referents actually need only form a small part of a game's representation.

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[241] Shephard, H. (2017). *Hatred dev aims to leave controversy behind with Ancestors Legacy*. Retrieved from https://www.pcgamesn.com/ancestors-legacy/ancestors-legacy-rts-strategy-medieval-controversy-hatred

Authenticity can be conveyed, it seems, by satisfying audience expectations of the Middle Ages. Take the berserkers Gop speaks of, for instance. What defined a berserker is still a matter of debate and there is no contemporary evidence that could possibly provide an accurate depiction of one, so how can they be reconstructed to be convincing to a modern audience? The answer, it seems, is very basic referentiality. Being bare-chested, highly muscular and wielding a (preferably) throwable axe is enough to satisfy most that they are indeed the ferocious berserkers the Vikings are famous for. These simple historical referents, referents that barely seem referential given how accepted they are in popular history, have become medievalisms instantly recognisable as being inherently Viking and, in particular, features of berserker warriors. The use of iconography like this is often enough to create a believably medieval world, leaving considerable room for creative licence to do the rest. With *Ancestors Legacy* this is perhaps even truer when taking a step back from the action and viewing the world from above, as it is played for the majority. This abstract, bird's eye view forces a reliance upon more basic visual and audio cues to construct a medieval experience. It is here that established iconography becomes even more important. Figure 8, for instance, shows a battle scene from above. Removed from context, it is impossible to determine who is fighting who and when. However, certain elements that are present here – the catapult, archers, swords, colourful tabards, the fallen castle tower – will cause most to deduce it is a scene depicting a battle from the Middle Ages. This iconography

Figure 8. A screenshot of a typical battlefield in Ancestors Legacy.

– very basic medievalisms – is innately seen as medieval despite being present across a far broader history.

Rules and mechanics offer further representation by way of the previously mentioned *procedural rhetoric*. Because the game is played, for the majority, from a perspective that is removed from that of the agent, it is necessary to provide historical meaning through metaphor and allegory. Again, the berserkers can be used as an example. If a player is unfamiliar with them, they are able to infer meaning from the mechanics encountered through play. When sending them into battle, the player will soon learn that these warriors were powerful but reckless, and potentially a costly risk as they are unable to retreat unlike other units in the game. *Procedural rhetoric* is a useful tool in conveying meaning and telling specific histories, however, these histories do not necessarily have to be accurate. The depiction of the Anglo-Saxons in *Ancestors Legacy* is one such example of this. *Procedural rhetoric* portrays them as freedom fighters with the "guerrilla tactics" skill of the slingers, offering the player meaning that is derivative of fiction, rather than fact.

In terms of representation in the broader sense, the game as a whole is trickier to define than *For Honor* and *KCD*. *For Honor* aimed to and succeeded in *creating a* Middle Ages, while *KCD* aimed to and succeeded in *recreating the* Middle Ages. *Ancestors Legacy* does neither. On the surface, it gives the impression that it is *recreating the* Middle Ages, but in fact, what Destructive Creations produced was closer to *recreating a* Middle Ages. In short, the game reconstructs a version of the Middle Ages with some reference to medieval events to ensure it is sufficiently bloody and "epic" enough to make it entertaining. Needless to say, this version consists of little else but brutality and warfare. Events from the past are taken and shaped into epic (hi)stories that form a glorified representation of the period. The majority of these events and battles occurred on a scale nowhere close to that shown in the game. The Viking raid on Lindisfarne is one such example, as is the Rebellion of Earl Godwin in 1051, which in reality ended with little to no bloodshed, but is dramatized as the (unsurprisingly massive) Battle of Gloucester.[242] The developers, it seems, had a very firm idea of what exactly their Middle Ages had to look like, although they do seem to acknowledge this by frequently pointing out the game is only 'inspired by medieval

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[242] Williams, A. Godwine [Godwin], earl of Wessex. (2004). In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from https://www-oxforddnb-com

times'.[243] Still, given how defenceless Lindisfarne was in reality, one cannot help but roll their eyes when approaching the monastery for the first time, as one of the characters remarks ironically, "I don't recall it being so fortified". It should, however, be noted that Destructive Creations have a record of creating violent games. Before *Ancestors Legacy*, they developed *Hatred*, a game panned and criticised for its extreme levels of excessive violence.[244] Their penchant for virtual brutality, therefore, is more than likely to have had an impact on how they chose to represent the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages *Ancestors Legacy* represents is one of grandeur and bloodshed. The medieval past is taken and shaped to the mould of a cliched interpretation, and then presented as a neat collection of histories to consumers expecting nothing less from a period popularly associated with bloody conflict, and a developer known mostly for its brand of virtual, remedial violence. This is a recreation of *a* Middle Ages; specific histories rebuilt to fit a particular brand of Middle Ages – one of little more than glorified violence.

Further Sites of Representation

Ancestors Legacy possesses no extra-ludic elements from which a player could extract historical meaning. In part this could be due to the restrictions of the relatively linear gameplay structure of the campaigns, but more likely is that the developers saw no need to include sites of representation that went beyond those offered by combat. Even a simple codex or encyclopaedia, like that seen within *KCD* or the *Civilization* series, is not present or needed when the game is offering only a simplified and popularly accepted interpretation of the medieval. It seems low effort, but the fact is this interpretation – of bloody warfare and little else – sells itself, both fiscally and persuasively. Although statistics to confirm this are unobtainable in the case of *Ancestors Legacy*, a game with a similar interpretation of the Middle Ages, *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*, provides the necessary supporting data. This entirely multiplayer hack and slash game has no real story or narrative; its appeal, it seems, comes simply from the excessively bloody bouts of (supposedly) medieval warfare it provides. The game has been very successful considering its humble origins as a mod for the

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[243] Shephard, H. (2017).
[244] Stuart, K. (2015). *Hatred: Gaming's Most Contrived Controversy*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/may/29/hatred-gaming-controversy

first-person shooter, *Half Life 2*, selling over a million copies in just eight months.[245] Before its release on console in October 2014, it had sold 2 million copies.[246] It, like *Ancestors Legacy*, contains no extra features, relying instead upon established iconography and basic referentiality. Both games highlight just how little is apparently required to convince an audience that what they are the playing is set in the Middle Ages.

<u>Gender</u>

For Destructive Creations, the representation of gender, or at least femininity, seems to have held little importance. The game contains no female characters or units at all, a fact that can be attributed to its exclusive focus on warfare and battle. This is as complex as their representation gets; no arguments are explicitly made about masculinity, nor can they be considering the heavy constraints of the strategy game genre. Instead we are left with a very basic interpretation that fits with the simplified version of the Middle Ages presented: warfare was an essential component of the medieval man, and medieval man was an essential component of warfare. Women, it seems, have no place here. Although it is true women were rarely involved in pitched battles in the Middle Ages (there were occasional exceptions), their omission from *Ancestors Legacy* does not hold up to scrutiny when one considers that the game brazenly invents battles and characters at will. Little can be gleaned from the representation of gender in *Ancestors Legacy*, but perhaps something can be said of how definitive its (mis)representation is. In 2019 it seems almost inconceivable for a game to contain no female characters; however, such a decision is unlikely to have been taken without prior thought. Perhaps this was a calculated choice, intended not to erase women from the historical record, but to appeal to a specific audience. This would be, primarily male, gamers that clamour for a perceived notion of "accuracy" based upon a warped historical purism or, often, simply blatant misogynism. Games such as *Battlefield V* have been attacked by those from this camp for placing women on the battlefield, sparking debate and controversy.[247] Given the friction caused by the *Hatred* debacle, it seems likely Destructive Creations simply wanted to avoid courting any further controversy. Perhaps the

[245] Torn Banner Studios. (2012). *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare Sells Over 1 Million Copies*. Retrieved from http://tornbanner.com/blog/chivalry-medieval-warfare-sells-over-1-million-copies/
[246] Matulef, J. (2014). *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare gets a release date on consoles*. Retrieved from https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-10-14-chivalry-medieval-warfare-gets-a-release-date-on-consoles
[247] Plunkett, L (2018). *Oh No, There are Women in Battlefield V*. Retrieved from https://kotaku.com/oh-no-there-are-women-in-battlefield-v-1826275455

appeasing of this vocal minority of players was an intentional strategy then to create an established, safe Middle Ages that would offer no dispute from the historical "purists" they seek to appeal to.

Race

Race is treated in a similarly safe manner to that of gender. The game has not been the subject of any racial controversy, nor does it contain any overt metaphorization relating to the racial struggles and politics of real-world peoples like that which Cooper identifies in *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*. Its depiction of predominantly white European peoples – Vikings, Slavs, Germans and Anglo-Saxons – as entirely white is enough to again appease those who see diversity in historical games as "inaccurate", whilst the macro scope, (mostly) abstract method of diegesis and the post-launch addition of the Saracens have shielded it from criticism and more intense scrutiny. As with the exclusion of women, the exclusion of minorities in the base game (not including the Saracens DLC) was likely welcomed by those misguided, and often racist, individuals that view only a white European history as an "accurate" European history. Again, however, like *KCD*, any arguments for the exclusion of BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) characters on the premise of "accuracy" are made defunct by the highly fictionalised version of events in the game, ranging from minor exaggerations of well documented events to complete fabrications.

The selection and inclusion of races and peoples is a conscious decision made by the developers. Undoubtedly the decision to include the stories of Norsemen and Anglo-Saxons came from their appeal and familiarity to audiences, but those of the Germans and Slavs, which include the relatively obscure campaigns of Rudolf I and Mieszko I respectively, can likely be attributed to the developers' desire to put their (Polish) national history to an international audience. Considering that a sense of national pride and ownership of their history was behind Warhorse Studios' reasoning for doing exactly this with *KCD*, it can be inferred that Destructive Creations held a similar position, although they do not explicitly state this and it does remain unclear. What separates *Ancestors Legacy* and *KCD* in terms of race is Destructive Creations' inclusion of a (hi)story from outside of Europe. With the Saracens DLC comes an entirely non-white race, the Arab Nations led by Saladin. Whether this was planned in advance or was simply an afterthought designed to add some much-needed diversity, it remains a conscious decision to include them. All developers of

medieval video games, and indeed historical games in general, must make similar decisions. How these decisions are influenced depends on a number of factors, including, but not limited to, target audience and a developer's nationality and perspective. The desire of many gamers for the representation of more than just the white European male is also becoming a factor that developers are becoming acutely aware of. With the freedom to recreate a past that can never – even for the want of trying – be a representation of *the* past, developers of medieval games are uniquely placed to deliver on the calls for racial diversity in historical gaming.

Community

In terms of popularity, *Ancestors Legacy* has never been able to compete with other medieval games.[248] A likely line of reasoning is that the game had less exposure due to its independent development, but whatever the reason, a lack of popularity means a lack of engagement among players, and therefore the lack of a large community. The community the game does possess, therefore, is small, with only a handful of dedicated players engaging in discussion and modding. Despite this, it still manages to demonstrate Houghton's model of research and analysis particularly well. For instance, the berserker units of the Vikings have been a topic of much discussion on the game's Steam forums. Here, Houghton's method of data, analysis, debate and counterargument seem most applicable. Data is first discussed with regard to the unit's damage and speed values, with one user pointing out that their retreat mechanic is necessary because 'they have some of the highest damage potential in the game along with insane speeds, making them like a cav[alry] unit'.[249] This ties directly to the analysis of the combat mechanics that sparked this discussion, with the retreat mechanic of the unit being seen by some as too detrimental for them to be useful. Analysis includes scrutiny of the berserkers' efficacy in different combat situations, as well as their viability against other units. From here, some begin to debate how and why the unit should, or should not, be able to retreat. Justifications for a revision of the mechanic are based around ludic necessity, with their increased damage output being

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[248] Steam Charts. (2019). *Ancestors Legacy - Statistics*. Retrieved from https://steamcharts.com/app/620590; Steam Charts. (2019). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Statistics*. Retrieved from https://steamcharts.com/app/379430

[249] Steam, User: ThePendulum. (2019, June 18). *Berserkers*. Retrieved from https://steamcommunity.com/app/620590/discussions/0/1639788130291258196/

viewed as not significant enough to make up for their inability to retreat. Others see the mechanic as a necessary counter, both from a ludic and historical perspective. The user *Farrow* justifies the mechanic by explaining 'berserkers would get totally drugged up to help induce their berserker rage', making their committal in battle absolute.[250] This allusion to a point of historiographical contention, i.e. the reasoning behind the berserkers' apparent ferocity in battle, demonstrates that at least some of those participating in the discussion will have considered historical arguments. Most agree that the developers could have rationalised a better alternative to the no retreat mechanic. Suggestions as to what that could have been are conscious of the "history" – the berserkers' frenzy – but adjust the mechanics in a way that gives the unit improved ludic potential. Allowing them to retreat, for example, could be countered by a forced 'auto-charge' upon seeing an enemy, or a massive morale penalty if the unit does choose to retreat.[251] Due to the small player base and only recent modding support from the developers, these improvements and counterarguments are yet to be realised. Still, it remains clear that Houghton's proposed method of analysis is applicable here, as it is in many other historical games.

Concluding Remarks

Ancestors Legacy does not precisely fit within the parameters of Chapman's criteria. It can best be described as being *realist conceptual* in that it contains elements of both. Its epistemology is similarly abstruse, being mainly *constructionist* but displaying some *reconstructionist* characteristics. Its time structure is, however, easier to identify, being decidedly *realist*. It can also be said for certain that it structures space into *narrative gardens* and that its narrative structure is *deterministic*.

The Middle Ages it recreates is one of simple bloodshed and "epic" history. Authenticity is built using referentiality, iconography and *procedural rhetoric*, resulting in a convincing medieval world no matter how far removed from actual history its campaigns stray. This world, however, is merely a recreation of *a* Middle Ages. Battles, events and locations may be present, but they are recreated in a manner that is becoming of a certain brand of the medieval, one of epic battles and violence, rather than *the* "true" Middle Ages.

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[250] Steam, User: ThePendulum. (2019, June 18).
[251] Steam, User: ThePendulum. (2019, June 18).

The game's depictions of gender and race offer little in terms of analysis, but they do suggest the developers were perhaps targeting a specific white, male audience. Examining the game's small community has been very insightful, however, providing another case to support the theory and framework conceived by Robert Houghton.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to study the fundamentals of medieval representation in digital games. To do so, it has asked two simple questions of the three games used as case studies. Firstly, how have developers used the gamic form to build their Middle Ages and convey authenticity? Secondly, and more importantly, how have developers ultimately represented their Middle Ages and what is the result?

From analysis of the three case studies it is apparent that some of the gamic structures identified by Chapman are favoured more than others when it comes to representing the Middle Ages. All three games, for instance, share a predilection towards a *realist* simulation style, with 'the aesthetics of historical description mainly operat[ing] through the audio-visual aspect'.[252] This is even true of *Ancestors Legacy* to a degree, an RTS game (a genre traditionally associated with the *conceptual* style). What this tells us about gamic representation is that *showing* the past apparently offers more potential for conveying authenticity than mechanics and metaphor. With developments in technology, it seems that superior graphics and computing power may be negating the need for interpretation and *procedural rhetoric*. The visual detail that games can now express makes (re)creating a believable Middle Ages that much easier; for audiences, to see is now to believe. The playable aspect, it seems, is becoming secondary in the conveyance of authenticity.

Analysis of epistemology has been less conclusive. Although each of the three games tends to favour either the *reconstructionist* (*For Honor* and *KCD*) or the *constructionist* (*Ancestors Legacy*), there remains considerable crossover. For instance, *KCD's* focus on referentially and touting of research is in line with Munslow's 'empiricist tradition' and Booth's 'objective process' of *reconstructionism*. However, *constructionist* tendencies become apparent when one considers the interpretation of concept artists, creative directors and historians that worked on the game. Epitomising this is Warhorse Studios' Tobi Stolz-Zwilling, with the simple phrase, '…we also had to interpret a lot'.[253] *For Honor* also shares features of both epistemologies. From this we can conclude that there are significant

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[252] Chapman, A. (2016). pp. 63-64.

[253] Clubit. (2017, December 11). *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Developer Interview* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXWd91GOpq0

obstacles to establishing authenticity and (re)creating a believable medieval world, even when visual referentiality is relied on for the conveyance of authenticity. These obstacles are the gaps left in our history by the passage of time and the scarcity of evidence. To fill these gaps requires the interpretation of the developers and, therefore, a part *constructionist* approach.

The temporal and spatial structures within the three case studies were more consistent than that of simulation style and epistemology. Time is structured in a decidedly *realist* fashion, although it seems those that do so differently, *discretely*, are actually few and far between. Turn-based strategy games usually favour *discrete* time, but their popularity has waned in recent years, with very few medieval games taking this form after 2010. Similarly, games that favour the *canvas* spatial structure are just as rare. Outside of castle simulators and the likes of *Civilization* or *Europa Universalis*, post-2010 medieval games that do not use the *narrative garden* structure are almost non-existent. This suggests that using space to tell a narrative, rather than having the player create one, is a far more effective tool for representing the past. Take *KCD*, for instance. If the world was a blank canvas from which the player had to build their own 15th century Bohemia, few would have the patience or know how to do so. As a *narrative garden* the developers can ease the player into the period, immerse them in its visuals and guide them through the narrative. Its "gardens" can convey historical meaning and authenticity far more effectively than a blank canvas.

As for narrative structure, it is difficult to say which developers favour when representing the Middle Ages. Both *deterministic* and *open* can offer the same possibilities when it comes to authenticity. However, as technology advances further and the power of video games with it, it may be that the *open* structure becomes more widely used as developers are able to make their virtual worlds larger and more detailed.

Before I offer any conclusions on the point of how the Middle Ages has been ultimately represented within the three games, it should be first noted that those analysed here are only a small sample. The trends I identify above are commonalities that can likely be found across most medieval video games, however, as with the content of any representation, how any game utilises the structures of form is not universal in any regard. As Chapman affirms in his work, these structures do not make up a 'complete and distinct

ontology', but rather they act as 'spectrums' upon which a game may find a rather unique place.[254] To further clarify any commonalties and trends in how developers are using the above structures in their medieval games requires further research and a larger sample. Games I suggest for further study include *Stronghold* (2001), *Dark Souls* (2011), *The Sims Medieval* (2011), *Crusader Kings II* (2012), *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare* (2012) and *Mordhau* (2019). Games that have already been subject to study, such as *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings*, *Medieval: Total War* (2002), *Mount & Blade* (2008) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) also warrant further investigation.

The crux of this thesis was to study how developers have represented our medieval past and what Middle Ages they have chosen to represent. Whereas the first half of my analysis of each game dealt with form and structure, the second half examined their content, looking closely at their (re)creation of worlds, treatment of race and gender, and how their representations have been perceived by gamers.

As I have suggested and maintained throughout, the representation each game manifests can be, following close analysis, viewed in simpler terms. *For Honor* presents players with a very unique Middle Ages – one of both fantasy and familiarity, achieving authenticity through a carefully selected combination of historical referents and established iconography. The game creates *a* Middle Ages; the developers blend history, reality and fantasy together as one to form a version of the medieval past conceived from the developers' creative vision. This Middle Ages was made specifically to resemble our medieval past, not replicate it.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance is quite different. Warhorse Studios developed the game with the goal of representing *the* Middle Ages as accurately as possible, specifically 15th century Bohemia. Such a feat was always going to be impossible, but nevertheless, this was undoubtedly the impetus behind the project, its main aim and appeal. The developers attempted to recreate *the* Middle Ages; to reconstruct the "true" past. Ultimately, due to the technical demands of video games and the constraints of the past, *KCD's* Middle Ages is one of compromise, of authenticity rather than accuracy. Both gameplay and visuals achieve this, offering a detailed and realistic past that immerses players in a referentially

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[254] Chapman, A. (2016). p. 80.

reconstructed environment – albeit a past with some understandable inconsistencies and some (less understandable) misrepresentations of race and gender.

Ancestors Legacy represents *a* Middle Ages the likes of which has become something of a cliché. It offers a medieval past that represents nothing more than bloodshed and "epic" history. From a developer known for its brand of remedial violence, the game takes narratives from the past and alters them to the point that even the most mundane of histories becomes a bloody conflict. The game world itself is also built to satisfy this cliché, with locations such as the Lindisfarne monastery made to resemble giant fortresses and battlegrounds. This is a recreation of *a* Middle Ages; narratives and locations are rebuilt and then built upon, refitted and then repurposed to fit a particular (and popular) version of the Middle Ages.

On a final note, I would like to draw one further conclusion from my analysis of race, gender and community. It has become apparent that the games studied here, particularly *For Honor* and *KCD*, have come under considerable scrutiny for their portrayal of certain issues. Clearly, representation matters. As we have seen with *For Honor* and the academic-style debates of some of its players, gamers care about the past that they are presented with, whether "accuracy" is the intention of that past or not. *KCD*, with its vehemently debated racial controversies and homoerotic fan works, also demonstrates that developers now need to be aware that their audiences are far from being simply white, heterosexual and male. Gender, sexual and ethnic minorities of the 21st century have a voice that is finally being heard and the call for inclusivity is stronger than ever.

This begs an intriguing question, who are the players of medieval games? What is their interest and experience with the Middle Ages? What do they expect and want from it? How do they want their past represented? This is a very fruitful avenue for further research. Moreover, answering these questions and raising the issues of gender, sexuality and race may actually aid future developers of medieval games. With a dedicated body of research, much like the one being compiled at *The Public Medievalist*, developers will have access to a

greater volume of scholarly resources that will help them to better present a more diverse

(and authentic) medieval past.[255]

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[255] *The Public Medievalist* contains some excellent scholarly articles pertaining to the matters discussed here, including entire series devoted to gender, sexuality and race. See https://www.publicmedievalist.com/

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