

The Middle Ages in Modern Games: Conference Proceedings

Vol. 2

Edited by Robert Houghton

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UNIVERSITY OF
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CENTRE FOR MEDIEVAL AND
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The Middle Ages in Modern Games: Conference Proceedings Vol. 2

Edited by Robert Houghton

The Public Medievalist

Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Research, University of Winchester

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@MidAgesModGames

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Table of Contents

Introduction: The Middle Ages in Modern Games	1
<i>Robert Houghton</i>	
Part One: Opening Keynote	3
1: Immersion as an Intermedial Phenomenon in Medieval Literature and Modern Games	4
<i>Florian Nieser</i>	
Part Two: Religion and Faith	8
2: What to Expect from the Inquisition: Historical Myth-Unmaking in <i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>	9
<i>Alicia Mckenzie</i>	
3: Where the Goddess Dwells: Faith and Interpretation in <i>Fire Emblem</i>	11
<i>Charlie Edholm</i>	
4: ‘Pseudo-Pseudohistory: The Use and Misuse of Medieval Irish Literature in <i>Scion</i> Second Edition’	12
<i>Emmett Taylor</i>	
5: The Portrayal of the Third Crusade and Crusading Ideology in <i>Dante’s Inferno</i>	13
<i>Juan Manuel Rubio</i>	
Part Three: Cultural Hybridity and Othering	14
6: “Everyone Knows Witches are Barren”: Images of Fertility, Witchcraft and Womanhood in Medievalist Video Games	15
<i>Tess Watterson</i>	
7: Cross Cultural Representation in <i>Raji</i> through Medieval Mythology and Architecture.....	16
<i>Priyanka Das</i>	
8: Cultural Spaces and Hybridity in <i>Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice</i>	17
<i>Jéssica Iolanda Costa Bispo</i>	
9: Unicorn Symbolism in <i>The Witcher</i> Storyworld	18
<i>Alan Lena van Beek</i>	
Part Four: Texts and Cybertexts.....	20
10: Dante in <i>Limbo</i> : Playing Hope and Fear	21
<i>Claudia Rossignoli</i>	
11: <i>Witcher 2</i> : Evolution of Fantasy through the Cybertext Medium.....	23
<i>Neil Nagwekar</i>	
12: Dragons and their slayers: Skyrim in Comparison to Middle High German romances and Heroic Epics	24
<i>Julia Kaspar</i>	

13: Experiencing Chivalric Texts through Gameplay in <i>La Mancha</i>	26
<i>Chris Totten</i>	
Part Five: Urban Environments	27
14: What you Leave Behind – Tracing Actions in Digital Games about the Middle Ages	28
<i>Jonas Froehlich and Tobias Schade</i>	
15: The Medieval City in Computer Games	30
<i>Stefan Ancuta</i>	
16: Medieval Japanese Warfare and Building Construction in <i>Total War: Shogun 2</i>	31
<i>João Paulo da Silva Roque</i>	
17: Visiting the Unvisitable: Using Architectural Models in Video Games to Enhance Sense-Oriented Learning	32
<i>Blair Apgar</i>	
18: The Medieval Influence: <i>Foundation</i> (game)	33
<i>Andy Ashton</i>	
Part Six: Chivalry and Feudalism	34
19: Feudal Law and MMOs: “I’m afraid he’s AFK my liege”	35
<i>Alec Thompson</i>	
20: “They’re Rebelling <i>Again?</i> ” Feudal Relations and Lawmaking as an Evolving Game Mechanic	36
<i>Doug Chapman</i>	
21: Watch your paths well! – On Medievalism, Digital Games and Chivalric Virtues	37
<i>Nico Huss</i>	
Part Seven: Constructing a Middle Ages	38
22: It’s Medievalism Jim, but not as we know it: Super-Tropes and Bastard-Tropes in Medievalist Games	39
<i>Robert Houghton</i>	
23: Vikings and Tudors and Knights, Oh My!: Pick-and-mix-medievalism in <i>Old School Runescape</i>	41
<i>Megan Bunce</i>	
24: How to Survive a Plague of Flesh-Eating Rats: An Introductory Guide to Studying Remediated Gameplay Imaginations of Medieval Folklore and Beliefs in <i>A Plague Tale: Innocence</i>	43
<i>Ben Redder and Gareth Schott</i>	
25: Iconic Bastards and Bastardised Icons: Plebby Quest’s Neomedievalist Crusades	44
<i>Mike Horswell</i>	

Part Eight: Teaching and Research	46
26: <i>Strange Sickness: Running a Crowdfunding Campaign for a Historical Research-Based Game.</i>	47
<i>William Hepburn and Jackson Armstrong</i>	
27: Presenting Your Research Through Games.....	48
<i>Francesco Migliazzo, Jacob Morley and Giuseppe Celico</i>	
28: Analysing and Developing Videogames for Experimental History: Kingdom Simulators and the Historians.....	49
<i>Vinicius Marino Carvalho</i>	
29: <i>Age of Empires II</i> as Gamic History: A Historical Problem Space Analysis	50
<i>Jeremiah McCall</i>	
Part Nine: Anachronisms	51
30: Vikings in Gaming, Gaming with Vikings	52
<i>Lysiane Lasausse</i>	
31: The Middle Ages in Modern Board Games: Some Thoughts on an Underestimated Medium..	53
<i>Lukas Boch</i>	
32: “Is that Staff Egyptian?” Asset Reuse and Historical Argumentation in <i>Assassin’s Creed Valhalla</i>	55
<i>Adam Bierstedt</i>	
33: What Comes After the Apocalypse? Theories of History in <i>Horizon Zero Dawn</i>	56
<i>Carolin Gluchowski</i>	
Part Ten: Whiteness and Indigeneity.....	57
34: Fuck the Paladin and the Horse He Rode In On	58
<i>Paul Sturtevant</i>	
35: The Middle Age as Meme: Medieval Spaces Remixed and Reimagined.....	59
<i>Johansen Quijano</i>	
36: Absent Arabic Women in <i>Assassin’s Creed</i>	61
<i>Simran Dhaliwal</i>	
37: Erasing the Native Middle Ages: <i>Greedfall</i> and the Settler Colonial Imagination.....	62
<i>Thomas Lecaque</i>	
Part Eleven: Race and Nation	63
38: The Sovereign Code: The Eurocentric Mechanics of Nationhood in Strategy Games	64
<i>Rhett Loban and Tom Apperly</i>	
39: Games and Fantasy in the Medieval Middle East.....	65
<i>Edmund Hayes</i>	

40: Problematising Representation: <i>Elsinore</i> and its Reimagination of Hamlet	66
<i>Angshuman Dutta</i>	
41: What It Means To Be Swadian: Encoding Ethnic Identity in Medieval Games	68
<i>James Baillie</i>	
Part Twelve: Modern Impositions.....	69
42: Trying not to Fumble in Medieval Times: Role Playing Games as a Medium of Historiography, Authenticity, and Experiencing the Past	70
<i>James Reah</i>	
43: Medieval Letterings – Gameplay, Argumentum and Conservation.....	71
<i>Tea de Rougemont</i>	
44: Medieval Themes in Modern Board Games	72
<i>Micael Sousa</i>	
45: Remakes and Remasters, Sequels and Expansions: Re-addressing Implemented History	73
<i>Daniel Wigmore</i>	
Part Thirteen: Closing Keynote	74
46: Hearing the Middle Ages: Playing with and Contextualising Acoustical Heritage and Historical Soundscapes Research.....	75
<i>Mariana Lopez</i>	

Introduction: The Middle Ages in Modern Games

Robert Houghton, @robhoughton, University of Winchester

The second Middle Ages in Modern Games Twitter conference was held over four days in May 2021 and comprised papers from 50 scholars and game developers dealing with the medieval and medievalism in games of all sorts. Each paper comprised a 12 Tweet thread detailing the author's current research and work. Papers were grouped into thematic sessions and bookended by two 24 Tweet keynote from Florian Nieser and Mariana Lopez. These proceedings compile the papers from this event in a permanent and more easily accessible format. In many cases, these papers represent embryonic ideas or work in progress. Nevertheless, a great range of important and innovative ideas are presented within this volume and the contributors future work should be watched with interest.

History games are important. They're hugely influential media both within and outside the classroom. This can be a positive thing as they can inspire interest in the field, help us think about the past, and help us discuss contemporary issues. But this can also be a problem. Games can present outdated or unfounded perspectives. They can struggle to present serious issues in an effective manner. From corpse Tetris in *Playing History: The Plague* to quiet imperialist doctrine in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, there's a plethora of issues with history in games.

Ludic representations of the Middle Ages are particularly important. There's growing evidence that these games can have the greatest impact on their players and the collision between medievalist and gaming tropes can lead to stronger stereotypes or unexpected accounts. But there's a huge amount of potential here too. Games can be fun and still historically valid. Serious games and critical play can make games valuable academic tools. There's growing constructive interaction between developers and scholars.

The papers in this conference address the issues and opportunities for games and the Middle Ages. Amongst diverse approaches from many fields of study and key industry voices, three key themes emerged:

First: many papers presented innovative and timely work on race, whiteness, and indigeneity within and around games and the Middle Ages. As many of our speakers demonstrated, there exists a huge amount of research within this subfield, but a vast amount remains to be explored and developed in practice. Of particular importance, many speakers looked at the causes of problematic representations and engagements and suggested solutions from commercial and scholarly standpoints.

Second: a substantial number of papers engaged with the creation of games for commercial, teaching and research purposes. This is an important move away from scholarly criticism of games towards a more active participation in their development and modification. There has traditionally been a divide between scholars and game developers around the study and construction of games and these papers show vital movements to collaboration from both sides.

Third: many papers provided a consideration of how the ludic Middle Ages are constructed. These papers consider the various influences on developers in constructing their representations of the period including the impact of modern medievalisms and socio-political environments and the impact of the nature and expectations of games as a medium. Other papers have considered the role of players in developing these historical accounts. This is an important move from the 'what' towards the 'why' and 'how'.

Ultimately, amongst an array of divergent papers, a movement away from old towards a more constructive and progressive approach to the Middle Ages in Modern Games can be observed.

This conference builds on the work presented last year at The Middle Ages in Modern Games Twitter conference 2020. The papers from this earlier event are available here: https://issuu.com/theuniversityofwinchester/docs/final_mamg20_threads. The first (2020) iteration of this event was very much an ad-hoc solution to the unfolding global crisis and the (eminently sensible) cancellation of the key in-person conferences *The Middle Ages in the Modern World* and the *International Medieval Congress* (Leeds). Papers from the games strands at each of these events, augmented by several new speakers, formed the basis for this first event. The 2021 conference benefited from experience with the format and an extended lead in time which allowed a global call for papers and facilitated the organisation of a larger event.

The event was sponsored by *The Public Medievalist* sponsor whose huge range of open access popular articles on all forms of medievalism, including games may be found here: <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/category/games/>. The event was also sponsored by the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Research at the University of Winchester: <https://www.winchester.ac.uk/research/our-impactful-research/research-in-humanities-and-social-sciences/research-centres-and-networks/centre-for-medieval-and-renaissance-research/>. The incredible artwork used on the cover is taken from *The Wagadu Chronicles* with kind permission from Twin Drums. Details about their fantastic work are available here: <https://thewagaduchronicles.com/>

The third Middle Ages in Modern Games Twitter conference will take place on June 8-11 2022. The call for papers will be released in December 2021 from the conference Twitter account: @MidAgesModGames.

24: How to Survive a Plague of Flesh-Eating Rats: An Introductory Guide to Studying Remediated Gameplay Imaginations of Medieval Folklore and Beliefs in *A Plague Tale: Innocence*

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Medieval games are exhibiting more authentic gameplay animations of past imaginative fantasies. This presentation unpacks this statement and explores the value of historical fantasy via a few exemplar remediations of Medieval folklore in *A Plague Tale: Innocence*. Historical fantasy is one of several key areas of my (Ben Redder's) current PhD study into the ways different modalities of gameplay represent history. This includes a developing historical modality concept 'Imaginative History' (poetic and fictional imaginations of history).

Historical fantasy is just one type of gameplay style of imaginative history. It utilizes content, narratives, and aesthetics that bear traces of literacies on past imaginations within old folktales, legends, mythology, religion, visual art, literary and dramatic works. *Plague Tale* exhibits varying imaginative histories of the plague. Set in fourteenth-century France, the game re-imagines or substitutes the real Black Death with a supernatural rat plague called 'The Bite'. *Plague Tale's* plague rat swarm, while partly connected to the popular perception of rats as disease carriers and the origin of the Black Death, are closely authenticated to premodern folkloric evidence of representing plague disasters through rats such as 'Rat King' and Popiel.

As a prime source of imaginative history on the plague, *Plague Tale's* rat swarm remediates several past plague imaginations as fantastical gameplay experiences via its supernatural pestilential powers, each power relating to the plague as famine, disease, and urban pollution. Rats physically devour both humans and animals, transmit diseases through biting victims, and decimate urban centers through putrefaction. Their ability to consume flesh is experienced on many occasions like the death of the monk Father Thomas. Piles of deceased victims with large black buboes and discharges of blood are found. These images of death constitute fantasized yet authentic referents to bubonic deaths as witnessed and documented by Medieval writers (e.g. Giovanni Boccaccio and Michele de Piazza). Finally, the game contains rat breeding nests that comprise a strange black substance, playing on early modern body metaphors of cities as corrupt pestilential bodies in order to playfully subvert Medieval motifs of cities as order, light, and civilization.

These rat powers combined are a consistently horrific experience. As fantasy constructs, they elevate the rat plague to an apocalyptic and unrelenting force of nature sparing neither good nor evil in similarity to other plague adaptations like *The Red Masque of Death*. Concurrently, they constitute as a particular imaginative history on pre-modern plague folklore by being historical gameplay remediations of personifications evident in Medieval rat folktales like *Mouse Tower* and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*.

In conclusion, the rat horde is only one of *Plague Tale's* imaginative histories via gameplay that offer fantasized historical knowledge on actual past imaginations of Medieval plague in its past usage as a complex all-encompassing expression for different types of disasters.