Fiction as History: 'Truth' and 'Authenticity' in *Total War: Rome 2* and *Total War: Warhammer*

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Keywords

Total War, Warhammer, Historical Games, Fiction, Mods

INTRODUCTION

A breadth of work in game studies is increasingly exploring the ways in which digital games represent and offer engagement with history (Kapell and Elliot 2013, Chapman, 2016, Kempshall 2015, McCall 2011). However, whilst formal and textual approaches to historical games themselves are commonplace, work considering the perceptions, discourses and practices involved in their production and consumption are less so (Chapman, Foka and Westin 2016). Similarly, it can also be argued that often games containing fantastical or fictional elements alongside the overtly historical have also been too easily dismissed (Koski 2016). By comparison, in this paper we consider the ways in which the formally informed practices of developers relate to the discursive communities that surround the playing and modification of historical and fictional games - with particular reference to the *Total War* series.

Total War is one of the most popular historical game series and has been developed by Creative Assembly since 2000. A testament to the popularity of this genre of historical game: following the release of *Total War: Attilla* (set in Europe around 400AD), Creative Assembly announced there were over a million unique players of games in the series each month. In *Total War*, players control a representation of a historical empire. Territories are reduced to a small number of major towns or cities, with a limited number of building 'chains' which players must balance between military production, economic return and other factors such as religious belief, culture, sanitation, food production and defense. Upgraded military buildings allow access to more powerful military units, based on historical military units and expectations – by developers – of that unit's historical abilities. Units are assembled into armies which players can move around the map to fight opponent empires controlled by non-player AI. Unlike similar turn-based grand strategy games like *Civilization*, *Total War* battles are fought by players on a zoomed in map where the player has a birds-eye, *Kriegspiel* tabletop view of the battle, controlling each unit individually and attempting to flank and outmaneuver their foe. An empire's units

have special abilities (for example Roman *Legio* can form a *Testudo* to increase missile defense) rooted in historical military understanding.

Games in the *Total War* series highlight a tension in games which represent history, where developers must balance gameplay and historical accuracy. Whilst accuracy is doubtlessly often very important to players enthusiastic about history, concentrating on this to the point of impingement on the game's agonistic "equality of chances" (Caillois 2001, 16) is a "dangerous strategy when aiming at more mainstream audiences who might be interested in games that only happen to be historical and are therefore more likely to be frustrated by imbalance" (Chapman 2016, 160). As such, concessions often include changing units' power so gameplay is balanced and omitting certain elements in order to reduce complexity. The game's developers articulate this as the pursuit of *authenticity*; creating an authentic sense of space (Brown, 2013), rather than historical accuracy.

However, *Total War* games have a rich modding community where the most popular mods are downloaded over 150,000 times - "...a new, albeit digital, wave of popular history revisionists" (Chapman 2013, 317). We argue that these mods reveal and reflect the tensions involved in the ways that historical games like *Total War* represent, reenact and simulate history and the kinds of discourses, cycles of historical exchange and communities of practice that such games sustain. For example, many *Total War: Rome 2* mods pursue the creator's version of historical accuracy. The seventh most popular *Total War* mod (*Divide Et Impera*) on the Steam Workshop, for instance "*seeks to provide a challenging, historically authentic, realistic experience of the ancient world and warfare*". Other mods support player pursuits of historically grounded play, such as 'Guaranteed Major Faction Empires' (downloaded 25,000 times) which attempts to ensure large empires that are distant to the player's empire do not get defeated by non-player AI. 'Realistic Legionary Tactics' similarly seeks to make the game less balanced in pursuit of *reenactment*:

> *HISTORY IS NOT BALANCED: Rome fell when they stop "being romans", not as romans. It is my believe that the fall of Rome happened when they became more barbarian-like and the barbarians more romanized. They abandoned scutum, lorica segmentata and many other practices that go beyond the military realm. Yes i'm bias and my mod is too. its my version reenactment.*

In our presentation, we will further detail the results of our analysis into the different ways that *Total War* mods attempt to pursue different versions of truth through altering the simulation of the game. We will also explore the ways in which these mods are framed, both by their creators and the wider community, as performing a 'public good', i.e. being frequently framed as holding wider educational, moral, documentary or memorial value.

Of particular interest is the way in which some of the rhetoric concerning accuracy and balance around these mods does not change in reference to *Total War: Warhammer* (2016)*,* the first *Total War* game to be based in fiction (the non-digital tabletop fantasy Warhammer wargame). For example, the 'True Siege of Karak Kadrin' mod pursues truth in the fictional lore of the game which is expanded on in over 30 years of game rulebooks and fictional novels:

> *Dwarf holds are famously difficult to assault, and this map aims to do justice to the Dwarf's legendary resistance. It's my attempt at a loreful recreation of a Karak siege, and as such this map is not meant to be a fair fight, it's meant to be a fun fight. Better bring some flying units if you're planning on assaulting this keep. Good luck.*

In Game Studies, fiction and history are largely treated as separate. However, these modding practices suggest that further work exploring the ways that fiction and history affect player experience, game development processes, and player behavior are warranted.

OPTIONAL BIO

Marcus Carter is a Lecturer in Digital Cultures at The University of Sydney. He recently co-edited *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader* published by The University of Minnesota Press. His prior work includes studies of the non-digital Warhammer 40,000, as well as digital games like EVE Online and DayZ.

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