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Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice, *by Adam Chapman. New York: Routledge, 2016. (Book Review)*

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Adam Chapman is a senior lecturer at University of Gothenburg, with PhD in media, culture and society and background in history and cultural history. The main subject of his research is how videogames shape our understanding and representation of history. «Digital Games as history» collects and summarizes his previous articles in a single volume.

The main question in Chapman's book is whether we can use video games to tell history and, if so, how games, as a medium, influence historical narrative. There are, of course, a number of researchers in the fields of both history and game studies who have addressed this very subject. Their evaluation of videogames' potential varies from an optimistic approach, such as Niall Fergusson's (cf. Vasagar) suggestion to include historical videogames into school curriculum, to argument about the possible harm they can cause, presented by scholars like Alessandro Testa. Among these, Chapman's work stands out because it is not confined to analysis of one game or genre. Instead, it explores the medium itself in all its generic variety and the ways it represents historical content in general.

Chapman's work is well grounded in the existing game studies theory. His analysis relies upon such concepts as procedural rhetoric (cf. Bogost) and ludic space (cf. Arseth). But his main method is based on applying Gibsonian psychology to videogames, as suggested by Jonas Linderoth (cf. Linderoth and Bennestedt). He also relies on studies about historical representation in cinema, especially Robert Rosenstone.

Digital Games as History consists of three parts. The first part introduces some introductory concepts in the study of digital games as historical matter. Chapman thoroughly discuss the problem of "popular history" as opposed to "academic history". His main idea (9) is that difference between those two fields is a matter of degree and purpose, but not the kind. Chapman states that popular history, presented in such medias as films and videogames, can still be used to make statements about the past and, therefore, can and should be studied and respected. He also point out that videogames have become too influential to be ignored and must be studied as a new medium whether we like the content of particular games or not. In the same part, he introduces ideas and terms crucial for the book. Most importantly - the concept of "historying" (21), making one's own statements and propositions about the past, which differs from history as the passive reception of information presented by historians. Chapman insists that historying is one of the most important practices that videogames can offer

The second part is dedicated to the formal analyzsis of videogames as historical medium. Here, Chapman uses broad categories, like time and space, different simulation styles and the relationship between player's agency and narrative restriction to propose a theoretical framework capable of describing any historical game. He introduces realistic (61) and conceptual (69) narrative styles, connecting them to different historical epistemologies. Realistic narrative style, presented mainly in shooters, favors showing history, relies on the visual element of the game and is best suited to the reconstructionist approach. Conceptual style, used in global strategies like Sid Meier's Civilization, prefers to tell history and allows players to interact with more abstract historical concepts and better understand historical causality, and can be compared to

constructionist history. Chapman also mentions a third epistemology, deconstructionist, mainly focused in the process of writing history itself. This approach does not have any particular corresponding narrative style, but still can be found in videogames, thanks to some of their postmodern qualities (81)

Finally, the last part considers practical approaches for using videogames as a medium for representation of historical content and, especially, for historying. Here, Chapman proposes three main roles: videogames as heritage experience, reenactment and narrative historying. All three roles are then described through the lens of affordance – a concept borrowed from Gibsonian ecological psychology. Chapman uses this idea on two levels. First, he notices that historical videogames themselves deal with affordance. Because of player agency, Chapman argues, games tell us more about what historical agents could do and less about what they actually did. This, obviously, sets them apart from linear narratives presented in history books and historical movies. However, videogames as a medium offer another kind of affordance making heritage experience, reenactment and, most important, narrative historying more available to individual players.

The last thesis Chapman proffers is both the most ambitious and the most problematic idea in the book. He proposes that videogames with conceptual narrative style can be used in order to give players the ability for historying. By supplementing necessary factual knowledge and, partly, scientific apparatus with information presented inside the rules of the game, they allow individual players to create narratives about the past, deepening their historical understanding (189). Chapman insists that even counterfactual narratives fall into the domain of history, since they can serve as a tool for a more complex understanding of historical causality and reasons behind real past events. All of this serves as a method of enfranchisement (272). In the words of de Groot, enfranchisement can be understood as a "mode of theorizing access to the past which attempts to somehow allow the ordinary citizens democratic access to the institutions and discourse of history." (De Groot 60)

While Chapman makes some compelling argument in support of using videogames for this purpose, his thesis itself is somewhat controversial because of the ideological layer presented in any videogame and, especially, in any conceptual videogame. Chapman himself admits this earlier in the book and advises critical thinking when dealing with historical narratives in videogames. However, in the chapter dedicated to discussion about enfranchisement, he does not address that problem. While that does not strip his proposition of its merit, it does present an obstacle for using videogames' potential for historying. Another problem, in my view, is the rather uncritical acceptance of some tendencies in videogame industry as a solid characteristic of the medium itself. Some of his generalizations for example, in the analyzes of space in videogames (chapter 4, pp 90-119) leaves the impression that violence and competition are so essential for this medium that it's hard to create a game around a historical topic other than war or similar situation. While videogames (and games in general) do lean towards competition, this is obviously not as universal and widespread a tendency as it may seem. In fact, we already know historical videogames like The Guild series, which present almost no direct conflict, instead focusing on economic development and roleplaying.

Having said all this, Digital Games as History is an insightful work, persuasive and accessible for everyone interested in the questions around videogames and history, both scholars and common readers. one strength of the work lies in the fact that the author attempts to provide an answer to all the questions he raises in the beginning of the book. Furthermore, many of Chapman's findings regarding the structure of historical games can be applied to other fields of game studies, making his work an indispensable read in the pool of works dealing with the value of videogames as more than entertainment.

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Author's biography

Naima Shaheen is completing a master's degree in British and American Studies at Bielefeld University. Her major research interest lies in analyzing the representation of human psychology in digital games, especially concerning the question how mental diseases of playable characters are reflected in horror games. She is further interested in how new narrative possibilities provided by video games change the reception and understanding of mental illness and of narratives in general.