

**1. Authenticity, Historicity,
and Cultural Practices**
Experience *in* and of
Game Worlds

Historical Digital Games as Experiences

How Atmospheres of the Past Satisfy Needs of Authenticity

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Abstract In this chapter, historical digital games are identified as offerings of an experience economy comparable to formats of heritage tourism or living history. As such, the historical digital game aims to satisfy needs of authenticity. Authenticity is subsequently defined as a feeling rather than an objective quality and thereby separated from accuracy. To evoke this feeling, a game like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Montreal, Quebec 2018) employs atmospheres of the past, which are introduced as a novel concept in this chapter. Finally, a preliminary framework between the poles of situations and constellations is offered to enable researchers to analyse such atmospheres.

Keywords Atmospheres, authenticity, accuracy, phenomenology, public history, experience, tourism, heritage, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*

Introduction

To grasp what makes players all over the world come back to the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007–2020) every time a new franchise title is introduced, I ventured to the major distribution platform *Steam* and had a look at the store page of one of its most recent iterations, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Montreal, Quebec 2018). The platform enables players to write reviews for the games they have played and either evaluate them as “Recommended” or “Not Recommended”. At the time of writing this text, the platform offers more than 33,000 reviews to interested parties trying to find out more about the game—or about the people that play them.¹ What I learned

1 The reviews referred to in this text are of course only a small sample of the entirety of reviews on *Steam*. Still, I see them as valuable clues to support my argument that atmospheric experience is of relevance for players of digital games. Further qualitative research is needed.

from scratching the surface of this vast pool of opinions is that players have heavily different motivations for playing this game and consequently different ways of writing about it. What sparked my interest as a Public Historian is how players describe their engagement with the setting of the game, which tells an alternate history of the Peloponnesian War and enables traversal of numerous Greek islands by foot, horse and ship. In a review, which 1,995 people “found helpful”, the user “steve.marte” for example writes: “[g]etting to walk the streets of Athens, Argos and Elis was like taking a trip back in time. Magical” (2019). What immediately strikes me as odd here is that someone who obviously could not have lived in the fifth century BC would describe his experience as “taking a trip back in time”. It appears that *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* is able—at least in this player’s opinion—to create a convincing illusion of another time which becomes accessible as a virtual world. Additionally, user “ricmadeira” claims that “Ancient Greece really comes alive in this game” (2018) while “Makam” writes that “[t]he game really feels and plays like you are in the middle of Ancient Greece” (2018). The latter determines “the atmosphere” of the game as the “best of all ingredients” and notes that “it’s like all school history books from that era came to life” (ibid.). The reviews clearly share their admiration for some kind of experience that corresponds with what they imagine the exploration of the Greek islands of this time period would have felt like. Finally, while the user “Abz” comes to the conclusion that the game “follows the Greek mythology to it’s [sic!] lore [...] which makes the game all more historically accurate” (2018), “Makam”, on the other hand, attests that “[i]f you liked the movie ‘300’ you will love this too” (2018). Whatever constitutes the experience praised in these reviews appears to be a blend of pop cultural influences and contents which are deemed “historically accurate”.

In the following pages, I will attempt to outline a theoretical framework which enables researchers to appropriately describe and dissect this experience of the game. For this purpose, I will firstly describe how historical digital games can be understood as part of the “experience economy” as outlined by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (1998, 97) and which is essential to understanding modern day engagements with the past. I will then continue by explaining how these games—as experiences of the past—can be seen as an instrument to satisfy needs of authenticity. Consequently, I will have to clarify what authenticity means in context of historical digital games and how it needs to be separated from ideas of accuracy. Then, I will claim that authenticity is a feeling which is evoked by engaging with atmospheres of the past. Finally, I will offer a preliminary² framework between the poles of situations and constellations to analyse these atmospheres of the past as they arise in digital game worlds.

2 The theory outlined in this chapter is developed as part of my doctoral project which explicitly focuses on atmospheres of the past in digital games. The arguments brought forth here are results of my early stage research.

Historical Digital Games as Experiences

In 1998, Pine and Gilmore claimed that western economy had entered a phase of an “emerging experience economy” (1998, 97), which is defined by the notion that experiences are in themselves “economic offering[s]” warranting the use of “admission fee[s]” to regulate participation in them (ibid., 100). They describe this phase at the end of the twentieth century as a transitory one in which experiences were primarily used to enhance the sales potential of goods and services. What they envisioned, however, is a fully developed experience economy in which experiences themselves can be sold independently from “traditional offerings” (ibid., 98). Now, around twenty years later, it can be said that they rightly predicted an ever-increasing importance of the commodification of experiences in the twenty-first century. Their ideas correspond well with what Eva Illouz terms “emodities” as the amalgamation of emotions and commodities and therefore of an emotional charging of consumption (2018, 23). Interestingly, Pine and Gilmore already hinted at the potential for “interactive games”, as they call them, to “render ever-more immersive experiences” (1998, 99). It is in this vein that I want to see historical digital games as a product of the experience economy and consequently as a commodification of experiences of the past and thereby as emodities.

Historical digital games, I am arguing here, are especially successful products of the experience economy as they are means to satisfy the need for authentic experiences, which is part of the human condition of late modernity. Here, modernity is understood as a “response [...] to the condition of modernization and the consequences of progress” (Boym 2001, 22). To elaborate: it was Jean Baudrillard who claimed that humanity entered a “hyperreal nebula” in late modernity (or, as some call it, postmodernity) which is characterised by an “implosion of the medium and of the real” (1994, 82). Hyperreality here refers to the idea that the integrity of representations itself is questioned as they begin to not refer to reality anymore but to themselves, eventually creating an illusion of reality, “a real without origin” (ibid., 1) and therefore a hyperreal. It is not my aim to follow Baudrillard’s “bleak pessimism” (Dow 2013, 225) here but to less radically point out the increasing uncertainty in everyday interactions of people all over the world questioning information they receive, images they see or relationships they have, not least induced by the success of digital communication media (Kerz 2017, 34). Additionally, as Zygmunt Bauman, a critical observer of modernity, notes, it is the failure of the state to sufficiently support its citizens and to instead force them to confront the challenges of life with their “(in most cases, grossly inadequate) resources” (2017, 42). The alleged necessity to see your peers as competitors in a fight for a place in the sun erodes even the basal certainty that could be found in face-to-face contact with other people (MacCannell 1999, 91). Without further elaborating on this admittedly broad subject, I want to conclude for the sake of my argument that the modern individual is faced with porous certainties and therefore suffers from “feelings

of lack” (Vidon et al. 2018, 63). As a reaction, the individual is in dire need to find the real again, the unmediated, the unfiltered or, in short: the authentic (see Zimmermann 2020).

Therefore, authenticity is a “term of crisis” which has gained importance since the second half of the twentieth century and is notable for its postulated double function as a symptom of the crisis sketched above and as a cure (Knaller and Müller 2006, 10–11). Inscribed in the search for authenticity is the hope to find certainty in a time of uncertainty. As the future appears bleak and riddled with anxiety over job perspectives, long-lasting relationships or even the climate, the modern individual resorts to the past. This past, it seems, is not gone and forever inaccessible but a “perfect snapshot” (Boym 2001, 49) which can be reconstructed to bring the authentic back into the present. Heritage practices like heritage tourism (Chhabra et al. 2003), re-enactment (Daugbjerg 2016) or living history museums (Kerz 2017) are dedicated to this reconstruction, to “turn[ing] the past into something visitable” (Macdonald 2013, 18). Thereby, they enable authentic experiences for their visitors who take advantage of this offering of a developed experience economy to satisfy their needs.

I want to stress the role of digital games as an interaction with the past which can only be understood if they are seen in the context of other heritage practices and are consequently seen as a specific form of such practices. Erik Champion already did some valuable research on this, attesting that digital games take part in processes of “virtual heritage” (2015, 95), as did Adam Chapman who claims that some games “are capable of offering access to heritage experiences” (2016, 177). Going in a somewhat similar direction, I want to claim that historical digital games are offerings of an experience economy dedicated to creating authentic experiences, which warrants the question of how a convincing authentic experience is realised in a digital game like *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*.

Authenticity as Feeling

Historical authenticity is heavily and often overanxiously discussed in the context of digital games.³ However, while some researchers point out that “the videogames medium increasingly considers authenticity and accuracy to be separate designations rather than two sides of the same coin” (Sweeting 2019, 65), there still remains a problematic confusion on the difference between accuracy and authenticity. For example, Tara Jane Copplestone writes in her engaging study that “accuracy” is “relational, subjective

3 See for example the discussion on female characters in *Battlefield V* (EA DICE 2018) as reviewed by Owan Good 2018.

and contingent on the parties involved, media form used and the purpose of the account” (2017, 417), a definition which rather seems to fit the term “authenticity”. It is important here to differentiate between ‘object authenticity’ on the one and ‘subject authenticity’ on the other side. The former term refers to the empirical verification of originality and is of importance for the auxiliary sciences of history or for archaeology when tracing the origins of a given object (Pirker and Rüdiger 2010, 14). The latter term typically refers to the idea of being real to oneself, of acting according to one’s true nature (Saupe 2016). I want to follow a different meaning of ‘subject authenticity’ or rather, to avoid confusion, of a ‘subjective authenticity’ which has been productively refined in tourism studies (Wang 1999; Olsen 2002; Chhabra et al. 2003; Vidon et al. 2018). This is not the place to elaborate on the numerous theories on this kind of authenticity, which have been developed since the second half of the twentieth century. It is, however, important to note how the subjective dimensions of authenticity are theorised in this specific field of research. Based on Ning Wang, who has described authenticity as an “existential state of Being” (1999, 352), Kjell Olsen emphasises that the corresponding “feelings [...] are constructed in a social process” (2002, 164) and thereby he encourages researchers to pay attention to the processes which allow for such feelings of authenticity to arise. Quite generally, I would argue, it is only by utilising such a process-oriented perspective which unearths power structures, modes of staging, and relations between actors that it becomes possible to get the pluralistic terminological charge of the term authenticity under control.⁴ In this sense, and this appears to be the common ground of research on historical authenticity, it is impossible to precisely separate objective and subjective dimensions of authenticity. Rather, current research is focused on how these dimensions interact and intertwine (see Sabrow and Saupe 2016, 11). One way in which they interact is by means of atmospheres of the past as I will argue below. In my focus on digital game worlds, I am influenced by the valuable contributions of Andrew J. Salvati’s and Jonathan M. Bullinger’s concept of “selective authenticity” (2013) and Tobias Winnerling’s theory of “affective historicity” (2014).

To be clear: there can be no object authenticity in a digital game because every object, even the most detailed one, is always a simulation. Still, to complicate this, digital games often refer to object authenticity and create the illusion that they can reach such a form of authenticity. Here, the term ‘accuracy’ is again of importance. It describes the process of referring to object-authentic, that is: verified real-world objects by imitating them as closely as possible. Functions like *bump mapping* or *screen space reflections* are used in advanced game engines to make this imitation possible (see for example Bonner 2014, 219). Also, accuracy is often used to describe an adherence of a given game to ‘facts’ verified by historical science. As Copplestone points out, the reasoning

4 Elsewhere, I have called this the “semantic burden” of authenticity (Zimmermann 2020, 11).

behind this lies in the authority of the verified object or fact and in its power to again verify the setting and narrative of a game. She writes that “[t]he majority of both videogame players and creators [...] correlated accurate representations to the authority of these outcomes” (Copplestone 2017, 421–22) and thereby hints at an important power structure at work in digital games. It is therefore important to understand the idea of accurate representation in digital game worlds as a process of authentication. Accuracy and authenticity are never the same. It is the feeling of authenticity which counts in the end and which constitutes if a given player will accept a given game as an authentic display of a given time. Accuracy is a means to increase the *likelihood* of a feeling of authenticity to arise. In this sense and especially in the context of digital game worlds, accuracy is subordinate to authenticity and an enabler or amplifier of the latter rather than an aim in itself.

Here, I need to add that accuracy does not automatically refer to an adherence to the state of research in the historical sciences. Being accurate to pop culturally infused ideas of the past or to possibly outdated knowledge acquired at school, in short, to an “elementary discourse” (Winnerling 2014, 159), can also increase the chance of feelings of authenticity to arise. Furthermore, there are other processes at work in historical digital games apart from accuracy, which contribute to a feeling of authenticity. It is even possible for feelings of authenticity to arise even if the participants of a given experience are fully aware of the fact that there are no verified objects present or that the postulated object authenticity is an illusion (Vidon et al. 2018, 62–63). In the following pages of this text, I now want to claim that it is the interaction with convincing atmospheres of the past which allow for feelings of authenticity to arise.

Atmospheres of the Past

Atmospheres of the past are the most important medium capable of producing feelings of authenticity. Understanding how they are created and how they influence participants—or players, in this specific case—means understanding how historical digital games can be influential and successful heritage practices despite the fact that they cannot deploy ‘real’ object authenticity. As elaborated above, I want to understand authenticity as a feeling. In the case of the digital game, it can be further described as a convincing feeling of “as-if” (Kerz 2017, 126) as the status of the digital game being a simulation is undeniable, even for the most immersed player. Therefore, the digital game “does not simulate a real world but familiarizes us with the simulation as real” as Konrad Wojnowski puts it (2018, 91), which, again, does not imply that feelings of authenticity become impossible to achieve. Rather, by means of producing atmospheres, the simulation can indeed satisfy needs of authenticity.

“Atmospheres fill spaces; they emanate from things, constellations of things, and persons”, as Gernot Böhme writes (2017, 25). Quite similar to Christina Kerz, I want to understand atmospheres as a medium connecting perceiving subjects with their surroundings on a phenomenological level (2017, 55–58). As Kerz, referring back to Jean-Paul Thibaud, writes in her insightful study of the living history site *Colonial Williamsburg* in the U.S. federal state of Virginia: “we are not sensing an atmosphere itself, but perceiving a situation according to the atmosphere that our lived body is immersed in” (2016, 916). This underlines that atmospheres are able to change our assessment of a given space—may it be a real or a virtual one. That it is in fact possible to interact with atmospheres of virtual worlds has already been argued by Marc Bonner (2014, 213) and myself (Zimmermann 2019, 53–62), heavily drawing upon Rune Klevjer’s phenomenological discussion on the player-avatar coupling (2012). To avoid a lengthy discussion here, I want to attest that players are able to extend their “bodily space” into the virtual worlds of digital games (Klevjer 2012, 23).

Atmospheres are a medium that is used to produce certain feelings in certain contexts, for example feelings of authenticity in the context of historical digital games. They are created by “aesthetic workers”, as Böhme calls them (2017, 73), which can refer to anyone involved in the production of digital games, including level and environment artists, as well as user interface or sound designers. Atmospheres of the past are a specific manifestation of the medium ‘atmosphere’, created to satisfy needs of authenticity by designing the game in a way that it successfully offers a convincing simulation of a specific time and space. To analytically grasp atmospheres, it is paramount to understand that they are always perceived as a “total impression” (“Totaleindruck”) and can only be dissected in their constituent parts afterwards (Kerz 2017, 58). The analytical process can therefore be described as a translation of a given situation to a constellation.

To give an example of how a constellation analysis can be conducted: on the way towards the harbour of Naxos on the island of the same name, players of *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* enter a certain atmosphere of the past which I would describe as calm and warm (depending on the in-game time and game state). This atmosphere, experienced as a total impression of the situation, colours the interaction with the game world without players actively having to reflect on their surroundings (» *Fig. 1*).

It is hardly possible to precisely determine what players are doing, thinking or feeling when arriving at these crossroads in the game and it would be a futile endeavour to speculate on it without conducting elaborated reception and user studies. Players might be running away from hostile forces, they might be trying to get to their ship as fast as possible or they might be looking for a place to stroll around and enjoy the sunset—and this is not even taking into account the different play settings in the real world. The whole idea of the constellation analysis is to bypass these eventualities of



Fig. 1 A situation. The island Naxos in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018).

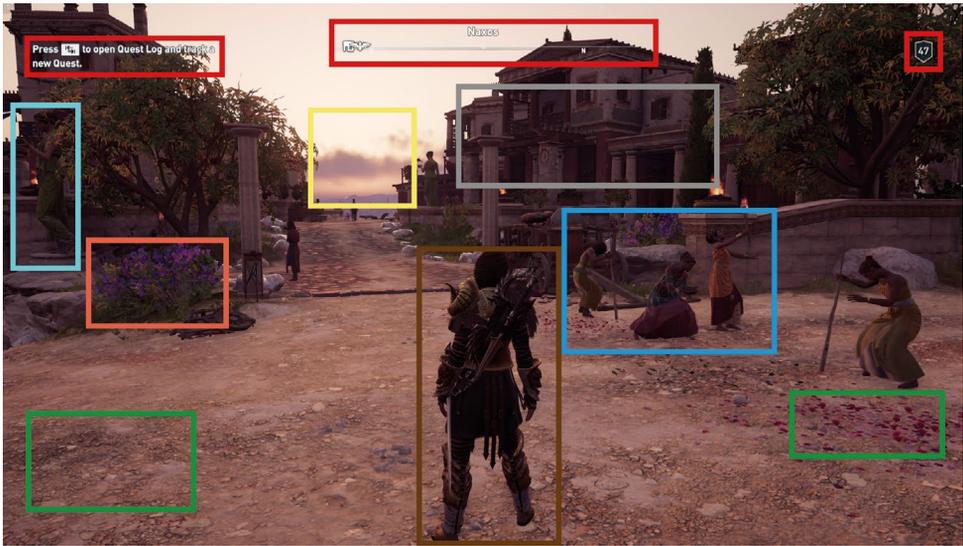


Fig. 2 A constellation. The island Naxos in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018).

subjectivity and rather focus on the object side, which are the dedicated elements constituting the atmosphere in question. This object side can be called the “atmospheric potential” of a situation “that can be explored by every individual” (Kerz 2016, 916). It is the main thrust of the concept of atmospheres of the past to treat this “atmospheric potential” as a means to an end: the authentication of the game world.

So rather than speculating on how a situation might or might not be perceived by players, it is necessary to turn this situation into a constellation and thereby change the perspective on it (see Kerz 2017, 65; Schmitz 2018, 53). A constellation analysis enables researchers to understand how a certain atmosphere of the past has been created by the respective aesthetic workers. Its aim is to unearth the craft of producing an atmosphere of the past.

» *Figure 2* shows how an analytical look at the aforementioned situation turns it into a constellation of elements which increase or decrease the chance of a successful atmosphere of the past arising. The total impression, the *modus operandi* of atmospheric experience, is dissolved into an analytical look at the details. Marked are the user interface (red), the skybox (yellow), architecture (grey), a marble statue (turquoise), flora (orange), different ground textures (green), dancing non-player characters (blue) and the avatar (brown). These elements (among others) influence the atmosphere and, by means of the avatar, enable players themselves to influence it—and to switch to a different situation at will. Without going into detail here, I want to make some early remarks on the function and importance of some of these elements: the user interface has the potential to severely harm the atmosphere of the past as it can be identified as strictly non-diegetic, therefore not belonging to the game world as such. It is notable, however, that *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* employs a slimmed-down user-interface which leads me to the assumption that its impact on the arising atmospheres can be deemed minimal. It is also of interest how *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* allows players to customise and even hide the interface completely which might enable players who are especially eager to engage with authentic experiences of the past to personalise the game to their needs. The impressive skybox of the game is of interest as it tends to display only the most beautiful sunsets and thereby gives the virtual image a warm, reddish tone. Looking back at how Svetlana Boym describes the past as a “perfect snapshot” (2001, 49), it becomes plausible that even this hyperreal perfection of the lush sunset plays an important role in constructing an atmosphere of the past able to authenticate the game world. Another important element, which this screenshot fails to convey, is sound. Engaging with the game, players will be confronted by the sound of voices blending with the chirping of crickets in the distance while the leaves of the nearby trees rustle in the wind. Referring back to Konrad Wojnowski, who claims that the game “familiarizes us with the simulation as real” (2018, 91), I want to stress here that such soundscapes are invaluable to atmospheres of the past if they want to successfully evoke feelings of

authenticity because players not only expect the past to look but also to sound a certain, plausible way.⁵

Architecture, finally, should be considered as a “medium within a medium: it rhythmises and regulates our experiences of the world” (Bonner 2019, 216). Therefore, it does not influence the atmosphere in the same way sound or lighting does but rather incorporates these elements and channels them. Architecture determines *how* players move through space, it offers “suggestions of movement” (Böhme 2017, 19),⁶ and thereby is an essential tool for aesthetic workers to ensure that atmospheres are experienced as intended—at least most of the time. To be more concrete in relation to the situation shown in » *Figure 2*: the temple building visible on the right is atmospherically potent because it functions as a somewhat accurate depiction of an ancient Greek temple building. In this sense, it functions as a “decorated shed” as it operates by means of its specifically designed façade (see for example Böhme 2018, 139). Contrary to some other buildings in the game, the temple structure in question is not accessible and could therefore be criticised as an “empty shell” (Götz 2019, 206) or even an “architectoid” for which Götz attests a fixation on “primarily visual platitudes” (ibid., 205). Still, these “platitudes” fulfil an atmospheric function and contribute to the atmospheric potential of the situation. Also, and arguably even more importantly, the building rhythmises the player’s experience and how the atmosphere of the past unfolds. In the situation depicted, it opens a direct line of sight towards the sunset and encourages players to follow the road towards the harbour. It regulates the effects of light and shadow on the atmosphere and predetermines (to a degree) how players transition into the next atmosphere. Finally, the building is of importance as “ludic topology” (Aarseth 2019, 131) as it can, for example, function as a climbable vantage point for players to overlook the scenery and, therefore, to easily get into contact with the atmospheric potential of the harbour area of Naxos.

To conclude this short and rather cursory analysis: depictions deemed accurate by a player or—ideally—by most players can be and usually are a part of such constellations. But again, accuracy and authenticity are not the same and alleged accuracy is only ever a part of the answer to the question why a specific game is valued as authentic. More than anything else, it is the total impression of a given situation that needs to correspond with the expectations of the audience or at least be deemed plausible. In short: *plausibility trumps accuracy*. Occasional inconsistencies or inaccuracies become unimportant when they are encased in a convincing atmosphere of the past. We perceive a situation “according to the atmosphere”, as Kerz writes (2016, 916), and

5 Rasmus Greiner goes into a somewhat similar direction with what he calls a “sonic histosphere” in film analysis. This term refers to the way in which “sound design models history, makes it a palpable object of experience and prompts critical reflection” (2018, 34).

6 Böhme determines these “Bewegungsanmutungen” as a specific type of atmospheres (2001, 89).

according to a successful, convincing atmosphere of the past, inconsistencies and inaccuracies are perceived as consistencies and accuracies. This is the power of atmospheres.

I want to stress again that atmospheres are never a guaranteed success (Willner 2016, 66). The aesthetic workers behind a given game—especially behind AAA games like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*—will surely try to offer situations which correspond with as many players as possible but still: a player who is well-informed on the depicted time period might be confronted with inaccuracies so severe that they will prevent an atmosphere of the past from arising. *Steam* user “Czarina Kalinka” for example writes that “[w]hile it looks stunning, most places seem copy pasted with older assets and you soon realize that the impressive temples are all the same” (2019) which would be one possible reason as to why an atmosphere of the past could break down. In a similar vein, an intrusive user interface, as mentioned above, or a glitch in the game world can harm the arising atmospheres. Also, more research needs to be done on how players with different attitudes towards a game and in different play settings react to different situations and if and how atmospheres of the past are perceived in these contexts.

Before conducting reception and user studies, it is essential to understand the craft of producing successful atmospheres of the past. For this, I would argue, constellation analyses of situations in successful historical digital games are the practicable way forward. Complementing these analyses with interviews in collaboration with aesthetic workers of the game industry will likely unearth a toolbox of techniques used by different departments in game development to create convincing atmospheres (of the past). This, finally, will help us to understand the shape and form of modern day historical digital games and their widespread success.

Conclusion

“Like taking a trip back in time”—“Ancient Greece really comes alive”—“feels and plays like you are in the middle of Ancient Greece”: in this paper I argued that these positive assessments of the game *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* can be analytically grasped by seeing them as successful interactions with atmospheres of the past which lead to feelings of authenticity arising in the reviewers. In these specific cases, it seems that the simulation of the game influenced how the reviewers think and feel about the depicted time and what they will expect from other depictions in the future. Consequently, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* can arguably be determined as a successful offering of an experience economy, an emodity (Illouz 2018), which reacts to increasing needs for authenticity in modern society. This, I claim, opens up a new way of thinking about the success of the *Assassin's Creed* series and other historical digital games as a new form of heritage practices satisfying needs for authenticity to their economic advantage. For this, the concept of

atmospheres of the past is essential as it can plausibly explain how digital games are able to induce feelings of authenticity despite their inability to present verified original objects. Rethinking these games in terms of situations and constellations establishes a novel phenomenological perspective on how they are experienced. While research on other heritage practices has already been productively engaged with the idea of atmospheric engagement and subjective experiences of authenticity (see Willner, Koch and Samida 2016), its potential has not been utilised for “historical game studies” (see Chapman et al. 2017). With this article, I hope to have introduced terms and concepts to the “analytical langue” (ibid., 367) of historical game studies suitable to unlock this potential.

Figures

Fig. 1: Screenshot by the author.

Fig. 2: Screenshot by the author; edited by the author.

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