

# Comparing Player Preferences for Historical Accuracy and Authenticity

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## INTRODUCTION

Long running, historically-set video game series, such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Total War*, and *Civilisation*, have sold tens of millions of copies (Apperley 2018), and as a result of their pervasive popularity, now hold an influential position in exposing people to historical settings that were once solely the province of films (Christensen and Machado 2010). Complicating historical depictions in video games is the concept of selective authenticity or historical authenticity. Selective authenticity involves blending historical representation with audience expectations to an authentic historical experience and immersive gameplay (Salvati and Bullinger 2013). Therefore, a game using selective authenticity focuses on feel and experience over strict factual accuracy and carefully chooses which historical elements will be foregrounded and which are absent to ensure the feel and experience, as well as fun gameplay, are created (Salvati and Bullinger 2013). Thus, selective, or historical, authenticity does not strive to be strictly factually accurate.

However, research suggests that players find value in video games with more accurate settings. For example, players of the *Total War* series (Creative Assembly 2000-2020) of games created the *Rome Total Realism* mod which changed the place-names, names of military units and weapons, the native language of each faction or nation, the type of units that could be trained, so they were more accurate, as well as the geography, so it more closely matched that of the time the game was set (Ghitta and Andrikopoulos 2009). Classical historians were involved in its creation to ensure it contained the accuracy that players desired (Ghitta and Andrikopoulos 2009). Likewise, players of *Europa Universallis* (Paradox Interactive 2007) will set challenges, such as only conquering nations that actually were conquered by the nation they are playing as (Chapman 2013). Finally, the popularity of the *History*

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*Respawned* podcast, which critiques and analyses historical video games, indicates players desire historical analysis of video games and their historical settings. The first *History Respawned* podcast examined *Assassins' Creed IV: Black Flag* and ran for forty-six minutes, which is relatively long for a podcast. The response was enthusiastic, and comments left in the comment section indicated that listeners desired an even longer podcast with more in-depth analysis (Whitaker 2016). Therefore, there are ample examples of video game players desiring a greater level of historical accuracy in their games than are provided by developers. This research explores how this desire for accuracy versus authenticity might differ between players of two long running video game series with historical settings: *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007-2020) and *Total War*.

Online threads discussing historical accuracy and authenticity in the *Assassin's Creed* and *Total War* series of video games were downloaded. The threads came from several online *Assassin's Creed* and *Total War* communities to ensure diverse viewpoints were represented and examined. Leximancer, the analytical software program, was used to extract the major themes, because it can be used to identify high-level concepts and extract their semantic and relational information from large volumes of text. A total of 2045 comments were analysed.

The results indicated that *Total War* Players generally chose one side or the other: total accuracy, or accuracy moderated by other factors such as gameplay. Of those who supported total accuracy, there were high expectations, for example units carrying historically accurate weapons and armour for their station, civilisation, and time period, which was not desired or noted in the analysis of the posts about the *Assassin's Creed* games. While the players of the *Assassin's Creed* series desired accuracy, they were aware and comfortable with it being moderated by other concerns and factors. The players of the *Total War* games were instead divided. Although overall, they desired and valued historical accuracy, they disagreed over how much and if it should be the number one concern of the developers. Despite both game series utilising historical settings, the research found that their players had differing opinions regarding the amount historical accuracy.

## ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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### **BIO**

Dr Jacqueline Burgess is an Associate Lecturer in International Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Her research investigates narrative brands with a focus on how consumers and audiences become emotionally connected to the stories these brands tell and the resulting marketing implications. She has published her work in multiple peer-reviewed journals including *Game Studies*.

Dr Christian Jones is Professor of Interactive Media and the leader of the Engage Research Lab. His research focuses on human-computer interaction, interactive media, and affective computing. He leads multiple large-scale, collaborative projects and his research has been published in over 100 international, peer-reviewed conference and journal articles. His work has also been covered by various journalists in news outlets.