

Transformationen des Populären. Working Paper Series des SFB 1472

16.10.2026

Working Paper 22

Video Game Design and Professional Historical Expertise

An Interview with Maxime Durand (Ubisoft)

Angela Schwarz
Milan Weber

Zitierweise:

Schwarz, Angela and Milan Weber (2026): "Video Game Design and Professional Historical Expertise. An Interview with Maxime Durand (Ubisoft)". *Working Paper SFB 1472*, no. 22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25819/ubsi/10911>.

Abstract

A wide range of actors are involved in the production of video games and, consequently, in the way history is popularised in the medium. In the production of video games with historical settings, experts from various professions are involved, drawn from a far wider field than game design and publishing alone. They are consulted at various stages of the production process. The working paper takes as its starting point an interview conducted in 2024 with Maxime Durand, at the time a long-standing member of staff at Ubisoft and one of the most influential of these experts, to shed light on the many processes at play in the production of video games with historical content.

Keywords: Popular History; Video Games; Ubisoft; Maxime Durand; History Experts

An der Produktion digitaler Spiele und damit auch an der Art und Weise der Geschichtspopularisierung, die über das Medium geschieht, sind viele Akteursgruppen beteiligt. Neben den Personen in Spieleentwicklung und Vertrieb sind dies gerade bei digitalen Spielen mit historischen Settings Expertinnen und Experten unterschiedlicher Professionen. Sie werden in verschiedenen Stadien der Spieleproduktion konsultiert. Das Working Paper nimmt ein Interview mit dem langjährigen Mitarbeiter der Firma Ubisoft Maxime Durand, einem der einflussreichsten dieser Experten, aus dem Jahr 2024 zum Ausgangspunkt, um die vielfältigen Prozesse zu beleuchten, die bei der Produktion digitaler Spiele mit historischen Inhalten eine Rolle einnehmen.

Schlagwörter: Populäre Geschichte; Digitale Spiele; Ubisoft; Maxime Durand; Historische Experten

1 For this reason, the project ‘Popular History in Video Games between Mainstreaming and Diversification’ focuses on the production of video games in the second funding period of the Collaborative Research Centre ‘Transformations of the Popular’ at the University of Siegen (2025–2028). In the first period (2021–2024), the main focus was two-fold: on the history staged in the games and on player reception.

The interview took place at the University of Siegen on 1 February 2024 in the context of a research project on history in popular video games (B05) as part of the Collaborative Research Centre ‘Transformations of the Popular’ funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The questions were put by Angela Schwarz, Tom Pinsker and Milan Weber, all of whom worked on that project.

1. Introduction

Many actors are involved in shaping and negotiating history in video games. Each of these actors, individually and as a collective, deserves scholarly attention if the medium and its popularisation of history are to be analysed adequately. This includes, of course, the game developers, programmers, visual and sound designers who create the historical game worlds, and the marketing and advertising staff who distribute them (Zimmermann 2023: 38–40; Copplestone 2017). But players also have a major influence on how historical knowledge in video games is perceived and negotiated. There is hardly a popular game whose content is not commented on, questioned and criticised both online and offline by players (Pinsker/Weber 2023). It is not surprising, then, that historical research on the subject has come to pay increasing attention to these groups of actors.¹

In addition to the groups mentioned above, it is experts involved in the production and distribution of video games whose role in the discursive negotiation of popular history needs to be considered equally – especially since they have been playing an increasingly important role in recent years (Politopoulos et al. 2019; Lowe 2018). This applies both to the actual development of the product and to public appearances for marketing purposes. For games with historical settings, these experts come from a variety of professions and disciplines, such as archaeology, religious and cultural studies, art and architectural history, and, of course, history itself. They range from university professors, museum staff and freelancers to people without an academic background whose expertise in a particular area becomes relevant for the production or the marketing of a video game.

Although the work they do is rarely easy to trace, experts’ tasks generally include conducting research in written sources or on site, supporting the development studio teams with reliable knowledge, and providing information that should make the historical game world appear more like a reconstruction than a mere representation of the past. Many of them are involved in promoting a game, emphasising their part in game development and thus lending the game an aura of authenticity. In the strategy game *Age of Empires IV* (2021), experts even appear in their own bonus videos that players can unlock, authenticating the game’s historicity and at the same time their own status as experts before a wider public. Videos like these explain, for example, how a medieval crossbow worked and what specific functions it served in battle. Experts thus certify the factuality and correctness of a historical production, allowing the companies behind the games to sell it as historically accurate. However, this appearance of historical accuracy must be questioned. After all, popular video games are entertainment products that need not meet the standards of historical knowledge

2 Durand left Ubisoft in June 2026. He now (as of August 2026) works as an independent expert for Digital Museums Canada.

or research and that are not assessed by those standards. Rather, many studios try to meet the expectations and the knowledge of the community of players they address, not the standards of academic historiography. For ultimately, it is players, who are also buyers, who decide the success of a game and who determine what they perceive as historically authentic and accurate (Schwarz 2023: 150).

Perhaps the best-known historian who has been involved in game development and marketing for more than a decade is Maxime Durand. Unlike many other experts, who are usually freelancers on a single project and perform specific tasks, Durand, who studied history at the University of Montreal, has been employed full-time as a historian at Ubisoft for more than a decade.² Thus, he has many years of experience in the development and release processes of a considerable number of games and has been a constant presence in the company’s public image. His work focused primarily on the immensely popular *Assassin’s Creed* franchise, which has sold over 200 million units to more than 120 million players by 2023 alone (Schwarz 2023: 40) – more than 230 million units by the end of 2025 (Ubisoft 2025: 9). In *Assassin’s Creed*, players experience a centuries-spanning struggle between two secret societies over prehistoric artefacts, with historical settings ranging from Ancient Greece to the industrialised London of the 19th century (Schwarz 2024). Durand was also jointly responsible for the creation of the franchise’s *Discovery Tours*, in which players can visit and explore the historical game worlds of three spin-offs of the series without combat or other gameplay challenges. In these modes, the games almost appear like digital open-air museums (Beil 2021: 59).

A lively exchange with the researchers of the research project ‘Popular History in Video Games between Mainstreaming and Diversification’ on various aspects of popularity, popularisation and changes in game development ensued when Durand spent a week at the University of Siegen at the end of January/early February 2024 at the invitation of the Collaborative Research Centre. In his presentation on ‘Imagery and the Visualisation of History in *Assassin’s Creed*’ as well as in several discussions with members of the Collaborative Research Centre and of the project on history in video games, he offered valuable insights. The intensive exchange crossed disciplinary boundaries and helped to refine previous assumptions.

Exploring Durand’s role as a historian at one of the world’s largest gaming companies remains essential to the project. This is all the more true because the questions of the project focus on the global distribution of history in video games and its alignment along the lines of *historical mainstreaming* or its diversification in certain geographical areas or social communities. So, the discussion with Durand centred on questions

- about the role he, his team and the other developers at Ubisoft play in the actual design of a historical game world,
- how Durand interprets his work and the popularisation of history in the medium from the perspective of an expert in the game industry, and
- to what extent he can draw connections between practical work in the field and the research hypotheses of the project.

His hybrid position as a studied historian who has been working in the field of popularising history in the media for so long allows him to explore where academic and popular approaches to history can be brought together, and where they cannot. For this reason, Angela Schwarz as principal investigator, together with Tom Pinsker and Milan Weber as research associates on the project, welcomed the opportunity to discuss various aspects at the heart of the project with Maxime Durand in an in-depth interview, recorded on 1 February 2024 with a view to publication. It is reproduced below in an edited and slightly abridged form.

2. Interview

Section 1: A historian at Ubisoft and the practice of game design

Schwarz

To start with, we would like to ask you to tell us about your career, your work at Ubisoft. This includes the issue of how you depict history in video games in general and the *Assassin's Creed* series in particular. So first, how did you come to work at Ubisoft?

Durand

Well, by luck very much. I have studied history at the University of Montreal, so I have a degree in history. I previously had been a tour guide in Montreal for two different organisations, reflecting my interest in the ability to tell people about history. The part where I got very lucky is that two weeks before I was about to graduate, Ubisoft published an offer to hire an in-house historian for a contract. Their desire was to have someone on board full time that could help teams to create the *Assassin's Creed* series. They had been working with external consultants before and they would continue to do so. But they saw that the potential advantage of having an in-house historian would be that it could go faster and the dialogue between external historians and the production team would be better for two reasons: The in-house historian would be able to better understand the production constraints, and could also give ideas that could inspire the team. So that is how it started. Now it has been almost fourteen years that I have been working on various *Assassin's Creed* games, transmedia products, and now the *Prince of Persia* series.

Schwarz

How would you describe your work at Ubisoft?

Durand

I would tend to simplify it or oversimplify it in three ways: A big part of my work is to do research. Another part is to educate, i.e. to transfer information and educate others about how to do research and how to understand the history. The third part is called diplomacy or communication. The reason is we can be very good at doing research as historians. But the ability in a video game production is to understand the needs of the appropriate people within the production, to understand their needs at the right time of the production. Because these games take an average of two to four years to

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		Schwarz Could you give an example of such an exchange taking place? Say on the way the palace of the Doge in Venice should look like? You would present images of the palace in Renaissance Venice, they would point to limited technical capabilities. What then? Durand Oh yes. The same applies to most of what is very iconic in games, major landmarks, main characters or their background. Let’s talk about <i>Assassin’s Creed Origins</i>. I remember a discussion on the main character Bayek I had with the team, mostly on the legitimacy of the protagonist’s background. This is a narrative question. They asked me, for instance, how they could make him do the kind of things he does as an assassin in Egypt and legitimise his presence in the crowd and his interactions with other characters? What I did was to look into books about the history of armies in ancient and Ptolemaic Egypt. I looked at books and found a lot of key concepts, one of them for Bayek, which was the Medjai, the old Egyptian kind of state police. It was more linked to the pharaoh, maybe a little bit stretched for Cleopatra, but it was important to have this connection. This was because we discussed the issue of whether he would have enemies that would follow him everywhere in the country. This is why we made his enemies Greek, gave them a Greek name, which was Phylakes. And this is a short version of Phylakitai, which was a kind of state police during the Ptolemaic time. So, it is really an exchange, understanding that for the narrative perspective, the name of the enemies had to be quite short and have a good sound for Bayek, to give him legitimacy. That is a good example of things that went my way. I would say another example where it was more challenging is for instance with the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul or Constantinople when we did <i>Assassin’s Creed Revelations</i>. The intention of the artistic direction was to make a very iconic landmark, because this is what it is and already was back then. It was already a thousand years old when the game was taking place. But because of the rise of the Ottoman Empire, the visual would be different. I know the game designers wanted to have heights for the protagonist to climb. When I looked at the story of the monument, I realised that there was only one minaret and a half at the time of the narrative, but from the artistic direction that would not be nice, not iconic enough. So they decided to put three minarets and a half into the game instead to show that the Ottomans were still arriving in the city in the sixteenth century, decided in favour of looks instead of historical accuracy. That is a typical discussion we had. Schwarz So, the virtual world created by the game is a question of exchange and compromises with you as an advisor? The outcome, then, is a compromise out of all factors, needs or ideas? Durand Here it is a matter of hierarchies, of the level on which decisions are made for things that are not super iconic. For usually it is each team that makes the decision. There are hierarchies in each team as well, between artists and lead artists for instance. And there is the director on your team or game design, various layers of decision-making. But when it comes to very important and iconic elements like the main character, major landmarks, main	5/24			

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	Durand Usually myself and other historians working at Ubisoft will suggest names based on the need of production. Sometimes it is proactive. We see that there would be value in suggesting to the team to hire these people. Sometimes it happens when we realise a need. So it may be the team that realizes that need or it may be the historian, but usually it is us, in-house resident historians that hire external people according to their field of speciality. If we need information on architectural history, event history or facts like politics, these experts usually are asked early in the process. For when we build a narrative, we need inputs on the political situation at an early stage. This is true of architecture too, whereas language might take more time. Language specialists are very useful for the audio team when they reconstruct languages of the past, but also when we try to create textures on the walls. They can be just a visual component, but also a gameplay component, which usually comes later in the process. Schwarz The people you address are not only historians or academic specialists, but other types of experts. I refer to specific communities or people – some would call them history nerds, I would prefer the term non-academic enthusiasts. How in your information gathering are they ranked in comparison to the academic historians and where exactly do they come into play? Durand For me, communities, for instance cultural communities, are very important early in the process. To give a few examples of this with <i>Assassin’s Creed Mirage</i>, <i>Assassin’s Creed III</i> and <i>Assassin’s Creed Valhalla</i>, which touch upon Arabic cultures, American First Nations, and Viking cultures. For me and the team it was key to have these communities on board and to profit from their inputs because they usually have a vision that may be very different from the ones of historians. This is very valuable. In <i>Assassin’s Creed III</i>, for example, we worked with the community to ‘recreate’ their language in the game. Of course, as we do not have enough sources to actually recreate that language, it is not the historical language. But, as it is a very small community with a very sad story connected to the American Revolution, we wanted to give them the possibility to decide how they wanted to have their culture portrayed in the game. We were very much aware of colonial ties. As a European-American video game company depicting First Nations, we wanted to have their inputs and be respectful of that, that they could be proud about it. When it comes to <i>Assassin’s Creed Mirage</i>, the situation was the same between historical sources and actual Arabic cultures that are connected to the Abbasid caliphate. It was important to have their inputs. Let me give you an example. In actual Arabic cultures, dogs are badly perceived. So we asked ourselves, if we wanted to put dogs in the game. What would be the value of having dogs in the game? Would it really add a big historical value or just trigger anger from Arabic communities because today they do not see the presence of dogs as something valuable. But in the time of the game they had dogs. In the end, we decided against adding them. Schwarz So that is your goal in your work?	7 / 24			

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	Durand Well, I feel history sometimes gives us perspective. But again, usually when people play a video game, they want to be entertained. They want to feel something that is different, but they also need to relate to the game in some ways. And history, again, is a very strange and foreign place. Sometimes it is good because it gives new perspectives. However, if people do not understand it, then it might be a lost effort. Schwarz What role do your experiences and knowledge from studying history play in your everyday work? Do you feel like an academic historian in a world where popular notions of the past prevail? Or is there no distance for you anymore? You might say that from your studies you would rather like to have some part of the narrative or visuals in a particular way, but you have to bow to necessities outside your historical expertise. Durand I have definitely a foot in both worlds. I have worked with academics all the time. I do first source research when I have a question. But I also need to understand the constraints and needs of the industry. To be more direct into examples, yes, of course I will look at entertainment products because I need to understand what people know about a setting, what the team might know and what players might know. So it can really orientate the kind of research I have to do, either to deconstruct a vision that has been made or to enhance the vision that people already have. I would say that is more on the public history side. On the academic side, it is working with the experts doing research. By myself understanding historiography, being able to tell to my colleagues what kind of what edition of a book they should use and not the other ones because it will totally change their understanding of a situation. If I were to place myself on the academic scale, I would probably say I am doing media studies now. My job, though, is history research. When it comes to the <i>Discovery Tours</i>, I collaborate with educational researchers and professors, which has been a huge part of my job for the last ten years. But I would not be comfortable teaching this. We do research with students, with schools, with players. I appreciate that part greatly. So again, I step in both worlds. Schwarz In your opinion, what is the brand essence of <i>Assassin's Creed</i>? How important are the historical science fiction and fantasy elements for the success of the franchise? Durand Well, I believe that the self-definition of <i>Assassin's Creed</i> is that it is an action-adventure video game inspired by history. I believe it is quite honest and true. It is not a historical reconstruction, I am not sure this is always clear for everyone. But to me it is quite clear. I try to be honest about this, that we do research, but ultimately produce a video game. There is no reason why we should not do anything we want and not to consider history. But this is reality. This is the process. I think the series is deeply inspired by history, adapted history.	8/24			

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	Schwarz So it is popular history, you might say? Durand Sometimes, yes, but not always, because sometimes we make decisions that are very niche decisions on historical authenticity, and absolutely no one or very few people will ever notice. And sometimes we make a choice of anachronisms. And then a lot of people point to these anachronisms and complain this is not history. Of course, they are right. It is a media adaptation. Section 2: Video games as mainstreamers of the past, practices of historical tourism, and products for edutainment Schwarz Let us now come to a question closer to our project idea. Would you say that history is presented in the series dovetailed to meet players’ knowledge of the chosen historical setting? For example, you present North American history in <i>Assassin’s Creed III</i>, the American Revolution: Do you want it represented in a way that people in other parts of the world can understand and connect to it just as U.S. citizens can? If so, it would be an example of what we call historical mainstreaming in our project. Durand Yes. Schwarz A broadening of history in the sense that everyone everywhere can connect to it. Durand Yes, 100 %. That is the objective because the goal of the company is to make best game for people everywhere. What this means is not that we will adapt every content to please everyone. What it means is that everyone who plays the game must understand the same thing, whether they know already of the time period or not. And this is crucial. If you asked me: ‘Are people learning history through <i>Assassin’s Creed</i>’? Then I could not tell the answer. They are learning something. Certainly. Maybe it confronts their view of the past, but it is impossible to tell exactly what people take away from playing <i>Assassin’s Creed</i> other than they know how to stab people in the face. And that is certain. But yes, it is definitely a way to mainstream history 100 %. Schwarz That underpins my hypothesis. I would always say that the series in particular and other video games with historical settings go a long way in shaping our conceptions of history in general, of particular settings, of landmarks. People have a clear notion of what a building or landscape at a certain time should look like. This is what the game reconstructs, the touristic view, not the exact historical state at a given time in the past. They often take that as the real thing.	9/24			

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3 The Animus database is an in-game database that provides players with information on the narrative and the historical background of an <i>Assassin's Creed</i> title, for example on historical figures, buildings, or events that frame the game's narrative. 4 In September 2025, the Discovery Tour app <i>Medieval Baghdad</i> was launched, which could not be disclosed at the time of the interview.	both their needs, which are very different. One has need to criticise the product with their students because that is where they are in their teaching courses in university. With high school education, it is more about teaching the minimum, the basis, showing students Greece, the Viking Age, Ancient Egypt and making it tangible for this kind of learners. We do have a lot of feedback too. And we track how people play the Tour. What we lack is the context in which they play it. A player at home, for instance, may play it twenty minutes and never open it again – which is sad but fine. But with a school licence, for just one computer, there might be 2,000 students that use it every year. And so we will see that there is a spike in the time they spent on the game. Unfortunately, we do not have individual feedback of these students. We have contact with maybe thirty teachers and academics usually around the <i>Discovery Tours</i>. Schwarz You mentioned numbers. Can you say anything about the first two instalments of the <i>Discovery Tour</i>? I once read that two million copies were sold of the first one. Is that correct? Durand I am not able to disclose exact numbers. ‘Millions’ is a good figure for the distributions. But it has been quite successful. And we can compare it to what was there before, the Animus database³ which was included from <i>Assassin's Creed II</i> to <i>Assassin's Creed Syndicate</i> and then back in <i>Assassin's Creed Valhalla</i>. They all had both an image database and an encyclopedia, <i>Valhalla</i> even a <i>Discovery Tour</i>. The <i>Discovery Tour</i> has always been more popular than the Animus database. They answer two different needs. It is more difficult to make a <i>Discovery Tour</i> than to make an encyclopedia within the game. But the Tour has been very popular. Weber If I may, why, then, is there no <i>Discovery Tour</i> for <i>Assassin's Creed Mirage</i>? Durand This is a good question, though I cannot answer it. I would like to have one, since it is a nice kind of game that would have one.⁴ Weber Because you return to the old system of the Animus database. Durand That was back in <i>Valhalla</i> by players' demand also. We created the <i>Discovery Tour</i> for some players because most players thought it was great. But there is also some part of the community that was still asking for the encyclopedia. And so, with <i>Valhalla</i>, they decided to do both. As <i>Mirage</i> is a smaller game, they decided to go for the encyclopedia and not the <i>Discovery Tour</i>. Schwarz I would like to go back to the issue of the role of historical expertise in the production and where you get the information from: from consulting historians, literature, documentaries, other formats, sometimes even contemporary sources. One might ask why bother at all for an entertainment	11/24				

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	Schwarz We appreciate your huge experience of fourteen years of the franchise very much. Would you say the games have changed regarding their representation of history and if so how did they change? Durand The expectations within the team are definitely higher for people that have been there for a long time because we have to consider people come and go. It is not always the same people working on the product. But when it comes to directors, there is quite a high level of maturity. And so what would have been okay in <i>Assassin's Creed</i> or <i>Assassin's Creed II</i> would not fly today. They would hope that research would affect all areas of the game. Everything from audio to narrative game design. So I think that has changed tremendously. Access to information has been much better and easier with a lot of collections digitising their contents and making them accessible online. I have been using the word history since the beginning of this discussion and in my presentations. But when I speak of history, I do not mean history only as the study of paper sources or written sources, but history in a broad sense including other sciences such as archaeology, for instance. This is probably where we have the most changes through time, because archaeology goes much faster in publishing its data and in making new discoveries than the historical study of written sources. So that has been a tremendous change in the way we make games. Instead of relying on the description of buildings, we can now have a scan from a satellite or from a plane of something that is in the field and gives us the exact shape of a monument as it was mentioned in sources from 2,000 years ago. And now we have data, the actual data or more data on the building. So that has been a big change in the way we work. Schwarz So many more opportunities to make it more diverse and heterogeneous and more detailed? Durand Yes. And from a personal perspective, I think this is what makes these games exciting, the ability to merge all of these elements to make history alive. I enjoy reading a book, a historical book, or reading a source and imagining what I want. But when it comes to representing it in the game, we have to make it feel more authentic. For that we have to rely on archaeology and anthropology. I feel that this makes history even more alive and more interesting for a lot of people. Again, I believe strongly that people are interested in the past, but traditional media do not necessarily appeal to everyone. I like to go to museums. A lot of people do not. And I think video games are answering that need. Pinsker We would like to talk a bit more about the products, later also about developments regarding the whole industry and your perspective on them. But first, we stay with the <i>Assassin's Creed</i> series: Could you tell us a bit more about the process of selecting the different historical settings? Do trends in popular media or society at large play a role in it?	13/24			

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	Durand Most choices of time periods come from the development teams themselves, the creative teams feel they want to tell a story or a subject that they like and want to tell or a place they want to go. This is, I think, the key element to decide a historical period for future or past games, that it is important in human history from a general perspective, worldwide history perspective. It is a nice place to visit for historical tourism. It has nice landmarks because it is a game where we climb a lot. It has an interesting narrative situation, political situation, historical characters, and usually it has to be before the twentieth century, as we have always been trying to avoid guns as much as possible. They were in <i>Assassin's Creed II</i> and <i>Brotherhood</i>, in some ways in <i>Assassin's Creed Syndicate</i>. But in human history, the closer we get to the present, the more guns there are that are permanent, together with other technologies that we think are so far from what is called history. It is more actual than historical. And so usually it comes from the teams to make the decision. Sometimes it comes from the company that suggests a time period with the help of historians because they want to be able to re-use some of the assets that have been made from some games. We have to remember that every time we do a new game, it involves tremendous investment in technology and also in modelling, since we have to recreate everything, voices, the sounds, the textures, the costumes. This is new every time. Sometimes it happens that the company will suggest to do one specific time period to be able to reuse some of these assets. But usually it goes very well with the team's choice. Pinsker Once the setting is decided, how much did the production team orient themselves towards other popular depictions, when, for example, they developed the game <i>Assassin's Creed Valhalla</i>? How much was the TV-series <i>Vikings</i> a role model? Maybe the game was to be different? Durand Some part of the decision-making is clearly oriented towards trends in other media. Some are more so just because we feel we want to tell this story. Actually, both are taking place. When we take <i>Assassin's Creed Black Flag</i> and <i>Assassin's Creed Valhalla</i>, we can certainly place them in a trend with other products on a similar subject. And that probably helps with the game. But usually the <i>Assassin's Creed</i> design differentiates itself from the other products by its maturity of its treatment of a period. The way we depict the narrative and the visuals, the fact that we try to be more on the historical side visually than many other entertainment products, makes a difference. Other games like <i>Assassin's Creed Mirage</i>, <i>Assassin's Creed II</i>, <i>Assassin's Creed III</i>: They usually offer more because the team cares about the story. I do not think we would have chosen these time periods, especially <i>Assassin's Creed II</i>, if it was only for popularity. And yet here we are. Pinsker Could we go back to the term historical tourism you used earlier on? What exactly do you mean by that? Durand Well, in many of our games the locations that are depicted in the game still exist in some form, though not all of them. When these locations do exist,	14/24			

6 The word is an ambivalent swear word in modern Greek that the protagonist of the game often uses to express displeasure.

7 An NPC or non-player character describes all the characters in a game that are not controlled by players.

players or people from these regions should be able to recognise some of the elements of the culture in the way they are represented in the game. This applies to a landmark, part of a language as well as part of clothing. These are elements that we consider and try to reproduce in the game. So, it can be a present-day expression like “Malaka”⁶ in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, sometimes, of course, a historical expression, say from ancient Egyptian as in *Assassin’s Creed Origins*, where we have used words which make no sense to anyone except an Egyptologist, who may be able to understand them. There are words that we use in the English version of the game that the main character will tell or the other character will tell in *Origins*, for instance. And these are inspired by real Egyptian words. But when you hear people in the background speak Egyptian, it is Egyptian gibberish. So it is real Egyptian words where we had the vowels. But we do not know the real vowels of all words in ancient Egyptian, so that the sentences may not make any sense. But it conveys a feeling of what is being said. If someone is angry or happy or having a chat, we understand that feeling, but we cannot understand any of the words.

But coming back to your question: Yes. Historical tourism has always been a key element that we take. Take *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*, for instance. A lot of British and Norwegian players have commented on the perception of the game, a lot of them coming from arguably small towns and villages. They are happy to see that their culture is represented, some of their folktales are represented, even more so since it has never been shown on the international scale before.

Pinsker

When it comes to creating this experience of historical tourism, it is not so important to represent hard facts, but more to create a feeling of the past, which might be true so players can grasp it emotionally?

Durand

Not necessarily. It is called tourism as a key element because we wanted people to be able to relate to the game and understand the history depicted, people who have visited Paris, who will visit Paris, who live in Paris, if we take *Assassin’s Creed Unity* as an example. This is true even though the city is not a full representation of the real city of Paris in the French Revolution in the terms of size. The scale of the streets is different. Anybody who has been to Paris can still recognise many iconic elements that existed during the French Revolution and where they were situated at. But there might be five streets instead of twenty from one building to the other. So there is a feeling of authenticity, but it is fake. So yes, historical tourism then means everything.

Maybe I can illustrate the point: In *Assassin’s Creed Unity*, we did not have horses, which was a technological choice. It is a nightmare. Imagine the city if we had thousands of NPCs.⁷ It was the first and last time we had so many NPCs in a game. It was a very big technological challenge to convey that feeling of a crowd because the city of Paris was the biggest in the world at that time and the most populated. But with the narrow streets and crowds it had also meant that we could not bring any horses or carriages. You can only imagine the nightmare it would have been. Of course, historically speaking, there were horses in the city of Paris during the French Revolu-

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	tion. People today do not see any horse in Paris – except maybe for the police – which is why they may not be able to relate to having horses in Paris. This was another reason for us not to have horses. Weber Would you say that historical tourism is a central idea of your way to represent history? Would it explain the choice of the historical environment, the clothing, the technology, and the disregard of other aspects of the past, for example economic systems or structures? Durand Oh, no. It is one element of consideration out of many. For instance, riding a boat in <i>Assassin’s Creed III</i> makes sense from a historical perspective because everything was moved by boats back then. That is how you could come from Europe. And ultimately it made us decide to start the game with a boat trip because we really wanted for people to understand that this is how it was made. But from a historical tourism perspective, it makes no sense because when people go to Boston today, they usually arrive by car and they do not realise that it is by the seaside because the city has been built over the bay. Historical tourism is not always affecting the decision. It is just one component out of many. Weber You said that <i>Assassin’s Creed</i> is an action-adventure inspired by history. With all these historical stagings in all genres of video games, would you say some genres of games are better suited to depict history than others, say an adventure is better suited than a strategy game? Durand Well, I would say the less you show of visuals and the less you engage into trying to reconstruct the past, the easier it probably becomes to get away with it. You are not trying to show everything, which means that you do not have to invest so much in everything that you do. You only have to focus on one aspect. So, it is not a hard critique. I think it is a matter of fact that if you play a strategy game, you may like a tabletop strategy game. Maybe you will focus mostly on political history, and this is what you depict in your product. But when you try to depict everything, narrative, culture, music, sounds, of course it is a lot of effort. Then you have to be more creative and you will make more anachronistic choices. If you read a book, you can imagine whatever you want. It cannot be fake, as it is what you believe. Nobody is ever going to know. But when you play a video game, you can go everywhere. So, it is easy to make mistakes or anachronisms. But it also gives you a lot of liberty and agency over what you do. And I believe that you can learn much better if you can climb over a monument and see it all around. You can never do that in real life, in the game you can and you can take the time you want. You can even use the photo mode. And historical tourism takes a huge part of that. The photo mode has grown so big in the gaming community. It is impressive. I personally have spent most of my time in <i>Assassin’s Creed Valhalla</i> using the photo mode because that is the part of the game I could not see or use before the actual game was released. And I thought it was just beau-	16/24				

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	tiful. There is just a strong sense that it conveys something very dramatic with the northern lights and the low lights because the sun does not get very high in the winter and it is very cold. This is something relatable, a strength of video games, and a big challenge too. Weber It is true that all media as well as academic research have to narrow the complexity of historical reality. In this media product, complexity must be narrowed down and a perspective on history must be chosen. Would you agree? Durand For some situations, yes. But again, it is more shades of grey than black and white. With the Assassins and the Templars, for instance, we can show different perspectives and political points of view, present a spectrum ranging from total anarchy and freedom one end and the opposite on the other. We usually have the perspectives held by the Assassins and that held by the fictive Templars in our game, which is all about order. And these are usually themes that we can find in any place in the world at any given time. This allows us to show different perspectives. I do hope that the games allow players to understand that the past is not one-sided or simple black and white, living happily or sad. It is much more complex than that. It is humankind. Weber Which elements of an <i>Assassin's Creed</i> game, do you think, actually depict history? The game mechanics, the story, the visualisation, the audio design, or all these layers of a game? Durand I believe all of them come into play in some ways, though with various levels of authenticity. It makes no sense from a player's perspective, sometimes to have historical information, I believe. For it is entertainment product that is meant to be played in context at home alone for fun. We can look at any moment of the game and there could be a lot of elements that we could pinpoint as historical and a lot that make no sense from a historical perspective. There is no fine line in the production team. We do not want that because otherwise it would restrain us from sometimes doing something that feels great for the game. But the element can still make sense historically. The general sense is still to aim towards historicity, but there is no fine line between what should be and what should not be. Weber Do you have an example for us for a situation where history is depicted in <i>Assassin's Creed</i> on a ludic, a mechanical level? Durand Yes. Sometimes it is a game. Some of them are closer to reality, some are less. <i>Assassin's Creed Unity</i> came out two years after <i>Assassin's Creed III</i>. I would say <i>Assassin's Creed III</i> aimed at being closer to historical facts. That is why you ride with Paul Revere on the back of his horse. The problem is, though, when you have facts, there is less freedom to do what you like, except in areas where there is no historical information. In that game, we wanted players get closer to facts, whereas with <i>Assassin's Creed Unity</i>, the	17/24				

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	French Revolution setting is more like a backdrop – which was an objective within the team. This is why Arno, the protagonist, is there. He witnesses some events of the revolution. He is like the Forrest Gump of the French Revolution in some ways. But he is not the one making the calls. That was the general sense of <i>Assassin’s Creed Unity</i>, coming from the team. Section 3: Game design as a global industry Weber The first question would be how do you observe the growing market for independently produced games which use history as a topic? Durand I do not have the actual knowledge to be able to say what was done before and is now, but my feeling is that there is more interest, more expectations and probably a lot more of indie games are published. However, this is limited by my perspective. I was not interested so much in indie games before working for Ubisoft and now I am more interested in other things and I speak with a lot of teachers and teaching associations and museums and see what they try to publish also. Sometimes I am invited to give advice for that. I see that there are a lot of academics, teachers, professors who are trying to make more historically accurate games, even gamers to try to do so. But because their means are quite limited, it usually does not translate very well into a product that is either successful or very interesting. Ultimately, a game is judged mostly by its ability to create entertainment and emotions. If it fails at that, if a game does not look very good, it does not translate into a very popular video game – although some people may like that and concentrate more on, and really appreciate, the narrative aspect. Pinsker Getting back to this big trend in depicting history in popular media and particularly in video games: Do you think the reason may be that history has been part of the medium from its beginnings? Was it mostly history reduced to the history of warfare? If it was and still is so, do you think this is going to change? Durand I think games like these will remain popular, but my personal feeling is that we will see more and more games emerging that try to show other aspects of the past that are more about representation and identity, for the simple reason that these aspects have been misrepresented for so long. There is quite a huge change in the players that are playing video games too. So, games that were made in certain parts of the world, especially for Westerners, if they want to have success, they have to take into account other parts of the world also. Today games are being made pretty much everywhere. For instance, I see a lot of African developers who have a very strong desire to make fun games that use their culture. I see a lot of Asians making games as well, games that have very different topics because their players, for various reasons, are looking for something else than fighting. I really believe that we will see more and more of other types of games than just warfare. But I believe you are right in saying that there were many warfare	18/24			

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8 In the original 1971 version of the game, attacks by indigenous groups play a peripheral role. For more information about the game, cf. Schwarz 2023: 28.	games. Historical video games have always been there since the beginning, though I believe that the first recorded historical game, <i>The Oregon Trail</i>,⁸ is not a warfare game. Maybe it is not the first one, but it is one of the first and most often mentioned historical video games. I do not think there is any warfare in that. Schwarz Would you say that it is a popular trend in many popular media to show and know more about the emotional state of the characters portrayed, instead of just having to survive combat situations and relive heroic stories? Does that interest in human interest stories apply to video games as well, to have a more diverse story as well as a more diverse microcosmos displayed? Maybe even to get something more from the medium itself? Durand Yes, I think so. Well, we have to consider what genuinely is a video game. What is at the core of a video game? It has challenges most of the time, players have to overcome challenges and usually fighting is key in them. I am not sure it is because people are so violent. I tend to think that by all means it has been proven otherwise, as it does not make people violent. Maybe it answers a need for anger management. What I know is that definitely conflict mechanisms in video games work well, they give an opportunity to solve problems, and the attempts to do so can be repeated until the problem is solved. That is at the core of game mechanics: You overcome a challenge and win over it. Fighting makes it very easy to master and do that. I believe this is why the setting is so popular, it is much more than just the need for violence itself. And when it comes to narrative, of course, there can be narrative challenges. There are lots of diplomatic games out there too, and I believe they are popular with certain communities. A lot of narrative-driven games are on offer that are just about meeting people and trying to date people or petting animals. They present opportunities, but have to include a challenge. We have to give challenges and an ability for players to overcome the challenge and feel like they won. In some ways, that is genuinely at the core of game design concepts. Weber What is the most exciting thing about your work? Durand When I take a step back and enjoy the process, it is usually, of course, when I see the reaction. And when I have time to reflect upon, I have enough distance with the product to reflect upon the result. Museum exhibitions, when we do partnerships, are something that I really appreciate about my work to see that people will go to the museum because they have played a video game. It is a very nice touch for my interest in history. Weber Which historical setting would you like to realise in a game? Durand But it is so tough a question. I used to say Egypt and then we did Egypt. I have mentioned that I had a strong desire to create the Lutheran reform period because I really want to see Germany in the Middle Ages. I have been	19/24				

9 Ubisoft has stopped the development of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* early in 2026, cf. Ubisoft 2026.

wanting that for a very long time. But also Peru. But we will see. I have no say in the future games, so I cannot tell.

Weber

And what kind of game beyond *Assassin’s Creed* would you like to work one day?

Durand

I have wanted to work on *Prince of Persia*. Now that is a reality.⁹ I feel I have asked myself the questions many times. I really need a game to be more than just entertainment. It has to be something more. I realised that this is what drives me to continue.

3. A Short Summary

The most significant limitation of any scholarly study that undertakes a content analysis of popular culture artefacts is that it cannot answer questions of ‘why’. Applied to the popularisation of history in video games, this limitation has far-reaching implications. For example, it can be traced in detail that the staging of ancient Greece in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* draws on a tradition of reception reaching back to Herodotus, or that well-known historical markers such as the philosopher Socrates and the Acropolis in Athens are used to lend the setting a historical flavour that as many players as possible can recognise. But why Ubisoft, the studio behind the game, chose this or that focus of staging, why they opted for an ancient setting in the first place, and how the developers position themselves historically and culturally – none of these questions can be answered here because the artefacts themselves do not answer these questions.

However, to understand the fundamental global and local changes in popular history that originate from video games, the medium must be understood holistically. Undoubtedly, it remains important to approach the content of the medium, as this is the only way to understand which elements are showcased in what way to represent a particular period and its ways of life. At the same time, players and their ways of using games and the history these games so vividly claim to portray must be taken into account too, since historical content is always received against the backdrop of individual needs, self-positioning, values, opinions, and discourses. The crucial question of ‘why’, by contrast, can only be answered by focusing on those individuals who are responsible for the historical content of video games: developers, programmers, artistic staff – and, of course, experts who support all of these actors with their knowledge and thus play a key role in the development of a historical game world.

For these reasons, it was particularly valuable for the CRC project ‘Popular History in Video Games between Mainstreaming and Diversification’ at the University of Siegen to engage in discussion with Maxime Durand. This is all the more so since the project, having focused in its first funding phase on both player reception and content analysis of highly popular games with historical settings, now turns in its second phase to the actors in the industry themselves. The discussions with Durand should thus be seen

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	authenticity, historical reality, and the representation of the past. For Durand, games are highly creative products. Particularly where historical sources are lacking, developers draw freely on imagination. For this reason, Durand makes it very clear that <i>Assassin's Creed</i> is not a form of "historical reconstruction", but rather a product inspired by history. Turning to games and the transformation of popular history, the interview supports the project's initial hypothesis that video games lead to a global homogenisation of historical representation. This means that they are involved in a process of mainstreaming through which the past is broken down into single, recognisable images that are universally accessible and understandable. Maxime Durand attributes this to the global nature of the medium, which is used by people from different geographical and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, players have expectations of how history should look and sound. These expectations must also be met when a game depicts the past. As a result, players, some of whom are directly involved in the production process, are also important actors when it comes to the design of history in the medium. Just like the project, Durand assumes that games are contributing to a fundamental transformation of popular history. For him, the medium has the potential to "make history alive" and, at the same time, to make today's understanding of history more diverse and heterogeneous – partly due to the ever-growing range of indie games available around the globe. Of course, intermedial trends are followed, but no medium invites people today to engage in "historical tourism" as directly as games. One reason he cites is interactivity, which promises immersion and cognitive and emotional involvement. Although Durand repeatedly emphasises that video games, and <i>Assassin's Creed</i> in particular, are entertainment products, he also mentions the possibility of using them as a medium of historical learning. He quotes statements from players who believe that games give them a good access to history. Search engine queries about the respective historical setting also increase when a new game is announced, he states. That is why Ubisoft has created <i>Discovery Tours</i>, which can also be used by teachers. Durand emphasises that the <i>Discovery Tours</i> were designed in consultation with teachers and deliberately made adaptable to different educational settings. Attending to the production side is evidently a worthwhile undertaking for the historical study of video games. It is here that decisions are made about whether the roof of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is golden or not, whether the ancient politician Pericles is portrayed as a friend or foe, whether 19th-century London is presented as a place of injustice or of progress – with all the implications these decisions have for popularising history. It is not historians who determine, for millions of people, how history is told and how it looks, sounds and feels, but creative professionals and experts designing and producing entertainment products such as video games. Academic history does not have a monopoly on the question of what history is – if it ever did. Rather, countless actors with and without an academic background are involved in negotiating how today's society imagines its past and how it wants to understand it.	22/24			

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