**Layers of History in Digital Games**  (revised abstract)

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The past five years have seen a huge increase in historical games studies. Quite a few texts have tried to approach how history is presented and used in games, considering everything from philosophical points to more practical views related to historical culture and the many manifestations of heritage politics.[[1]](#endnote-1) The popularity of recent games like Assassin’s Creed, The Witcher and Elder Scrolls also manifests the current importance of deconstructing the messages and choices the games and the game designers present. The impact of especially digital games on the modern understanding of history, and the general idea of time, narrative and change, is yet to be seen in its full effect.

The short paper at hand is an attempt to structure the many layers or horizons of historicity in digital games, into a single taxonomic system for researchers. The suggestion considers the various consciousnesses of time and narrative models modern games work with. Several distinct horizons of time, both of design and of the related real life, are interwoven to form the end product. The field of historical game studies could find this tool quite useful, in its urgent need to systematize how digital culture is reshaping our minds and pasts.

The model considers aspects like memory culture, uses of period art and apocalyptic events, narrative structures, in-game events and real world discourses as parts of how a perception of time and history is created or adapted, interestingly enough often along the same structures if there is any narrative developments within the game. The suggested “layering of time” is applicable on a wide scale of digital games, ranging from Fallout and Dishonored into educational simulations.

In brief, a structuring along six concepts of adaptable but necessary “horizons” is suggested, here with Mass Effect as an example:

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| **Layers** | **Uses of History or Time** | **Mass Effect 1-3** |
| **Obligating** horizon | -> Memory culture, History [in game] | Cycles of evolution |
| **Authenticity** horizon | -> Design choices, styles, period art | Rather near future |
| **Apocalyptic** horizon | -> Mother of events, reason or leading to the following events | **Arrival of the Reapers (2183)** |
| **Protagonist or Plot** horizon | Personal narrative start, possible trauma | Birth 2154, Commoner, Lone survivor |
| **Present** horizon  | **-> Game events** | 2183-, Arrival of Reapers 2186 |
| **Related** horizon | -> Real world discourses, ideas, choices, morality - right now | **Racism, Essence of humanity, Gender** |

1. See for example Jason Begy, ”Board Games and the Construction of Cultural Memory” in *Games and Culture* Vol 12, Issue 7-8 (Sage Journals, 2017); Adam Chapman*, Digital Games as History: How Videogmes Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Routledge, 2016); Dawn Spring, “Gaming history: computer and video games as historical scholarship” in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol 19 (2015); the anthology “Gamevironments of the Past”, ed. Derek Fewster & Ylva Grufstedt, *Gamevironments* Issue 5 (2016) & two older articles by Jeremy Antley in *Journal of Digital Humanities,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2012) on “Going Beyond the Textual in History” & ”Games and Historical Narratives” and the references in all of these works. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)