Playful Presenting: Reflections on The Present and Future of History and Games symposium at the University of Warwick

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Abstract

The Present and Future of History and Games symposium took place at the University of Warwick on the 28th February 2020. This article provides some critical reflections on the symposium and its open theme of the study of history and games, which invited papers from a broad selection of scholars and professionals working in an interdisciplinary fashion at the intersection of these two fields. Papers brought into focus questions around particularly important or difficult topics encountered at this meeting of sectors, such as authenticity, accuracy, ownership, context, barriers, ethics and audience/player perceptions. The symposium explored how current research across various disciplines is intertwined and connected with other projects and subsequently encouraged speakers and attendees alike to consider how their work might develop and shape the future of study at the convergence of history, heritage, and gaming.

Keywords: games; history; museums and heritage; reflection

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The title of the symposium, *The Present and Future of History and Games,* was carefully chosen. Not only did this conference bring together people from broad areas of academia and practice including scholars in history, museum studies, and game studies, but it also welcomed heritage professionals and game developers. At a time of increasing convergence between games and history in practice and research, this symposium had an open theme of history *and* games. As such, the papers and panels presented covered topics of both history *in* games and the history *of* games. Whilst my research lies mainly in exploring the relationship between video games and the ways museums use them to present and explore history, the breadth of the symposium meant that there was space for exploring this too. The organisers made it clear during the opening and closing remarks that they had deliberately avoided placing artificial barriers between the fields in order to encourage an interdisciplinary and cross-sectional exchange of ideas. The resulting program provided a day of fascinating papers from a number of unique perspectives which contributed to a larger discussion on how research into the intersection of history and games might develop and progress in the future.

Fittingly, the event began after these welcoming and inclusive opening remarks with two concurrent panels exploring, on the one hand, video games, and on the other, board games. Whilst this format meant that unfortunately I was not able to attend, and therefore comment on, half of the day's talks, each panel led in to later conversations and open discussions. Nevertheless, I shall briefly summarise the talks I was unable to attend so anyone with a research interest overlapping with this field might be able to contact relevant speakers. In the board game session, Jan Gonzalo-Iglesia, Natalia Lozano-Monterrubio and Nurla Arauna-Baro (Rovira I Virgili) began with a paper on re-signifying playful historiographic designs in board games for audiences, followed by Robert Houghton's (Winchester) exploration of user modification as historical debate, delightfully titled 'Homebrew History', and Juan Hiriart (Salford) presenting on how board games address historical gender imbalances.

Meanwhile, in the other panel, James Sweeting (Plymouth) opened the video game panel with a presentation examining the concepts of vicarious nostalgia and authenticity in historical games, with a particular focus on *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (**2015**). Sweeting broke down the various meanings of nostalgia as a 'joyful longing for the past' that people feel towards something to which they have little or no connection. Sweeting drew upon the concepts of collective memory and vicariousness in relation to nostalgia to argue that it is more effective when dealing with recent events, either in living memory, or just before. He also suggested that authenticity - a problematic term in many senses and one which arose throughout the day - does not equate to accuracy, and that an

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understanding of authenticity as of undisputed origin was more useful to examining games. Sweeting's study of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* led him to conclude that the game followed a policy of 'selective authenticity', a balance of fact and fiction. Sweeting argued, that the need to balance fact and fiction was exacerbated by the games temporally proximate setting – a version of Victorian London - which was less the case with the later *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (**2018**), set in ancient Greece, for which Sweeting claimed no one could feel this type of vicarious nostalgia.

Following on from this, Regina Seiwald (Birmingham City) led an exploration of historical bias and propaganda in Cold War video games. Her description of propaganda as the 'presentation of one message or point of view that sought to change people's views and actions' was especially useful to consider when examining the case studies Seiwald used. In particular, she focused on how video games developed by the US and the USSR portrayed themselves and their rivals and how this contrasted with depictions in third party games developed by other countries. One of the overarching trends Seiwald uncovered was that the propaganda in the video games tended to mimic the propaganda in real life. US based games, such as *Freedom Fighters* (**2003**) and *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (**2010**) generally focussed on a theme of 'good versus evil', looking outward and portraying the USSR as weak or as an aggressor. In contrast, *Hammer and Sickle* (**2005**) developed by a Russian company flips the narrative to present the US as the antagonist. Seiwald found that USSR games tended to be more inward-focussed, concerned more with portraying the USSR as good and righteous than in ensuring that the US were seen as weak. Interestingly, Seiwald noted, USSR games were less overt with their use of propaganda and generally depicted larger historical events in games focused more on military tactics. In the few games that allowed the player to choose a side, the developer tended to depict conflict not with their Cold War rival, but with a fictive third party. Seiward's paper presented some interesting thoughts on recognising the importance of a game's origin and on acknowledging and critically examining the messages video games contain. It certainly led to me re-evaluating some of the Cold War-inspired games that I have played such as *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2* (**2000**) and *Papers Please* (**2013**).

The discussion that followed these papers was lively and invigorating. Conversation began around the idea that nostalgia cannot be claimed for 'far' historical events as raised by Sweeting. The discussion highlighted a number of important points here. The idea of 'near myths' and 'far myths' was mentioned in a response that the effectiveness of nostalgia depends on the individual and what they perceive as part of their collective memory, which may differ depending on other media they had consumed such as film and television. My contribution to the discussion drew upon

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the variety of work in museum studies which explores how individual experience has an impact on interpretation and the construction of meaning (**Silvermann 1995, Hooper-Greenhill 2000, Mason 2005**). Furthermore, drawing on personal experience I noted that I arguably felt more nostalgia for *Assassin's Creed II* (**2009**), set in Renaissance Italy, than I did for the more recent historical setting of the French Revolution in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (**2014**) as I have personal experience of both studying Renaissance Italy and visiting Venice, one of the settings of *Assassin's Creed II*. This provoked a discussion into the idea of distance from a historical situation and how that might affect how historical events are perceived. A comment was made that this might also affect how a developer choses to be cautious in addressing an event that occurred in their own country compared to how they might be willing to take more risks in relation to a geographically distant history. From this conversation broadened into topics such as commercial viability and regulatory issues which might also affect the way developers approach history in games. One of the themes to emerge from the discussion that was particularly relevant to my research was the ways in which these factors contribute to how video games help people see things from different perspectives and how they can be channels for ideology (as per Seiwald). Finally, the discussion turned to how conceptual or 'authentic' depictions of history as opposed to realism held different affordances and impacted gameplay, game mechanics, dramatic narrative, and the extent to which they could be included. It was argued that the 'authentic' depiction of history was preferred as not only did it prevent criticism for inaccurate portrayal, but it also gave the developers and subsequently the players more freedom in creating a playful experience.

Following on from the first set of panels, and after lunch, delegates entered into a discussion panel entitled 'Museums and Socially Engaged Practice'. The panel was led by Hwa Young, a professional artist, Alex Moseley (Leicester), Jen Bergenvin (Leicester), and Ceciel Brouwer (Leicester), all of whom were involved in either research into museums, or work within museums, or both. To begin with, the panel introduced how games in museums were currently perceived, exploring how games, as a participatory and experiential medium, were seen as a way to move beyond the museum as the authoritative voice (**see: Hein 2006, Kidd 2012, Proctor 2015**). Equally, the panellists discussed what they understood by 'socially engaged practice' with meanings including inclusivity, representation, democratic practice, empowerment of the visitor, participation, and a focus on everyday life. From this broad understanding, it was immediately clear to see how games and video games might address and feed into some of the aspects of socially engaged practice in museums.

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The panellists then provided some thoughts on a few key themes and practical examples of games. The theme of games transforming museum visitors was explored through the 'lunch counter experience' at the National Centre for Civil and Human Rights in the USA.[i] In the interactive exhibit, visitors are encouraged to put on headphones and sit at the lunch bar to relive the experiences of those who undertook the sit-in protest during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. Bergenvin noted that visitors tended to act differently at the centre after going through the experience and drew out the issues of ethics of creating game-like experiences around difficult topics and, consequently, whether or not games had to be 'fun'. Brouwer made a useful comment on the need to balance 'shock factor' in this sort of experience which was often aimed at encouraging longer engagement and the actual content of the experience. Young, in response to the ethics and playfulness questions, reminded us of the idea of games as safe spaces to explore difficult or scary things (**Flanagan 2009**), but also stressed the importance of a game's context. However, the discussion also raised problems around ownership and outreach when the topic turned to how games connect people within and outside of the museum. Brouwer noted that whilst one of the projects that she has been involved with did help young people feel a sense of ownership, the project only reached young people who were already committed to working with the museum. From this Young added that, even today, history and interpretation is so often written by those who were 'in the room'. The challenge for them was to get people to buy into the projects and move into that space.

In the spirit of play, the panel then took a rather more interactive turn and out came the inflatable dice. The panel provided us with twelve topics and encouraged us to roll the dice to pair up two of the topics for open discussion. Indeed, I would encourage readers to try this exercise for themselves. Personally, I have found it an excellent way to spend some time thinking about some of the issues around these fields that, whilst not intrinsically connected to my research, are nonetheless at play; pun intended.

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Figure 1: The Topics for the Dice Roll Discussion. Author's own image.
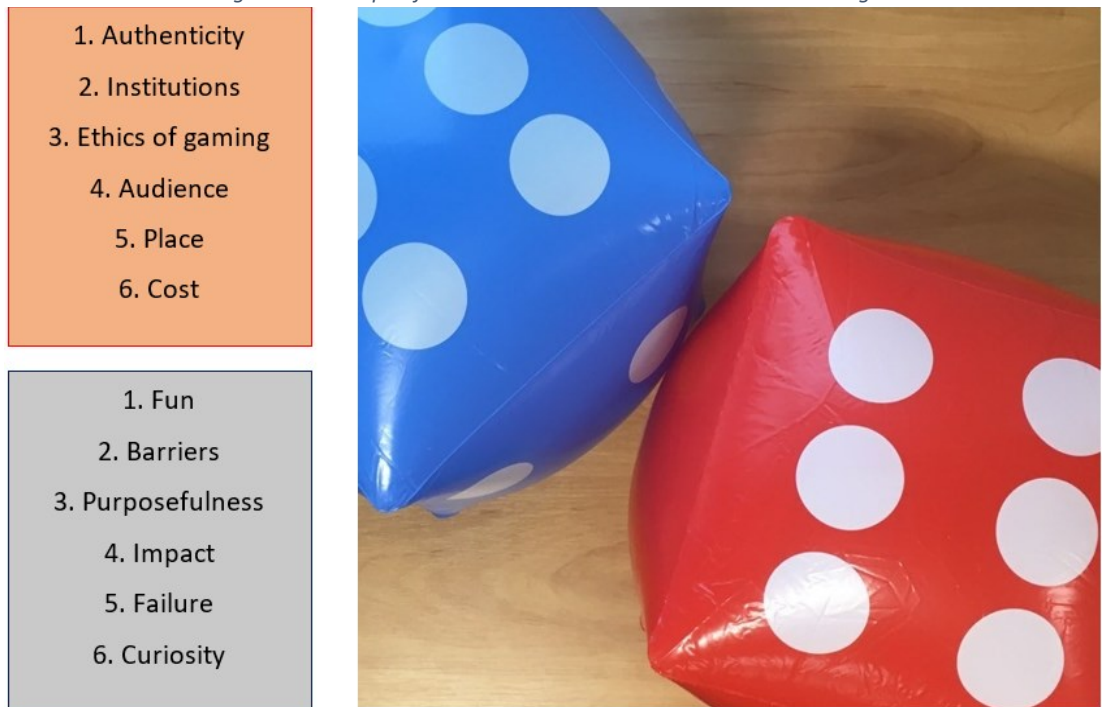
Our first dice roll directed us to the topics of the ethics of gaming and barriers. Perhaps the key discussion point to arise from this conversation was the role that self-censorship often played on the part of both the museum and the visitors, especially when dealing with difficult topics where both might shy away from wanting to provoke. We then moved onto place/impact which provoked a number of interesting responses. The importance of personal connection to place as key to impact was discussed, along with the need for people to be open in order to be impacted. A particularly interesting point that was raised was about how game places could be made meaningful. The topic of *Minecraft* (**2009**) arose quickly as a game in which place could have meaning because, it was argued, players could inhabit the space in *Minecraft*, change and shape it, in a way that was impossible in games such as the *Assassin's Creed* series. Indeed, the affordances of *Minecraft* in relation to place have already begun to be explored in museums with projects such as *MuseumCraft* and English Heritage's instructional videos on how to build Kenilworth Castle in *Minecraft* already linking real-world place with game place and encouraging players to take ownership of those places. Finally on this topic, the ways in which the inclusion of games impacts museum space was brought up, especially the impact the inclusion of games had on the way visitors interacted with the space and the ways it challenged the mindset of what was considered 'permitted' in a museum space. Conversation around cost and purposefulness highlighted how they are often linked, with cost often being a barrier to museums in using digital technology in particular, and that maintenance costs were often not

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considered. Yet Alex Moseley also expressed how institutions are increasingly considering purpose before cost, thinking more deeply about what they want the game to achieve rather than relying on the appeal of new technology. Before the next set of parallel panel sessions participants had time for one more roll of the dice and ended up with institutions and fun as our final topic which due us back to our earlier ponderings on whether games had to be fun to be effective. We were also reminded that fun is a very subjective term. This led to discussions on how museum staff often considered the learning experience or engagement before fun, but how it was important not to work towards engagement at the expense of fun.

For the second set of panels we once again split. I had spoken with one of the speakers over lunch regarding museum games so chose to join the panel they were participating in to hear more. In the other panel Nick Webber (Birmingham City) kicked off with a discussion of games and historical time, followed by Lysaine Lasausse (Helsinki) exploring games as having the potential to critique societal issues through the lens of game noir. Alex Wade (Birmingham City) then explored British video games in the Cold War in relation to welfare and warfare and finally, Jake Blunt (Reading) examined 'nerd culture' and the 'satanic panic' in relation to 1993's *Doom*. In the panel I attended, we started by watching a video presentation from Manuel Cruz (São Paulo), who sadly was unable to attend in person. Cruz narrated us through the creation of *Time Historians*, a 'deconstructionist historical video game' that he designed as part of his research. Drawing upon Munslow's ideas of deconstructionism (**1997, 2006**) the aim of *Time Historians* was to explore how we construct our knowledge of history and to encourage players to consider and call into question historical narrative. In order to achieve this, Cruz studied how the player narrative, game narrative, and the context of creation and consumption interacted. He also drew upon creative judgement games wherein the validity of the answer depended on the judgement of the player, and therefore wanted to explore the process of subjectivity, interpretation and consensus and how they worked together. *Time Historians* incorporated a local multiplayer mode in order to build a system capable of providing creative judgement. Players travelled through the in-game location of ancient Egypt playing the role of futuristic historians, cut off from our modern quotidian understanding by some unknown disaster and using time travel in order to search for lost knowledge. Players spoke with ancient Egyptian characters in order to learn information, however they each gather different pieces of fragmented information and must vote on what they think is the correct answer to historical question from a set of options at the end of the level. This is where the consensus and

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creative judgement aspects comes into their own and engage players in the construction of historical knowledge.[ii]

Ylva Grufstedt (Helsinki) then presented on her research of game design practices from the perspective of the developers of historical strategy games. Grufstedt focused on decision points in game making and how this impacted content and form, and the values behind the games. She developed a game design praxeology in order to examine the frameworks within which developers worked when building historical strategy games, including games which had elements of counterfactual history.[iii] Grufstedt explained how she had looked at *Europa Universalis IV* and *Hearts of Iron* in her research through this praxeology, working with the developer of the games in order to build and understanding of how social and political values, the developer's interest in history, studio values, entertainment-centric values, player-centric values and genre conventions had impacted how history was depicted within the game. There were a number of key takeaways from Grufstedt's research, particularly the importance of exploring the developer's perspectives and considering how this impacts our understanding the game in the larger academic context. Finally, Grufstedt also stressed the importance of acknowledging the authors and producers of historical content as part of our broader study on history in games.

Iain Donald (Abertay) brought a different perspective to the study of history and games in his exploration of how commemoration and collective memory were designed into a virtual reality game*, Their Memory.* He had also brought a few virtual reality, or VR, headsets so we could experience the game ourselves. Created in collaboration with the charitable organisation Poppyscotland, *Their Memory* explored the stories of veterans as told by the veterans themselves. Donald first highlighted how research amongst developers using game design tended to be broader than academic research, but also acknowledged that game developers often encountered problems when working at the intersection of games and history. Donald described his experiences with how the original vision for *Their Memory* was subverted and adapted to meet the needs of the partnering companies, such as Poppyscotland. The project partners wanted a focus on the legacy of WWI and not the war itself, and the veterans participating in the creation of the game's content expressed the desire that no battlefield or conflict imagery be included. As such, the original plans had to be scrapped and a new design thought out that used the Poppyscotland factory as the setting for the telling of stories as it meant a great deal to the veterans. The development of this game raised a lot of issues and difficulties that Donald shared with us. These included the mundane and perhaps easily overlooked problems of compliance with the amended Data Protection Act 2018, intellectual property and

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licencing. Yet Donald also addressed the reluctance of game companies to work with outside partners as these projects are usually not financially viable. This suggests an explanation for why museum video games are still relatively uncommon.

The final speaker for the panel was Vinicius Marino Carvalho (São Paulo) who presented on the game *Triumphs of Turlough,* asking whether it would be possible to create a game that could be used by historians in the same way a research article would be. Carvalho stressed that *Triumphs of Turlough* is a work in progress, but the intention is to create a game that maps out the landscape of Turlough in the early medieval period in order to enable historians to use as a resource upon which to run historical experiments about the movement of people and grown of settlements. Carvalho expressed a desire to show the complexity of real-world territories and landscape in a medium where complex maps are often eschewed in favour of simple divisions of land.

Following the presentations, there was an opportunity to discuss some of the topics that had been covered. One of the first questions to come out of conversations was around abstraction and how far a game could move away from an accurate historical depiction and it still be useful. Donald raised an important point that researchers often fall into the trap of assuming that players have the same knowledge as them, so that even without abstraction the game content could prove a barrier to some of the players. Grufstedt also commented that abstraction within the visual design of a game was often needed when the game dealt with macro-history and the content of a more realistic depiction would be too complex and large to attempt. Carvalho commented that it depended on the historical content in question, if historical figures were involved, he argued from a moral and ethical point of view, you shouldn't abstract at all. The other main topic that arose was in how to engage players, but especially younger generations, with narrative in historical games. Donald explained from their experience of testing *Their Memory* that the VR experience tended to engage students regardless simply because they are caught up in experiencing the new technology, he also urged us to recognise that VR is not nearly as established as we might think. However, Donald also pointed out that players will always interact with a game in unexpected ways and we have to be ready to design around that. On the other hand, Grufstedt noted how it was through engagement with the narrative that players tended to pick up on the historical context. The big take away from this conversation was the need to have gameplay content as well as historical content. As Esther Wright commented during this discussion, 'you need to have content as well as agency to make it a game, otherwise all you have is a recreation of a heritage site where all you can do is stand

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and look' as whilst this might be useful for improving access, it isn't a game.

After a final tea and coffee break, we re-joined the other panel group for the final session of the day. For the closing roundtable we returned to the theme of the day to consider the present and future of the study of history and games and a number of key topics of the day re-emerged during the panel and subsequent discussion. The panellists for the roundtable were Ylva Grufstedt, Linzi Harvey (Natural History Museum) and Benjamin Litherland (Huddersfield). They began by talking about their specific research interests and, from their respective perspectives, what they would like to see emerge from future study at the intersection of games and history. Grufstedt, from the background of arts and humanities commented that we needed to consider more the internal practices of game developers and how that translated into their chosen depiction of history. She also wanted to see more discussion on the juxtaposition between history and historiography and the demystifying of games for players as a way to challenge perceptions of games and developers. Litherland, from a cultural and media studies background wanted to see more research into history and games through the lens of social history, with a focus on everyday life. He also expressed a need for researchers to step back from the text of the game and examine the social bonds and connections that formed around games and in game culture. Finally, Harvey, an archaeologist, spoke about her research into the depiction of human bones in historical games and in the types and breadth of data you could learn from in-game bones, which led to the quote of the day: 'syphilis is amazing on bones'. From this Harvey suggested more research was needed into how developers chose what to include in their games and where that data comes from, and the ethics of game development.

The final discussion time built upon conversations throughout the event. The theme of authenticity and accuracy came up a couple of times. We queried whether the terms had or even could have stable meanings. Particularly when talking about accuracy it was commented how even monographs are not 'accurate' and that accurate is probably an unhelpful term. Nick Webber described both terms as problematic and suggested that their use implied an appeal to the truth. Instead of talking about authenticity and accuracy, he suggested, we should talk about history. The idea of context as key re-emerged, both in regard to how and where we encounter games, and in how we share our love of them with friends. Sometimes we forget that games are so prevalent in society and that even talking to non-gamers about games is not actually that hard![iv] Yet, at the same time we do need to recognise the barriers at play, especially in regard to access to the more expensive technology such as VR equipment. Esther raised an interesting comment that the emphasis we tend to place

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on progress and the development of technology is not a useful way to frame discussion of games and instead we should look at other means of assessing their meaning and value. Finally, we turned to the topic of diversity, representation, and ownership as this brought together many important considerations that need to be kept in mind when exploring history and games. Who gets to tell stories about the past? Who gets to make games? Who gets to consume these games? Indeed, representation and diversity are an issue both in what games simulate and in how they are made and consumed.

As we face uncertain times, these discussions are more relevant than ever. With much of the world facing lockdowns and social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, interaction with the digital world has become vital to maintaining patterns of work and play alike. Video games, in particular, are seeing a growth in usage as people seek the escapism they provide, institutions of learning are building lists of games for learning, and playing together has become a pathway to fulfilling social needs.[v] It will certainly be interesting to see how this period impacts upon the video game industry and on how we study games. In light of this, I will leave readers with one particularly challenging and thought-provoking question that Nick Webber posed towards the end of the day: 'what is the single biggest contribution we could make to the study of history and games, and what are we missing in order to make that contribution'? I encourage readers to consider this question in relation to their own research interests. Personally, I look forward to seeing the increasing breadth and depth of research in the future exploring history and games.

Acknowledgements

Amy is a second-year PhD researcher based at Nottingham Trent University, exploring the intersection of museums, video games, and interpretation. She has previously gained a BA in History at the University of Nottingham, before shifting focus to Museum and Heritage Studies for her MA, which she studied at Nottingham Trent University. Amy also works freelance for a heritage consultancy and has experience working with a large range of museums and heritage sites. She spends much of her free time playing video games.

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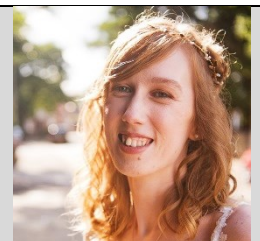
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Ludology

Assassin's Creed II (2009).

Assassin's Creed: Unity (2014).

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Freedom Fighters (2003).

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Minecraft (2009).

Papers Please (2013).

Endnotes

i https://www.civilandhumanrights.org/exhibit/american-civil-rights/

ii Manuel Cruz's thesis is available here:
http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/90194/1/Cruz%20Martinez%2C%20Manuel%20Alejandro.pdf

iii Praxeology is a theory and methodology of human action. The primary concept of praxeology is that human beings consciously act towards chosen goals.

iv The phrase 'non-gamers' refers to those who do not habitually play video games.

v See, for example, the record sales of Animal Crossing: New Horizons,
https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/30/despite-pandemic-gaming-is-well-positioned-to-withstand-recession/
The National Videogame Museum in Sheffield has provided a list of educational games for parents:
https://twitter.com/nvmuk/status/1240634714224017408?s=20

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