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GAME STUDIES. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES FROM THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL ART

GAME STUDIES. APROXIMACIONES METODOLÓGICAS DESDE LA HISTORIA DEL ARTE MEDIEVAL

Javier Castiñeiras López[1]

Abstract

This article presents an updated state of the art about the relation of videogames with the cultural sphere and the historical disciplines. Specifically, we will try to address the role that the History of Medieval Art can play in the analysis and assessment of these cultural objects from a double way defined, on one side, by the historical Middle Ages and, on the other side, by the recreated medioevo. The Assassins Creed saga and titles as Bloodborne or A Plague Tale: Innocence, offer very particular visions of medieval and neomedieval architecture, all of them likely to be part of the cannon of medievalizing works of contemporary culture and, therefore, be object of study for the History of Medieval Art.

Keywords

Medieval Art; Neo-gothic; Videogames; Archeogaming; Historical Game Studies

Resumen

En el presente artículo se ofrece un estado de la cuestión actualizado acerca de la relación del videojuego con el mundo de la cultura y de las disciplinas históricas. De manera concreta, se tratará de abordar el papel que la Historia del Arte Medieval puede ofrecer en el análisis y valoración de estos objetos culturales a partir de una doble vía definida, de una parte, por la Edad Media histórica y, de la otra, por el Medievo recreado. La saga *Assassin's Creed* y títulos como *Bloodborne* o *A Plague Tale: Innocence* ofrecen visiones muy particulares de la arquitectura medieval y neomedieval, susceptibles todas ellas de formar parte del canon de obras medievalizantes de la cultura contemporánea y, por lo tanto, de ser objeto de estudio para la Historia del Arte Medieval.

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Palabras clave
Arte Medieval; Neogótico; Videojuegos; Archeogaming; Historical Game Studies

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IN RECENT DECADES, the videogame sector has become one of the most successful cultural phenomena, with an exponential growth in the numbers of sales and users that continues year after year. This industry is characterised by a decided commitment to R&D, with the consequent constant renewal of hardware and software that helps to maintain the social interest in videogames and to expand their introduction into an increasing number of sectors[2]. Although as a cultural phenomenon it is still somewhat stigmatised and questioned[3], in Spain alone sales reached 1.479 billion euros in 2019 (3.3% more than the previous year) and there are an estimated 15 million players aged 6 to 64, 58% of which are male and 42% female[4]. These statistics furnish a good idea of the importance of the videogame sector in contemporary society and show it to be the most popular cultural industry in the 21st century. It is precisely this gradual success, generated since the first games in the late 1970s (with some precedents in the 1950s), that has allowed videogames to be introduced into academic studies in an irregular way, not without its problems. However, it has advanced firmly, in a wide range of disciplines, such as psychology[5], education[6], philosophy[7], and also in historical studies and to a lesser extent in history of art. The present study is located in the latter field, but before explaining the methodology, it is necessary to make some remarks about the relationship between videogames and theoretical study systems for a better comprehension of these media as multi-faceted cultural objects.

1. *GAME STUDIES*

Theoretical studies of videogames are mainly based around the double nature of the new media of digital art. On one hand, they are considered in their aspect as scientific-technological objects dependent on technical advances, while on the other hand, they are an object of analysis owing to their aesthetic nature as objects of

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2. The latest great technological challenge is the introduction of virtual reality. Since November 2020 we are within the ninth generation of video-consoles. The first generation began in 1972 and finished in 1977. This frenetic inter-generational transition is a good indication of the impact of R+D in the sector.

3. Some sectors of journalism and education perpetuate the blinkered and stereotype view identifying videogames with violence. Fortunately this trend is in decline and an increasing number of voices defend videogames in their educational and cultural facet. González-Sancho, Roy: «Estado general de la investigación sobre videojuegos: un breve análisis y posibles tendencias a futuro», *Repertorio Americano Segunda Nueva Época*, 29 (2019), pp. 249-268.

4. The data are monitored in Spain by the *Asociación Española de Videojuegos (AEVI)*, a member of the *Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE)*. The 2019 report can be consulted at *http://www.aevi.org.es/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/AEVI-ANUARIO-2019.pdf* [viewed: 15/02/2021]. At a world level, in 2020 it was calculated that the turnover reached 174.9 billion dollars. Source: *https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-12-21-gamesindustry-biz-presents-the-year-in-numbers-2020* [viewed: 15/02/2021].

5. Tejeiro Salguero, Ricardo; Pelegrina del Río, Manuel: *La psicología de los videojuegos. Un modelo de investigación*. Málaga, Ediciones Aljibe, 2008.

6. Lacasa, Pilar: *Los videojuegos. Aprender en mundos reales y virtuales*. Madrid, Morata, 2011. Gee, James Paul, *Lo que nos enseñan los videojuegos sobre el aprendizaje y el alfabetismo*. Málaga, Ediciones Aljibe, 2004.

7. See for example: Velasco Padial, Paula; Flores Ledesma, Antonio: *Ideological games. Videojuegos e ideología*. Sevilla, Héroes de Papel Studies, 2020. The literature in these disciplines cannot be covered fully in a study of the present kind. Three significant recent studies have been chosen and these attest the growth of these lines of research in Spanish academic circles.

visual and narratological culture[8]. Game Studies are founded on that basic premise[9], but from there many avenues of thought have attempted to fill this new theoretical architecture with contents. Thus, two initial methodological approaches have addressed this field of study: narratology and ludology.

The narratological perspective prioritises a semiotic approach to the fictional space of the videogames, within the framework of narration in digital media, as the basic container of new stories defined by their interactive and participatory character[10]. For the followers of this approach, interaction and participation of the receiver/user/player are the main novel elements of the narrative of videogames and therefore the factor that defines them compared with other literary or cinematic media. In turn, ludological studies are based on the theories arising out of the fields of sociology and anthropology connected with the ludic factor in the development of human societies and they then apply them to videogames[11], especially discussing the role of the internal rules of the games in order to differentiate them from other narrative arts. These rules, which affect the behaviour of the receiver/user/player and establish narrations with multiple possibilities, are, from this methodological viewpoint, the defining element of these media[12].

Finally, they shape the theoretical foundations of proceduralism, which also locates the definition of videogames in the process established by the rules, with the difference that they are considered alone, and not through their relation with the receiver/user/player[13].

With this theoretical and speculative baggage, videogames are defined as cultural objects and with that consideration they are starting to be studied in the field of humanities, creating, among others, the category of Historical Game Studies[14]. Theoreticians of historical videogames discriminate mainly between games focusing on a particular historical event, which pay greater attention to details, and games that represent longer and more general historical processes[15]. Both of these tend to distance themselves from academic history in favour of more fabulated versions, influenced by commonplaces, myths and historiographic prejudices, which are ultimately conditioned by ideological criteria and the demands of the market itself. Alberto Venegas Ramos has recently proposed

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8. Paul, Christiane, *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Models for Digital Art*. Oakland, Berkeley, University Presses of California, 2008.

9. On the possibilities of the development of this research perspective, see Navarro Remesal, Víctor (ed.): *Pensar el juego. 25 caminos para los Game Studies*. Valencia, Shangrila, 2020.

10. Murray, Janet: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997.

11. Huizinga, John: *Homo ludens. El juego y la cultura*. Madrid, Alianza, 1990 [1938]. Caillois, Roger: *Teoría de los Juegos*. Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1958.

12. Aarseth, Espen: *Cybertext - Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

13. Bogost, Ian: *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2007. For the main resources of the videogame language, see Pérez Latorre, Óliver: *El Lenguaje Videolúdico. Análisis de la significación del videojuego*. Barcelona, Laertes, 2012.

14. For a state of the art about the theoretical-methodological relation between history and videogames, see: Peñate Domínguez, Federico: «Los Historical Game Studies como línea de investigación emergente en las Humanidades», *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, 39 (2017), pp. 387-398.

15. Uricchio, William: «Simulation, history, and computer games», in Raessens, Joost; Goldstein, Jeffrey: *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2005, pp. 327-338.

a history games classification based on the sources employed to devise the games and the ludo-narrative elements used. He discriminates between history-testimony games, that offer «a testimony of a past event and whose sources for their images, rules, mechanics and narrative come from memory, either individual or inherited»[16]; history-problem games, those that provide «history as the heart of the playable proposal, whose sources for the creation of their images, rules, mechanics and narrative come from historiographic texts and debates about the past»[17]; and media-history games based on «aesthetic memory reproduced in the mass media whose only objective is attraction, fun, profit and immediate satisfaction and pleasure for players»[18].

This author is a clear representative of the new interest of Spanish historiography in the theoretical study of video games and participates in «History and Video Games. Knowledge, learning and projection of the past in digital society»: a research project that has been a point of reference in recent years in the national scientific panorama. It is headed by Juan Francisco Jiménez Alcázar, a pioneer of Games Studies in Spain whose research interests in this field are focused on the Middle Ages[19], particularly on medieval war.[20] For this researcher, the discipline of historical studies on the Middle Ages cannot turn its back on these new ways of informing about the past, and he even posits the figure of a «Medievalist Gamer» as a new kind of historian[21].

2. VIDEOGAMES, ART AND HISTORY OF ART

In the relationship of videogames with the world of art, several important landmarks have underpinned their reconsideration as artistic objects. One important step has been the increasingly common bestowal of awards traditionally

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16. Venegas Ramos, Alberto: *Historia y Videojuegos: la Segunda Guerra Mundial en la Cultura y la Sociedad Digital Contemporánea*, (unpublished doctoral thesis), University of Murcia, 2020, p. 45.

17. *Idem*, p. 47.

18. *Idem*, p. 50. This author provides a full, updated bibliography about history videogames and the historiographic tradition about them. *Idem*, pp. 25-57.

19. Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco: «Video games and Middle Ages», *Imago Temporis*, 3 (2009), pp. 311-365; Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco: «The other possible past: simulation of the Middle Ages in videogames», *Imago Temporis*, 5 (2011), pp. 299-340.

20. Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco: *De la Edad de los Imperios a la Guerra Total: Medievo y videojuegos*. Murcia, Compobell, 2016.

21. Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco: *De la Edad de los Imperios a la Guerra Total: Medievo y videojuegos*. Murcia, Compobell, 2016, pp. 195-219. The Middle Ages, videogames and History are increasingly studied in Spanish university circles. For a review of the introduction of this avenue of research in Spain, see Mugueta Moreno, Íñigo: «Los estudios sobre los videojuegos históricos en el mundo académico español», in Jiménez Alcázar, Juan Francisco; Rodríguez, Gerardo Fabián (eds.), *Videojuegos e Historia: entre el ocio y la cultura*. Murcia, Compobel, 2018, pp. 59-72. This author has also published several studies on the Middle Ages in videogames from the viewpoints of History and Education. Mugueta Moreno, Íñigo: «Las representaciones sociales de la Historia al servicio de la didáctica en Educación Superior», *Contextos Educativos*, Extra No. 1 (2016), pp. 9-30; Mugueta Moreno, Íñigo: «La Historia de los *gamers*: Representaciones del Medievo y la Antigüedad en los videojuegos de estrategia multijugador», *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea*, 2/I (2018), pp. 15-42.

FIGURE 1. CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION *ART AND VIDEOGAMES* (taken from https://americanart.si.edu/books/video-games)

reserved to other artistic manifestations to videogame creators[22], but the main symbolic turning point was the exhibition *The Art of Video Games* in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington (2012)[23]. This later became a travelling exhibition, which fostered even greater impact in American cultural circles (FIGURE 1). In the same year of 2012, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York acquired the code of 14 videogames for its collection, with the aim of conserving, exhibiting and investigating them[24]. Some large exhibitions have also been held in Spain (*GameWorld*, LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial, 2007; *Playware*, LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial, 2007-2008; *Homo Ludens Ludens*, LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial, 2008; *Try Again*, La Casa Encendida, 2008; *Videojuegos: Los dos lados de la pantalla*, Espacio Fundación Telefónica, Madrid, 2019-2020; and *Gameplay: Cultura del videojuego*, CCCB, Barcelona, 2019-2020). Moreover, an institution of such acknowledged cultural prestige as the National Library of Spain (BNE) has undertaken a major task of conservation and valorisation of Spanish videogames as part of the country's cultural heritage. These examples are only a small indication of the re-writing of the relationship between videogames and the world of art and culture but they demonstrate the progress that has been made in the last decade.

Videogames were catalogued as artistic objects in what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called «cultural industries»[25], as they are products made in an industrial environment aimed at the general public[26]. Although videogames have been affected by the debate about whether they can be regarded as artistic manifestations[27], there is no doubt that they have been able to generate aesthetics that are consubstantial to them, of which «Pixel Art» is the most popular. This was the first visual language for the sector and therefore it is associated with the first two decades of the industry (1970-1990) but it is still used as a kind of visual acknowledgment and conscious invocation of the media's own memory, as in some super-productions (*The Octopath*

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22. The most paradigmatic example is Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of the famous series *Super Mario Bros* and *The Legend of Zelda*, who was the first person inducted into the Hall of Fame in the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (1988), was made a knight of the French *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (2006) and became the first interactive creator to receive the Prince of Asturias Award in Communication and Humanities (2012), among other distinctions.

23. MELISSINOS, Chris; O'ROURKE, Patrick, *The Art of Videogames. From Pacman to Mass-Effect*. Nueva York, Welcome Books, 2012.

24. The collection has been enlarged in successive years: *https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/* [viewed: 18/02/2021].

25. HORKHEIMER, Max; ADORNO, Theodor: *Dialéctica de la Ilustración: fragmentos filosóficos*. Madrid, Trotta, 2009 [1947].

26. On mass culture and the means of industrial production, BENJAMIN, Walter: «La obra de arte en la época de su reproductibilidad técnica», in *Discursos Interrumpidos I*, Madrid, Taurus, 1973, pp. 15-57. is still quite valid.

27. The controversy was led by Roger Ebert, film critic in the Chicago Sun, for whom videogames should not be regarded as more than mere entertainment. For this controversy, see GARCÍA MARTÍN, Ruth: *Los videojuegos en el mundo del arte: del juego en el arte al arte del juego* (unpublished doctoral thesis), University of Castilla - La Mancha, 2019, pp. 162-174.

Traveler, Square Enix, 2018) and in countless more independent products (*Celeste*, MonoGame, 2018).

The development of three-dimensional games in the early 1990s and constant technological progress has enabled the consolidation of hyper-realistic aesthetics (*Detroit: Become Human*, Quantic Dream, 2018), which have been accompanied by alternative products that have essayed diverse visual languages ranging from expressionism (*Limbo*, Playdead and Double Eleven, 2010) to cartoon aesthetics that evoke the 1930s (*CupHead*, Studio MDHR, 2017) and even abstract language (*E4 – Every Extend Extra Extreme*. Q Entertainment, 2007).This process of theoretical-artistic consolidation has led to the appearance of the terms Game Art, to refer to the relationship of videogames with the arts, and Artgames, for videogames with a clear aesthetic intention[28]. They are changeable concepts undergoing constant revision but in any case they demonstrate the aesthetic trend of the videogames world in connection with movements in digital and interactive art.

Once creators and theoreticians had defined and defended the artistic character of videogames, History of Art as a field of study has also focused occasionally on some of these new artistic objects in order to apply its analytical methodologies. There is still a long way to go to be able to determine the role of this media in the future History of Art, it is still not very often studied in research projects and even less so in teaching programmes or in general textbooks on History of Art. Despite this incipient condition, historians and art historians can approach videogames in themselves as artistic objects inherent to contemporary culture[29], and at the same time, study the relations they establish with the main historical periods and styles.

Among this second aspect, from their beginnings, videogames have inaugurated a connection with History of Art through the concept of individual monuments. From the earliest stages, they have included digital reproductions of such emblematic architectures as the Great Wall of China (*Street Fighter*, Capcom, 1987), the Statue of Liberty in New York and the Sacred Family in Barcelona (*Atomic Runner*, Data East and Dempa, 1988), among numerous other examples. At first, the architectonic landscapes fulfilled a picturesque function as more or less intellectual geographic points of reference that were presented as static photographs in the background of the pictorial image of the videogame. This was largely because of the technical limitations of the software, and it was not until the technological developments in the second half of the 1990s that the growth of polygonal graphics and

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28. The definition of these terms is under debate and constantly changing. For a complete state of the art, see GARCÍA MARTÍN, Ruth: *op. cit.*, pp. 201-206.

29. From this point of view, the most important point is the analysis of contemporary plastic aesthetics and narratology of cinematography. A clear example of the videogames susceptible to this study method is the two issues of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013 and 2020), whose narrative aim is placed in the centre of the experience and, in the clear exercise of transferring media, is in the pre-production process for a series on the HBO channel. Another significant example is *God of War* (Santa Monica, 2018) whose narration is articulated by means of a false sequence of shots lasting over 25 hours. Ludo-narrative studies increasingly occupy a larger space in Spanish academic circles. A good example is the monographic issue of *L'Atalante. Revista de Estudios Cinematográficos*, which in its Number 31 included the booklet *Ludonarrativas. La complejidad narrativa en los videojuegos*. See the introduction to this issue by MARTÍN NÚÑEZ, Marta; NAVARRO REMESAL, Víctor: «La complejidad ludonarrativa en el videojuego: un doble boomerang», *L'Atalante. Revista de Estudios Cinematográficos*, 31 (2021), pp. 7-32.

three-dimensionality of playable space allowed greater ludo-narrative integration of architecture, historical or otherwise. In this way, after shaking off their condition as mere backgrounds, monuments began to be a crucial element in the narrative, playable and aesthetic development of a wide array of videogames[30].

A second and fundamental qualitative leap took place with the arrival of the seventh generation of video consoles (2005-2011) and launch of the videogame *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007), the first title in a successful and prolific saga in which History and History of Art occupy a place that the industry had never allowed them previously (FIGURE 2). In this action-adventure franchise, the idea of the individual monument rooted in the nineteenth century found in earlier games is still present, but in *Assassin's Creed*, the concept of a monumental and historic city now appears, at least at that scale. Furthermore, it becomes an active and fully accessible agent, which allows greater fusion between player, city and individual architectures.

FIGURE 2. *ASSASSIN'S CREED*, 2007. DOME OF AL-AQSA MOSQUE (screenshot by the author)

The Holy Land during the Crusades (*Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft, 2007), Italian Renaissance cites (*Assassin's Creed II*, Ubisoft, 2009), the Rome of the Borgia Pope (*Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, Ubisoft, 2010), Ottoman Istanbul (*Assassin's Creed Revelations*, Ubisoft, 2011), North American colonies in the War of Independence (*Assassin's Creed III*, Ubisoft, 2012), the post-colonial Caribbean (*Assassin's Creed Black Flag*, Ubisoft, 2013), the Atlantic during the Seven Years' War (*Assassin's Creed Rogue*, Ubisoft, 2014), Paris in the French Revolution (*Assassin's Creed Unity*, Ubisoft, 2014), Victorian London (*Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Ubisoft, 2015), the Egypt of Ptolemy (*Assassin's Creed Origins*, Ubisoft, 2017), Greece in the Peloponnesian War (*Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, Ubisoft, 2018) and, finally, Great Britain during the Viking raids (*Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, Ubisoft, 2020), are a sample that make perfectly clear the

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30. The saga that started with *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) is one of the clearest examples in this sense, in which 3D technology allowed the creation of convincing historicist architecture that the player could move through. Beyond more or less historical or historicist tendencies, architecture plays a fundamental role in games like *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), where the mansion and its intricate design are another character in the experience that set the pattern for later games.

large historical and monumental panorama that this saga has travelled through[31]. Anachronisms and historical mistakes occur in the series, but they are occasional and do not overshadow some of the most faithful and technically correct recreations that the videogames industry has achieved[32]. With both the history of the *Assassin's Creed* and many other examples, studies of virtual historical-artistic heritage are increasing year after year,[33] and thus the History of Baroque, Renaissance or Medieval Art possesses a new format in which it is reproduced and reinterpreted.

3. HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL ART AND VIDEOGAMES

In the relationship that contemporary culture has established with the past, the constant revision of the Middle Ages occupies a privileged place. This is a period that is equally vilified and mythicised, in which the origin of many European national discourses is located; but also a place for Arcadian evasion that becomes a constant source for fantasies. With this binary perspective as the background, 20th and 21st century cultural industries have dialogued with the long medieval period mainly along two main conceptual axes. The first of these prioritises the criterion of the truth and aims for the most reliable historicist recreation possible through the constant use of academic methodologies. In turn, the second nuances, or even disregards, historical truth in favour of folklore and myth, thus providing a medievalising imagination with fewer restrictions.

These categories, which are far from perfectly delimited, are the extremes of a spectrum full of nuances in which truth, veracity, recreation and myth fluctuate constantly and consciously[34]. Perhaps the two most paradigmatic examples of each approach are *Il nome della rosa* by Umberto Eco (1980) and *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R.R. Tolkien (1954)[35]. The novel by the Italian author is an extremely faithful recreation based on his profound knowledge of the Middle Ages, whereas the no

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31. These are only the canonical titles. The list of historical periods and places would increase even further with the spin-off versions.

32. An analogical example for the study of contemporary architecture is the recreation of New York in *Marvel's Spider-Man* (Insomniac Games, 2018) and *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales* (Insomniac Games, 2020).

33. Archaeology also participates intensely in these studies. ANGUS *et alii* (eds.): *The Interactive Past. Archaeology, heritage & video games*. Leiden, Sidestone Press, 2017. In addition to research that demonstrates real archaeology in the virtual medium, a new trend has emerged that vindicates the use of archaeological methodology for the virtual remains in the imaginary world of videogames. REINHARD, Andrew: *Archeogaming. An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games*. New York and Oxford, Berghann, 2018. Closer to historical-artistic methodologies are mainly works that focus on the history of styles (ESCANDELL MONTIEL, Daniel; CRUZ SUÁREZ, Juan Carlos: «Del encanto de vivir en Azeroth. Presencias Neobarrocas en la lúdica virtual», *Brumal*, III/1 (2015), pp. 139-160) together with studies concentrating on virtual urbanism (PÉREZ INDAVEREA, M.ª Aránzazu «Espacios urbanos en el videojuego: París como escenario de tensión», *Ángulo Recto. Revista de estudios sobre la ciudad como espacio plural,* 4/1 (2012), pp. 31-48). These studies are only a small sample of the growing academic interest, still in its infancy and with many lacunae.

34. The relativisation of the model of historicity is an important topic of study among historians. Part of post-modern historiography has assumed that historical accounts are essentially subjective and therefore there are possibilities of representation that combines historical truth with mythical and literary aspects. See DUBY, George: *Diálogo sobre la Historia. Conversaciones con Guy Lardre*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1988.

35. Eco's book was filmed by Jean Jacques Annaud in 1986 and Tolkien's trilogy by Peter Jackson from 2001 to 2003. Both cinematographic adaptations basically attempted to transfer to an audio-visual format the two ways of the approaching the Middle Ages in the literary texts.

lesser erudition of the British professor crystallised in a medievalised world of fantasy, but still absolute realistic and full of knowledgeable references to the period[36].

The reinterpretation of the Middle Ages is not exclusive to contemporary mass phenomena, and the neomedieval can be traced in European culture since at least the Romantic movement[37]. Literature and painting in that time found in the fragmented monumental landscape of the Middle Ages an emotional escape valve and a mythical point of reference for the new national identity mentalities, propitiating the value of a ruin linked to the aesthetic concept of the sublime[38]. The direct consequence of this re-semantisation of monumental heritage established by the Romantics is the association between architecture in ruins and the universe of fantasy and terror that has exercised a huge influence in literature, cinema and, as we shall see, in videogames[39]. Parallel with this, the revision of the Middle Ages also brought with it a new way of understanding architecture, which crystallised in the proliferation of neo-medieval and neo-Gothic buildings, the products of the new industrial society and the new national sentiments, clearly contrasting with the neo-Classic movement and aesthetics linked to the Ancien Régime.

The constant nostalgic reference to the memory of the Middle Ages in much of 19th century architecture, in addition to the construction of buildings of unquestionable historical-artistic value, decidedly conditioned the contemporary collective view of medieval architecture. The neo-medievalising works and theories of Eugéne Viollet-le-Duc, John Ruskin, Charles Barry, Augustus Pugin, Josep Puig i Cadafalch and Demetrio de los Ríos, among many others, sketched out a new Middle Ages on which much of contemporary culture has been based[40]. For the creators of cinematic, literary or ludo-narrative works, Amiens Cathedral, the Castle of Loarre or the Abbey of Conques are as medieval as Westminster Palace, Trinity Church in Manhattan and Neuschwanstein Castle. We should not see in this an effect of ignorance of the historical Middle Ages, at least not always, but a consequence of the importance of

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36. From the post-modern historiographic point of view mentioned above, J.R.R. Tolkien's books and their numerous veracious references to the Middle Ages attain a value of historicity complementary to Umberto Eco's more academic approach.

37. The 'invention' of the Middle Ages goes back to the 14th and 15th centuries when the new postures of Humanism and the new dialogue with Classic Antiquity were contrasted with the medieval period. The Enlightenment reactivated this debate by evoking the idea of progress and Romanticism vindicated the period out of the subjective spirit that was consubstantial to it. A vast number of prejudices and clichés about the Middle Ages arose out of those movements and transcended the limits of the medieval world chronologically. See HEERS, Jaques: *La invención de la Edad Media*, Barcelona, Crítica, 1995.

38. MORTIER, Roland: *La poétique des ruines en France: ses origines, ses variations, de la Renaissance à Victor Hugo*. Genève, Droz, 1967.

39. Already in 1765, the first novel in the Gothic genre, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, combined the architecture of the castle with a ghost story. In paintings, the subjective value of the aesthetics of ruins can be seen in such an important work as the *Ruins of Eldena Abbey* by Caspar David Friedrich (1825). In the same sense, Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) was important in the creation of the collective image of the Parisian cathedral and Gothic architecture in general.

40. For a summary of the context in which this architecture emerged, see POBLADOR MUGA, María Pilar: «El neogótico y lo neomedieval: nostalgias del pasado en la era de la industrialización», in LOMBA SERRANO, Concha *et alii* (coords.): *El recurso a lo simbólico. Reflexiones sobre el gusto II*. Zaragoza, Institución Fernando el Católico, 2014, pp. 119-144.

the 19ᵗʰ century neomedieval revival in the construction of cultural imagination, through works that are in any case extraordinary.

This multiple conception of the Middle Ages filtered by Romanticism and neo-Gothic aesthetics soon appeared in videogames about the historical Middle Ages. The purest historicist view took the developers of *World Heroes 2 Jet* (ADK Corporation, Hamster Corporation and SNK, 1994) to include a correct reproduction of the Patio of the Lions in the Alhambra in Granada as the setting for combats, only a few years after *Super Gouls'n Ghost* (Capcom, 1991) reproduced a castle clearly inspired by neo-Gothic examples such as Neuschwanstein to enhance its environment of Victorian horror[41]. As in Horace Walpole's novels, the relationship between architecture and the genre of horror are a constant in the videogames sector, with such significant examples as the saga that began with the first release of *Castlevania* (Konami, 1986), whose title shows the importance given to the *topos* of the Gothic Castle, with its nineteenth century origin, in its aesthetic and ludo-narrative design. Owing to its greater adaptability, the neomedieval aesthetic is used in the fictional universes of videogames more than faithful historical recreations. However, a very interesting example of virtual historical architectures is seen in the *Age of Empires* saga and, specifically for the Middle Ages, in *Age of Empires II. The Age of Kings* (Ensemble Studios, 1999), which contains a varied array of historical buildings from different latitudes and styles, like the Mausoleum of Theodoric in Ravenna, Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, Sta. Maria Laach Abbey and Chartres Cathedral[42].

This brief overview has shown that architectonic reproductions were common in the first decades of videogames, ornamental in some cases and much more integrated in others, but they were always greatly conditioned technically. It was not only a matter of replacing pixel aesthetics with a hyper-realistic view but also of the possibilities of 3D videogames in which architectures are able to abandon their pictorial character to become bodies in space. In other words, thanks to technological developments, buildings in videogames were no longer painted architectures but real constructions in a virtual world defined by space, light and interaction with the player/user.

The fundamental role of the *Assassin's Creed* saga (henceforward *AC*) in this qualitative leap has already been mentioned. This was in both technical and narrative aspects, as this series is based on the greatest possible historical accuracy, in which architecture and urbanism play central roles[43]. This makes the saga the clearest representative of the use of historical architecture in the videogames industry. In order to assess its impact in the dialogue with the Middle Ages, we should take into

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41. The reinterpretation of the German castle by Disney has played a crucial part in the cultural transmission of this image. The appearance of palace-fortresses inspired in the Disney one is constant in the sector, with a recent famous reinterpretation in the castle in *The Legend of Zelda. Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017).

42. ZARDOYA APÁSTEGUI, Óscar: «Análisis educativo. Age of Empires 2. Definitive Edition», *Games to Learn History*, 2020.

43. NAVARRO MORALES, Elisa: «La arquitectura como elemento narrativo en Assassins Creed II», *Quaderns*, 13 (2018), pp. 93-102. This studio is characterised by the consultancy of architects and historians. One of the key members of its development team is Maxime Durand, with a qualification in History, who is coordinator of the contents. The presence of a historian in a leading company in the development of videogames is clear evidence of the importance of the discipline for the industry and new possibilities for humanities in this sector.

account that most of the games released to date are set temporally in periods before or after the medieval centuries. Only the most recent, *AC Valhalla*, and the first release take part in that time and curiously in contexts that are rarely referenced in popular medieval monumental imagination. The first game was set in the Holy Land during the Crusades and the one released in 2020 in the British Isles and Scandinavia in the 9th century. Neither the geographic setting of one or the time period of the other correspond to the most stereotyped History of Medieval Art, generally associated with the 14th and 15th centuries in France and Britain[44]. This is an important point and seems to confirm the historicist intention of the *AC* brand rather than clichés about the period, including the monuments, in which a Gothic cathedral is equally important as a late medieval abbey or a mosque for *AC*.

Regarding those two titles, the first *AC* provided an entirely novel recreation of some Middle East cities in the Crusades, such as Acre, Damascus and Jerusalem. It should be noted how a great effort was made to transmit a monumental landscape and urbanism of multi-cultural cities, in which church spires were side by side with mosque minarets. The influence of the culture of monuments meant that the greatest care was taken in the best-known works in the canon of History of Art, and therefore the Dome of the Rock, Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were emphasised. The case of *AC Valhalla* is particular and suffers from greater difficulties in historical faithfulness. It should be noted that few remains are known of British 9th-century monuments and this allowed greater imaginative freedom for the developers who, conditioned by popular medieval images, introduced for example windows with Gothic tracery in the church of St Alban's Abbey. As regards the architectonic recreations, the greatest merit of this issue is the inclusion of the wooden architecture of the Viking culture and the constant presence of the Roman past through ruins, abandoned in some cases and reused in others, that correctly transmit in images the culture of *spolium* in medieval architecture[45] (FIGURE 3).

FIGURE 3. *ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA*, 2020. ROMAN RUINS (screenshot by the author)

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44. The Crusades and Viking culture are undoubtedly mythified aspects of the Middle Ages, but from the point of view of military history rather than the image of their architecture.

45. It should be taken into account that there is also a high degree of invention and a certain tendency towards the romantic reproduction of ruins.

The small number of chapters set in the Middle Ages does not stop the architecture of the period appearing in other *AC* releases. Indeed, except for the American games and the adventures in Antiquity (Egypt and Greece[46]), medieval and neo-medieval monuments form part of the virtual constructions in all the other chapters. In *AC II*, Italian Renaissance cities are successfully recreated through the architecture of the time but also in the inherited monumental landscape. In this way, together with the impressive Brunelleschi's Dome in Florence, it reproduces the Palazzo Vecchio and the Loggia dei Lanzi and, in Venice, the Basilica of St Mark. The following chapters, set in Rome and Istanbul in the 16th century, also offer a considerable number of medieval buildings (Hagia Sophia, the Galata Tower, Santa María in Aracoeli, etc.), and above all St Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican, where Constantine's buildings are still standing next to Michelangelo's dome under construction.

To conclude, the two games set in more recent chronologies (*AC Unity* in Paris during the French Revolution and *AC Syndicate* in Victorian London[47]) again display scrupulous respect for the monuments of both cities and include famous medieval architectures. The game set in London is doubly interesting as it recreates the medieval Westminster Abbey next to the palace of the same name in a neo-Gothic style. The chronological context of the videogame allows the appearance of historical and not fictitious neomedieval architecture, which further opens the possibilities for the study of virtual medieval art. The videogame that takes place in Paris is the one with the most detailed reproductions of medieval monuments, especially as regards those in the Île-de-France, above all Sainte-Chapelle, where the intrinsic value of light in this building has been understood perfectly (FIGURES 4 and 5), and Notre-Dame de Paris (FIGURE 6). The Parisian cathedral in *AC Unity* is the best example of how the videogame industry participates in the filters that the nineteenth century imposed on our view of the Middle Ages, as the image it gives of the building in about 1789 includes the Viollet-le-Duc spire built during the restoration that began in the 1840s.

FIGURE 4. *ASSASIN'S CREED UNITY*, 2014. EXTERIOR OF SAINTE-CHAPELLE (screenshot by the author)

46. These two releases stand out because they opted decidedly for teaching about History as they include *Discovery Tour* modes without violence and offer interactive explanations about the main historical events and monuments.

47. Tobalina Oraá, Eva: «Análisis educativo. Assassin's Creed: Unity», *Games to Learn History*, 2020. Mugueta Moreno, Íñigo: «Análisis educativo. Assassin's Creed: Syndicate», *Games to Learn History*, 2020.

This anachronism was included consciously by the studio as they thought that, for the general public, the Paris cathedral would be unrecognisable without its iconic spire, and therefore collective neo-medieval imagination was given priority over the chrono-constructive reality of Notre-Dame[48] (FIGURE 7).

FIGURE 5. *ASSASIN'S CREED UNITY*, 2014. INTERIOR OF SAINTE-CHAPELLE (screenshot by the author)

FIGURE 6. *ASSASIN'S CREED UNITY*, 2014. NOTRE DAME (screenshot by the author)
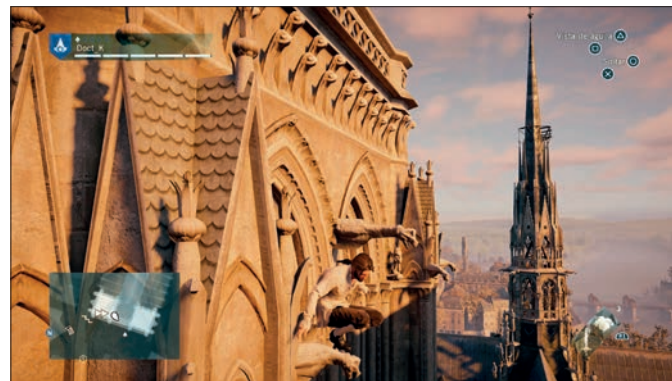
FIGURE 7. *ASSASIN'S CREED UNITY*, 2014. SPIRE OF NOTRE DAME (screenshot by the author)

48.   The importance of this building for Ubisoft led the studio to give away the videogame for a few days after the 2019 fire, so that users might observe the lost spire virtually. Although this initiative was for publicity purposes, it is a good example of the current relationship between heritage, History of Art and the videogame industry.

The value of the new and the recreated Middle Ages brings us to the following aspect to be discussed here: the relationship between videogames and the neomedieval image in the *Souls* universe of Hidetaka Miyazaki[49]. *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009) was released on the Japanese and American markets in 2009 and in Spain a year later. One of the most influential games in the last decades, its success has led to a remake in 2020[50]. It was the start of the so-called *Souls* or *Soulslike* universe devised by Hidetaka Miyazaki, which is characterised by its enormous difficulty, its cryptic narrative and its liking for the aesthetics of Gothic horror[51].

The games include levels like Tower of Latria or Boletarian Palace, clearly influenced by neomedieval aesthetics inspired by literature and Gothic horror films. The technical possibilities of the 2020 remake have also enabled an amazing level of detail, so that architectural elements are much more convincing, allowing vault systems, pointed arches, clustered columns and even railings and sculptures to be reproduced and recognised. The neo-Gothic settings are also used in the three releases of *Dark Souls* (Cathedral of Darkness, Lost Fortress, Anor Londo, etc.). In the first of these games a level was designed that is very interesting for a consideration of how this cultural manifestation understands the Middle Ages through inherited concepts, as the level called New Londo Ruins takes place in an impressive destroyed and abandoned city that is directly inspired by Romantic sensitivity towards the architecture of ruins.

The neo-medieval aesthetics are repeated in *Bloodborne*, but in a diverse way (FIGURE 8). Although buildings in a medieval style are again found, such as a huge Gothic cathedral, this game released in 2015 chooses an even more lugubrious setting, inspired by Dracula and Lovecraftian mythology, in which the city of Yharnam plays a crucial role. The design of the city centre is again based on the Middle Ages, but in this case with a clear Victorian bias in which the Gothic Yharnam skyline is filled by pinnacles, gables, pointed arches, tracery and spires, together with towers and chimneys evoking the Industrial Revolution. *Bloodborne* goes a step further than its predecessors and opts for a wide ranging revision of the medieval world, from late medieval Gothic architecture to nineteenth-century

49.   On this developer and his particular works, see Suárez, Adrián: *El padre de las almas oscuras. Hidetaka Miyazaki a través de su obra*. Barcelona, Star-t Magazine Books, 2019.

50.   We say it is a remake when a game is updated to the technical possibilities enabled by new software while maintaining the narrative and playable essence of the original game. The release of remakes is proof of the self-assessment of heritage of the media, which supposes that a number of games should be recuperated so that new users can know and enjoy them.

51.   The videogames canon includes, together with the cited *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011), *Dark Souls II* (FromSoftware 2014), *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware 2016), *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware 2015) and *Sekiro* (FromSoftware 2019). The last game is not studied here as it is inspired by feudal Japan, where the cultural dynamics are different from those of the Western Middle Ages. At the present time, *Elden Ring* is being developed with a storyline by Hidetaka Miyazaki and George R. Martin, creator of the literary saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (begun in 1996 and to be completed. The novels were the source for the famous television series *Game of Thrones*), and one of the most important authors in the neo-medievalising tradition of modern fantastic literature. The participation of the author in developing the videogame is framed within the increasing value of trans-media development in contemporary culture, and at the same time, in the relationship he possesses with the Middle Ages and its recreations. See Encabo Fernández, Eduardo, Urraco Solanilla, Mariano; Martos García, Adriana: *Sagas, distopías y transmedia. Ensayos sobre ficción fantástica*. León, Universidad de León, 2016.

Victorian neo-Gothic. Miyazaki's third game is thus located in the long-lasting tradition of the Gothic novel that, from Horace Walpole to Bram Stoker[52], gives a crucial role to medieval architecture in the construction of its universes.

FIGURE 8. *BLOODBORNE*, 2015. NEO-GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE (screenshot by the author)

The *Assassin's Creed* saga and the *Souls* universe are the clearest representatives, but by no means the only ones, of the way in which the cultural videogames industry has connected with the Middle Ages and its architectonic world. However, the possible ways of approaching the Middle Ages have not been exhausted with them and an intermediate trend exists between the archaeological rigour of *AC* and the neo-Gothic inventiveness of *Souls*. A good example is the French videogame *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo Studio, 2019), which tells the story of two brothers in south-west France in the Hundred Years' War[53]. With this premise, the developers seem to display an aim of historical veracity close to *AC* and, indeed, the realization of the climate of war in 14th-century France is worthy of praise. However, as the plot develops, a large number of pejorative clichés about the Middle Ages constantly emerge; such the extreme violence, religious fanaticism, the Inquisition, the plague and alchemy.

The architectonic recreations that accompany the game are taken from the historical Aquitaine and the humble buildings in the rural world are especially noteworthy in contrast with the Romanesque monasteries and Gothic buildings (FIGURES 9 and 10), not only religious constructions, but also civil buildings like fortresses and even a university. They all reflect detailed knowledge of the characteristics of the different artistic periods: the importance of the cloisters in the Romanesque monastery, use of light through the Gothic stained-glass windows, the construction of new buildings for urban life, etc. However, based on this knowledge, the developers designed buildings that do not copy historical buildings even though they are inspired by them. The

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52. The relationship with the novel by the Irish author transcends the horror aspect as both works use the historical Middle Ages and the new nineteenth century medieval aesthetics. In the novel, the narrative space is articulated around the medieval castle in Transylvania and Victorian London in an exercise of duality that the videogame emulates with the Gothic architecture of such buildings as the cathedral and the neomedieval aesthetics of the city of Yharnam. In both works, the architecture and urban areas are elements in the achievement of a lugubrious setting, in the way that the 2015 videogames repeats the cliché that associates Gothic architecture with darkness and horror, which also appears in the 1897 novel and in Western cinematography.

53. Mugueta Moreno, Íñigo: «Análisis educativo. A Plague Tale», *Games to Learn History*, 2020.

rigour in the buildings contrasts towards the end of the game with the fantasy of the narrative that takes place in them. The impressive Gothic cathedral in the final chapter full of supernatural events is especially noteworthy. The Gothic architecture takes its presence directly inherited from Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and functions practically like another person in the story.

FIGURE 9. *A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE*, 2019. ROMANESQUE CRYPT (screenshot by the author)

FIGURE 10. *A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE*, 2019. GOTHIC GALLERY (screenshot by the author)

A Plague Tale: Innocence is a good example of the ambiguity in which the reproduction of the buildings is rigorous, but without the constraints of a literal copy, where the architecture is the setting for a story that deliberately combines historical veracity with science fiction, creating a contrast that separates this game from the *AC* and *Souls* sagas. It traces out a third approach in the relation of videogames with the medieval world.

4. CONCLUSIONS. MEDIEVAL ART GAMES STUDIES?

A brief overview has been made of the cultural videogame industry and its relationship with the world of History and History of Art. The evident narrative and aesthetic vocation of the games fully justifies society's new appreciation of them, which has taken videogames to museums and universities, albeit not without some issues. In the universities, they are studied in their nature as artistic objects

in themselves and as new media for historical recreation and the teaching of humanities. This cultural and academic dignification has allowed terms like Game Studies to be coined in order to cover an expanding line of studies, or Historical Games Studies, in which the role of historical disciplines is fundamental. Their nature as an audio-visual product also situated videogames in the specific field of History of Art, both from the methodological perspective of the history of the cinema and visual arts, and through the history of architecture owing to their mimetic nature in two or three-dimensional interactive environments.

From this scientific point of view, the History of Medieval Art may offer specific interpretations of interest because, as we have shown, multiple conceptions of the Middle Ages exist, and many of them transcend the rigour of History to enter the terrain of the construction of collective cultural imaginary worlds. Videogames undoubtedly follow inherited traditions filtered through the cinema, comics and literature, and in all these media appears the dichotomy, equally seen in videogames, between the historical and the recreated Middle Ages. Historical personalities next to witches and demons, or Romanesque churches together with castles adorned with impossible towers, appear in ludo-narrative products following the dynamics of other cultural mass media. All these artistic manifestations are conditioned, as explained above, by the revisions of the Romantic movement and the nineteenth century, which confers a certain special status to the History of Medieval Art, as its relationship with videogames must be analysed through historical veracity but also through the History of Neo-medieval Art and the cultural constructs accompanying it.

The participation of videogames in these wider dynamics fully justifies their inclusion in a present and future avenue of research for the History of Medieval Art and all other periods. However, a final factor that individualises videogames and differentiates them from other artistic manifestations must be emphasised. Interactivity and the semiotic relationship with the user/player allow an approach to the new medieval worlds that is impossible in other formats. Above all, the three-dimensional development has enabled buildings not only to be reproduced and stories to be developed around them, but also to become full architectures defined by light, space and their relationship with the individuals. Rapid technological progress has therefore allowed videogames to reproduce historical architectures and create new virtual ones, not for that any less real. Both of these are susceptible to being studied by History of Art, following precepts similar to those of *Archeogaming*. In the same way as Archaeology is beginning to consider virtual remains on the same level as the material culture reproduced in videogames, the historical-artistic discipline can study newly-created virtual architecture at the same time as the recreated historical buildings.

In this way, a new and fertile avenue of research, hand in hand with technological advances, will be able to rethink History of Medieval Art, at least as regards its relationship with contemporary culture, under the legitimate conceptual umbrella of Medieval Art Games Studies.

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9

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REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

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ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

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