Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams

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It's eleven-o-clock in the morning, and I'm watching a war end. Live on YouTube, I join with a thousand other viewers as the Mayans, long assailed by their ancient enemy Saladin, sally forth from their capital of Spudtopia to drive their antagonists out of the Patagonian basin. The end arrives swiftly – barely three hours after I started watching. Later, I join another large group of fans to observe an entirely different spectacle: the young Count Eudes, newly ascendant in West Francia in 892 C.E., schemes to seize the ducal title of his overlord. We the audience spend twenty minutes unraveling the quirks of early medieval primogeniture and titular claims to figure out who, exactly, the young Count should befriend, marry, and kill. The two popular games played here, *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* and *Crusader Kings III*, represent the latest iterations in long-running franchises that were – until recently – largely played by individuals in isolated scenarios. Now, history can be made and remade live, with you and a thousand of your best friends. Yet how, exactly, does this work? What role does history and historical thought play in the process T.L. Taylor calls "[transforming] private play into public entertainment?" (*Watch Me Play* 6). To answer these questions, I examine two live streamers and their communities for historical engagement, connecting my analysis of these two microcultures to a growing body of research on historical games and the people who play them.

For decades, historians and scholars of digital media have cast a wary eye on digital historical games. For many of these scholars, the importance of digital historical games is clear – they're extraordinarily popular, and they represent not just a few hours' worth of engagement, but potentially hundreds of hours per individual (Chapman, *Digital Games*; Kee and Bachynski). In addition, with waves of cultural backlash channeled at historical education sweeping the United States,

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the historical representation and encounters happening in popular digital spaces becomes ever more important. In short, the popularity of these games – for good and for ill – underscores their importance in popular understandings of history.

The popularity of digital historical games emphasizes a long-running scholarly debate regarding the compatibility of these games with scholarly history itself. Much of this debate is rooted in the shifts and turns in historical scholarly discourse, which contest the public legitimacy, academic validity, and general efficacy of digital games for historical purposes. This debate finds its roots in an earlier shift in historiography; this shift opened up what has been termed a deconstructionist approach to historical scholarship which asserts that, according to historian Alun Munslow, "past events are explained and acquire their meaning as much by their representation as by their 'knowable actuality'" (13). In this deconstructionist view, scholarly narrative is dethroned as a singular source of objective truth, and the role of more material factors – such as authorial bias, narrative structuring, and the medium in use – become prominent. Deconstructionist historiography thus foregrounds an old question – originally put forth by historian Hayden White – which asks if the affordances of a particular media form are compatible with scholarly history. Thus, the importance of the form of digital games.

The twin overlapping emphases provided by form and popularity are further emphasized by a third vein of scholarly activity: the exploration of digital historical games' pedagogical potential. This particular scholarly thread is one of the few to also include examinations of analog historical games, which have a longstanding place in historical (particularly military) education (Dunnigan). Scholarly work investigation the pedagogical potential of historical games – digital and analog – centered largely on both the engagement factor (e.g., students' unsurprising enthusiasm for games in the classroom) and their use in teaching complex and systemic historiographic concepts. Kurt Squire, a notable early scholar in this area, argues for his work by highlighting his historical game of choice's "wide appeal, design sophistication, and unique affordances as a world history simulation" (4). He and Historian Tom Taylor both also emphasize the facility of these games in allowing students to explore historical processes – a notably difficult set of concepts to teach (T. Taylor). Thus, digital games represent a potentially valuable resource for educators at all levels – and the need to better articulate and comprehend their underlying formal structure is also increased.

All three of these overlapping arguments for importance – popularity, form, and pedagogy – are reiterated and reemphasized by large-scale, tectonic shifts in the

landscape of digital gaming which threaten to invalidate many of the detailed analyses on which they were built. As I have written elsewhere, the bulk of the early scholarship previously characterized here focused heavily on the digital game as a specific, concrete artifact played by small groups of individuals (Lundblade); more recent scholarship has turned toward viewing games in a more sociological light, locating the older conception of digital game within a layered network of other physical, social, cultural, and economic phenomena. Responding to a variety of trends which trouble the older ideas of game, such as the rise in alternate-reality and virtual reality gaming and digital game live streaming, many of these recent works see the necessity in situating a proliferation of game and game-adjacent media forms within broader, more encompassing frameworks than just the game itself.

Historical games scholarship is just beginning to incorporate this material turn in wider games scholarship and has yet to incorporate any studies of historical games in newer modalities such as live streaming. With such a popular modality yet unexamined, White's questions reemerge in a new light: how do the affordances of digital gaming change when it is "[transformed from] private play into public entertainment" (*Watch Me Play* 6)? Is the audience-player model represented by live streaming more in line with the affordances of historical films or historical games? How does live streaming impact informal historical education and learning? If, as scholars argue, digital games grant players an agentive role in historical construction, what happens when large audiences are engaged in watching streamers make that history? As the popularity of live streaming grows, and as the politicization of historical education increases, the importance of answering these questions will only continue to grow.

Examining Historical Game Live Streaming

This work seeks to form an initial, exploratory extension of historical games scholarship into digital game live streaming. It seeks to identify how a selected pair of popular streamers and their respective audiences engage with history when streaming two different historical games – *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (Civ6) and *Crusader Kings III* (CK3). Using discourse analysis in what James Paul Gee describes as both its descriptive and critical aspects, two major interweaving streams of discourse – the verbal utterances of the streamer and the written discourse found in the stream's chat feed – are analyzed for their "ways of saying

(informing), doing (action), and being (identity)" (*An Introduction* 8), as well as for how historical streaming discourse articulates positions of power and authority through play and through reference to history or historicity. Both descriptive and critical lenses are essential, considering the close connections between racism, white supremacy, and historical appeals in online spaces. Through the application of this analysis to the streams under examination, I then use grounded theory (Birks and Mills) to move between the copious available data – potential thousands of hours of recorded live streams – and the production of a set of codes that aim to provide an initial characterization of historical engagement within the multifaceted sites associated with historical game live streaming. I then seek analogous paradigms of historical inquiry in the extant scholarship on historical games, which enables me to build a bridge between the large body of previous work and this new modality.

Examined in detail, digital game live streams represent complex assemblages in and of themselves. Attempting to break down their constituent elements and relevant actors reveals an extremely large set of factors to consider – from the streaming platforms, players, viewers, games, archived recordings, and the various technological, legal, and social actors framing these other interactions, to name a select few. While one option would be to take an experimental approach which isolates a specific platform, game, or streamer (the most feasible options), this approach would limit the ability to draw connections between some of the rich contextual factors impinging upon the observed play experience by eliminating key opportunities for comparison-based analysis; instead, I have chosen to treat the study of historical live streaming as an assemblage of play, whereby, according to Taylor,

> many varying actors and unfolding processes make up the site and action, allows us to get into the nooks where fascinating work occurs; the flows between system and player, between emergent play and developer revisions, between practices and player produced software modifications. […] between legal codes, designer intentions, and everyday use practices, between contested forms of play, between expectation and contextualization. ("The Assemblage of Play" 332)

Within this rich notion of assemblage, I have chosen to initially highlight two major observed drivers of differentiation in historical play: the live streamers themselves, and the games themselves.

Embodying History: Quill18 and *Crusader Kings III*

The first game included in this examination of historical streaming is Paradox Interactive's hit 2020 release, *Crusader Kings III* (*CK3*). Following previous iterations of the series, this latest iteration of *Crusader Kings* places a single player in control of a (generally) historically rooted personage from the 9th through 15th century. *CK3* is marketed and broadly characterized as a grand strategy game – a subgenre of strategy game which generally provides a more multifaceted and multidimensional play experience than other mainstays of strategy gaming, such as the popular 4X (Explore Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate) titles. Strategy games such as *CK3* have featured prominently in studies of historical games, with titles in the *Civ* series becoming among the most-cited games within game studies scholarship (Frome). As such, they form an integral basis for the conceptual frameworks – rooted in examination of form – which have sought to establish a deeper scholarly grammar for their examination (Chapman, *Digital Games as History*; Uricchio). In *Digital Games as History*, media scholar Adam Chapman characterizes these strategy games as generally falling under what he calls a conceptual simulation style – a style rooted in high-order abstraction which more easily positions the player as a godlike historian (rather than a mere historical agent) managing the complex interactions of a multitude of historically-rooted processes. Thus, Chapman argues, the historical argumentation in these games is largely rooted in procedural rhetoric (Bogost) and serves "not only [as] a simulation of the past itself but a simulation of discourse about this past." (Chapman, *Digital Games as History* 75). It would seem that, as a grand strategy game, a formal analysis of *CK3* would fully situate it on this end of Chapman's spectrum.

However, *Crusader Kings III*, like its predecessors, contains substantive elements which break this conceptual mold. The first clue is found in the game's marketing, which offers a "life of medieval drama and majesty" and the ability to "live stories of romance, bravery, duplicity, and greed in a richly detailed medieval sandbox" (*Crusader Kings III*). This highlights one of the series' key twists – placing the player not in control of entire civilizations or organizations per se, but in control of a series of individuals (hopefully) forming a medieval dynasty. Thus, the player takes on the role not of some omnipotent diegetic agent, but specific historical(esque) actors whose power and range of responsibility is largely determined by the player's efforts with the preceding generation. Thus, the game also incorporates aspects typically associated with the opposite end of Chapman's

spectrum – the realist simulation style – which are underpinned by stylistic techniques aimed at a form of visual "realism" and attempts to tie the player concretely to the diegetic level of specific historical agents. Circling back to the key role form plays in the legitimization of historical play, this brief framing of *CK3* suggests that observed play of *CK3* will reveal modes of historical interaction in line with what is suggested by its hybridized conceptual and realist simulation styles. How well, then, does this analysis of form characterize the modes of historical engagement actually identified in live streaming assemblages? To answer this, we turn to the first streamer and set of streams analyzed: Quill18's Count of Anjou series.

The first examined streamer, Quill18, positions himself as a variety streamer focusing on digital strategy games, playing strategy games ranging from Paradox Interactive titles such as *Europa Universalis IV*, *Crusader Kings III*, and previous iterations in these series, to city builders and other role-playing games. Across the titles examined, Quill exhibits several distinct behavior patterns that carry across all the titles he chooses to play. First, Quill leans heavily into what Taylor characterizes as a variant of the "think aloud" usability protocol, wherein the participant is asked to verbalize the entirety of their normally internal thinking process when making decisions and interacting with certain systems. As Taylor notes, this behavior "is typically accompanied with humor, frustration, and suspense" (*Watch Me Play* 75). Quill also engages in a comparable "read aloud" protocol – my term for his proclivity toward reading the entirety of various game messages and written entries, ranging from help-screen messages to internal game encyclopedia entries. Through emphatic and skilled elocution, Quill selectively reads game content in a way that almost completely eliminates the reading load for his audience, transforming his play into a more auditory experience which more closely recalls tabletop RPG podcasts. In a ludically-dense game which nonetheless possesses extensive "filler" or "fluff" text (common community terms for descriptive/narrative text lacking a clear ludic link), this dialectical strategy shifts the presentation of the game further towards the first person, narrative-focused side of Chapman's spectrum.

Figure 1: A CK3 event pop-up. With his read aloud approach, Quill usually reads the narrative and mechanical descriptor text in the course of play.

The second notable stylistic marker stems from Quill's deft awareness of the relatively fluid transmedia properties of streaming – for video game live streams represent a form of transmedia, as they necessarily combine a form of cinematic entertainment with ludic engagement; this positions the interactions between streamer and audience "across media" (Jenkins 2011). Like many streamers, Quill uses simple and clear pronoun distinctions (e.g. "I" vs "we" statements) to shift between a mode of play which elides the audience – one where the streamer narrates their decision-making and thought process in the first person – and a collectivist mode of play which incorporates the audience into the role of the player through the use of direct audience questions and collective framing (and thus partially collapsing the transmedia divide between audience and player). An early example from Quill's Count of Anjou series demonstrates his use of this split:

> Quill18: We have to kill one of their husbands – oh that's not true…I think I still want to marry there. I mean, we could – wait, I mean he's six, so we'd have to wait forever for him to come of age. That would be no good.[1]

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[1] Transcribed from Quill18's "Let's Play Crusader Kings III – Count of Anjou – Part 13," at approximately 13:40.

In this brief section, the streamer is discussing the strategic choice of whether to order the assassination of one of their character's daughter's husbands, allowing the player to remarry their newly widowed daughter to a higher-status strategic target. Here we can see this streamer's own negotiation of the transmedia divide: personal opinions and desires are clearly separated and not attributed to the audience, while all discussion which frames specific in-game action uses the collective framing. This linguistic strategy positions the audience and streamer together as a single player, partially collapsing the transmedia positioning inherent in the divide between audience and player. This strategy which is extended by the more direct strategy of soliciting viewer input on decisions with varying ludic value, from highly strategic marriage strategies (with a high level of ludic relevance) to naming the character's children (with absolutely no ludic connection). This direct and indirect prompting towards collective identity and action, I argue, increases engagement in the decision-making process – engagement which directly bears on the ways in which history and historicity impinge upon the *CK3* play experience.

Taken together, the combination of formal depiction and the streamer's layered mannerisms mediate the viewers' individual and collective engagement with our primary target for analysis: the historical aspects of play. Historical engagement in Quill18's *CK3* streams tends to take a small set of forms, most of which fall under the broad category of historical resonance. Chapman defines historical resonance as "the establishment of a link between a game's historical representation and the larger historical discourse, as the player understands it" (*Digital Games as History* 36). In Quill's streams, historical resonance can not only be directly identified as shaping play, but specific instances that span the intersections between streamer, audience, and game can be separated out and further elucidated. Two examples from his stream shall suffice to illustrate the point. In the first case, an in-game event has just revealed that a young, female, married character in the streamer's dynasty (essentially a family member to some degree) has committed adultery with a considerably older male priest. Needless to say, this scenario provoked an outburst of discussion:

> pharynx007: a catholic priest preying on a child... noooo. color me surprised. Lol
> Anamalocarid: Eighty was like being Methuselah back then

Robodine: Wasn't there a US president who fathered a child at high age, with said child also fathering a child age?[2]

In all three samples, different articulations of historical resonance appear, as all three viewers explicitly attempt to situate recent events in a historical context. In the first, we see an explicit connection first with current events (with the stereotypical proclivities of priests a well-known cultural referent), but also makes an implied argument for the historical continuity of this stereotype. The second draws an empathic framing which emphasizes the male character's extreme age specifically within the game's historical context; this sort of historical connection was drawn by many other viewers as well. In the third, the viewer draws a connection between the event and another historical scenario as part of an ongoing side discussion on the likelihood/frequency of octogenarians fathering children. All three vary in the ways in which they incorporate historical awareness into their response to play events, but all these comments represent individual and collective efforts to frame and legitimize the game's events into their historical awareness.

This first example presents commentary and reactions which flow entirely between participants in the community chat; this intra-audience historical engagement is not addressed or built upon by the streamer. Quill18's own responses to the conversation stirred up by this incident are instead directed at more humorous comments. Here we must separate the identified interactions which remain entirely between chat participants from interactions which involve streamer and audience acknowledging and responding to each other. The first category – represented by the previous sample – I term intra-audience engagements. While relevant for addressing our core questions, this first category does not readily speak to the overall structure of the community created by the stream. Our second example comes from a different category: interactions where the streamer acknowledges and responds to discussions and questions in chat. These I term curated engagements. The overall structure and distribution of these curated engagements reveal more about the micro culture being constructed at this particular site – since interaction with the streamer is generally an extremely desired outcome, the type of interactions which the streamer selects as worthy of response are likely to have a strong effect on shaping the micro culture of that streamer's community.

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[2] Archived from Quill18's "Let's Play Crusader Kings III – Count of Anjou – Part 14," at approximately 4:10, 4:13, and 4:54 respectively.

Quill's curated engagements are largely focused on humorous and other convivial responses to his audience, with a focus on acknowledging and strengthening the relationship between his audience members and their occasionally embodied avatars – one of his distinctive practices. In his *CK3* streams, Quill allows his audience members to enter their names into an ad-hoc database from which names for in-game characters are randomly selected; many of his curated engagements center and reinforce this narrative embodiment, as he frequently re-engages with and responds to audience members whose in-game avatars have become embroiled in entertaining or relevant events. However, some of Quill's curated engagements also respond to and acknowledge instances of historical resonance; here, in our second example, Quill responds to chat by discussing the stream's gameplay options going forward:

> Quill18: We could potentially start a faction, and other people might join our faction…but I don't know; do we really want to be that game-y and do it? In reality, Count Eudes would already be king. He would've been elected king because of some things that happened.[3]

This passage is notable for several reasons: first, it represents a direct understanding of the potential conflict between player actions and historical understanding – a form of the commonplace tension between player agency and game systems often brought about by ludic and narrative constraints at odds with one another. It is here that Quill engages in what Apperley calls configurative resonance, which "involves the player deliberately configuring, and/or performing actions in the game – out of all the possible potential configurations and performances – in order to create specific resonances" (135). Quill's historical resonance includes awareness of past events as history (his reference to the historical record), but his brief discussion of configurative resonance shows his understanding of how specific game actions would generate not undesirable historical outcomes (otherwise any gamified historical process would be an acceptable way to bring the game's events closer to the strict historical record), but represent a-historic, expressly ludic mechanisms for accomplishing those ends. Critically, this shows an awareness of historical resonance in Quill's configurative resonance play – and this resonance is nuanced enough to differentiate between and include both historical *events* (e.g., the strictly linear names, dates, and places structure pedagogically aligned with conceptions of

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[3] Transcribed from Quill18's "Let's Play Crusader Kings III – Count of Anjou – Part 13," at approximately 13:00.

history that claim objective historical understanding of the past) and historical *processes* (e.g., the social mechanisms by which rank and title were acquired in early medieval European society).

Continuing examination of Quill's *CK3* streaming shows similar types of interactions and historical engagements; both streamers and viewers engage in discussions of historical resonance, seeking to draw connections between their individual historical understandings and the events unfolding in the game. Concurrently, streamers and viewers engage in configurative resonance to take historically resonant actions as well as to achieve historically resonant outcomes and events. Notably, while these interactions are common, they still represent only a small fraction of the viewer and streamer discussions – even during events which precipitate this sort of historical reflection. The bulk of the discourse, even at these moments, is filled with commonplace cultural touchstones, memes, and other continuing conversation threads.

When viewing Quill's flip to streaming *Civ 6*, one of his core tendencies immediately serves to differentiate the stream's historical engagement: as previously discussed, Quill makes heavy use of both the commonplace think-aloud protocol and his more distinct read aloud approach; with *Civ 6*, a game where the written content load leans towards the ludic, this read aloud directly leads to a greater emphasis on the ludic aspects of play – simply reading the available stream of text in *Civ 6* provides the player and audience with a far more dense ludic load (though still far below that of the second streamer examined here). Beyond the shift to the streaming experience inflected through Quill's read aloud approach, his *Civ* streams are notable for a near-complete lack of historical resonance, awareness, or engagement of any kind. Viewer comments do not introduce any of the historical resonance, configurative resonance, or historiographic knowledge demonstrated by both streamer and audience.

The overall effect of Quill's stylistic behaviors is to center narrative embodiment and roleplaying in his play. Borrowing mannerisms from notable tabletop RPG communities, Quill endeavors first and foremost to create a lighthearted, convivial environment where nothing is taken too seriously, and the audience can locate themselves somewhat in the unfolding narrative of community play. The balance between narrative roleplay and ludic, systems-driven interaction in Quill's streams is somewhat affected by the choice of game; in *CK3*, examinations of curated and intra-audience engagements suggest that the community styles of light roleplay and embodiment lead to greater consideration

of the game's clear connection to a popular historical past. Conversely, in *Civ 6*, the embodied roleplay shifts more towards a generalized humorous approach which satirizes historical connection. While these aspects are largely recognizable in isolation, to achieve some additional clarity and understanding of how historical engagement occurs in Quill's *CK3* streams, it is necessary to turn to a different streamer entirely, and to investigate how their stream and their community engage with the same game.

Mastering Play: PotatoMcWhiskey and *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*

Sid Meier's Civilization VI, the latest in the best-selling series, continues the iterative reproduction of one of the most-referenced game series in the game studies canon (Frome), as well as one of the pivotal early objects of study in historical game studies (Chapman, "Is *Sid Meier's Civilization* History?"; Poblocki; Friedman). A classic 4X game which purports to allow players to guide a chosen civilization across history, *Civ* – like the *Crusader Kings* series – is closely connected to history and historical processes. While *CK3* presents an atypical blend of elements from across Chapman's simulation style spectrum, *Civ* (and specifically *Civ 6*) occupies the prototypical niche for conceptual simulation, featuring high levels of abstraction and a diegetic scope that puts the player in a deific and far-reaching authorial position – indeed, a popular early term for similar games was "god games." For streaming, then, if the formal analysis translates directly to observed play, we would expect to identify historical engagement taking the form of awareness of historical processes and conceptions of history itself.

Looking at streamers who play *Civ 6*, one of the most prominent and popular is PotatoMcWhiskey. Well known in the community for his constant use of the game's highest difficulty setting, Potato's streams largely focus specifically on *Civ 6*, with a relatively small percentage directed towards many of the same strategy games streamers such as Quill18 play in a more balanced rotation. When compared with Quill, Potato's streams are marked by the near-complete absence of two of Quill's defining streamer characteristics; first, he generally avoids the collectivist framing Quill frequently makes use of, framing the entirety of his think aloud process in the first person singular (with occasional lapses into collective language as the exception). Second, he largely avoids Quill's inclusion of a comparable read aloud behavior, preferring to instead devote most of his speaking time to thoroughly explaining his strategic thought process; where he does read aloud, the chosen text

is never the filler of fluff text – Potato instead reads and re-reads relevant rules text to his audience, usually to legitimize or explain his overall strategic thinking. Third, instead of selecting and including participant names from chat as names for entities in-game, Potato instead allows his chat to pay to set almost any name for the game's renamable entities. Thus, for PotatoMcWhiskey, the auditory load shifts from narrative embodiment (literally reading the audience into the world of the game) to a ludic focus which continually exposes game systems and allows for lengthier strategic forecasting.

Close analysis of Potato's curated engagements also reveals a ludic expertise-driven focus. Like Quill, Potato responds to occasional jokes, jibes, and humorous quips in his chat. However, the bulk of Potato's curated engagements take the form of two overlapping types of interaction: strategic assessment and explanatory knowledge-sharing. The latter is easily demonstrated through the following interaction:

Tamer Batayneh (in chat): Why can't aqueducts be built across rivers? That makes no sense.
PotatoMcWhiskey (audibly): Why can't aqueducts be built across rivers? Um, it's actually really really simple. So, aqueducts can be built across rivers…let me open up paint…so here's how aqueducts work…
PotatoMcWhiskey (while drawing): For people who don't understand them: I've explained this before. Some people in chat may be familiar…all right, so we've got our hex grid…[4]

In this interaction, Potato demonstrates a behavior pattern largely distinct to his streams; he frequently moves in and out of the game on stream in order to examine charts, graphs, spreadsheets, and other graphics (often drawn on the fly) in order to thoroughly analyze a particular tactical or strategic option within the context of the game. The visual explanation which followed the above exchange is presented in Figure 2 below.

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[4] Transcribed from PotatoMcWhiskey's "THICC and TALL Maya Livestream" at approximately 2:33:57.
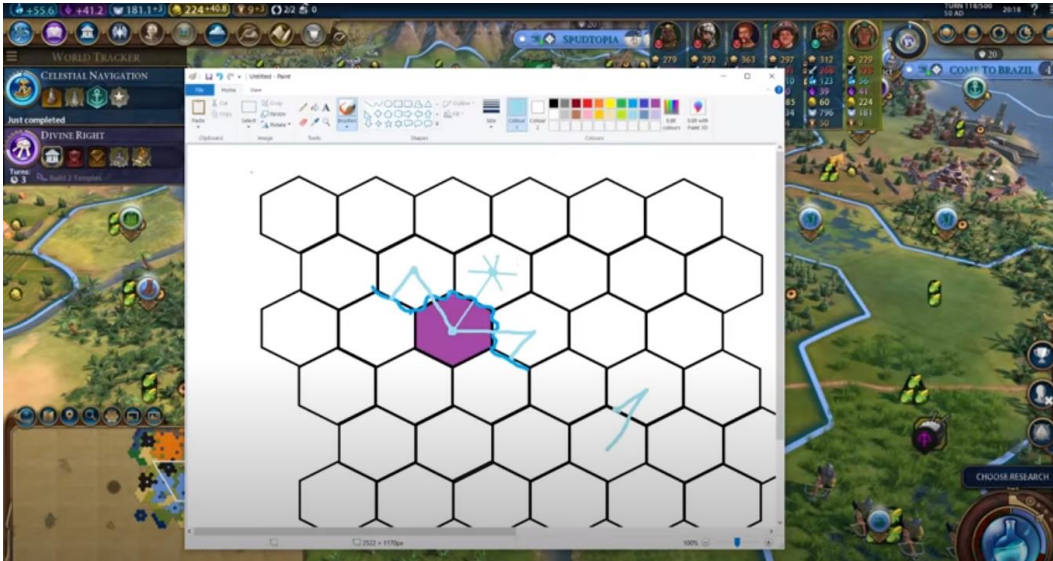
Figure 2: Streamer PotatoMcWhiskey demonstrating the complex Aqueduct placement mechanics in Civ 6 (taken from PotatoMcWhiskey's "THICC and TALL Maya Livestream" at approximately 2:37:14)

Entries in this first category of interaction, rule-based explanations, are conducted in a manner analogous to the facilitator-student interactions observed in Durga and Squire's two-year study of a *Civilization*-based course environment (Durga and Squire), wherein facilitators paired with students and helped answer increasingly complex questions. For Durga and Squire's class, this enabled their students to progress along what the authors characterize as their "multiple trajectories of expertise" (13). In Potato's stream, these interactions begin not through contestation of his value judgments or expertise, but through interrogatives directed at opaque game systems; they are resolved when Potato, generally taking cues from chat, believes the rule has been articulated and understood. Other interactions fall more into the strategic assessment camp, wherein Potato defends (to varying degrees) his assessments of the game state and his overall strategy:

PotatoMcWhiskey (audibly): I think we disperse [the barbarian encampment]. We could get thirty gold out of it.

Kam Sing (in chat): No

Kam Sing: City state better

>   PotatoMcWhiskey: City state is better? This one is pretty close to where I
>   may want to settle cities. I haven't decided upon that…[5]

In this interaction, Potato jumps in to defend his desire to remove a potential long-term resource, the barbarian encampment, from the map. Though initiated at this early phase of the game, the bulk of the argument plays out over the subsequent hour, as Potato enacts his initially-proposed plan immediately before he became able to make use of the territory the camp formerly occupied. This and comparable strategic contestations do not center discussions of rules and mechanics (though they frequently include them), but instead center more amorphous articulations of values and competing desires (e.g., which do I want more: a trading partner or available land?). These interactions are frequently more open-ended and are rarely resolved immediately after the initial discussion.

Through both mechanical explanation and strategic debate, PotatoMcWhiskey's curated engagements reveal the empowered norms of the affinity space he is largely responsible for directing: he articulates a clear, singular trajectory of expertise rooted in mastery of the game's rule-driven systems (not unlike the affinity spaces surrounding *Age of Empires* which Gee characterizes in *Situated Language and Learning*). In a move that is instantly familiar to any longtime educator (or student), Potato frequently chides audience members who ask questions which he has already answered and documented – reinforcing and reinscribing his contextual role in these interactions as educator and facilitator (as well as solidifying other recognizable scholastic norms: attendance and attentiveness). Conversely, Potato's praise is reserved for audience members which can articulate novel (and convincing) strategic approaches or are able to improve upon the community's existing knowledge of game systems (usually by correcting or extending an explanation given by Potato). The tonal connotations of these interactions further underscore the core social currency of Potato's streaming community: public displays of game knowledge.

PotatoMcWhiskey's mastery-driven community style persists even through changes in game selection. When playing CK3, Potato's curated engagements or distinctive stylistic behaviors do not alter significantly; his *CK3* streams still largely lean on his strategic, think aloud approach which delves deeply into game mechanics and is accompanied by occasional digressions to visually present and

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[5] Transcribed from PotatoMcWhiskey's "THICC and TALL Maya Livestream" at approximately 32:54.

articulate his decision making, with almost none of the implicit or explicit awareness of historical and configurative resonance which characterizes Quill18's *CK3* streams. When compared to Quill18's *CK3* streams, Potato directs a much greater portion of his read aloud efforts at rules text – completely avoiding the narrative fluff text which Quill centers.

Overall, PotatoMcWhiskey's *Civ* streams demonstrate a strong focus on purely ludic play with an inseparably intertwined pedagogical component. Mirroring the mastery and knowledge development arc described in Squire and Giovanetto, Potato scaffolds detailed explanatory discussions of game systems in a clearly pedagogical manner. Lacking any overt connection to conceptions of history, his *Civ6* and *CK3* streams sever *Sid Meier's Civilization* from any historical context, perfectly aligning with the purely ludic, semiotic disruption identified by Myers; Carr; Durga and Squire. For PotatoMcWhiskey's community, mastery of the game's systems is the coin of the realm – all others need not apply.

History in the Margins: Quill18 and PotatoMcWhiskey in Context

This study sought to examine a key linchpin in the tripartite arguments for validity which undergird the study of historical games. Specifically, I sought to examine a contemporary style of play and game engagement for direct, qualitative evidence of the oft-theorized notions of historical engagement found in play. To accomplish this goal, this work has to negotiate the complex assemblage of play which constitutes the live streaming of historical games, and, in doing so, must seek to provide some additional insights into the complex relationship between historical games and historical game streamers.

In this study of two major historical game streamers – Quill18 and PotatoMcWhiskey – each playing two different historical games – *Crusader Kings III* and *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* – two distinct community styles emerged. Examination of their distinct streamer behaviors, differing curated engagements, and identified intra-audience behavior reveals the norms and values which govern each group, and provides indications of the ways in which these norms enable or avoid differing forms of historical engagement.

Of the two, PotatoMcWhiskey's community exhibited the most strongly identifiable set of norms, and very closely modeled the affinity spaces for game-based learning modeled in early game studies scholarship (Gee, *Video Games*; Durga and Squire; Squire and Giovanetto). His community most values

recognizable scholastic norms such as attendance and attentiveness – norms which support the primary social currency in his space: game-related knowledge and mastery. For Quill18, a strong narrative focus when playing *CK3* – one which seemed to encourage historical resonance and direct consideration of the game's historical aspects – largely dissolved when switching to *Civ 6*.

While a considerable body of research has addressed digital historical games as an overall form (and has added considerable analytical flexibility via incorporation of genre, simulation style, etc.), historical engagement in these two major historical game streamers' communities mostly occurred in the intersections (and margins) between game-specific affordances and the streamer's particular community cultures and conventions. For Quill18, the game-specific affordances exhibited significant influence over whether the community directly grappled with historically resonant play, with a superficially similar historical game (*Civ 6*) leading to a near-complete lack of this historically resonant engagement. In addition, the oft-studied paradigm of ludic mastery appeared dominant in PotatoMcWhiskey's community, with the complete semiotic separation between game element and historical representation observed by numerous early scholars reasserting itself in a new context. Largely, this work suggests that streamers of historical games – as well as their audiences – infrequently engage in explicit examination of the ubiquitous historical representations presented in these games, largely preferring to focus on more ludic and narrative/embodiment facets of play. In many cases, efforts to improve play within a ludic context work directly against historical engagement for both streamer and audience – thus, the broad cultural values (which are emphasized further in some micro communities) placed upon ludic skill and success work directly at odds with the marketed historical engagement. For these streamers and their audiences, history is an effect applied to play, and is rarely examined directly.

While the results presented here shade historical engagement through play with a thick cloud of skepticism, this introductory study offers several intriguing lines of future inquiry: if previously identified styles and cultures of play can be readily identified in contemporary streaming contexts, then it remains an open possibility that comparable communities structured around a more historical trajectory of expertise exist or can be constructed on live streaming platforms. In addition, the norms of both communities studied here largely remain amenable to education praxis and deserve future study as part of historical games-based education efforts. Notably as well, this research contains several key limitations which deserve to be

addressed in future work. Specifically, discourse analysis fails to capture evidence of historical resonance and understanding which is not directly articulated either by the streamer or member of the audience; with a large percentage of the audience rarely engaging in the examined conversation, it is highly possible that historical resonance occurs in more individual, offline responses than this study could capture. Furthermore, as a complex and shifting assemblage with numerous interlocking social, cultural, and technical factors, simply examining stream chat and streamer response is unable to capture the off- and cross-platform channels in which this engagement may also take place. Hidden in these limitations glimmers yet another desirable possibility: that more comprehensive ethnographic excavation of these mixed communities can unearth deeper veins of historical inquiry – present only as resonant glimmers in this initial work. For it is a near certainty that these communities will continue to grow, evolve, and influence how history is made and remade for an eager public.

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