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# Book Review

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## *World War Two Simulated: Digital Games and Reconfigurations of the Past* by Curtis D. Carbonell (University of Exeter Press, 2023)

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## Abstract

A review of Curtis D. Carbonell's book *World War Two Simulated: Digital Games and Reconfigurations of the Past*. Published by University of Exeter Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-804-13060-5, 264 pages.

## Keywords

World War Two; videogames; simulation; history

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**Amid the copious UK news coverage** of the 80th anniversary of D-Day in June 2024**,** one story caused particular consternation. A public opinion survey indicated that only 37% of British 18–24-year-olds knew that D-Day occurred during the Second World War (Redfield and Wilton Strategies, 2024). Just 15% knew what D-Day was (as against 21% who thought it referred to the German invasion of France). Across all age groups, the most common answer to the question "Who did the most to defeat Nazi Germany?" was Britain (42%), with the US (12%) in third place after the "Don't Knows" (21%), while the contribution of the Soviet Union ranked a distant fourth (6%, equal to France). This was of course just one opinion poll, but it is worth noting that a survey on the 75th anniversary produced similar results (Rogers de Waal, 2019).

Yet if such indications of shocking ignorance of the history of the Second World War, particularly among younger people, are even partially true, this surely presents something of a puzzle. World War Two is continually celebrated and mythologised in Britain and other allied countries. It features in films, TV dramas and documentaries, museums, books, and in everyday political rhetoric. There are hundreds of thousands of videos with a WWII theme on YouTube, a sizeable number of which

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are about WWII-themed videogames—indeed, Wikipedia's list of WWII-themed games is time-consuming to scroll, let alone to read (Wikipedia, n.d.). We might wonder whether the consumers of all this cultural output are actually learning anything about the Second World War, and if they are, what sort of knowledge is being imparted.

Curtis D. Carbonell advances two theses about these questions, one of which, it seems to me, is in tension with the other. On the one hand, he sees games as highly valuable in promoting historical education; on the other, he sees them as offering "reconfigured" versions of the past which omit much and potentially skew understanding of history in particular ways. The first thesis is the most prominent, but ultimately the weaker of the two. The second is potentially more interesting, but under-developed—largely because the first seems to get in the way.

The main argument of the book hinges on what Carbonell calls the "simgame–simtext dynamic". Playing games that simulate historical settings and events, he contends, may prompt players to search for information from "simtexts": any digital or analogue text that contains relevant material. This dynamic is "the core process under examination" (p. 6). It engenders a "latent form of learning", which happens "often involuntarily" but "sometimes with surprising depth" (p. 6). He suggests that the player's journey towards simtexts may begin from "in-game paratexts" (such as "an official manual published by a developer, game narration or cut-scene descriptions, maybe even a squadron 'history' written by the developers coupled with videos, graphs, statistics, and so on"), which constitute the "first steps a player takes in traveling along an interpretive dynamic towards more demanding simtexts outside this narrow context" (p. 39).

This sounds perfectly reasonable. However, *World War Two Simulated* is a study, not of players, but of games. All its claims about how players are led to engage with and learn about history are speculative. It tells us much about what might potentially happen, but nothing verifiable about what does in fact happen. In a chapter exploring the capacious category of "simtexts", for example, Carbonell emphasises "player agency" and "the importance of player experiences" (p. 37), and concludes by claiming that "this chapter has argued the centrality of simtexts for the simulated experience that is afforded to players through the simgame–simtext dynamic" (p. 73). Yet arguing for the "centrality of simtexts" in principle is quite a different matter from investigating how such texts are actually used in practice. The chapter simply gives "examples from histories, fiction, technical works, and scholarly works … that represent typical types of simtexts a player might encounter" (p. 38). How he knows that his examples are "typical" is not explained, and it is hard to avoid the impression that Carbonell is simply recounting examples with which he is personally familiar. There is, for instance, a discussion of Anthony Doerr's 2014 novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, which was adapted as a Netflix mini-series in 2023. Carbonell concludes this with the thought that such "complex written and screened fiction is probably the genre least penetrated by players", but that "the connection can be made" even

with such "unlikely material" (p. 67). Perhaps this assessment is correct, perhaps not—but the book offers us no way of knowing either way.

It is not only simtexts that are judged to have different levels of complexity—a similar assessment is also made with respect to games and players. Carbonell explains that:

> casual players who may have only a passing interest in WWII play a simple game such as the original [*Call of Duty*] (2003) with its curated history, and never think twice about the past. The more serious player's potential encounter with real history (and likely failure) challenges this. … It may be preposterous to expect a casual player to learn how to parse history, war, and games from playing an FPS. But with more complex forms of simulation, even a casual player may be confronted with the need for a latent form of critique that considers the human condition, even if ever so subtly. (p. 33)

At one end of the scale, we have casual players and simple games, and at the other, serious players and complex games. These categories are never defined explicitly. Instead, they are deployed in terms of their commonsense appeal: a game that is difficult to play is more likely to prompt players to seek out extra-textual resources that will help them to complete it successfully, and the type of player who is willing to undertake such research is also more likely to be someone with a more-than-passing interest in the historical setting of the game. This is all entirely plausible, but the book does not take us much further in this respect. The opening claim that "even if success in the game is the goal, an awareness of the past gradually emerges, one that often leads to traditional forms of study" (p. 1) is never tested, so we have to make do with potentials and possibilities, maybes and might-dos.

These potentialities are elaborated in relation to three types of games—shooters, simulators, and strategies—which get a chapter each. Carbonell introduces his main examples as follows. For shooters, he focuses on *Hell Let Loose* (Expression Games, 2021) and *Post Scriptum* (Offworld Industries, 2018), which are chosen partly because they "distinguish themselves from the many more casual FPSs" by being "two of the most serious", but also because they illustrate how "game-time and game-space are simulated, especially … how players experience these in curated maps" (p. 8). The chapter on simulators focuses on *IL-2 Sturmovik: Great Battles* (1C Game Studios, 2013) and *Digital Combat Simulator* (Eagle Dynamics, 2008), chosen because they reveal the "formidable connection between how a simgame curates the past and an experience in the present" (p. 9). Finally, the chapter on Grand Strategy Games focuses on *Hearts of Iron IV* (Paradox Development Studio, 2016), working through the game's "national focuses as a way to show how curated history emerges as gameplay" (p. 9). As these repeated references to "curation" indicate, the interest of these chapters is not so much how imagined players may be led to studying history via simtexts, but more how the games themselves curate and "reconfigure" the past.

Carbonell is well aware that "myths [are] reinforced in simgames, especially those of national pride for the victors" (pp. 241–242). He argues that game developers typically approach the problem of historical accuracy narrowly, in terms of "degrees of curated authentic simulation" (for instance in the "meticulous simulation of aircraft, weapons, classes, maps, kits, and so on"), rather than striving to achieve accuracy "in a comprehensive manner that would capture the full lived experiences of historical agents" (p. 7). And of course, he is also aware that the history of the Second World War as presented in video games has important pieces missing—most conspicuously, the Holocaust—an "erasure [that] removes horrible truths that should be remembered" (p. 193). This last is an issue that has been addressed by other authors, whose work is discussed here, exploring the "limits to play" (Chapman & Linderoth, 2015) and the problem of "dark play" by those seeking to transgress those boundaries (Salvati, 2020). Carbonell's treatment of these issues is a little ambiguous. On the one hand, he repeatedly draws attention to the "glaring lacunae" in historical games (p. 9), yet on the other, he sometimes seems close to suggesting that the absences may have the positive effect in pushing players to find out more via engagement with simtexts. "When players encounter mysterious lacunae in game", he tells us, "they find themselves confronted with reconfiguring the past through an interpretive process in which they have to recognize that war causes mass destruction" (p. 60). Even in the case of the Holocaust, he maintains, players may be driven to read history books in order to "solve the mystery of such a glaring in-game lacuna" (p. 210).

This is the sense in which his argument about the educational potential of historical games tends to limit his critical assessment of such games. Carbonell announces early on that he is not interested in pursuing "a critique of 'milsims' or how the military industrial complex and entertainment have a long history", and instead wants to "shift the focus to individual players and how he or she experiences gaming aspects related to a historical understanding of WWII" (p. 7). There is nothing wrong with such a choice, of course. The problem, though, apart from the fact that there is no empirical investigation of these player experiences, is that the attempt to accentuate the positive educational affordances of games tends to close down critique. Thus, when he considers what Holger Pötzsch (2017) calls the "selective realism" of war games, Carbonell notes that "degrees of curated authenticity add to a particular gameist experience, rather than a direct correlation with history", but immediately counters that nevertheless, "aspects of lived history often emerge inadvertently through the simgame–simtext dynamic" (p. 7). Similarly, he raises some interesting issues regarding myth-making about the Second World War, noting that the "touchstone" for videogame depictions of D-Day is dramatised screen representations of the event—particularly *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* (pp. 85–86)—and observes that in this process of remediation history is reconfigured in a way that "often tells us as much about the present as about the past" (p. 83). Regrettably, this promising line of enquiry is quickly dropped in favour of an extended discussion of how game maps might work as "digital memorials" (p. 89).

In the end, Carbonell concludes that in-game "absences may point players to simtexts full of misinformation about the war as much as they might provide some form of consciousness-raising awareness of the past" (p. 244), which rather begs the question of why the emphasis throughout has been on historical education and learning. He is drawn to this conclusion mostly by the phenomenon of "dark play", which leads him to acknowledge that while the simgame–simtext dynamic might promote "involuntary education" and "a type of inadvertent consciousness-raising" prompting players to "become better aware of the mistakes of the past that led to war", what might "just as easily occur is an encounter with simtexts that … provide misinformation or … indoctrinate through propaganda that runs counter to liberal democracy" (p. 209). So does the simgame–simtext dynamic "create a more aware liberal subject who is better prepared to counter the sort of horrible totalitarianism seen in the war" (p. 209), or does it promote a form of "repugnant agency" (p. 88) and encourage players to "fetishize human suffering [and] embrace the graphic violence" of Nazism (p. 196)? Both possibilities seem equally (im)plausible. *World War Two Simulated* is successful in raising such questions, but less so in answering them.

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