

# Digital Shogun and Electronic Imperialism: Japanese History through the Lens of Historical Videogames

Aldo Giuseppe Scarselli

**Abstract:** This chapter looks at how Japanese history is represented in videogames. The focus is on the difference between historical videogames produced in the Western world and those produced in Japan. I am going to highlight how videogames are often influenced by Orientalism and Eurocentrism and how this is quite evident for Western products set in historical Japan. After that, my focus will be on how Japanese game developers re-imagine their history, moving away from concepts of historical authenticity towards a freer and more elastic representation of the past.

**Keywords:** Historical videogames, History of Japan, Samurai, Cultural representations.

## Why Videogames?

First, we should ask ourselves why videogames should be researched from a historical perspective. Nowadays, videogames are a powerful, global, all-encompassing medium. The videogame industry is a worldwide colossus, competing with and sometimes surpassing other more classic industries, such as cinema and music publishing. Developing and publishing videogames is a complex process that not only involves great assets, but also boosts technological advancements, given the great number of different hardware supports they can be played on, including consoles, personal computers and mobile phones.

A large number of titles produced by the videogame industry are history-based. Humankind's past has always attracted videogame developers, who have looked to history for stories to create and narrate. History not only represents a source of inspiration, but also provides the background and the scaffold on which a game is created. In fact, many videogames feature in-game historical notions, sometimes taking the form of electronic encyclopaedias, which help the player feel part of a realistic historical setting. Precise depictions and descriptions of weapons and tools, historical events contextualised in the gameplay, insightful descriptions of economic and social processes: all these aspects are very often part of the structure of history-based videogames.

Given the popular dimension of this medium, digital games spread historical knowledge in a popular form. They represent a sort of cultural mirror: they

Aldo Giuseppe Scarselli, Independent Scholar, Italy, [aldo.giuseppe.scarselli@gmail.com](mailto:aldo.giuseppe.scarselli@gmail.com)

Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup\_referee\_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Aldo Giuseppe Scarselli, *Digital Shogun and Electronic Imperialism: Japanese History through the Lens of Historical Videogames*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0242-8.15, in Rolando Minuti, Giovanni Tarantino (edited by), *East and West Entangled (17<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries)*, pp. 189-198, 2023, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0242-8, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0242-8

produce views of the past, but also reproduce how we see, understand and manipulate the past itself. This aspect is fundamental in a history-related discussion on videogames.

In recent times, we have seen the launch of serious academic criticism on history-based videogames. In the last fifteen years, many historians have tried to address the theme of history as it is represented in videogames. In 2005, William Uricchio produced a contribution that is widely considered the cornerstone of a new historical approach to videogames: *Simulation, History and Computer Games* (Uricchio 2005.) In this article Uricchio highlighted the videogame as a tool for reproducing and simulating historical processes, as opposed to focusing on historical authenticity and accuracy.

Taking Uricchio as an example, a group of academics founded what they termed Historical Game Studies, publishing their manifesto in *Rethinking History*, titled *Introduction: what is historical games studies?* (Chapman, Foka, and Westlin 2017). In this manifesto, the authors describe their intentions and offer a way to approach videogames as the subject of historical analysis. The definition they suggested for historical games is very important for my research:

Though of course it is possible to forward many definitions of the «historical game», we work from the open definition of this as those games that in some way represent the past, relate to discussions about it, or stimulate practices related to history (Chapman, Foka, and Westlin 2017, 367).

The relationship with the past and the way it is portrayed in videogames is fundamental when we address the depiction of Japan in this medium. Japanese history is widely used as a setting for historical videogames. As previously said, this happens in different ways, depending on whether the producers are Japanese or Western. In the last thirty years, the history of the Japanese archipelago, and certain historical periods in particular, has become archetypal in the gaming dimension.

### Digital Games and Oriental Otherness

Before proceeding any further, it is fundamental to highlight a central aspect of our discourse: the representation of otherness in videogames. By default, videogames are constructed on a more or less rigid separation between the «identity» of the player and the ««otherness» of the artificial intelligence (AI) controlling the game mechanics. When we approach videogames, we often find that this separation is articulated on historical rails, like the contrast between West and East or civilisation and barbarism. In recent times, this aspect has become more and more central, very often making up both the narrative and the functional basis of many videogames. The player can take on the role of defender of an advanced civilisation against barbaric hordes, or brave leader of a simple tribe against an imperialistic oppressor. Both situations often make wide use of cultural artefacts rooted in dichotomies, such as civilisation-backwardness, liberty-oppression, or modernity-tradition.

Behind these elements it is not difficult to see the influence of a broader heritage of ethnocentric and colonialist mindsets. In many cases, stereotypical aspects are highlighted in order to depict certain entities within a videogame, with the result of stressing their otherness. Souvik Mukherjee explored this aspect in his book *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Mukherjee 2017), claiming that a post-imperialistic, Eurocentric mindset often gains a central role in the development of videogames, providing the inspiration for creating and structuring the aforementioned otherness. Orientalism is still very strong in videogames, with developers, publishers and gamers not always fully aware of it.

This aspect is incredibly striking when we look at historical games set in non-European contexts, especially in the Near and Far East.

The Eurocentric, or more generally, the Western-centric, mindset is mixed with a strong proneness for simplification. Historical games have to simplify aspects of the past so that they fit into the mechanics of games, but also to create a recognisable setting for the audience. This has led to numerous templates that have become archetypical across different game genres and platforms, and are exploited to create an immediate sense of recognition for the Western audience.

For example, an exploration of the way three Eastern civilisations are depicted in videogames reveals these templates or patterns of representation:

- India is often portrayed as a whole unified entity, with massive emphasis on spiritualism and mysticism as constituents of its identity, and with a large presence of warrior monks, use of war elephants and veneration of cows.
- China is usually described as a monolithic, sometimes excessively bureaucratic, entity, divided between the enlightenment of philosophy and the autocracy of emperors, with massive armies 'seasoned' with technological wonders, such as weaponised fireworks and repeating crossbows.
- Korea is often depicted as technologically advanced, fiercely independent and animated by a strong attitude in the face of threats from China and Japan.

Of course, these depictions draw inspiration from historical realities, but they push, stretch and manipulate them to create the aforementioned recognisable templates.

Japanese history is no exception, since the archipelago's past has fascinated generations of game developers and gamers. One popular example is the extremely famous *Age of Empires* videogame franchise, a real-time strategy (RTS) series of historical games. Of the three main historical games in the series, the first instalment, *Age of Empires* (1997), is set in a chronologically broad ancient era, spanning geographically from the fertile crescent to Japan, which is depicted as the Yamato civilisation. The second game, *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (1999), covers the medieval period and Japan is present as a playable faction. The third game, *Age of Empires III: Age of Discovery* (2005), is set in a period ranging from the discovery of America to the early nineteenth century. Initially it did not include Japan, which was added in a later expansion – an upgrade of the game with new features – in 2007, called *The Asian Dynasties*.

By analysing these and other games, such as those from the *Total War* turn-based strategy (TBS) franchise, *Shogun: Total War* (2000) and *Total War: Shogun 2* (2011), we recognise a number of recurring elements and patterns in the depiction of Japan in historical games. Initially we will focus on Western-developed games and later we will move to the Japanese native context.

### The East in the West

Most historical games produced in the West present a strong preference for a specific period of Japanese history, the Sengoku Jidai period (戦国時代, 1467-1603). This period saw a long civil war between Japanese lords interested in controlling the shogunate, the de facto ruling system of Japan. The Sengoku era offers one element in particular that has become pivotal for historical games set in Japan: the bushi. Bushi (武士), more commonly known as samurai (侍), were aristocratic warriors, already protagonists of countless cultural artefacts all over the world, and have become something of a mandatory feature of videogames. Bushi are central cogs in digital realities dominated by war, honour and chivalric values, becoming a transposition of European – digital – knights. Also, the emphasis is often on the warlords to whom the bushi pledged their loyalty, the daimyo (大名) and their struggle to subdue all their competitors to reach the position of Shogun.

Western-developed historical games frequently belong to two genres of games: real-time strategy (RTS) and turn-based strategy (TBS).<sup>1</sup> RTS and TBS both give the player a large degree of control, as a ruler or commander entitled to coordinate economy, production, army enlistment and logistics, diplomacy and strategy. These games often claim to be as faithful as possible to historical realism, priding themselves in having a large apparatus of in-game notes, notions and historical information, with great accuracy in the presentation of weapons, artefacts, buildings, traditions and events. In the case of Japan, for example, much attention is devoted to reproducing the samurai panoply, their famous swords and their traditional rituals. Although bushi-samurai are generally the main characters of these games, some attempts have been made to do justice to the historically accurate cannon fodder of the Sengoku period: the humble *ashigaru* (足輕), the peasant conscript who made up the largest part of the Japanese armies. This movement towards historical accuracy is quite evident in the aforementioned *Shogun: Total War* and *Total War: Shogun 2*, where the recruitment of *ashigaru* is fundamental to the creation of balanced and functional armies.

However, all these aspects of the Western-style historical game may produce a series of conceptual problems and some dangerous simplifications and cultur-

<sup>1</sup> The main difference between these two genres is that RTS enables direct, continuous control of the gaming action, whereas TBS forces the player to act only when it is their turn, like a massive game of chess, passing the hand to the AI every time. The *Total War* series is a hybrid of these two genres: control of the map view, the economy and diplomacy are turn-based, while battles are in real time.

al manipulations. First of all, the use of the Sengoku Jidai setting has flattened the entire history of a country over a couple of centuries which, although fundamental, cannot be taken as the entire history of Japan. A few attempts have been made to reproduce other periods, but the attraction for the Sengoku Jidai remains dominant. Secondly, the bushi-oriented approach is the result of the idealisation of these figures, which started in the West during the modernisation of Japan, between the second half of the nineteenth century and the First World War. This simplification cuts entire parts of Japan's society from the historical process, as reproduced in the games. Even if other figures from the period are included, such as the above mentioned *ashigaru*, or geishas, ninjas and monks, they are never as pivotal as the bushi-samurai.

Finally, various games use a great figure approach and base the in-game characterisation of Japan on a specific leader, usually a military one. The in-game historical process is only made possible by the presence of a great historical leader embodying all national and cultural aspects of a country. One striking example is provided by the *Civilization* franchise. This long-recurring North American series, launched in 1991 and counting six main instalments, allows the player to guide the development of historical civilisations from the prehistoric age and into the future. Within a process of blatant anachronism, historical figures are extracted from their times and positioned as the eternal rulers of a civilisation through the ages. The case of Japan is very interesting because five out of the series' six instalments feature historical figures from the Sengoku period. In fact we have the following characterisation for the Japanese leaders:

- *Civilization* (1991): Tokugawa Ieyasu
- *Civilization II* (1996): Tokugawa Ieyasu and the goddess Amaterasu
- *Civilization III* (2001): Tokugawa Ieyasu
- *Civilization IV* (2005): Oda Nobunaga
- *Civilization V* (2010): Oda Nobunaga
- *Civilization VI* (2016): Hojo Tokimune

With only the exception of Amaterasu, a divinity, and Hojo Tokimune, a key figure in the Kamakura Shogunate (1185-1333), Tokugawa Ieyasu and Oda Nobunaga are both leaders from the Sengoku Jidai. The «great figure» approach is not exclusive to videogames developed in the West, as we are going to see, but it has notably become a leitmotif of many American and European games.

### Japanese History in Japanese Videogames

If we look at Japanese historical games, we are going to encounter some interesting peculiarities.

First of all, although Japan is one of the leading countries in videogame development and publishing, a large portion of its market is domestic. Many titles developed in Japan are sold specifically to Japanese users, and usually reach the rest of the world sometime after their debut. Historical games are no exception. In comparison with Western products, Japanese videogames cover a broad

spectrum of historical periods and use different languages, genres and mechanics that are specific to this kind of production and apparently very distant from their European and North American counterparts. The Japanese videogame industry began quite early on to exploit the nation's past as a source of inspiration for games. The *Nobunaga's Ambition* series of strategy games launched in 1983, with fifteen sequels produced until 2017, and was one of the first to propose the glorification of historical leaders. In 1986, the Namco company published *Genpei Tōma Den* (源平討魔伝), a side-scrolling beat'em up game that has since become a milestone for the game industry. This title is set during the Genpei War (源平合戦, 1180-1185), but includes monsters, demons and ghosts as enemies.

Although the Sengoku period is the context in many titles, its centrality is challenged by the use of different historical contexts. The same happens with the bushi-samurai character, who is not always preeminent in the game mechanism, but may be obscured by other figures like the shinobi (忍び), a furtive secret agent or scoundrel, also known as the ninja. However, in my opinion, the most important distinctive aspect of Japanese games is their frequent disregard of historical accuracy and authenticity. Often magic, demons, monsters and other fantastic elements taken from Japanese folklore are given a place alongside historical figures. At the same time, a large degree of poetic licence can be found in the material representation of the past. For instance, if we look at the in-game representation of Tokugawa Ieyasu in *Age of Empires III*, we immediately recognise a realistic and accurate depiction of samurai armour. On the other hand, the Japanese videogame *Sengoku Basara* (2005) depicts the great general Oda Nobunaga in completely unrealistic attire, with armour resembling that of a European knight, only with a demonic form and oversized firearms. This is not a general rule, but shows the distance between the Japanese and Western videogame industries with regard to historical accuracy.

Japanese historical games are often centred around heroes and the historical references serve only as a backdrop to their deeds and actions, taking us back to the idea of poetic licence in relation to historical authenticity. In this regard, heroes may be portrayed as part romantic figure, part caricature, in striking contrast with the more serious and realistic approach usually on display in Western productions. The centrality of the hero is a feature of the most popular historical game genres in Japan: real-time tactics (RTT) and action games. In RTT and action games, there is a great deal of stress on the role of the single hero/player as a living and direct part of the action, whereas in many RTS games the player's role is that of an almost god-like overseer. It is useful to list a few examples of Japanese historical games that present many of the characteristics described so far: the *Onimusha* series (2001-2006), which combine the Sengoku setting with monsters and spirits; *Kessen* (2000), Sengoku-based and famous in the rest of the world; the *Way of the Samurai* series (2002-2012), whose titles are set between the Sengoku Jidai and the last days of the Tokugawa shogunate, with a narrative oscillating between dramatic and easy-going; *Nioh* (2017), where a European pirate becomes a samurai to fight demons and monsters for the Tokugawa shogunate.

The Japanese videogame industry is also popular for using Chinese historical works of fiction as backgrounds. The famous historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義), written during the fourteenth century by Luo Guanzhong, is the inspiration for the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* series (1985-2017) made up of twelve instalments. An older but similar text, *Record of the Three Kingdoms* (三國志) written in the third century by Chen Shou was used as the background for the *Dynasty Warrior* series (1997-2018) made up of nine instalments. These two pieces of Chinese historical literature, which are well known in Japan and Korea, were re-imagined, manipulated and re-told through the canons of Japanese videogames, including the centrality of the hero and the forgoing of historical accuracy (although not in all titles). Also notable is the enduring fortune of these series, which have had the same longevity we have previously seen in other titles.

Finally, I will look at one more particular game: *Hakuōki: Shinsengumi Kitan* (2008). This title is a successful *otome* game, that is, a dating simulator for young women. This genre is quite popular in Japan and involves a simulation in which the player is challenged to date and form a relationship by choosing dialogues and courses of action. The main characteristic of *Hakuōki* is the historical setting. The action takes place in the late Edo period, with the young female protagonist looking for her father in the city of Edo, where she meets a commando of the *Shinsengumi* (新選組), a sort of secret police in the Tokugawa shogunate. The objective of the game is to fall in love and interact romantically with these *Shinsengumi*. These have always been recurring figures in Japanese popular media, such as movies, novels and TV dramas, portrayed with heroic, masculine characteristics. In contrast with more traditional representations, *Hakuōki* transforms the *Shinsengumi* into a product for young women. Their appearance and behaviour in this game are charged with androgynous and erotic elements. The *Shinsengumi* are not threatening and imposing male figures, but charming, deceitful ephemic men. The game's sexual undertones, although never too explicit, create an ambiguous atmosphere, where genre boundaries shift and are eroded. This kind of approach is quite unthinkable in the West and has not been pursued by any developer of historical games. Kazumi Hasegawa explored these aspects of the game in "Falling in Love with History: Japanese Girl's Otome Sexuality and Queering Historical Imagination" (Hasegawa 2013).

### The Shadow of the Second World War

There is one final topic that I consider fundamental, namely how Imperialist Japan is represented in videogames. The Second World War is one of the most used – and sometimes abused – settings for historical games, especially for first-person shooters (FPS), that is, games where the player's perspective is that of a single soldier. While references to Nazi Germany abound and it is depicted as the only epitome of evil in the war, not many videogames take account of the other powers in the Axis, namely Japan and Italy. Some strategy games – like the *Hearts of Iron* series – present a very bland portrayal of Japan, with all problem-

atic elements removed, such as racism, massacres of civilians, experimentation on humans, and so on, while characterising Imperial Japan as a generic imperialistic, non-democratic nation. Researchers have devoted a certain amount of attention to the representation of Nazi Germany in videogames (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015). However we cannot say the same of early Showa Japan (1926-1945), as this period is rarely portrayed in videogames.

I have identified two titles that can be linked to our general theme, which specifically contain representations of Japanese martial models: *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* (2004) and *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008). Both games are Western-produced FPS and depict the American operations in the Pacific Ocean theatre during the Second World War. The Japanese Imperial Troops are represented as inherently evil, treacherous and fanatical. They set traps using the bodies of American soldiers, hide in the shadows in the jungle ready to jump out, they torture and execute prisoners in gruesome ways or shoot at drowning enemy sailors. But the most frequent element is how they attack the player, shouting their devotion for the emperor, wielding katanas or charging blindly with bayonets. These images are undeniably based on generally accepted historical evidence, but players are often under the impression that this evil characterisation is excessive and stereotypical. Japanese soldiers are portrayed as a corrupt and almost nonhuman version of the honourable and heroic bushi, so present in other games. In this respect, videogames draw inspiration from a long tradition of movies set in the Pacific Ocean theatre.

One final curious case is that of *Valkyria Chronicles* (2008), a Japanese game that re-imagines European elements of the Second World War. Set in a fictional European-like continent, *Valkyria Chronicles* follows the struggle of the small country of Gallia, a curious mixture of France and the Netherlands, thrown into the middle of a world war between the West Atlantic Federation, loosely based on the Allied Forces, and the Autocratic East European [sic] Imperial Alliance, a racist empire, halfway between Nazi Germany and czarist Russia. The game uses topoi and archetypes related to the Second World War in Europe – the rise of tanks as primary weapons, the persecution of a race of dark-haired people, the tragedy of civilian casualties – to create a peculiar war narrative, mixed with Japanese elements more common to other settings. This game attracted the attention of Johannes Koski in his analysis “Reflections of History: Representations of the Second World War in *Valkyria Chronicles*” (Koski 2017).

## Conclusions

In my analysis I have tried to show how historical videogames use different strategies to reproduce the past and how these representations can be influenced by the cultural perception of their producers, the demands of the audience or by deep-rooted social and cultural mechanisms. Japanese history is clearly not represented in videogames produced in Japan in the same way as it is in those produced in Europe or North America. Very often, cultural stereotypes and misconceptions about the past find their way into videogames, reinforcing them

in the collective mind. Different agencies around the world are involved in processes of rethinking, retelling and reproducing the past through the lens of videogames, whether it is their own past or that of others. Historians should play a key role in these processes, by addressing those segments of the videogame industry that use history to narrate stories. This should not be done to restrain or correct them, but rather to understand the different ways the past comes to life within popular media depending on cultural and social background.

### Bibliography

- Chapman, Adam, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin. 2017. "Introduction: What is Historical Game Studies?" *Rethinking History* 21, 3: 358-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638> (last accessed 08/01/2023).
- Chapman, Adam, and Jonas Linderöth. 2015. "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representation of Nazism in Games." In *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth, and Ashley ML Brown, 137-53. New York: Routledge.
- Hasegawa, Kazumi. 2013. "Falling in Love with History: Japanese Girl's Otome Sexuality and Queering Historical Imagination." In *Playing With the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, and Andrew B. R. Elliot, 135-149. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Koski, Johannes. 2017. "Reflections of History: Representations of the Second World War in Valkyria Chronicles." *Rethinking History* 21, 3: 396-414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256625> (last accessed 08/01/2023).
- Mukherjee, Souvik. 2017. *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*. London: Palgrave.
- Uricchio, William. 2005. "Simulation, History and Computer Games." In *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, edited by Joost Raessens, and Jeffrey Goldstein, 327-39. Cambridge: MIT Press.

### Cited Games

- Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, Microsoft 1997)
- Age of Empires II: the Age of Kings* (Ensemble Studios, Microsoft 1999)
- Age of Empires III: Age of Discoveries* (Ensemble Studios, Microsoft 2005)
- Age of Empires III: the Asian Dynasties* (Ensemble Studios, Microsoft 2007)
- Call of Duty: World at War* (Treyarch, Activision 2008)
- Civilization* (MicroProse 1991)
- Civilization II* (MicroProse 1996)
- Civilization III* (Firaxis Games, Infogrames 2001)
- Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games, 2K Games 2005)
- Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2K Games 2010)
- Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2K Games 2016)
- Dynasty Warrior* series (Omega Force, Koei 1997-2018)
- Genpei Tōma Den* (Namco 1986)
- Hakuōki: Shinsengumi Kitan* (Idea Factory 2008)
- Hearts of Iron* series (Paradox 2002-2016)
- Kessen* (Koei 2000)

*Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* (EA Games 2004)  
*Nioh* (Team Ninja, Koei-Sony 2017)  
*Nobunaga's Ambition* (Koei 1983)  
*Onimusha Series* (Capcom 2001-2006)  
*Romance of the Three Kingdoms series* (Koei 1985-2017)  
*Sengoku Basara* (Capcom 2005)  
*Shogun: Total War* (The Creative Assembly, Electronic Arts 2000)  
*Total War: Shogun 2* (The Creative Assembly, Sega 2011)  
*Valkyria Chronicles* (Sega 2008)  
*Way of the Samurai series* (Acquire, Spike 2002-2012)