

**History, Heritage, and Memory in Video Games: Approaching the Past in *Svoboda 1945*:
*Liberation and Train to Sachsenhausen***

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Abstract

This article explores authenticity, immersion, and heritage in two historical video games, *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* and *Train to Sachsenhausen*. The two games use different strategies when inviting understanding, emotional attachment, and immersive experiences of past events. We draw upon a critical, self-reflective analysis of the design process and a comparison of both games. Our aim is to expand further the toolset for historical game analysis and critique by developing the terms *inter-medial authenticity* and *procedural heritage* to enable investigations of games as both representations and simulations of historical events. We show that both these aspects can contribute to the roles games can play as conveyors of historical memory and heritage.

Keywords: memory, heritage, video games, procedural heritage, inter-medial authenticity

Recently, a number of critically acclaimed video games have appeared on the market that aim at presenting history and heritage in engaging and accurate ways (Friedrich, 2021; Šisler, 2019). Simultaneously, the field of historical game studies has expanded, moving from general topics such as games and history (Chapman, 2016; Lorber & Zimmermann, 2020; Lünen et al., 2020; Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke et al., 2021) to memory culture in games (Hammar, 2019; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019; Pfister, 2022), and procedural rhetoric in virtual heritage projects (Mol et al., 2017; Champion, 2020). Mochocki (2021a) in particular bridges the disciplines of game studies and heritage studies by presenting a mixed model of immersion and authenticity to describe players' engagement with historical discourses, game worlds, and heritage material.

In this article, we explore aspects of authenticity, immersion, and heritage in two historical video games: *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* and *Train to Sachsenhausen* (Charles Games, 2021; 2022). Each of the two games places emphasis on different strategies when inviting understanding, emotional attachment, and immersive experiences of past events. Drawing upon a critical, self-reflective analysis of the design process and a comparison of both games, we further expand the toolset for historical game analysis and critique by developing the terms *inter-medial authenticity* and *procedural heritage*. We devise these concepts to enable a more precise understanding of how games can function as conveyors of historical memory and heritage (Chapman, 2016; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019). Several of this article's authors were part of the games' development teams, with Šisler being a lead game designer of *Liberation* and *Train* and Cuhra and Pinkas acting as historians for *Liberation*.

Theoretical Frame: History, Memory, Heritage, and Games

The question of how different media can influence how historical knowledge is conveyed, experienced, and understood has been much discussed. The recurrent emergence of

“new” media technologies often leads to debates about the supposed dangers of lowering standards of education by enabling new formats of dissemination (Rosenstone, 2006; Erll, 2011; Chapman 2016). As Rosenstone (2006) remarked, “making the case for film as a new form of historical thinking” (p. 9) requires us, in essence, “to bring the practice of history kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century” (p. 3). However, his explicitly stated mission of enabling new forms of studying and teaching history by opening the field for new means of representation also had its own implied blind spots in that it excluded historical simulations and games.

In a similar manner, Erll (2010) and Erll and Rigney (2009) have explored how narratives of the past spread across media and genres to create and reproduce collective understandings of the past. Directing attention to different layers of representation and dissemination—intra-medial, inter-medial, and pluri-medial—Erll (2010) has shown how the dominant potentials of historical meaning and understanding are produced and negotiated through a variety of cultural expressions. Suggesting a distinction between history as the study of traceable facts about the past based on verifiable accuracy and cultural memory as emerging from collectively sanctioned and culturally disseminated narratives about the past that draw upon various types of authenticity to assert discursive relevance, she directs attention to the ways through which beliefs about, and attitudes towards, an ultimately contingent past are formed and attain effects. As Pötzsch and Šisler (2019) have argued, however, games are lacking as media of cultural memory in both Erll’s (2010) and Erll and Rigney’s (2009) approaches, while Hammar (2019) has shown that their models are largely descriptive and de-emphasize the power relations through which representations of the past are formed and acquire ideological biases.

Following scholars such as Mochocki (2021a; 2021b; 2022), Mol et al. (2017), Hammar (2019), Lorber and Zimmermann (2020), Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke et al. (2021), and Pfister

(2022), the present article fills such gaps and continues where Rosenstone (2006) left off 15 years ago. We aim to bring the study of cultural memory and heritage “kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century” by assessing how digital games enable vicarious experiences of cultural heritage in and through simulated environments. We focus on the media specificity of games that convey meaning and offer experiences not only through representation and storytelling, but also through their rules and mechanics that predispose interaction with simulated historical environments and characters (Bogost, 2007; Uricchio, 2011; Champion, 2020).

Tensions between games’ simulational and representational aspects become particularly important when analyzing how games open “historical problem spaces” (McCall, 2016) that can be actively explored by players. Here, the transition from practices of representing history to techniques of enabling vicarious experiences moves center stage, and with it a gradual shift of emphasis from questions of accuracy towards issues of authenticity (Uricchio, 2011). Such aspects of the game-past nexus have been explored in some detail by Mochocki (2021a; 2021b; 2022). We apply a similar framework to our analysis and develop the terms inter-medial authenticity and procedural heritage to enable more accurate accounts of the dynamics at play in this field.

Conceptual Focus: Towards an Understanding of Inter-Medial Authenticity and

Procedural Heritage

In analyses of realist narratives about the past, a distinction is often made between the notions of accuracy and authenticity (Saxton, 2020; Mochocki, 2021a). This is done to account for different ways through which written or audiovisual stories signal the significance of historical discourse and understanding. As described by Saxton (2020), an accurate text about the past focuses on historical veracity and aims at consistency between its representation and

available historical facts. In contrast, authenticity is a concept that refers to *experiences of accuracy* created in shifting audiences. Saxton argues that “authenticity is the impression that a text is accurate, even if it is not” (p. 128). As such, this terminological distinction resembles the difference between the disciplines of history (concerned with facts and accuracy of representation) and cultural memory studies (concerned with mediation and perception of factuality).

According to Saxton (2020), authenticity is strongly context-dependent and is actively negotiated by audiences in varying contexts of reception; that is, authenticity is not only asserted based on verisimilitude with traces and documents offering seemingly direct access to preceding factual events, but also with reference to earlier representations and their ways of framing a particular event. Copplestone (2016) has identified similar subjective aspects as salient for audience perceptions of history in cultural heritage games.

Drawing upon the advances of Wang (1999), Mochocki (2021a) has adapted the terms authenticity and accuracy to the domain of heritage studies, distinguishing between the terms’ object-related and activity-related dimensions. He developed a framework for an understanding of how authenticity and accuracy are negotiated in heritage practices and experiences, and how these concepts enable understanding of players’ shifting relations to the past in the virtual realms of historical simulations and video games. Combining his evolving terminology with Calleja’s (2011) game involvement model, he develops a complex typology of forms of experiential heritage and immersion as tools for new heritage and reenactment practices. Mochocki (2021a) also initially alerts readers to inter-medial references and representational conventions for perceptions of authenticity. However, as his work develops further in its main direction of virtual heritage and experiential immersion, this dimension is de-emphasized. We will now redirect

attention to this aspect of the game-history-memory-heritage nexus by proposing the term *inter-medial authenticity* as an analytical tool.

An intertextual, or inter-medial, variant of historical authenticity had been highlighted by Erll (2010) and Erll and Rigney (2009). The idea is that impressions of authenticity are not only achieved by suggesting verisimilitude with a preceding reality, but also by playing upon similarities between the respective work and earlier representations of the past. Adherence to conventional forms of presentation rather than congruence with available historical facts thus becomes the crucial guiding light for the perceived authenticity of a novel, film, or game. Following Coppstone (2016), and in part Mochocki (2021a; 2021b), we develop and use the concept of inter-medial authenticity to investigate how *Liberation* and *Train* draw upon established discourses and familiar audiovisual and narrative tropes to invite perceptions of the presented historical narratives' and worlds' factuality.

The second term crucial for our inquiry is heritage and the question of how heritage can be vicariously accessed, experienced, and understood in historical digital games. We draw upon the works of Champion (2020) who uses the term "virtual heritage" and Mochocki (2021a; 2021b) who uses Calleja's (2011) incorporation–involvement model and connects heritage to game immersion dynamics. Bringing these advances together with Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric, and its subsequent refinement (Flanagan, 2009) and critique (Sicart, 2011), we develop the term *procedural heritage* to fathom how not only narratives, but also rule systems and mechanics, can predispose possible player engagements with virtual pasts along the scale of authenticity and accuracy; thus opening them to "activity-related" dimensions of virtual heritage (Mochocki, 2021a). We subdivide the concept into a determinate and an exploratory variant and

use it to gain a better understanding of how *Liberation* and *Train* enable specific engagements with virtual heritage sites and objects.

Defining Procedural Heritage and Inter-Medial Authenticity

As Mochocki (2021a; 2021b; 2022) has shown, authenticity in historical games, simulations, and reenactments is closely connected to issues of incorporation and immersion. A historical game world is not only perceived as authentic because of the verisimilitude of its representational surface layer, but also due to the believability of the player actions it makes possible. The term *procedural heritage* captures this significance of rules and mechanics for commemoration and heritage practices. We follow Bogost's (2007) understanding of procedures in digital games as a source of potential ideological bias thus enabling critical approaches to the potential political implications of simulated "historical problem spaces" (McCall 2016).

In our definition, procedural heritage is the emergent set of actions and perceptions selectively predisposed by the rule systems and mechanics of historical video games. These framed game play practices contribute to conveying particular understandings of past events and the historical actors bringing them into being. As such, procedural heritage can be used to control tightly emergent historical narratives and closely weave them into alleged truths (determinate procedural heritage), or it can leave considerable freedom to explore and even enact counter-factual alternatives (exploratory procedural heritage).

In contrast to procedural heritage that enables a better understanding of the implications of rules and mechanics for historical understanding and practice, the term *inter-medial authenticity* stands on a representational layer. Inter-medial authenticity offers a way of tracing the formal means through which, for instance, historical games invite players to accept the virtual world that they see and act in as realistic and corresponding with accepted historical facts

(Saxton 2020). This concept underscores that an impression of authenticity is not only the consequence of aligning a work to factual sources and original traces, but also of replicating established representational conventions and accepted practices for historical reenactments regardless of their actual truth value (Sturken 1997).

While procedural heritage in both its variants is a concept specifically dedicated to the study of action-based media such as reenactments, games, and simulations, inter-medial authenticity readily lends itself to a wider variety of medial forms. In the following sections, we provide examples of both concepts and their mutual interferences through brief illustrative analyses of how the games *Liberation* and *Train* invite certain perceptions of, and interactions with, historical objects and witnesses.

Procedural Heritage and Inter-medial Authenticity in *Liberation* and *Train*

Liberation and *Train* are narrative historical games developed by Charles Games, a spin-off of Charles University, in 2021 and 2022. The titles deal with the history of Czechoslovakia during and after WW2. More specifically, *Liberation* takes on the expulsion of German-speaking citizens in 1945 (Frommer, 2005; Staněk, 2005) and the subsequent rise of communism characterized by collectivization and gradually growing oppression (Jech, 2001). *Train* directs players' attention to Nazi oppression in occupied Czechoslovakia and tells the story of student revolts in Prague that led to a series of executions and the deportation of 1200 students to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp (Leikert, 2001). Both games have been used for educational purposes with preliminary studies suggesting a high degree of acceptance among teachers and students (Pinkas & Hannemann, 2020).

Train and *Liberation* are choice-based games that combine fictitious with factual elements to assert authenticity. Therefore, they are well-suited to exemplify the concepts

developed above. In the following pages, we will, firstly, offer examples of how the games assert authenticity by audiovisually aligning to received genre conventions and established representational practices—inter-medial authenticity—before we move on to show how they predispose interaction in and with historical settings—procedural heritage.

To assert authenticity, both games draw upon established Czech historical discourse and employ a series of audiovisual icons and narrative tropes familiar from documentaries, museums, and historical movies to reiterate relevance for memory politics and historical understanding. One example of this is that *Liberation* (Fig. 1) features interactive video interviews with alleged eyewitnesses who, in reality, are played by actors and whose stories are fictitious. However, the visual presentation is designed to resemble the specific aesthetics of recorded witness accounts known from the genre of documentary films. As such, even though the content of the narrated “memories” is fictitious, the game invites players to understand the represented accounts as more than a product of the imagination—inter-medial references to the documentary genre here charge the game with memory-making potential (Erlil, 2010) and assert relevance for historical discourse.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Fig. 1. *Interview with a character in Svoboda 1945: Liberation* (Charles Games, 2021).

In *Liberation*, the visual elements referring to the past are embedded in a storyworld set in our own present where players navigate and gradually excavate past events in a small village while determining the fate of a heritage site. By means of its mechanics that only offer limited choice by adhering to either one or the other dialogue option with non-player characters encountered at the virtual heritage site, the game limits player actions and interventions to a binary outcome that accentuates two overarching approaches to heritage and commemoration—

erasure or preservation. Yet, at the same time, it threatens to suppress alternative negotiated solutions. This binarization is a good example of how procedural heritage works as a stylistic device that brings forth specific meaning potential by limiting player choice.

The second game under scrutiny here, *Train* (Fig. 2), has two distinct parts that connect emerging stories to a shared past—a choice-based fictitious game and a virtual museum accessible through the game interface. *Train* confronts players with a series of drawn images that are designed to resemble historical footage, archival photography, and other period documents thus asserting an inter-medial form of authenticity. Short descriptive texts offer historical context to each image and enable player choices that drive the narrative forward. As a procedurally driven heritage site, *Train* reduces complex historical processes to a binary choice option thus amplifying the severity of decisions to be made. At the same time, however, and not unlike *Liberation*, it limits possible variations by procedurally reducing available options for action. Both games, as such, tend towards a determinate form of procedural heritage that disables free exploration and counterfactual choices and only leaves limited decision-making options for players. The various possible story configurations emerging from these choices are fictitious yet inter-medially linked to available historical facts; thus inviting players to see all the emergent storylines as inherently authentic and therefore relevant for historical discourse and memory politics.

The second part of *Train* consists of a virtual museum that becomes accessible to players once they have completed a play-through. This virtual site contains video testimonies from real eyewitnesses, digitized archival photographs, and other available documents to underscore the factual basis of the depicted dramatized events. In this manner, the fictionalized content of all

narrative outcomes emergent from player choices is recursively authenticated by inter-medial references connecting them to actual sources and traces of the past.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Fig. 2. *Choice-based game and documentary museum in Train to Sachsenhausen (Charles Games, 2022).*

Train distinguishes between fictitious, yet authentic, emergent storylines contingent upon player choices and a documentary archive consisting of involved witnesses' memories, historical documents, and traces. By balancing these two dimensions that emphasize authenticity and accuracy respectively, *Train* offers realistic accounts of an ultimately fleeting and evasive past. Through its inter-medial rhetoric that remains contingent upon player preferences expressed at the level of procedural heritage, the game emerges as a suitable tool for the exploration of individual decision-making in historical conflict situations.

Memory and Heritage between Objects and Actions

As Mochocki (2021b) posits, objects in historical video games have the capacity to focus memories and emotions, as well as trigger questions. *Liberation* and *Train* both incorporate material culture to connect the game world to preceding historical events. This in-game availability of material traces and actual witnesses makes both titles function not only as historical representations playing on tensions between authenticity and accuracy, but also makes them accessible as heritage sites that can be vicariously experienced as problem spaces navigable by players. For this second dimension, the rules and mechanics predisposing player interaction with the historical storyworlds and characters become key objects of scrutiny.

Memory and heritage are central to the story in both games. In *Liberation*, players take on the role of a preservationist who arrives in a village in the Czech–German borderland to

investigate whether a local schoolhouse should be given protected landmark status or not. What seems to be a mundane job turns into a deep dive into postwar traumas that still resonate in the village. It quickly dawns upon players that making the final decision to either preserve or tear down the old schoolhouse is a challenging task deeply ingrained with local history, personal animosities, and acknowledged as well as unacknowledged past atrocities.

The game thus suggests that history is something that lives in memory and therefore in the present. Memory emerges as a relational entity that is based on real events but is constantly negotiated among communities (Sturken, 1997; Rosenstone, 2006; Erll, 2010; Erll and Rigney, 2009; Mochocki, 2021a). In *Liberation*, these negotiations are framed by material objects, documents, and sites that players can explore with a certain degree of freedom. Similarly, in *Train*, the choice architecture shows how small daily decisions shape history to a degree equal to that of supposedly significant ones by world leaders or military commanders. Both games use procedural heritage techniques to assert the ultimate contingency of our present understanding of the past upon individual actions and upon different ways of articulating the contents conveyed by historical objects and traces.

The two games use different communication registers to achieve a ludonarrative representation of the past so that it appears authentic to players. This way, the very relation between past events and articulations about them becomes a key theme of the games. In this respect, *Liberation* and *Train* do more than simply convey facts about the past. They make these facts explorable to some degree and subject them to player interventions—key ingredients of what we refer to as procedural heritage. Thereby, the titles enable different and often mutually exclusive evaluations of the same documentable past. As procedural heritage drawing upon inter-medial strategies of asserting authenticity, *Train* and *Liberation* enable critical reflection and

active interrogation rather than simply positing a chronological series of allegedly factual events. However, limitations to mostly binary choice options make free exploration difficult.

In spite of their overall similar outlook on what history is and how it should be conveyed, both games differ in the ways they utilize procedurality and allow for player agency. *Liberation* does not allow players to replay and change history and its gameplay consists of interviews with fictitious eyewitnesses and articulations of their memories through interactive comics and “playable memories.” In this game, history is how it is remembered and negotiated in the present. Depending on whom players ask and how they frame their questions, they get to different layers of the story and different evaluations of the past. The game de-emphasizes possibilities of replaying the past due to the title’s complex social and political settings and dangers of schematizing the ethically- and emotionally-loaded experiences of people who actually lived through the events (Šisler, 2019). It subscribes to a determinate version of procedural heritage.

In contrast to this, *Train* allows players to decide on every important move made by the main protagonist, effectively changing his fate and the overall outcome of the game with each decision made. Unlike in *Liberation*, the schematization of a complex historical reality into a system of binary choices in *Train* was possible due to the fact that the core of the game covers a period of only a few days and the authors had hundreds of oral, eyewitness testimonies at their disposal from which to construct the game world. This makes *Train* less a procedural presentation of “historical possibilities” than a problem space that opens for the reenactment of a variety of possible outcomes of concrete historical decisions. This is emphasized by the virtual museum connected to the game, where players encounter video testimonies of real persons who had made the same or similar choices during the depicted time period.

In response to Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric, Flanagan (2009) has argued that games are frameworks that designers can use to model complexities and make them intelligible to players. Brathwaite and Sharp (2010) have proposed that graphics and other representational game elements merely articulate mechanics into specific contexts, but that "they are not the game. The rules are." (p. 317; for a critique of procedural rhetoric see Sicart, 2011). However, the assumption that rule systems are most crucial for the messages conveyed by games is problematic. Rules are always articulated into certain visual environments that can or cannot be designed to resemble historical environments. Therefore, we argue that only a combination of aspects of representation (story, world) and simulation (rules structuring interaction with this world) give rise to play experiences as forms of authenticated procedural heritage.

In addition, any simulated historical world or event will, out of necessity, only contain a narrow selection of possible variables and factors. The realism of all representations and simulations—games among them—is inherently selective and contingent upon available technologies as well as developers' interests and capacities (Bogost, 2007; Uricchio, 2011; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019). Through both their narratives and mechanics *Liberation* and *Train* remind players precisely of this contingency of mediated pasts upon constrained choices by both designers and players.

The interplay of procedural and representational layers that we call authenticated procedural heritage is an important condition for critical and reflective engagements with the past. An example of this is the collectivization minigame embedded in *Liberation* that makes the memories of a former farmer trying to maintain his family farm during collectivization in the aftermath of WW2 accessible to players.

In the resource management minigame, players sow and harvest fields, earn funds, buy resources, and so forth. If successful, they can invest in new real estate, animals, and machinery. Yet, they have to meet gradually increasing mandatory quotas introduced as a collectivization measure after the communist coup in 1948 in order to push rich farmers to “voluntarily” join collective farms. Farmers unable to meet the quotas who still refused to join collective farms were tried as saboteurs, imprisoned, or executed (Jech, 2001).

The Collectivization minigames’ rule-system models this situation, with quotas becoming higher and higher every year until they are impossible to meet regardless of how carefully players managed their resources before. By these means, the game only seemingly offers choice and in reality uses a determinate form of procedural heritage to illustrate the forced nature of collectivization. Although players are aware that the mayor is a fictitious character, the “assemblage of real testimonies” (Šisler, 2019) accompanying the minigame signals that the inter-medially authenticated determinate procedural heritage of *Liberation* is relevant to historical discourse and memory politics.

Similarly, the emotionally moving message of *Train* is delivered by a combination of reductionist game mechanics with comics and real video testimonies mirroring the players’ in-game choices about actual past events. Through this orchestration of an encounter between the results of in-game decisions embedded in an authentic storyworld and the real memories of witnesses presented in a virtual museum, the game’s determinate procedural heritage enables historical empathy and critical reflection.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have developed two theoretical concepts analyzing the intersections of history, memory, heritage, and video games: inter-medial authenticity and procedural heritage.

Inter-medial authenticity refers to asserting historical authenticity in games through references to earlier representations and the resulting dynamics between players and a pre-mediated past.

Procedural heritage highlights how narratives and audiovisuals combined with rule systems and mechanics predispose player engagements with virtual pasts and makes the latter explorable as interactive historical problem spaces in a determinate or exploratory manner. We have utilized these theoretical concepts in illustrative analyses of the historical games *Liberation* and *Train*.

The two games differ in how they construct authenticity and allow for player exploration of virtual heritage sites. *Liberation* uses actors simulating interviews with actual witnesses and archival footage to enhance players' experiences of the depicted historical events as being authentic. *Train*, conversely, features recorded video testimonies of real eyewitnesses that recursively offer direct access to memories of the actual past once the game has been completed.

Despite varying emphases, both games allow for ludonarrative engagements with the past while creating an open space for critical engagement with history. Thus, both games can be labeled as procedural heritage, aimed not only at playable commemoration of the past linked to material and heritage culture, but also at opening a metaperspective on cultural heritage by making the contingencies behind decisions to either retain or discard traces of the past explorable and experienceable.

Our findings suggest that, firstly, historical representations and simulations resemble extremes on a scale with actual games being placed according to the emphasis they put on degrees of freedom in exploration of historical problem spaces. Secondly, games utilizing the concept of procedural heritage facilitate critical analyses of causes and consequences in contingent terrains (Seixas & Morton, 2012). Learners can vicariously explore not only how particular decisions were “shaped, made possible, or constrained by the historical circumstances of the moment” (p.

6) but also experience the differentiated weight and impact of their decisions. Similarly, procedural forms of experiencing heritage engage learners emotionally (Mochocki 2021b), thus fostering historical empathy and an awareness of the multifaceted motivations and conditions for “real” decisions. Overall, the two concepts introduced in this article might help historians, teachers, and game designers to develop and use games that not only aim at conveying historical facts in an accurate manner, but also at problematizing the depicted events and placing them in a wider framework of inter-medial memory culture and critical multiperspectivity.

Acknowledgements

This article was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734) and the Charles University project Primus/21/Hum/005. The acceptance study of *Liberation* was partially funded by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.

Declaration of Interest

VŠ, JC, and JP were part of the development team for *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* and VŠ was part of the development team for *Train to Sachsenhausen*.

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