



Fictional Games Imagined by Real Historians

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Abstract. We developed a practical exercise, titled “The Game That Does Not Yet Exist”, which helps historians take the first step in imagining their thesis turning into a ludic experience (games, MR experiences). The exercise simplifies core design elements, so no designer is required at this early stage. Scholars are asked to think about historical arguments as interactive systems. We tested the exercise on our archival, interpretive, qualitative, and quantitative research, producing three conceptual prototypes: a VR game on ancient Greek inscriptions, a sailing simulator based on a sixteenth-century logbook, and a narrative thriller using seventeenth- and eighteenth-century maritime accident records. The exercise is now available on the Engineering Historical Memory (EHM) platform for broader use. This exercise is part of an ongoing project to emphasize authorship and enable early-career historians to create, rather than merely consult, historical ludic experiences. It opens the path for participatory experiments in which scholars design and share their own (eventually not only fictional) games.

Keywords: Historical games, Fictional games, Game-based learning, Digital humanities, Procedural reasoning in games, Adaptation, Design Thinking, Historiography.

1 Introduction

Historically themed video games—whether or not they are explicitly marketed as historical—have become powerful mediators of public memory, shaping how players experience and understand the past in ways that often surpass the reach of books or museums [4, 32, 34]. Yet despite their influence, the discipline of history has been slow to recognize games as legitimate forms of historical narration, even though they function as metonymic devices that reshape how history itself is represented [12]. The result is a widening gap: audiences play with history, but historians rarely shape the systems through which history is played.

If games are to matter as doing history [12, p. 329], historians must move beyond consultancy roles focused on “accuracy” [36] and instead act as co-creators of systems that model historical reasoning.

This research responds to that challenge by using a design thinking approach. We designed a small exercise for early-career historians who wish to take the first step toward transforming their thesis into a playable experience. Completing the exercise fosters, for historians, a first (non-conclusive) form of critical game literacy. Put simply, it helps them move from “no idea how a thesis could become a game”, which is the most common feedback we received from colleagues in the field, to forming an initial concept for a playable system.

The exercise simplifies core design principles, such as rules, goals, conflict, and feedback, into accessible steps. It does not require coding or technical expertise. Instead, it aims to encourage historians to think procedurally about their arguments and to consider how a historical thesis might be conveyed through gameplay. In simple terms, we encourage experimentation through speculating in two iterations, which move the idea from vague to conceptually doable. The exercise is now available on the Engineering Historical Memory platform, a hub for historians exploring digital humanities and data visualization methods [17].

The outcomes of this exercise are not finished games but concepts, or rather, game ideas. Nevertheless, they invite reflection on what might constitute a historical game in a deeper sense. In historiography, a distinction exists between history (i.e., the result) and historiography, that is, the process of writing and interpreting it [3, pp. 3–4]. Translated into design terms, this means creating systems that enable players to evaluate evidence, test interpretations, and debate causality. In this way, the emphasis shifts from visual realism to procedural realism:

the game becomes a space where historical knowledge is produced through play rather than merely represented as spectacle [31, p. 3].

While such ideas have been explored by media theorists, educators, and scholars of (historical) game studies [12, 14, 35], they have rarely been examined from within the discipline of history by historians, who would be the natural agents in such a shift. The exercise results in a game idea. The three game ideas created during its development are presented in the sections that follow. Together, they demonstrate, first, how this exercise can help historians without professional design experience reimagine their research as playable systems. Second, they offer something to the broader iLRN community (e.g., artists, computer scientists, game developers, educators, and researchers) by suggesting new ways to engage with history as an active process of reasoning. In this sense, these fictional games begin to sketch what a genuinely historical game might be.

2 Authorship and Intention

Games that simply recreate past settings without interpretation remain illustrative rather than analytical. They reproduce the aesthetics of history without engaging its logic. An example is *This War of Mine* [1], whose developers added specific scenes to heighten emotional engagement, presenting the game as inspired by the Siege of Sarajevo rather than as a representation of the siege itself [28]. Such historically themed games can be emotionally powerful and ethically resonant, but they are not historical arguments in the disciplinary sense. They stage history, but they do not practice historiography [5, 24, 45].

The long-standing debate between historical accuracy and game affordances [13, 18, 47] remains important, yet our concern lies elsewhere: in authorship. Authorship here refers to who speaks, from which perspective, and to what interpretive aim. Foucault frames the author as a function that organizes meaning and guides interpretation [20]. The creator's choices—what to include, exclude, or emphasize—carry interpretive weight. Contemporary digital media complicate this traditional notion, highlighting collaborative and assemblage-based processes in which multiple contributors and perspectives influence the final product [43]. Nonetheless, for the purpose of historical game design, we wish to return to the idea of a primary author (or co-author) whose interpretive choices retain central significance, guiding the translation of research into a playable system. Imagine a historian's signature appearing on a game, as an author's name appears on a book. Authorship marks accountability. It ensures that a game follows a logic consistent with the historian's own method. It is the first step toward distinguishing historically themed games from historical games that advance an argument [24].

For players, this distinction works much as it does in film: it signals the game's perspective or stance. The documentary/feature analogy, for example, helps clarify the contract between author and audience, between representation and reality [39]. Historical games might similarly be categorized—documentary, historical debate, fiction, non-fiction—placing them within frameworks of knowledge and interpretation rather than only aesthetics. Ultimately, authorship begins with a signature: when historians co-create and “sign” their games, they define the interpretive weight of their choices.

3 The Historian-Creator

How might historians present original historical research through creative media? The question is not simply how to represent the past through games, but how to think historically through game design itself. Four paths can be identified.

1. Adaptation: transforming a research question or thesis into a playable prototype. This might take shape within academic scholarship—as what Adam Chapman terms a distinct historical form, where the game itself functions as a medium of historical argumentation—or as a creative endeavor pursued alongside one's scholarly work [13, pp. 4–5].

2. Exploration: Games can serve as tools for testing hypotheses and exploring models in historical research, addressing questions of causality, contingency, and social dynamics. This can take multiple forms, from citizen science or participatory games [23] to structured playtests to computational simulations that generate data relevant to historical inquiry [35, 44]. In each case, the game or simulation functions as an experimental space where historians can observe, manipulate, and reflect on historical processes in ways that complement traditional research methods.

3. Dissemination: embedding games within classrooms, museums, or heritage initiatives, where historians collaborate as lead co-creators to translate research into public-facing interactive experiences [10–11, 22, 33].

4. Practice-based research: drawing on methods from art and design [7, 9] to frame games as valid scholarly inquiry and hybrid research outputs. Here, the act of creation itself produces critical reflection, advancing both

(historical) game studies and the historian's own field through argumentation embodied in design. For inspiration, examples of this methodology, primarily applied in the arts rather than history, can be found in the Society for Artistic Research online catalogue [42].

Taken together, these four approaches point to a simple but radical possibility: historians can make their arguments playable. This is what might be called historiographical game design—a practice in which systems of play become tools for thinking historically [5, 24, 45].

Yet this potential remains largely unrealized. Most historically themed games are still developed by game studios, with historians joining late in the process as consultants. In this role, they shape content but not structure [36]. What if we reversed this model and let historians begin as authors? Only a few independent or research-led projects show what direct authorship by historians can achieve, as illustrated in the curated selection EHM: Games for History [17].

These early attempts reveal both the field's potential and its limitations. They demonstrate how games can embody historical research in original ways, yet their rarity underscores a disciplinary gap that continues to discourage broader engagement among historians. To advance the field, historians should approach game creation not merely as a tool for dissemination but as a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry, a kind of design-based, arts-informed research. In this framework, creative practices such as the design of immersive experiences serve as reflective processes through which knowledge is generated [15, p. 60]. For historians, this means that designing a game can become a mode of historical thinking, shaping how the past is interpreted and understood.

4 Bridging the Disciplinary Gap

Historians recognize a civic responsibility to disseminate knowledge through the media their audiences inhabit [37]. The reluctance we observed, however, stems not from opposition but from uncertainty: a lack of orientation at the starting point.

Our initial idea was to develop a quick guide for historians, intended as a practical entry point into game creation. The aim was to offer orientation, best practices, and inspiring examples—a concise introduction for scholars curious about interactive media but uncertain where to begin.

We used the Engineering Historical Memory (EHM) platform as the basis for this project. EHM is a digital research hub that integrates methods from history, digital humanities, and data visualization. Established in 2007, it supports collaborative efforts to transform historical data into machine-readable, mappable, and interactive formats. The platform allows users to organize and visualize relationships between historical sources, places, and events. Within this context, EHM hosts tools and guidelines for historians interested in experimenting with procedural and immersive forms of historical representation. Situating the exercise within EHM ensures accessibility for historians already using the platform and connects the work to an established framework of visual and analytical approaches to historical knowledge.

We assumed that information and examples would be enough to spark engagement. It quickly became clear, however, that the disciplinary gap ran deeper. The availability of data or guidelines did not overcome the conceptual threshold between historical research and design thinking. For many historians, the main obstacle is the assumption that creating a game requires technical skills such as programming or media production. Our aim was to remove this barrier.

We began by focusing on helping historians translate their theses into the idea of a game—what we called “crossing the threshold.” To address this, we developed an exercise based on concepts from design thinking and game literacy, yet accessible to those without prior familiarity with these fields.

The framework draws on stages adapted from Tim Brown's model: *inspiration* (the initial idea of the exercise) → *ideation* (iterative development guided by feedback) → *implementation* (not included here, as the exercise focused on the initial conceptual development). From Brown's framework, we adopted the principle of balancing three constraints: *feasibility* (what is logically and conceptually possible), *viability* (what can remain faithful to the historical thesis), and *desirability* (what makes sense for participants) [8]. Then we drew on IDEO's practical approach, which emphasizes rapid prototyping and iterative testing [29].

From game studies, we drew on Ian Bogost's notion of procedural rhetoric as a means of expressing arguments through systems of relations [6]. This helped us focus the exercise on how historical reasoning might operate as a dynamic process rather than a static narrative. We adopted key ideas from game and learning theories. Drawing on James Paul Gee's framework, we integrated the view of games as effective learning systems in which meaning develops through problem-solving, situated practice, and active engagement [21]. From Arnab et al., we employed the Learning Mechanics–Game Mechanics (LM–GM) model, which links pedagogical goals to specific gameplay structures, helping participants conceptualize how research questions could be operationalized through rules and

player actions [2]. This helped formalize the exercise and guided participants toward feasible and coherent game concepts.

We then applied the exercise to our own research. Each of us presented a different type of study—archival, interpretive, qualitative, or quantitative. The process of developing a fictional game adaptation of our thesis resulted in three distinct conceptual prototypes. Through this process, we refined the exercise and published it online as part of the EHM Best Practices guide. The next phase is to invite other historians to test its transferability, share feedback on their experience, and suggest directions for follow-up exercises.

5 Framing and Methodology

We draw on the notion of fictional games, which are imagined, often non-playable game concepts that appear in literature, film, or speculative fiction. As Stefano Gualeni and Ricardo Fassone describe, these are ludic artefacts created for fictional worlds rather than intended for actual play [27]. More recently, a collaborative effort expanded this framework to include related categories such as fake, nonexistent, imaginary, impossible, or unplayable games [19]. This broader view highlights the conceptual potential of fictional games as tools for thinking, experimentation, and argumentation.

We entitled the exercise “The Game That Does Not Yet Exist.” Fictional games in this sense are deliberately open: rules, goals, and mechanics may remain undefined, allowing scholars to speculate and explore without technical design skills. Their unfinished, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory nature is precisely what makes them useful for our purpose.

Rather than situating fictional games in utopian or fantastical settings, we place them within frameworks of historical periodization and historiographical reasoning. These fictional (historical) games serve as ideal or conceptual models—approximations of what a historical game could be, rather than prescriptions for what it must become.

The first part of the exercise anchors the game in a historian’s own research. The participant selects a study, article, or book as the foundation for the fictional game. The participant summarizes the work, including an abstract or a brief description, and the core thesis: what is argued, why it matters. This positions the historical context and establishes the “engine” that will drive the imagined interactive experience.

The second stage engages imagination. The historian is asked to consider how the thesis could be translated into a playable experience while preserving its core historical insights. This involves defining player motivations and objectives, and envisioning a system in which players learn through their choices and actions.

The follow-up step in the exercise asks the historian to translate an argument into “procedural rhetoric”—mechanics that express interpretation through process rather than text or imagery [6]. Anticipating that this would be the most difficult stage, we introduced a second iteration following feedback, using an analogy with a similar existing game. The existing game is not necessarily related to history but shares structural features with the participant’s proposed idea in the first iteration. Watching gameplay videos helped the participant visualize how ideas could operate within a system of rules and goals. This method allowed the participant to refocus attention on the logic of historical reasoning: what could be borrowed from the reference game, and what must differ to convey her/his own interpretation. In this way, pairing fictional concepts with existing games proved essential to advancing the exercise. The exercise can be accessed at EHM [17]. Our fictional examples are presented below.

Since its creation, we have tested the exercise with two early-career historians, which reaffirmed both its benefits and its limitations, as discussed in the conclusions. Further testing with more participants is needed to allow additional iterations and refinement of the exercise.

6 A Fictional Epigraphic Game on Mariner’s Inscriptions (Στὰ Γράμματα)

In fieldwork conducted in 2001, Andrea Nanneti documented sixty ancient Greek inscriptions across six sectors of the rocky walls of Grammata Bay on the island of Proti (Messenia, Greece). The corpus was produced through systematic mapping and photographic recording. Sectoral descriptions identify inscriptions on the southern and northern walls, on a western face partially buried by collapsed rocks, and on one epigraph currently inverted on an isolated boulder. The texts date from the sixth century BCE to the eleventh century CE, with a concentration in the early Common Era [38].

In Figure 2, for example, we see an inscription from the Roman Imperial period (27 BCE–284 CE). It is arranged vertically, written left to right, and consists of three lines. The inscription reads Λεύκιος ὁ Σάμιος ἀνέβη ὁ Θουενέσιος, which translates as “Leukios, son of Thouenesios from Samos, boarded.” The text likely refers to

a mariner named Leukios, originally from the island of Samos in the eastern Aegean, who boarded at this site and may have been seeking refuge (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Grammata Bay (Proti Island, Messenia, Greece), Sector no. 2, Inscription no. 2.

Methodologically, this project is primarily archival and documentary. It focuses on primary-data curation, epigraphic documentation, and the construction of an accessible epigraphic corpus. Its novelty lies less in a novel interpretive thesis and more in publishing previously unavailable primary material — photographs, readings, and contextual notes — that expand the evidentiary base for later historiographical work. The team’s archival recovery also revealed lacunae: inscriptions recorded by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century travelers have not been relocated on site and were likely lost in the 1903 explosions. These losses and fragmentary survivals shape the limits of the corpus.

The fictional VR game unfolds on a small island where ancient mariners once left inscriptions on the rocky walls of a natural inlet known as Στὰ γράμματα. The first layer of the game focuses on engaging directly with these inscriptions. Players explore the cliffs, uncovering and deciphering marks carved centuries ago. Each discovery reveals fragments of messages, names, and dates, gradually building a sense of the island’s maritime past. Progress happens as players connect symbols, translate short texts, and learn to recognize patterns in the inscriptions themselves.

To use the example above, consider the phrase Λεύκιος ὁ Σάμιος ἀνέβη ὁ Θουενέσιος, in English, “Leukios, son of Thouenesios from Samos, boarded.” That single reading activates a rule: when a verb (e.g., “boarded”) appears in another inscription, its meaning begins to stabilize across contexts. In this way, inscriptions gradually decipher one another. Players follow these linguistic traces — connecting names, places, and verbs — until a network of relationships and recurring phrases emerges.

This mechanic mirrors the historian’s work: observing patterns, testing hypotheses, and refining interpretations through partial evidence. It transforms scholarly reasoning into interactive play.

The second layer of this fictional game explores the history of how these inscriptions were studied and remembered. Players begin to uncover stories about the people who documented them — scholars, explorers, and travelers from different centuries. For example, they might encounter the Greek scholar Athanasios Petrides, who first reported the site in 1881, or follow Wilhelmus Strijd, the Swedish archaeologist whose 1903 expedition was cut short by a violent storm. Through these encounters — traveling across timelike visions from the past — players navigate a web of old books, reports, and letters that unlock further clues. Each flashback or document adds context, linking new discoveries to the broader historiography surrounding the island.

In this way, players not only decipher the ancient messages but also experience how history itself is constructed — through fragments, interpretations, and the efforts of those who came before. The two layers intertwine: every inscription can open a new story from the past, and every story sheds light on another set of markings waiting to be understood.

The idea for this fictional game was then paired with Heaven’s Vault, a narrative game built around the logic of language reconstruction [30]. Heaven’s Vault offers one of the most sophisticated models for transforming epigraphic reasoning into gameplay. Its central mechanic revolves around deciphering an ancient script known as “Ancient.” Players build a growing personal lexicon by hypothesizing word meanings, testing them against new inscriptions, and revising their interpretations as evidence accumulates. The game rewards both intuition and linguistic patience: each discovery, such as a phrase carved into a wall, a pattern of grammatical markers, a reused root, feeds back into a web of interconnected meanings. This recursive process mirrors the experience of solving

a linguistic puzzle or completing a crossword, where each local breakthrough reshapes one’s understanding of the whole (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Heaven’s *Vault* by Inkle, 2019.

What makes Heaven’s Vault a valid pairing here is that it feels archaeological — sustained by the steady rhythm of inference, discovery, and doubt, echoing the labor of real-world translation. Yet, as a fictional system, its language is an encoded form of English. It simplifies the ambiguities, irregularities, and material imperfections that characterize real epigraphy: dialectal drift, letter damage, variable orthography, or the tension between literacy and orality in ancient societies. These omissions make the experience accessible and elegant, but they also flatten the historical complexity of language evolution and decay.

Heaven’s Vault also features a narrative: it uses travel and dialogue to sustain emotional engagement. Nanetti’s fictional game diverges here. His focus is not on a voyage narrative but on the process of decipherment itself as a historical act. The inscriptions on the island of Proti are real, and the motivation is discovery rather than story. The player does not embody a hero on a mythic journey; they become a scholar engaged in careful, iterative reading. The pleasure comes from recognition, that is, from seeing patterns emerge through verbs, names, and places.

Still, this remains a conceptual sketch. Many design questions are left unresolved. How can missing inscriptions be represented ethically, without fabricating claims? How can fictional vignettes be balanced with documentary historiography so that players do not conflate imagination with evidence? These uncertainties are not flaws but essential features of the fictional-game approach: it invites experimentation and critical reflection, not closure.

7 A Fictional Sailing Simulator Based on a Sixteenth-Century Logbook

Our second fictional game is based on Renard Gluzman’s critical edition of a sixteenth-century logbook of a 960-ton merchant ship commanded by a Dalmatian-born captain. The manuscript documents a routine commercial voyage between Venice and Cyprus. Its systematic notations provide a quantitative record of ship performance and navigational behavior under varying conditions. Regular entries on sail handling, course adjustments, and weather observations enable the extraction of data on:

- Average sailing speeds and the conditions under which they were achieved.
- Regional and micro-regional wind patterns, including diurnal variability.
- Sailing angles and manoeuvring strategies, such as pointing into the wind, reefing, tacking, and standing off and on.
- Drift and leeway allow for the quantification of ground lost under adverse winds and currents.

For example, the following translation to English of an entry in the log illustrates the events recorded during 9 August, the second day of the voyage:

“On Saturday, at sunrise, the wind turned adverse from the southeast, and we sailed close-hauled towards south-southwest, tacking and making headway with pleasant breezes until sunset, and then the wind shifted from the southwest, and keeping a course towards southeast-by-east, the wind veered to the west in such a way, that by sunrise, I would estimate, forty miles to southeast-by-east (c. 1r).”

The consistency of these descriptions provides a standardized framework for reconstructing early modern sailing performance and understanding the practice of navigation [25-26]. The research does not center on a narrative of discovery or catastrophe but on everyday seamanship. We highlight the interplay between tacit knowledge (the codified craft of rules, charts, and instruments) and situational discernment, what Venetian historian Alberto Tenenti called *senso del mare*, a “feeling for the sea” [46].

Gluzman then imagines a fictional sailing simulation inspired by this reconstruction of a sixteenth-century voyage. The player assumes the role of a ship's captain navigating the Mediterranean. Every decision, such as adjusting sails, estimating position, or interpreting wind shifts, must be made using historically plausible tools: a compass, a ruler, an hourglass, and a portolan chart whose distortions replicate sixteenth-century inaccuracies.

The game world incorporates realistic weather models approximating daily Mediterranean conditions—wind direction, speed, gusts, and wave behavior—allowing for partial simulation of regional and seasonal effects. Each player's decision generates an entry in the day's log, written in a format like the original manuscript, as shown above.

Next, we paired this fictional concept with a contemporary sailing simulator designed for realism, eSail Sailing Simulator (see Fig. 4). Observing gameplay revealed key differences that helped refine the design. In the fictional 'sixteenth-century' version, the player never sees GPS coordinates or a mini map. Only the horizon line and faint coastal silhouettes are visible. When land appears, period toponyms would emerge, prompting the player to locate them on a portolan chart and cross-check course and timing to estimate position.



Fig. 3. Screenshot from eSail Sailing Simulator (eSail, 2019).

The idea is that the game internally tracks the ship's 'true' coordinates on a modern map, but this information remains hidden. The pleasure and frustration of play lie in this tension: Each turn requires interpreting position, sometimes leading to misjudgments and drifting off course. Navigation unfolds through approximation and inference rather than certainty. Each leg of the voyage would become a synthesis of observation, reasoning, and intuition, and ultimately a digital enactment of Alberto Tenenti's *senso del mare*.

Occasional fictional events, such as an approaching storm, a passing vessel, or a dispute among sailors, test ethical and practical judgment. Should one risk pressing on or wait for calmer weather? The 'winning' condition remains modest: to reach port safely and efficiently. Success depends less on fixed rules than on the balance between calculation and intuition.

Yet design questions remain open. What does the player learn through doing, and through erring? To what extent can historical constraints or real meteorological data enhance authenticity without overwhelming the player? Would the player gradually develop an embodied sensitivity to the sea or to a computer system? How might ethical judgment be represented procedurally without reducing it to a points system? These uncertainties are intentional. As with the inscriptions project, the exercise does not produce complete games but illustrates what is absent in existing historical simulations.

Sailing simulators, from the epic *Sea of Thieves* to the technical eSail Sailing Simulator, privilege a modern gaze, using top-down maps, radar, and automated data to ensure stable orientation. Late medieval and early-modern mariners' experience, however, was built on uncertainty, sensory cues, and continuous adjustment because of the force of the wind on the sails, and the color of the water. Reintroducing such constraints allows a historically grounded design not only to convey maritime history but also to propose new directions for game design itself.

8 A Fictional Thriller Game Based on Prove di Fortuna Records

The third fictional game, proposed by Gerassimos D. Pagratis, turns to Corfu and the Venetian maritime world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pagratis's research examines seventy-three *prove di fortuna* (i.e., records of maritime accidents) handled by the Venetian authorities in Corfu between 1611 and 1795. These cases, drawn from the Adriatic, Ionian, and Aegean seas, involve medium-sized vessels such as *marciliane*, *tartane*, *polacche*, and *checchie*, crewed by Greek sailors who often sailed under Ottoman or *San Marco*'s flags [41].

The *prova di fortuna* was a formal legal procedure. After an accident, a captain appeared before state officials to declare the event, supported by crew members' testimonies. The court assessed whether the loss of ship or cargo resulted from natural causes—storms, reefs, or contrary winds—or from human error, negligence, or piracy. The outcome determined liability and the amount of insurance compensation. In studying these records, Pagratis reconstructs the geography of maritime risk: the zones most exposed to tempests, the recurring months of calamity, and the social networks linking sailors, merchants, and insurers across Venice's dominions overseas (*Stato da Mar*).

From this corpus, a fictional game can be envisioned: an investigative thriller where players take on the role of a Venetian official or maritime insurer based in Corfu. The player's task is to review reports of seventy-three incidents with a brief vignette of loss, danger, or misfortune, and classify them by cause, location, season, ship type, and flag. As the cases accumulate, patterns begin to emerge: recurring winds, dangerous routes, the moral reliability of specific captains. The process reflects Pagratis's own analysis, turning a series of individual archival cases into patterns and trends in maritime history during the age of sail.

The player's motivation stems not from adventure but from inquiry. Each case is a puzzle demanding judgment: Was the captain negligent? Was the damage due to fortuna di mare or to poor seamanship? Players catalogue incidents, weigh testimonies, consult maps, and compare similar cases. Through this process, the player experiences how accountability was reconstructed.

This concept aligns closely with Lucas Pope's *Return of the Obra Dinn*, a game that similarly reconstructs a ship's fate through fragmented testimonies and visual clues [40]. Yet, while *Obra Dinn* builds a unified mystery around a single vessel, Pagratis's imagined game unfolds as an anthology: a network of independent yet thematically linked cases. The *prove di fortuna* thus become modular shorts, each offering a self-contained story and contributing to a broader understanding of risk, accountability, and maritime culture.

Design challenges remain unresolved. To what extent should the game visualize events such as storms, shipwrecks, or interrogations, rather than present them textually, as they survive in the sources? Simplification is inevitable, yet the repetitive legal formulae of the *prove di fortuna* could structure gameplay themselves. It remains an open question whether teaching players to interpret patterns in bureaucratic language is sufficiently engaging.

As with the previous exercises, this project does not seek to produce a finished game but to test what becomes possible when historical reasoning takes on a procedural form. Pagratis's case illustrates how interactive narrative can shed light on the interpretive process, opening the question of how historians move from a corpus of fragmented cases toward more generalized claims. It also exposes the limits of such translation: for some historians, the narrative mode may remain the more appropriate framework for adaptation, allowing for ambiguity that a procedural system might constrain. In this sense, both the historian and the player traverse similar paths of inference and interpretation, though not necessarily toward the same conclusions.

9 Conclusions

This project began as an experiment in translation, not between languages, but between modes of knowing. What happens when historical research is recast in the language of interactive systems? How can the logics of play, feedback, and procedural reasoning be applied to accurately represent the historian's craft? 'Fictional Games Imagined by Real Historians' were never meant to produce a playable prototype. Their goal was to externalize scholarly reasoning, to make visible the patterns of causality, judgment, and interpretation that normally remain hidden in narrative prose.

Yet, in doing so, we also confronted the boundaries of what such translation can achieve. The very process of imagining games exposed how much of historical reasoning resists systematization. The richness of ambiguity, the particularities of the sources, and their interpretation cannot be neatly proceduralized. Even the act of designing logic structures risks oversimplification: what feels elegant in game terms often flattens the complexity of historical evidence.

This approach cannot, and arguably should not, fully replicate historical reasoning; rather, it can produce a composite output that combines textual argument and ludic experience, each complementing the other. When playable historical experiences are presented alongside critical texts, or when written introductions, interludes, or reflections frame and deepen interactive audiovisual work, the result can be a more layered and comprehensive engagement, without reducing one form to the terms of the other.

The exercise and the appended examples clarify what might be possible if historians were to think more like designers or collaborate with them. The imagined games reveal that design thinking allows historians to reimagine knowledge as something experienced, tested, and negotiated through feedback loops. Still, their feasibility remains uncertain: transforming these sketches into functioning systems would require interdisciplinary expertise beyond our current capacity.

The next challenge, therefore, is not simply to build these games but to share the method. How might other historians respond if asked to imagine their own fictional game? What kinds of truths, distortions, or blind spots might emerge if we collectively designed playable versions of our research arguments? Such participatory exercises could extend current conversations at the intersection of digital humanities and immersive learning research.

Finally, this project raises a deeper question about purpose. What we missed in this first attempt, perhaps, is a clearer articulation of the audience: Who are these games for? Scholars, students, or the public? And how might different levels of fidelity alter the experience of historical learning?

Future iterations of the exercise will incorporate a target audience profile, or persona. We postulate that the exercise could be adapted based on feedback from these personas, for example, by adjusting historical fidelity, the complexity of mechanics, or the balance between interpretive and procedural reasoning. This extra iteration could bring us closer to a feasible, fictional game.

In the end, these fictional games are mirrors held up to our own practice. They remind us that history, like play, is a dynamic negotiation between rule and improvisation, evidence and imagination. Thinking through games reveals the performative side of scholarship, a craft that is at once analytical, interpretive, and creative. What remains now is to see whether other historians are willing to play.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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