



Workshop
“Playing the Aggressor: Historical Conquest, Colonization, and Resistance in Video Games”

Heidelberg, November 15–16, 2024
Hybrid

Convenors

- PD Dr. Ivan Sablin (ivan.sablin@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de), Ladenburg Research Network “The Aggressor: Self-Perception and External Perception of an Actor Between Nations,” Daimler and Benz Foundation, Heidelberg University
- Dr. Florian Nieser (florian.nieser@uni-heidelberg.de), Heidelberg Center for Digital Humanities (HCDH), Heidelberg University

Topic and Themes

The workshop will analyze video games that reconstruct, model, or draw inspiration from historical aggressors and aggression, with a particular focus on conquest, colonization, and resistance. It explores games where players engage in territorial expansion or resistance, spanning various genres including real-time strategy, grand strategy, and other turn-based strategies and tactical games, among others.

Three themes drive the workshop’s agenda:

1. **Examination of the normalization and trivialization of historical aggression within gaming narratives.** This involves considering how the perpetrators of conquest and occupation are depicted, such as the juxtaposition of military figures like Napoleon and Attila with civil historical figures like Gandhi in games like Civilization, and how behavior algorithms of player avatars or non-player characters inspired by historical figures are standardized. Additionally, scrutiny will be given to the portrayal of perpetual conflict, as seen in series like Total War, which may inadvertently trivialize and standardize historical conflicts from the Crusades to World War II.
2. **Investigation into how occupation and conquest mechanics in games are influenced by historical events and developments, regardless of the games’ settings.** This includes analyzing the prevalence of nation-state models for territorial representation and the persistence of nineteenth and twentieth-century ideals of military organization across various historical epochs as well as fantasy or science fiction settings. For instance, even the Chaos legions in the Warhammer: Total War series are named and structured similar to modern armies. Exploration will also extend to determining whether games like XCOM draw inspiration from WWII-era resistance or guerrilla warfare, whether titles like Stellaris presuppose modern-era colonialism in future space politics, and whether non-war survival games like Frostpunk rely on modern models of wartime economy and politics.
3. **Exploration of alternatives to traditional conquest and occupation mechanics in historical strategy games.** This involves considering economic strategies that may still perpetuate themes of expansionism and colonialism in a disguised form, but also established war games offering more choice in relation to play style, such as the more recent entries in the Total War series. The workshop also seeks to move away from conventional AAA games and explore

unconventional game mechanics, such as mercenary simulations exemplified by the Jagged Alliance series, which depart from the nation-state and modern military mechanics.

The workshop encourages a diverse conversation among specialists in game studies, historians, social scientists, literary scholars, and developers. It also seeks to transcend the medium and academic discourse by addressing community engagement with such games and modding.

Submissions of 300-word abstracts accompanied by a brief biographical paragraph are kindly requested to be sent to ivan.sablin@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de by June 1, 2024. Authors of accepted abstracts will be required to further develop their contributions into draft papers of up to 5,000 words, due by November 1, 2024. Scholars of all levels, including advanced MA students, are invited to submit their proposals.

This workshop is part of the Ladenburg Research Network “The Aggressor: Self-Perception and External Perception of an Actor Between Nations” (https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/fakultaeten/philosophie/zegk/histsem/forschung/project_aggressor_en.html), sponsored by the Daimler and Benz Foundation. Participants will be offered accommodation and coverage of travel expenses. The workshop will be held in a hybrid format, facilitating both in-person and online participation.