

Recensão a *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games*, de Robert Houghton, ed.

Tess Watterson

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Robert Houghton, ed.

Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games

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Tess Watterson*

Playing the Middle Ages is a collection of varied essays on medievalism and video games that overall reflects both the expansive scope and critical nuance of the past decade of scholarship on this topic. This volume is one of the editor Robert Houghton's three book-length projects on medievalism and games in as many years: preceded by another collection edited by Houghton, *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games: Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact*, published in 2022 in De Gruyter's *Video Games and the Humanities* series, and then followed in 2024 by his monograph *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism*, published in Boydell & Brewer's *Medievalism* series[1]. *Teaching the Middle Ages* is pitched at a much broader audience and deliberately positions its pedagogical suggestions as widely applicable—or at least adaptable—to other historical games[2]. *Playing the Middle Ages* and *The Middle Ages in Computer Games* are both published in medievalism-themed series,

* Tess Watterson (tess.dunbar@adelaide.edu.au). https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5413-8481. Department of Historical and Classical Studies, School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, Business, Law and Economics, Level 7, Napier Building, The University of Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia. Original review: 16-05-2025. Revised version: 26-05-2025. Accepted: 27-05-2025.

1 Robert Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781805434498; Robert Houghton, ed., *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games: Using, Modding and Creating Games for Education and Impact* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110712032.

2 Robert Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games", in *Teaching the Middle Ages through Modern Games*, 1–28.

unlike the *Teaching* collection, and are both framed much more specifically as part of a concerted effort towards field cohesion for "ludic medievalism", as Houghton describes how scholars have often ended up "talk[ing] past each other" while working on this topic in "parallel" in varied disciplines[3]. While the volume as a whole offers a range of valuable contributions to the literature, there is some disconnect between the editorial vision of the introduction and the varying approaches of the chapters authors.

As Houghton himself also notes in the first paragraph of his introduction, the most analogous predecessor to this volume is the 2014 collection *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, edited by Daniel Kline, though there has been a wide range of scholarship in the intervening decade in medievalism studies and in historical game studies more broadly[4]. *Playing the Middle Ages* follows some similar themes as Kline's volume, including some case studies that have remained prominent in the field (especially *Crusader Kings, Assassins Creed,* and *The Elder Scrolls*), but overall, comparing the two volumes usefully demonstrates the diverse expansion of this area of study. Reflecting the editors geographical contexts, Kline's volume had a higher proportion of contributions from North America, whereas Houghton's *Playing the Middle Ages* skews slightly more towards the UK, however it also notably includes contributors from Europe and India.

This diversity is likely reflective of the international involvement in *The Middle Ages in Modern Games* (*MAMG*) network of events that is enabled by their virtual or hybrid nature, and of which Houghton is the central organiser. Indeed, the *MAMG* strand of panels at the International Medieval Congress (IMC) conference in Leeds in July of 2024, culminated in a Roundtable Discussion, chaired by Houghton, titled "The Middle Ages in Modern Games: An Adolescent Field?" – the title

3 Robert Houghton, "The Middle Ages in Modern Games: An Adolescent Field", in *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games*, ed. Robert Houghton (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 3.

4 Daniel T. Kline, *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

of his introduction to *Playing the Middle Ages*[5]. This re-framing to a question is a good example of Houghton's inclusive and collaborative approach to organising *MAMG* and to his work in this space more broadly, welcoming diverse perspectives and platforming underrepresented voices. *MAMG* events are designed to "support engagement between medievalists, games scholars and developers at any point in their career" and to share accessible reflections and discussions on medievalism and games in a public forum[6]. Its key organisational effort is the "Twitter Conference" first established in 2020, which shifted in 2024 to its current "Asynchronous Conference" format, hosted on the *MAMG* website. Some trends from recent years in *MAMG* events are evident in this volume, such as the innovative work on sound design in medievalist games, especially by Mariana Lopez who has ensured the topic's consistent presence in *MAMG* contexts[7]. Houghton's introduction foregrounds the challenges of linguistic barriers and the commonplace privileging of anglophone scholarship in work on medievalism and games, and notably in the two years since this publication, the *MAMG* asynchronous conference's calls for contributions has expanded its linguistic scope from only English to six possible languages[8]. A more expansive

5 Houghton, "Playing the Middle Ages". Past Call for Papers and strand programs for the Middle Ages in Modern Games at IMC are available on the website https://middleagesinmoderngames.net/mamg-leeds-imc/.

6 "About MAMG", The Middle Ages in Modern Games, accessed 29th April 2025, https://middleagesinmoderngames.net/what-are-the-middle-ages-in-modern-games/; "The Middle Ages in Modern Games" The University of Winchester, accessed 29th April 2025, https://www.winchester.ac.uk/research/Our-impactful-research/Research-in-Humanities-and-Social-Sciences/Research-centres-groups-and-networks/Centre-for-Medieval-and-Renaissance-Research/The-Middle-Ages-in-Modern-Games/.

7 Houghton, "Playing the Middle Ages", 4–5.

8 Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games*, 6.they can engage their players in a manner that is not only different, but in certain aspects, more profound than traditional literary or cinematic forms of medievalism. However, although it is important to understand the versions of the Middle Ages presented by these games, how players engage with these medievalist worlds, and why particular representational trends emerge in this most modern medium, there has hitherto been little scholarship devoted to them.This book explores the distinct nature of medievalism in digital games across a range of themes, from the portrayal of grotesque yet romantic conflict to conflicting depictions of the Church and religion. It likewise considers the distinctions between medievalist games and those of other periods, underlining their emphasis on fantasy, roleplay and hardcore elements, and their consequences for depictions of morality, race, gender and sexuality. Ultimately the book argues that while medievalist games are thoroughly influenced by medievalist and ludic tropes, they are nonetheless representative of a distinct new form of medievalism. It engages with the vast literature surrounding his-

vision of a global Middle Ages has long been a project in medievalism and medieval studies, including grappling with Eurocentrism (and how to analyse it while avoiding inadvertently propagating it) shaped by a generally self-reflexive nature that is carried into this ludic medievalism research.

The chapters in *Playing the Middle Ages* collectively demonstrate a real strength of medievalism studies approaches for this research, which is a sensibility that is comfortable with uncertain origins and ever evolving stories, and that allows for analysis to focus on *how* representations over time re-mediate ideas about the past without pressure to legitimise or disqualify these adaptations solely based on their fidelity to the known historical record. This sensibility shapes this volume, as the medievalism lens conceptually allows scholars to be comfortable with rhizomatic "original" texts and to trace the development of stories over time. Blair Apgar's chapter is a great example of this in analysing how certain aspects of the legacy of the figure of Matilda of Canossa shapes the way she is depicted in Paradox Games' *Crusader Kings* – this felt effortlessly conducted by Apgar as it is the mode of good medievalism research, but it is certainly not a balance that all scholarship on historical games typically achieves[9]. As is common in medievalism work, the authors here that call for more "accuracy" clearly articulate

torical game studies, game design, and medievalism, and considers hundreds of games from across genres, from Assassin's Creed and Baldur's Gate to Crusader Kings and The Witcher series. In doing so, it provides a vital illustration of the state of the field and a cornerstone for future research and teaching","collection-number":"28","collection-title":"Medievalism","ISBN":"978-1-80543-449-8","language":"eng","note":"DOI: 10.1515/9781805434498","publisher":"D.S. Brewer","title":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism","title-short":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games","author":[{"family":"Houghton","given":"Robert"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2024"]]},"locator":"6","label":"page"}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} The call for papers are open to contributions in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, as these are the languages able to be facilitated by the organising committee. This deliberate awareness and efforts to improve diversity are also prominent in other adjacent spaces, such as the *Coding Medieval Worlds* workshop series that Houghton mentions earlier in his introduction, created and run by James Baille to facilitate collaboration of historians and game designers. For example, for the 2024 CMW4 theme of "Monsters and Outsiders", Baille organised panels with a wide range of topics including Chinese and East Asian history, and Indian-language folklore. Previous workshops are well documented (and partially recorded) on the Exilian website: https://exilian.co.uk/codingworlds/.

9 Blair Apgar, "Matilda of Canossa and Crusader Kings II: (Papal) Warrior Princess", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 245–64.

their analysis as part of a necessary resistance to the popular dominance of invented narratives of homogeneity or conservatism about the period, as these are so often weaponised to legitimise harmful modern beliefs. Highlighting discrepancies between the historical record and modern historical imagination, in this context, is to encourage the expansion of ludic medievalism's repertoire into what Johansen Quijano's describes in his chapter as the "rich tapestry of diverse networked cultures with unique arts and literatures" that constitute the Middle Ages[10]. Houghton's introduction offers a well-articulated argument for the ongoing, nuanced consideration of "accuracy" in historical games, with a thoroughly-referenced summary of the well-trodden ground of "accuracy" or "authenticity" debates. This explanation, as well as the thread throughout these chapters of discussions about ideological uses of the imagined medieval past[11], demonstrate a model of productive "accuracy" analysis that maps ludic historical accuracy as part of analysing the nature and utility of its claims to accuracy.

From the outset, the volume is framed through a clear vision for the future of this research: that while the study of medievalism in games has expanded significantly, future "development and recognition" depends upon improved field cohesion[12]. However, this call to action does not really sit comfortably with much of the work in this volume itself, and there are some unresolved tensions in how this cohesion could operate in practice. Houghton suggests that a barrier to the field's maturation has been contributors working in parallel to all reinvent the wheel, rather than truly building on existing literature, which is often due to the siloing of different approaches under different parent fields[13]. Houghton raises a similar concern in his monograph, especially about

10 Johansen Quijano, "Virtually (De)Colonized: Racial Identity and Colonialism in the Middle Ages and as Depicted in Kingdom Come: Deliverance, Innocence: A Plague Tale, The Elder Scrolls, and Black Desert Online", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 195–210.

11 See for example, in Mariana López, "Playing the Sonic Past: Reflections on Sound in Medieval-Themed Video Games", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 68; Liam McLeod, "Subverting the Valiant Crusader: The Sarafan in the Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver Series", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 108.

12 Houghton, "Playing the Middle Ages", 3.

13 Houghton, 3.

isolated and siloed work, and indeed opens *The Middle Ages in Computer Games* (and much of its marketing) with the statement that "we need to talk about the Middle Ages in computer games"[14]. This statement's emphatic urgency implies that this topic is not currently being talked about, clearly with the intention of prompting more "big picture" analysis in a space largely dominated by case studies and genre-specific studies. However, it still feels a little at odds with the very thorough literature review that Houghton effectively and generously weaves throughout his introductions and his continual re-assertion of the substantial existing work on these topics. Houghton is suggesting that this need is specifically for discussions about medievalist games as unique products of the intersection of "the medium of digital games and popular medievalism" in such a way that sets them aside from other historical games and other forms of medievalism[15]. Indeed, Houghton argues

14 Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games*, 1.they can engage their players in a manner that is not only different, but in certain aspects, more profound than traditional literary or cinematic forms of medievalism. However, although it is important to understand the versions of the Middle Ages presented by these games, how players engage with these medievalist worlds, and why particular representational trends emerge in this most modern medium, there has hitherto been little scholarship devoted to them.This book explores the distinct nature of medievalism in digital games across a range of themes, from the portrayal of grotesque yet romantic conflict to conflicting depictions of the Church and religion. It likewise considers the distinctions between medievalist games and those of other periods, underlining their emphasis on fantasy, roleplay and hardcore elements, and their consequences for depictions of morality, race, gender and sexuality. Ultimately the book argues that while medievalist games are thoroughly influenced by medievalist and ludic tropes, they are nonetheless representative of a distinct new form of medievalism. It engages with the vast literature surrounding historical game studies, game design, and medievalism, and considers hundreds of games from across genres, from Assassin's Creed and Baldur's Gate to Crusader Kings and The Witcher series. In doing so, it provides a vital illustration of the state of the field and a cornerstone for future research and teaching","collection-number":"28","collection-title":"Medievalism","ISBN":"978-1-80543-449-8","language":"eng","note":"DOI: 10.1515/9781805434498","publisher":"D.S. Brewer","title":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism","title-short":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games","author":[{"family":"Houghton","given":"Robert"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2024"]]},"locator":"1","label":"page"}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

15 Houghton, 7.they can engage their players in a manner that is not only different, but in certain aspects, more profound than traditional literary or cinematic forms of medievalism. However, although it is important to understand the versions of the Middle Ages presented by these games, how players engage with these medievalist worlds, and why particular representational trends emerge in this most modern medium, there has hitherto been little scholarship devoted to them.This book explores the distinct nature of medievalism in digital games across a range of themes, from the portrayal of grotesque yet romantic conflict to conflicting depictions of the Church and religion. It likewise considers the distinctions between medievalist games and those of other periods, underlining their emphasis on fantasy, roleplay and hardcore elements, and their consequences for depictions of morality, race,

that "ultimately, we need to look at medievalist games in the context of neighbouring fields, but also as part of a distinct media which forms a field in its own right"[16]. While the goal of a distinct and cohesive field theoretically opens up productive discussions about future research, this volume itself shows some of its challenges in practice.

The first tension is in the scope of the "distinct media" of "games" in this so-called field. The titles of the introductions to this volume and Houghton's monograph have a singular notable difference that neatly highlights this issue: "The Middle Ages in Computer Games" and "The Middle Ages in Modern Games". The terminology and scope of what is meant by "games" is challengingly slippery throughout scholarship in this area, with the term "games" often used in contexts that seem

gender and sexuality. Ultimately the book argues that while medievalist games are thoroughly influenced by medievalist and ludic tropes, they are nonetheless representative of a distinct new form of medievalism. It engages with the vast literature surrounding historical game studies, game design, and medievalism, and considers hundreds of games from across genres, from Assassin's Creed and Baldur's Gate to Crusader Kings and The Witcher series. In doing so, it provides a vital illustration of the state of the field and a cornerstone for future research and teaching","collection-number":"28","collection-title":"Medievalism","ISBN":"978-1-80543-449-8","language":"eng","note":"DOI: 10.1515/9781805434498","publisher":"D.S. Brewer","title":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism","title-short":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games","author":[{"family":"Houghton","given":"Robert"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2024"]]},"locator":"7","label":"page"}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

16 Houghton, 3.they can engage their players in a manner that is not only different, but in certain aspects, more profound than traditional literary or cinematic forms of medievalism. However, although it is important to understand the versions of the Middle Ages presented by these games, how players engage with these medievalist worlds, and why particular representational trends emerge in this most modern medium, there has hitherto been little scholarship devoted to them.This book explores the distinct nature of medievalism in digital games across a range of themes, from the portrayal of grotesque yet romantic conflict to conflicting depictions of the Church and religion. It likewise considers the distinctions between medievalist games and those of other periods, underlining their emphasis on fantasy, roleplay and hardcore elements, and their consequences for depictions of morality, race, gender and sexuality. Ultimately the book argues that while medievalist games are thoroughly influenced by medievalist and ludic tropes, they are nonetheless representative of a distinct new form of medievalism. It engages with the vast literature surrounding historical game studies, game design, and medievalism, and considers hundreds of games from across genres, from Assassin's Creed and Baldur's Gate to Crusader Kings and The Witcher series. In doing so, it provides a vital illustration of the state of the field and a cornerstone for future research and teaching","collection-number":"28","collection-title":"Medievalism","ISBN":"978-1-80543-449-8","language":"eng","note":"DOI: 10.1515/9781805434498","publisher":"D.S. Brewer","title":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism","title-short":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games","author":[{"family":"Houghton","given":"Robert"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2024"]]},"locator":"3","label":"page"}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

to functionally be referring specifically to digital games, in contrast to other instances where "computer games" are specified in broad field-defining claims that sometimes seem to forget about analogue games like boardgames or tabletop roleplay games. Dunstan Lowe's review of *Playing the Middle Ages* suggested that consensus on the terminology of "Middle Ages, Medieval and Medievalism" would be a crucial next step, but these definitions have been contested in medieval studies for quite some time and, on the whole, their varied uses don't seem to prevent nuanced analysis and sometimes may even prompt deeper reflexivity[17]. The varied uses of these terms have less of an impact on the scope of the field than its other key term, games, within which the relative positioning of analogue and digital games, and their respective development histories, fundamentally shapes any potential analysis. This is not to say that Houghton is dismissive of analogue games or their study – rather he specifically argues for their equal significance in this volume's introduction, and has included multiple chapters that focus exclusively on analogue games in this volume itself[18]. This scope question is a widespread underlying issue not just for historical game studies but often in game studies generally, and it would be unreasonable to expect a volume like this to resolve it. However, this issue needed deeper discussion here given the seemingly contradictory specificity of the argument in this volume and in *The Middle Ages in Computer Games* that video games are defined by their unique intersection of *digital* gaming with medievalism. Is this cohesive field one that includes all formats of games, or are analogue games instead one of the various neighbouring fields that we must consider?

This speaks then to the issue of disciplines. In this both introductions, Houghton emphasises the importance of the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of scholars working in this space, and clearly establishes

17 Dunstan Lowe, "Review: Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games", *Game Studies* 24, n.º 2 (2024).

18 Houghton, "Playing the Middle Ages", 2; Adam Bierstedt, "Making Friendships, Breaking Friendships: Exploring Viking-Age Social Roles Through Player Strategy in A Feast for Odin", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 131–48; Gordon Smith, "All on Board for the Crusades", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 89–102.

that "any consideration of the Middle Ages in computer games must consider the body of literature around historical games more broadly"[19]. In summarising the contributions to the *Playing the Middle Ages* volume, Houghton describes compiling "work from a range of disciplines and from industry around several key emergent areas of study", which is born out even in the first two chapters that are authored (respectively) by Ylva Grufstedt, who works in general on the concept of counterfactual history in games, and Mariana Lopez, whose work on medieval soundscapes is one aspect of broader research in sound production and sonic art[20]. While it is certainly a significant problem that scholars from interdisciplinary backgrounds are often reinventing the wheel with regard to fundamental issues, it is not clear here how that would be effectively resolved through attempts to differentiate ludic medievalism as a discrete or distinct field. Rather, this in itself seems to have the inverse potential to re-establish boundaries between disciplines that would further "silo" off medieval historical games from the work on intersecting themes and trends. Calling for field cohesion is framed as a way to improve the issue of interdisciplinarity "mean[ing] that we have a tendency to come to the field with limited knowledge of

19 Houghton, *The Middle Ages in Computer Games*, 14.they can engage their players in a manner that is not only different, but in certain aspects, more profound than traditional literary or cinematic forms of medievalism. However, although it is important to understand the versions of the Middle Ages presented by these games, how players engage with these medievalist worlds, and why particular representational trends emerge in this most modern medium, there has hitherto been little scholarship devoted to them.This book explores the distinct nature of medievalism in digital games across a range of themes, from the portrayal of grotesque yet romantic conflict to conflicting depictions of the Church and religion. It likewise considers the distinctions between medievalist games and those of other periods, underlining their emphasis on fantasy, roleplay and hardcore elements, and their consequences for depictions of morality, race, gender and sexuality. Ultimately the book argues that while medievalist games are thoroughly influenced by medievalist and ludic tropes, they are nonetheless representative of a distinct new form of medievalism. It engages with the vast literature surrounding historical game studies, game design, and medievalism, and considers hundreds of games from across genres, from Assassin's Creed and Baldur's Gate to Crusader Kings and The Witcher series. In doing so, it provides a vital illustration of the state of the field and a cornerstone for future research and teaching","collection-number":"28","collection-title":"Medievalism","ISBN":"978-1-80543-449-8","language":"eng","note":"DOI: 10.1515/9781805434498","publisher":"D.S. Brewer","title":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism","title-short":"The Middle Ages in Computer Games","author":[{"family":"Houghton","given":"Robert"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2024"]]},"locator":"14","label":"page"}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

20 Ylva Grufstedt, "Unbending Medievalisms: Finding Counterfactual History in Sandbox Games Set in the Middle Ages", in *Playing the Middle Ages*, 29–50; López, "Playing the Sonic Past".

its breadth and historiographical trends", but that intellectual project of the book feels disconnected from the somewhat inconsistent cohesion between the chapters curated here.

While some chapters present thematic analysis that resonates with this concept, many are entirely case study focused and some do not feel grounded the kind of understanding of relevant scholarship that this very book calls for[21]. For example, one chapter published here has no endnote citations, and only a singular bibliography entry to a 2004 Espen Aarseth book chapter, which seems in stark contrast to Houghton's own thorough citation practices and like an example of scholars potentially talking past one another[22]. Another example is Markus Eldegard Mindrebø's chapter on "gender", which begins by distancing itself from research in game studies on "the link between representation and identification", cursorily citing Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* as an example, from the chapter's stated aim to highlight connections between female non-player characters in fantasy CRPGs and the gender archetypes of thirteenth century Old Norse-Icelandic sagas[23]. However, most of the substantive claims therein are then not isolated to comparison with medieval saga texts, or even to medievalism, such as the statement that "the image of the masculine woman in fantasy games serves as deliberate female inclusion in a male-dominated narrative space", made without any references to the extensive body of literature on gender balance in game texts and the industry. Mindrebø's chapter also does not cite or use any of the existing scholarship on medievalism or gender roles in *The Elder Scrolls* or *The Witcher*, which are two of the most examined texts of the genre. This is not to suggest that any scholarship can ever be across all possible interconnected literature, or that these chapters don't still offer a range of useful and valuable

21 For example, the nuanced analysis and informed citation patterns that support the chapter by Bierstedt, "Subverting the Valiant Crusader".

22 Smith, "All on Board".

23 Markus Eldegard Mindrebø, "Representations of Medieval Gender Archetypes in Fantasy Role-Playing Games", in *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games*, ed. Robert Houghton, New Directions in Medieval Studies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 211–26.

insights. These potential missed opportunities for deeper grounding in the existing scholarship only feel so notable because they are presented in the context of the volume's own framing advice warning against repeated reinvention due to surface level engagement with the field.

These tensions are reflective of longer running challenges in the study of historical games as to where these field/s should be nestled – should historical game studies fall under history or game studies? Does medievalism in games constitute a branch of medievalism or a branch of historical game studies? Or of game studies? Or all the above? The same questions can be asked of other themes – should the study of gender in historical games be considered part of the field of history, game studies, or gender studies? Many other interdisciplinary areas of research face similar challenges. Regardless of how these tensions are traversed in coming years, this volume is demonstrative of the continued importance of studying history in games, the Middle Ages in modern games, and the Middle Ages in modern games *in* history in games, as Houghton recently guest chaired the *Historical Game Network* theme of "medievalism", which was the first to focus on a specific period of history, rather than thematic concept like education or environment. It will certainly be interesting to see how this adolescence (or adolescents perhaps, if considering other subfields) matures over its next decade.

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