

Historical consultants in the CEE video game industry. Part 1: good and bad practices

Konsultanci historyczni w branży gier wideo w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Część 1: dobre i złe praktyki

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Abstract: This is the second paper from the *Historical Consultancy for Games* project run by Games Research Association of Poland with grant funding from Centre for the Development of Creative Industries in Poland. It is based on an online survey among 16 professionals, who worked on video games either as historical consultants, or as developers who collaborated with historical consultants. Due to the regional focus on Central and Eastern Europe, the survey includes respondents who worked for game studios in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Serbia. This paper collects and comments on opinions on the strong and weak points of historical game consulting, as well as on examples of good and bad practices reported from the interviewees' own experiences or noticed on the market.

Keywords: historical games, game studies, game production, history, heritage, consulting

Homo Ludens 1(17) / 2024 | ISSN 2080-4555 | Published by: Adam Mickiewicz University and Polskie Towarzystwo Badania Gier | Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the CC licence (BY-NC-ND, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

DOI: 10.14746/HL.2024.17.2 | received: 20.10.2024 | revision: 01.11.2024 | accepted: 11.11.2024

Informacja o finansowaniu

Tekst jest efektem Zadania nr 1.2 w projekcie badawczym Polskiego Towarzystwa Badania Gier pt. *Konsulting historyczny gier – rozpoznanie potrzeb i stworzenie rozwiązań dla rozwoju nowej specjalizacji kreatywnej*. Projekt dofinansowano ze środków Ministra Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego w ramach programu własnego Centrum Rozwoju Przemysłów Kreatywnych w programie *Rozwój Sektorów Kreatywnych*.

Funding

This text stems from Task 1.2 in the research project titled *Historical Consultancy for Games: Needs Analysis and Solution-Building for the New Creative Specialisation*, carried out by the Games Research Association of Poland. Co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in the funding scheme *Development of Creative Sectors* from the Centre for the Development of Creative Industries.



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1. Introduction

As we established in our preliminary research (see our previous paper in this collection: *Historical Consulting for Digital Games: From General Reflections to CEE Game Industries*), historical consultancy for video games in the CEE region is first and foremost conducted by academic experts: historians, archaeologists, art/architecture historians, etc. Almost as popular as academics are self-educated expert enthusiasts, such as historical reenactors. In the special case of wargaming, the historical expert is usually understood as a technical-historical specialist in military technology. Less frequently, game studios rely on consulting with living witnesses of history (the low frequency is not surprising, as living witnesses may cover only the most recent history, whereas games reach centuries back into the past). Finally, another infrequent category of historical consultant are school teachers of history.

When it comes to hiring practices, full-time jobs for in-house historians are very rare occurrences. Most of the time, consultants are hired temporarily for a particular project. The collaboration may be based on a contract between the game studio and the individual expert, but it may also happen via an institutional partnership with a university, museum, research center, etc. Another popular model of securing historical consultancy is hiring staff with dual skill sets: ones who can do historical research and act as consultants for the team, but at the same time do other productive work as a game designer, writer, narrative designer, artist, or other.

In this paper, we wish to focus on the details of doing histgameconsultancy: its aims and generated value, its weaknesses and oft-reported problems, and its good and bad practices – in particular, as they are reported by our respondents from the CEE region. Besides introduction and conclusion, this text has four sections. Firstly, we present basic information on the method of data collection and on the respondents. Then, each section follows one of the core questions from the survey: the benefits, the weaknesses, and the good and bad examples of histgameconsulting.

2. Methods and respondents

This research was preceded by a preliminary survey with national game developers organisations in eight CEE countries, in which we asked for the names of most important historical games and game companies from that nation. We also asked for the names of individual historical consultants – or developers who worked with consultants – whom we could invite to the next stage of the survey. About 50% of the respondents, whose views inform the hereby presented paper, have been invited to those recommendations. Others were recruited from our personal networks of contacts. They are:

- Ihor Timoshenko (Starni Games), a Ukrainian game developer, who worked with historical consultants in various roles (designer, producer, programmer, company owner); games he worked on include the *Strategic Mind* series, *Headquarters: World War II*, and *Ukraine War Stories*;
- Joanna Nowak (Warhorse Studios), a Polish historical consultant, who worked on the Czech game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* and is working on *Kingdom Come 2*;
- Peter Adamčík (3DIVISION), a Slovak game developer, who does historical research in conjunction with his game design responsibilities; he worked on the *Air Conflicts* series and *Workers & Resources: Soviet Republic*;
- Branislav Guláš (Centurion Developments), a Slovak game developer, who worked with historical consultants on *World War 2*;
- Jacek Komuda (OddInn, Chronospace), a Polish historian, writer and game designer, who worked as consultant and/or designer on various Poland-made games set (mostly) in medieval Europe or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, including *Hellish Quart*, *Gloria Victis* MMORPG, and *Lotnicy*;
- Michał Gembicki (Klabater SA, Chimera Entertainment GmbH), a Polish game producer, who worked at various marketing, publishing and production positions for Polish and international publishers; he worked with historical consultants on *We: The Revolution*, *Help Will Come Tomorrow*, *Apocalipsis: Harry at the End of the World*, *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword*, and *Inspector Schmidt: A Bavarian Tale*;

- Jiří Hoppe (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague), a Czech historian, who worked as a consultant and designer for the Czech-made games *Attentat 1942* and *Svoboda 1945*;
- Helen Carmichael (Grey Alien Games), a UK-based historical consultant, who worked for the Serbia-based company Foxy Voxel on *Going Medieval* (and also in the UK on: *Regency Solitaire*, *Regency Solitaire II*, and *Shadowhand*);
- William Stanowski (formerly: Symulacje Historyczne), a Polish game developer, who worked with historical consultants on the unfinished Poland-made project *Duma szlachecka* MMO.
- Beata Krzywdzińska (Slavic Magic), a Polish artist working with historical consultants on the highly successful Polish game *Manor Lords*;
- Jo Hedwig Teeuwisse (Historical Consultancy 30-45), a Netherlands-based historian-consultant, who worked on the Poland-made game *Manor Lords*, and on *Anne Frank House VR* for a Dutch museum (after decades of experience in consulting for film and TV).

Five respondents asked for their identity to remain hidden from the public:

- ANON-1 (male), an anonymous Polish indie game developer, who worked with a historical consultant on two Poland-made historical/archaeological games;
- ANON-2 (male), an anonymous Ukrainian specialist in localisation and narrative design, who worked as a historical consultant on one game made in Ukraine;
- ANON-3 (male), an anonymous Belarusian 3D game artist with an experience in historical reenactment, who worked as a historical consultant on one game made in Belarus;
- ANON-4 (female), an anonymous Polish game designer and developer, who worked with historical consultants on a WW2-themed game and on a prehistory-themed one;
- ANON-5 (male), an anonymous Polish historian and nondigital game designer, who worked as a historical consultant on one strategic video game and one mobile app (not counting several nondigital narrative projects).

They all received an online questionnaire via Google Forms, which they filled in in June or July 2024. In addition to questions about their name, company, and prior experience, we posed 6 open questions, which constitute the core of the survey. Of those 3 questions are discussed in this paper:

1. What are the benefits of having a historical consultant for the game?
2. What part of historical consultancy work can be a waste of time?
3. Could you write a few examples of best and worst cases of/in historical consultancy that others could learn from?

Due to limited word count, we deal with the next 3 questions in a separate paper – *Historical Consultants in the CEE Video Game Industry. Part 2: Competence Building*. Those questions are:

4. What would you advise to yourself in the past at the start of your historical consultancy career (if relevant)?
5. What specific tools (templates, software, creative techniques, etc.), methods, skills should expert historians learn in order to be efficient and productive partners to game developers?
6. If a university curriculum for a degree in history were to include courses in historical game consultancy, what should it focus on?

Even though we originally planned to cover all 6 in one paper, this division is easily defensible on the merits of different content. The first 3 are evaluative in nature: they ask about benefits and losses, or good and bad practices in making historical games. The other 3 focus on skills, competences, learned experience, and prospects for formal education of historical consultants. They naturally break down into two parts with different foci: 1-3 are about the impact of historical consultancy on game development, and 4-6 are about competence-building in histgameconsultancy.

3. Why historical consultants are useful

In a way, the question about the benefits of histgameconsulting may simply be answered with the list of tasks and responsibilities typically assigned to them. Whatever they are tasked with is supposed to bring benefits to the project. Collewijn (2015) lists three main tasks: collecting historical information for the team; teaching the dev team how to conduct

their own research; and writing content for the web (p. 46). Today, thanks to GRAP's research project, we can extend the list and elaborate on these points.

Needless to say, providing the dev team with reliable historical information is the primary task of the consultant. The delivery of this information takes various forms, and is often directly dependent on the stage of the game's development process:

- a. In the early stage, consultants are often brought in to provide a general introduction for the dev team to the historical period; this may be done in the form of lectures (see ANON-4 in Table 1) or guided tours to historical sites (e.g. Lavelle, as cit. in: Burrows, 2021; Wald, 2022).
- b. in the early and middle stage, consultants provide the team with specific reference materials: factual and biographical information, technical data, charts and models with figures, and visual references; this is commonly reported as one of the main duties of the consultant (e.g. Kotzer, 2014; Saga, 2015; RBARTRA, 2019; Nowak in DrFusselpulli, 2017; as well as the same Nowak and many of our interviewees quoted in Table 1 (below).
- c. also in the early and middle stage - if the consultant is a weapons expert, or historical martial arts practitioner, or reenactor, or experimental archaeologist, the consultancy typically includes practical demonstrations, workshops and practice for the dev team (Vávra, 2018; Ruatta, as cit. in: Reinhard, 2019);
- d. throughout the process, consultants respond to the team's questions about specific details; this often involves lengthy exchanges of emails.

Interestingly, alongside primary sources and academic knowledge, consultants may use popular media and historical fiction as illustration and inspiration. For instance, Maxine Durand used "a mix of dry documentaries and blockbuster action flicks" working as Team Historian for Ubisoft (Plante, 2012).

Historical research and adaptation of historical sources is commonly done by many members of the dev team. The artist will search for visual references, the writer will search for diaries and documents from the period, etc. Therefore, a historical consultant, being an expert researcher,

may be asked to instruct the dev team how to do efficient research (e.g. Durand, as quoted in Collewijn, 2015, p. 29; Navarro, as cit. in: Saga, 2015). For instance, (s)he may teach:

- a. how to find, evaluate, and select reliable information in published sources;
- b. how to find and use resources available in archives, museums, collections, heritage sites, and other venues;

In addition, the consultant may help in establishing partnerships between the game studio and academic or heritage institutions, in which further historical consultancy provided by the institution may be part of the deal. Such was the case of *Valiant Hearts* (see Collewijn, 2015, p. 27; Kempshall, 2019, p. 11). Šisler speculates that without university experts on the team it might have been difficult to get high-profile academic institutions on board for a video game project (2020, p. 214).

Another key task of the consultant is validation and feedback to materials created by the dev team in order to check for errors and inaccuracies. Typically, this involves:

- a. proofreading and correcting the script: dialogues, character behaviour, scenarios;
- b. reviewing the visual details of costumes, architecture, vehicles, landscapes, etc.;
- c. playtesting and analysis of gameplay and mechanics to assess its accuracy as simulation of the past.

This duty is reported by nearly all who write about the nature of hist-gameconsulting, including our informants (see Table 1 and Table 3).

Oftentimes, consultants take a more productive role in game development: as story writers, narrative designers, game designers, artists, etc.. This may happen in two ways. Apparently, it much more commonly begins with a role in game development: a designer, writer, creative director etc., who is knowledgeable or interested in history (or sometimes happens to be a historian, as Josh Sawyer on the *Pentiment's* team; see Loroff, 2024), adopts the extra role as historical consultant for the team. Other times, an academic expert hired primarily for his/her expertise in history, archaeology, or ancient mythology is offered an active role in game development, an example being Maciej Paprocki, a consultant and story writer for *Apotheon* (see Paprocki, 2020). Bazile (2022) formulated

design principles for historians making historiographic games, and other scholars are known to follow them (e.g. Reid, 2024).

An increasingly important responsibility of the consultant is alerting the team to risks and controversies around difficult (e.g. traumatic, or politically contested) historical topics, as well as pointing out biases and stereotypes in representations of minority cultures, etc. For *Assassin's Creed III*, in which consultants took effort to respectfully represent Native Americans (see e.g. Bazile, 2021, p. 154), the consulting team included both “professors and Kanien’kéha consultants” (Durand, as cit. in: That Shelf Staff, 2012). Gembicki and Nowak mention this issue in Table 1.

Finally, historical consultants are often tasked with writing educational materials for in-game encyclopaedias and/or other web content published on the game’s website and/or social media. In addition to classic educational texts or presentations retelling pieces of history, sometimes the consultants create ‘behind-the-scenes’ content revealing the process of historical research and consultancy that informed the project, and discussing design decisions taken with regard to historical accuracy and authenticity (as is the case with the Discovery Tour mode in *Assassin's Creed*; see Durand, Éthier, Lefrançois, 2018; Hiriart, 2024, p. 145).

Table 1. Benefits of histgameconsulting

Q: What are the benefits of having a historical consultant for the game?

If the game does require a lot of historical authenticity there are hundreds of details most people on dev team have no idea about, unless they happened to research the topic as a hobby before, and do extensive research during the development process. And even then, often there is no spare time for very detailed research (Timoshenko).

People [...] often pay attention to such nuances as the plausibility of architecture, clothing, weapons and armour, and so on. This is a separate category of players for whom it is important [...] The artists and graphic designers who work on such projects are often not as involved in the history as specialists and may substitute objects that seem similar to them but have no connection to the actual history (ANON-3).

Game is more consistent, believable, logical in its scenario and environment. Moreover, historians select information and at least give a warning about information coming from a source that is not backed with facts. Hopefully, it also inspires others to understand some of our cultural stereotypes and makes some myths vanish (Nowak).

Benefit would be to save time, and to have better accuracy (Adamčík).

Google offers a lot of answers these days. But some of them are just incorrect. And that's where the consultant steps in. He tells us if this information is correct or not (Guláš).

I have learned how to improve game scenarios to ensure they are historically accurate. And at the same time that they are not too difficult for the player (Komuda).

Historical consultants foremost can provide research, listing sources both written and visual necessary for recreation of historical background. Some other benefits listed below:

- ensure that the game's depiction of historical events, settings, and characters is accurate and authentic, enhancing the player's immersion and increasing credibility of the game in the eyes of the audience;
- provide historical context and details that can be woven into the game's narrative, making the story more compelling and engaging on all layers – visual, text, gameplay mechanics;
- add an educational dimension to the game, allowing players to learn about historical periods, cultures, and events in an entertaining way, often by inspiring the dev team to explore the period's details;
- help to prevent the inclusion of elements that do not fit the chosen historical period, such as inappropriate technology, language, or clothing, maintaining the integrity of the game's world;
- ensures respectful and accurate representation of different cultures and historical figures, reducing the risk of offending players from various cultures (Gembicki).

Cooperation in a relatively large team and getting to know interesting people, collaboration with IT specialists, didacticians and professors from the university, thinking about a topic from different perspectives, study of unusual literature and sources (Hoppe).

In the case of games by my own studio (*Regency Solitaire*, *Regency Solitaire II*, *Shadowhand*) we were setting stories in two real historical time periods in the UK. Historical research into fashion, language use, customs, politics, food, etc. helped us to create believable and coherent game worlds and stories for our games.

In the case of *Going Medieval*, I was working as a writer and sometimes design consultant for a team based in Serbia (Foxy Voxel), which wanted to make a game set in an alternate UK medieval history. They had strong ideas, but needed the additional culturally-rich information from a person who was familiar with UK medieval history and language, in addition to writing and editing support (Carmichael).

We organized a set of lectures, conducted by an academic specialist in this time period. Those lectures were a big source of inspiration for the team, both in terms of understanding the life of those early humans (and translating it to game play), and for building a visual library for the art team, with actual photos of artifacts for the period.

- We also show elements of the game to the consultants to get their opinions and for them to spot missed interesting opportunities coming from that setting.
- We asked them to prepare documents for us with facts, pictures etc. that we could check while developing. We also sent them a set of questions about the period that they answered for us.

I think those 3 things benefited the development process and the team (ANON-4).

1) Some of players appreciate historical details. 2) The game was noticed by several institutions, which hadn't focused on gaming before (Stanowski).

First and foremost, it's historical accuracy, which can drive immersion and deepen the connection between the player and the world the player is presented with.

[...] What a HC can bring to the table is credibility. Without a HC, the developer might make a mistake of following some misconception or commonly believed myth. Some simplifications are understandable but sometimes the final product will lose on perceived value if it turns out it contains glaring historical mistakes [...]

added educational value – players can learn historical facts without even realizing it, for example by completing in-game objectives, or by actively choosing to learn more.

[...] simply having a Historical Consultant in your game's credits can make a difference in how the game is perceived – no matter how big the developer team is, knowing that someone took time to make sure the setting is more historically accurate can make a huge impact on the audience (ANON-1).

he or she helps ensure that the historical elements in the game are consistent with the facts and realities of the era. This makes the game world more authentic and believable to players. [...]

Deepening the storyline – a consultant can provide details and historical context that will enrich the game's plot and make it more complex and interesting. [...]

Educational value – games with accurate historical elements can perform an educational function, teaching players about the history, geography or culture of the period in an attractive way. This increases the affordability of the game for fans of the period, and provides an alibi for purchasing the game for some potential players. In some cases, it makes it possible to apply for grant support for the project.

Support in creating a coherent world [...], taking into account the social, economic and political realities of the era (ANON-5).

The main benefit is that you don't have to worry about whether something is historically accurate or not. You can focus on your work, which in my case is creating illustrations or concepts. A historical consultant greatly facilitates and speeds up the work process by verifying the authenticity of your research (unfortunately, finding accurate information or images on the internet can be misleading). A historical consultant allows for quick corrections to the work to avoid making historical errors blindly. They help prevent significant mistakes during the game's production stage. Thanks to a historical consultant, we have the guarantee of player satisfaction and no disappointment in the game's reception (Krzywdzińska).

It makes the game more historically accurate or at least gives the developer the facts and knowledge about the past that they can then either implement or ignore, whatever is best for the game, but at least they have the information to do it accurately if they want to. Gamers are smart, they know how to do research, they are demanding and want historical games to make sense and be authentic, getting consultants involved can help developers avoid silly mistakes and it can help them make the game better (Teeuwisse).

To faithfully recreate a historical setting, flesh it out with details that players can appreciate, and ultimately create a stronger player fantasy. Simply put, well-grounded and well-informed fiction sells better because, like any consumers, players appreciate quality.

The disadvantages of NOT hiring a historical consultant for a game are even more important. Poorly researched or tone-deaf material can lead to negative reviews, public outcry and bad PR, or sometimes ruin a team's reputation. (ANON-2)

4. Weaknesses and issues with histgameconsulting

The most commonly reported problem is “going too deep” or “overdoing” historical consultancy, i.e. trying to put too much detailed knowledge into the game (ANON-3, ANON-4, Adamčík, Guláš in Table 2). On the other hand, Carmichael states that the fact that some researched material does not make it into the final version of the game is a normal part of game development (Table 2). Gembicki, Teeuwisse and Krzywdzińska (also in Table 2) go as far as to claim that no time spent on historical consultancy is wasted.

One of recurring problems is not listening to historical consultants. It happens when the company hires a consultant only to use his/her name and authority for marketing value (Metzger, Paxton, 2016, p. 21; Schwarz, 2020, p. 129), without the intention of actually using his/her advice (see ANON-5 in Table 2). The underappreciation of expert consultants might perhaps been a factor in the case of broken contract and unpaid work reported by ANON-5 in Table 4 (see below).

Two issues reported by our interviewees can be classified as general concerns of the historian's trade, which can be raised in any kind of historiography. ANON-2 warns against relying entirely on an academic historian without a cultural (indigenous) consultant in matters concerning a minority culture and heritage (see Table 2). Nowak, in turn, warns against the ill-advised ambition to try and arrive at 100% truth, or find the one right answer (Table 2).

It is worth noting that the latter issue – how to use video games to convey the contested and interpretative nature of history/historiography as opposed to a simple transmission of seemingly objective historical narratives – has been of particular interest to academic historians for many years, from Uricchio (2005, p. 336) to Spring (2015, p. 2) and Chapman (2016, p. 280) to Bazile (2022), Šisler et al. (2023, p. 72) and Reid (2024). At least two PhD theses were devoted to the exploration of this question: *The Potential of Video Games for Exploring Deconstructionist History* (Martínez, 2019) and *Opération historiographique et game design de jeu vidéo* (Bazile, 2021).

What truly is game-specific, and emerges as the greatest difficulty in collaboration between academic experts and game developers, is incompatibility in the way of exchanging ideas. Scholarly experts are used to linear transmission of knowledge via lectures and detailed text-based

publications. As a result, game developers often complain that materials delivered by consulting experts are unusable. A perfect and witty summary of this problem can be found in Copplestone in a passage quoted directly from an anonymous interviewee:

We consulted an archaeologist as part of our development process [...]. We would ask what we thought was a simple question and get an essay for an answer, or an answer that simply would not work in a game. I guess the problem was that we didn't speak "history" and she didn't speak "game" so we kind of just talked past each other and missed out on what the other was wanting and saying (2017a, p. 13).

Among our interviewees, we see the problem of experts "not speaking game" reported by Timoshenko and ANON-1 (in Table 2) and Komuda (in Table 4), whereas Nowak and Komuda (in Table 2) mention issues with developers "not speaking history".

Can this problem be prevented? In her other paper, Copplestone (2017b) reflects on her own experience in the context of such interviews, revealing how she – an archaeologist – struggled with this challenge. We continue this thread in our next publication in this collection.

Table 2. Problems of/in histgameconsulting

Q: What part of historical consultancy work can be a waste of time?

The main problems with external consultant are:

1. Most historians with relevant knowledge have little to non-existent understanding of computer games and game development processes. So, in a situation, where historical facts or other data needs to be presented in the game in a specific way they have no idea how to present it and may provide ideas/suggestions that would not work in the development process for a variety of reasons, and will end up discarded.
2. They are usually consultations in early stages of development or review the almost ready game to avoid obvious blunders, but usually, you would not expect them to be available on a daily basis. Yet, usually, there are hundreds of minor details or potential mistakes that the team can run into on a daily basis. So, it is very important to have someone well-versed in the historical period on the main team – so they can keep an eye on what is going on and fix any inaccuracies. It is hard or costly to expect that level of involvement from an external expert.

A couple of examples:

A. During the marketing campaign for *Strategic Mind: The Pacific* – we post a USA carrier vessel image, that the artist mirrored in Photoshop "to look better" before posting. We immediately were hit with a lot of people saying that the "isle" is on the wrong side of the ship, despite it being a correct model in game.

B. In *Headquarters: World War II* we were researching historical awards for the game and had a German award for being wounded in the game. However, the mistake that we noticed a few months before release and fixed, was that instead of a common award we had a special limited edition version that was awarded only to the people wounded in the explosion of the Hitler assassination attempt. So, we corrected that and changed it to the regular version.

There are lots of situations like that which could happen any time any day. So, it is important to not only rely on external experts, but also have some level of expertise internally, even if it's not as comprehensive.

Alternatively, a bigger team could go for a full-time consultant – that would have been ideal, if they have the resources for that (Timoshenko).

An in-depth study of those nuances that ultimately will not be visible or understandable to the end consumer without special education, even if this consumer is interested in history. The task of the developers, in collaboration with a historical consultant, is to create a plausible picture, and not a scientific study (ANON-3).

Looking for one, straight answer. Or 100% truth (Nowak).

When too detailed [...], from my point of view it is more important to maintain playability over historic accuracy [...], however it may depend on the game, when unique selling point is historic accuracy, then this is a different story, but for regular game, is important game have just some basic accuracy, however some in some details it may be inaccurate as normal 99.9% of players not know the exact history (Adamčík).

If it goes too deep too much. There must be a balance kept in videogames. You must decide what is useful and what is not. Because you want to make the game historically correct, but it must be fun at the same time. So going deep too much is always a waste of time, because it can't be used in a game anyway (Guláš).

Improving poorly written computer game scripts. If the script of a historical game was written by a person who has no idea about historical realities and is not a good designer/scriptwriter, there is no point in correcting such a script. It is better to throw it in the trash right away (Komuda).

The more work is spent on historical consultancy the better, I would have issues in identifying any of that time as wasted. A lot is dependent on how deeply the game needs to be "historical" accurate, if the chosen theme is just "light" then definitely there shouldn't be too much time spent on research and source analysis, and consultant should just focus on a proper implementation and perhaps provide audience with a context of placing game setting or characters in a proper historical background. If history is a main feature of a game and its audience is defined as history geeks, then every hour spent on work with a history consultant is precious and shouldn't be a subject of economisation (Gembicki).

We tried to figure out the story of the game throughout the whole team. This proved impossible because everyone approached the solution from a different direction. It paid off to divide the team into specialized groups that passed the work around (Hoppe).

Some researched detail will not find its way into the final game. However, this is a normal part of design/pre-production, so I would not call it a waste of time (Carmichael).

Not setting the role of the consultancy clear. Sometimes people can get stuck on trying to have everything right in a game that is not a historical game, but a game inspired by given times. Also not stating clearly if something is an educational historic game, or an entertainment historic game, those understatement may be a source of conflict and wasted time.

I think it boils down to clearly stating if the Consultant is a source of inspiration or a fact checking person (ANON-4).

- 1) Some graphic details, which are historically important, but may damage gameplay.
- 2) Relationships between historical figures – players usually do not care about historical issues.
- 3) Historical language (Stanowski).

Anything that comes from miscommunication and it works in both ways: a HC not knowing exactly what they are expected to do will probably waste time trying their best to pass on as much information as they think is necessary. On the other hand, not knowing about certain aspects of the game the HC will be unable to correct the developer, which might lead to a lacklustre product or a waste of time to fix any mistakes after it has been implemented – and possibly deeply rooted – in the game.

Overdoing historical accuracy could also be harmful. Too much information presented to the player with little to no context/relevance to the gameplay can lead to undesired effects: it will not only “stand out” from the experience, but also most likely be ignored by the player. A good HC needs to remember that they are helping out with a video game, not a thesis – there are and will be aspects that are inaccurate or just ignored. The important thing is to achieve a certain balance between historical accuracy and interesting gameplay (ANON-1).

Some game developers don't want the help of a historical consultant. They want an alibi for his existence. Realistically implementing his comments requires too much effort or would require too many changes to their project. Or, delegated to a particular project by their bosses, they feel that they know better and the consultant is ballast on their heads. And at the same time, they expect the consultant to be their alibi and a fig leaf for what they create. It's not worth pushing into it, because it's all too easy to get splashed with mud.

Some clients know better, in their opinion anyway. Unless they are pressured by Social Security contributions and rent, it's better to leave them to their own devices (ANON-5).

It depends on the game designer(s), mainly on how much they want to meet players' expectations regarding the historical aspects of the game. I think nothing is a waste of time, if the game designer is highly committed to the authenticity of all elements in the game. In my case, it was literally about accurately portraying characters (portraits) in the game *Manor Lords*. Selecting appropriate clothing for 14th century European. Everything mattered, from types of hairstyles to race and of course armour. Even though it can be frustrating, the precise selection of a gorget, the materials used for each clothing element, and even the visible strings on the shoulder pads, all contribute to the overall reception of a historical game. Therefore, everyone working with a historical consultant should arm themselves with patience and respect the decisions involved. After all, the goal is to present historical accuracy in the game as accurately as possible (Krzywdzińska).

No part, it's always useful, even if you can't answer a question the developer asked, at least they know they have the freedom to be creative because the historians don't know something either (Teeuwisse).

Researching historical, linguistic, or any nuanced cultural aspects without a native can be detrimental. Despite the best intentions, a person lacking the cultural context can be misled by conflicting and often erroneous material available online. While not necessarily a waste of time, it is always best to double-check your research with a person who has first-hand knowledge of the subject (ANON-2).

5. Examples of good practices

In the online form we asked a single question about examples of the best and worst cases. In this paper we separate the good from the bad, dealing with them in different sections. Hence, Table 3 and Table 4 intentionally refer to the same question in their headings.

Some of our interviewees pointed to well-known and globally successful examples, which they did not personally work on. Gembicki mentions *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (noting the Discovery Mode, specifically), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, and *Total War*. Carmichael mentions the *Assassin's Creed* series collectively, as well as *Red Dead Redemption*, *Ken Follet's Pillars of the Earth*, and *Pentiment*. Stanowski, in turn, is very specific in praising not the entire games but their particular aspects in *Hearts of Iron*, *Europa Universalis*, *World of Warships* and *World of Tanks*.

Most of the respondents (see Table 3) refer to their own game-making experiences. Timoshenko recalls how a consultant saved the game from an erroneous visual representation. ANON-2 is grateful to a Turkish consultant for proofreading and editing a badly-written NPC dialogue. Stanowski shares his appreciation of the thoroughness and attention to detail with which his consultants worked on maps and game art. Komuda's best example of good practice is consultancy on *Lotnicy (Aviators)*, with the consultant efficiently delivering requested information and not interfering with game design decisions. ANON-1, by contrast, reports an active involvement of the historical consultant in every stage of game development, but praises the consultant for an acute understanding of the nature of games as an entertainment medium. Hoppe, in turn, emphasises the role of project manager in *Attentat 1942*, who was able to coordinate and inspire the team even in the face of the initial distrust from the academic consultants.

Table 3. Histgameconsulting – good examples

Q: Could you write a few examples of best and worst cases of/in historical consultancy that others could learn from?

When we were making cinematics for *Strategic Mind: The Pacific*, for the Japanese campaign, that has around 40 mins of historical cinematic scenes, we were making scene of Admiral Chūichi Nagumo suicide after the Battle of Saipan. It went like this – he draws a katana, then decides he is not worthy to die as a samurai of the era long gone, and shoots himself with a pistol (as was historically) saying he would die as a soldier of the Emperor. However, when we reviewed the scene, the person on the team who has been to Japan before and studied Aikido and also filled the role of our internal historical consultant and scriptwriter, noticed that the katana sword was placed incorrectly, so it cannot be drawn with the right hand correctly. So, we fixed the katana sword position. (We know the katana sword was not usually used for suicide, we just used the army/ceremonial sword that the Admiral could wear and have at hand. And he shot himself anyway) (Timoshenko).

One educational anecdote I can share is about writing NPC dialogue. This particular NPC was a Turk (or rather an Ottoman), and I wanted to make their speech more colourful using idiomatic language and other linguistic markers. I found plenty of examples online, on websites that seemed perfectly legit. After finding the NPC voice and writing the first draft – luckily! – I decided to show the dialogue to an actual Turkish person. Turned out, half of the things, which I had so carefully curated, actually sounded unnatural, off-key, and some even made the consultant laugh. By rewriting the dialogue based on their feedback, I dodged the bullet of evoking the same negative reaction from Turkish players (ANON-2).

Best cases are when I meet with passionate people, experts, who understand that we are just helping other people to make visual projects in a short time with limited budget of time and money. And people. I cannot start an archaeological site to check some things and bring an answer in 15 years.

Also it is great when the scientists, experts are open to discuss possibilities and admit things they do not know. This is helpful (Nowak).

The best thing you can do is always to consult things beforehand. Because you may think you have correct information from the internet, but after you finished the job and asked your consultant after, you find out the information was not correct. Always discuss everything beforehand (Guláš).

The best example of cooperation was a game about pilots, where the historical (technical) consultant was knowledgeable about game simulators, so he limited himself to comments on the equipment of World War II planes, their painting, creating biographies of the characters, and corrections of historical errors in the texts. At the same time, he understood that the game was not a manual for operating the Halifax bomber, but an arcade simulation of the actions of this machine, designed to interest players in the subject of supply drops for Warsaw insurgents in 1944 (Komuda).

Best cases:

- *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*
Immersive level of accuracy, Warhorse team worked with various cultural and educational institutions in Czech Republic to achieve a high level of realism in depiction of medieval combat (armour, weapons, tools), realistic depiction of places (castles and villages in Bohemia).
- *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey and Origins*
Recreation of localisations from Egypt and Greece, including the great Discovery Mode proved that close collaboration with historians and institutions such as Cairo Museum made this part of the Assassin's Creed series one of the best-sellers!
- *Total War series*
Though a very lightly historically accurate series, it is still a great example of a very balanced level of "complex history content" and entertainment, accurate enough to raise the interest of the audience, but not too scientific to kill the fun coming out of gameplay. By far one of the best combinations available on the market. (Gembicki).

The best thing was the awards we received both in the Czech Republic and abroad. In my experience, it is very much up to the project manager to maintain initiative and collaboration across the team (Hoppe).

There are many excellent games that draw on historical themes. When games fail, it is more likely to be through a failure in game design to "find the fun", rather than the history itself being the issue. Good examples:

- *Assassin's Creed series of games* (however, in my opinion, the part where the player jumps to the future occasionally is not helpful; the historical segments of gameplay are excellent);
- *Red Dead Redemption*;
- Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*;
- *Pentiment* (Carmichael).

About my game (*Duma szlachecka*): Paweł Przeździecki, his historical works on *Duma szlachecka* – he was so accurate making maps, focused on details but still watching on the overall view; Weronika Chróсны, who spent hours and days in Central Military Library, looking for ancient images and descriptions of old Polish cities, towns, churches and castles to make separate icon for all of them.

About Paradox games: tech tree in *Hearts of Iron* series; also, maps in each game, also in *Europa Universalis* series.

About Wargaming games: detailed silhouettes of each warship in *World of Warships* (by Wargaming). Even fictional warships are tricky modified designs of really existing warships in a particular country. I really appreciate that. And silhouettes of tanks in *World of Tanks* are very detailed and historically accurate (Stanowski).

The game I had the pleasure of working on tackles the problem of an educational game from a different angle – aiming to be a fun and entertaining game first, and a source of information second. The reasoning behind it is pretty straightforward – the player will learn anything only if they decide to stick around and keep playing the game. The title was created in a strict cooperation with a historical consultant from start to finish, so all the aspects of it were supervised – from technological advancements and side quests to pixelated architecture of the

[TOWN NAME – removed for anonymity]. We decided to simplify some elements, like omit the exact dates and instead measure the flow of time simply using in-game turns, however when a specific historical event occurs, the date is brought up if it's relevant enough. The historical aspect of the game never stands in the way of fun, but rather extends it in a form that we believe is as non-invasive as possible (ANON-1).

6. Examples of bad practices

Our consultants rarely decide to name specific titles as bad examples. The titles that did get mentioned are *Call of Duty: WWII* and *Battlefield V* (see Gembicki in Table 4), and *Dziedzictwo kulturowe Jana Pawła II (Cultural Heritage of John Paul II)* (ANON-2 in Table 4). Instead, they recall situations from their own practice.

Timoshenko (see Table 3 below) takes a light-hearted approach to what he now considers as a mistake: a deliberate decision, taken for the sake of visual aesthetics, to deviate from historical accuracy in the choice of military vehicles to be represented as participating in an actual historic battle in *Strategic Mind: The Pacific*. Technical-historical inaccuracy in promo materials for a strategy war game is likely to draw criticism from players.

Komuda (in Table 3) recalls an example of a historical consultant – assigned to a project by the funding institution – who lacked any understanding of games, and approached the game more like an instructional e-learning material. Input from the consultant was detrimental to the game's quality. This illustrates the key problem identified by Coplestone (2017a): incompatibility between a playability-oriented dev team and knowledge-focused academic experts who have no understanding of game design and development. ANON-1 (Table 3) talks about the same problem.

ANON-5, by contrast, complains about a company that did not take the contributions of the historical consultant seriously. Once the work delivered by the consultant went into the pipeline, it got outside the consultant's control, with the final outcome of the seemingly-historical maps falling far from actual geography (see Table 3). Another variant of this problem, as mentioned by Nowak (still in Table 4), is partners who

do have some knowledge of the history and want to impose their vision of the past on the consultant rather than follow the consultant's advice.

Some bad practices are not illustrated by particular examples or experiences, but mentioned as potential mistakes or mismanagement that companies should be wary of. In this vein, we can learn that it may be very costly and cumbersome to bring in consultants too late, when a significant part of work is already done (see Guláš and Krzywdzińska in Table 4). Speaking from the side of the consultant, it may be hard to work with partners who are too ignorant about the historical realities (see Nowak and Komuda in Table 4). Another identified problem is sloppy and superficial research that does not take into account differences between local regions and time periods. This results in game settings mixing up incompatible historical elements that would not really go together (Teeuwisse and ANON-3 in Table 4).

Table 4. Histgameconsulting – bad examples

Q: Could you write a few examples of best and worst cases of/in historical consultancy that others could learn from?

I do not really have a case of really bad consultancy as such. But there are a lot of things that could go wrong during development. Here is one example. When making a promo video for *Strategic Mind: The Pacific*, the lead artist somehow managed to convinced the team to use Japanese Dive bombers model for the torpedo attack on the US ships in the video, instead of torpedo bombers, because they “looked better”, despite everyone on the team realizing it was incorrect. So, after releasing the video, the audience immediately spotted that and there was a bunch of comments on the improper model usage. Even though in the actual game everything was correct. So, do not make mistakes, especially in the promo materials – as people would judge the entire game by that video or screenshot. Even if it “looks better”, in a historical game the details like that are more important than “looks” (Timoshenko).

One of the difficult things that you sometimes have to do is mixing different places and historical times. It happens that the game requires that there be many options for some kind of armour, for example. And during the period described, very little or no historical evidence was found. In such cases, you often have to make compromises and create something that will visually fit into the game's narrative. And then some users write that this is not true, and such things never existed in reality (ANON-3).

Worst case of consultancy is when members of a team come with one information, a theory found on the internet and they want me to find something to support this. So it is like reversed

logic – I am supposed to find a shield for something I do not agree with, or is not actually proven. Also when I am supposed to provide a fact, that something DID NOT EXIST. Like was impossible. This is a waste of time and immediately I know somebody wants to force his idea, no matter if it is logical. I have learnt it is pointless.

Very difficult are also consultations when people do not understand or know general things about culture, history. Like explaining Christian religious aspects to someone from regions in the world, where it is not the main religion. It is important to build the whole background and context (Nowak).

The worst thing you can do in game dev is: Do the job first and consult the matter after. Due to this we had to rework some stuff and it cost us more time. A very big mistake is to rely on Open AI. It provides false information quite a lot (Guláš).

The worst example of historical consultation was my involvement as a consultant for a tactical game set in the 17th century during the Polish-Turkish wars. When I sat down to work, it turned out that the script for this game almost didn't exist; it was a mishmash of characters and events (partly copied from Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy*) that didn't adhere to any realities. The producer, likely to save costs, thought that as a consultant, I would not only correct historical inaccuracies but also write the script for him, which was necessary for the gameplay to make any sense, have atmosphere, and a cause-and-effect sequence. So, besides being a consultant, I was also supposed to be a narrative designer and writer. Of course, all for the same compensation.

Another bad example of cooperation was an action-adventure game set during World War II, funded by the European Union and co-financed by state-owned institutions. Unfortunately, within the bureaucratic system, the co-publisher tried to impose a historical consultant on us – a well-known scholar who had no idea about the nature of computer games and that historical knowledge needs to be creatively translated into gameplay mechanics. His comments, although substantive, disrupted the entire gameplay and completely destroyed the narrative of the game's events. An example was his proposal to implement – in a game reminiscent of the cult classic *Wolfenstein* but with a TPP view... – historical quizzes that interrupted the gameplay (Komuda).

Call of Duty: WWII/Battlefield V. Great examples of how lack of any accuracy can cause a community backlash that has a negative impact on game rating and sales. Inclusion of weapons, and characters not existing in this time period are the lightest of mistakes made when producing this title. Often historical accuracy fell a victim to political correctness in both of these titles. E.g. lack of naming Germans as a nation in game, replaced by gauge "Nazis", usage of iron cross instead of swastika, inclusion of weapons not available during the period, the list of abominations is heavy on these two titles (Gembicki).

The worst part was the very beginning, because we didn't believe in the project (Hoppe).

While I lack information on how the historical consultancy looked in this example, the infamously bad take on an educational game overall would be the *Dziedzictwo kulturowe Jana Pawła II (Cultural Heritage of John Paul II)*, published as a part of *Godność. Wolność. Niepodległość (Dignity. Freedom. Independence)*. Its many flaws have been pointed out by publications in the press at the time, so it's not just my personal opinion when I say the way the historical facts were handled – while not judging the accuracy of the facts themselves – was uninspired and dull.

The information thrown into the game – in the form of quizzes and mostly not very captivating gameplay mechanics – was not sifted through in any way, as if the creators were not sure what kind of knowledge was important enough to be included, resulting in a game that was quickly jumping between trivial and impossible difficulty levels (ANON-1).

I think the worst case of historical consulting is the lack of communication skills with others. Therefore, the best approach includes being flexible and staying in constant contact, for example, when collaborating with graphic designers. Avoid arrogantly pointing out mistakes; instead, approach your colleagues with respect and the ability to explain or show what needs to be corrected. Providing valuable historical sources on time is also important. The worst approach is neglect and tardiness, especially when many things have already been done and errors are only pointed out after a long time. Staying up-to-date with feedback and preparing a clear brief will save time and money for those workers (Krzywdzińska).

Researchers sometimes just research a theme, such as “the Middle Ages”, they create a mood-board, just lots that’s medieval, instead of being more specific, making sure they get the exact era and location, which part of the middle ages, etc. People often hire random researchers, not experts, so you get people who can look up stuff for you but who don’t have that general level of knowledge about a certain era that you really need. Not having basic knowledge can make an entire film or game look silly, gamers know how to look things up online and can find out that things aren’t correct (Teeuwisse).

[FOUNDATION’s NAME REMOVED for anonymity] commissioned to develop an application game [DETAILS REMOVED]. After receiving three rounds of proposals and revisions to their changing expectations, they broke the contract with the retention of the work done and a long struggle to pay, at least part of the compensation [...] from the accounts of other associates, such situations regularly occur.

Classic problems with companies implementing games through multiple subcontractors. An example: for a computer game, I was preparing graphic and illustration materials intended to be an indicator of how to draw a campaign map for a strategy game. At the client’s request, I made them at the level of marking the mountains in Europe and the main rivers, I also included administrative divisions to be plotted. The external graphics each time went into a strong... fantasy. Of which the loss of Crete and Sardinia are fairly minor details (ANON-5).

Summary

All or nearly all of the work can be shared among members of the dev team, who could be tasked with historical research and fact-checking without a hired consultant. As Collewijn reports, this was the default situation at the time of his research (2015, p. 38). Why then do some game studios and publishers decide to pay for external consultancy from experts, or even hire resident historians as full-time positions? One of the obvious benefits is saving the work time of productive-creative

staff. The amount of time spent solely on historical research is estimated at one-third of the total work time – whether it is Jos Hoebe working on *Verdun* in a three-person team where everyone does research on their own (as reported in *ibid.*, p. 26) or Ubisoft's resident historian Maxine Durand (*ibid.*, p. 29). Another advantage, which can only be provided by an expert historian, is in-depth knowledge and understanding of the historical period setting and the mentality of its inhabitants. Even though everyone can research facts and visuals, only in-depth specialist expertise can guarantee top quality of accuracy and believability that would be appreciated by other knowledgeable stakeholders. Moreover, an expert is better at judging the credibility of available sources, being far less likely to fall for popular myths and stereotypes than a non-expert researcher could be misled by. Finally – the sole fact of having a historian in game credits has some marketing value as a signpost of credibility for the indiscriminating audience.

On the negative side, academic experts brought in from outside the game industry frequently lack an understanding of the needs and processes of game development. Scholars used to top-down linear transmission of knowledge in the form of lectures, research papers, and monographs are known to be notoriously difficult in communication with the dev team. Only a part of this problem is lack of experience with game design documents and technology on the side of academics. As Copplestone reports from her own experience in approaching game designers as an academic, the key observation was that:

the material academics tend to produce in books or journal articles tells a story about the past which is directly *told* to the reader. By contrast, [narrative designers] were writing many possible stories about the past where the player is taking an active role in choosing how this unfolds (2017b, p. 86).

This reveals a more insidious factor behind this academia-gamedev miscommunication: different and potentially incompatible conceptualisations of historical settings and narratives.

As we are well on our way into the mid-2020s, it appears that mutual understanding and appreciation have developed on both sides of this uneasy partnership. This is not to be understood that the majority of game developers started caring about research-validated historical accuracy,

or that the majority of academic historians have learned to respect video games as historiographic engines. Nonetheless, the video game market is large enough that even if as little as 15% of history/heritage-themed game developers want to rely on expert consulting, it still provides a remarkable number of games we can study – and, as Collewijn noticed already in 2015 (p. 46), a small job market for academic historians/archaeologists/classicists/etc. About 10 years ago, as we learn from Sabin’s experience in British academia, it was an uphill battle to introduce historical wargaming into the academic environment due to the still-present stigma and suspicion of the inherent triviality of games (2016, pp. 433–437). Today, London-based Brunel University has opened a Master degree in Wargaming and Resilience Planning, Falmouth University in Cornwall is leading a high-profile “Peace-gaming” research project, and University of Gdansk in Poland launches a Bachelor programme in Historical Game Design. On the research and R&D side, we can point to multiple examples of academia-industry collaboration on historical games which have not only secured respect and critical acclaim in academic environments, but also translated to oft-cited research publications in top-tier academic venues. The *Assassin’s Creed* series alone has sparked at least two book-length publications (Éthier, Lefrançois, 2020; Champion, Hiriart, 2024), and the success of historiographical games from Charles Games studio is now followed by their participation in a grant-funded Horizon project, in which six institutions from multiple countries are developing heritage-themed games inspired by museum collections (Dimitriou, n.d.).

Taking it all into account, we think that the field of histgameconsulting is well-established and mature enough to become recognised as a creative specialisation or subspecialisation of its own. If it is to be recognised as such, we should be able to identify its professional characteristics, range of responsibilities (job description), standard practices, and a typical skill set – perhaps with a prospect of dedicated training. We have discussed the characteristics and examples of good and bad practices in this and the previous paper. The questions of skills, professional standards, and competence building are addressed in our next article, *Historical Consultants in the CEE Video Game Industry. Part 2: Competence Building*.

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Date of access to the internet sources used in the text: 24 September 2024.

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Konsultanci historyczni w branży gier wideo w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Część 1: dobre i złe praktyki

Abstrakt: Jest to drugi artykuł z projektu *Konsulting historyczny gier*, prowadzonego przez Polskie Towarzystwo Badania Gier z finansowaniem z Centrum Rozwoju Przemysłów Kreatywnych. Bazuje na ankiecie online przeprowadzonej wśród 16 profesjonalistów, którzy pracowali nad grami wideo jako konsultanci historyczni lub jako deweloperzy współpracujący z takimi konsultantami. Ze względu na ukierunkowanie na Europę Środkową i Wschodnią ankieta obejmuje respondentów, którzy pracowali dla studiów gier w Polsce, Czechach, Słowacji, Ukrainie, Białorusi i Serbii. Artykuł zbiera i komentuje opinie na temat mocnych i słabych stron konsultacji historycznych dla gier, a także przykłady dobrych i złych praktyk z własnych doświadczeń respondentów lub zaobserwowanych na rynku.

Słowa kluczowe: gry historyczne, groznawstwo, produkcja gier, historia, dziedzictwo, konsulting
