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Rome Was Not Built in a Day

Reimagining the Roman Empire in Video Games

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INTRODUCTION

The video game industry has been one of the most fast-moving areas when it comes to creating, innovating and producing virtual representations of the past. Historical video games are popular; hundreds of millions of people spend large chunks of their time in these digital, playful recreations of the past. As is the case with other popular history media, such as movies, historical novels, podcasts (Joshel, Malamud and McGuire Jr 2001; Cyrino 2009), Roman culture, particularly Rome itself, has been a very popular setting for historical games. Every year the list of ‘Roman video games’ grows, as does the number of people playing them. To put it succinctly, more people than ever before have experiences centred around the Roman past through these contemporary and digital playgrounds. Given their popularity, how do these games allow play with Rome, where playing can be understood as its own specific way of experimenting, aligned with but, as will be clear from this chapter, methodically distinct from other experiments with the past (Lammes and Mol forthcoming)?

Until quite recently, there were very few studies of Rome in games (e.g. Gardner 2007), although these games were of course being discussed in game magazines, gaming guides and on online forums. Yet the last few years have seen a small boom in archaeological, historical and classical studies on Rome and other ancient Mediterranean cultures in games; these works are published both in traditional academic outlets (e.g. Rollinger 2020; Clare 2021; Politopoulos, Mol and Lammes 2023) and on online blogs and social media (e.g. the Play the Past blog).¹ Providing a full overview of these studies falls outside of the scope of this chapter, but many of these can be grouped under the header of ‘academic game review’, works that investigate and discuss the representation of Rome in particular games. The focus in this chapter is a bit different: it will ask what sort of experiments with Roman culture and society have happened and are currently happening in the video game medium. This will be done by looking at how game developers set the boundaries and potentials of these experiments as well as how such games are then modded by their players. The chapter will close with a discussion of our experiences

running a playful heritage project, *RoMeincraft*, a Minecraft version of the Dutch Roman border area in 150 CE. The aim is to paint a picture of both the potentials and pitfalls for Roman video games and particularly how it affords and limits game-based experimental research and knowledge dissemination by scholars *and* playful citizens.

A HISTORY OF ROMAN VIDEO GAMES

Roman video games go back a long time, relative to the age of the medium. Among the first is *Legionnaire* (Microcomputer Games 1982), a 1982 ‘microcomputer’ game by legendary game developer Chris Crawford in which the player takes command of the Roman armies to fight a number of tribes, inspired by Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico*. The game is noteworthy not only because it is one of the first Roman video games, but also because it is one of the first real-time strategy games, a by now well-established genre of games in which players have to make instant tactical (military) decisions. Furthermore, it is also noteworthy because its manual provided a historically inspired breakdown of how to play, including references to different types of Roman historical figures, such as Crassus and Labienus, as well as named enemy tribes, such as the *Aedui*, *Eburones* and *Helvetii*. The game was published by Avalon Hill, a game company active in wargame publishing that branched out to publish a set of early and successful wargaming video games. *Annals of Rome* (Level 9 Computing 1986), a turn-based strategy game in which players take command over the early Republic, move troops and appoint military commanders to fight other civilizations in a map that covers Europe, North Africa and the Near East, is another example of an early tabletop-like wargame. As such, *Legionnaire* and *Annals of Rome* have important roots in tactical and strategic wargaming, a hobby that rose to popularity in the 1950s and itself can be traced back to the tabletop simulations of battles and campaigns, including historical ones, that had become an integral aspect of army officer training since the early nineteenth century (von Hilgers 2012).

It is notable that, even today, a large group of Roman video games takes its cue from playful simulation of military history: of a list of 125 games identified with the ‘Rome’ tag in world-leading online video game platform Steam,² eighty-three games are also tagged as being ‘Historical’ and fifty-seven are tagged as being a ‘Simulation’.³ Roman video games have also branched out beyond simulation and other notable tags are ‘Action’ with forty-two, RPG (Role Playing Game) with thirty-three, ‘Casual’ (offering a more relaxed type of experience) with thirty-two, and ‘Adventure’ with thirty-one games out of 125 Roman video games tagged. It should also be noted that most of these descriptive tags co-occur with the simulation tag. Only a fraction of Roman video games does not incorporate some aspect of simulation: *Ryse: Son of Rome* (Crytek 2013), a Michael-Bayesque single player action game from 2011, and a series of *Asterix and Obelix* games (OSome Studio 2003) are the only ones of these which are more generally known and had some measure of commercial success. Most of the well-known and commercially successful Roman video games, such as *Imperator: Rome* (Paradox Interactive 2019), discussed extensively below, are simulation games at their core. Simulation as a mode of play is certainly not exclusive to Roman video games (Chapman 2016), but the popularity of historical simulation in the corpus of Roman video games is indicative of a global market in which people experiment with Romans through simulation-based gameplay.

Historical simulation games are rule-based, what-if replays of historical scenarios; as such, they are a specific form of experimentation that lets you play around with (counter)factuals (Mol 2020). There exists a small, but valuable, body of work that has

addressed how video games provide spaces for experiments with the Roman past. The research of Roman archaeologist and digital scholar Shawn Graham (2020) on Agent-Based-Models (ABM) as games is of special note here. Graham's work highlights how both ABM and games provide analogous routes of approach to understand the Roman past. He posits how both provide rule-based spaces for experimentation, and in particular hypothesis testing, using a repeatable, computational process that Graham likens to a form of digital magic. His example is *Romans Must Die*, a playful ABM that models what happens in a close-knit, family-based society where many family heads die at once. The result is a digital experiment that provides a new understanding of the ways in which 'Roman society was resilient to the frequent pogroms and proscriptions of the late Republic and other eras' (Graham 2017). *FORVM: Trade Empires of Rome* is another game-based project by Graham, made together with Tom Brughmans and Iza Romanowska. In this boardgame players compete to become the most prestigious Roman by having their agents engage in trade in markets across the Roman Empire. Like *Romans Must Die*, this board game allows you to play around with real historical trajectories and systems, based on archaeological and historical knowledge of how Roman social networks and economies operated.

In a similar vein, the historian and didactic specialist Jeremiah McCall has written extensively about the role of play-based learning about antiquity. His *Path of Honors* is a practical example of this. In this choice-based text game, players learn about political career trajectories in Republican Rome, the *cursus honorum* (path of honours), by exploring a young Roman aristocrat rising through the ranks. By allowing players to make their own choices within the game and seeing what success and failures they can lead to, this small game effectively allows you to experience, but crucially also to experiment with, the life of an elite member of the Roman Republic. Just like Graham's work, McCall's *Path of Honors* is a specific type of 'historical simulation', an algorithmic or rule-based imitation of real-world historical systems and processes.

Simulation as experimentation is, of course, a standard scientific tool. There are clear overlaps between game-based experimentations and other forms of historical simulation, such as experimental archaeology. First of all, they take place in a set-aside and controlled space, something which in play and game studies is usually referred to as the 'magic circle' of play – conceptually analogous to the space experiments take place in. These magic circles are based on models of real processes and things, but are not necessarily a one-to-one representation of them. Instead, specific systems of interactions are simulated by controlling which elements play a role in the simulation and which do not. In a given simulation game it can be very important to have an economic or religious system or a building style that is reflective of Roman and other ancient economies, but not meticulously (or even accurately) so. Furthermore, simulation games and many experimental archaeologies have in common that they are, in some respects, creative undertakings: where experimental archaeologists work with the materiality of the physical world to create new things using old processes and tools, players of Roman games fashion new histories or countries out of computational processes and representations based on the past.

Game-based simulations are different from other experiments in the sense that they are inherently about playing around with something, about being in that magic circle and reacting to and changing what happens in it (Lammes 2003). In other words, where in a scientific experiment one is interested in outcomes of simulated processes, play-based simulation is focused on the 'experience of experimenting' as something fun and valuable

in and of itself. At the same time, as most anyone who has undertaken an experimental study will agree, making choices, interacting with materials, manipulating forces, recovering from mistakes, having success, and being in the moment, to name just a few things, are core but also fun and inherently valuable aspects of research. Yet in contrast to most scientific experiments, gaming is a performative act where you take on a role, such as that of a Roman military commander or merchant, while play simulating. In this performative sense, gaming is more akin to historical re-enactment, as an activity where you are asked to immerse yourself in a past time and place and play your role in it, together with others. Of course, performative re-enactment can itself be an important aspect of an experimental study (see Hamelink, Griffiths, this volume). In short, there are clear and direct analogies between playing (and making) Roman video games and experimental research. As will be discussed in more detail below, it is a combination of simulative, performative, social and fun aspects that make games particularly suitable as a tool for outreach and a frequently used tool for playful experiences, which let the public loosely experiment with the shape and history of the Roman past (see also Birley et al., this volume).

EXPERIENCE OF EXPERIMENTING WITH HISTORY: *IMPERATOR: ROME*

The game *Imperator: Rome* was released in 2019 by Paradox Development Studio, and can be described as a grand strategy game. The player can select any political entity on the available map of the Mediterranean in the year 305 BCE (Figure 25.1),⁴ and is then asked to manage it in an antagonistic environment. This is done through strategic management of its politics, army, religion, technological advancement and more. In this way *Imperator: Rome* (from here onwards *Imperator*) places the player in the role of the ruler of an entire polity and gives them the space to experiment with it in the political arena of the period. At first glance this is both an interesting and appealing quality for the game: the player gets to experiment in any way they would like with any entity and agent of the time. Maybe the player can replay the history as it happened, or try to make an alternative version of history, where, say, the Carthaginians are the ones making a long-lasting empire and not the Romans.

For *Imperator*, however, creating an authentic feeling of the period, as well as each separate political entity, is crucial. To achieve this, *Imperator* often attaches specific missions to each polity. These missions, often expansions of territory, are more easily achieved by using the predetermined strengths of each culture. When playing as Rome, for example, which almost every player will do as it is part of the tutorial of the game, the first mission is titled 'Roman Italia'. The objective is to unify or subjugate all of Italy through any means possible. These means could be diplomatic or economic, but more often than not subjugation through conquest is the most effective.

This system of missions attached to each polity puts history on rails, so to speak. To continue with the example playing as Rome, one could make the decision to ally with the Etruscans and take over the rest of Italy by force, eventually trying to subjugate Etruria as a tributary subject. Alternatively, the Etruscans could become your enemy, which brings Rome into an anything but ideal situation when they subsequently choose the Carthaginians as allies, who are always keen on conquering Rome. When a player loses all of their territories, there is simply no alternative and they have to start all over again, having learned from the past experiences and trying to find better allies or trying to avoid getting



FIGURE 25.1: The first pop-up for Diadochi, Egypt in this case. Image: © ParadoxInteractive

into fights with Carthage too early on.⁵ This limits the experimental space the players get to use, as they might try to rely on history to figure out what would be the most efficient strategy.

While in a grander sense the game might limit the experimental space, by focusing too much on territorial expansion and limiting each culture's creative space to specific traits, there are a plethora of other things to manage and decide besides waging war, which create more depth. The political and family elements in *Imperator* generate an idea for the player of what the average Roman ruler had to deal with. Whenever the player decides they yearn to declare war, the Senate will need to back them; if there is not ample support, it might not be possible to initiate the war at all. The player can try to push a specific

decision through the Senate, but they will gain tyranny for doing so and also lessen the loyalty of the elite. When playing as Rome, there are four different powerful families, who expect positions to match their rank within the political system. Failing to provide enough of the family members with a high-ranking function will cause the entire family to lose loyalty. Low loyalty can kindle several problems: unloyal generals will not obey orders and run free on the land, the senate might block all decisions, or, in the worst-case scenario, the player will have a civil war on their hands.

This creates another way in which the player can experiment, this time on an individual level. To prevent or remedy such unproductive disloyalty problems, the player can decide between several approaches. One can try to make the consul befriend people in high positions, bribe them, throw political enemies in the prison (which is by no means always successful), or even try to murder one's opponents. These are all schemes that potentially could work, but do not necessarily have to, and can even create outrage among other characters when such plans are exposed. The player has to take into account several elements to try and figure out what might work best, the amount of money, the character traits and prominence of the ruler, and the traits of the person who will be the aim of the plot. It will be evident after playing for a while that different situations need different approaches.

A player can, of course, decide to experiment with history in another way: by making an alternative version. While it is entertaining and challenging to create the Roman Empire, the advantages of the army, for example, might make it feel like it is inevitable that Rome expands. A player then can choose to be on the other side of history: to pick a 'losing' state and expand that, possibly beating the historical conquerors. However, even when playing on the other side in this game, often the representation of a culture is still being determined by Roman representation, at least so for the northern and western parts of Europe. For example, the names of the British tribes are almost all taken from either Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* or Tacitus' *Historiae*, their technologies are for the biggest part the same as in the Mediterranean world, and all of their military decisions are based upon Roman encounters with tribal 'armies'.⁶ Thus, while the player gets to play with these tribes and has opportunity to rewrite their history, they had still to view them through Roman eyes as represented in historical texts, even though when the game begins in the third century CE, the historical peoples most likely had not much interaction with the Romans.

This limited experimental space can also be seen in the game's observer mode. This is a feature that allows the player to basically let history unfold and observe it without interacting with the game. The tribes, (city-)states, and empires will make their own decisions and the game will basically 'play itself', while the player gets to look. This mode can help the player understand better what choices the states around them might make and how they could anticipate and align their actions with this new knowledge. Secondly, this mode helps to understand the way particular states function and what could be expected to happen in a great narrative. For example, if the observer mode is run for over fifty years, it will be clear that all political entities have the tendency to grow in size, conquering their neighbours, until they get conquered themselves by an even bigger state. It will also show that there is only one major battle in this game in the western part of the Mediterranean: Rome versus Carthage.⁷

This seems logical from a historical viewpoint. The Punic wars were tremendously important events in the history of Rome, Carthage, and the power balance in the western Mediterranean. However, when just looking at the game's observer mode, it seems

strange that Rome continuously grows in size. While other minor states vanish quite quickly, Rome expands swiftly. Etruria is about three times the size of Rome in the beginning and in other situations like these, the bigger state would take over the smaller one in a heartbeat. So why is it reversed in this case? The Roman army is simply one of the strongest, if not the strongest in the game. It is quite easy for Rome to create a lot of armies, pay for them and have quality generals; together, this ensures that Rome can easily take over its neighbours on the Italian Peninsula. When playing as Rome, this is even more evident than in the observer mode. Every time an objective centred around expansion is fulfilled, the player gets rewarded with bonuses to boost up an aspect of the army, ensuring that Rome can create an empire as quickly as possible.

Whilst a game such as *Imperator* provides players with a means of playing and experimenting with history, they are still bound by the developers' representation of that history and the narratives the developers decide to focus on. The Roman eyes through which the player sees the world are hard to circumvent. However, the world of gaming provides a way to go around the developers' focus, and have players make their own content for a game. This is called modding, and will be the focus of the next section.

MODIFYING HISTORY

The process of modification, or modding for short, entails the changes players make in the way the game is played. These mods can greatly differ in impact and size, depending on the definition of mods. Following Sihvonen's (2011) definition, there are two main types of game modification: *game-provided* and *user-extended*. The former encompass all changes players can make that are provided by the designers (e.g. the difficulty setting of a game, choosing to play a game in single player or cooperative modes, etc.), while the latter are modifications to core aspects of the game made by the players themselves.

It is these user-extended changes that are referred to as mods within the gaming community, and are often called the modding proper. Mods can range from simple changes in the user interface of a game (e.g. the font of the interface, the colours of the letters, etc.) to more intrusive and complicated mods such as rule or mechanical changes which can completely change the way the game plays. Mods are not exclusive to video games, as analogue games, such as board games, are often being modded by their players. A popular example is *Monopoly* (Magie 1935). Even though the game has predefined rules, many people play by (differing) house rules. These different rules can be seen as user-generated changes to the mechanical workings of the game: they are mods. Video game mods, however, due to their technical nature (knowledge of code, for example) are more difficult to be realized and are often products of the combined effort of gaming and modding communities.

While mods exist in various different video games, historical video games are one of the most often modded ones. Mods then provide players with a different layer of experimentation with the past. Where many games include limited factors and elements with which to experience the past, mods allow players to be the authors of their own digital pasts. By using mods, players can change a game into, in their opinion, a more historical game with more historically accurate elements, or go the opposite direction and take a certain history out of its in-game context. A player may decide, for example, to make a change as simple as paying Roman legionaries fifty denarii less per year, but could also have Roman legions fighting machine-gun-wielding Carthaginians. Whatever the player's fantasy, mods can potentially create the experimental space to reproduce it and play with it.

Imperial Mods

Imperator: Rome, discussed above, has seen extensive modding by its community despite its relative historical authenticity, with more than 780 mods for the game available.⁸ Some mods only make superficial or visual changes, such as mods that are tagged as ‘flag changes’. Other mods are more extensive, and change much more than visuals. Mods tagged with ‘overhaul’ often change multiple elements of the game.

What should be noted is that the mods tagged as ‘historical’, meaning they affect the historicity of the game, are the most popular (194 mods). This highlights both the interest of the players to toy and experiment with historical games, as well as the demand for even more historical content. Some of the most popular historical mods add new contextual elements to the game, as is the case with both the mod ‘Interesting histories’ and ‘Interesting treasures’.⁹ The first adds brief introductions to over forty ‘countries’ (as they are referred) in the game, in an effort to give the player more historical context. The latter adds over sixty culturally relevant objects to the game, with images for each object. Both of these mods are trying to make the game experiences more immersive for more ‘countries’.

Aside from the contextual changes, some players try to change the historical experience by changing the way the game is played. These mods make changes to, for example, the growth or size of elements such as army composition.¹⁰ This is often coupled with an idea by modders that the base game is too linear or un-historical. With such mods, the players critique the way the game simulates the (economic) growth of cities, as this is perceived to be too linear to be realistic.¹¹ Through play and experimentation with the base game, players might ‘feel’ something is off or does not fit in with their interpretation or understanding of history and they experiment with modding tools to offer what they deem a better or more historical experience.

Lastly, there are some mods which implement massive changes to certain political entities in the game. Interestingly, most of these do not target Rome itself, since that is one of the most detailed playable cultures. One of the ‘countries’ which has been remodelled with the use of mods is Etruria.¹² The mod splits up Etruria into several city-states, referring to the historical twelve city leagues, it changes the names of offices to more historical ones and it even goes as far as changing the names to appear less Latin and more Etruscan in nature. Some of these mods go even beyond the historical realm and insert states that were not present in the original game.

Roman Mods in Other Games

We focused on *Imperator: Rome*, as it is one of the most illustrative examples of players experimenting with Roman history and game mods. That does not mean, however, that it is the only game wherein such experimentation is taking place. In another well-known strategy game, *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI* (from here on Civ), Rome is one of the playable civilizations. Differing from *Imperator* in many ways, Civ simulates the development of a civilization from 4000 BCE to the future, where the player is playing as a leader of a civilization. In Civ’s case, Rome is led by Trajan. Whereas *Imperator* finds grounding in historical narratives, Civ itself is already more of an experimental game, as it places the player at the helm of a fictional development from the first cities towards interstellar travel. It does not thrive on ‘real’ historical narratives, but lets the player make their own historical narrative. However, this also has its historical limits, and often players make up for the lack of historical narrative with mods.

For Civ a total of seventy-four mods were identified and, similarly to Imperator, these mods can differ in scope and size. Some mods, such as a set created by JFD, simply change the playable leader of your civilization.¹³ When using JFD's mods, the player can play Nero, Commodus, Caracalla or Antoninus Pius. Aside from a visual change, some of the special traits change. Even though the player can in this way experiment with a certain historical emperor, it does not change the historical narrative much more than the game itself already does. The player's experience and own historical narrative is still the leading narrative in the game.

But there are also mods that entirely change the scope of the game. A good example is the *Anno Domini* mod, which is a combination of different mods by different modders.¹⁴ This mod takes the players back to the ancient world, and leaves the entire development of civilizations from 4000 BCE behind. In essence, players are taking the basic elements of civilization, but changing the entire narrative of the game. With the use of the *Anno Domini* mod, the player can experiment with a historical narrative focused around the ancient world, and Rome. They have added a historical narrative to a game where the historical narrative is not the grounding factor, as in Imperator.

What Do Mods Have to Offer?

However big or small each mod might be, they have an impact on the game and the eventual experience the player has. With the use of mods, players can step away from the predetermined narrative in a video game. Players can add their own (historical) elements to the presented narrative and thereby shape their own experience. In understanding how games affect historical perceptions, and in turn how historical perceptions can be shifted in games, mods are a crucial component that is often neglected by scholars who study games and history. In our opinion mods offer a creative space for players with the drive and interest to manifest their own historical understanding in a game and move away from popular historical narratives. This hands-on, player-driven experimentation with playful histories was explored by the authors, in an attempt to reconstruct the past in our own public outreach project, RoMeincraft.

ROMEINCRAFT¹⁵

RoMeincraft: Virtual Reconnaissance of the Dutch Limes is a project developed in 2017 by the VALUE Foundation.¹⁶ The Lower German Limes were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list as part of the 'Frontiers of the Roman Empire' in 2021, but the nomination procedure had started in 2011.¹⁷ As part of the ongoing efforts to increase visibility of the limes in the Netherlands, our project, funded by the South Holland province at the time, utilized the popular video game Minecraft to reach out to a wider audience within the province and provide open and accessible knowledge of people's local heritage in a fun way.

Minecraft can be described as the digital Lego bricks of this generation. Much like its analogue counterpart, Minecraft consists of a (pixelated) blocky world of squares measuring 1 x 1 x 1 metre. In the survival mode of the game, the players are thrown into a huge world which they have to explore, collect materials, survive and build. Despite its apparent lack of narrative or storyline, the player never runs out of things to do, as long as they can imagine things to build – a key aspect to the success of the game. This success is highlighted further by the creative mode of the game, where players have access to

infinite resources, and therefore, without having the need to survive, they are free to use all material to create potentially anything.

The creative mode of Minecraft is not a mod as such, although it does enable a whole lot of creativity. Within this creative mode players have created everything from large castles and complicated buildings to actual computers and functional phones that can make calls from within the game to actual phones. In that sense, the Minecraft community has already been engaging for a long time with imaginative reconstructions of the past. It is possible, however, to further enhance this creative mode by allowing players to develop their own maps, via software such as WorldPainter, or even build their own servers in which they can bend the rules, introduce new elements and materials, or change the textures and graphics of the game.

These latter functions of the game – a combination of creative mode with the possibility to develop one's own map – was what inspired our RoMinecraft project: if players can build anything they can imagine, why not experiment with rebuilding heritage? Since 2015, the VALUE Foundation has organized a wide variety of Minecraft events. The first pilot events took place at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, where we reconstructed: (i) the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, after its destruction by the Islamic State; and (ii) Roman military fort *Matilo* at Leiden, as part of the Dutch Archaeology Days 2015. The success of these events inspired us to scale up and organize a bigger reconstruction project that would cover a larger region and target a wider audience.

RoMinecraft was designed as a primarily public outreach event. The goal was to increase interest in and knowledge of local Roman heritage in the Netherlands, a type of heritage that is often underappreciated. This would be done with an evidence-based approach, through our knowledge as archaeologists, but also creatively. We saw this latter creative aspect of it, however, as an opportunity. We wanted to assess these kinds of creative events as an experimental tool for crowdsourced research – namely, how could our archaeological reconstructions be reconsidered if we involved the imagination of the wider public in this process?

For the purposes of RoMinecraft we created a 1:4 scale map of various Dutch provinces (South Holland, Gelderland, Limburg), where sites of Roman forts and towns were recreated in a 1:1 scale. The development of this map took place in WorldPainter. The elevation and landscape features (key canals, forests, roads) of this map were based on the elevation maps of the Netherlands from c. 200 CE (Colenbrander 2005). The locations of the key sites were flattened and emptied from other features to make the reconstruction process easier.

The events of the project took place in public spaces (museums, plazas, libraries) and were free of charge. Four PCs were set up, all connected on a local Minecraft server. Participants of the event could sit at one of these PCs and rebuild part of their local site. They were provided with supplementary historical and archaeological material to guide those reconstructions, but we also encouraged creative reconstructions and participant input in the building process. There was also a large screen showing the building process for those who did not wish to build themselves, and a VR station, where participants could experience the reconstruction process live in virtual reality. It was our goal to create an open and accessible environment, where people were free to participate in any capacity they wanted.

We have discussed extensively elsewhere (Politopoulos et al. 2019; Boom et al. 2020; Mol 2020) the potential of such a project for public outreach and its educational benefits. RoMinecraft has been a successful project, with thousands of participants over the last

four years, and we have been able to do various spin-offs of such events. These include a collaboration with the National Museum of Antiquity, in Leiden, the Netherlands for the temporary exhibition dedicated to the city of Nineveh, collaborations with the Dutch Prince Claus Fund to reconstruct heritage at risk from various regions of the world, and international collaboration and consultancy with other projects to implement similar projects elsewhere. Since then, many other projects worldwide have also successfully used Minecraft for heritage outreach purposes (e.g. Edwards et al. 2021; Langis-Barsetti 2021; Morgan 2021; Poulsen and Ariese 2022). In this chapter, however, we would like to highlight the added potential of such projects as experimental spaces for archaeological research and reflection.

As already discussed, a crucial aspect of the project was to allow our participants to have creative freedom. While we curated the supplementary material, offered historical and archaeological information, and guided our players towards the goal of each event (i.e. to reconstruct a particular site), participants were free to build whatever they wanted. This created an interesting dynamic among participants, who responded in different ways. Some participants took it upon themselves to stick to the archaeological information we had provided. They strived for as much authenticity as possible, making sure to ask questions every time they did not know something, and to help or direct other participants towards more authentic builds.

On the other hand, there were players who were still interested in building, but they wanted to build things in their own way, caring only somewhat (or very little) about the accuracy of their reconstructions. In Minecraft's creative mode, players have access to all the materials or even animals present in the game, which sparked the imagination of some players. A certain participant, for example, was very fond of polar bears, and the otherwise accurate reconstruction of the fort *Matilo* ended up with a polar bear infestation. Some more skilled participants were able to find the cheat code blocks and make colour-changing sheep, while others were more interested in the rare materials they had access to, making diamond versions of Roman buildings. It might seem paradoxical, but it is exactly this space between archaeological evidence and creative reconstruction that offers the opportunity for archaeological experimentation and the development of new approaches.

Let us look at *Matilo*, for example, a fort that was part of the Lower Rhine limes in the Netherlands, the site of which is located on the outskirts of the modern city of Leiden. This a protected archaeological site, and very limited archaeological research has taken place, with the exception of that which attempted to define its limits (de Bruin 2015). The site has been covered with soil and opened as an archaeological park in 2013. Many of our participants in the events that took place in various locations in Leiden (e.g. Faculty of Archaeology, National Museum of Antiquities) had already visited the park and had their own ideas about where buildings should be placed, what kind of buildings should be in the fort, etc. The combination of archaeological information and creative reconstruction created a unique version of *Matilo*, one that had never been seen before but one that can constantly change.

In that fluidity lies the key of how projects such as RoMinecraft can be used as experimental spaces for archaeological research. The reconstructions being produced are inherently playful and require interaction to be created or to shift. Experimental game spaces are about the experience of experimenting, about the interaction and the playfulness (Politopoulos et al. 2023). The products of our project are openly available to all experts to enter this reconstruction and, in turn, play with it themselves, interact with the



FIGURE 25.2: Aerial view of fort *Matilo* as constructed in RoMinecraft.

environment, the ideas, and the experiences of the other players, and add their own ideas and knowledge in it. RoMinecraft is, thus, a collaborative experimental space which combines archaeological outreach with scientific research that happens not within the confines of academia, but as a product of social engagement between academics and the public at large.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been argued that Roman video games, and video games at large, can be experimental spaces for archaeological research as well as outreach and democratization of the past. In one sense, the difference between Roman video games and experimental archaeology is one of degree: they differ in their sphere of activity ('leisure' vs 'professional') and stated aims. Both, however, are types of simulative activities in practice that are not conceptually at odds with each other. Rather, both activities aim to create an experience of the past today, through which it is possible to get a glimpse of how something worked, how something was made, how something felt in the past.

Roman video games offer experimental spaces in which versions of Roman histories can be simulated, hypotheses tested, or historical processes reflected creatively. They allow players to perform, to become agents of the time, and through that performance experience historical events. They can also be social events, spaces where individuals collaboratively rebuild instances of the Roman past, both between scholars, but also and crucially with a wider audience.

The tools and actions afforded by games are not in the same wheelhouse as the type of formal methodologies that underpin experimental archaeology. Experimental Roman archaeologists need to at least be tangentially aware of the specific nature of the experiments or simulations going on in Roman video games – not only because they can

be part of outreach strategies, but also because they constitute a loose form of research on the Roman past by a global community, which is, in its own way, data-driven, inquiry-led and conclusion-oriented.

Games are always data-driven, by virtue of being software that does not function without recourse to databases programmed in there by game developers. As this chapter has shown, in the case of Roman video games, game variables are at least partly based on historical and archaeological data about the Roman past. This data is the bedrock for playful experimentation that starts with an inquiry based either on a challenge the game sets the players or a challenge they set for themselves – e.g. in *Imperator: Rome* ‘How can the player grow a regional polity into an empire that stretches across the Mediterranean?’ or in *RoMeincraft* ‘What materials, shapes and colour blocks do I need to craft what I think a Roman fort looks like?’ As in research, a successful end to this line of inquiry will give the player some (sometimes deep) insights into the way Roman culture and society worked.

This is why it is important to note that Roman video games, traditionally and currently, are relatively narrow in scope. As has been shown in the review of early instances of Roman video games and the in-depth discussion of *Imperator: Rome*, the experiences presented tend to be relatively linear and teleological and frequently set around the more militaristic aspects of Roman cultures and societies. While there is a lot of simulational play to be done within those games and alternative histories to arrive at, these still do not stray too far from the stereotypical representation of Rome as superpower of the time, nor do they deviate in focusing on other contemporary cultures. It has also been demonstrated, however, that players do want to experience these other histories, and experiment with variations of Roman histories through player-developed mods. These smaller, bottom-up initiatives mark a point where the insights and methodologies of Roman experimental archaeology can be most fruitfully used for intervention in the frequently passionate community that has formed around this popular video game past.

This desire of players to play and engage creatively with the Roman past highlights the potential of video games as experimental spaces and can spark collaborative projects such as *RoMeincraft* (Politopoulos et al. 2023). Roman video games can offer the performativity, the collaboration, the playfulness, the creativity and the fun – components that will only bolster the toolset of experimental archaeology.

NOTES

1. <https://www.playthepast.org/> (accessed 16 August 2023).
2. <https://store.steampowered.com/> (accessed 16 August 2023).
3. Tags on Steam are given to games by its more than 100 million users from a pool of more than 300 available tags. They are used by Steam to recommend games to its users, but can also be used as rough indication of the main contents of a game. However, only the more popular of more than 50,000 games on Steam are tagged in the first place. In short, a game that is not tagged with ‘Rome’ could still mean that it is in fact a game with ‘Roman’ content.
4. Steam, ‘Imperator Rome’, https://store.steampowered.com/app/859580/Imperator_Rome/ (accessed 16 August 2023).
5. In the case of ‘Iron man mode’, which does not allow the player to have multiple saves. In the case of the regular mode, one can also decide to revert back to an earlier save, before their hardships began.

6. Based upon the Menander update of *Imperator: Rome*, released on 11 August 2020, https://imperator.paradoxwikis.com/Patch_1.5 (accessed 16 August 2023).
7. For a demonstration of a long run of the observer mode, see VALUE Foundation vlog, 'Exploring Imperator: Rome; The Perfect Adversaries Pt.2', <https://youtu.be/fROsZzaBQJ4> (accessed 16 August 2023).
8. Steam, 'Imperator Rome workshop', <https://steamcommunity.com/workshop/browse/?appid=859580&searchtext=&childpublishedfileid=0&browsesort=textsearch§ion=items> (accessed 16 August 2023).
9. Steam, 'Interesting histories', <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2224295560&searchtext=interesting>. Steam, 'Interesting treasures', <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2254903759&searchtext=interesting> (both accessed 16 August 2023).
10. Steam, '50 per cent Manpower and Half Unit Scale Mod (1.5)', <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2228813353&searchtext=smaller> (accessed 16 August 2023).
11. Steam 'Realistic Growth and Travel', <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2200081489&searchtext=travel> (accessed 16 August 2023).
12. Steam, 'Jozef's immersive Etruria', <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1896691398&searchtext=etruria> or 'Jozef's split Etruria', <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2407676143&searchtext=etruria> (accessed 16 August 2023).
13. JFD has a pack with leader changes for many CIVs: <https://steamcommunity.com/workshop/filedetails/?id=896454049> (accessed 16 August 2023).
14. <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1655044827&searchtext=Rome> (accessed 16 August 2023).
15. The title is a word play: it combines a Dutch word for Romans – Romeinen – with Minecraft.
16. The VALUE is a Dutch non-profit organization that operates internationally. The foundation brings out the potential of knowledge arising from play. More about the foundation and its activities can be found here: <https://value-foundation.org/about-the-value-foundation/> (accessed 16 August 2023).
17. 'Frontiers of the Roman Empire – The Lower German Limes', <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1631/> (accessed 16 August 2023).

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