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The Potential of Made-For-School History-Oriented Video Games in the Classroom: The Case of *Mission US*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the potential of *Mission US*, a history-oriented video game, to foster historical thinking and reasoning skills in K-12 students. Historical thinking, which involves reasoning like historians, is a critical component of disciplinary literacy in history education. The game offers students interactive experiences by placing them in historical scenarios like the American Revolutionary War, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement, allowing them to engage in historical perspective-taking, cause and consequence analysis, and use of primary source evidence. Through a combination of content analysis and discourse analysis of gameplay, the study assessed how effectively the game mechanics support students in practicing historical thinking. Findings suggest *Mission US* provides limited but meaningful opportunities for deep engagement in historical thinking. The game includes numerous historical facts and scenarios but often falls short of requiring complex analysis or impactful decision-making. While mechanics such as dialogue selection and map navigation encourage perspective-taking, many interactions remain surface-level. The study concludes that the game, when used in conjunction with broader educational strategies, can enhance students' historical thinking skills but is less effective as a stand-alone teaching tool. The research highlights the importance of teacher involvement in guiding students through the game's content. Effective integration of the game into classrooms should include guided play sessions, collaborative learning, and reflective activities that bridge the gap between gameplay and real-world historical analysis. This study emphasizes the need for supplementary resources and careful handling of sensitive historical topics to fully realize the educational potential of history-oriented video games.

Keywords: video games; historical thinking; curriculum; simulation games; social studies education

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THE RESEARCH

Could video games be places for students to practice historical thinking skills? For decades, the terms *historical thinking* and *historical reasoning* have been cited by scholars, educators, and policymakers as goals for history learning that expand beyond mere knowledge of historical facts. Definitions of historical thinking vary (Lévesque & Clark, 2018), but they generally involve discussions of the cognitive processes involved in historical work. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies' *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* (2013) described historical thinking as a "process of chronological reasoning, which means wrestling with issues of causality, connections, significance, and context with the goal of developing credible explanations of historical events and developments based on reasoned interpretation of evidence" (p. 45).

Within these conceptions of historical thinking, some scholars have identified sets of historical thinking skills and understandings to guide teachers and students in historical work. For example, the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness (n.d.) identified six "historical thinking concepts," including "take historical perspectives" and "understand the ethical dimension of historical interpretations" (see https://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concepts); similarly, van Drie and van Boxtel (2007) described a historical reasoning framework with six components, including "contextualization" and "using sources" (p. 89). Taken together, these skills represent critical elements of literacy in history and are an important aim of ambitious history teaching (Blevins et al., 2020; Wineburg, 2001). Skills such as analyzing evidence, considering perspectives, and developing historical arguments are included in many standards documents throughout North America and Europe, as well as national curricular documents such as the *C3 Framework*. Video games, with their potential for engagement and perspective-taking (Dishon & Kafai, 2020), may be worthwhile spaces to engage students in such historical thinking work (McCall, 2022).

We explored the educational potential of the history-oriented video game *Mission US* (https://www.mission-us.org/) in fostering historical thinking skills in K-12 students (Kessner & Harris, 2022). The game, developed for schools, provides interactive experiences where students take on the roles of historical figures in various missions set in significant historical contexts, such as the American Revolutionary War, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement. The game aims

to offer players opportunities to develop historical thinking skills, such as perspective-taking, analyzing cause and consequence, and using primary source evidence.

For our study, we used directed content analysis by playing the game's missions multiple times and generating gameplay videos using screen-capture software. We counted "choice points" (where players had to make a choice to drive the game) and, within those, "history-oriented choice points." We analyzed history-oriented choice points for alignment with historical thinking skills. We also identified five types of game mechanics (how players take in-game actions): dialogue selection, probing, sorting, map navigation, and trading. We then engaged in additional analysis to examine how effectively the mechanics offered opportunities for students to practice historical thinking, or to "think like a historian," as the game's creators intended (see Thirteen Productions, 2025).

FINDINGS

We found *Mission US* offered limited but meaningful opportunities for students to engage in historical thinking. While the game included historical content and allowed players to interact with historical scenarios like the Boston Massacre, it did not consistently require students to engage deeply with the material. Instead, many of the game's interactions revolved around surface-level engagement, such as acquiring historical facts or making simple choices that did not significantly impact the game's outcome. We concluded that while *Mission US* presents opportunities for learning, it works best when incorporated as part of a larger educational framework rather than as a stand-alone tool. Table 1 shows some of the historical thinking skills that we identified in the missions, with suggestions for how teachers could connect them to their larger instructional context.

Table 1

Opportunities to Practice Historical Thinking Skills by Mission

Mission	Historical Context	AHQ	Source	Arg	PT	Instructional Suggestions
I. For Crown or Colony	1770 Lead-up to the American Revolutionary War	21	6	5	9	Students and teachers could work on argumentation by discussing the courtroom discussion at the end of Part 5 and considering stronger alternatives and/or

						identifying the claims and warrants used in the scene.
II. Flight to Freedom	1848 The American South at the end of the Antebellum Era	28	1	0	29	Students and teachers could sharpen their inquiry skills by practicing asking historical questions about the game content throughout their gameplay, writing them down each play session, and then voting on the most interesting one to guide a wraparound inquiry activity.
III. A Cheyenne Odyssey	1866 Encroachment of White settlers,' railroads, and the United States military upon ancestral Indigenous lands during Westward Expansion	31	0	1	56	Students could practice perspective-taking by analyzing White settler narratives about Westward Expansion and having students compare those narratives to their in-game experiences as the avatar Little Fox, a Northern Cheyenne boy, through writing or discussion
IV. City of Immigrants	1907 New York City, Industrialization, and Immigration	24	1	3	33	Students could engage in perspective-taking by considering the perspective of the game avatar, Lena, a young Russian immigrant, and comparing it to other immigrants' stories in this period, such as Chinese, Irish, or Italian immigrants.

						Students could also draw on their own family histories and compare them to their experience playing as Lena.
V. Up from Dust	1929 Great Depression, Dust Bowl	56	24	0	36	Since this mission heavily features sources, students could identify different types of sources in the mission and compare them to ones they have examined in class. Teachers could generate inquiry questions for a gallery walk and have students match in-game sources to the questions the sources could contribute to answering.

Notes. A) There were five missions when we conducted our study. There are seven at the time of this writing. B) This is a sample of some of the historical thinking skills we analyzed in our study: AHQ = asking historical questions; Source = using sources; Arg = argumentation; PT = perspective-taking.

Our study found that key game mechanics, such as dialogue selection and map navigation, provided some opportunities for deeper engagement. Students could consider historical perspectives or navigate historical events through these mechanics, but these moments were unevenly distributed across the game's missions. The trading and sorting mechanics, which involved interacting with historical figures and making decisions based on their roles, showed promise for engaging students in more complex historical thinking. However, the game often failed to provide immediate feedback or meaningful consequences for players' decisions, limiting the depth of learning. Our study highlights the tension between the game's educational aspirations and its practical limitations. While the game is designed to promote historical thinking, many of the opportunities to practice these skills were implicit rather than integral to gameplay. We suggest games like *Mission US* are most effective when leveraged as part of a broader learning ecology, where teachers can scaffold students' understanding and guide them through historical thinking processes.

Still, we identified 588 opportunities for students to make choices about historical content, which adds up to 1.6 times per minute of gameplay. Considering these numbers in the context of a typical 50-minute history class, it adds up to 78 history-relevant choices per class period. Despite not all of these choices being particularly deep, we point out that such engagement remains impressive compared to more traditional forms of teaching and learning about history.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

To effectively integrate *Mission US* into K-12 classrooms, teachers should view the game as part of a whole, rather than as a standalone activity. *Mission US's* potential lies in its ability to immerse students in historical scenarios, offering a dynamic way to engage with the past. Nevertheless, to foster genuine historical thinking, teachers will need to carefully structure wraparound classroom activities to ensure students are not simply playing, but critically engaging with the content. In what follows, we provide some examples of classroom structures that could guide such engagement.

Guided Group Play Sessions

Teachers may opt to play the game as a whole class, projecting the game from a classroom computer. This could be particularly useful in classrooms with limited access to technology. During gameplay, teachers can pause at critical moments to facilitate class discussions. For instance, when students are asked to choose whether to help a British soldier or a patriot in the American Revolution (Mission I), teachers can encourage them to consider the historical implications of each choice. By asking questions like, "How might this decision affect public perception of the revolution?" or "What would the consequences be for ordinary people like your character?" teachers can guide students toward deeper historical thinking.

Collaborative Play

Students can also play in pairs or triads, with the stipulation that students come to agreements on in-game choices before proceeding. This format retains the value of collaborative discussion and decision-making, which itself requires higher-order reasoning. This approach backgrounds teacher expertise more than does a group play session, but it foregrounds student agency. Additionally, such a participant structure creates opportunities for more students to actively participate, as opposed to a whole-group dynamic in which some students may be less comfortable contributing.

Post-Game Reflection

After completing a mission, students should engage in reflective activities that encourage them to think critically about their experiences. Activities could include writing assignments where students compare their in-game decisions to the actions of real historical figures or debates where they defend their choices using evidence from the game and primary sources. Students could also discuss the different types of game mechanics (e.g., dialogue selection, sorting) and how they allowed for them to better understand (or not) the historical period. These activities help bridge the gap between the virtual world and real-world historical analysis.

Incorporating Other Resources

The *Mission US* website offers several companion resources (https://www.mission-us.org/teach/). The primary source documents they provide teachers can be critical for developing historical thinking skills. Teachers could also pair gameplay with other resources like scholarly articles or documentaries. For example, students playing Mission V on the Great Depression could also analyze photographs from the Dust Bowl, or read excerpts from firsthand accounts of the era. By comparing these materials with their in-game experience, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of the period. A particularly useful strategy Taylor used when using *Mission US* in his middle school classroom was to have students play the game in pairs and then work together to use the companion documents to answer questions like, “How accurate is this mission? Where did the developers get it right? Get it wrong?” Using primary source documents in this way to construct historical arguments about the accuracy of historically themed new media not only supports students’ development of disciplinary literacy in history, but also gives students practice interrogating the use of history in popular media—a crucial skill for citizenship in the 21st century.

Cross-Curricular Connections

The game’s missions provide opportunities for cross-curricular learning, particularly with subjects like English and geography. For example, students could write creative narratives from the perspective of their in-game characters, incorporating historical details they learned during the mission. In geography, students might map the locations they visited in the game and discuss how geography influenced historical events, such as the escape routes used by enslaved people in Mission II, which is set before the Civil War.

Addressing Sensitive Topics

Some missions in *Mission US* deal with sensitive topics, such as enslavement and Indigenous displacement. In fact, the Flight to Freedom mission, which deals with such difficult histories, has been removed from the *Mission US* website at the time of writing pending redesign (https://www.mission-us.org/games/flight-to-freedom/), possibly due to these very concerns of racialized (re)trauma. Teachers should approach these topics with care, ensuring students understand the historical trauma associated with these events. Classroom discussions could focus on the ethical dimensions of these issues, encouraging students to consider the long-term effects of historical injustices. Teachers can also use these moments to discuss how history is represented in media, prompting students to critically evaluate the game's portrayal of complex topics. As sensitive topics and difficult histories always carry potential for (re)traumatization (Stoddard, 2021), teachers should emphasize thoughtfulness and exercise their professional discretion in choosing how and whether to attend to these topics, particularly in the context of a game, which could present the appearance of trivializing historical injustice.

CONCLUSION

Mission US can be a valuable tool for engaging students in historical thinking, but it should be used strategically within a well-planned curriculum. By providing historical context, guiding students through critical moments, and incorporating supplementary materials, teachers can help students move beyond surface-level engagement and develop deeper historical thinking skills.

Q & A with Taylor Kessner & Lauren Harris

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

How can history-oriented video games be integrated into the inquiry arc of the *C3 Framework*?

Taylor & Lauren's Response:

Video games make excellent objects of inquiry from several perspectives—or on several levels, if you will. A "level one" approach could use a video game to think about how accurately or faithfully it portrays events, concepts, or phenomena. For a game like *Mission US*, teachers and students could couple gameplay with more traditional approaches to inquiry using primary source documents to answer questions like, "Does *Mission US* provide an accurate representation of the Great Depression?" (Mission V: Up from Dust). Games can be used in this same way for any of

the content areas described in the *C3 Framework*; for example, the game *Offworld Trading Company* for economics. On a second level, teachers and students can get more "meta." Games are designed interactions within designed environments, and those designs are undertaken in a particular time and place, which influences to a significant degree what stories games ultimately tell. Teachers and students could look at history-themed games and think about the game designers' choices about the versions of history they tell and how the zeitgeist in which these games were designed influenced those choices. As a brief example, a recent project of Taylor's showed how Ubisoft, the developers of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, made design choices in the last decade that resulted in significantly greater representation of Queer folks, even when such public representation would have been unlikely according to the historical record (Root-Williams et al., 2024). This second level of inquiry gives teachers and students the opportunity to think deeply about the interplay between the present and the past and the historical narratives that result from that interplay.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

Games and simulations are often billed as "empathy machines" which facilitate student perspective-taking through immersive experiences. What are the potentials of history-oriented video games to support student understanding and the use of other types of historical thinking?

Taylor & Lauren's Response:

Encouraging perspective-taking through immersive experiences is precisely what games are good at. In fact, games are not actually very good at the things schools traditionally focus on, like content acquisition, because content acquisition often requires lots of repetition, something good, engaging games typically avoid in order to maximize interest and minimize boredom. Rather, games are good at putting players into the shoes of someone else in a different situation. Then, playing as that person who has their own identity, needs, wants, goals, and tools for achieving these, all of which are different from the player's lived experience, gives players a sense of what it is to live in a certain world as a certain kind of person. Though we focused in our study on historical thinking (see Wineburg, 1991a, 1991b, 2001) and reasoning (see van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018), there are other frameworks worth considering in both scholarship and teaching, such as historical empathy (Endacott and Brooks, 2018) and historical consciousness (Nordgren, 2016; Rüsen, 2004).

Although not focused on a made-for-school game, Gilbert's (2019) study of students' developing a sense of historical empathy through playing *Assassin's Creed* exemplifies this potential. Historical empathy, or the "process of students' cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions" (Endacott & Brooks, 2018, p. 209), may be one of the most salient affordances of video games in history and social studies education. These in-game experiences become a framework within which new information, understandings, and ways of thinking can fit, increasing the kind of understandings about the past and the world that even schools strive for. In addition to perspective-taking, games can potentially engage students in other types of historical thinking, as we found in this study (see Table 1). Previous scholarship on games and simulations for teaching history has also identified potential historical thinking opportunities. Kurt Squire's (2011) seminal work using *Civilization* in an after-school program showed how history-themed games can be used to develop deep understandings of the complex relationship between context and cause and effect. Teachers might consider pairing a game like *Civilization* with an anchor text like *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond, 1997) or *Day of Empire* (Chua, 2007) to support intertextual activities (Gee, 2003) that help learners come to understand the relationship between events, concepts, and phenomena across texts and genres. Such depth of appreciation for the relationship between the past, the present, and how we narrate each in relation to each other forms the bedrock of historical consciousness. In particular, placing students into simulated worlds, particularly when we give them roles and tools to solve problems embedded within historical narratives, positions them to develop a deep understanding of how citizens and leaders tell certain stories about the past to shape the present and future.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

What specific examples can you provide about where the game did not engage students in deep historical thinking? Can you provide suggestions on how to provide the scaffolding needed to do so?

Taylor & Lauren's Response:

Frankly, *most* of the game does not engage players in deep historical thinking—and that is actually okay. For example, in Mission I: For Crown or Colony?, players probably are not thinking historically when they meet Paul Revere, and he introduces himself to the player as a member of the Sons of Liberty. This interaction with Paul Revere is simply a moment in which the player

gets some information that becomes relevant later, but, at the time, there really is not much for the player to do with that piece of information. But again, that is okay. Just like not every line in a great work of literature can be the apex of literary devices, and just like not every moment of a video game is a boss battle, historical thinking necessarily needs some basic facts with which students can reason. The best way to scaffold students in thinking historically about games is to provide wraparound activities like the kind we discuss in Table 1 and our answer to Question #4.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

What suggestions for "wraparound classroom activities" do you recommend to ensure students not simply play, but critically engage with the content?

Taylor & Lauren's Response:

When designing learning experiences for students, we often think about the phrase, "the task on the table." If the task on the table for students is simply to play the game, that is really all we can reasonably expect many of them to do. To get students to think historically about the game, teachers need to put a task on the table that requires students to think historically. Here is where teachers can turn back to the idea of inquiry as outlined in the *C3 Framework* and elsewhere: ask students a question that requires them to think historically about the content and representations within the game and give them primary source documents to help them do that thinking. As an example, when I (Taylor) taught with *Mission US* in my 7th grade U.S. History classroom, I found primary source documents to use alongside the game. I had a variety of approaches for using these documents with the game, depending on where we were in the year—i.e., how comfortable my students were with historical thinking at any given point in the year. Early on, I would give them questions and specific document sets to guide their inquiry. In Mission I: For Crown or Colony?, for example, I asked, "What happened at the 'Boston Massacre?'" and, "How does the *Mission US* representation of the Boston Massacre compare to what you found?" and I would pair those questions with *Mission US* gameplay and historical sources like Paul Revere's engraving of the event and recorded eyewitness accounts. This gives students opportunities to engage in historical thinking and historical literacy skills like sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating (see Reisman & Wineburg, 2008; Wineburg, 2001 for more on these skills).

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

How can teachers engage students in analyzing narrative and representation in history-oriented video games?

Taylor & Lauren's Response:

Overall, *Mission US* does a good job of including diverse perspectives in U.S. history. For example, players engage Mission II: Flight to Freedom as a young Black girl, Lucy, who is fleeing enslavement in the American South. (However, it is worth noting this mission is, at the time of this writing, unavailable and undergoing revision). And, in Mission III: A Cheyenne Odyssey, players play as Little Fox, a young Northern Cheyenne boy experiencing the gradual movement west of White settlers. While students typically learn about Westward Expansion in the context of, for example, Manifest Destiny, Mission III gives students the opportunity to experience and further examine the counternarrative to this Eurocentric justification of expansion into the ancestral lands of Indigenous peoples. But even in Mission I: For Crown or Colony?, though players play as a young White boy in Boston, they encounter a fictionalized Phyllis Wheatley, the first published Black female poet. Through this meeting, the game confronts players with a counter to the oft-assumed narrative of Black illiteracy in the American colonies. Missions added after our study focus on the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the experiences of Japanese Americans forced into camps during World War II. Teachers can help students think about narrative and representation in these contexts by working with students around questions like, "What was life like for Black folks in the American colonies, and how does that compare to the portrayal in *Mission US*?" In the *Assassin's Creed* study (Root-Williams et al., 2024) we mentioned as part of our response to Question #1, Taylor and colleagues asked how the representation of Queer folks had evolved in the series amidst the changing attitudes of the modern era, finding that in some of the games Queer folks are over-represented when viewed in light of the historical record concerning how public-facing one could be with their sexual orientation, leading to a potentially harmful flattening of Queer experience historically. Teachers could ask similar questions about this and other kinds of representation in games, like, "Does *Mission US*' choice to present Phyllis Wheatley in the game potentially paint a sanitized narrative of the Black experience in the American Colonies?"

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I am an Assistant Professor of Secondary Social Studies Education at SUNY Geneseo and a former middle and high school social studies teacher. As a K-12 teacher I utilized games- and simulations-based learning, which has been the focus of my academic career since. My recent work has examined how avatar identity and game mechanics create opportunities for players (learners) to experience visceral emotion and take up opportunities to practice using disciplinary skills in dynamic environments. In my free time, I enjoy spending time with my daughter and wife, hiking and camping with my dog, playing guitar and piano, and playing video games.

Lauren McArthur Harris

I am a Professor of History Education at Arizona State University and a former 9th-grade world history teacher. Throughout my career, I have researched representations of history in curricular resources and investigated how teachers teach history in schools. Recent scholarship has focused on teachers' use of online resources and the experiences of educators on state social studies standards writing committees. I am the co-editor of *Teaching Difficult Histories in Difficult Times: Stories of Practice* (link). I enjoy hiking, running, and traveling with my husband and daughter.