School of Computing, Engineering, and the Built Environment
Edinburgh Napier University

PHD STUDENT PROJECT

Funding and application details

Funding status: Self funded students only

Application instructions:
Detailed instructions are available at https://blogs.napier.ac.uk/scebe-research/available-phd-student-projects/

Prospective candidates are encouraged to contact the Director of Studies (see details below) to discuss the project and their suitability for it.

Project details

Supervisory Team:
- DIRECTOR OF STUDY: Iain Donald (Email: I.Donald@napier.ac.uk)
- 2ND SUPERVISOR: Hanne Wagner

Subject Group: Applied informatics

Research Areas: Computer Science (Videogames), Computer Science (Human Computer Interaction)

Project Title: Playing in the Past: Investigating User Experience Design in Historical Games

Project description:
Historical Games continue to find critical and commercial success. Game series such as Assassin's Creed, Red Dead Redemption, Total War, and Civilisation are amongst the most recognisable forms of popular history. Independent games, such as This War of Mine, My Child Lebensborn, Through the Darkest of Times and Where the Water Tastes Like Wine, have proven particularly adept at producing new and interesting ways of presenting history. Over the past decade Historical Game Studies has prospered as a field. Key texts examine how the past is represented and played with (Kapell & Ellliot 2013, Chapman 2016, Chapman et

al 2017, Hartman et al 2020), perceptions of historical accuracy and authenticity (Copplestone 2017, Lorber & Zimmermann 2020) and the manufacturing of history in and around games (Wright 2023). Design analysis of history has often focused on the content and narrative design. Less attention has been paid to the to the game mechanics and user experience design of historical games.

This project aims to investigate existing game mechanics and user experience techniques to determine good practice and define 'historical game design' beyond narrative design, content creation and the game setting. A core question will expand on recent scholarship (Keogh 2018, Schniz 2021) to consider what is a historical game experience? The project will consider how design practices use, interpret and present historical information through play. Indicative research questions include:

- How do games use archival material in their representation of the past? How are different modes of user experience design utilised to present historical information in games?
- What is the most effective mode of 'citation' for players? What makes players engage or ignore evidence?
- How do the game mechanics influence player perceptions of the history? What makes them representative/subversive of history?
- Where does the historical context fit within existing processes for designing and developing games (such as the RITE model Rapid Iterative Testing and Evaluation)
- How do we evaluate historical game UX (history content, fun, usability)? How are these best presented to players to establish a game and content as historical

Games research is inherently cross- and inter-disciplinary. It is anticipated that the PhD will undertake a mixed methodological approach utilising a combination of practice-based, quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Prototyping will be influenced by contemporary game approaches, tested with users and iterated on to establish good practice. A wide range of tools and techniques can be employed with consideration of recent developments in artificial intelligence chatbots and text-to-image-generation.

This practice-based component will identify new opportunities and challenges for game creators, academics and cultural heritage organisations.

Applications are invited from candidates that have an interest in the research, design, development, and evaluation of a digital experience. Candidates should have good creative design and software development skills, as well as experience in appropriate research methods. Prospective applicants are encouraged to contact the Supervisor before submitting their applications.

Applications should make it clear the project you are applying for and the name of the supervisors.

References:
[1] Chapman, A. (2016). Digital games as history: How videogames represent the past and offer access to historical practice. Routledge.
[2] Chapman, A., Foka, A., and Westin, J. (2017) Introduction: What is historical game studies? Rethinking History 21(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638
[3] Copplestone, T. J. (2017). But that's not accurate: the differing perceptions of accuracy in cultural-heritage videogames between creators, consumers and critics. Rethinking History, 21(3), 415-438.

[4] Hartman, A., Tulloch, R., & Young, H. (2021). Video games as public history: archives, empathy and affinity. Game Studies, 21(4).

[5] Kapell, M. W., & Elliott, A. B. (Eds.). (2013). Playing with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

[6] Keogh, B. (2018). A play of bodies: How we perceive videogames. MIT Press.

[7] Lorber, M., & Zimmermann, F. (Eds.). (2020). History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past (Vol. 12). Transcript Verlag.

[8] Schniz, F. (2021) What is a Videogame Experience? A Peripatetic Acknowledgement of Inner Sentiments in Virtual Worlds. PhD Dissertation, University of Klagenfurt

[9] Wright, E. (2022). Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity. DeGruyter.

Candidate characteristics

Education:

A first-class honours degree, or a distinction at master level, or equivalent achievements in Game Design, Game Development, Computer Science, Human-Computer Interaction, Digital Media, or User Experience Design.

Subject knowledge:
- User Experience research
- Design principles
- Digital games

Essential attributes:
- Experience of fundamental user experience design and user research methods
- Competent in multidisciplinary research, game design or visual communication
- Knowledge of history, historical games, games studies
- Good written and oral communication skills
- Strong motivation, with evidence of independent research skills relevant to the project
- Good time management

Desirable attributes:
- Practical experience in game or digital experience design and analysis
- Practice-based, qualitative and/or quantitative research methods
- Awareness of game development processes and interest in gaming experiences