eludamos
Journal for Computer Game Culture
Vol. 16, No. 2 (2025)

eludamos.org

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Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 16, issue 2 (2025), pp. 333–339

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The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism by Robert Houghton (D. S. Brewer, 2024)

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Abstract

A review of Robert Houghton's book *The Middle Ages in Computer Games: Ludic Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism.* Published by D. S. Brewer, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-84384-729-8, 355 pages.

Keywords

Medievalism; ludic medievalism; game studies; game genre; historiography; interactive pedagogy; game mechanics

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Computer games that represent a medieval or medieval-like world are caught, as other media are, between authentic representation on one side and practical demands and artistic expression on the other. Developers choose which aspects of the Middle Ages to prioritize in their gameworlds and which aspects to ignore or alter. Little scholarship has been devoted to addressing medievalist computer games beyond their accuracy or authenticity to their source materials and/or historical reality. Indeed, there is hardly any scholarship that sets up a schema or framework by which game studies scholars and historians can both explore, examine, and analyze such medievalist computer games. Such is the gap in game studies frameworks which Robert Houghton seeks to fill in his 2024 book *The Middle Ages in Computer Games*. Indeed, this new book is a continuation and expansion on Houghton's 2023 edited collection *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games*, which he begins by declaring, "The study of the Middle Ages in modern games is no longer a new field" (Houghton 2023, p. 1). While no longer brand new, the field is still young, and Houghton seeks to provide a groundwork for future study.

Eludamos Vol. 16, No. 2 (2025), pp. 333–339
https://doi.org/10.7557/ejcgc.v16i2.8334

Houghton presents his book as the beginning of a new subfield worthy of study, a necessary text as game studies continues to rise in the academy and as more and more scholars from various fields begin to analyze games through their own lenses. The title is general in order to show just how wide and how important the current work truly is. Houghton's goal is not, as he says, to present a "case-study approach" to any games (2024, p. 29). Nor is it an "encyclopedic catalogue of medievalist games and tropes" (2024, p. 29). Rather, Houghton made a "deliberate choice" to privilege "breadth over depth" and "create a broad thematic survey with reference to a substantial range of games, similar to the approach utilised by Wainwright and Kempshall" (2024, p. 29). There, he refers to A. Martin Wainwright's 2019 book *Virtual History: How Videogames Portray the Past* and Chris Kempshall's 2015 book *The First World War in Computer Games*. Houghton situates his book as a continuation in style from those, even paraphrasing Kempshall's apt title, while in content he sets out an invitation or instigation for further discussion and scholarship.

Houghton accomplishes this instigation by leading the reader, chapter by chapter, through several possible themes, frameworks, or tropes worthy of study within any single game or group of games. The introduction and first two chapters establish Houghton's credentials and present the reason for this text, how to analyze games and gameplay, and the scope of medievalism within game genres. They are broad chapters, and Houghton never offers a full or deep examination of any particular game, rather sticking to brief summaries or descriptions as he lists the games pertinent to any given theme or larger concept. Other chapters are more specific in their lenses and approaches—such as 'Combat and Warfare', 'Science, Technology, and the Dark Ages', 'Race and Nationality', and more—but his discussion of individual games remains, understandably, surface-level.

The central focus of *The Middle Ages in Computer Games* is methodology, not specific textual or adaptation analysis. Houghton clearly and effectively demonstrates and provides examples for the major trends and habits of medievalist computer games, based on the aspects of the medieval world which those games represent or adapt. Gender, religious practice, and the position of rulers all receive their due attention. The benefit of Houghton's newest project is clear from his own careful and abundant citations: he has built, coagulated, and now reproduced the litany of game studies and medievalist scholarship that preceded this project (including his previous work). As a foundational text for a new subfield of ludic medievalism, it has no peer. Its breadth and his confidence in that breadth are commendable in themselves; even more praiseworthy are the ways in which Houghton engages with contemporary scholarship and establishes the main themes and lenses of academic discussion from a bird's eye view. Houghton establishes these themes and lenses through careful and introductory observation and examination, rather than individual textual or mechanical analysis (he offers these broadly and briefly, and only at some points throughout the book). His claims in each chapter—and indeed, for the book itself—are structured to erect a foundation of relatively low-level and basic axioms. His

claims say little brand new in themselves, but they set the groundwork for more detailed and precise scholarship to come afterward.

The Middle Ages in Computer Games similarly presents very few precise, detailed, and new claims about any game. Some scholars may, therefore, find some of Houghton's brief descriptions of some games either imprecise or without their deserved complexity. Houghton himself admits that his approach for the whole book will necessarily lose "detail and nuance" (2024, p. 29) in his treatment of games and of theoretical lenses. The book's purpose as a survey of methods and games and as a foundation for future scholarship produces short and unnuanced mentions of games. For example, when differentiating between games that present a fully magical world and ones that present a more mundane one, Houghton briefly describes *Pentiment* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2022) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018) as two of those rare "games that eschew the supernatural" (2024, p. 60). His privileging breadth over depth helps his rhetorical goals here, despite the loss of a detailed view of *Pentiment*'s complex dealings with the supernatural. Taking two extra paragraphs to describe, in detail and with textual evidence, how *Pentiment* features ecstatic dream visions in every act and a mystical abstract relationship with space and movement in its final moments would not further support any of Houghton's arguments or observations. The trend for medievalist games to portray a world filled with magic is still prevalent, and *Pentiment* (generally speaking) is still a rare exception to that trend.

Like the short references, examples, and one-off suggestions of games, Houghton's claims for the entire book and for each individual chapter are more observational than argumentative. His arguments themselves are relatively surface-level and are meant only to begin critical thought and ignite interest. The nature of these claims is due to the book's purpose as a grand view of scholarship and thematic approaches, and they succeed in inspiring the reader to go the next steps on their own. That is, the claims are less for Houghton to demonstrate his own encyclopedic and omniscient grasp over all of ludic medievalism—they are more for Houghton to gesture to his audience, invite them to the conversation, and then hand off some of the reins. There is always an implication—sometimes outright said—that there is more to explore here and better, deeper theses to find. I expect more detailed analyses of these brief mentions to come from Houghton, his collaborators from *Playing the Middle Ages*, and many more scholars inspired by this new text.

Middle Ages in Computer Games has a secondary use as an introduction to game studies and medievalism scholarship, particularly useful for those beginning their academic journeys now. The sheer volume of Houghton's bibliography and ludography at the end (together over 40 pages) and his constant references to previous scholarship (the introduction and every chapter average 150 footnotes each) function as a cultivated database of academic sources on game studies, medieval history, medievalism, adaptation studies, and other fields. Though Houghton himself acknowl-

edged that his book is not an encyclopedia—and surely, it would be nearly impossible to categorize and precisely summarize or describe every single computer game that depicts a gameworld and/or narrative that harkens back to the Middle Ages—his book nonetheless categorizes and describes hundreds of such games and, more importantly, thematic and theoretical scholarship.

The introduction itself is an introduction to ludic medievalism. It functions not only as an outline for the coming chapters, nor is it only a defense of Houghton's purposes and goals. In only 29 pages, Houghton takes the reader through every major thematic area which he will discuss more fully in the nine full chapters. He also cites an overwhelming plethora of scholarship, ranging in scope and time from Marc Prensky's 2006 book on computer games and education and Kaspar Pobłocki's 2002 article on the *Civilization* series (1991–2001) and imperialism to Alberto Venegas Ramos's 2022 article on games' reconstruction of the Middle Ages and Houghton's own first chapter in *Playing the Middle Ages*. Throughout the introduction (and the rest of the book), Houghton cites heavily across game studies subfields, including books on pedagogy and culture and the journals *Game Studies* and *Gamevironments*, and across medievalist scholarship, most notably the previous entries into the Medievalism series of monographs and collections to which *The Middle Ages in Computer Games* belongs. Right from the start, Houghton creates a network and review of literature spanning several interdisciplinary fields and even reaching back into the earliest days of true gaming-focused scholarship. In doing so, Houghton also exemplifies how to bring together the study of games and the study of medievalism, forming a rhetorical guide for engaging in his fledgling ludic medievalism. Any citation which a reader does not know and that is within a subfield of interest to that reader should be noted for future research.

Houghton begins the first chapter, 'Mechanical and Social Pressures', with a brief review of Espen Aarseth's "tripartite model of game elements:" gameplay, game-structure, and game-world (2024, p. 31). This first chapter outlines what makes games separate from other forms of media, and therefore what makes ludic medievalism worthy of its own approaches and name. Games are inherently interactive, are bound by unique mechanical rules and requirements, and are therefore also bound by social pressures, expectations, and identities. Ludic medievalism, like a medievalist study of modern films, must acknowledge the tropes and conventions born of audience expectation rather than historical authenticity. Unlike film or novels, however, ludic medievalism must also reckon with the fact that players are co-authors of ludonarrative, not merely audiences.

Chapter 2 discusses the "common ludic trends" in gaming genre conventions that affect medievalism (2024, p. 55). Houghton sets out broad genre trends in use for telling medievalist stories or creating a medieval-like gameworld, from roleplaying games and roguelikes to adventures and action-adventures. This chapter is best for scholars needing a quick grasp of the gaming genre landscape, including names, styles, and conventions.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss two themes that most affect medievalist gaming: combat and warfare, and technological stagnation. Medievalist games overwhelmingly present the period as overly violent and defined by war, in part due to videogames' tendency toward violent gameplay in the first place. Chapter 4 is a long discussion on the Dark Ages and its clash with games' promise that the player might improve at the playing itself and that the character might unlock better equipment, find better materials, and improve their skills. There was real technological and scientific advancement during the Middle Ages, even in Europe, but in popular culture the few examples of lost technology remain characteristic of modern ideas of the 'Dark Ages', like Roman concrete. Many medievalist games follow suit and give an individual player free rein to improve their skills and explore in a world defined by stagnation or even regression.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss more cultural matters represented simplistically in medievalist games: the aristocracy and the clergy/Church. Outside of a few authentic examples, computer games tend to portray a Middle Ages with the absolute rule of kings and a Church fundamentally conservative, restrictive, and powerful. Neither of these characterizations are authentic to the realities of medieval Europe: as Houghton explains, games in general overstate the power the Church held over individuals and mundane life, and royalty did not have absolute power—political authority lay with a decentralized nobility, and specifics differed across the centuries and the continent.

Chapter 7 explores how games represent moral decisions in a medieval worldview. It is almost always based on a Christian point-of-view, and even then usually a more modern progressive one with some older ideas for flavor. Violence is justified by a greater good or by an ultimate goal deemed worthy of bloodshed. The Church tends to control the moral systems with the game with a firm hand. Christian symbolism (demon horns, crosses, etc.) is often leveraged to indicate friend and foe in games. People of other faiths, when they are enemies, are often dehumanized (more on this in the next chapter) so that the player may act violently toward them without moral scruples.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore modern critical lenses in terms of ludic medievalism, exemplifying how to apply to videogames such frameworks as queer studies, gender and sexuality more broadly, nationalism, and orientalism. Games tend to alienate, otherize, or discard non-white and indigenous groups. Medievalist strategy games present clear and exact borders and rightful rulership, and games in general portray pride and ethnic awareness beyond one's city—even though these were not common until the rise of nationalism in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Games tend to overrepresent how white medieval populations were, even in European cities, despite consistent scholarly evidence that people in the Middle Ages traveled and moved like anyone else. Games also homogenize other races—most commonly in fantasy games, but in historical games as well. Games prioritize

European cultural artefacts as belonging to the global Middle Ages, as well, universalizing ideas, weaponry, and governance that can only be found in medieval Europe. Medievalist games similarly underrepresent women and queer characters, tending to allow them as main characters only when they subvert gender roles, such as dressing as men. While representation across the board has been improving, and more games are subverting the old trends, computer games still marginalize identities that are not straight white men, and they rely on stereotypes.

Houghton's grasp of gameplay, fan discourse, history, and potential theoretical lenses for so many games is also quite useful for younger scholars and reifies his ethos. For example, in the fourth chapter, 'Science, Technology, and the Dark Ages', Houghton refers to "peaceful barbarian encampments" within the *Civilization* franchise as "Goody Huts" (2024, p. 112). These "Goody Huts" grant the player small bonuses when the player guides a unit to the tile where the hut is. "Goody Huts" as a term is never used within the franchise itself, instead calling this type of tile feature (that is, some item or location placed on a single tile) an "Ancient Ruin" (*Civilization V* [Firaxis Games, 2010]), "Tribal Village", (*Civilization VI* [Firaxis Games, 2016]), or something similar. Because the games change what they call this tile feature, fans call them "Goody Huts" in general whenever it is appropriate to discuss them across several games. While I've been playing *Civilization* games for 15 years, I only first encountered "Goody Huts" online about a year ago. It is possible to enjoy the games and even study them critically without ever knowing the term. Houghton's use of "Goody Hut" demonstrates that either he has played *Civilization* for a while and has engaged in fan discourse online, or that he has read from scholars who have. In either case, he displays a care for and a love of the fan community and of the games themselves. Such knowledge of the gameplay across the franchise and of fan discourse can only support his applying theoretical lenses to the franchise. He knows it well, and he shows a connection to themes, not just enjoyment or the playing itself.

Houghton's seminal book *The Middles Ages in Computer Games*, then, is a great fit for the new scholar who needs guidance into the scholarly landscape, the graduate student still learning how to find gaming analysis in the themes they love, the established scholar seeking to expand their grasp of either medievalist or videogaming academic writing, and any scholar willing to heed and respond to Houghton's call to action. It is past time for medievalism to dive into the games that portray the Middle Ages, and Houghton's concept of ludic medievalism opens the door wider than ever before. If we are willing to follow in the first footsteps of this foundational text, as an even firmer basis coming from *Playing the Middle Ages*, we can only benefit the academy. Each of Houghton's references, examples, and one-off suggestions could become full projects in themselves. Each of his chapters could be expanded into monographs, and none are better posed at this moment than Houghton himself as the nucleus of this new study.

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