

Video games bring history back to life

Video games are the latest complementary resource to hit library shelves. Video games have been popular for more than 30 years, and three generations have grown up gaming. It's not just something for kids either, with the average age of today's gamer sitting comfortably at 35-years old, and the fastest growing group of gamers are older Australian's – aged 60 plus.

"We have found that by adding board and video game formats to library collections we are providing users with tools to build strong literacy practices while sharpening technical and critical thinking skills," said American Library Association (ALA) President Dr. Camila Alire. Last year, libraries across the United States actually participated in the largest simultaneous national video game tournament ever held. Kids were able to compete against players at other libraries and track their score while playing at their local library.

According to Michael Pachter, videogame analyst for Wedbush Morgan Securities, video games with a historical genre have made up about 10 per cent of overall sales over the past year.

The best examples of these historical games are Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* titles, renowned for their detailed narratives and historical settings. The latest game, *Assassin's Creed II*, launched in November 2009, brought a detailed reconstruction of renaissance Italy into the homes of millions.

Set in a time of considerable change across politics, architecture, art, and the creation of modern war and diplomacy, the game introduces key figures, buildings, and historical events of this era with painstaking accuracy through the eyes of hero, Ezio Auditore. As players progress through the game, they interact closely with a young Leonardo da Vinci who helps Ezio in his quest with various contraptions and gadgets – including Leonardo's flying machine.

"Most people picture an older, bearded man (made famous by his early 16th century self portrait), however our game begins in 1459 and ends in 1499 so the Leonardo players encounter and interact with is much younger," said Corey May, lead scriptwriter for the game at Ubisoft Montreal.

"Our Da Vinci is vivacious and manic, full of youthful exuberance and delighted by every new discovery he makes," added May. "He's still a genius – the very definition of a Renaissance man – but he's not perfect."

As with the original game that was set in the Middle East during the Third Crusades and sold over 9 million copies, *Assassin's Creed II* transports gamers into a fictional story that is rooted in real history and has been recreated with painstaking accuracy.

Marcello Simonette, historian and writer, served as tour guide for Ubisoft teams in Italy, who took over 30 000 pictures of buildings and iconic features to then recreate back in the studio.

An in-built 'wikipedia' or database enables gamers to walk up to any character or building, and access a history and information database that gives information on topics such as the medical practices of the time, the history behind the collages of the wooden Rialto bridge, or the creation of the breathtaking St Mark's Basilica.

"We worked a lot on the proportions of the Basilica to give the impression that it's as big as in reality. Only when players set foot in Sain Mark's piazza will they understand the grandeur of the basilica" says Mohamed Gambouz, Art Director.



Ubisoft also engaged Margaret Meserve, Assistant Professor of History from University of Notre Dame to help developers create an accurate game world – from architecture to social practices, banking systems, and clothing.

"I'm intrigued by their reconstruction of Renaissance cities like Venice and Florence. The opportunity to walk through those urban spaces, as they were at the time of the Renaissance, is really appealing," say Meserve.

In *Assassin's Creed II*, game missions are also based on actual historical events such as the Pazzi Conspiracy – when the Pazzi family tried to replace the Medici family, the rulers of Florence during the 15th century – on April 26, 1478.

"The conspiracy culminated in a botched assassination attempt during mass at the high altar of Florence's cathedral – it was a hugely scandalous event," says Meserve.

By paying such close attention to detail, and delicately balancing historical narratives with the freedom of game play, developers like Ubisoft are giving growing, new audiences a unique way to engage with and immerse themselves in history like never before.

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