

From playing to designing

War games and historical-political learning in Austria

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Abstract

War is a highly relevant topic in contemporary society, youth culture, and history education. At the same time, digital games have become an important part of historical culture, including representations of war and violence. This article examines their significance for history and civic education in Austria. It argues that, despite clear curricular requirements, digital games have so far played only a marginal role in Austrian classrooms. Research further suggests that commercial war games often privilege combat, soldierly agency, and immersive battle experience, while neglecting civilian perspectives, war crimes, and broader social contexts. Against this background, the article discusses the co-constructive development of digital games with students as an alternative didactic approach. Such a model may foster multiperspectival historical-political learning, strengthen critical engagement with historical culture, and connect historical meaning-making with media education and basic digital education.

Keywords

Digital games; war; historical culture; history and civic education; co-constructive game development

1 Introduction: The topic of war in the classroom

Wars have shaped human history from the very beginning (Offenstadt, 2010) and rank among the key problems characteristic of an era (Plessow, 2023). Events in recent years have made them (once again) omnipresent in news feeds and everyday conversations in the German-speaking world as well. This is reflected, for example, in public concerns. In a 2025 survey conducted in Austria by the public broadcaster ORF, which included 77,684 participants, 79% of respondents reported that military conflicts worldwide cause them concern. This makes military conflicts the most pressing collective worry, surpassing concerns about inflation (64%) and the state of democracy worldwide (63%).

Interest in wars is strong, including among adolescents. In an empirical study conducted in Germany in 2025, 55% of surveyed young people aged 12 to 19 reported a high level of interest in the various armed conflicts around the world. By a wide margin, this was the topic of greatest interest. Compared to the previous year, the figure increased by 11 percentage points (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2025, pp. 43–44).

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If engagement with history is assumed to provide orientation for the present and the future (Rüsen, 2013, p. 29), and if addressing current key problems is regarded as a feature of good history teaching (Gautschi et al., 2012, pp. 330–331), especially since this leads students to consider the subject more relevant (van Straaten et al., 2015, pp. 481–483), then the topic of war has immediate relevance for history education. This was already emphasized in the 1990s. The educational theorist Klafki (1993, p. 21), whose ideas strongly influenced education policy in the German-speaking world from the 1970s onward, as well as history didactics, counted war and peace, international understanding, and peacekeeping among the most important epoch-typical key problems to be addressed in the classroom.

A quantitative study by the author shows that wars are an important topic in Austrian history teaching: 68.7% of respondents stated that they had been addressed very or fairly frequently. According to the respondents, only the broader topic of National Socialism and the Holocaust receives more attention in history classes (Wieser & Brait, 2026 [in press]). How wars are taught in Austria, however, still requires more detailed investigation. On this question, only one diachronic textbook analysis on World War I is available. According to this study, topic areas extensively researched up to 2015 and associated with the so-called “new” military history (Kühne & Ziemann, 2000), and for which there is a strong source base, such as prisoners of war, captivity, or war crimes, were hardly included in the textbooks (Brait, 2022b, p. 249).

Studies in other countries yield varying results. Arand (2003, p. 211) observes with regard to German history teaching that World War I, for example, is treated much more briefly than other topics and that many aspects are not addressed. Based on the experiences of student teachers during school placements, as well as textbook analyses, John (2024, pp. 106–112) concludes that wars from earlier and more recent periods are treated very differently. The main emphases are military leaders, political implications (causes and consequences), and, regarding World War I, individual wartime experiences. A British study found that teachers consistently regarded World War I as important, even though it is not prescribed as a compulsory topic in the curriculum. This may also be linked to the particular status of the war within British historical culture, where it is linguistically foregrounded as the *Great War*. The findings point to history teaching focused on traditional themes of military history, with little attention to approaches from economic, social, and cultural history (Pennell, 2014, pp. 36–37).

There are only a few empirical studies on whether history teaching on war is capable of introducing students to the historical culture surrounding them, as required both by the Austrian curricula and by history didactics (Barth & Schnakenberg, 2023, p. 8). Reference may be made to an Australian study that examined how students evaluate the commemoration of the Battle of Gallipoli during World War I, which still holds a prominent place in Australian public memory today. The findings show that the majority of the surveyed students adopted the historical narratives associated with Gallipoli and did not critically question the public culture of remembrance (Innes & Sharp, 2018).

For Austria, it must also be borne in mind that history is taught in combination with civic education in almost all school types (Brait, 2023; Krösche, 2025). Wars therefore offer an important context for historical-political learning (Hellmuth, 2017), in which questions of power, interests, violence, international law, displacement, human rights, and peacekeeping can be interconnected. In this context, it seems sensible to include not only those wars that receive particularly strong attention in the European and Western media public sphere, but also conflicts that receive less public attention. At the beginning of 2026, the International Committee of the Red Cross (2026) counted around 130 active conflicts worldwide.

Against this background, the article discusses how students can develop and articulate their own historical interpretations and political judgements about wars on the basis of their everyday encounters with historical culture. The analysis focuses specifically on digital games, which have become the subject of controversial public debates, as shown, for example, by the discussions following the attack at a school in Graz in 2025, in which the perpetrator’s intensive engagement with first-person shooters was problematized (Breščaković, 2025).

2 Digital games on war and violence as part of historical culture

2.1 Research findings on digital games on war and violence

Digital games dealing with wars and military-historical themes have long been part of youth culture (Friedrich et al., 2020, p. 268), ranging from first-person shooters such as *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, which depict modern or historical battles, to strategy games such as the Total War series, in which entire campaigns of war are reconstructed. In a 2025 survey conducted in the Austrian federal state of Upper Austria, 75% of respondents ($n = 500$) aged 11 to 18 stated that they played digital games every day. The average playing time reported was 82 minutes (Education Group GmbH, 2025, p. 68). With regard to genres, a clear difference in preferences between the sexes can be observed: in a nationwide Austrian survey conducted in 2021, more than half of all male adolescents who played digital games stated that they most liked action games (first-person shooters, shooting games), whereas only 16% of female respondents said the same (Marketinstitut, 2021, p. 65).

While digital games often draw on aesthetic patterns known from films, series, documentaries, and other popular forms of remembrance, they have one distinctive feature when compared with other forms of historical culture (Grever & Adriaansen, 2017): Chapman (2016, pp. 33–34) described this as “shared authorship” and “narrative diversity.” Although the limits of the narrative are set by the game developers, players shape the specific story that unfolds within these limits. When players are asked what they regard as memorable moments, from a historical perspective, in games such as *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, they stress their “reenactment potential.” Players gain a sense of the chaos of battle, of the fear and vulnerability that Allied soldiers must have felt during the landings on the beaches of Normandy. It should also be noted that players in these games usually fight on the side framed as morally justified, which runs counter to the premises of a multiperspectival view of history (van den Heede, 2022, pp. 167–168). As Grever (2017, p. 36) summarizes:

In these war games excitement and immersive experiences are more important than historical facts, resulting in dichotomous representations and appropriations (good and bad guys, enemies and patriots). There is little room for the ugly sides of history, dissonant representations or heritage that hurts.

Moreover, various studies on the representation of the world wars in digital games show a strong focus on combat. Armed fighting, soldiers’ agency, and heroic action are foregrounded, while occupation, civilian wartime experiences, and mass crimes are often marginalized or omitted altogether. Where authenticity is strongly emphasized, it usually refers above all to weapons, equipment, settings, and the immersive experience of battle, but not to the social, political, and moral dimensions of war to the same extent (see, among others, Gish, 2010; Bender, 2012; Pfister, 2018; van den Heede, 2020). This can be illustrated by one example: the first campaign in *Call of Duty: WWII* begins with the narrated landing of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division in Normandy on June 6, 1944. Players assume the role of the young soldier Ronald “Red” Daniels, who lands with his unit in a Higgins boat on Omaha Beach. Under heavy machine-gun fire, the player fights from the beach toward the fortifications, uses a Bangalore torpedo against the obstacles, and then storms German bunkers. The sequence evokes the iconic Omaha Beach scene from the film *Saving Private Ryan* and transposes its logic of staging into an interactive shooter format. The focus is on survival, soldierly endurance, comradeship, and the audiovisual intensity of combat, while other perspectives play no role (Prager, 2026).

This brief overview makes clear that historical learning is not the explicit aim of most commercial digital games dealing with war. Rather, their primary focus is entertainment. Compared with city-building, environmental, or economic simulation games, in which social problems are often modelled as processes of management and negotiation that players address through planning, resource allocation, and the assessment of consequences, war games frequently construct agency through violence. Violence is presented as an effective and legitimate means of achieving objectives. Such games can generate an intense historical imagination, including identification with military actors, but they often exclude many perspectives that would be central to a reflective understanding of war.

2.2 Digital games as part of historical culture

Even if only some commercial shooters deal with historical wars, it can be assumed that, like other products of historical culture, they shape adolescents' conceptions of them as well as their historical interest (Kühberger, 2018, p. 72). Kohler's (2016, p. 106) study indicates that adolescents show greater interest in representations that omit sources than in the sources themselves or in representations that explicitly rely on them. On the basis of such findings, scholars have called, and continue to call, for a stronger integration of historical culture into history teaching so that learners acquire the ability to engage with it critically (Rox-Helmer, 2006, pp. 28–29). Since the 2016 reforms, the Austrian curricula for lower secondary education and for the upper level of academic secondary schools, both based on the FUER competence structure model (Körber, 2015), have taken this into account by requiring the inclusion of products of historical culture. Among the items explicitly mentioned are computer games, which, alongside other products of historical culture, are to be used to promote a critical questioning of historical representations and products of historical culture, as stated in the curriculum for the upper level of academic secondary schools (BGBl. II 219/2016). In the lower secondary curriculum, it is striking that they appear specifically in the section on World War I, where, alongside films and monuments, they are to be addressed as examples of historical culture in the past and present (BGBl. II 1/2023 idF BGBl. II Nr. 204/2024).

In recent years, numerous teaching examples (Mai & Preisinger, 2020; Buchsteiner & Jahnke, 2021; Preisinger, 2026), as well as more general guidance on the inclusion of digital games in history teaching (McCall, 2016), have been published, highlighting their potential for historical-political learning (Kühberger, 2017). Empirical studies also point in this direction. Studies using *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* suggest that digital games can strengthen historical empathy by presenting war through multiple experiences, including those of soldiers and civilians, and by addressing themes such as national belonging, separation, loss, care, and captivity. Not all games foster complex empathetic relationships, however, since “many military games offer the player an historical empathy purely on the level of sensory spectacle, seeking to create an affective empathy in terms of an overwhelming first-hand experience of the intensity, noise and destruction of large-scale battles,” yet there are also games that “seek to have players relate to and understand the contexts and challenges individuals faced historically” (Hartman, 2021, para. 4). Using *Medal of Honor: Frontline*, O'Neill and Feenstra (2016) show that players do not simply assume that they can learn about the past—in this case, World War II—from the game unless they are directly told that it contains verifiable facts; according to this study, players therefore approach historical narration quite critically.

2.3 Digital Games in Austrian History Teaching

Despite the clear curricular requirements and their didactic potential, however, it is doubtful that digital games are actually used in Austrian history teaching. Various studies have shown that domain-specific competence orientation has been implemented only in part (Oberhauser, 2018; Bernhard, 2020; Brait, 2021; Brzobohaty, 2022; Pichler, 2022), that Austrian teachers are not very familiar with theories of history didactics, and that products of historical culture, if they are used at all, tend to serve the transmission of historical factual knowledge. A central criticism voiced by teachers concerns the discrepancy between the content of many products of historical culture and historical records, while they fail to recognize their potential for deconstruction (Brait, 2022a). The lack of factual accuracy in digital games is likewise one of the main criticisms raised against them with regard to their use as media for historical learning (Zeng, 2024, p. 124).

With regard to the use of historical culture in Austrian history teaching, a quantitative study shows that this differs markedly from private use: documentaries, feature films and series, explanatory videos, and digital games are all used far more frequently in private contexts. According to 95.5% of respondents, the latter play little or no role in history classes, whereas only 63.3% said the same about private use (Brait, 2025, p. 236).

In a pilot study conducted by the author (Wieser & Brait, in press), respondents did not mainly encounter past wars through digital games; documentaries were clearly more important in this regard. Thus, 47.4% stated that they (almost) never encountered past wars in digital games, while only 9.0% said this was often the case. The study found a statistically significant gender difference: whereas 78.8% of female respondents said that they rarely or never encountered past wars in digital games, 36.7% of male respondents stated that this was often or fairly often the case. Among the genres known from personal gaming experience, strategy and building games

predominated, followed by adventure and role-playing games; first-person shooters were also relevant, with 20.5% stating that they knew them very well from personal experience, while 41.0% did not know them at all. Here, too, the data showed a clear gender difference: 56% of male, but only 11% of female respondents stated that they played first-person shooters more frequently. In terms of content, male respondents associated war more strongly with technical and strategic aspects, whereas female respondents emphasized emotional, ethical, and social-psychological dimensions. Those familiar with war games from personal experience described weapons and equipment as especially prominent topics, followed by strategic issues such as troop movements or resource management; according to the respondents, soldiers' lives away from the front and civilian life played a much smaller role. Finally, the contrast between these gaming experiences and expectations of such games is striking: for all surveyed aspects of war, respondents wished for stronger representation, most clearly with regard to war crimes, which only 12.9% perceived as very present, but whose strong presence 36.6% would have liked to see.

3 Developing games with students as an approach to fostering historical-political learning

Building on these findings and the Austrian curricular requirements, the following section discusses the development of a digital game together with students as an alternative approach to enabling historical-political learning.

In the co-constructive development of a digital game with students, they are not merely recipients but active creators. This creates the possibility of including precisely those aspects of war that are often underrepresented in commercial digital games or that players themselves feel should receive greater attention. Perspectives of civilians, questions of war crimes, or moral dilemmas can thus be addressed. In this way, more differentiated and multiperspectival approaches to war as a historical-political phenomenon can be developed. At the same time, students reflect on their everyday experiences, which is explicitly required by the Austrian curriculum in order to take up students' existing conceptions and further develop them (Buchberger et al., 2024, p. 4). Moreover, such an approach can contribute to inclusion and to gender-sensitive historical-political education, especially since empirically demonstrated differences in conceptions and interests can be taken into account.

In such an approach, students develop narrative game structures that depict historical or current situations, conflicts, or decision-making processes and offer players different options for action. In line with the didactic principle of action orientation, students are required to work on historical or political questions independently and transform them into a reflective, subject-related representation. This also allows students to reflect on media references and conventions: Which ideas about war from films, series, documentaries, or commercial games are adopted, modified, or deliberately avoided? The negotiation process thereby initiated, potentially in small groups, makes the constructed character of historical representation especially tangible for students (Levisohn, 2010). In addition, based on research on digital storytelling, it can be assumed that the production of students' own digital stories can foster "historical significance, historical imagination, perspective taking, continuity, historical emphasis as well as values and traits identification" (Peñalba et al., 2020, p. 1).

For technical implementation, software such as *Twine* is particularly suitable. It is a freely available tool for creating non-linear, interactive stories that can be used without programming skills. Content is organized in the form of linked text blocks between which players can make decisions. This enables the realization of complex narrative structures with minimal technical effort. The software is therefore widely applicable in educational contexts (Salter & Moulthrop, 2021; Projekt Medienkompetent mit Spielen, 2025). Although *Twine*, in its basic text-based form, does not necessarily correspond to the gaming habits of many young people, its didactic strength lies in making historical spaces of decision-making, shifts in perspective, and narrative consequences visible and open to design.

Studies in the field of student-generated digital games show that independently developing games can stimulate learning processes in distinctive ways, since learners do not merely absorb content but actively structure it and transform it into new forms of representation (see, for example, Yang & Chang, 2013; Slussareff & Boháčková, 2016). Unlike the mere use of ready-made digital games, the focus shifts: it is not playing itself that stands at the center, but the

reflective shaping of historical and political meaning-making processes. In line with the Austrian curricula, students should work with historical sources and representations and/or political manifestations (Buchberger et al., 2024). Studies on student-created multimedia documentaries and digital stories show that such formats can foster historical thinking (Hernández-Ramos & La Paz, 2009), which is readily transferable to the co-constructive development of a game, since here too historical content is not simply received but transformed into a medium of one's own.

Finally, it should be noted that this approach also responds to the demand, set out in the Grundsatzrlass Medienbildung (2022), which applies across all school forms and types in Austria, to promote digital and computational competences in all subjects. Within this teaching principle, media education is defined as a reflective, analytical, and practical engagement with media and technological developments, with particular emphasis on the creation of media products. It further calls for the analysis of the technical functioning of digital tools and artifacts; theoretical and practical knowledge of these functions is explicitly described as a basis for social participation and co-creation. In addition, the approach can also be linked across subjects with the area of "Digital Basic Education," since this includes the digital creation and publication of content, the design of algorithms, programming, computational thinking, as well as the testing and debugging of simple programs. The co-constructive development of a digital game thus provides a suitable framework for combining historical-political learning with the promotion of basic informatics competencies.

4 Conclusion

According to one study, students are more likely to favor games in the classroom when they believe that they genuinely contribute to learning and that their use is not too difficult (Bourgonjon et al., 2010, pp. 1151–1152). Against this background, it seems of limited value to integrate digital war games into teaching merely as a motivating supplement. Rather, the research suggests that their particular didactic value lies where digital games are not only played, but understood as objects of critical analysis and/or as the outcome of co-constructive design processes. Whereas commercial war games often focus on combat, soldiers' comradeship, and immersive battle experience, the joint development of a game with students creates the possibility of making underrepresented perspectives visible and of exploring war more fully as a phenomenon affecting society as a whole. The discrepancies identified by research between players' experiences and their expectations of games about war can serve not only as a starting point for the deconstruction of commercial games, as explicitly required in the Austrian curricula, but also as a basis for designing a game to be developed by students.

Such a co-constructive development of digital games addresses central aims of the combined subject of History and Civic Education. In particular, this approach would realize the life-world orientation frequently called for and embedded in the Austrian curricula, especially since many adolescents use digital games regularly, even though there are clear gender differences in preferred genres. At the same time, war is not only omnipresent in the media but also holds a prominent place in Austrian history teaching. Moreover, it can help productively draw on the gender-specific differences in approaches to war identified by research, enable inclusive learning processes, and connect historical meaning-making with media education and digital basic education.

The proposed approach should also be seen as a response to research findings showing that the inclusion of digital games, like the integration of historical culture more broadly, must be regarded as deficient in the teaching of History and Civic Education in Austria. Future empirical research will need to examine whether, and under what conditions, these potentials can be realized in Austrian schools.

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This research did not require ethical approval because it is a conceptual article based on published literature and previously conducted studies; no new data were collected from or about human participants for the purposes of this article. Artificial intelligence tools (OpenAI ChatGPT and DeepL) were used in the preparation of the manuscript to support translation from German into English and language editing. All AI-generated output was critically reviewed. The author assumes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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