



## **An Epoch on the Rise. On ‘Pentiment’, the Early Modern Period in Games and Microhistory**

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**Abstract:** *‘Pentiment’ marks a turning point in history in two ways. First, the game is set in the 16th century, the time of the Reformation, the Peasants’ War and the Renaissance, thus, symbolising the beginning of a new era, the so-called Early Modern Period (1500–1800). Second, the game shifts focus in the press and public discourse onto this era. This is long overdue since, although this time has long been established as an independent epoch in historical research, producing fruitful research, the Early Modern Period is still virtually unknown in public discourse and consciousness. Historical images prevalent in popular cultural images remain stoutly in the Middle Ages. Unsurprisingly then, ‘Pentiment’ was primarily framed as a medieval game during its launch. This article aims to show why this framing as a game set in the Middle Ages deprives players of worthwhile insights and food for thought. The article introduces the Early Modern Period as a unique era and utilises its depiction in video games via ‘Pentiment’ to show what characterises this unique era as a successor to the Middle Ages. ‘Pentiment’ and its microhistorical approach contributes to a more differentiated understanding of the 16th century in popular culture.*

**Zusammenfassung:** *‘Pentiment’ markiert eine Zeitenwende – im doppelten Sinne. Zum einen spielt das Spiel im 16. Jahrhundert, dem Jahrhundert der Reformation, des Bauernkriegs, der Renaissance und damit dem Beginn der sogenannten Epoche der Frühen Neuzeit (1500–1800). Zum anderen verschafft das Spiel genau dieser Epoche nun zu mehr Aufmerksamkeit in Presse und Öffentlichkeit im Bereich Games, was überfällig ist. Denn obwohl die Epoche in der Geschichtsforschung schon länger als eigene Epoche etabliert ist und ertragreiche Forschung hervorgebracht hat, ist sie noch immer nahezu unbekannt im öffentlichen Diskurs und Bewusstsein. Populärkulturelle Geschichtsbilder fokussieren noch immer stark auf das Mittelalter. Letzteres erklärt auch, warum in der Berichterstattung zum Launch von ‘Pentiment’ weithin nur von einem Mittelalterspiel die Rede war. Dieser Artikel soll zeigen, warum die ausschließliche Konzentration auf das Mittelalter als Kontext des Spiels den Spielenden wertvolle Einsichten und Denkanstöße vorenthält. In diesem Artikel wird die Frühe Neuzeit als Epoche und die Frühe Neuzeit, wie sie in digitalen Spielen thematisiert wird, vorgestellt und es wird anhand von ‘Pentiment’ aufgezeigt, was diese einzigartige Epoche im Nachgang des Mittelalters auszeichnete und wie ‘Pentiment’ mit seinem mikrogeschichtlichen Ansatz dazu beitragen kann, dass die populärkulturellen Geschichtsbilder zum 16. Jahrhundert letztlich differenzierter werden.*

## Prologue

Upon its release in November 2022, ‘Pentiment’ received overwhelmingly positive reviews. The game attracted attention because it covered a time period and region still rarely found in games, while offering captivating, unique visuals that appealed to many, not only fans of history. ‘Pentiment’ is a narrative video game in the point-and-click genre, set in 16th century Upper Bavaria, Germany, in the fictional town of Tassing with its Benedictine abbey Kiersau.<sup>1</sup> At the centre of the story is Andreas Maler, a journeyman artist, later joined by Magdalene Druckeryn as the second main character. Both live in a time of upheaval and great religious, political and cultural change, indeed, a crossroads in world history (1518–1544).<sup>2</sup> Game and culture critics alike were in agreement: In terms of historical accuracy, attention to detail, art style, and multi-layered narrative, the game developed by Obsidian Entertainment is a treasure and a small work of art. At the same time, press and players alike seemed to come quickly to a second consensus regarding the historical setting, namely, that it takes place in the Middle Ages. According to the German press coverage, the “medieval game Pentiment” is a “medieval secret tip” and “a medieval piece of art” and as a “medieval adventure RPG” a “gripping medieval thriller” where “fans of the Middle Ages” can solve a “medieval cold case”.<sup>3</sup> In the anglophone and the French press coverage, there was a similar picture: a “medieval murder mystery” or a “a brilliant game about being a terrible medieval murder-solver”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Obsidian Entertainment, ‘Pentiment’ (Windows/Xbox). Irvine, CA: Xbox Game Studios 2022, <https://Pentiment.obsidian.net>. Detailed references to a multitude of game reviews in the following footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> The game director Josh Sawyer described the game as a “historical narrative game with light RPG elements.” Josh Sawyer, Mixing History and Fiction in Pentiment. Talk given at a Game Developers Session in Prague, 9 December 2023, <https://youtu.be/mhZcNA16m8A>.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes translated by the author. Find the original quotes here: “Mittelalterspiel Pentiment“, Rainer Sigl, Eine Welt wie gemalt, in: Der Spiegel, 18 November 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/games/mittelalterspiel-pentiment-im-test-eine-welt-wie-gemalt-a-9e849b42-2238-4aa7-81af-feff5ba63372>; “mittelalterliche Bayern“, Maximilian Gerl, In diesem Videospiel hat ein Nürnberger die Hauptrolle, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 20 November 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/pentiment-mittelalter-game-bayern-nuernberg-1.5698638>; “Mittelalter-Geheimtipp Pentiment“, Dennis Zirkler, Pentiment: Die internationalen Testwertungen des Mittelalterspiels, in: Gamestar, 15 November 2022, <https://www.gamestar.de/artikel/pentiment-wertungsspiel.3386793.html>; “echtes Mittelalter-Kunstwerk“, Gamestar, Eines der besten Spiele 2022 ist auch ein echtes Mittelalter-Kunstwerk! Pentiment im Test/Review, 14 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlqwJnjOmNI>; “mittelalterliche[s] Adventure-RPG Pentiment“, Maci Naeem Cheema, Pentiment im Test, in: PC Games, 18 November 2022, <https://www.pcgames.de/pentiment-Spiel-73761/Tests/Xbox-Game-Studios-Obsidian-RPG-Adventure-Xbox-Highlight-2022-Test-Review-Wertung-Fazit-1407562/>; “Fesselnder Mittelalter-Krimi“, Franziska Bechtold, Pentiment im Test, in: Futurezone, 27 November 2022, <https://futurezone.at/games/pentiment-test-review-obsidian-pc-xbox-game-pass/402213168>; “Cold Case im Mittelalter“, Andreas Müller, Pentiment angespielt, in: Heise, 15 November 2022, <https://www.heise.de/tests/pentiment-angespielt-Cold-Case-im-Mittelalter-7340317.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “A Medieval Murder Mystery”, Rob Zacny, A Medieval Murder Mystery, in: Vice, 15 November 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7z53g/pentiment-review>; “a brilliant game about being a terrible medieval murder-solver“, William Hughes, Pentiment is a brilliant game, in: AVClub, 2 December 2022, <https://www.avclub.com/pentiment-game-review-obsidian-1849843232>; “le jeu médiéval“, Tiraxa, Pentiment, in: JeuxVideo, 14 November 2022, <https://www.jeuxvideo.com/test/1668860/pentiment-le-xbox-game-pass-a-t-il-trouve-son-goty.htm>.

Moreover, in the British and American response to the game, there was also the option of only reporting the events in the game without an epochal classification or only referring to the Renaissance as the context.<sup>5</sup> I myself came to the game through one of the first game reviews published in Germany by Rainer Sigl in “Der Spiegel”, also presenting the game as a milestone which shows the “Middle Ages, more picturesque than ever.”<sup>6</sup> A review from the “Süddeutsche Zeitung” newspaper paints a similar picture, albeit with some platitudes, stating that the game is also a pleasant surprise because it presents the “supposedly dark ages, pop-culturally more associated with sword fighting, castle building and plague, Viking raids and armies of knights” in a new light.<sup>7</sup>

After playing the game, I found myself completely agreeing with the critics’ first assessment. The game is a milestone. However, in contrast to the press, the marketing campaign and public opinion, I take issue with the second, or rather, I see room and the need for historical fine-tuning. Thus, as a historian of the Early Modern Period, I put forward in this article that this game does not primarily represent the Middle Ages, instead, ‘Pentiment’ is a game that helps to understand the epoch that following the Middle Ages – the Early Modern Period. This era, dated between 1500 and 1800, seems to live an unjustified shadowy existence in games studies in general and in public opinion alike. ‘Pentiment’ and games like it can change that. It depicts this time in a way that the concept of epochs works best. It shows a *Zeitenwende*, a turning point in history. It manages to carefully convey the *zeitgeist* and characteristics, the culture and particularly the everyday life of the people living during this time, depicting the 16th century not as an offshoot of a bygone era, but as a starting point and a catalyst of a new age on the rise. ‘Pentiment’, thus, makes an important contribution to increasing public awareness about the Early Modern Period and its characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> Without historical contextualisation: Shannon Liao, In *Pentiment*, characters don’t shy away from history or heartbreak, in: Washington Post, 14 November 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/reviews/pentiment-review-xbox/>; Swapna Krishna, *Pentiment* May Be the Best New Game You’ve Never Heard Of, in: Wire, 16 November 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/pentiment-best-game-2022/>; Ash Parrish, *Pentiment’s* pretty pages protect otherwise poor play, in: The Verge, 28 November 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/23482189/pentiment-xbox-obsidian-entertainment-impressions>; “Renaissance“ and “Renaissance-style“, Jason Cohen, *Pentiment*, in: PC Mag, 24 March 2022, <https://uk.pcmag.com/microsoft-xbox-games/146096/pentiment>; “Renaissance murder mystery“: Lewis Packwood, *Pentiment* review, in: The Guardian, 11 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2022/nov/14/pentiment-review-a-renaissance-mystery-with-an-eye-for-historical-detail>.

<sup>6</sup> Sigl, *Mittelalterspiel Pentiment* (see footnote 3).

<sup>7</sup> Gerl, Hauptrolle (see footnote 3): „Das vermeintlich finstere Zeitalter ist ja popkulturell eher auf den Schwertkampf abonniert, auf Burgenbau und Pest, Wikingerraubzüge und Ritterheere.“

It has to be said that this article is not intended as a critique of the game or culture critics. It is commendable that so many voices in the press and in game journalism have given this much attention to a game that is ultimately not a blockbuster but a “niche” game.<sup>8</sup> It is also not a criticism of colleagues who find many references to the Middle Ages within the game; this does not present a contradiction. A key feature of epochal transitions is that cultural change happens as an “additive and not a substitutive” process.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the references to the Middle Ages, however, the game is particularly strong in showing the many different developments in politics, everyday life and religion that led to the beginning of a new era. Last but not least, this article is also not a critique of the studio’s advertising campaign, which itself pushes the medieval angle for obvious advertising reasons. Instead, this article makes suggestions on how to gain new perspectives. It is intended as a starting point and recommended reading on the Early Modern Period in Games. For games-studies historians, the article is furthermore a reminder for our own profession of Early Modern historian. ‘Pentiment’ demonstrates that the concept of the Early Modern Period has still not found firm footing in public consciousness.

The Middle Ages in film, television and video games still drown out the centuries that followed with their powerful historical imagery. Speaking of only games in exaggerated fashion, it is noticeable in both digital and analogue games that there still seems to be a gulf between the castles and knights and the factories of the industrialisation. There are exceptions, particularly regarding games set in the French or American Revolution, and of course there is also more fine-grained reporting in the media bringing the “late Middle Ages” into play or even mentioning the Early Modern era with regard to ‘Pentiment’, but this still remains the exception.<sup>10</sup> On impulse, public opinion reaches for the familiar medieval drawer as soon as players see people wearing doublets.

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<sup>8</sup> “It is very niche, unusual and it has a high appeal to a very enthusiastic audience.” Josh Sawyer quoted by Mollie Taylor, *Pentiment*, in: PC Gamer, 17 November 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/pentiment-director-says-he-never-would-have-proposed-the-game-without-game-pass>.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Burke, *Die Renaissance in Italien*, Berlin 1992, p. 29 (translated by the author).

<sup>10</sup> Games like ‘Assassin’s Creed Unity’, ‘Assassin’s Creed III’ or ‘Assassin’s Creed Black Flag’ (Ubisoft Entertainment). Press coverage mentioning the Early Modern Period with regards to ‘Pentiment’: “Übergang vom Spätmittelalter zur Frühen Neuzeit“, Matthias Kreienbrink, Ein herrlich verschnörkeltes Spiel, in: Die ZEIT, 19 November 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/digital/games/2022-11/pentiment-videospiel-handschriften-mittelalter>; “frühneuzeitlich“, Benjamin Schmädig, *Pentiment-Test*, in: Eurogamer, 16 November 2022, <https://www.eurogamer.de/pentiment-test-jetzt-wei-ich-was-unsere-vorfahren-umgetrieben-hat>; “Early Modern aesthetic“, Joshua Wolens, *Pentiment-Review*, in: PC Gamer, 14 November 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/pentiment-review>.

The probable reason for this gulf in the public sphere was summed up aptly by Josh Sawyer, the game director of ‘Pentiment’ and himself a trained Early Modernist specialised in the Holy Roman Empire. When Alan van Beek and I asked him about it in an interview, he replied:

“I think it’s because people don’t know that the Early Modern Period exists, or they think of Renaissance, and when they think of Renaissance, they think of Italy or, charitably, they think of France or maybe England. But they don’t think of the Northern Renaissance. They don’t think about the Early Modern Period. And I think especially for the Holy Roman Empire, the 16th century is incredible.”<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, the phenomenon he describes is not only limited to the USA, where the game was developed and where the 16th to 18th centuries are less well-known today due to a focus of US history writing on the 18th century. This also apparently applies to Europe, as the press coverage shows, which is again revealing in terms of the current primacy of pop culture in relation to the relevance of history in games worldwide.

Therefore, this article therefore exists not only to address that people should know more about the Early Modern Period, but primarily because Sawyer puts his finger in a wound that we Early Modernists need to face. We need better scientific communication relating to our research and the epoch we investigate. In this regard, ‘Pentiment’ leads the way for the Early Modern era to step out of the shadows. As a game it chooses to communicate historical content by way of public history. The special trick though is that the game not only recites more well-known events of the era, such as the Reformation, the Peasants’ War or the Estates Society, but because of the special perspective and narrative the game actually depicts these events from the ground up. Players encounter the era and its peculiarities and events from the perspective of the protagonists, the fictional actors who experience the historical developments surrounding them within the game narrative. With this approach, ‘Pentiment’ is inspired by a research approach well-known in historiography, but again less so in the public sphere. It is inspired by so called microhistory.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alan van Beek and Lucas Haasis, Interview and Q&A with Josh Sawyer, Game Director of Pentiment, 9 May 2023, <https://youtu.be/mptRooNj0Dg?si=SkJYpJJO45umTdXF>.

<sup>12</sup> See John Brewer, Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life, in: *Cultural and Social History* 7,1 (2010), pp. 87–109; Giovanni Levi, On Microhistory, in: *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, edited by Peter Burke, Cambridge 1991, pp. 93–113; Danny O’Dwyer, Jeremy Jayne and Frank Howley (Noclip documentaries), *The Making of Pentiment – Noclip Documentary*, minute: 35:34, <https://youtu.be/ffldgOBYwbc?si=ojFSKkKwM-Chli99Q>.

The approach of microhistory is not primarily based on large-scale or event-based perspectives, but it draws on close-up perspectives thickly described and contextualized by the researchers to investigate the past, focussing on a town, an event, or an actor as research fields. The approach deliberately puts historical actors, their stories and thought processes at its centre of interest. In microhistory, history is furthermore often written based on the perspective of ordinary people. For this reason, it is sometime referred to as a history from below. ‘Pentiment’ follows the same approach. Analysing the game is thus a threefold enrichment: for historical games studies, for historiography, and also for the interested public playing the game, because it brings the approach of microhistory into public consciousness and even makes it ‘playable’.

In this article I will introduce the Early Modern Period as an epoch in part one, followed by part two, which details the Early Modern Period in games using the example of ‘Pentiment’. To conclude in part three, I will discuss microhistory as applied in games.

### **The Early Modern Period as an Epoch**

Epochs are temporal frameworks, large periods of time perceived and defined by historians as coherent units in history. Historians set these frameworks in order to structure the past in a meaningful way and to put different periods of time in relation to each other. Proclaiming epochs is as old as historiography itself. It goes back as long as Antiquity. According to Jacques Le Goff, people have always used epochs to try to understand the past and to trace the way in which humanity developed over time.<sup>13</sup> The concept also helps to delineate and define new fields of research. It allows cooperation in research and a more coherent response to public discussion. Epochs are defined primarily by the fact that historians perceive certain caesurae in the course of time as so profound, in contrast to what came before or after, that they see the need that this period be understood as something of its own. At the same time, these settings are of course always artificial and dependent on the respective present, the specific questions of today and the region in which they are proclaimed.<sup>14</sup> History is written in various forms and ways around the world, depending on who is doing the writing and when and where this history is being written.

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<sup>13</sup> See Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods*, New York 2015.

<sup>14</sup> See Birgit Emich, *Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit (1500–1800) studieren*, Konstanz 2017, p. 87. See Ursula A. J. Becher, *Periodisierung*, in: *Geschichtswissenschaft. Hundert Grundbegriffe*, edited by Stefan Jordan, Stuttgart 2002, p. 235.

Depending on the region and the time, epochal frameworks are set differently.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore ultimately remarkable that in the case of a game like ‘Pentiment’, despite different traditions in the USA, where the game was developed, and in Germany, where the game is historically set, the reception of the game still draws on the same historical imagery. Moreover, despite these different backgrounds, common ground is found in referring to the Middle Ages as the background of the game. However, it is perhaps precisely this overlap that is significant regarding the current gulf and the culture of remembrance around the Early Modern Period and its relevance in the public eye.

A typical way of defining epochs is to set landmarks or to define milestones as decisive in time, so that the innovation stemming from them becomes clear. For a long time, historians used decisive events such as wars, inventions, or an uprising as points of reference for proclaiming a new epoch. The caesura consciousness of contemporaries was soon also included in the debate. In the second half of the last century, many historians began to focus on long-term developments and structural transformations. These long-term developments exceeded the power of the individual to control and yet changed the world in the long run. The latter relates to historical developments that changed history in an irreversible way due to interlocking factors happening in *longue durée*, but without this having been the result of a united, planned action of individuals or groups of historical actors. Precisely because these transformations were irreversible, historians speak of a new era or a new epoch. The best example of this is the Reformation movement, which, while Luther only intended to reform the Catholic church, led to the division into Protestant religions and Catholic religion. The dynamics of the reformation movement unhinged the centuries-old foundations of the Catholic Church – a development that could not be reversed.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this confessionalism, historians have further identified processes of state formation and secularisation as other long-term structural developments that shaped the Early Modern Period. Modernisation theories were also very influential, arguing that the Early Modern Period created the foundation upon which modernity and today’s world could be built. All these developments in historiography have changed the way people perceive and analyse the past.

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<sup>15</sup> See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Conclusion. Region, Nation, World: Remarks on Scale and the Problem of Periodisation, in: *Chronologies: Periodisation in a Global Context*, edited by Barbara Mittler, Thomas Maissen and Pierre Monnet, Heidelberg 2022, pp. 271–286.

<sup>16</sup> See Emich, *Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (see footnote 14), p. 91.



Currently, research has largely moved away from trying to establish causal connections between the epochs or search for traces of modernization. Instead, it is common practice to consider past epochs in their own right and focus on the historical particularities and often on their strangeness vis-à-vis today's world. The question in historiography is no longer about possible consequences of the past for later times, but about the characteristics of the epoch itself. Historical research today often focusses on how contemporaries experienced their own time and their social embeddedness as meaningful. Furthermore, it has become widely accepted in research to no longer speak of epochal boundaries between epochs, but to search for continuities and soft changes. This is why it has become customary to speak of epoch thresholds or transition periods at the beginning and end of each epoch. This approach allows to identify different epochal thresholds depending on region, time, and tradition. The decisive factor for the definition of epochs is, however, still to provide proof that the respective era brought forth something new that irrevocably changes people's lives.

The epoch of the Early Modern Period and especially the 16th century at its beginning has much to offer in this regard.<sup>17</sup> "Anyone seeking to draw a distinction between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period can point to the extraordinary changes that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries".<sup>18</sup> Historians today date the Early Modern Period from 1500 to 1800.<sup>19</sup> This, too, is only a recent development. For a long time, these centuries were simply defined as part of an epoch of 'Modernity' in historiography. Modernity referred to a long period starting at the end of the Middle Ages lasting to the present day. The classical tripartite division of history was Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity. Separating the three centuries after the Middle Ages once again as 'The Early Modern Period', defining them as an epoch in their own right, is a recent development, only starting during the second half of the 20th century. Today, the concept of the Early Modern History has become internationally established in research and institutionalised through academic denominations not only in Europe but also in the US and Asia. Even if there are still discussions about the timeframe and characteristics of the period and how it shaped history in different parts of the world, it is undisputed that this epoch had its own influence on the course of history and that it should be regarded as something

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 91. See Beat Kümin, Introduction, in: *The European World 1500–1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History*, edited by Beat Kümin, London/New York 2014, pp. 1–9, here pp. 2–4. See Paul Münch, *Lebensformen in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a.M./Berlin 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Humfrey Butters, *Europe in 1500*, in: Kümin, *The European World* (see footnote 17), pp. 13–22, here p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Vocelka, *Frühe Neuzeit 1500–1800*, Konstanz 2013, p. 9. See Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe, 1450–1789* (*The Cambridge History of Europe* 2), Cambridge 2013.

unique and independent.<sup>20</sup> The epochal changes occurring at the beginning of the Early Modern Period include, speaking only for Europe, for instance the Reformation Movement, Renaissance-Humanism, the invention of the printing press, but also the witch hunts or the Peasants' War. From a global perspective, epochal changes occurred due to the fall of Constantinople, the Rise of the Ottoman Empire, Early Vast America or the Sengoku Period in Japan, to name but a few.<sup>21</sup> The end of the Early Modern Period, as historians mostly agree, is marked, for instance, by the Atlantic Revolutions in America or Haiti, or the French Revolution or the Enlightenment, which again heralded a new age.<sup>22</sup> All these developments irreversibly changed history, led to the separation of state and religion, contributed to the creation of a new image of the world and of humankind, promoted literacy, and, negatively, led to persecution and death through war and exploitation. Socio-cultural changes were the rise of the bourgeoisie, the emancipation of science, and also changes in lifestyle, dress, language, and local customs.<sup>23</sup> These developments shaped and characterized the Early Modern Period.

The reason why this is important for this article is that almost all the events listed above make an appearance in 'Pentiment'. This is why the game is such an interesting subject of research. Furthermore, this demonstrates the importance of the medium of games for conveying history to the public. The success of games with historical contexts such as 'Pentiment' shows that games, too, have the power to influence what we perceive as an epoch and how the public eye envisions and remembers the past. I would go even further in that, in terms of shaping the way we perceive history in the future, games play a significant role precisely because they are public objects. 'Pentiment' is awash with cross-references of historical sources, events, figures, art, religion or social practices, allowing players to get to know this exciting period, which unjustly lives a hitherto shadowy existence in games studies.

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<sup>20</sup> See Emich, *Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (see footnote 14), p. 97; *Die Frühe Neuzeit als Epoche*, edited by also Helmut Neuhaus, München 2009.

<sup>21</sup> See Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe* (see footnote 19), pp. 236–267, 490–530. For the Ottoman Empire see *The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453–1603* (*The Cambridge History of Turkey* 2), edited by Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, Cambridge 2012; *The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603–1839* (*The Cambridge History of Turkey* 3), edited by Suraiya N. Faroqhi, Cambridge 2006. See Karin Wulf, *Vast Early America: Three Simple Words for a Complex Reality*, in: *Humanities* 40,1 (2019), <https://www.neh.gov/article/vast-early-america>. For Japan see Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding the Haitian Revolution and Videogames see Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games*, Jackson 2021.

<sup>23</sup> See Kümin, *Introduction* (see footnote 17), pp 1–3. See also Achim Landwehr, *Kulturgeschichte*, Stuttgart 2009. See Richard van Dülmen, *Die Entdeckung des Individuums. 1500–1800*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002.

## The Early Modern Period in Games

The Period between 1500 and 1800 is generally no stranger to the gaming industry. In fact, the epoch is omnipresent in games. However, there are surprisingly few instances in which it is written or talked about – neither in research, nor in public.<sup>24</sup> The Middle Ages and Antiquity are far more well-known. The Early Modern Period takes a back seat despite the fact that successful big budget games are set in the era. Several franchises within the Anno series (Ubisoft) are set in the Early Modern Period: “Anno 1404” (2009), “Anno 1503” (2002), “Anno 1602” (1998), “Anno 1701” (2006), and “Anno 1800” (2019). The Ezio trilogy of Assassins’ Creed (Ubisoft) is set in the Renaissance, and some of the series’ later instalments take place during the Age of Sail (AC: Black Flag), the French Revolution (AC: Unity) or the American War of Independence (AC: 3). In “Europa Universalis” (Paradox), players can take on the role of kings and queens who are widely known today as Early Modern rulers.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore a mystery why the Early Modern Period in games is largely omitted as a topic by historians. Tobias Winnerling provides initial explanations for this circumstance. He concludes that it

“turns out [...] that the Early Modern Period functions much less clearly as a category in digital games than, for example, antiquity and the Middle Ages. This may have to do with the lack of a more precise knowledge of the historical circumstances – in the West as well as in the East: While the Middle Ages are associated with strict role models and the constraints of modernity still extend into one’s own life, the in-between in digital games has become a utopian space in which all orders may be challenged and nothing is binding.”<sup>26</sup>

This ultimately extends to the discussion of ‘Pentiment’ in the press and public discourse presented at the beginning of this article. The only way out of this disregard, however, is to reverse it. Not to do so, on the other hand, would be a mistake, for these games shape our historical images of the past and of one of the most crucial eras in human history.

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<sup>24</sup> With the exception of Frühe Neuzeit im Videospiele. Geschichtswissenschaftliche Perspektiven, edited by Tobias Winnerling and Florian Kerschbaumer, Bielefeld 2014. See Early Modernity and Video Games, edited by Tobias Winnerling and Florian Kerschbaumer, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2014. See in this volume Tobias Winnerling, Das Tänzeln auf der Epochenschwelle. ‘Pentiment’ zwischen Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed list of videogames see Universal Videogame List, search: Early Modern Period, <https://www.uvlist.net/groups/info/earlymodernperiod>. For a list of boardgames see <https://boardgamegeek.com>.

<sup>26</sup> Original quote: “Es zeigt sich [...], dass die Frühe Neuzeit in Digitalen Spielen als Kategorie weitaus weniger eindeutig funktioniert als etwa die Antike und das Mittelalter. Das mag mit dem – in West wie Ost – fehlenden genaueren Wissen um die historischen Umstände zusammenhängen: Während das Mittelalter mit strengen Rollenbildern assoziiert ist und die Zwänge der Moderne noch in die eigene Lebenswelt hineinreichen, ist das Dazwischen in Digitalen Spielen zu einem utopischen Raum geworden, in dem alle Ordnungen herausgefordert werden dürfen und nichts verbindlich ist.“ Tobias Winnerling, Josef Köstlbauer and Eugen Pfister, Piraten, Ninja und Strategen! Digitale Spiele als hyperkompetitive Inszenierung frühneuzeitlicher Konfliktfelder, in: Konkurrenzen in der Frühen Neuzeit: Aufeinandertreffen, Übereinstimmung, Rivalität (Frühneuzeit-Impulse 5), edited by Franziska Neumann, Jorun Poettering, Hillard von Thiessen, Cologne/Vienna 2023, pp. 261–283, here p. 282.

Historians today have a responsibility to ensure that modern images of the past are critically assessed, that history is taught appropriately, that historical knowledge is passed on and current research findings are included in our analyses and teaching. All sources in which historical content is conveyed should be included in our discussions. Thus, games and fiction with what is often perceived as the ‘believable’ modelled worlds of the past they create should be included in the canon of analysis. Today it can be stated without a doubt that many of current and future generations will come into first contact with historical eras through games.

“For good or for ill, many young people receive their initial impression of historical epochs, characters, and events in this visually compelling ludic format, and historians should pay attention to these virtual renderings of the past”, concludes the American Historical Review.<sup>27</sup>

Games like ‘Pentiment’, therefore, have the ability to raise awareness of the Early Modern epoch and create an interest on the part the players, but also of students and pupils. This immense potential is characterised, for example, by the fact that in summer 2023, I gave a lectures series at my university on the introduction to the Early Modern Period. In almost half of the sessions, I could cite an example from ‘Pentiment’ to illustrate a particular issue. While playing the game, I took 366 screenshots of moments in the game that relate to the phenomena characteristic of the Early Modern Period, even leaving out the subject areas I am not familiar with like clerical life or wood prints. Such a variety of material and its potential for communicating history should not go unutilised. Interestingly, from an analytical point of view, looking at these screenshots in hindsight, it becomes clear that many of these moments not only work as historical reference in the game, but also are relevant with regard to the gameplay, narrative, and story. The scenes in question mostly bring about something new or change the course of the game – just as the actual events or phenomena in history heralded a new era during the Early Modern Period, which in itself is a learning outcome in the experience of players and researchers alike. In the game, this changing nature of events, however, often happens almost casually, organically, and not in an overt or obtrusive manner. Thus, learning occurs not via pedagogical finger pointing, but as a happy side effect. Furthermore, players are invited to learn more about a selection of events, people, or other phenomena referred to in the game by clicking on underlined words in the dialogue bubbles. These then zoom over and into the game glossary, where the player can obtain a wealth of additional information about the phenomena in question, but

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<sup>27</sup> See Video Game Reviews, Introduction, in: The American Historical Review 126, 1 (2021), p. 214.

only if they wish to find out more. The game functions as a discovery tour, in which the players learn clues, tips and curiosities about the Early Modern Period. Of course, players will then have to deepen and critically examine this knowledge on their own, but the game is an innovative way to set out on this journey of learning about this epoch. Those who know the Early Modern Period will discover many typical characteristics of the era. Those unfamiliar will learn about them in a playful way. In the following chapter, I have compiled a selection of examples of these characteristics that one encounters in ‘Pentiment’.

### **Snapshots of the Early Modern Past in ‘Pentiment’**

This chapter summarises explanations of various topics addressed in ‘Pentiment’ that allow conclusions to be drawn about representation of the Early Modern Period in games. The selection is meant to serve as an example and primarily depicts larger phenomena. In addition to this selection, the game is peppered with many smaller references, all of which would warrant further discussion. These include references to, for example, “Till Eulenspiegel” or Erasmus of Rotterdam, to magic, to Leonardo Da Vinci (in the character of Baltasar), to the “Hammer of Witches” (Latin: *Malleus Maleficarum*), the “Dictionarium Hebraicum” (1523) or the “Nuremberg Chronicle” (1493).<sup>28</sup> The following examples mainly relate to larger events, the historical setting or typical cultural phenomena of the Early Modern Period that are depicted in ‘Pentiment’, starting with the background to the fictional city of Tassing.

**Early Modern cities:** Early Modern cities were bustling melting pots of people from different ranks, professions, gender, age, and origin. Locals and travellers, councillors, noblemen, merchants, and craftsmen pursuing their trades lined the streets. Farmers offered their wares for sale, even those from the lower social strata like beggars were not unknown in the cityscape.<sup>29</sup> Again referring to Europe, the imperial cities of Southern Germany, first and foremost Augsburg and Nuremberg, were the hub of the European world. This started during the Middle Ages and in the 16th century they were in full bloom. After the 16th century, the pendulum swung in the direction of northern cities. During the Renaissance, however, these cities were crucial. The merchant elites met, and the Imperial Diets convened there. The important postal routes led through these cities. Post riders went in and out.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Maria Frenay, Companion Pieces to Pentiment @UB Wien, Vienna 2024, <https://bibliothek.univie.ac.at/virtuelle-ausstellungen/2024/companion-pieces-to-pentiment.html>.

<sup>29</sup> See Heinz Schilling, Die Stadt in der frühen Neuzeit (Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte 24), Berlin 2015.

<sup>30</sup> See Wolfgang Behringer, Im Zeichen des Merkur. Reichspost und Kommunikationsrevolutionen in der Frühen Neuzeit, Göttingen 2003.

This scenery of the typical Early Modern city can be best described by looking at historical paintings depicting city life. A famous example is the “Augsburg Labours of the Month”, painted 1531–1550. These paintings are on display in the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* in Berlin today or the *Maximilianmuseum* in Augsburg.<sup>31</sup> Labours of the Months were a genre of paintings, that, from the Middle Ages onwards, were painted to show typical activities of the population during the year. These included, for example, farming or the harvest festival, but also city life.<sup>32</sup> Famous manuscript illustrations such as the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, and other illuminated manuscripts in medieval Books of Hours, established the tradition of these seasonal pictures. During the Early Modern Period, they still enjoyed great popularity and became more individualised.

The Augsburg Labours of the Month are among the most famous works of art from the Early Modern Period. The painting “Winter: Oktober–December” (see fig. 1) is the most well-known. It shows an idealized city of this period depicting market scenes during the winter months, the old town butcher’s shop, the “Perlach Tower” and the town hall in Augsburg. Townspeople from many different ranks and professions line the square. The events displayed represent an idealised image of the market scene, because the actual markets in Augsburg took place in different places and at different times of the year. Yet, as if seen under a magnifying glass, the painting still shows the activities that were most common in the typical city of the time.<sup>33</sup> Its colourful hustle and bustle, its people and their daily routines become apparent: the council walking out of the town hall wearing expensive fur coats, nobles in pompous, colourful robes, the butcher tearing apart a pig, or the begging woman in the foreground. Looking at this picture, the reader of this article can easily observe how close it is to the setting in the fictional city of Tassing in ‘Pentiment’ (see fig. 2).

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<sup>31</sup> See exhibition “Kurzweil viel, ohn Mass und Ziel”, Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM), 2000, <https://www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/kurzweil/index.htm>; “Der Rathausplatz im Winter“, painting by Heinrich Vogtherr d. J., Augsburg, ca. 1540, Kunstsammlungen und Museen Augsburg, Maximilianmuseum, see figure 1.

<sup>32</sup> See Harvest Festivals and Harvest Thanksgiving, Blog entry DHM, <https://www.dhm.de/blog/2017/09/29/harvest-festivals-and-harvest-thanksgiving>. In the Noclib documentary, Josh Sawyer also refers to the painting “The Procession to Calvary” by Peter Brueghel the Elder, painted in 1564 (Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna), as depicted in the film “The Mill and the Cross” (2011, directed by Lech Majewski) as a source of inspiration. See Noclip, The Making of Pentiment (see footnote 12).

<sup>33</sup> A good introduction and detailed articles about the paintings can be found in the online exhibition “Kurzweil viel, ohn Maß und Ziel” (see footnote 31). See the original painting here: Augsburger Monatsbild Winter, <https://kunstsammlungen-museen.augsburg.de/maximilianmuseum-lieblingsstuecke>.



**Fig. 1:** *Der Rathausplatz im Winter*, Heinrich Vogtherr d. J., Augsburg, ca. 1540. Image: *Kunstsammlungen und Museen Augsburg, Maximilianmuseum, all rights reserved.*

**Fig. 2:** *Town hall square in 'Pentiment'* (Obsidian 2022). Courtesy of Obsidian Entertainment.

The rural scene in ‘Pentiment’, on the other hand, is strongly reminiscent of painting “March” from *Très Riches Heures*.<sup>34</sup> Playing the game, therefore, immerses the player in a similar scenery as shown in the historical *Labours of the Month*. The buildings, the town hall where Magdalene Druckeryn later answers the council’s questions, the tavern and the inn as important places of exchange and festivities, the marketplace where the population met for events, to hold council or for executions, players encounter all these places in ‘Pentiment’ as typical places of Early Modern city life.<sup>35</sup> In the countryside depicted in ‘Pentiment’, the picture is similar and many parallels with the historical paintings become apparent. Fields are cultivated, sometimes by entire families. The so-called “Allmende” can be found in the game’s map. This was common land, the typical extended area of villages that was jointly used by the peasants for instance for cattle grazing, but that also included forests for clearing or land for cultivation.<sup>36</sup> As far as rulership in ‘Pentiment’ is concerned, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation is addressed as a political entity. In the case of ‘Pentiment’, power is also exercised by the clergy, more precisely by the Catholic clergy. Abbey or Fronhof, the seigneurial demesne, as the centre of cities were typical for the city structure of the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern Period.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Tobias Winnerling, *Das Tänzeln auf der Epochenschwelle. ‚Pentiment‘ zwischen Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, in this volume.

<sup>35</sup> See *The World of the Tavern. Public Houses in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Beat Kümin and Ann Tlusty, Aldershot 2002.

<sup>36</sup> See Reiner Beck, *Ländliche Wirtschaft und dörfliche Gesellschaft des 18. Jahrhunderts: Unterfinning in Oberbayern, 1721. Zur Ökologie bäuerlicher Produktion und Reproduktion*, Hagen 1991.

<sup>37</sup> See *Landgemeinde und Stadtgemeinde in Mitteleuropa. Ein struktureller Vergleich*, edited by Peter Blickle, München 1991; André Holenstein, Beat Kümin and Andreas Würzler, *Diskussionsbericht*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 489–506; Heinz Schilling, *Aufbruch und Krise: Deutschland 1517–1648*, Berlin 1988, pp. 140–160; Daniel Fabre,

In the fictional city of Tassing, the rule is said to lie with the “Prince-Bishop of Freising: religious and secular ruler of scattered territories in the Holy Roman Empire”. Within the abbey of Kiersau the power lies with the abbot. During the Early Modern Period, the towns and villages later increasingly emancipated themselves from this order and became more and more independent from the Fronhof or abbey.

**Clothing:** A crucial shaping characteristic of the Early Modern Period and its city life were dress codes. The society of the estates was characteristically expressed by clothing and habit during the Early Modern Period. At the time, dress codes regulated the clothing appropriate to one’s status and rank, which also helped to represent symbolically the differences between the estates and the legally consolidated and unquestioned inequality of society.<sup>38</sup> This finds its clear expression in the figures depicted in the Augsburg Labours of the Month, wearing different and sometimes very colourful garments. Clothing represented a person’s status and prestige.<sup>39</sup> One of the most famous dress codes was again published in Augsburg: “Regulations of the Roman Imperial Majesty and Reformation of Good Policies in the Holy Roman Empire” (German: *Römischer Kayserlicher Majestät Ordnung und Reformation guter Policen*) which was announced in 1530.<sup>40</sup> These clothing ordonnances as part of sumptuary laws regulated, among other things, “Improper and costly clothing” that particularly delineated clothes people of noble status or burghers were allowed to wear in public.<sup>41</sup> The bourgeoisie especially knew how to skilfully instrumentalise the dress code and express their importance in this way. Clothing therefore became a means of social distinction and an agent of both social differentiation and professionalisation.<sup>42</sup>

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Die Familie. Privates Leben und Brauchtum im Widerstreit, in: Geschichte des privaten Lebens 3, edited by Philippe Ariès and Roger Chartier, Frankfurt a.M. 1992, pp. 535–571.

<sup>38</sup> See Liselotte Constanze Eisenbart, Kleiderordnungen der deutschen Städte zwischen 1350 und 1700. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Bürgertums, Göttingen/ Berlin/Frankfurt 1962; Richard Van Dülmen, Kultur und Alltag in der frühen Neuzeit 2, Dorf und Stadt im 16. bis 18. Jahrhundert, München 1992, p. 223: “Unter Policey verstand der frühmoderne Staat noch nicht die Institution, die für innere Sicherheit zuständig war, sondern den ganzen Komplex der Verwaltung, Ökonomie und Ordnung einer Herrschaft.”

<sup>39</sup> See Ulinka Rublack, Dressing Up. Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe, New York 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Römischer Kayserlicher Majestät Ordnung und Reformation guter Policen, im Heiligen Römischen Reich, zu Augburg Anno 1530 auffgericht. Regulations of the Roman Imperial Majesty and reformation of good policies, in the Holy Roman Empire, established in Augsburg in 1530. Augsburg Dress Code (1530), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-282>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. See Sumptuary Laws in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, in: The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c.1200–1800, edited by Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack, Cambridge 2019, pp. 35–164.

<sup>42</sup> See Fashioning the Self in Transcultural Settings: The Uses and Significance of Dress in Self-Narratives (Istanbul Studies and Texts 17), edited by Claudia Ulbrich and Richard Wittmann, Würzburg 2015.



In ‘Pentiment’, this historically specific phenomenon inspired the many designs of the characters, from noblemen to burghers, to peasants, and it is executed masterfully. Especially in the figure of Andreas, his status and how it is reflected in his clothing becomes clear. Andreas’ social advancement throughout the game is represented by his change in clothing and style, which is particularly evident in the differences between part one and two of the game and the way he dresses later as a successful citizen burgher.

**The rise of the ‘Bürgertum’:** As epitomized by Andreas, the rise of the bourgeoisie was a characteristic feature of the Early Modern Period.<sup>43</sup> Merchants, scholars, officials, artists, physicians, even craftsmen such as goldsmiths, gained more social prestige and power as a social group and started to exert more political power during the time. As so-called “functional elites”, these groups and professions increasingly set the tone in society because their skills were needed.<sup>44</sup>

This change in social structure also had consequences for the idealised structure of society shaping the Early Modern Period. Since the Middle Ages, estates had been “large social groups that differ from one another in terms of their economic subsistence, their rights of rule, the norms of lifestyle (‘estates honour’) and their legal status.”<sup>45</sup> At the time, the order of society was “always [...] synonymous with hierarchy. For contemporaries, society could not be imagined in any other way than in the form of a hierarchical sequence of levels.”<sup>46</sup> During the Middle Ages, society was mainly divided into the three segments of clergy, nobility, and peasants. In the 16th century and, thus, the period of ‘Pentiment’, however, “a change began to emerge that did not call into question the existence of the estates order at its core, but allowed differentiations to become visible that were perpetuated until the end of the 18th century. These were a growing mobility within the estates on the one hand, and a demarcation between the estates on

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<sup>43</sup> See Bernd Roeck, *Lebenswelt und Kultur des Bürgertums in der Frühen Neuzeit*, München 2011; *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England 1550–1800*, edited by Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, Basingstoke 1994.

<sup>44</sup> See *Sozialer Aufstieg. Funktionseliten im Spätmittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Günther Schulz, München 2002.

<sup>45</sup> „[Stände sind] gesellschaftliche soziale Großgruppen, die sich voneinander unterscheiden hinsichtlich ihrer wirtschaftlichen Subsistenzweise, ihren Herrschaftsrechten, den Normen der Lebensführung (ständische Ehre) sowie ihrem Rechtsstatus.“ Winfried Schulze, *Ständische Gesellschaft und soziale Mobilität*, Munich 1988, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> „Gesellschaft war für die Zeitgenossen gar nicht anders vorstellbar als in Form einer hierarchischen Stufenfolge.“ Marian Füssel and Thomas Weller, *Einleitung*, in: *Ordnung und Distinktion. Praktiken sozialer Repräsentation in der ständischen Gesellschaft*, edited by Marian Füssel and Thomas Weller, Münster 2005, pp. 9–22, here p. 10.

the other.”<sup>47</sup> This change had already begun previously, but became established throughout society only during the Early Modern Period. Research speaks of a transition from an estate society to a society characterised by an estates system and hierarchy for the 16th century. Society remained hierarchically structured, but became more socially diverse and differentiated. This change and the heterogeneity of social groups can also be seen in the Augsburg Labours of the Month and the Augsburg dress code of 1530 and, again, it is also reflected in ‘Pentiment’. In the game, players encounter a wealth of different groups showing an identifiable self-image and practices of their own, including living and eating habits, individual styles of dress and particularly their own ways of speaking and writing.

During the Early Modern Period, the group most responsible for this change was the bourgeoisie, the middle class, the “Bürgertum” in German. This group vehemently demanded its own place in society, thus changing the ideal character of society in their favour. For the Early Modern Period, both the contemporaries and research today still divide the societal structure into three segments, but the nature of the groups changed. The tripartite now included the nobility, the bourgeoisie and the peasants. The clergy, once the first group within the medieval estate society, was integrated into the other two groups, itself subdivided into two groups. The catholic clergy was allocated to the nobility because they held ruler rights in their territories. The Protestant clergy was counted among the middle classes. Protestant pastors were considered bourgeois professions. These structural changes were accompanied by the decisive innovation at the beginning of the Early Modern Period that social advancement was no longer categorically excluded solely on the basis of different birth rights. It was no longer only the respective estate one was born into that was decisive for social advancement in the world, but also factors such as individual abilities, education, knowledge, and capital accumulation gained in importance. At the same time, personal networks, communication and travelling became central to one’s position in society because they promoted worldliness.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> „[In der Frühen Neuzeit begann sich] ein Wandel abzuzeichnen, der nicht die Existenz der ständischen Ordnung im Kern in Frage stellte, aber Differenzierungen sichtbar werden ließ, die sich bis zum Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts verstetigten. Diese waren eine wachsende innerständische Mobilität einerseits, eine Abgrenzung der Stände untereinander andererseits.“ Luise Schorn-Schütte, *Geschichte Europas in der Frühen Neuzeit. Studienhandbuch 1500–1789*, Paderborn <sup>3</sup>2009, p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> See Antoni Maczak, *Travel in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1995; Eva Johanna Holmberg, *Writing Mobile Lives, 1500–1700*, Cambridge 2024.

The functional elites were able to gain influence and political say through the growing demand for their professional skills. They developed enormous self-confidence and created their own self-perception and practices, underlining their importance as a driving factor in society. This new self-image is reflected in many contemporary records, which we describe today as so-called self-testimonies, the German concept of “Selbstzeugnisse”.<sup>49</sup> Self-testimonies are defined as all records in which historical actors write about or appear suffering or acting.<sup>50</sup> This type of historical record is also often seen as part of so-called “ego documents”, a category, which generally refers to all records with a first-person reference.<sup>51</sup> Sources such as letters, or diaries, but also portraits bear witness to the new self-perception of these groups. Accordingly, self-testimonies experienced a veritable boom during the entire Early Modern Period.

Two of today’s best-known self-testimonies are, speaking of paintings, the “Little Book of Traditional Costumes” (German: *Kleidungsbüchlein / Trachtenbüchlein*) by Matthäus Schwarz and, in terms of written sources, the records of Albrecht Dürer.<sup>52</sup> Both sources are echoed in ‘Pentiment’ – the latter consciously, the former less so.

The character Andreas Maler, journeyman artist and main character of the game, is inspired by the self-testimonies of Albrecht Dürer, namely his letters and travel journals documenting his journey to the Low Countries in 1520–21.<sup>53</sup> Dürer’s famous painting of the “Praying Hands” from 1508 is directly quoted in the game.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sometimes also translated as ‘self-narrative’.

<sup>50</sup> See Benigna von Krusenstjern, Was sind Selbstzeugnisse? Begriffskritische und quellenkundliche Überlegungen anhand von Beispielen aus dem 17. Jahrhundert, in: *Historische Anthropologie. Kultur. Gesellschaft. Alltag* 2 (1994), pp. 462–471.

<sup>51</sup> The term ‘egodocuments’ means different things in different national and disciplinary contexts. See *Selbstzeugnisse in der Frühen Neuzeit. Individualisierungsweisen in interdisziplinärer Perspektive*, edited by Kaspar von Greyerz and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner, Munich 2007; Andreas Rutz, Ego-Dokument oder Ich-Konstruktion? Selbstzeugnisse als Quellen zur Erforschung des frühneuzeitlichen Menschen, <https://www.zeitenblicke.de/2002/02/rutz/index.html>; Stefan Elit, Stephan Kraft and Andreas Rutz, Das “Ich” in der Frühen Neuzeit. Autobiographien – Selbstzeugnisse – Ego-Dokumente in geschichts- und literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive, in: *Zeitenblicke. Online-Journal für die Geschichtswissenschaften* 1 (2002), <https://www.zeitenblicke.de/2002/02/index.html>; Von der dargestellten Person zum erinnerten Ich. Europäische Selbstzeugnisse als historische Quelle 1500–1800 (*Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit* 9), edited by Kaspar von Greyerz, Hans Medick and Patrice Veit, Cologne et al. 2001. In English, the term ego-document is much more common, however, in the German discussion self-testimonies is the more common concept.

<sup>52</sup> See Rublack, *Dressing Up* (see footnote 39); Valentin Groebner, Die Kleider des Körpers des Kaufmanns. Zum Trachtenbuch eines Augsburger Bürgers im 16. Jahrhundert, in: *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 25,3 (1998), pp. 323–358.

<sup>53</sup> See *Dürer’s Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist*, edited by Susan Foister and Peter van den Brink, New Haven/London 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Albrecht Dürer, Study of Praying Hands, Albertina Museum Vienna, Austria, <https://www.artchive.com/art-work/study-of-praying-hands-albrecht-durer-1508>.

Creating the entire setting of ‘Pentiment’, the developers were inspired by Dürer, who gained world renown through education and travel and became one of the most famous artists in the world at that time lasting until today.<sup>55</sup> In many ways, the character Andreas epitomises Dürer and his life. In the game, Andreas embodies the societal group of artists or, depending on the player’s choice, also the group of scholars as representatives of the Early Modern functional elite and bourgeoisie. In the course of the game, one follows Andreas’ social advancement over time. This rise, made possible by education and travelling, becomes particularly clear after his return to Tassing. The game developers, likely inspired by the historical phenomenon itself, actively build the possibility of social rise and advancement and the conditions for it into the gameplay. This means that players are asked to choose between different backgrounds for Andreas, including certain abilities (e.g., if he is a “bookworm” or “business man”) or background stories (e.g., if he has travelled before), which can either pave the way or make it more difficult later in the game and influence possible courses of action (see fig. 3 and 4).

In the respective moment of choice in the game, the prompt reads “Pick a background that will affect your character’s choices going forward.”<sup>56</sup> The decisions are then recorded in the game diary, whose design and aesthetics are reminiscent of the typical Early Modern family books. In these genealogical books, the origins of the family were recorded by means of coats of arms, genealogical tables and other written evidence.<sup>57</sup> In contrast to earlier epochs, it became common practice during the Early Modern Period to include portraits in these books. As a general practice and change in style during the Renaissance, individualised portraits, self-portrait, family portraits, showing people in all their uniqueness, with facial expressions, gestures and many details and individual characteristics in the paintings, became the norm. With regard to this phenomenon, research has long spoken of the “discovery of the individual” during the Early Modern Period.<sup>58</sup> Artists as a professional group were becoming an important group within society with their own self-image. They began to portray the entire middle classes, *conterfeyen* as it was called in German.

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<sup>55</sup> See credits of the game with a long bibliography and references to Foister and van den Brink, Dürer’s Journey (see footnote 53).

<sup>56</sup> ‘Pentiment’ (Obsidian 2022).

<sup>57</sup> See Haus- und Familienbücher in der städtischen Gesellschaft des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit (Städteforschung 69), edited by Birgit Studt, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2007.

<sup>58</sup> See van Dülmen, Entdeckung des Individuums (see footnote 23).



**Fig. 3 and 4:** Choose your background in ‘Pentiment’ (Obsidian 2022). Courtesy of Obsidian Entertainment.

**Fig. 5:** Matthäus Schwarz of Augsburg: *Trachtenbuch*, 1520–1560, 32 jar 5 1/2 monet [18th century copy]. Image: Courtesy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hannover, Ms XVII, 988, fol. 91r. (1497–1574).

Numerous portraits of the 16th century bourgeoisie have survived to this day.<sup>59</sup> Matthäus Schwarz’s “Little Book of Traditional Costumes”, sometimes also referred to as “Book of Clothes” or simply “Costume Book” is one of the most famous and is a good example of a historical source that can be compared with the fictional world of ‘Pentiment’. Schwarz was chief accountant to the Fugger merchant dynasty and had himself been portrayed throughout his entire life in 137 richly detailed and colourful drawings. These paintings show many parallels to the clothing used for the characters in ‘Pentiment’ (see fig. 5). The historical image that is conveyed in ‘Pentiment’ is therefore very close to the historical source. Interestingly, the historical source itself is idealised. However, this idealisation nevertheless reflects a great deal of the self-image of contemporaries and encourages players to continue to engage with the phenomenon.<sup>60</sup> Schwarz’s clothing reflects social advancement, professionalisation, everyday life and festivities, important markers in peoples’ lives at that time and at important junctures such as birth, life, marriage or death. In the same way, clothing is used as a social marker in ‘Pentiment’. The clothing of the protagonists represents their personal backgrounds, status, origins, or special moments in people’s daily lives. Once again, even regarding clothing in the game, a central element of the turn of the Early Modern era is conveyed in a playful way: the beginning of the age of social differentiation and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

<sup>59</sup> See also the portraits in Annette Kranz, Christoph Amberger. *Bildnismaler zu Augsburg. Städtische Eliten im Spiegel ihrer Porträts*, Regensburg 2004.

<sup>60</sup> See Gabriele Mentges, *Fashion, Time and the Consumption of a Renaissance Man in Germany: The Costume Book of Matthäus Schwarz of Augsburg*, 1496–1564, in: *Gender & History* 14 (2002), pp. 382–402.

**The Reformation Movement:** The Reformation changed the course of history dramatically. In 1517, Martin Luther wrote his 95 Theses against the sale of indulgences and more criticisms of the principles and methods of the papal church. The Reformation movement then gained momentum and led to the religious division into Catholicism on the one hand and the Protestant churches on the other. The latter included not only Lutherans, but also Zwinglians, Anglicans, and many more Reformation groups in the course of religious pluralisation.<sup>61</sup> The Reformation movement was only able to prevail because it met with great approval from large swaths of the different groups of the population: the intellectuals in the cities, humanists, imperial knights, merchants, peasants, and even secular rulers such as the Catholic Frederick the Wise supported the movement.<sup>62</sup> ‘Pentiment’ mentions humanism and it refers to other reformers besides Luther, such as Zwingli. An essential aspect of the Reformation movement was the criticism of the omnipotence of the clergy and the authority of the Papal Church, of the abuse of power, extravagance, and the monopoly of the sole interpretation of the Bible by the clergy on the basis of the Reformation principles *sola fide* (only faith), *sola gratia* (only God’s grace), and *sola scriptura* (only Scripture).<sup>63</sup>

One of the central ideas of the Reformation was that it does not need any intermediary authorities between believers and God, because the believers themselves could interpret the Holy Scriptures and thus come into contact with God on their own. This principle was profoundly directed against the foundations of the Catholic Church, its institutions and authorities, which, besides the Pope, included the monasteries, convents and churches, monks, priests and nuns, who held sway in many places. The conflict between Protestants and Catholics is directly addressed as a topic in ‘Pentiment’ and there are several references to Luther. Interestingly, this position is embodied by the figure of the count, who as a secular ruler nonchalantly criticises the right of the clergy to rule. Once again, the historical context as inspiration is woven into the game narrative and, thus, does not come across as a didactic product. The game is set after the notorious Diet of Worms, during which Luther defied the Papal Church and the emperor for the first time.<sup>64</sup> After the “Emperor’s Diet”, count Lorenz of Rothvogel visits Tassing. He is described as a “a great Lord from the countryside near Worms”.

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<sup>61</sup> See Thomas Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Reformation in Deutschland*, Berlin <sup>2</sup>2016; Heinz Schilling, *Aufbruch und Krise. Deutschland 1517–1648*, Berlin 1988.

<sup>62</sup> See Luise Schorn-Schütte, *Die Reformation. Vorgeschichte – Verlauf – Wirkung*, München 1996; Heinz Schilling, *1517. Weltgeschichte eines Jahres*, München 2017.

<sup>63</sup> See Thomas Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation. Studien zur Kontextualität der Theologie, Publizistik und Inszenierung Luthers und der reformatorischen Bewegung*, Tübingen <sup>2</sup>2018.

<sup>64</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 280–282, 433–535.

Rothvogel talks with Maler about Martin Luther and asks: “Have you read his works? Tremendous mind.” Referring to the 95 theses and the monks, he then muses: “Perhaps they have even read his list of ninety-five theses against the church?”

One of the most central passages in the game is the moment when the reformist ideas directly meet and confront Catholic monasticism. At vespers in the monastery Kiersau, Rothvogel inquires: “That reminds me, Father Gernot, have you read anything by Martin Luther?” The abbot Father Gernot answers angrily: “Neither you nor Martin Luther dictate change to the Holy Church on their whim.” Those familiar with reformation history know that these words are similar to the words of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* (“Arise, O Lord”) by Pope Leo X, in which Luther’s works and critique are depicted as “heretical, false, scandalous, or offensive to pious ears” (German: *häretisch, Ärgernis erregend, irrig, für fromme Ohren anstößig*) – the abbot’s reaction in Kiersau is not far from that.<sup>65</sup>

**The Printing Press:** More than half a century before the Reformation began, the printing press with movable blocks was invented. Both events are interlinked. Before the 16th century, however, there was no real need for printing, effectively rendering this technology of little use.<sup>66</sup> With the Reformation, however, this need suddenly increased enormously. It was a win-win-situation in modern terms. Luther’s translation of the Bible alone was reprinted over 70 times by Melchior Lotter’s printing house. Pamphlets and leaflets were similarly important and helped the Reformation and the printing press achieve a breakthrough.<sup>67</sup> The so-called caricature controversy would have been inconceivable without the printing press. During this controversy, both sides branded each other as diabolical. The Counter-Reformation also used the printing press, which meant that the Catholic side also promoted the new technology.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Papst Leo X, Bannandrohungsbulle “Exurge Domine” (Erhebe Dich o Herr) gegen Martin Luther und seine Anhänger (Bulla contra errores Martini Lutheri et sequacium), 5 June 1520, Stuttgart, Hauptstaatsarchiv, J 385 U 28, quoted after: 450 Jahre Reformation in Heilbronn. Ursachen, Anfänge, Verlauf (bis 1555). Katalog zur Ausstellung des Stadtarchivs Heilbronn, edited by Helmut Schmolz, Hubert Weckbach and Karin Peters, Heilbronn 1980, p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> See Michael Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien*, Frankfurt a.M. 1991; Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance*, New Haven 2010; Richard G. Cole, *Reformation Printers: Unsung Heroes*, in: *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 15,3 (1984), pp. 327–339.

<sup>67</sup> See Daniel Bellingradt, *Die vergessenen Quellen des Alten Reiches. Ein Forschungsüberblick zu frühneuzeitlicher Flugpublizistik im Heiligen Römischen Reich deutscher Nation*, in: *Presse und Geschichte. Leistungen und Perspektiven der historischen Presseforschung* (Presse und Geschichte 36), edited by Astrid Blome and Holger Böning, Bremen 2008, pp. 77–95.

<sup>68</sup> See Ulinka Rublack, *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, Oxford 2019.

In ‘Pentiment’, players encounter a wooden printing press, which is depicted in a way very close to preserved originals. The printer himself plays a central role in the story, as does his daughter, who later becomes the game’s second main character. In the game, the printing press and its products are crucial elements of the narrative and harbour consequences for the game and the development of its story. The printer and his press fuel the flaming conflict in the city, just as the printing press fuelled the Reformation in the 16th century. Therefore, the printing press in the game and its historical predecessor again show parallels in their ultimate consequence in that players experience it as a turning point.

**The Peasants’ War:** The printing press was not only relevant to the Reformation, but also to events that were fuelled by the Reformation, such as the Peasants’ War.<sup>69</sup> The Peasants’ War raged from 1524 to 1525 in what is now Southern Germany (mostly in Baden-Württemberg and Thuringia, but also in Bavaria).<sup>70</sup> Tassing is fictional, but ‘Pentiment’ takes place in Bavaria, not far from the actual locations of this particular conflict in Southern Germany, like Kempten in Allgäu, Böblingen, Freiburg, Frankenhausen. In the Peasants’s War, peasants rose up en masse against the nobility and ruling classes to denounce grievances, exploitation, excessive taxes and misery. This process would have been unthinkable in the Middle Ages.<sup>71</sup> The conflict flared up over the discussion of the tithe, the peasants’ traditional levy for the lordship, which was newly levied on livestock during the time. The revolting peasants referred to Luther and the bible and questioned the justification for this increase. There was no word in the bible about tithing which, as they argued, made tithing unlawful, as they could verify via Luther’s translation of the bible.<sup>72</sup> Luther, however, sided with the nobility and condemned the actions of the peasants. He even called for the slaughter of the peasants which he justified in his writing “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants” (German: *Wider die Mordischen und Reubischen Rotten der Bawren*) in 1525.<sup>73</sup> The peasants, most of whom were inadequately armed and outnumbered by the Landsknechte (German mercenary soldiers), were indeed brutally massacred. The appearance of the Landsknechte in ‘Pentiment’ therefore was feared not without reason. It is a reference to the brutality of the historical precedent.

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<sup>69</sup> See Rainer Wohlfeil, *Der Bauernkrieg 1524–26. Bauernkrieg und Reformation. Neun Beiträge* (Nymphenburger Texte zur Wissenschaft 21), München 1975.

<sup>70</sup> See Peter Blickle, *Der Bauernkrieg. Die Revolution des Gemeinen Mannes* (Beck’sche Reihe 2103), München 42012.

<sup>71</sup> See Richard Wunderli, *Peasant Fires: The Drummer of Niklashausen*, Bloomington 1992.

<sup>72</sup> See André Holenstein, *Bauern zwischen Bauernkrieg und Dreißigjährigem Krieg*, Munich 1996; Peter Blickle, *Die Revolution von 1525*, Munich 42004.

<sup>73</sup> See Donald K. McKim, *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 184–186.



One of the most well-known battles from the Peasant's War is the Battle of Frankenhäusen, in which 6,000 of 8,000 peasants lost their lives.<sup>74</sup> The monumental painting of the battle of Frankenhäusen near Bad Frankenhäusen still commemorates the battle today.<sup>75</sup> In 'Pentiment', the scenes of the rebellious peasants seem to have been inspired by this panorama picture.



**Fig. 6:** *The monastery on fire in 'Pentiment' (Obsidian 2022). Courtesy of Obsidian Entertainment.*

The most unique testimony to the Peasants' War, however, is the "Twelve Articles of Memmingen", written by the Swabian League in 1525 and published as a pamphlet.<sup>76</sup> Today, they are considered one of the first drafts of human and civil rights in history, written long before the French Revolution. In the game, an original facsimile of the print of this pamphlet is shown and the peasants of Tassing make the exact same demands as the historical peasants. Unfortunately, they also share the same fate as them. In the game, players experience a fiery battle in which the peasants are outnumbered by the Landsknechte and many die, and large parts of the abbey are reduced to ashes. The event turns into a collective memory for the residents of the fictional village of Tassing. The event still shows repercussions years later. In the game as in history, the peasants' revolt is a central turning point. Historically, in fact, it was not only a turning point in the history of the Reformation, but in European history.

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<sup>74</sup> See Günter Vogler, *Bauernkrieg zwischen Harz und Thüringer Wald*, Stuttgart 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Original painting: Werner Tübke, „Monumentalbild“, Panorama Museum, Foto: Dieter Leistner, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2021, <https://www.panorama-museum.de/en/monumentalpainting.html>.

<sup>76</sup> See The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants. Appendices, in: *The Radical Reformation* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), edited by Michael G. Baylor, Cambridge 1991, pp. 231–238.

**Telling History:** Taken together, the game offers an impressive insight into the beginning of the era of the Early Modern Period as a turning point. Without a didactic mission, the game conveys the history-changing effect of this time. In doing so, games such as ‘Pentiment’ help to create more awareness of the Early Modern Period and the late Middle Ages in Europe and beyond, which could help to expand the primacy of the Middle Ages in public interest for another era and to foster differentiation regarding the popular images of history.

‘Pentiment’ unfolds its special appeal particularly through the way in which the narrative and the story are interwoven with the actual historical context. The game’s special atmosphere is created by the way history is told with a focus on the lives of the protagonists and their lived environments. This perspective and atmosphere are not chosen randomly or only due to the game mechanics, but it is inspired by a particular research approach, the so-called research approach of microhistory, which will be the subject of the last part of this article.

In ‘Pentiment’, the story as history is told from the perspective of the actors who experienced their own time and influenced it. The actors are depicted not as puppets of past structures, but as creators of their world and its events. The game is about individuals who write history as part of the game. Every single larger historical context in the game discussed above – from the estate society as a phenomenon to the Reformation or the Peasants’ War – is concretely represented or even embodied by one particular character in the game, through whose story we simultaneously learn more about the phenomena at hand and their larger context. Andreas Maler embodies social advancement, the count Rothvogel embodies the Reformation, the monks the Counter-Reformation, the peasant Martin embodies the Peasants’ War, Claus and Magdalene Druckeryn embody the printing press, Magdalene furthermore represents the empowerment of women, which Alan van Beek describes in the article in this volume.<sup>77</sup> This list could be extended beyond the topics discussed in the article, e.g., Jewish faith embodied by Rachel and Benjamin, magic and popular faith by Peter.

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<sup>77</sup> See Alan van Beek, *It’s fine poetry. For men. Schwester Illuminatas Kritik am Patriarchat in ‚Pentiment‘ vor dem Hintergrund der Figur Dido im ‚Eneasroman‘ Heinrichs von Veldeke*, in this volume. See Heide Wunder, *Er ist die Sonn’, sie ist der Mond. Frauen in der frühen Neuzeit*, München 1992; Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge <sup>3</sup>2008.

This is an interesting twist that the game chooses, because, again, the past is the inspiration, but in the gameplay, it is practically focussed on the agency of a particular player. As soon as the player realises this, they can see an aspect of the past in each of the players and this makes the discovery tour within the game even more rewarding. In ‘Pentiment’, it is the actors themselves who write their history and who are in focus of the chosen perspective from below: In historiography, this kind of perspective is called microhistory – and game director Sawyer, as he made clear during our interview was inspired by it. For historians this harbours immense potential for history communication.

### **Microhistory and Games**

When ‘Pentiment’ was released in November 2022, Josh Sawyer posted several tweets mentioning the books that inspired him during the game development. A more detailed list was published by Xbox. In the credits section at the end of the game the books are also cited in full.<sup>78</sup> This, of course, shows the game’s promotional claim to being historically informed and thus also to being appealing to an academic audience. Advertising motives aside, this step of combining research books as a direct inspiration for game development is also stimulating for a more general discussion and audience and represents a helpful resource. The books mentioned are not only cited as further educational reading, as is, for instance, the norm in educational games. They are listed as references and sources of inspiration, making it clear that and how the game’s entire design, its storytelling and narrative was influenced by historical research.

The list of inspiring books contains many of the most well-known books from the research strand of microhistory. It also lists fictional novels as influences, such as Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*. This book was historically informed, too, but combined with an exciting fictional plot. The latter is the reason why this book had the most far-reaching influence on ‘Pentiment’. The microhistorical books are, however, in fact not that far removed from Eco in terms of their intriguing stories and the excitement that these stories evoke – except that the stories told in microhistorical books – as unbelievable as it sounds – are based on true events and historical sources.

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<sup>78</sup> See Mike Nelson, A Recommended Reading List of Late Medieval History from ‘Pentiment’ Game Director Josh Sawyer, <https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2022/11/10/recommended-reading-of-medieval-history-from-josh-sawyer>. Sawyer also tweeted about it several times: e.g. Tweet, 10 November 2022: <https://twitter.com/jesawyer/status/1590770830375804934>. See van Beek and Haasis, Interview and Q&A with Josh Sawyer (see footnote 11).

These books with this new approach changed the way history was written at the time of their publication in the eighties until today. They have become classics and are known worldwide. They are books that I recommend to my students every semester. Some of them have also been turned into films.<sup>79</sup> But they have not yet been an inspiration for a game – until now.

The approach of microhistory encompasses the investigation of a historical topic on the basis of a limited field of observation, like a village, an event, a family, a community or an individual, using the method of extensive contextualisation to arrive at detailed conclusions about the phenomena and the larger context of which it was once a part and which it shaped at the same time.<sup>80</sup> It is typical to speak of “finding the big in the small” (“das Große im Kleinen finden”).<sup>81</sup> As Giovanni Levi, one of the founding fathers of the research approach, summarised, microhistory is a research perspective and “practice [that] is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material”.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, this detailed analysis is used to derive at larger contexts pertaining to the whole. In relation to stories about individuals, it is not a matter of writing their biography, but of looking at their lives in the context of their time. The aim is to draw conclusions about life-worlds, beliefs, practices, or language in the past based on the stories of the historical actors. This means that microhistory should not be reduced to the “investigation of small things, but it investigates in small scale”.<sup>83</sup> The best example for this is that “even the apparently minutest action of, say, somebody going to buy a loaf of bread, actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world’s grain markets.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The Return of Martin Guerre. Original title: *Le retour de Martin Guerre*, directed by Daniel Vigne (French), Cohen Media Group, starring Gérard Depardieu and Natalie Baye, 1982. The movie *Sommersby* (1993) is a Hollywood remake of the film in English, transposed to the American Civil War, starring Richard Gere and Jodie Foster.

<sup>80</sup> See Hans Medick, *Mikro-Historie*, in: *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie – eine Diskussion*, edited by Winfried Schulze, Göttingen 1994, pp. 40–53; Hans Medick, *Mikrohistorie*, in: *Lexikon der Geschichtswissenschaft. 100 Grundbegriffe*, edited by Stefan Jordan, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 215–217; Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, *Was ist Mikrogeschichte?*, in: *Geschichtswerkstatt 6* (1985), pp. 48–52; John Brewer, *Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life*, in: *Cultural and Social History 7*, 1 (2010), pp. 87–109; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szi-jártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, London 2013; Lucas Haasis, *The Power of Persuasion. Becoming a Merchant in the 18th Century*, Bielefeld 2021.

<sup>81</sup> See Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler, *Im Kleinen das Große suchen. Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis*, Innsbruck 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Levi, *On Microhistory* (see footnote 12), p. 95.

<sup>83</sup> Giovanni Levi quoted after Medick, *Mikro-Historie* (see footnote 80), p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> Levi, *On Microhistory* (see footnote 12), p. 96.

Lawrence Stone wrote in his article “Return of the Narrative” that a “whole social system and set of values can be brilliantly illuminated by the searchlight method of recording in elaborate detail a single event, provided that it is very carefully set in its total context and very carefully analysed for its cultural meaning.”<sup>85</sup> In ‘Pentiment’, the approach is similar, but it is not a searchlight put on a research topic, but a spotlight put on particular actors in a game that point us to particular historical events, figures, developments or ways of thinking.

One of the most popular methods and analytical designs of microhistory is the concept of the “exceptional normal”, which aptly reflects the way microhistory narratives work and which is, again, very applicable to ‘Pentiment’. The “exceptional normal”, or in its original “une communauté de style”, is a concept coined by Edoardo Grendi. The expression generally refers to “exceptional documents that can turn out to be exceptionally ‘normal’ because they are relevant”.<sup>86</sup> Francesca Trivellato notes that in English the concept of the “normal exception” is “perhaps a more accurate English rendition of the oxymoron”.<sup>87</sup> The concept signifies that historical documents, phenomena or historical actors that seem strange or exceptional to us initially ultimately represent normal circumstances for the contemporaries. An obvious example of this is defence magic, which was once considered effective. Sometimes it is also extraordinary circumstances that have occurred in the past that bring to light what was actually normal at the time. An obvious example of this is witchcraft cases. One could say that the exception proves the rule, while the exception could also occur frequently. One major premise of writing a history from below by writing microhistory is to point to the fact that the world of the past was different to the world of today. This becomes particularly apparent if one looks at the individuals living in the past and giving meaning to their actions and the world they were living in. Many of the stories told in microhistory are incredible, but in all their absurdity or extraordinariness, they ultimately show us the alterity of the past. Many of these microhistorical studies and their now widely known stories are also told or cited in ‘Pentiment’. In this chapter, I will look at three of them in detail and find references to them in the game and discuss what this tells us about the representation of the past in the game.

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<sup>85</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History*, in: *Past and Present* 85,11 (1979), pp. 3–24, here pp. 13–14.

<sup>86</sup> Edoardo Grendi, *Micro-analisi a storia sociale*, in: *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977), pp. 506–520, here p. 512.

<sup>87</sup> Francesca Trivellato, *Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory*, in: *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33,1 Special Issue, *The Politics of Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (2015), pp. 122–134, here p. 133.

Among the most well-known books in microhistory are “The Cheese and the Worms” by Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis’ “The Return of Martin Guerre”.<sup>88</sup> Both books draw extensively on original source material, in both cases exceptional court records, in order to deeply reconstruct the cosmologies of certain individuals living within a particular lived environment. They do so for the purpose of reacting to and answering general questions and assumptions about the time that these individuals were living in. In his famous book, Ginzburg examines the cosmology of a miller named Mennoccio living in the rural Italian village of Friuli in the 16th century. He was accused of heresy by the inquisition because he explained the world and his own religious belief as having evolved from “chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels.”<sup>89</sup> Ginzburg’s book tells us about the cosmology, literacy and wide cultural horizon of the common folk in the Early Modern Period. It provides an insight into Early Modern popular belief, contemporary judicial practices and into the logic of the inquisition. In ‘Pentiment’, it is not the miller but the charcoal burner who takes offence, but his worldview is ultimately very similar to Mennoccios. In one scene this character, Vacslav, speaks in the forest: “If the five elements, angels are fire and air, and demons water and earth. And the world was aether before the Lord formed it.”<sup>90</sup> It is a direct reference to *The Cheese and the Worms* – a popular belief that was still widespread in the Early Modern Period.<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, from today’s perspective, it almost seems like an early version of the theory of evolution. Despite the rigid order, it was not surprising for a miller or burner in the Early Modern Period to take this position, because after all, this derivation was about explaining the origin of the world from the experiences of their everyday life and the lived world – which was exceptionally normal.

Natalie Zemon Davis’ book “The Return of Martin Guerre” takes the reader to a rural society of the 16th century France, presenting us with the story of a peasant man, Arnaud du Tilh, who took on the identity of another peasant, Martin Guerre (who himself had left his family and home, of which Arnaud knew because both men had met briefly during war) in order to ‘return’ to this man’s hometown, taking over his house and home and also raising a claim to his wife and child. The impersonation even worked out and lasted for three years until first doubts were

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<sup>88</sup> See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, Baltimore 1980; Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge, Mass. 1983.

<sup>89</sup> Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (see footnote 88), pp. 5–6.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Pentiment’ (Obsidian 2022).

<sup>91</sup> See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Abingdon/New York 2019.

raised in the village community, resulting in a court case, during which, to make matters worse for Arnaud, the real Martin Guerre eventually returned, all of which in the end led to the execution of the false Martin Guerre. Zemon Davis also draws on court records, the account regarding this case written by the judge Jean de Coras, and other contemporary sources in order to recreate on the basis Early Modern village life as well as Early Modern concepts of identity and marriage. Her book provides insight into Early Modern “property rights, inheritance, customs, family relationships and the mechanisms of the law”.<sup>92</sup> It has been adapted as a movie several times, even by Hollywood, because the story seems almost unbelievable, but it is based on exceptionally normal sources that survived. In ‘Pentiment’, Martin Guerre is turned into the character of Martin Bauer. He is known for his “boorish youth”. He also leaves and comes back. Depending on how you deal with him in the course of the game, he develops more or less for the better.<sup>93</sup> But he definitely undergoes a transformation similar to the story of Martin Guerre.

The last book I wish to mention is “The Faithful Executioner” by Joel F. Harrington. The book tells the story of the social rise of a man who earned his living in a so-called dishonorable profession during the Early Modern Period. As part of this marginal group of outsiders, the so-called “dishonourable people”, this man had no honour of the estates and was not considered an actual part of the Estates Society.<sup>94</sup> However, his services were in great demand and his expertise needed in the Early Modern world, so that this occupational group gradually managed to climb the social ladder. The book is about executioners.<sup>95</sup> Harrington’s book is based on a unique historical source that has survived from the 16th century executioner Frantz Schmidt, also known as *Meister Frantz*, whose reputation preceded him even during his lifetime. The executioner documented all his executions in detail and preserved them in a book. Master Frantz carried out more than 600 executions during his lifetime.<sup>96</sup> In ‘Pentiment’, the executioner plays a crucial role and appears during one of the most pivotal moments in the game. In part one, players experience an execution that is shown in great detail (see fig. 8). The player can also notice the character of these occasions in the life of the city.

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<sup>92</sup> David Parker, Review of “The Return of Martin Guerre”. Times Literary Supplement (June 15, 1984), p. 620.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Pentiment’ (Obsidian 2022).

<sup>94</sup> See Richard van Dülmen, *Der ehrlose Mensch. Unehrllichkeit und soziale Ausgrenzung in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Cologne/ Weimar/Vienna 1999. See Kathy Stuart, *Defiled Trades and Social Outcasts. Honor and Ritual Pollution in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 1999.

<sup>95</sup> See also Jutta Nowosadtko, *Scharfrichter und Abdecker. Der Alltag zweier “unehrlicher Berufe“ in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Paderborn 1994.

<sup>96</sup> Joel F. Harrington, *The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century*, New York 2013.

The design of the executioner in ‘Pentiment’ is based on the only image that has survived of the actual Master Frantz Schmidt.<sup>97</sup> The portrait was drawn in the margin of a legal volume of capital sentences by a Nuremberg court notary (see fig. 7).<sup>98</sup> The executioner is equally as effective in the original historical case as in the game. His appearance is brief but his action was effective. After the performance, he disappears from the stage. But whoever wants to learn more about executioners can find the entire story of the “The Faithful Executioner” in Harrington’s book. This story is among the most exciting and at the same time daunting examples that research literature on the Early Modern Period has to offer. It is a perfect portrayal of what characterises the epoch of the Early Modern Period most: its ambivalence.



**Fig. 7:** *The executioner Frantz Schmidt executing Hans Fröschel on May 18, 1591). Image: Nürnberg, Staatsarchiv, Reichsstadt Nürnberg, Amts- und Standbücher 223, fol. 485r, all rights reserved.*

**Fig. 8:** *The execution in ‘Pentiment’ (Obsidian 2022). Courtesy of Obsidian Entertainment.*

Roger Chartier summarised for microhistory that “it is on this reduced scale, and probably only on this scale, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of beliefs, of values and representations on the one hand, and social affiliations on the other.”<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> The executioner Franz Schmidt executing Hans Fröschel on May 18, 1591. This drawing in the margins of a court record is the only surviving fully reliable portrait of Franz Schmidt. Courtesy of Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, public domain. Original source: Die Enthauptung von Hans Fröschel durch Frantz Schmidt, 18. Mai 1591 (zeitgenössische Darstellung). Nürnberg, Staatsarchiv, Reichsstadt Nürnberg, Amts- und Standbücher 223, fol. 485r.

<sup>98</sup> Joel F. Harrington, The Director of the Theater of Horror. What was it like to be an executioner in the 16th century, in: Slate, 30 May 2013, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2013/05/executioners-in-medieval-europe-history-of-capital-punishment.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Roger Chartier on The Cheese and the Worms: Roger Chartier, Intellectual history or Sociocultural history? The French Trajectories, in: Modern European Intellectual History. Reappraisals and New Perspectives, edited



This statement is equally apt in relation to the books on microhistory as to games that are inspired by these books. Microhistory makes history more accessible, draws readers in, only to show that the past will always remain the past, which is in many ways foreign to the modern world.<sup>100</sup> ‘Pentiment’ does the same and therefore shows that microhistory can be an inspiration for games. In general, it shows that games are a viable contemporary bring the epoch of the Early Modern Period to the masses, so to speak. With ‘Pentiment’, we have come a good deal closer to the goal of getting the Early Modern Period into the forefront people’s minds and finally defying the overpowering historical images of the Middle Ages.

All links were checked on 16 June 2024.

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by Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, Ithaca 1982, pp. 13–46, here p. 32.

<sup>100</sup> See David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*, Cambridge 2015 (first version 1985).