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The Educational Applications of Popular Depictions of Vikings in Videogames and Film – Taking advantage of Popular Media

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Foreword

It has been a rollercoaster of a task to write this thesis. It has been a lot of work, but it has also been interesting and informative. I am glad that this project is over, but I am also glad that I was able to do it. I am proud of myself while also being thankful for all the people that have helped me and been there for me during this time.

First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisor Beñat Elortza Larrea for being helpful, professional, showing interest, and providing guidance when I needed it, not only on this work, but also on my bachelor's thesis. I sincerely believe that your guidance, your vast knowledge, and keen eye for detail, have helped me improve academically.

I also want to thank my fellow students and friends at Nord University for making my time in Bodø one of the best times in my life. I want to thank my roommate Carl, who out of the kindness in his heart made sure that I did not starve to death during the most stressful periods of writing this thesis by cooking me dinner. My friends Jonas and Kristian also deserve a special thanks, as they introduced me to a couple of the videogames discussed in this thesis and played with me when I was learning to play the games myself.

Lastly, I have to thank the person that (unintentionally) started me on this journey way back when I was deciding what topic I wanted to write about for my bachelor's thesis, Lavrans. Thank you for expressing your dissatisfaction with popular depictions of Vikings, leading me to write about popular depictions on my bachelor's thesis which again lead to this thesis. I could not have done this without you.

Kristoffer André Skei Bye

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Theme and research question

For my bachelor's thesis I looked at how Vikings are portrayed in popular culture, and I tried to answer whether popular depictions of Vikings are inherently wrong or if alternative narratives are justified. That thesis focused on historical accuracy, and I concluded that it was reasonable for these types of depictions to have some inaccuracies as they were entertainment products. However, what about if one wanted to use these depictions for educational purposes, to teach about the Vikings? Are these inaccuracies (which may also misrepresent history in a deeper, conceptual level, in addition to the more surface level aesthetic ones, which again may create a warped perception of History which could harm students' historical understanding) justifiable then too? As this was a topic I found interesting, combined with the fact that I am studying to become a teacher, I wanted to look into this further, forming the research question for this thesis, which goes as follows: ***Can popular depictions of Vikings in films and videogames be used to teach Viking history, and if so, how can they be used to teach Viking history?***

This research question consists of two parts, the first part is concerned with whether popular depictions of Vikings in films and videogames are educationally viable for teaching about Vikings, while the second part is concerned with how these depictions could be used for this purpose. To help answer the research questions I have constructed four sub-questions that will shape the structure of this thesis and form a foundation on which I can answer the research question. The sub-questions go as follows:

- 1) How do historical films and historical videogames portray history?
- 2) What can one learn from historical films and how can they be used in education?
- 3) What can one learn from historical videogames and how can they be used in education?
- 4) How are Vikings portrayed in these depictions?

Several relevant authors will be used throughout this thesis, the most notable being, Erik Lund, Jeremiah McCall, Adam Chapman, Marcus with others, Rosenstone, A. Martin Wainwright, Tozoğlu and Kuran, Burgess and Jones, Robert Houghton, Clément Dussarps, and many others. These authors build the theoretical framework on which this thesis is built upon.

1.2 Previous research and the relevance of the thesis

There are many ‘popular’ mediums for sharing and promoting history, amongst other, graphic novels, films, theater, music, and videogames.¹ McCall argues that as the mediums that portrays history shapes the historical content they deliver, they all have to be understood on their own.² Screen media has since the second half of the 20th century played a more significant role in shaping the public history infosphere, especially films, but as videogames have become a larger part of screen media since the start of the 21st century, they have also started to play a more significant role in the shaping of the public history infosphere.³ New technology has a huge potential when it comes to “recreating” the past and making it more “alive”, which again makes history more accessible and interesting for the general public.⁴

The literature on the use of films to teach history has been growing for a while, and in recent years the literature on the use of videogames to teach history has been growing as well. However, from the literature I have looked at concerning historical videogames in education, most of it is quite general in the sense that it does not necessarily look at how one could teach about specific events, time periods, or groups of people by using these mediums, (except for one of the books that is specifically concerned with how videogames could be used to teach about the Middle Ages). The point of this thesis is to try to figure out what one could learn from various popular depictions of Vikings and how these depictions could be used in education. From what I have seen in the literature is this a topic that has yet to be more thoroughly explored.

Students are in contact with history all the time, even outside school, through popular culture which has an impact on and shape their historical consciousness.⁵ An increasing amount of research is done on the usage of videogames to represent and convey history, both to the public and in education.⁶ It has been argued that historical videogames can be extremely influential when it comes to their players’ views of the past, even more influential than any other forms of popular media.⁷ As Bøe and Knutsen mention, a competent history teacher

¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 11.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ Belyaev & Belyaeva, “Historical Video Games in the Context of Public History”, 53.

⁴ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 77.

⁵ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 29-30.

⁶ Carter & Chapman, “Fiction as History: Truth and Authenticity in Total War: Rome 2 and Total War: Warhammer”, 1.

⁷ Houghton, “Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games”, 4.

should stay up to date on any technological development that is relevant for history, and it can be argued that to use historical films and historical videogames in education is a part of this, as popular culture's films and videogames plays a role in how history is interpreted and understood by people.⁸ Teachers should therefore be aware of and think about both the possibilities and the challenges that comes with digital tools like these.⁹ Historical depictions in popular media like feature films, TV-series, and videogames could not only make students more engaged and motivated if used correctly, but they could also help students to be able to recognize and analyze narratives, as well as making students aware of and help them examine the constructive nature of historical interpretations, which is central to historical thinking.¹⁰

According to Robert Houghton do educational curricula often marginalize or omit large parts of the medieval period, which leaves players (students) to get their information about the Middle Ages mostly from popular media.¹¹ However, popular depictions of the Middle Ages are 'problematic' for various reasons, and popular depictions of the Middle Ages in videogames are no exception, as they are to a large degree influenced by medievalist and gaming tropes, and they therefore usually focus on violence while at the same time promoting a technological and social backwardness, the centrality of religion, and moral absolutes.¹² In addition, popular depictions of the medieval period are also largely influenced by the fantasy genre as well, which then again also influences consumers' understanding of the period.¹³ Because of this it is important to be aware of and consider the limitations of historical videogames when it comes to teaching about the Middle Ages.¹⁴ Robert Houghton further states that even with their 'issues', these depictions could still be used as educational tools for the Middle Ages, and that they could be incredibly effective at this, but that they must be used with care.¹⁵

As historical depictions in film and videogames are extremely influential on students' historical understanding, combined with the fact that popular depiction of Vikings contain various inaccuracies, in addition to the little focus on the Viking Age in educational curricula which leads to popular depictions being one of (if not, the most) important sources of

⁸ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 169.

⁹ Haldal & Wittek, *Pedagogikk: en grunnbok*, 234.

¹⁰ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 6.

¹¹ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

information about the period for most students, this thesis therefore aims to look at whether teachers could utilize these depictions, using them as tools and resources, helping students to carefully interrogate and critically evaluate these depictions, as suggested by Robert Houghton.¹⁶

1.3 The approach and scope of the thesis

There are a couple of reasons for looking at both historical films and historical videogames. Firstly, due to the fact that people often treat watching films and playing videogames as similar activities, and that they believe that historical films and historical videogames treat history the same, both of which may be true to some extent, but historical films and videogames are also vastly different. Even though one could argue that watching historical films is not a passive activity, it is often seen as a passive activity.¹⁷ This is also how people often distinguish between watching films and playing videogames, seeing watching films as a passive activity and seeing playing videogames as an active activity.¹⁸ Secondly, media scholars have also proposed that film theory could be serve as a guide on how to interpret videogames, both in terms of thematic content and visually.¹⁹ The main difference being that videogames allow players to participate in, interact with, and even shape their historical portrayals, which again influences the narratives within these portrayals.²⁰ This means that having an understanding of how films portray the past and historical films educational applications is useful for understanding how videogames portray history and their educational applications as well. There is however a slightly more focus on videogames, due to the fact that the way they portray the past is somewhat more complex, (as I will touch upon later), and I want to add to the still somewhat lacking literature concerning historical videogames in education.

I will look at existing scholarship regarding historical films and historical videogames, and how these can be used for educational purposes. By building upon those two angles, I will provide a case-study specifically focused on the Viking Age. There are two main reasons for choosing to focus on the Viking Age. Firstly, it is a topic that I am interested in and have some prior knowledge off, and secondly, as my focus is mainly on high school history

¹⁶ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 15.

¹⁷ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 127.

¹⁸ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 2.

¹⁹ Brown, *Videogames and Education*, 53.

²⁰ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 2.

education in Norway, a focus on Vikings is relevant due to Vikings' importance in Norwegian history and its use in Norwegian history education related to nation building and national feeling, and so on. As I am using existing scholarship and past studies in this thesis, I do not provide any raw data based on studies carried out by me, however, this does not subtract from the applicability of this thesis, as this scholarship provide a solid foundation to answer the research question. This thesis will use relevant literature concerning how historical films and historical videogames portray history, and relevant literature on how historical films and videogames could be used in education. This forms the basis for the case study, where I am going to look at how Vikings are depicted in films and videogames by looking at a small sample size of popular depictions. All this will build a foundation on which one could look at how these portrayals could be used in education to teach about the Vikings and the Viking Age.

The way the thesis is structured it can be divided into three main parts. The first part deals with how historical films and historical videogames portray history. Having a basic understanding of how film and videogames portray the past is crucial to the second part of the thesis that deals with how they can be used in education. The third and last part of the thesis consists of the case study, where I am going to look at six popular depictions of Vikings in these mediums, looking at how they portray Vikings, and how these depictions could be used in education to teach about Vikings, followed by a short discussion and summary. First off however, I will introduce some relevant theory that is central to this thesis, clarifying key history-didactical concepts, in addition to a short presentation of the Norwegian history curriculum and the Norwegian goals for history education. This is followed by an introduction of the source material, before diving into the main task of this thesis.

1.4 Theory

This thesis is very much didactical in its nature, as it is going to look at the educational purposes of different popular depictions of Vikings. It is therefore sensible to get a general overview of the didactical concepts that are the most relevant to this thesis. Before this I will look at the goals for history education in Norway by looking at the Norwegian history curriculum, at what the pupils are supposed to learn within the subject of history, which is important when discussing how these popular depictions could be used in education. First off however, I will clarify this thesis' use of the term 'Viking'.

1.4.1 What is meant by ‘Viking’ in this thesis?

As this thesis is concerned with popular depictions of Vikings the term *Viking* itself must be clarified. I am not going to discuss the origin of the term, but rather explain how the term is used in this thesis. First off, the term *Viking* is commonly used about Scandinavian people that during the Viking Age traveled outside of Scandinavia, (mainly to the British Isles and Continental Europe), as raiders and traders during the late 8th to the 11th century.²¹ However, contemporaries at the time did usually not use this term, preferring terms like, ‘Danes’, ‘Northmen’, and ‘pagans’ instead.²² The term ‘Viking’ has also been used about people in Scandinavia that did not participate in overseas activities during this time as well, but this is not something this thesis has to consider as the popular depictions used in this thesis are focused on Scandinavian people who traveled outside of Scandinavia during the Viking Age, (except for one of the depictions, but I will get to that later). It is for this reason that this thesis will simply stick to this term as well when discussing the Scandinavians portrayed in these popular depictions, in a similar way as Claire Downham, who uses the term ‘Vikings’ as an umbrella term to describe people from Scandinavian culture that participated in activities outside of Scandinavia.²³ “Viking culture”, “Viking religion”, “Viking society”, and so on, is also then just Scandinavian (or, more specific, Norse) culture and religion, as Vikings did not have a separate culture or religion from the other Scandinavians that did not participate in ‘Viking activities’.

1.4.2 Schools’ goal and the Norwegian curriculum in history – LK20

Previously, in the middle of the 1900s, the subject of history emphasized students’ ability to memorize certain years, places, and names, but today, turning historical consciousness into a central concept, and the students’ ability to see the connection between the past, present, and future are instead emphasized.²⁴ ‘Historical consciousness’ was introduced as the overall goal in the subject of history for high school in the Norwegian curriculum of 2006, LK06, and multiple of the competence goals in the primary school curriculum were also inspired by it according to Lund.²⁵

²¹ Brink, “Who Were the Vikings”, 5.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ivarr to A.D. 1014*, xv.

²⁴ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 165.

²⁵ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 61.

The new central concept introduced in LK20 was ‘*kjerneelementer*’ (core elements), they were introduced in order to renew the subjects and to realize in-depth learning.²⁶ The subject of history was given four core elements: *historical consciousness; exploratory history and source critical awareness; historical empathy, connections, and perspectives; and people and society in the past, present, and future.*²⁷ These core elements can again be connected to multiple competence goals that students should work towards.²⁸ The core element “historical consciousness” is also concerned about key concepts like source investigation, cause, continuity, and change.²⁹ The core element “People and society in the past, present, and future” also introduced *five “great questions”*.³⁰ This core element refers in reality to what was previously seen as the content of the subject of history, and certain competence goals can relate to some of the five “great questions”.³¹ The five “great questions” are: *How have people acquired food and livelihoods and created and distributed wealth and resources?; How have people organized themselves into societies?; How have people communicated and met other people?; How have people both created, lived with and resolved conflicts, but also managed to live peacefully?; and How have people been defined, how have they defined themselves, and how have they perceived their place in the world?.*³²

Even though in-depth learning is not directly mentioned in the history subject plan of LK20 it was one of the central justifications for the implementations of LK20, according to Lund.³³ Lund states that the concept has somewhat of an unclear definition within history, but it has often been defined in terms of amount of time spent on a topic as well as the amount of material studied.³⁴ Further he writes that key concepts like source, continuity and change, and cause are central when it comes to in-depth learning, and that the amount of material studied, how much one knows about a topic, and how much time spent are no longer central to in-depth learning.³⁵ Connected to this, LK20 emphasizes that students should work with historical material and that they themselves should carry out a creative written work.³⁶

²⁶ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 63.

²⁷ Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Historie (HIS01-03): Kjerneelementer”.

²⁸ Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering”.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

³² *Ibid.*, 65.

³³ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

Within the subject of history it is important to be able to evaluate evidence, engage in meaningful discussions, form valid interpretations of the past, and to be able to validly critique others' interpretations of the past, as this set the foundations for a richer understanding of the past as well as it develops students' critical thinking skills, that are central in today's modern world.³⁷ Being able to analyze and critique sources and the authors of various sources is an important skill for young people to learn.³⁸ In the subject of history, one of the most important skills that can be fostered is then also to be able to analyze and critique interpretations and reconstructions of the past.³⁹

LK20 also emphasizes certain basic skills that students should develop, including writing and reading skills, oral skills, and digital skills, all of which are crucial within the subject of history, and all of which are to varying degrees commented upon in this thesis.⁴⁰ However, I want to emphasize the basic skill concerned with 'digital skills' and being able to use of digital tools to acquire knowledge and develop competencies within the subject of history as well as being able to search for, evaluate, and use information critically and appropriately.⁴¹ As it can be argued that students should be able to use historical videogames and films for this purpose as well, as they are also digital tools. As previously written, as these digital tools play an important role in students' understanding of history, it is important that students learn how to utilize them. Lastly, various competence goals that students should work towards was also included in LK20, similar to LK06.⁴²

1.4.3 History didactical concepts relevant to this thesis

Lund writes that the most central concept within Nordic history didactics is ***historical consciousness***.⁴³ Further he writes that the term implies that the more factual knowledge one has about the past the more qualified historical consciousness one has, as well as that historical knowledge should mean something for attitudes and actions in the present as well as in the future.⁴⁴ The Norwegian curriculum's interpretation of the term, on the other hand,

³⁷ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 7-10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁰ Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Historie (HIS01-03): Grunnleggende ferdigheter".

⁴¹ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 134.

⁴² Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering".

⁴³ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

focuses more on the interaction between the past, the present, and the future.⁴⁵ According to Lund is historical consciousness built upon four competences: substantial historical knowledge, examination of sources, reflection, and utilizing historical terms.⁴⁶ Together these competences work together to develop students' historical consciousness.⁴⁷ Bailon and Afandi emphasizes how historical consciousness embraces many elements of history, amongst others, historical literacy, historical reasoning, and historical understanding.⁴⁸ Further they write that historical consciousness, to some extent, is an intuitive state of mind, as well as something that could be learned and adapted, and that it includes interest in the past as well as being able to critically reflect upon and engage with the past.⁴⁹ According to Lund, students' historical consciousness can be tested in four ways: 1) testing their knowledge in how to use a historical frame of reference; 2) testing their understanding of how historical knowledge is created; 3) testing their knowledge of how history is used; and 4) testing their ability to use historical concepts.⁵⁰

Previously *historical knowledge* meant knowledge of historical facts, has become much more than just knowledge of historical facts, and Lund distinguishes between three types of historical knowledge: “know that”-knowledge, “know how”-knowledge, and conceptual knowledge (knowledge of concepts and terminology).⁵¹ According to him does “Know that”-knowledge consist of what we know within history, “know how”-knowledge, on the other hand, is about how we can claim to know what we know in the “know that”-knowledge.⁵² Crucial to “know how”-knowledge are sources and source criticism.⁵³ Lastly, conceptual knowledge, is according to Lund often divided into two categories, first order concepts (i.e. content terms like *cold war, revolution, king, farmer, nation, democracy, free trade*) and second order concepts (i.e. key terms like *source, cause, empathy, development*).⁵⁴ Historical knowledge is often understood and practiced as “know that”-knowledge based on memorization and reproduction of what students remember from history textbooks and lectures.⁵⁵ Lund divides students' historical understanding into four levels, where students on

⁴⁵ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁸ Bailon & Afandi, “History Education Research and Practice: An International Perspective”, 48.

⁴⁹ Clark & Grever, “Historical consciousness: Conceptualizations and Educational Applications” 183.

⁵⁰ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 190-191.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 18-21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

the first level perceives historical knowledge as given, and on the fourth level begin to see historical portrayals as reconstructions that can show connections and motives that the people that lived in the past would not have perceived, and perhaps not even understood.⁵⁶

Carla von Boztel and Jannet van Drie also divide historical knowledge into three categories, but they distinguish between first-order knowledge (or content knowledge), second-order knowledge (or metahistorical knowledge), and epistemological beliefs.⁵⁷ According to them is ‘first-order knowledge’ knowledge of historical events, structures, themes, concepts, and chronology.⁵⁸ Second-order knowledge consists of knowledge of concepts that are a part of defining the structure of history as a discipline, as they shape historical questions, help make sense of historical sources, and they are a part of constructing historical interpretations.⁵⁹ Examples of some second-order concepts are evidence, change, historical context, human agency, historical perspectives, and so on.⁶⁰ Lastly, epistemological beliefs, are concerned with how historical knowledge is constructed and the nature of historical knowledge.⁶¹

Multiple scholars have pointed out how all disciplines have their own disciplinary literacy, (‘reading skills’), and that the discipline of history, for example, requires *historical literacy* to be able to critically evaluate a historical reasonings.⁶² Debra Donnelly states that historical literacy has been used about being generally able to collect factual historical information, but according to her is this description too narrow.⁶³ She writes that historical literacy is synonymous with historical understanding, and that skills like interpretation, using historical sources, reasoning, and to make conclusions, is a part of this.⁶⁴ Lund defines interpretations as conscious reflections on the past, and he adds that interpretations are not actual ideas or attitudes by the ones that participated in the events of the past.⁶⁵ Interpretations can take many forms and be expressed in various ways, and they consist of facts, fiction, fantasy, and perspectives; they are built upon historical material; they can be explained by referring to purpose and target audience, as well as to the author’s background, amongst other.⁶⁶ Developing historical literacy consists of making students ‘read’ history critically, evaluating

⁵⁶ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 38.

⁵⁷ Boztel & Drie, “Historical Reasoning: Conceptualizations and Educational Applications”, 155-157.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶³ Donnelly, “Using Feature Films in Teaching Historical Understanding”, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁵ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 114.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

historical evidence's reliability, having students make connections with historical background knowledge, and lastly, making students take part in creating historical knowledge.⁶⁷

Building upon the concept of historical literacy as well as media literacy, *historical film literacy* focuses on audiovisual representations of the past, for example, historical feature films, television shows, documentary films, and so on.⁶⁸ This concept deals with being able to critically watch historical films, where one could recognize, describe, question, and analyze films' themes and intentions.⁶⁹ In a way, using historical films as 'texts' that could be analyzed, questioned, and discussed.⁷⁰ Using films as 'text' where they are reviewed, reflected upon, discussed, criticized, and so on can be used to develop the analytical and interpretive skills that are central to 'doing' history.⁷¹ Being able to interpret and analyze historical films are important as a lot of what students believe they "know" about the past is based on what they have seen in films.⁷² This is why it is important to develop students' historical film literacy skills, as this could help students to interpret films and use them to learn about the past even though they are historically incorrect.⁷³

Further, building upon the concepts of historical literacy, historical media literacy, and historical film literacy, and connecting these to historical videogames, another concept emerges – *historical videogame literacy*. Historical videogames, like historical films, could also be used to develop historical literacy by critically analyzing them.⁷⁴ Being able to critically engage with historical videogames is part of a comprehensive media literacy.⁷⁵ Like historical films, historical videogames could also be used as texts that could be critically interrogated and analyzed.⁷⁶ However, historical videogame literacy also entails being able to understand how these games portray history and historical processes through their game mechanics, and critically evaluate these portrayals and the historical arguments they present.⁷⁷

Students could get a better understanding of historical events by analyzing *causes* and *consequences*.⁷⁸ According to Lund students often have a deterministic attitude toward

⁶⁷ Hover & Hicks, "History Teacher Preparation and Professional Development", 407.

⁶⁸ Paxton & Marcus, "Film Media in History Teaching and Learning", 580.

⁶⁹ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁷¹ Ibid., 71.

⁷² Paxton & Marcus, "Film Media in History Teaching and Learning", 580.

⁷³ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 17-20.

⁷⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 17.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁶ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, "Digital Simulations and Games in History Education", 620-621.

⁷⁷ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 15-17.

⁷⁸ Boztel & Drie, "Historical Reasoning: Conceptualizations and Educational Applications", 149.

history, and that they often have a mono-causal understanding of the concept of cause.⁷⁹ Students then may start to believe that “what happened had to happen”, and the teacher’s and the textbook’s description of what happened then often become somewhat of an explanation of why what happened had to happen.⁸⁰ According to Lund counterfactual elements and reasonings could be extremely useful to counter students’ deterministic and mono-causal view of history.⁸¹ This is, according to Lund, because counterfactual thinking a part of causal thinking and discussions within history.⁸² *Counterfactual history* involves trying to understand what happened in the past by theorizing about what did not happen.⁸³ There is somewhat of a disagreement between historians whether counterfactual history is history, however there are many that argue for the benefits of using counterfactual history as a way to understand what actually happened better and understanding causal relationships better.⁸⁴ Lund however states that counterfactual history and being able to analyze the past through different perspectives is key to developing historical consciousness.⁸⁵

Historical agency has over the years gotten more recognized within history, especially within history education, but also when it comes to forming students to become informed and aware citizens of society.⁸⁶ Students often overemphasize the role of heroic individuals when it comes to social and political change, and their view of social and political change is therefore often somewhat misguided.⁸⁷ However, historical agency is concerned with how people are both influenced and influential within history and within society in general.⁸⁸ Agency is influenced by many factors, including individuals, groups, institutions, ideas, and other forces, that all interact with each other in various ways.⁸⁹

When trying to develop students understanding of historical agency one has to make them understand the time period and the context the people of the past acted within, which makes historical agency linked to *historical empathy*.⁹⁰ Historical empathy is concerned with trying to understand what people in the past experienced, often focusing on trying to understand why

⁷⁹ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 43-44.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁸¹ Ibid., 43-44.

⁸² Ibid., 126.

⁸³ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 233.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 233-234.

⁸⁵ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 45.

⁸⁶ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 13.

⁸⁷ Heyer “Historical Agency: Stories of Choice, Action, and Social Change”, 228.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 235.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 234.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 246.

and how they made certain decisions, as well as trying to understand and be tolerant and sympathetic towards the people of the past.⁹¹ When trying to develop historical empathy students will need some historical background information about the time period and the situations the people of the past were situated in, all sorts of materials could be used for this, like textbooks, documentaries, statistics, and so on.⁹²

Two concepts that are not connected to history didactics *per se*, but still relevant to this thesis are historical accuracy and historical authenticity. They are used throughout this thesis, as well as the literature concerned with historical videogames and historical films, and a clarification of the terms is therefore helpful, especially as they are at times used as synonyms. This thesis follows Burgess and Jones' interpretation of the terms, as they give a clear and reasonable interpretation and explanation of the concepts that also align with most of the other authors' usage of the terms. They see historical accuracy as being factually accurate to the time period that is being portrayed, while historical authenticity on the other hand has to do with depictions staying true to the time period that is being portrayed.⁹³ They state that historical authenticity was seen as being synonymous with historical accuracy in the past, with the terms being used interchangeably to mean factually accurate.⁹⁴ In recent years however, authenticity has been used about portrayals that are not necessarily factually correct, but that feels 'true', even though they might contain factual inaccuracies or anachronisms.⁹⁵ Historical authenticity implies that the overall look and significant details of a historical portrayal are historically accurate, aligning with historical records and facts, but that some artistic license through speculation, changes, or additions are allowed.⁹⁶

1.5 Source material/introducing the games and films/tv-series being looked at

As stated, this thesis is going to look at popular depictions of Vikings, and these popular depictions can be divided into two categories, videogames and films, ('films' covers both movies and TV-series, but I will get to that later). This thesis will discuss six different depictions of Vikings in total, where half of them are videogames, and the other half are

⁹¹ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 29.

⁹² Endacott & Brooks, "Historical Empathy: Perspectives and Responding to the Past", 214.

⁹³ Burgess & Jones, "Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity in Video Games", 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

films. Limiting the source materials to six depictions hinders the thesis in becoming too extensive, while still having enough depictions to answer the research question.

The videogames depicting Vikings that I will look at are *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020), *Crusader Kings III* (2020), and *Valheim* (2021). The reasons for focusing on these videogames are simple. These game franchises are discussed a lot in most of the literature used in this thesis, and they are also the most popular videogames that deal with 'Viking themes', which means that some students might already have played these videogames in their own time. These videogames could therefore already be familiar to some students and may therefore already influence what they believe about Vikings as well as their historical consciousness. Additionally, these three videogames also belong to different genres, and their portrayals are therefore different, providing a broader understanding of how different types of videogames portray Vikings and the past differently. *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* is an action-adventure game, while *Crusader Kings III* is a grand strategy game. Both of these focus more on history, while *Valheim* on the other hand is more inspired by, and focused on, Norse mythology, and are therefore not that focused on being historical portrayals. However, videogames like *Valheim* can still tell us something about Vikings and their culture, which is why this game is included in this thesis. (It should be noted that there are also elements of Norse mythology in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* as well, but to a lesser extent, however that will be discussed later).

The historical films depicting Vikings that this thesis will examine are the TV-series *Vikings* (2013-2020) by Michael Hirst and *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2022) by Stephen Butchard, and the feature film *The Northman* (2022) directed by Robert Eggers. These TV-series provide some of the latest and most popular depictions of Vikings in popular media to date as they were both recently finished, and the same goes for *The Northman* (2022), that was released just last year. It should be noted that this thesis will focus on *Vikings* the original series, and not the spin-off series *Vikings: Valhalla* as the series is not finished yet and I have not personally seen this new spin-off series yet. The second TV-series this thesis focuses on is *The Last Kingdom*, which recently also has become a feature film, *The Last Kingdom: Seven Kings Must Die* which is intended to be the finale to the television series.⁹⁷ However, as this film just came out, at the writing of this thesis, it is not going to be discussed herein.

⁹⁷ Philipson, "Is Seven Kings Must Die the end of The Last Kingdom?"

There are other popular depictions of Vikings in films and TV-series that could have been discussed in this thesis as well, like NRKs *Vikingane* (2016-2020) (or *Norsemen* as the English version is called on Netflix) and *Valhalla Rising* (2010). However, the portrayals chosen are sufficient for this thesis. The reasons for why *Vikings*, *The Last Kingdom*, and *The Norseman* have been chosen is, as stated earlier, that they are some of the most recent depictions of Vikings on film while also being some of, if not the most popular and best-known depictions at the moment, like the videogames chosen for this thesis. Additionally, also as stated earlier, I wrote my bachelors thesis on popular depictions of Vikings where I looked at portrayals of Vikings in the videogame *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* as well as the TV-series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, which makes these popular depictions familiar to me, which is also one of the reasons for choosing them. *The Northman* was chosen as it is one of the most recent well-known depictions of Vikings while also being a feature film, which gives this thesis some variety, even though, as I will later touch upon, feature films and TV-series are quite similar, both in the way they portray history and in the way they could be used in education.

2.0 Historical films

To get a better understanding of how Vikings are portrayed in films one has to first examine how films portray history in general. Various authors have already done so, including Rosenstone, Lund, Brinch with others, Marcus with others, Stoddard, and Toplin. By using these authors this thesis will provide a summary of how films portray history, which creates a basis for understanding how historical films can be used in education. However, first the term *historical film*, and what is meant by it in this thesis has to be clarified.

First off, the term ‘film’ should be clarified, as the term ‘film’ is ambiguous and has a broad meaning.⁹⁸ In Store Norske Leksikon, film is defined as individual images that are recorded and shown in a sequence that gives the illusion of movement, which creates some sort of narrative. Based on this, the term itself only says something about the visual, but today's films often include sound as well, which means that films are not only visual, but 'audiovisual'. These audiovisual narratives can be categorized in a number of ways based on length, basic technical features, genre, target group, and the depictions' relationship to reality.⁹⁹ For example, are feature films usually commercially made for mass audiences, often for entertainment purposes and to earn money, which also applies to most TV-series as well.¹⁰⁰

However, according to these categorizations are feature films and TV-series two different types of ‘films’. The main difference between them being that one episode of a historical TV-series usually lasts somewhere between 40 minutes to an hour, however, a TV-series usually consist of season with multiple episodes within a season, and usually therefore consist of a lot more content than historical feature films, as they have to fit all their content within two to three hours. Historical feature films could create sequels, however, there are very few historical feature films that make them. Whole historical TV-series takes longer to consume than whole feature films, but they can therefore also provide more in-depth content, depicting more characters, more content, and multiple points of view. However, for the sake of simplicity, the term film will also be used about both feature films and TV-series, as the way they present history is similar to each other, and they are, for the most part, discussed as being fundamentally the same in most of the literature and in this thesis.

Popular depictions are often categorized as entertainment products. Entertainment is characterized by being pleasing and fun, it plays a central role within popular culture, and

⁹⁸ Store Norske Leksikon, “Film”.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Marcus & Stoddard, “Tinsel Town as Teacher”, 304.

financial profit is therefore much of the driving force for entertainment.¹⁰¹ As videogames and films are entertainment products and their purpose is to entertain, they have to simplify the complexity of the past by compressing space, time, events, and characters in a way that consumers are able to understand and enjoy the products, as well as limiting their focus to certain aspects of history, but so do academic historical texts as well.¹⁰²

What is a *historical film* then? According to various authors there does not seem to be a clear and precise definition of the term ‘historical film’, which is why Robert A. Rosenstone believed that the term ‘history film’ in itself is not a good enough term.¹⁰³ However, in a lack of a better term he chose to use the term anyway, and he connects this term with cinematic works that, according to him, “consciously try to recreate the past”.¹⁰⁴ Other authors, including Marcus and Stoddard, use the term similarly to Rosenstone as well, about films that in some way or another are rooted in history or that are based on historical events.¹⁰⁵ Based on these descriptions, will this thesis also use a broad definition of the term, and films that are rooted in history, based on historical events, or that in some way or another try to recreate the past, will be considered as ‘historical films’. As many films are about historical people and events, this means that there are a lot of films that could be considered to be historical films.¹⁰⁶

Further, films are often divided into two categories, the fictional category, which the historical feature film and TV-series is often categorized as, and the non-fictional category, that documentaries and news are often categorized as.¹⁰⁷ (Most scholars argue that the non-fictional category consists of some fiction as well, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis). Even though documentary films are a favorite amongst history teachers, this thesis will not discuss them, as the depictions concerned with in this thesis belong to the ‘fictional’ category.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 127.

¹⁰² Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 38-39.

¹⁰³ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Marcus & Stoddard, “Tinsel Town as Teacher”, 304-305.

¹⁰⁶ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk*, (2016), 176.

¹⁰⁷ Brinch et al., *Forestillinger om fortid*, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 5.

2.1 How do historical films portray history?

Rosenstone states that film and written history interact with the past in different ways and that one should therefore not expect films to interact with history the same way that written history does.¹⁰⁹ He states that historical films are not going to be as factually ‘correct’ as academic written history, and they are not going to show many different sides of an issue or point to all sorts of evidence the same way academic history does either.¹¹⁰ However, he also writes that one has to remember that historians’ written works, like historical films, are narratives too, which means that neither of them are the ‘actual truth’, as these narratives involves fiction.¹¹¹ Historians fictionalize by using generalizations and great abstract concepts like revolution and evolution, ‘words’ that can give enormous amounts of information in a small amount of space, while films on the other hand have a hard time doing the same, as films consist of specific images, and they cannot generalize these great concepts in the same way.¹¹² Instead, films have to summarize, synthesize, generalize, and symbolize through images.¹¹³

Historical films are constructions of the past, (like written history).¹¹⁴ Historical films make arguments about the past by making a representation of the past through visual, dramatic, symbolic, metaphoric, and fictional forms, based on historical evidence (to various degrees).¹¹⁵ To make these representations meaningful this is delivered in a narrative, in a story about people, events, moments, or movements of the past.¹¹⁶ These narratives are prefigured by the filmmakers.¹¹⁷ According to Rosenstone do narratives within films often consist of interesting characters, a progressing plot, and a satisfying conclusion with a strong moral position.¹¹⁸

Debra Donnelly also writes that the way historical films interact with the past is different than the way written works by historians interact with the past, as they work with history through a focus on individual stories acted by actors that ‘actualize the past’, they combine visuals and audio to construct a captivating world for the audience, while written history argues a point of

¹⁰⁹ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 42.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹¹ Rosenstone, “The Historical Film as Real History”, 12.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁴ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 60.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

view, often with the use of generalization and abstractions.¹¹⁹ If one compares these two methods of conveying history, written history seems more bound to evidence, while films reach a larger audience while at the same time being able to convey emotional and memorable visual representations.¹²⁰ Instead of pitting historical films and historians' written works against each other, Deshpande argues that films could complement the historians' written sources, illustrate concepts, and complement and enrich the texts, and he also mentions that the historians' explanations also help the film makers make historical films.¹²¹

Film makers use their own 'film language', and they are concerned with 'camera angle' and 'frame'.¹²² Historical films convey history visually, through the use of tools in the form of props, characters, dialogue, setting, music, camerawork, and editing.¹²³ The setting is central to the historical 'fiction film', and consists of, amongst other things, place, setting, and the actors' costumes.¹²⁴ It is strongly linked to a film's production value and the setting is what makes the historical fiction seem credible.¹²⁵ Lund emphasizes how many films often have a very well reconstructed historical setting.¹²⁶ In fact, he states that there are many scenes in historical feature films and TV-series that have reconstructed the past in such a believable way that they could be used as sources for describing the past.¹²⁷ However, he also emphasizes that the past is not actually reproduced 'correctly' in historical feature films and mentions how film makers can deviate from the 'correct' history because of 'dramaturgical reasons'.¹²⁸ This is usually done to make films more entertaining and to attract as many viewers as possible.¹²⁹

It is important to be aware of the fact that film makers may not necessarily feel responsibility when it comes to historical issues like 'correctness' and 'representation', as the films that they create are creative entertainment products and are therefore first and foremost supposed to be entertaining.¹³⁰ Anirudh Deshpande also argues that all historical films are fictional in nature, to a varying degree, and that a little imagination and fabrication is necessary in these works as

¹¹⁹ Donnelly, "Using Feature Films in Teaching Historical Understanding", 4-5.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹²¹ Deshpande, "Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History", 4459.

¹²² Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 168.

¹²³ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 69.

¹²⁴ Brinch et al., *Forestillinger om fortid*, 42-44.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 42-44.

¹²⁶ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk*, (2016), 176.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 176.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 176.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 176.

¹³⁰ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 18.

they become boring without it and they will not earn any money, which is ultimately the goal of these works.¹³¹ As fiction and inventions are central to historical films, one can look at these historical depictions as more ‘approximate’ reproductions than literal reproductions.¹³² The fact is that the past is gone, and films therefore do not actually recreate historical events, instead they construct them.¹³³ As film makers have to choose what angles to include and/or not to include as well as create new angles, they cannot communicate history’s complexity.¹³⁴

As historical films are constructions they also fictionalize in many ways and to varying degrees. Brinch with others emphasizes how film makers combine historical people into fewer representations, show meetings between historical people that never happened, simplify explanations and causes, ‘imagine’ and ‘invent’ dialogue, and that they compress time.¹³⁵ Robert B. Toplin also highlight some of the main ways historical films fictionalizes, and emphasizes six genre traditions that one can identify in historical films: historical films simplify historical evidence and exclude many details; historical films simplifies plots by including few representative characters; historical films give biased views of the past that clearly distinguishes between heroes and villains; historical films give morally uplifting narratives that deals with struggles between Davids and Goliaths; historical films provide a limited amount of information and facts, (but they often give memorable emotional impressions); and historical films also comment the present as well as the past.¹³⁶ Toplin do however conclude his article by stating that film makers could work within the frameworks of the film genre and still give a valuable contribution for the public to think about history.¹³⁷ He believes that it should be possible for film makers to make historical films that are both entertaining and provide audiences with history.

¹³¹ Deshpande, “Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History”, 4459.

¹³² Rosenstone, “The Historical Film as Real History”, 11.

¹³³ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i historiebruk*, 75.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³⁵ Brinch et al., *Forestillinger om fortid*, 34.

¹³⁶ Toplin, “Cinematic History: An Anatomy of the Genre”, 35-38.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-38.

3.0 Historical video games

Having looked at how historical films portray history it is time to look at how historical videogames portray the past as well, providing a foundation to better understand how Vikings are portrayed in videogames. To provide a summary of how historical videogames portray the past this thesis is taking advantage of the works written by Jeremiah McCall, A. Martin Wainwright, Adam Chapman, Stirling and Wood, and others. This again will provide a foundation which helps us to understand how historical videogames could be used in education. However, as with historical film, the term *historical videogame*, and what is meant by it in this thesis, also has to be clarified.

Following the structure of defining historical film, we start off by defining ‘videogame’, which is defined as games that are played by electronically manipulating images that are produced by a computer program on to any kind of display screen.¹³⁸ Videogames can also be categorized in various ways, however the two main overarching categories are what type of device the videogame can be played on and what genre the videogame belongs to.¹³⁹ What is a historical videogame? The concept of ‘historical videogame’, like ‘historical film’, also has somewhat vague and unclear definitions, as Belyaev and Belyaeva, for example, define the term as videogames that have historical elements in their plot, gameplay, or graphic design.¹⁴⁰ However, Jeremiah McCall highlights two definitions of ‘historical game’. The first definition is narrower than the other and emphasizes how historical games have to be set in a real historical time and place, with a real-world historical setting and date.¹⁴¹ The other definition is broader and includes all games that represent the past in any way or that could be connected to discussions about the past.¹⁴²

Wainwright defines historical videogames similarly to this second broader definition and defines historical videogames simply as videogames that deal with historical themes.¹⁴³ As McCall states that both of these definitions are useful, and no matter what definition one follows videogames fitting in either definition could be used in history education, this thesis therefore follows both these definitions.¹⁴⁴ This is why the videogame *Valheim* is included as a historical game, even though it does not take place in a real historical time and place, (as it

¹³⁸ Gamedesinglounge, “What Is Considered A Video Game? Definition And Examples”.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Belyaev & Belyaeva, “Historical Video Games in the Context of Public History”, 54.

¹⁴¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 23.

¹⁴² Ibid., 23.

¹⁴³ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 23-24.

takes place in a fantasy world at no specific time), however it does provide a portrayal that is influenced by a historical time and people, and it can therefore be argued that it could be connected to discussions about the past, as will be discussed later.

3.1 How do historical videogames portray history?

Like historical films, are also historical videogames multimodal as they communicate through both visual and auditory channels, and they even communicate through tactile channels as well.¹⁴⁵ However, whereas historical films provide their audiences with images and stories that cannot be altered, historical videogames allow their players to participate in determining the outcome.¹⁴⁶ This is arguably one of videogames' most distinctive features, allowing players to both interact with and manipulate gameworlds that recreates the past, making the players more than just audience members, but also narrators.¹⁴⁷ Historical videogames offer players the ability to make choices, choices that affect the gameworld they are playing in.¹⁴⁸ In this way videogames enable players to exercise agency, which is arguably one of historical videogames' most distinctive strengths.¹⁴⁹ In videogames, agency is connected to how players are able to make choices and take actions within the games, the more actions players have the opportunity to make, the more agency players have.¹⁵⁰ However, agency is also connected to the players' skills, as their skills sometimes determine what they can and cannot do within the gameworld.¹⁵¹ Providing players with agency enables them to not only consume historical scenarios passively, but to also actively participate in them, which is what differentiates historical videogames from other historical media.¹⁵²

As stories about great individuals tend to be more compelling than the behaviors of the masses over long stretches of time, many historical videogames tend to exaggerate the influence of these great individuals, like historical films do.¹⁵³ However, one genre of historical videogames, historical strategy games, do try to simulate these larger changes that

¹⁴⁵ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 34.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 25.

¹⁴⁹ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 30-32.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵² Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 33-35.

¹⁵³ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 74.

happen over long stretches of time, viewing history through a wide lens.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, they allow for and encourage players to try out alternative scenarios to the ones that actually happened in the past (counterfactual history), which is another powerful and beneficial aspect of historical videogames, which other media like films have a hard time doing.¹⁵⁵ It has to be noted that if one believes that the goal of the subject of history is to only learn the established dates, events, facts, and conclusions, one might argue that historical videogames that allow for counterfactual history have no use in history education.¹⁵⁶ However, as Wainwright argues, exploring counterfactual scenarios could help with understanding why things turned out the way they did as well as what may have possibly happened if they had not.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, if players have some knowledge of the actual history and are aware of the fact that counterfactual historical videogames are not actually recounting the past, are these games unlikely going to be problematic.¹⁵⁸

Historical strategy games are especially great at providing players with opportunities to explore counterfactual scenarios and historical contingency.¹⁵⁹ Dawn Spring is amongst the authors that emphasizes how videogames could open for an in-depth understanding of contingency, conditions, and circumstances.¹⁶⁰ This is due to their inbuilt re-playability that allows players to test different decisions and, in that way, explore different potential outcomes and scenarios.¹⁶¹ This is also why Stirling and Wood emphasize how historical videogames more so simulate the past than represent it.¹⁶² Harry J. Brown similarly emphasizes that videogames could never represent the events of the past faithfully, and that their strong suit is therefore not that they are able to simulate **what** happened, but rather to simulate **how** things happened, simulating the processes of history and the contingency of events.¹⁶³ However, it is also important to note that causality within historical videogames is to a degree predetermined as they contain rules for what the players are able to do and for how the games can unfold.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁴ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 74.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁵⁶ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 39-40.

¹⁵⁷ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 75.

¹⁵⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 235.

¹⁵⁹ Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 38.

¹⁶⁰ Spring, "Gaming History", 209.

¹⁶¹ Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 36.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁶³ Brown, *Videogames and Education*, 134.

¹⁶⁴ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 37-38.

Like other kinds of popular media, videogames are also subject to the pressures of commercial interests, artistic spectacle, and popular expectations.¹⁶⁵ As historical videogames are an entertainment medium as well, they also consist of historical inaccuracies and simplifications, like historical films.¹⁶⁶ For example, are historical strategy games very simplified and more symbolic models of the past, that are limited or biased in their perspective and filled with inaccuracies and omissions.¹⁶⁷ They may also direct their players towards specific interpretations and understandings of the past, for example have strategy games often tended to encourage the reproduction and/or disruption of colonialist and hegemonic ideologies.¹⁶⁸

In addition, videogames, like films, are also dependent on the choices made by the design teams, the limitations of the medium, and the target audience.¹⁶⁹ When videogame designers choose what to include and what to leave out when creating historical videogames, they are influenced by their own worldviews and assumptions about history, as well as market forces and playability of the games.¹⁷⁰ Like film creators, they also aim to create products that are financially profitable by catering to the masses, by making entertaining products.¹⁷¹ Their goal is therefore to make playable and fun entertainment products, and they are therefore not primarily concerned with creating accurate depictions.¹⁷² However, as multiple authors argue, including Adam Chapman, that as long as game developers, and other ‘producers’ aim to make meaning out of the past, engage with the larger historical discourse, and that their produced histories are constructed with the use of evidence in relation to other historical narratives, could they still be seen as producers of history, even though they are not primarily concerned with accuracy and their products consist of various inaccuracies.¹⁷³

Players of historical videogames, on the other hand, often desire historically accurate depictions, which makes the role of historical research as well as historians in the production of these games more important.¹⁷⁴ Some players even prefer historical accuracy over balanced gameplay, and some even go as far as even modifying games or play mods that make these

¹⁶⁵ Houghton, “Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games”, 12.

¹⁶⁶ Burgess & Jones, “Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity in Video Games”, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, *Videogames and Education*, 134.

¹⁶⁸ Stirling & Wood, “Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games”, 39.

¹⁶⁹ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 2.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷³ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 7-8.

¹⁷⁴ Houghton, Robert “Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games”, 1-2.

games more historical accurate but more unbalanced.¹⁷⁵ Many historical game developers therefore do extensive research and try to present at least convincing historical depictions of the past, through for example, the way they show architecture, weaponry, and clothing.¹⁷⁶ However, if videogame developers feel that historical accuracy gets in the way of fun and gameplay they might ignore accuracy.¹⁷⁷

This is one of the challenges historical videogame designers have to face when creating a historical videogame, balancing gameplay and historical accuracy, because even though many players want accuracy, the more mainstream audiences would most likely get frustrated with the imbalance these accuracies entail.¹⁷⁸ For example, including historical elements like disease would be more accurate, but it could also worsen players' experience as it would limit their control and possible choices.¹⁷⁹ For this reason, videogame developers change units' power, and they omit certain elements to reduce complexity, and instead focus on authenticity rather than accuracy.¹⁸⁰

This is also why time compression, space compression, character compression, and the use of fictitious characters are all part of historical videogames as well, (as they are in historical films), as they are necessary due to the fact that players would get bored when there is too little action or player participation over a longer period of time, and they are needed to reduce the complexity of these depictions.¹⁸¹ Like filmmakers, historical videogame developers sometimes compress multiple historical accounts into one linear one in an effort to recount existing 'official' histories or to make meaning about the past.¹⁸² Examples of time compression within historical videogames can be found in action-adventure and role-playing games, like the *Assassin's Creed* games, where time compression usually happens through cut scenes, through allowing fast travel, and through compressing the geographic space to allow for faster travel.¹⁸³ Another example of time compression can be found in historical grand strategy games, like the *Crusader Kings* series, where time is compressed by players being

¹⁷⁵ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 162.

¹⁷⁶ Burgess & Jones, "Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity in Video Games", 2-3.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷⁸ Carter & Chapman, "Fiction as History: Truth and Authenticity in Total War: Rome 2 and Total War: Warhammer", 2.

¹⁷⁹ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 159.

¹⁸⁰ Carter & Chapman, "Fiction as History: Truth and Authenticity in Total War: Rome 2 and Total War: Warhammer", 2.

¹⁸¹ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 49.

¹⁸² Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 156.

¹⁸³ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 40.

able to speed time up instead of skipping it.¹⁸⁴ Like historical films, are historical videogames also still viable for historical reflection and critique, even though they contain historical inaccuracies.¹⁸⁵

Lastly, it should be noted that videogames often emphasize violence, progression, and competition, while, for example, social interaction, religion, and morality have tended to be abstracted, marginalized, or ignored.¹⁸⁶ Many have even claimed that videogames are too violent, however Wainwright claims that many historical videogames are in reality not violent enough compared to the violence that actually occurred in the past.¹⁸⁷ Many have also raised concerns when it comes to how women are portrayed in videogames, as these portrayals are often influenced by sexism and their creators' sexual fantasies.¹⁸⁸ Women have also tended to be excluded in historical combat games, however the *Assassin's Creed* series games are one of the few exceptions to this.¹⁸⁹ Over the years female characters have increasingly been included in historical videogames and they have been given greater depth, however these female characters are usually just identical to their male counterparts, exchanging historical accuracy for historical inclusivity.¹⁹⁰ Historical videogames in franchises that spans many years, like the *Assassin's Creed* series and the *Crusader Kings* series, have over the years generally become more nuanced in their approaches to history.¹⁹¹

3.1.1 History problem spaces and game mechanics

Jeremiah McCall introduces the concept of how historical videogames are *historical problem spaces*, which is connected to how videogames portray history through several central concepts.¹⁹² This thesis will later take inspiration from this model to discuss the chosen historical videogames depicting Vikings. First, the concept *historical problem space* itself should be deconstructed. *Historical problem spaces* consist of *gameworlds* that are shaped and formed by *elements and systems of elements* which *player agents* interact with by making

¹⁸⁴ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 40.

¹⁸⁵ Burgess & Jones, "Exploring Player Understandings of Historical Accuracy and Historical Authenticity in Video Games", 5-6.

¹⁸⁶ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 13-14.

¹⁸⁷ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 206.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁸⁹ Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games", 600.

¹⁹⁰ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 179-180.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹² McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 13.

action-choices in order to achieve certain *designed goals*.¹⁹³ These gameworlds are affected by this interaction by the player agents and their choices and actions.¹⁹⁴ To understand *historical problem spaces* better these key terms should be expounded upon.

First off, the *player agent*, is a term that is used about the character or the role that the player controls or assumes when playing the game.¹⁹⁵ The *gameworld* within historical videogames usually symbolizes or directly represent a specific historical time and space from the past.¹⁹⁶ In the gameworld the player agent could be either *embodied* or *unembodied*, which has to do with if the player agent has an avatar within the gameworld or not.¹⁹⁷ Within a gameworld the player agent is able to make *action-choices*, which are choices or actions that affect the gameworld or the story within the gameworld.¹⁹⁸ *Designed goals* are made by the game designers, and is the same as victory conditions, and the “problem” in *historical problem spaces* is concerned with how the player agents can achieve these goals, how to ‘win’ the game.¹⁹⁹ *The elements and the systems of elements* in gameworlds consist of nonplayer agents, resources, tools, and obstacles that interact with each other and the player agents in order to help or hinder the player agents to achieve the designed goals.²⁰⁰

These terms are connected to videogames’ mechanics, and an understanding of these *game mechanics* is useful when discussing historical videogames as they are connected to how videogames model reality, and how historical videogames represent arguments about historical systems and societies.²⁰¹ There are also other terms connected to videogames’ game mechanics. For example, the way time passes in historical videogames are categorized in three categories, *turn-based*, *real-time*, or a *hybrid* of these two.²⁰² In turn-based videogames the play is divided into turns where the player is able to do actions.²⁰³ In real-time videogames however, actions and decisions are made continuously, and time is always moving, unless the game is paused.²⁰⁴ Lastly, some games, like the *Paradox Development Studios*’ grand strategy games, are a hybrid between these two, where time moves continuously and one can make

¹⁹³ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 13.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰¹ Houghton, “Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games”, 7-8.

²⁰² McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 46.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

decisions and make choices making the games real-time, but where the player could also pause the game and still make decisions and actions, queueing commands that will be executed when the game is unpaused, making them similar to turn-based games.²⁰⁵ Two of the videogames this thesis looks at are real-time videogames, while *Crusader Kings III* is a hybrid.

3.1.2 Narratives within historical videogames

Like other historical mediums, historical videogames also consist of narratives, however there is a difference in how videogames create their narratives, as the narratives created within historical videogames are influenced by both the videogame developers and the players, creating a shared authorship.²⁰⁶ The videogame developer determines the nature of the narratives and set in place the components for the narratives to take place, while the players determine which narratives that are eventually told by making action-choices when they play.²⁰⁷ This connects narratives with agency within historical videogames, which means that the more agency players have the more the historical narratives that are produced are determined by the players.²⁰⁸ Historical videogame developers can however somewhat control what narratives that are being told through making certain narratives more likely to occur by making certain actions more challenging.²⁰⁹ ‘Challenge’ is therefore a kind of tool that historical videogame designers can use to express their historical claims and arguments, and according to Chapman it is the tension between player agency and the game mechanics/the challenges of the game that generates meaning.²¹⁰

Players are also consumers which means that they are audiences as well as narrators when they are playing.²¹¹ As with films, players are given a fully formed historical narrative through the game, but unlike films, as players are allowed to partake in the creation of the narrative, they are also left with the memory of how their actions influenced the narrative in the game.²¹² Action-adventure and role-playing games offer a personal perspective on events through microhistorical narratives, while strategy games on the other hand offer better insight

²⁰⁵ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 47.

²⁰⁶ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 33-34.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 120.

into larger patterns of causes and effects by trying to illustrate more complex relationships between economy, technology, politics, population, popular support, diplomacy, war, and chance.²¹³ Strategy games allow players in this way to get insight into historical contingency which again is connected to counterfactual speculation.²¹⁴

Historical action-adventure and role-playing games often feature a narrative structure that consists of exposition (a beginning), conflict (the middle), and a resolution (an end), where the story's hero is faced with challenges before a gripping climax and a satisfying resolution, in a similar way as films.²¹⁵ Also in a similar way to films, historical action-adventure and role-playing games also contain sublots, (called side quests in videogames), that may or may not be connected to the overarching narrative, and in videogames they may even be ignored completely.²¹⁶ However, in the majority of action-adventure and role-playing games most of the major narrative events and transitions are established through the use of cinematic cut scenes, and with the addition to limited dialogue options this helps 'control' player action.²¹⁷

Historical narratives in videogames are influenced by a number of factors, including the videogames' form, game developers and players, popular culture, games culture, and commercial goals.²¹⁸ Sometimes some narratives within historical videogames are also influenced by fantasy, supernatural, or science fiction themes, (especially within action-adventure games or role-playing games), but Chapman argues that even these narratives can make (at the very least metaphorical) meaning about the past, as they are often connected to other historical narratives.²¹⁹ Chapman also argues that narratives are produced even though players make strategic decisions within the games instead of 'historically correct' ones.²²⁰

²¹³ Brown, *Videogames and Education*, 127.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹⁸ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 162.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

4.0 Using historical films to learn history

Films are already utilized by most, if not all, history teachers to varying degrees.²²¹ Various authors have also addressed this topic to varying degrees as well. In this section of the thesis, we are going to look closer at what some of these authors have discussed and look at the educational applications of historical films, while also addressing some of the challenges one might face by using them in education. This will provide the basis on which one could discuss the educational applications of historical films portraying Vikings which will be discussed later.

4.1 What can one learn from historical films and how to use them in education?

To quantify what students learn from watching historical films is difficult.²²² However, historical didactical research show that historical films do have a crucial influence on what students believe about central historical events, and they might even override what is taught in school.²²³ Historical films are probably also one of the main actors in shaping students' historical consciousness.²²⁴ Brinch with others, for example, argue that historical fictional films contribute to our historical consciousness, while at the same time fostering engagement and curiosity.²²⁵ This is also a part of what characterizes a good historical fictional film.²²⁶ It has also been argued that they could be useful tools for developing students' historical empathy, as they are structured and framed in a way that lets students see historical events through historical characters.²²⁷

As historical films are great at giving an “image” of the past they could be used to help students visualize the past.²²⁸ However, Jeremy D. Stoddard emphasizes how historical films should not be used to show what happened, but rather to be used as a resource to engage students in activities connected to evaluation and reflection.²²⁹ For example, making students aware of who it is that is telling the story and why; look at what the underlying narratives are; look at whose views that is missing, or what the ‘price’ of this is; consider how credible the

²²¹ Wagner, “Teachers’ Use of Film in the History Classroom”, 27.

²²² Paxton & Marcus, “Film Media in History Teaching and Learning”, 581.

²²³ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk*, (2016), 176.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

²²⁵ Brinch et al., *Forestillinger om fortid*, 59-60.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

²²⁷ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 30.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

²²⁹ Stoddard, “Film as a ‘thoughtful’ medium for teaching history”, 286.

films are as historical sources; think about who the films are made for; consider what the film makers' views and goals are; think about how the films' have been affected by the time and the society they were made and published in; and make students look at what other historical sources say about the period and the events that are depicted in the films.²³⁰ Marcus and Stoddard emphasizes how historical films should not be used alone when teaching history, but that they should be used with other sources, like textbooks or primary sources.²³¹

Lund also argues, as many others have, that it is not that rewarding to examine historical films, or many other historical mediums, based on how reliable they are as historical sources, but rather to try to understand why they were made the way they were and at that time, what their purpose were, what audiences they try to reach, and how the message of the films come across.²³² Sara Brinch with others also add that one could rather discuss the ethical and moral responsibility the film makers have when they depict historical people, for example when people are being depicted as 'good' or 'bad'.²³³ Analyzing historical films in class could challenge students' traditional role as passive observers and consumers and turn them into analyzing, discovering, and constructive critics.²³⁴

One of the more fruitful activities one could do with historical films is to look at the narratives within them and analyze, critique, and discuss them.²³⁵ Historical films could help students to develop historical literacy (or rather, historical film literacy), which improves students' analytical and interpretive skills, their understanding of how historical films construct the past, and their ability to analyze these constructions.²³⁶ They could also be used to develop source criticism, historical empathy, and to a limited degree, give students an understanding of agency.²³⁷

A study done by Marcus and Stoddard highlight several other pros with using historical films in education as well. For example, could students become more motivated by using films in education; they could learn more and understand history better through films than through other more traditional texts; and historical films could help students connect the material they

²³⁰ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 318.

²³¹ Marcus & Stoddard, "Tinsel Town as Teacher", 318.

²³² Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 114.

²³³ Brinch et al., *Forestillinger om fortid*, 35.

²³⁴ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 168.

²³⁵ Donnelly, "Using Feature Films in Teaching Historical Understanding", 5-6.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

use in class to their own lives.²³⁸ Using films in education can also make it easier for teachers to teach about more difficult or controversial topics, as they can help students envision events or difficulties that may usually be hard to imagine, and then one could use this in thoughtful discussions afterwards.²³⁹ Using films in education can also increase student interest in the subject in general or raise interest in certain themes and topics within history.²⁴⁰

It can seem difficult to choose what historical films to use in class, but Alan S. Marcus with others states that it is not that important if the films that are being used are good or bad, but rather what the films are being used for and how they are being used.²⁴¹ Teachers are therefore crucial when teaching with historical films is concerned, especially as students often struggle with being able to understand and work with historical issues or lack the right motivation without the guidance of teachers.²⁴² Students' motivation in class is therefore dependent on the teacher, which means that "an interesting source", for example, is seldom going to work "by itself", the teacher is needed.²⁴³ As many of the authors state, including Marcus with others, historical films are not educational instructions alone, they are tools and resources that could be used in educational instructions.²⁴⁴

An example of a history lesson with film broadly defined by Alan S. Marcus with others, who writes that a good history lesson where film is used consists of three parts, before, during, and after the viewing of the film: the work before watching the film involves planning and preparation; during the viewing of the film, the students should have an assignment; and lastly, after the viewing it could be rewarding to have a structured discussion about how the students interpreted the film.²⁴⁵ They emphasize the importance of the students having an assignment to do during watching the film, this is to help them focus and help them take notice relevant information that is helpful in the discussion about the film afterwards.²⁴⁶ This assignment can be as simple as taking notes.²⁴⁷ Debra Donnelly mentions how it is common practice amongst teachers to make students fill in a form after showing a film as well, but she argues that this is not an optimal way of using films in education.²⁴⁸ It can seem like an

²³⁸ Marcus & Stoddard, "Tinsel Town as Teacher", 309.

²³⁹ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 109-110.

²⁴⁰ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2016), 176.

²⁴¹ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 22.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 19-20.

²⁴³ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 203.

²⁴⁴ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 19.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁸ Donnelly, "Using Feature Films in Teaching Historical Understanding", 7-8.

overwhelming task to prepare for a lesson with film, but teachers may ease the workload by taking advantage of the enormous amounts of resources that are available on the internet.²⁴⁹

4.2 Challenges with using historical films in education

Using films in the history education has its limits, for example is the length of films often seen as one of the biggest challenges with using films in history education.²⁵⁰ For example, according to a survey done by David-Alexandre Wagner teachers feel that the amount of time instructions with film take in the preparation phase beforehand, the time that it takes to show the films, and the work afterwards, is challenging.²⁵¹ However, digital films have a playback feature, and one could also use clips of films, making it easy to use films without having to spend a lot of time.²⁵² Selecting certain clips to use as examples could connect films to the texts and textbooks, and students could also compare clips with depictions in other mediums.²⁵³ Using clips could also be more practical at times as they could be sent to the students' computers, so that they could examine the clips more closely by themselves.²⁵⁴ There is also an abundance of clips from feature films on YouTube that one could use.²⁵⁵ Marcus with others emphasize how clear goals and instructions by the teacher could justify the use of films, even though they are time consuming, if the usage of these films could be justified by the goals of that lesson.²⁵⁶

Some teachers in Wagner's study also thought that it could be challenging to choose what film to use in their classes as they were unsure about how historically 'correct' various films are.²⁵⁷ Once again, the factor of time plays a role as it requires a lot of preparation and prior knowledge if one is going to identify what is 'correct' and not 'correct' in films.²⁵⁸ This is a valid concern as a study done by Andrew C. Butler with others indicated that, as long as the students were not made aware of the historical incorrect information in historical films, they remembered the incorrect information over of the correct information in academic texts.²⁵⁹

²⁴⁹ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 21.

²⁵⁰ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 170.

²⁵¹ Wagner, "Teachers' Use of Film in the History Classroom", 36.

²⁵² Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 170.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁵⁶ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 24-25.

²⁵⁷ Wagner, "Teachers' Use of Film in the History Classroom", 36.

²⁵⁸ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 5.

²⁵⁹ Butler et al., "Using Popular Films to Enhance Classroom learning", 1161-1167.

Teachers therefore have to be careful when using historical films in class, and make sure to warn students about historical incorrect information ideally both before and after the viewing, as this counters the wrong information from being remembered.²⁶⁰ However, Lund, amongst many other authors, argues that the fact that historical films are not historically accurate should not stop them from being used in history education, as they are great at raising interest while at the same time train students to critically analyze films.²⁶¹

In Wagner's survey some teachers also feared that some of their students did not see the value in watching films to learn history, and that these students then would see watching films as a meaningless activity and become passive.²⁶² This is something that Marcus with others support as they mention how it could be difficult for teachers to make their students see feature films as something other than entertainment, especially as they are used to evaluating these types of films based on how entertaining they are in their free time.²⁶³ However, even though using historical films in education has its challenges, many still feel that using film in history education is worth it.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Butler et al., "Using Popular Films to Enhance Classroom learning", 1161-1167.

²⁶¹ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2016), 176.

²⁶² Wagner, "Teachers' Use of Film in the History Classroom", 36.

²⁶³ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 18-19.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

5.0 Using historical videogames to learn history

As previously stated, are the educational applications of historical videogames increasingly being explored and studied, as they have huge potential within the space of education.²⁶⁵ For example, in a survey done by Stirling and Wood, was it highlighted how students that played videogames could learn a lot from playing historical videogames.²⁶⁶ Playing some historical videogames could also lead to unintentional learning, players could learn about the past without being aware of it themselves, especially when the videogames are highly immersive.²⁶⁷ Playing videogames could also be motivating to many students as they can lead to a sense of fulfilment due to the fact that videogames consist of achieving (designed) goals.²⁶⁸ Playing videogames can also lead to rich discussions about historical topics.²⁶⁹ In this section of the thesis, using various authors, what one can learn from historical videogames as well as how one could teach by using historical videogames are discussed, before touching upon some of the challenges one might face when teaching with historical videogames. This is crucial to the later discussion about the educational applications of the popular depictions of Vikings in videogames.

5.1 What can one learn from historical videogames?

Historical videogames could provide a wide range of learning opportunities, for example by developing knowledge skills.²⁷⁰ According to McCall could historical videogames help students gain historical knowledge and help them learn about the historical process.²⁷¹ They could to some degree be used as sources of information and as tools for understanding more or less complex concepts and events.²⁷² Historical videogames could also play a central role in some students' understandings of the discipline of history and the past as well.²⁷³ This is because they could teach students about the nature of history as a discipline in addition to

²⁶⁵ Carter & Chapman, "Fiction as History: Truth and Authenticity in Total War: Rome 2 and Total War: Warhammer", 1.

²⁶⁶ Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 36.

²⁶⁷ Dussarps, "Le jeu vidéo médiateur de savoirs en histoire", 5.

²⁶⁸ Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 32.

²⁶⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 14-15.

²⁷⁰ Dussarps, "Le jeu vidéo médiateur de savoirs en histoire", 4.

²⁷¹ Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 41.

²⁷² Dussarps, "Le jeu vidéo médiateur de savoirs en histoire", 22-23.

²⁷³ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 4.

giving them insight into the inconsistency of history.²⁷⁴ They could additionally be used to demonstrate some of the big questions historians grapple with in their discipline.²⁷⁵

Tozoğlu & Kuran state that it can be challenging to get students to understand historical events, decisions, and choices through the lenses of the people that experienced these events and made these decisions and choices, (historical agency), however, videogames could be useful for this purpose.²⁷⁶ According to Lund various simulation activities traditionally have been used to try to understand the past through historical actors' own premises through working with historical situations, events, or processes as if they had not happened or as if they were still ongoing.²⁷⁷ However, digital simulations in historical videogames may serve as platforms for students to become actors within historical (or quasi-historical) scenarios instead, as they allow students to make decisions and see their (sometimes) unpredictable consequences.²⁷⁸

According to Jeremiah McCall historical videogames could provide students with simplified virtual versions of complex historical systems, which makes it easier for students to comprehend these systems, making these historical videogames pedagogically useful.²⁷⁹ Further he states that other media cannot provide students with the same complex systems with variable factors as easily as historical videogames can.²⁸⁰ Historical videogames could serve as a direct analogy to the real world and systems that they represent, which other media simply do not, as they do not place students as actual agents within these systems.²⁸¹ In addition, Stirling and Wood also argue that videogames' ability to replicate some of the choices made by historical actors, could make them effective learning tools as well.²⁸² As they could expand students' awareness of agents and systems.²⁸³ McCall also argues that historical videogames are great tools for making students think about and understand agency, as player agents in many videogames are faced with having to make choices and take actions in order to achieve goals, and that these choices and actions affect the gameworld the player agents act

²⁷⁴ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games" 10; Belyaev & Belyaeva, "Historical Video Games in the Context of Public History", 56.

²⁷⁵ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, "Digital Simulations and Games in History Education", 617.

²⁷⁶ Tozoğlu & Kuran, "What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History", 87-88.

²⁷⁷ Lund, *Historiedidaktikk* (2020), 125-126.

²⁷⁸ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, "Digital Simulations and Games in History Education", 609-610.

²⁷⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 13.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸² Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 35.

²⁸³ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 25.

within.²⁸⁴ Historical videogames could therefore be used in counterfactual inquiry and provide students with a deeper understanding of cause and effect as well.²⁸⁵

A similarity between historical videogames and historical films when it comes to teaching is that teachers should make sure that students are aware that there are inaccuracies in historical videogames as well, as this helps them to identify these inaccuracies.²⁸⁶ Historical videogames often take liberties when it comes to their historical settings, providing their players with ‘false representations’ that can be deconstructed and critiqued in an educational setting.²⁸⁷ As with historical films, historical videogames do not have to be completely historically correct to be used in history class, and some teacher might prefer historical games that are more fictionalized.²⁸⁸ This all depends on what the goal of the teachers’ lessons are, and how they want to work with the videogames.²⁸⁹ Historical inaccuracies in historical videogames could be useful if a teacher want their students to challenge videogames’ depictions more on a ‘surface level’, as it may be easier for some students to analyze and critique games that deviates a lot from the historical record, while videogames with more defensible elements could be used more as analogies to illustrate the past.²⁹⁰ Even though historical videogames are designed primarily to entertain, and not to be educational *per se*, they could still be useful tools in history education as they could help students to learn how to critically analyze these, as well as other forms, of historical interpretations.²⁹¹ This then engages students in historical discussions about interpretations of the past and how the past is understood in the modern world.²⁹²

As a central skill within the discipline of history is being able to criticize representations of the past, analyzing and critiquing historical videogames could therefore help students to develop their skills of historical criticism.²⁹³ McCall emphasizes that this is actually one of the main goals of using historical videogames in education.²⁹⁴ However, it is he also warns against focusing too much on visual realism, as this can hinder a deeper analysis of how the

²⁸⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 13.

²⁸⁵ Brown, *Videogames and Education*, 135.

²⁸⁶ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 32.

²⁸⁷ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, “Digital Simulations and Games in History Education”, 615.

²⁸⁸ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 31.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

past is modeled in historical videogames.²⁹⁵ He states that in addition to looking at the factual accuracy of individual details it is more rewarding to look at how larger elements within historical videogames agree with the historical record, if these elements could reasonably function as defensible models and provide defensible analogies for historical systems and actors.²⁹⁶ Wainwright also argues that it is more rewarding to look at how historical videogames depict the underlying processes of history, rather than looking at the accuracy of specific historical details.²⁹⁷ Robert Houghton argues that highlighting and analyzing the shortcomings of the mechanics (the historical arguments) of historical videogames are similar to the methods that are used when analyzing historical arguments in more traditional mediums.²⁹⁸

Lessons with historical videogames have the potential of being more engaging and often a lot more interactive than other forms of lessons when used correctly, which is a part of their appeal.²⁹⁹ Through the combination of interactivity, engaging challenges, and captivating gameplay, often with appealing graphic- and sound design, historical videogames provide engaging multimodal presentations of the past that could spark learner interest.³⁰⁰ That games spark an interest in history is evident in Stirling and Wood's survey, where they asked respondents to tell them what they did as a result of playing games, and many responded that they wanted to find out more.³⁰¹ The survey pointed out that historical videogames piqued some students interest in certain periods, introduced them to important historical actors, and some reported that they did additional research into certain historical topics because of playing historical games.³⁰² Dussarps also emphasizes how historical videogames could spark an interest in learning more and lead players to do research on their own, searching for additional information.³⁰³ It should also be stated that historical videogames could also be the reason for why some students are interested in history in the first place as well, something that could be utilized by history teachers.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁵ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 33.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

²⁹⁷ Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 2.

²⁹⁸ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 9.

²⁹⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 19.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

³⁰¹ Stirling & Wood, "Learning About the Past Through Digital Play: History Students and Video Games", 37.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁰³ Dussarps, "Le jeu vidéo médiateur de savoirs en histoire", 22.

³⁰⁴ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 4.

5.2 How to teach with historical videogames

Historical videogames could be used in a wide variety of ways in history class, all viable, depending on the goals for that class, the technology available, and pedagogical reasons.³⁰⁵

The various activities that historical videogames allow for are usually divided into two categories that are associated with older more traditional historical forms, *reading* (consuming historical representations) and *doing* (interacting with videogames' rules).³⁰⁶ These *reading* activities with historical videogames, are similar to the *reading* activities done with historical films.³⁰⁷ However, players' *doing* in historical videogames also affects their *reading*, as how players interact with the videogames affects what occurs within the videogames' representation, which does not happen within historical films.³⁰⁸

Historical videogame could be used as memorable introductions to a periods, regions, or themes, that again could form a strong foundation for further study.³⁰⁹ However, many authors, including Jeremiah McCall, highlight how historical videogames by themselves are not sufficient for history education, but that with the guidance of teachers through well planned lessons, historical videogames could become quite useful tools.³¹⁰ Ahmet Erdem Tozoğlu and Mehmet Şükrü Kuran also argue that historical videogames cannot be used alone, but that they serve better as complementary tools to lectures and discussions.³¹¹ When planning on using a historical videogame in their teaching, McCall emphasizes that teachers have to consider what real-world historical systems they want to analyze; what real-world systems the game present some kind of analogy for; to what extent their students are able to witness or participate in historical events, systems, and processes; how the game's setting could be used for analysis and learning, including its geography, architecture, and people; and how the strengths and weaknesses of the analogies the game provides could be used in a learning context.³¹²

When using historical videogames in history education it is important to have made certain concepts about history clear, like the fact that history is not the past, but rather a representation of the past; that history is made by everyone, in different ways; and lastly, that

³⁰⁵ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 90.

³⁰⁶ Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 31-32.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

³⁰⁹ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 7.

³¹⁰ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 77.

³¹¹ Tozoğlu & Kuran, "What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History", 108.

³¹² McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 35.

being able to interpret and reconstruct elements of the past in meaningful ways, along with being able to critique the validity of the interpretations of others, are the most important skills that ‘professional’ historians possess.³¹³ These concepts should ideally have been introduced at an earlier stage, but reinforcing these concepts is also useful.³¹⁴

Practically, there are several ways one could utilize historical videogames in education. For example, as some students are interested in these videogames and may have played them in their spare time, teachers could connect these videogames to historical topics and skillsets.³¹⁵ As with using historical films, teachers could also show clips of historical games, to critically analyze certain historical videogames’ portrayal of history or certain ‘historical’ elements of historical games, without having to actually play the videogames in class.³¹⁶ The whole class could also play on a single device, projecting the gameplay on the blackboard, where one student or the teacher plays while the others watch.³¹⁷ One could for example then rotate who plays. It is also possible for students to play on their own computers, individually or in small groups.³¹⁸ As a sidenote, a bonus with students playing in groups is that they could discuss their observations together as they play and help each other out when or if they struggle with gameplay.³¹⁹ Working and playing in groups could also make it easier for students to observe and take notes, as well as helping them stay on track.³²⁰ McCall also suggest that students could use schools’ computer labs if they have one, but most high schools in Norway do not have one.³²¹ However, this might change in the future if videogames, or other computer programs, that require certain hardware, become more central in school and in teaching, then it might be common for schools to have their own computer lab.

As with teaching with historical films, are teachers also crucial when it comes to teaching with historical videogames, and they have to play an active role as guides and resources for students to utilize, encouraging and planning for purposeful play (play accompanied by observation, reflection, and analysis).³²² Teachers do not have to be experts in the games that they use in class, however, they should be able to play the games themselves.³²³ McCall

³¹³ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 79.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

³²² *Ibid.*, 15.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 97.

believes that the teachers' task should be to serve as a guide, and give hints, suggestions, opinions, or constructive criticisms where applicable.³²⁴ Teachers could also point out the more and less defensible historical elements of the videogames that their students are studying.³²⁵

When using historical videogames in history education it is important to do research before or after playing (or watching).³²⁶ Both primary and secondary sources should be used when working with historical videogames.³²⁷ Robert Houghton also emphasizes the importance of reflection before, during, and after playing historical videogames.³²⁸ Both having a class discussion lead by the teacher and discussing in groups are viable for reflection and analysis.³²⁹ In a classroom discussion, one might be faced with passive students. However, Terje Ogden suggests a couple of solutions for this problem. First off, students usually contribute more when teachers ask open questions, and the same goes for when students discuss together in pairs or in smaller groups before answering.³³⁰

How much time is required for historical videogame-based lessons can vary, depending on whether students are going to play themselves, and if so, how long it takes them to learn how to play the videogames.³³¹ Lessons where teachers play themselves or use video clips can be done relatively quickly.³³² If a lesson is based around students playing the games themselves it is important to give them time to learn how to play before having them analyzing the game, as this will establish a self-reliance and a willingness to take risks amongst the students, allowing them to be able to explore these games to a larger degree.³³³

Martin Wainwright and Jeremiah McCall have both used videogames in their teaching, however their approaches are somewhat different. McCall's approach focuses more on the 'how', while Wainwright's approach focuses more on 'what'. Jeremiah McCall offers a more of a step-by-step guide on how to teach with historical videogames where the students play themselves. His approach consists of four core steps: First students should study historical sources; then they should learn how to play the game; continued by purposeful play (playing

³²⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 82.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

³²⁶ Dussarps, "Le jeu vidéo médiateur de savoirs en histoire", 5.

³²⁷ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 81.

³²⁸ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 13.

³²⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 106-107.

³³⁰ Ogden, *Skolens mål og muligheter*, 96.

³³¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 143.

³³² *Ibid.*, 143.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

while observing the videogame's portrayal of history); and lastly, they should analyze, critique, and reflect over the videogame's portrayal of history.³³⁴ A key component of this approach is 'purposeful play' where students play while observing a videogame's portrayal of history, and he emphasizes how making observation notes is central to purposeful play, as they are useful for later reflection and analysis.³³⁵

Wainwright on the other hand teaches a course at university where they look at several historical videogames and discuss multiple themes connected to history and portrayals of history.³³⁶ His course focuses on seven different themes including economics and environment, cultural biases, world systems and world history, determinism and contingency, combat and brutality, gender, and game mechanics.³³⁷ Even though Wainwright focuses on university level education, the themes discussed in his course could still be useful for lower levels of education as well, such as high school. One could use these themes as a guide to discuss whether certain historical aspects portrayed in historical videogames are defensible or not, or one could discuss the potentially problematic depictions of these themes in historical videogames, or how (and why) historical videogames portrays these themes (in the way they do).

5.3 Challenges with using games in education

Historical videogames are in some ways more effective learning tools than other, more traditional, learning tools, however they are also faced with their own limitations and challenges.³³⁸ Historical videogames as educational tools both have their limits and potential pitfalls, ranging from them being commercial products to the difficulties that comes with student engagement.³³⁹ Students' interest in, and engagement with, historical videogames can vary, as some might embrace these activities, some might find them intimidating or unpleasant, while others, especially experienced players, may dislike having to take it slow in order to analyze, instead of playing for fun.³⁴⁰

³³⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 79.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

³³⁶ Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games", 579-581.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 581-583.

³³⁸ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 7.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁴⁰ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 19.

As historical videogames consist of many simplifications and other inaccuracies this could be seen as problematic when talking about using them as tools for history education, however, inaccuracies within historical videogames could serve a very useful purpose as they could provide students with opportunities to challenge portrayals of history, in the same way as accuracies give them opportunities to support portrayals.³⁴¹ Some historical videogames may also have potentially problematic or upsetting portrayals of enslavement, imperialism and colonialism, gender inequality, and Nazism, and that many historical videogames are often Eurocentric or American centric, teachers should be aware of these problematic and upsetting portrayals, and it is important that these portrayals are critically evaluated in class.³⁴² Another issue with using historical film in history education is that it is usually very time consuming.³⁴³ However, there are solutions to this issue, for example do lessons where teachers play themselves take less time, and as with film-based instructions could teachers also use video clips of the videogames as well.³⁴⁴ Also, as with films, the goals of the lessons could justify the time spent on these instructions.³⁴⁵

Computers are widely used in education today, however not all computers are capable of running all historical videogames, the teachers therefore have to find other solutions in these instances, for example lettings students borrow teachers own computers, let them play at home if they have capable computers there, or have them watch YouTube clips.³⁴⁶ Another potential challenge with using videogames (technology) in education is that it is easy for teachers to lose control in technology filled classrooms, both over teaching content and non-disciplinary activities.³⁴⁷ There is no use in high quality lessons if students are inattentive, uninterested, or do not understand.³⁴⁸

³⁴¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 31.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁴⁵ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 24-25.

³⁴⁶ DeVine, "Declaiming Dragons: Empathy Learning and *The Elder Scrolls* in Teaching Medieval Rhetorical Schemes", 84.

³⁴⁷ Ogden, *Skolens mål og muligheter*, 99.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

6.0 Popular depictions of Vikings in popular media

Vikings have for a long time been portrayed in various ways in popular media, ranging from cartoons and novels to films and videogames.³⁴⁹ Their portrayals have usually been far from correct, and many have therefore criticized these portrayals for their lack of accuracy.³⁵⁰

Various works within the fantasy genre are clearly Viking-inspired, for example *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003), and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). However, recently it seems like more historical portrayals directly depicting Vikings, (and not only depictions inspired by Vikings in the Fantasy-genre), have become very popular with shows like *Vikings* (2013-2020) and *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2022), and now with videogames like *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. Some would argue that the interest in Vikings have never been higher. In this section of the thesis, I will look at how the chosen popular depictions portray Vikings, I will look at the narratives within these portrayals, look at what they want to convey, what they want to tell the audiences, and I will briefly touch upon some accuracies and inaccuracies within these depictions. As the focus of this thesis is on portrayals of Vikings, other aspects, elements, or people that are not directly concerned with Vikings will not be discussed. This section is divided into two parts, where the first part is concerned with popular depictions of Vikings in films and the second part is concerned with popular depictions of Vikings in videogames.

6.1 Popular depictions of Vikings on film and TV

As stated previously, are there many depictions of Vikings in films that could have been included and discussed, however, this thesis focuses on three of them, where two of them are TV-dramas and the last one is a feature film. They are all fairly new, and one could therefore arguably assume that other recent popular depictions of Vikings portray Vikings similarly to these depictions.

6.1.1 Vikings & The Last Kingdom

Vikings and *The Last Kingdom* share many similarities in their portrayals of Vikings, which is why they are combined and discussed together in this thesis. They are also both TV-series, which adds to their similarities as well. There are of course some differences between the two,

³⁴⁹ Bøe & Knutsen, *Innføring i Historiebruk*, 128-137.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-137.

one of them being the plot, (as *Vikings* is based on the Legends of Ragnar Lothbrok and his sons, while *The Last Kingdom* is an adaptation of a historical novel series written by Bernard Cornwell, called *The Saxon Stories*), but their portrayals of Vikings are in general quite similar.³⁵¹

The Last Kingdom's story is focused on Uhtred, a fictional character which is loosely based on Uhtred the Bold, but he is mostly fictional.³⁵² Uhtred in the show is a Saxon that has been raised by Vikings after his father is killed, which provide the show with intriguing tensions as his allegiances are split between Saxons and Vikings.³⁵³ However, he ends up meeting Alfred the Great, and helps him fight off Viking invaders on multiple occasions. He also cooperates with Vikings at times as well, however he mostly fights for the Anglo-Saxons throughout the series. Uhtred interacts with various historical and non-historical characters throughout the series, which he often either cooperates with or fights against. Various historical characters, places, and events are therefore included, including historical Vikings like Ubba Ragnarson and Hastein, and places that Vikings went to like Northumbria and Eoforwic (York). However, there are many fictional characters as well, including the main character, Uhtred, (he may be somewhat inspired by a real person, but he is certainly not historical).³⁵⁴ The show also includes real historical events like the christening of the Viking King Guthrum, (Christian name: Athelstan). Unlike *Vikings*, does the story in *The Last Kingdom* practically only unfold in England, (there are some minor segments where they travel to Wales and to Ireland), and the focus is to a much larger degree on Anglo-Saxons at the time in *The Last Kingdom*. Some overarching themes that shape the narratives within the show are destiny and fate, cultures clashing, friends and family, loyalty, and the importance of reputation.

Vikings on the other hand, takes inspiration from the Norse sagas, amongst them, Ragnar Lodbrok saga.³⁵⁵ The story is therefore mainly focused on Ragnar Lothbrok, and later seasons are focused on his sons, as Ragnar himself dies in the fourth season. Ragnar starts off as a farmer, but his ambitions lead him on a journey where he eventually become a king. He travels to both England and France to raid and eventually to set up settlements. His sons follow in his footsteps, exploring, raiding, conquering, and so on. Throughout the show they travel to many places including Iceland, Greenland, America, to countries surrounding the

³⁵¹ Lawley, "The Last Kingdom Season 5 True Story: Every Major Change To Real History".

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Craig, "The Last Kingdom history: Was Uhtred of Bebbanburg real?".

³⁵⁵ Tyler, "Vikings True Story: How Much Was Real (& What The TV Show Changed)".

Mediterranean, and Ukraine.³⁵⁶ However, most of the plot unfolds in Norway, in a fictional place called Kattegat, and in various places in England. Various historical characters are depicted in the show including famous Vikings like Ubba Ragnarson, Ivar the Boneless, and Harald Finehair, however, many of the situations they are placed in are fictional, for example, how Ivar the Boneless is shown traveling to Kiev, however there are no evidence of this actually happening in any historical sources. Historical places and events are also included as well, for example is the raid at Lindisfarne depicted in season one of the series, and Ragnar and his family also travels to Uppsala, (which is believed to have played an important role in the Viking religion).

Vikings is inspired by some real events as well as the sagas about Ragnar Lothbrok and his sons, however the show creators also deviate a lot from these sources in their story. The series mainly focuses on Vikings and their ‘point of view’, and there is a heavy focus on warfare and raiding, but there are also some elements of romantic intrigues and drama. Some overarching themes within the show are family and friendship, loyalty, power, and the pursuit of a higher calling. These are themes that run through the entire series and that shape the narratives within the show. The narratives within the show focus to a large degree on Vikings being warriors and raiders, however, there are also narratives that focus on the more peaceful aspects of Vikings, including depictions of them being peaceful farmers, family-oriented, friendly and fun-loving, emotional, ambitious, and more. These types of narratives give Vikings more depth, allowing viewers to see them as human beings, and not just as savages.

As previously stated the portrayals of Vikings are quite similar in these depictions, both how they are depicted aesthetically, and how other aspects of Vikings are portrayed. However, the Vikings in the shows are generally to a larger extent portrayed as invaders in *The Last Kingdom* compared to how Vikings are portrayed in *Vikings*. Probably because most of the story is focused on the Anglo-Saxons in *The Last Kingdom*. *Vikings*, unlike *The Last Kingdom*, does somewhat emphasize how Vikings were farmers through characters like Ragnar Lothbrok and Ubba Ragnarson, as this was something these characters strived for.

The way that Vikings within these shows are portrayed aesthetically is well put together adding to the authenticity of the shows, and the shows do get some details correct as well, however their appearance is to a large degree inaccurate. Vikings are for the most part given a ‘tribalesque’ appearance with tattoos (often in the face as well), eyeshadow, or other facial

³⁵⁶ Dee, “Vikings: Every Country The Main Characters Visit (In Maps)”.

markings. They are often depicted with big beards, and some also have braided hair or dreadlocks. Many of them also have various kinds of ‘mohawk-ponytails’, and some have manbuns. (It is important to note that not all of these features are incorrect, I am simply listing how Vikings are portrayed in these shows). Clothingwise, are they dressed in a variety of clothes, often with some sort of fur ‘coats’ and some sort of leather or textile tunics. The accuracy of many of these costumes are questionable at best, and the same goes for their armor as well, as they for example rarely wear helmets and they never wear chainmail which contradicts archeological finds.³⁵⁷ The shows do avoid clichés that have been a part of popular depictions of Vikings for a long time, like the use of the infamous horned helmets. However, as there seems to be no evidence of tattoos or the ‘mohawk-ponytail’ being a part of the Vikings aesthetic, they may become new clichés. In addition to taking creative liberties with the plot and storyline, and with the aesthetics of the shows, as *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings* are TV-series, they also fictionalize the same way as other historical films do as well as suggested by authors like Brinch with others, by compressing characters and time, including fictional characters, and excluding characters.³⁵⁸

The portrayals of Vikings vary greatly within the shows, as they are sometimes portrayed as being violent barbaric savages, while they at other times are portrayed as being more civilized. These shows display various aspects of Viking life including religion and religious practices; slavery; seafaring; legislation and assemblies; the relationship between kings, chieftains, and warriors; as well as showing how Viking settlements changed over time, (mainly in *Vikings*). The narratives within the show focus to a large degree on Vikings being warriors and raiders, however, there are also narratives that focus on the more peaceful aspects of Vikings, including depictions of them being peaceful farmers, family-oriented, friendly and fun-loving, emotional, ambitious, religious, and more. These types of narratives give Vikings more depth, allowing viewers to see them as human beings, and not just as savages. However, these depictions rarely portray Vikings as traders, (this being mostly just referenced to, rarely ever shown). However, *Vikings* emphasizes in later seasons how Kattegat, (the hometown of the main characters), has become a major trading settlement, which may be the show creators’ way of conveying how trade was important to the Vikings. Slavery is a part of both shows, however *Vikings* does to a larger extent show how Vikings took people captive during raids and selling them as slaves than what *The Last Kingdom* does,

³⁵⁷ Pedersen, “Viking Weaponry”, 207.

³⁵⁸ Brinch et al., *Forestillinger om fortid*, 34.

even though this is also somewhat shown in *The Last Kingdom* as well. Religion is portrayed as having an important role in Viking culture and Vikings' personal life. The shows often emphasize the importance of religion and the conflict between the Viking religion and Christianity, both between Christians and 'pagans' as well as the struggle Vikings faced with this new religion, being tempted to convert. The shows depict Vikings as being freer than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, in the sense that they are more laid back, easy-going, and careless. For example, are they depicted as more sexual than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, and women are also portrayed as having more rights within Viking societies than their Christian counterparts.

6.1.3 *The Northman*

The film's story is loosely based on the same story as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, namely the legend of Amleth.³⁵⁹ The film takes inspiration from the islandic sagas as well as works by Saxo Grammaticus, however, most of the aesthetic details are based on archeological knowledge and inputs from scholars like Neil Price.³⁶⁰ By doing this Eggers try to blend the supernatural with historical details in an effort to blur the line between reality and the supernatural, (in an effort to try to show how the supernatural was a part of Vikings' life and mindset).³⁶¹

The story is based around Amleth, who lost his family at a young age when his uncle killed his father and married his mother. He becomes a Viking berserker raiding with other Viking berserkers having no cares in the world. One night he gets a vision, a calling, to avenge his father and save his mother. He disguises himself as a slave, travels to his uncle's farm and is sold to his uncle as a slave. During his time there he plots his revenge on his uncle, however he meets and falls in love with another slave there. He eventually tries to free his mother, but she reveals that she was the one that made his uncle kill his father. She told Amleth that she used to be his father's slave until he raped her and made her pregnant with Amleth. She refuses to be freed and Amleth eventually has to kill her, and he also kills her son, (his nephew/brother). Amleth then decides to run away with his love interest, however, when she tells him that she is pregnant with his child, he decides to turn back to kill his uncle, to make

³⁵⁹ Zalutskiy, "Commitment to Historical Accuracy Helps Turn 'The Northman' Into a Masterpiece".

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Connellan, "How accurate is 'The Northman' to Viking history? Well, it's a Robert Eggers film".

sure that he will not come after his unborn children. The story ends with Amleth and his uncle killing each other, fulfilling Amleth's destiny.

The Norseman is ultimately a vengeance story and some of the overarching themes one can identify throughout the movie that shape the narrative are revenge, fate and destiny, dealing with death, betrayal, family, and the dangers idealizing one's parents. It is a vengeance story based on a Nordic tale from the islandic sagas, set in an extremely authentic and quite accurate Viking setting. Slavery is central to this film, and it depicts Vikings taking prisoners and discussing where to send them, showing how they were active in trading slaves. Amleth himself becomes a slave as well, providing a representation of how slaves' life might have been on a Viking farm. Except for the raid shown early on in the movie, there are not much focus on raiding or warfare in this film, (however it still includes brutality and murder). Much of the movie consist of Amleth living as a slave, doing everyday tasks, while also scheming to get his revenge on his uncle. There is therefore more of a focus on the 'farmer aspect' of Viking life in this depiction, as most of the story unfolds on the farm of Amleth's uncle. The film does also emphasize the supernatural and how Viking myths and religion played a part in Vikings' view of the world and their everyday life. There are a few religious rituals that are depicted in the movie, including both animal and human sacrifice, and the use of blood. The filmmakers make their own interpretations of the primary sources and archeological finds, as there are some archeological finds and written sources that are somewhat ambiguous, and historians are not quite sure what these sources tell us, allowing for some imagination, for example when the characters in the movie mimic animalistic behaviors in certain rituals.³⁶²

One of, if not the most detailed and accurate depictions of Vikings in popular movies and on TV at the moment, some even calling it the most accurate Viking-movie of all time.³⁶³ Many historical details correspond with the historical record, and the film depict detailed setting and locations that are inspired by various archeological artifacts and literary sources.³⁶⁴ This focus on detail is not only restricted to the setting but the way the film depict Vikings aesthetically also. For example, is the 'tribalesque' appearance with facial tattoos and 'mohawk-ponytails' dropped in this film. There is also a lot of focus on details related to their clothing as well, portraying them in quite accurate tunics, and some in chainmail. Some also wear various types of helmets, both leather and metal, which also look quite accurate. Some of those of

³⁶² Connellan, "How accurate is 'The Northman' to Viking history? Well, it's a Robert Eggers film".

³⁶³ Zalutskiy, "Commitment to Historical Accuracy Helps Turn 'The Northman' Into a Masterpiece".

³⁶⁴ Connellan, "How accurate is 'The Northman' to Viking history? Well, it's a Robert Eggers film".

high social status also wear fur, which corresponds with historical evidence. *The Northman* also includes some inaccuracies in its aesthetic depiction as well, however, it is much more accurate than *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*'s depiction of Vikings.

6.1.3 Comparison

These portrayals share some similarities. For example, these portrayals emphasize the aesthetic of the Vikings to a large degree, even though the accuracy of the aesthetics in their portrayals are varying, they are at least authentic. They also focus to a varying degree on Vikings' behavior, at times portraying them as brutal warriors, and even as savages at times, however they also provide the audience with portrayals of Vikings that humanize them, depicting them as caring, fun-loving, emotional, and ambitious. There is, to a large extent, a focus on warfare and raiding in these depictions, however these depictions also provide audiences with portrayals of Vikings' culture, through portrayals of religious rituals, offering a more substantial view of Vikings. *The Northman* may provide the most accurate depiction of Vikings when it comes to historical details, however it does not provide audiences with the same range of historical events like *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* does, and it does not include historical characters to the same extent as the TV-series does either, as it is based on myths and legends. Even though these depictions provide a more in-depth representation of Vikings than many previous popular depictions they still focus heavily on the image of Vikings as warriors and raiders, while not focusing too much on other aspects of Viking history, like the trading and farming aspects of their life.

6.2 Popular depictions of Vikings in videogames

Many videogames have been influenced by the Middle Ages, both in their settings and in their themes.³⁶⁵ However, many, if not most of them have belonged to the fantasy genre, and these games have therefore consisted of various fantasy elements, including magic, mythical beasts, and Tolkienesque concepts.³⁶⁶ There are not as many videogames that are primarily concerned with the more historical aspects of the period, and especially not as many that include depictions of Vikings and the Viking Age, and those that do have usually been filled with

³⁶⁵ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?": A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 94.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. 94.

tropes, misconceptions, and inaccuracies, such as Vikings having horned helmets.³⁶⁷

However, as previously stated, do more recent historical videogames pay more attention to historical accuracy.³⁶⁸ The popular depictions chosen for this thesis are the latest and probably the most famous and popular historical videogames concerned with Vikings to date, serving as examples of how the topic is dealt with within popular videogames.

When discussing how Vikings are portrayed in the chosen videogames, it is also necessary to explain some of the mechanics of the games, which helps explain how Vikings are portrayed in the videogames. The premise of these videogames and how they are played will therefore also be described before diving into how these various games portray Vikings. Historical videogames about the Middle Ages are generally divided into four broad categories, however, the videogames this thesis is discussing belong to only two of these genres, namely the action-adventure genre and the strategy/grand strategy genre of videogames.³⁶⁹

6.2.1 *Creed Valhalla*

Some of the best known, if not the best-known historical action-adventure games to date are the *Assassin's Creed* series games, which in addition to having the most titles, is also one of the bestselling videogame franchises.³⁷⁰ It is therefore quite likely that some students have played some of these games in their own time.³⁷¹ *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* belongs in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, and as so, the game shares many similarities with the other entries in the franchise, and much of what various authors write about the *Assassin's Creed* games in general is applicable to *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* as well, and the same goes for certain elements within other specific *Assassin's Creed* games that are part the franchise as well.

The *Assassin's Creed* games are known for being visually authentic.³⁷² They are open world games that reconstruct and simulate historical settings, which players can explore, that depict different societies, cultures, and economies, including clothing, weaponry, and more complex economic, political, and social systems.³⁷³ These games show various aspects of people's

³⁶⁷ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?”: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 95.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 95.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 95.

³⁷⁰ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 52.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 52.

³⁷² Belyaev & Belyaeva, “Historical Video Games in the Context of Public History”, 61.

³⁷³ Spring, “Gaming History”, 211-212.

lives, like people interacting in the public space and how they lived.³⁷⁴ As it is possible to enter many of the buildings within these games, players are also shown furniture, utensils, décor, and food as well.³⁷⁵ The *Assassin's Creed* games' possibly strongest quality may actually be their ability to portray historical settings that could help students to recognize elements of historical life and humanity that other, more traditional forms of history may struggle with.³⁷⁶ In addition to providing players with detailed historically authentic settings that visualize the past, The *Assassin's Creed* games also provide players with stories that are historically inspired, and that often include depictions of historical figures, which players are able to partake in.³⁷⁷ These historical figures are well-known historical personalities that players are able to interact with in the game, for example, military commanders, politicians, philosophers, and artists.³⁷⁸ With each successive title, and with better gaming technology available, the gameworld have become more and more true to life, especially visually.³⁷⁹

The player agents in the *Assassin's Creed* games are embodied in the gameworld.³⁸⁰ They do not serve as particularly defensible analogies of historical agents as they are often an amalgam of historical archetypes and are in that way not actually 'historical'.³⁸¹ They also possess abilities that no real-world people would have, including fantastical climbing and leaping skills, as well as fighting skills.³⁸² Making the player agents assassins, that in these games are kind of 'outsiders' of society, allow the players to in a way be 'spectators' to historical events.³⁸³ McCall emphasizes that players do not as much interact with historical elements and systems within these games, as they are witnesses to these elements and systems.³⁸⁴ However, he also emphasizes that this does not hinder these games from being educationally useful, as I will discuss later.³⁸⁵

As stated above, the stories within these games are fictional stories that are historically based.³⁸⁶ The story within *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* is focused on Eivor, a Viking raider

³⁷⁴ Spring, "Gaming History", 211.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 211.

³⁷⁶ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, "Digital Simulations and Games in History Education", 615.

³⁷⁷ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 53.

³⁷⁸ Belyaev & Belyaeva, "Historical Video Games in the Context of Public History", 61.

³⁷⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 52.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 28.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 34.

³⁸² Ibid., 34.

³⁸³ Horswell, "Historicising Assassin's Creed (2007): Crusader Medievalism, Historiography, and Digital Games for the Classroom", 51.

³⁸⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 35.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 35.

³⁸⁶ Spring, "Gaming History", 211.

from Norway that lost their (I write their as Eivor could be both man and woman, depending on the preferences of the player) at a young age. Due to the political situation in Norway Eivor and their clan is forced to settle new lands in England. Here Eivor and their clan are faced with conflicts with the other kingdoms of England in addition to having to deal with other Vikings warring in England, while at the same time trying to sustain, develop, and secure their own settlement by securing alliances with Saxons and other Vikings. Eivor meets various historical characters including King Aelfred the Great, Ubba Ragnarson, Ivar the Boneless, King Guthrum, Harald Finehair, and more. As this short list suggest, are many of the historical figures that Eivor meets Vikings. It should be noted that there are various narrative segments in the game that is not concerned with *Assassin's Creed's* depiction of Vikings, including a completely fictional story concerned with the fictional conflict between the Templar Order and the Assassin Brotherhood, (which the protagonist partakes in), however, as they are not relevant to this thesis they are excluded. Certain segments of the game also occur in Asgard, as Eivor dreams from Odin's perspective, referencing various aspects of Viking mythology and religion. Some overarching themes that are identifiable within *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* are loyalty and betrayal, self-discovery, revenge, family and friends, violence, struggle, cooperation, war and peace, and violence. These themes are a part of shaping the narratives that this game convey.

There are various events and activities that players may partake in throughout the game, for example, religious and cultural rituals, like marriages and burials, and they are also able to have feasts. Players are also able to take part in raiding, warfare, and assassinations throughout the game, most of which is a part of the main story. Like some other installments in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, does *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* also simulate boating, allowing players to explore nautical exploration and raiding.³⁸⁷ In the base game the player is able to travel to England, parts of Western Norway and Vinland, however, if one purchases all the DLCs (downloadable content) it is also possible to travel to Ireland, Paris, and Isle of Skye as well. The player is faced with various choices throughout the game, that to varying degrees shape the story. As *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* is a historical action-adventure game, the main focus of the game is on action elements connected to physical reflexes and deduction skills.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁷ Spring, "Gaming History", 212.

³⁸⁸ Tozoğlu & Kuran, "What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History", 95.

In a similar fashion to the TV-series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* also portray Vikings with a 'tribalesque' appearance, with similar hairstyles (including the 'mohawk-ponytail) and facial tattoos. They often portrayed wearing various types of fur and animal feathers of some sort, often adorned with various types of ornamentals in gold and silver, giving them a glamorized and a somewhat romanticized appearance. They do not include chainmail, but various enemies do wear helmets, however the accuracy of this armor is rather questionable, and the same goes for the weapons that the player can use. The player may wield bows, swords, axes, spears, and more, however their appearance is rather inaccurate, aiming for more fantastical, decorative "cool-looking" weapons than realistic ones. Even though the appearance of Vikings is for the most part inaccurate, it does feel authentic to the average player.

To progress in the game, players have to develop their settlement, building farms, shops, a smith, a stable, a 'temple' of some sorts, and various other buildings. Players also have to make alliances in order to protect their settlement. This emphasis on developing and protecting the Viking settlement provides a view of Vikings as being more than just raiders and warriors, (even though the game emphasizes this aspect of Viking history a lot throughout the game). Trading is mostly absent in the base game (except for players being able to purchase resources, weapons, armor pieces, and some other items in 'shops'), however, with the *Wrath of the Druid* expansion, players are able to travel to Ireland and set up trading posts. These trading posts are not that important or useful, however they do show trading being a part of Viking culture. Viking society is portrayed as being quite egalitarian within the game, where women seem to be equal to men, even being chieftains. The importance of slaves and slavery in Viking society is also excluded completely, which is interesting as *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* emphasized slavery.³⁸⁹

As the main premise of the *Assassin's Creed* games is to assassinate various in-game characters, they have tended to be quite violent. However, Ubisoft, which is the studio behind the *Assassin's Creed* games, have in recent installments developed *Discovery Tours*, which remove the violent aspects of the games and allow players to explore a rich virtual world of geography, architecture, and historical characters, which educators and students can benefit from.³⁹⁰ In the *Discovery Tour* of *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odessey* are players mostly able to explore the historical settings, as they could also do in the main game,

³⁸⁹ Johns, "10 Facts Assassin's Creed Valhalla Gets Wrong About Vikings".

³⁹⁰ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 35.

but in the latest *Discovery Tour, Discovery Tour Viking Age*, are players given more opportunity to interact with the settings and historical processes.³⁹¹ This aligns with the *Assassin's Creed* series' tagline "the past is your playground", which is how they market themselves to their (potential) customers.³⁹²

6.2.2 The Crusader Kings series – Crusader Kings III

Even though famous Vikings are included in *Crusader Kings III*, like Bjorn Ironside, Ivar the Boneless, and Harald Finehair, the game does not primarily focus on Vikings. Vikings are in reality just a small part of the game, however, they are included, and the game does representations of Vikings that can be discussed. We must take a different approach when looking at how this game portray Vikings than with the other depictions. For example, looking at the premise of the game, the mechanics of the game, and then look at how these connect with the game's portrayal of Vikings.

Ahmet Tozoğlu and Mehmet Kuran have argued that grand strategy games could offer the best and most inclusive experience of the Middle Ages as their goal is to understand and "play" according to the historical versions of these institutions.³⁹³ In grand strategy games (like the *Crusader Kings* series) the player controls a realm and interact with and explores sociopolitical, technological, militaristic, economic, and religious aspects of history.³⁹⁴ The *Crusader Kings* series tries to simulate the feudal systems in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, but other geopolitical entities have also been included like societies in the Islamic world, the Nordic pre-Christian societies (which are the aspects of the game this thesis is concerned about), and societies in and around India.³⁹⁵ *Crusader Kings* simulate these governmental systems by 'forcing' players to have vassals and to engage with them.³⁹⁶

The smallest geopolitical entity in the *Crusader Kings* games are *provinces*, several provinces together form a *duchy*, several duchies form a kingdom, and multiple kingdoms form an empire.³⁹⁷ Each of these entities are owned and controlled by a dynasty which is led by one

³⁹¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 35.

³⁹² Horswell, "Historicising Assassin's Creed (2007): Crusader Medievalism, Historiography, and Digital Games for the Classroom", 58.

³⁹³ Tozoğlu & Kuran, "What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History", 96.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

character from that dynasty that is allowed to collect taxes and levy military from the controlled provinces.³⁹⁸ The ownership of these entities is connected to titles that the characters can hold.³⁹⁹ As these games try to simulate feudalism these geopolitical entities in the game have a hierarchical relation to each other, where the owner of a duchy is the “de-jure” liege over the owners of the provinces within that duchy, and the owners of the provinces are the “de-jure” vassals of the duchy.⁴⁰⁰ This relationship is repeated at every level, between the owners of duchies and the owners of a kingdom, and the owners of kingdoms and the owners of an empire.⁴⁰¹

The player controls a lineage of individuals from a medieval royal family.⁴⁰² The player controls the highest-ranking member of a particular dynasty, while all other characters in the game are controlled by the computer, (by an AI).⁴⁰³ All the characters are given certain traits (including genetic, social, and cultural traits) that influences other characters’ opinion of them.⁴⁰⁴ The characters’ personality traits are mainly developed during childhood, and they are connected to a “stress” system, where the player is punished by certain events or for making decisions that contradicts with the characters personality traits, or rewards the player when events or decisions harmonizes with the characters personality traits.⁴⁰⁵ In the *Crusader Kings* games personality traits of rulers are also emphasized as playing an important role in the events that happen in the game, providing a person-oriented view of history as well as focusing on the socio-political aspects of society during the Middle Ages.⁴⁰⁶

The player is allowed to appoint and remove government advisors, vassals, and generals; move armies; manage the economy; construct regional improvements; handle legislation, diplomacy, taxes, and more.⁴⁰⁷ Many of these decisions are done through dialogue boxes with sliders and other controls, other decisions are managed through the main map screen.⁴⁰⁸ The player is also faced with choice-based-text scenarios that they have to respond to.⁴⁰⁹ The most “action-oriented” aspects of these games are players ability to conduct wars with other

³⁹⁸ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?”: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 96.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 100-101.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 97-98.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁰⁷ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 65.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 65-66.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 66.

nations, where the game follows a “casus belli” system, meaning that characters need a valid “casus belli” against other nations to declare war on them without being punished.⁴¹⁰ As the game does not really have an end goal, and as victory and defeat are relative in these games, players decide themselves what their criteria for “winning” are.⁴¹¹ This means that the end goals in the *Crusader Kings* games are usually not historically accurate, but the game do allow for players to explore strategies for achieving and maintaining a successful dynasty.⁴¹² The narratives within these types of games are quite dependent on the player, as the player has quite a lot of agency, meaning that the narratives produced are to a large extent based on the choices and the actions made by the player. However, they are usually connected with controlling and growing a successful dynasty, and what this entails. Some of the overarching themes one might identify within *Crusader Kings* are socioeconomics, sociopolitics, and feudalism.

In late 2020 the newest addition to the *Crusader Kings* series, *Crusader Kings III*, was released, which continued the core design principles of the earlier games, but it also increased the focus on characters through personality traits affecting many other mechanics, as well as being more inclusive than the other games from the get-go, and it is easier for non-gamer audiences to play.⁴¹³ The fact that the game is easier for non-gamer audiences to play is important when wanting to use the game in education, as struggling with learning to play is frustrating.⁴¹⁴ However, as *Crusader Kings III* is fairly new, most of the non-Christian world lack considerable details, the Nordic realms however are an exception as a DLC concerned with the nations in this area was released shortly after the main game itself.⁴¹⁵ This thesis uses the main *Crusader Kings III* game and the *Northern Lords* DLC. As stated at the beginning of this section is *Crusader Kings*, unlike most of the other popular depictions used in this thesis, not necessarily focused on Vikings, as it has a wider focus, focusing on multiple societies, and on simulating various feudal systems. There are however aspects of this game that are concerned with Vikings, which are the aspects that will be discussed in this thesis. The most significant being how it includes various well known historical Vikings, (including Harald Finehair, Ivar the Boneless, Bjorn Ironside, and more), how the Scandinavians are some of the

⁴¹⁰ Tozoğlu & Kuran, “What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 98.

⁴¹¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 66.

⁴¹² Spring, “Gaming History”, 211.

⁴¹³ Tozoğlu & Kuran, “What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 100.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

only societies in Europe that are allowed to raid, how they are given their own religious tree (Åsatru), and that they play a significant role in the beginning of the game where they invade Northumbria. How the game simulate feudalism could also be connected to Viking society as well.

Religion plays an important role within the game, and *Crusader Kings III* tries to systematically model every religion through a system that consists of *religion family*, *tenets*, *virtues and sins*, and *doctrines*, where every character and province have a “faith”.⁴¹⁶ Even though the accuracy and complexity of these games’ portrayal of faith and religion is debatable, they still include a complex and consistent system that give players the opportunity to experience and understand religion’s effect on social life as well as its effect on the political sphere.⁴¹⁷ Vikings (Scandinavians) within *Crusader Kings III* are given their own religion family, ‘Åsatru’, which tries to simulate the Norse religion at the time, through the mechanics of the game. ‘Åsatru’ has prefigured tenets, virtues and sins, and doctrines which may serve as the game developers’ historical arguments about the Norse religion, (for example, doctrines that allow for cousin marriage and the legitimization of ‘illegitimate’ children, and doctrines that forbids same-sex relation and witchcraft). These tenets, virtues and sins, and doctrines can however be modified through reforming the religion. Laws and legislation is also connected to religion within *Crusader Kings III*, and reforming the religion allows the player to change laws and norms as well.

As the game try to simulate the feudal system, the game provides a portrayal of the hierarchical system at the time. There are three types of governmental forms within *Crusader Kings III*, *feudal*, *tribal*, and *clan*. These three governmental forms are in practice the same, however there are a few minor differences. The Scandinavian realms have a tribal government, with the most notable effects being that they are allowed to raid (which is one of the most viable methods of getting money) and they are given the *Varangian Adventure* casus belli (which in short means that are allowed to declare on someone of another culture group and migrate there if they if they win using this casus belli, probably as a way to simulate how Vikings settled throughout the world). Except for their ability to raid, being able to invade and settle elsewhere, and being given their own religion (Åsatru), there are not many other mechanics that set Vikings apart from other cultures and societies within the game. However,

⁴¹⁶ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 103.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

the game does allow for players to play as various ‘Viking’ dynasties, offering a simulation of how Vikings’ ‘governments’ worked.

6.2.3 Valheim

Valheim is another depiction that does not interact with ‘Viking history’ the same way as the other depictions does. Valheim is to a much larger extent fictional and is not therefore directly historical. However, as previously stated, it is inspired by Vikings, and it does include elements that could be connected to Viking history. *Valheim* is therefore not a ‘historical’ videogame according to the first, narrower definition mentioned by Jeremiah McCall, however, based on the second, broader definition, it could still be considered to be a historical videogame, as it does portray some elements that could be connected to historical discussions, as it is clearly inspired by Vikings and Viking age, (namely their mythology, but also other aspects of Vikings).⁴¹⁸ Valheim is inspired and influenced by Viking (Norse) mythology, and it therefore focuses more on the mythical aspects of Viking culture, their religion and their myths. The story (and the gameworld) takes place in a fictional tenth realm, (as there are nine realms in Norse mythology), where Vikings that did not die in battle go to prove themselves so they can eventually go to Valhalla. Valheim is in that sense a kind of a purgatory, a limbo. The player agent is one of these slain Vikings and by defeating various monsters and ‘monster-bosses’ the player agent proves himself to Odin, allowing him to enter Valhalla.

Various aspects and elements within the game is directly inspired by Viking history or Viking mythology. For example, the various pieces of clothing and armor is inspired by Viking apparels, like chain mail and helmets with eye guards, and the same goes for various tools and weapons that the player is able to craft and use, like axes, swords, spears, shields, and more. The player is also able to gather and cook various types of foods that are also inspired by food Vikings used to eat, including, (but not limited to), berries, mushrooms, deer meat, bread, and of course mead. The player may also gather iron by mining bog iron and melting it create the various tools, weapons and armors. Seafaring is also an important aspect of the game, as the player is able to build longships to explore, find new land, find new resources, and to find various NPCs (non-player characters) to trade with. One may also build farms and have farm animals, which may also be connected to how Vikings lived, as most of them were farmers. Most of the various creatures that exists in the world are inspired by creatures form Norse

⁴¹⁸ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 23.

mythology, including draugrs, trolls, dwarfs, and the famous sea serpent, as well as non-fictional creatures as well, like wolves, deer, and boars. Thor and Odin may appear in the distance, the player is not able to interact with them, but this shows how they are a part of this world. The player can also meet Hugin and Munin (Odin's ravens), and a Valkyrie as well.

Valheim is not aesthetically realistic as it is a stylized videogame, providing a more 'cartoony' depiction, however it does resemble the 'medieval' aesthetic one may find in other games inspired by the 'Viking aesthetic' or the Middle Ages, like Skyrim or RuneScape. It should also be noted that all the text-prompts that the player is provided are first delivered in runes, before being translated into English. In addition to being an action-adventure game, is *Valheim* also an open-world, sandbox, survival game, meaning that players are able to explore the world on (mostly) their own premises, they are able to interact with and change the world by gathering resources and building, and that one core aspect of the game is to survive, meaning that they have to gather food, build shelter to stay safe, and avoid being killed. This makes *Valheim* a very intriguing game, that give players a lot of 'space' to do what they want to do, which means that if they want to ignore the quests to kill the monster-bosses, and build a nice settlement instead, they could do that, or if they want to ignore building shelter and simply focus on killing the monsters, they could do that as well. Some of the overarching themes that may be identified within *Valheim* are survival, adventure, fantasy and mythology, combat, exploration, and building.

6.2.4 Comparison

The portrayals of Vikings in these videogames are quite different, in content, in how they interact with the past, and in how they portray Vikings. *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* is more focused on stories, is more action-oriented, is more focused on creating an authentic setting, and provide audiences with a more 'personal' view of history. *Crusader Kings III* on the other hand try to simulate the feudal system and let players interact with and explore sociopolitical, technological, militaristic, economic, and religious aspects of history, trying to simulate the how the intricate relationship between historical people connects to how past dynasties ruled. While also trying to simulate how historical actors made decisions, the potential consequences of these decisions, and how certain personality traits effects their decisions. *Crusader Kings III* therefore simulate the hierarchical social structure that Viking society followed. This provides audiences with a somewhat more 'theoretical', 'objective'. and

maybe even ‘structured’ view of the past. Lastly, *Valheim*, unlike the two other videogames, does not try to be historical, it is rather inspired by Viking mythology and some aspects of Viking history. With a completely fictional gameworld, not based on real locations, with no historical characters, and depicting no historical events. However, the game does include elements within the gameworld that is inspired by Viking history, and it does include elements inspired by Vikings’ mythology and religion.

7.0 Using popular depictions of Vikings in films and videogames to teach about Vikings?

Having looked at various depictions of Vikings in films and in videogames, it then time to look at how these depictions could be used in education. Following the structure of the previous section we start off by discussing how the depictions of Vikings in films can be used in education before moving on to how these depictions of Vikings in videogames can be used in education. This then allows for a discussion about similarities or differences between how these two mediums could be used in education.

7.1 Using popular depictions of Vikings in films and TV-series to teach about Vikings

With a basis in what various authors write about using films in education and applying this to the depictions of Vikings that this thesis has looked at, we can get an understanding of how these portrayals can be used to teach about Vikings, as well as an understanding of how these depictions can be used to achieve the broader overall goals of history education.

7.1.1 Vikings & The Last Kingdom to teach Viking history

As *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* portray Vikings similarly, their education applications are similar as well, and they are therefore discussed together in this section of the thesis as well. First off, it is important to note that as these are TV-series that spans multiple seasons with almost many episodes it is impossible to watch the entire series together with the class, and it is not useful to do so either. One could probably justify watching two or three episodes if one wanted to watch multiple episodes, but it is also possible to watch only one episode, this depends on the goals of the lessons. They may be successive episodes or episodes from various points in the series, again this is based on what the goals of the lessons are. As written previously, watching certain clips of the show is also possible, maybe even preferable when it comes to TV-series, however this requires that teachers locate clips on YouTube beforehand, make clips themselves, or just simply know what timestamps they want to use so that they can quickly skip ahead to the parts of the series they want to look at in class. One could use these portrayals together in class, watch clips from both series, or an episode of each series, and compare these two portrayals. This could be useful as they share many similarities, both in terms of format and content, (even some of the same historical characters).

As suggested by Jeremy D. Stoddard, these popular depictions should not be used to show what happened, but rather be used as tools to develop historical criticism and to develop

historical film literacy.⁴¹⁹ As these TV-series consist of many historical inaccuracies, and as they are as popular as they are, it may be important for teachers to help students critically analyze these portrayals, pointing out various inaccuracies while also commenting upon the more defensible representations as well. By critically analyzing these depictions of Vikings, pointing out the various inaccuracies, students will become aware of these inaccuracies, and they are then more likely to remember what is historically accurate, as suggested by Butler with others.⁴²⁰ This means that even though these depictions are riddled with historical inaccuracies about Vikings, students will learn factual correct information about Vikings by critically analyzing these portrayals. These TV-series could for example be used to teach about Vikings' overseas exploits; to teach about certain famous, important, and influential, Vikings; some important events that they took part in; potentially to show religious practices; and to teach about the material culture of Vikings to some extent (looking at clothing, armor and weapons, houses, and so on). By critically analyzing the incorrect information within these portrayals students will also learn factual correct information about Vikings, even though these portrayals contain many inaccuracies.⁴²¹

As emphasized by Alan S. Marcus with others, it is important for students to have a task to do while watching these portrayals.⁴²² They suggest taking notes, which I also believe is a viable task. Having students take notes during watching, taking notes of how these depictions portray various aspects or elements connected to Vikings, is educationally viable. This could be notes concerned with aesthetic details or notes concerned with certain situations or events within the shows, and more. These notes could help students at a later stage when they could discuss and analyze these portrayals by using other sources, primary sources or secondary sources by historians. As emphasized by Marcus and Stoddard, it is crucial to use other sources when using films, which is why it is useful to use various primary sources, looking at archeological evidence, and using academic research when analyzing these depictions, in order to evaluate the credibility of the various portrayals within these TV-series. In the case of *Vikings* it could also be rewarding to look at the legends in the sagas that the show is inspired by, perhaps reading Ragnar Lodbrok's Saga.

Based on what various authors have written about using historical films to teach history, multiple of the core elements and the five "great questions" in the Norwegian curriculum for

⁴¹⁹ Stoddard, "Film as a 'thoughtful' medium for teaching history", 286.

⁴²⁰ Butler et al., "Using Popular Films to Enhance Classroom learning", 1161-1167.

⁴²¹ Marcus et al., *Teaching History with Film*, 20-21.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

history can be addressed to varying degrees by using *Vikings* or *The Last Kingdom* in history class, meaning that one could justify using them. One could also work towards various competence goals in a lesson with *Vikings* or *The Last Kingdom* as well, including, but not limited to: *explore the past by asking questions and obtaining, interpreting and using various types of historical material to find the answers; explore how communication and cultural encounters have influenced people in Norway and the rest of the world; describe the significance of religion for society and power structures from the Middle Ages to the present and assess its role in peoples' self-perception and how they view others; reflect on how interpretations of the past are affected by our understanding of the present and expectations for the future; reflect on how the past is used by different stakeholders and discuss the purpose of this use of history; (explore the options and choices a person has in conflict situations and assess the consequences of the choices that were made); (explain the reasons why people have migrated and discuss cultural encounters as seen from different perspectives).*⁴²³ Once again, emphasizing the fact that one could arguably use these types of portrayals to work towards most competence goals, depending on how these portrayals are used.

7.1.3 The Northman

As *The Northman* is a feature film, it is more familiar to most teachers, as very few teachers, based on my experience, use feature films (or videogames) in their teaching. In contrast to *Vikings* or *The Last Kingdom*, *The Northman* does not consist of many seasons and episodes, and its playtime is two and a half hours in its entirety. Watching *The Northman* in class is still quite time consuming, and it will take almost three and a half class hours to watch the entire movie. Teachers may therefore watch clips of certain elements and portrayals within the film that could be studied closer, however, my experience is that teachers usually play movies in their entirety, which is also fine if the goals of the lesson are worth the time spent on it.

As *The Northman* has been praised for its attention to historical detail, and as it includes many elements that are defensible and correspond with historical research, some of the elements within the film could be used as examples of how these aspects of Viking history may have looked like, for example discussing the clothing portrayed in the film, discussing the religious rituals that are portrayed, or discussing the film's portrayal of slavery, and slave trade. In this

⁴²³ Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering".

way teachers are able to utilize the elements that correspond with historical evidence and sources, using them as examples to ‘show’ how Vikings probably looked like, what they wore, how they lived, and so on. (However, it is important to be aware that these portrayals do consist of inaccuracies, and that the film consists of various fictionalizations, and it is important to make students aware of this as well, making sure that students do not accept all the elements within this film, taking them at face value). Like other historical portrayals, it is useful and important to analyze, critique, and discuss these depictions, developing historical criticism, historical film literacy, and look at if these portrayals are defensible or not.

As this feature film is heavily inspired by primary sources like Saxo Grammaticus and the Icelandic sagas it makes it quite useful as a resource to be used together with these primary sources in various ways. Students could look into how the film corresponds with these sources, and how it interoperates these sources. As Viking religion and mythology is quite central to the story of the film, it may be useful to look into and discuss the film’s portrayal of these aspects of Viking culture. Discussing religion’s role in Vikings’ everyday life and its place in Vikings’ ‘mind’. I believe that one of the most suitable activities teachers could do with *The Northman* is to use the elements within the film that are accurate and defensible, while also highlighting the less accurate and defensible elements within the film. Teachers could use clips, or pause the film during watching, point out the most notable elements. Students could then discuss to what extent the film is an accurate depiction of Vikings after watching.

As with *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, multiple of the core elements and the five “great questions” can be addressed to varying degrees by using *The Northman* in history class, and as with the two TV-dramas are there also several competence goals one could work towards when using *The Northman* in a lesson, including, but not limited to: *explore the past by asking questions and obtaining, interpreting and using various types of historical material to find the answers; describe the significance of religion for society and power structures from the Middle Ages to the present and assess its role in peoples’ self-perception and how they view others; reflect on how interpretations of the past are affected by our understanding of the present and expectations for the future; reflect on how the past is used by different stakeholders and discuss the purpose of this use of history; explore the past by formulating research questions, assessing and using different materials and presenting one’s own conclusions; explore a historic figure and discuss his or her ideas, options and choices in light of the time in which he or she lived; as well as, compare different accounts of an event and reflect on the fact that historical accounts are influenced by the points of view and*

*context of the author.*⁴²⁴ (On this last competence goal one could for example compare the film to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, however, this arguably fit better in a literature class rather than a history class).

7.2 Using popular depictions of Vikings in videogames to teach about Vikings

As historical videogames interact with the past in a different way than what historical films do, they also have other educational applications than historical films do. Historical videogames that depict the Middle Ages, (including the Vikings and the Viking age), could serve as useful educational tools to, not only, learn about the period, but also to interrogate and discuss these games' portrayals of the period, in a similar way as one could do with films.⁴²⁵ However, unlike historical films, do historical videogame consist of mechanics that convey the game developers historical arguments, which could also be analyzed, interrogated, and discussed.⁴²⁶ The fact that these videogames often contain exaggerated tropes and historical inaccuracies, makes them very useful as case studies that could be used in history class.⁴²⁷ Having looked at how these popular depictions of Vikings interact with the past and portray Vikings, it is possible to discuss how these depictions could be used to teach about Vikings, and how utilizing these depiction in education connects to the overall goals of the subject of history.

7.2.1 Assassin's Creed Valhalla

As McCall has suggested, there are various ways of using historical videogames in education, which are also applicable to using *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* to teach about Vikings as well. There are a wide range of activities that teachers could plan for and carry out, including watching clips, playing on the blackboard, and letting students play themselves. However, the most viable method of using *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* in education at the moment is probably to play on one device for everyone else in the class to observe (teachers playing themselves or allowing one of the students to play while the others observe). There are various reasons for this, connected with the challenges teachers have to face when using videogames in education. For example, are students' computers usually not capable of

⁴²⁴ Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering".

⁴²⁵ Houghton, "Introduction: Teaching the Middle Ages Through Modern Games", 16.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 16.

running *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, while convincing the school to purchase enough copies of the game may be a challenge as well. It is also extremely time consuming to allow all the students to learn how to play the game themselves so that they may observe on their own hand, (which may be justified if the goals of the lessons are beneficial enough, but then you would have to turn it into a larger project that goes beyond the scope of simply learning about Vikings).

Instead of students playing the game by themselves (which I have already stated is not that viable when the goal is to learn about Vikings), or the teacher 'playing on the blackboard', teachers could also show videoclips of the game, as suggested by McCall.⁴²⁸ There are for example plenty of video clips from the *Assassin's Creed* games (including *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*) that could be showed and used in class, that depict both historical figures that one could meet and interact with in the games, and video clips that depict the architecture, geography, and vision of everyday life in historical regions and locations, including more mundane buildings, as well as historical icons like the Egyptian pyramids or the Parthenon, and so on.⁴²⁹ These clips, and the portrayals within them, could also be critically discussed.⁴³⁰ Watching video clips of someone playing historical videogames is quite similar to watching one person in class play, except for when watching clips there is no way for the rest of the class giving input to what actions the player should do.⁴³¹

The activities most fruitful for *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* is to critically analyze the portrayals of Vikings to dissect the many inaccuracies within these portrayals, in a similar way as using historical films. The difference being that *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* is more interactive, making it more likely to captivate students' interest, especially as teachers could allow for students to partake in playing, walking around, and look at certain elements on behalf of the rest of the class, (given that students do not play individually on their own computers). In a similar way as with historical films, students could critically analyze the representations of Vikings within the game. Analyze and discuss the way that they are portrayed aesthetically (looking at their appearance, clothing, hairstyles, weapons, armor, and so on), also look at how they are portrayed in terms of what aspects of Viking history is emphasized (raiding and warfare, but not that much on trading, while slavery is completely omitted – religion focused on, some culture). Walk through Viking settlements, look at and discuss the portrayals of

⁴²⁸ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 53.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

‘Viking buildings’. The cut scenes and dialogue scenes within the game could also be analyzed.⁴³²

As with the popular depictions of Vikings in film, students may critically analyze the various inaccurate portrayals of Vikings within *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*, and by doing so actually learn historically correct information about Vikings.⁴³³ Using various historical sources will be important for this as well, allowing students to also work with historical sources, developing historical literacy, which is important within the subject of history. In the same way as with the popular depictions of Vikings in films, *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla* could then for example be used to teach about Vikings’ overseas exploits; to teach about certain famous, important, and influential, Vikings; some important events that they took part in; potentially to show religious practices; and to teach about the material culture of Vikings to some extent (looking at clothing, armor and weapons, houses, and so on).

If the goal is to teach about Vikings with using *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla* the most educationally viable aspect of the game is then the *Discovery Tour*. In *Discovery Tour: Viking Age*, (the *Discovery Tour* connected to *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*), students are able to explore the world depicted in the main game, while also having the opportunity to embark on various ‘guided tours’ that are curated by professional historians and experts.⁴³⁴ *Discovery Tour: Viking Age* also allow players to participate in quests connected to archetypical historical player agents everyday life, making the action-choices available to the player more defensible.⁴³⁵ While some of these quests are concerned with Munks’ lives at the time, are most of the quests concerned with Vikings. The *Discovery Tours* are well suited as a whole-class activity, projecting gameplay on one screen and letting everyone participate collectively.⁴³⁶ The *Discovery Tour* is more suitable for educational use, as it removes the more ‘entertaining’ aspects of the game (including the combat and the story), while adding guided tours curated by professional historians and experts, providing information on various aspects of Viking history while also giving a ‘behind the scenes’ of the mechanics of the game.⁴³⁷ Another bonus with Ubisoft’s *Discovery Tours* is that they could be bought separately from the main game at a discounted price.⁴³⁸ Teachers and schools do not have to

⁴³² McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 106.

⁴³³ Butler et al., “Using Popular Films to Enhance Classroom learning”, 1161-1167.

⁴³⁴ Ubisoft, “Discovery Tour”.

⁴³⁵ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 54.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁴³⁷ Ubisoft, “Discovery Tour”.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.,

buy the game though, as they could watch YouTube videos posted by the Ubisoft team themselves where they play through the *Discovery Tours*.⁴³⁹ However, one loses the ability to explore on one's own terms, if there are certain elements one want to examine closer with the class.

Most of, if not all, the core elements and the five “great questions” can be addressed to varying degrees by using *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* or *Discovery Tour: Viking Age* in history class if the teacher plan for it. There are also several competence goals one could work towards as well, including: *explore the past by asking questions and obtaining, interpreting and using various types of historical material to find the answers; explore how communication and cultural encounters have influenced people in Norway and the rest of the world; describe the significance of religion for society and power structures from the Middle Ages to the present and assess its role in peoples' self-perception and how they view others; reflect on how interpretations of the past are affected by our understanding of the present and expectations for the future; reflect on how the past is used by different stakeholders and discuss the purpose of this use of history; explore the past by formulating research questions, assessing and using different materials and presenting one's own conclusions; discuss the degree to which developments in different periods have been influenced by upheaval or continuity and consider what makes an event in the past meaningful; explain the reasons why people have migrated and discuss cultural encounters as seen from different perspectives; explore the options and choices a person has in conflict situations and assess the consequences of the choices that were made.*⁴⁴⁰

7.2.2 Crusader Kings III

Crusader Kings III allow for various types of learning and knowledge, including geographical knowledge; awareness of the interactions between economic, religious, technological, political, and cultural elements within history, and an increased understanding of these topics; being able to contextualize key events and major developments; being able to understand that history can be interpreted in multiple ways; and experiment with counterfactual history.⁴⁴¹

The *Crusader Kings* games could be useful in critical discussions about historical geopolitics,

⁴³⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 54.

⁴⁴⁰ Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering”.

⁴⁴¹ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 106-107.

as state and regional boundaries are presented in these games.⁴⁴² Historical videogames are great at showing students the consequences of certain decisions, allowing them to evaluate the actions of historical actors to a greater extent than most other educational tools.⁴⁴³ They also let students test assumptions, analyze circumstances, and challenge any deterministic views they may have.⁴⁴⁴ As the *Crusader Kings* games, (especially, *Crusader Kings III*), are quite character-focused, they open up for students to see key historical figures as human beings rather than larger than life characters or mythical beings.⁴⁴⁵ While historical simulation games like *Crusader Kings III* could be useful for learning counterfactual history, some have argued that they might not be the strongest mediums for conveying factual information, while others believe that counterfactual history could lead to better understanding of factual knowledge.⁴⁴⁶ It can be argued that historical strategy games are well suited to be tools to show “history as a process” in history education.⁴⁴⁷

When using *Crusader Kings* to teach about Vikings is concerned, it becomes a little more complicated. As the game does not primarily concern itself with Vikings, its portrayal of Vikings is fairly limited. However, as discussed earlier, Vikings are included, and to understand how *Crusader Kings* could be used to teach about Vikings one must look at what the game portrays, and how Vikings are a part of this, which we have already done. As previously discussed, is *Crusader Kings III* concerned with simulating the feudal system, and the game therefore deals with the more intricate geopolitical aspects of Viking history, simulating the hierarchy in which various Viking dynasties ruled through. In an educational setting it would therefore be useful to allow the students to interact with the mechanics of the game and partake in the simulation allowing them to get a (somewhat limited) understanding of the geopolitical aspects of Viking history. However, McCall estimates that it would take six hours or more, (maybe even ten or more hours), to both learn the basics of the game and to achieve some depth or purposeful play when planning for students to learn and play a 4X game (like *Crusader Kings III*).⁴⁴⁸ Anything less than six hours is probably not sufficient enough to learn how to play the game and do some purposeful play, meaning that it is not that

⁴⁴² McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 67.

⁴⁴³ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, “Digital Simulations and Games in History Education”, 617.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 617.

⁴⁴⁵ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?”: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 106.

⁴⁴⁶ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, “Digital Simulations and Games in History Education”, 613-614.

⁴⁴⁷ Tozoğlu & Kuran, ““What if you are a Medieval Monarch?”: A *Crusader Kings III* Experience to learn Medieval History”, 88.

⁴⁴⁸ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 144-145.

viable to have students play the game themselves to learn about Vikings, (especially since the extent in which students learn about Vikings through the game is minimal).⁴⁴⁹ However, teachers could play themselves, showing the game's simulation and explaining it to the students so that they could analyze and discuss the simulation later, or they show the more or less defensible models within the game. Teachers could also show videoclips of certain elements within the game which students could analyze and discuss as well.

As with *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, most of the core elements and the five "great questions" can be addressed to varying degrees by using *Crusader Kings III* in history class if the teacher plan for it. As well as many of the same competence goals. Some competence goals that could be worked on when using *Crusader Kings III* that stand out are *describe the significance of religion for society and power structures from the Middle Ages to the present and assess its role in peoples' self-perception and how they view others; explore a historic figure and discuss his or her ideas, options and choices in light of the time in which he or she lived; discuss the degree to which developments in different periods have been influenced by upheaval or continuity and consider what makes an event in the past meaningful; explore the options and choices a person has in conflict situations and assess the consequences of the choices that were made.*⁴⁵⁰

7.2.3 Valheim

As discussed previously, *Valheim* is not a historical videogame in the sense that it set in a real historical time and place, with a real-world historical setting and date. As so, its educational applications are somewhat limited. However, as *Valheim* is inspired by Viking mythology, and therefore take inspiration from Viking history as well, it does provide with a depiction of Vikings that could to some extent be used in teaching about Vikings. As *Valheim* does portray various aspects of Viking mythology, these portrayals of their mythology may be critically analyzed and discussed in class, asking whether these depictions fit with what we know about the religion and mythology of the Vikings. The game also portrays simplistic models of various aspects of Viking life, like farming, boating, resource gathering, food, as well as clothing, tools, and weapons. These portrayals may also be analyzed and discussed, as the

⁴⁴⁹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 144-145.

⁴⁵⁰ Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering".

inclusion of these aspects may tell us what the game developers believe about the period, as these elements are a part of their ‘historical arguments’.

As with *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla* are students school computers probably not capable of running *Valheim*, making it challenging to have students play it in class. Even though I believe that the best teaching experience with *Valheim* is to allow students to play the game themselves to explore the various elements of the game, taking notes and to do research on the various elements within the game, looking at whether they are defensible models or analogies for real-world historical elements that connect with Viking history. It is of course possible for teachers to play for the whole class ‘on the blackboard’, however, I believe this is not the best use of the videogame. If students are not able to play themselves, I argue that teachers using the game to portray various elements connected to Viking mythology is the next best thing. This means that the game’s use in education is limited, as mentioned above, however, this does allow for using the game in manner to teach about Vikings, while also allowing students to develop their historical videogame literacy skills.

As discussed previously, *Valheim* not very ‘historical’ in its depiction of Vikings, and it is therefore limited in the ways it can address the four core elements, the five “great questions”, and most of the competence goals. However, even though it does not directly interact with the past, it is influenced by Vikings, and it could therefore be used in history education through fitting instructions and clear set goals, as suggested by various authors, including McCall.⁴⁵¹ Some of the competence goals that students are expected to have done after high school that may be worked with in a lesson with *Valheim*: *reflect on how interpretations of the past are affected by our understanding of the present and expectations for the future; explore the past by formulating research questions, assessing and using different materials and presenting one’s own conclusions; reflect on how the past is used by different stakeholders and discuss the purpose of this use of history.*⁴⁵²

7.3 Summary

These popular depictions of Vikings in these mediums do share some similarities in the way they portray Vikings and in the way they could be used in education. However, as videogames allow for students to actively participate and interact with historical gameworlds

⁴⁵¹ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 15.

⁴⁵² Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Historie (HIS01-03): Kompetansemål og vurdering”.

and elements within these gameworlds they have the potential to provide students with more complex models of Viking history that allow for deeper analysis of representations of Vikings. Students are through these videogames able to interact with mechanics that portray some sort of historical arguments about Vikings. They also provide students with simulations that have the potential to give students a better understanding of actions and decisions that some Vikings may have made, developing their understanding of agency. These videogames' biggest educational potential is therefore to allow students to interact with these gameworlds, allowing them to critically analyze and discuss these representations of Vikings.

However, I would argue that to use videogames to specifically teach about Vikings, (with no wider goals), where students play themselves individually or in groups, is not that fruitful. The main reason for this is that learning to play and facilitating for purposeful play is quite time consuming, (ignoring the issue concerning whether students' computers could play the game, which in itself is problematic), and it is therefore difficult to justify when there are no wider goals. By aiming for the more overarching goals within the Norwegian History curriculum through the core elements and the various competence goals, these depictions become more educationally viable. Students are then working towards developing historical (videogame) literacy, historical criticism skills, and historical consciousness, and an understanding of concepts like agency, empathy, cause and consequence, and counterfactual history, while "passively" learning about Viking history. As for films, the approaches suggested by the various authors do allow for using historical films to specifically teach about the Viking Age, as these instructions are usually less time consuming.

All of these portrayals, in both mediums, consist of many historical inaccuracies to various degrees, however, as multiple authors argue, this does not hinder them from being used in education, as they suggest that teachers should use portrayals like these with other sources to analyze, criticize and discuss the various depictions, both accurate and inaccurate depictions. When using these representations of Vikings in education teachers can act as middlemen, choosing what aspects of Viking history which is focused on (through choosing specific depictions in videogames or in films), they could give commentary and contextualize these portrayals, or highlight accurate and inaccurate depictions as students are watching or playing. This extends to both the portrayals in both mediums, the difference being that videogames interact with the past differently than films, which is why they may have their own usage.

8.0 Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer whether popular depictions of Vikings in films and in videogames could be used to teach about Vikings. To do this I looked at existing scholarship regarding historical films and videogames, and existing scholarship regarding how these could be used for educational purposes. This built a foundation on which I provided a case-study which specifically focused on depictions of Vikings. The case-study pointed out that some popular depictions of Vikings were more educationally viable than others, especially concerning the videogames looked at, as their focus and game mechanics were widely different. However, they could still be used to teach various aspects of Viking history to varying degrees, for example using *Crusader Kings III* to teach about the more intricate geopolitical aspects of Viking history or utilizing *Assassin's Creed Valhalla's* (or *Assassin's Creed Discovery Tour: Viking Age's*) rich and detailed gameworlds in teaching about the Viking Age, while taking advantage of *Valheim's* portrayal of Viking mythology. The educational applications of the films depicting Vikings on the other hand were quite similar to each other and somewhat simpler, as they do not present mechanics that students could interact with. However, the main focus of these portrayals was also to critically analyze them and discuss them.

Could these popular depictions be used to teach about Vikings? Yes, the popular depictions of Vikings in both mediums are educationally viable to teach about Viking history, however their approaches are somewhat different. Most of the authors recommend having students play themselves, as the learning potential from playing themselves seem to be greater. However, as I have argued, having students themselves play the videogames, (individually or in groups), to specifically teach about Vikings, with no wider goals, is not that fruitful. Students could either learn about the Viking Age “passively” while aiming for wider goals within the Norwegian history curriculum, or teachers could play or show clips while giving commentary and contextualizing these portrayals, or highlighting accurate and inaccurate depictions as students are watching or playing. Both approaches are educationally viable, and they both allow for these games to teach about Viking history. As for films, the approaches suggested by the various authors do allow for using historical films to specifically teach about the Viking Age.

Non-factual depictions (often ones that misrepresent something in a deeper, conceptual level, rather than more surface cosmetic ones) can create a warped perception of history, which might harm historical understanding. However, as various authors discuss, there are two

important counterpoints to this. The first one is that these depictions may spark an interest in History, which can be inherently positive as players play a game or watch something, leading to them becoming interested, which again may lead them to do their own research, as mentioned by Dussarps.⁴⁵³ This is for example how I became interested in the Viking history in the first place. The second counterpoint, which is most relevant to the angle of this thesis, is that when popular depictions like these are used within education, teachers may act as middlemen, as guides and resources for the students, an important argument within Jeremiah McCall's book.⁴⁵⁴ This can take many shapes, for example, teachers choosing what aspects of (in this instance) Viking history which is focused on (through choosing specific depictions in videogames or in films), they could give commentary and contextualize these portrayals, or highlight accurate and inaccurate depictions as students are watching or playing. Alternative narratives or counterfactual history are therefore not necessarily a bad thing, and they may then actually be useful for teaching about Viking history, (and history in general).

8.1 Final remarks and the road ahead

First off, as this thesis is very much theoretical in nature, the next step would then be to move beyond theory and test this in practice through some sort of qualitative study, based on testing, observations, and empirical evidence. Further research on using videogames in high school history education is warranted. Secondly, there should be some focus on teaching teachers and teacher-students on how to use videogames in history education. According to a survey done by Marcus and Stoddard, the teachers that participated stated that they did not learn anything about using films in education through their teacher training, and one can therefore assume that they did not learn anything about using historical videogames either, as they belong to a newer medium.⁴⁵⁵ Teacher education programs are crucial in the incorporation of historical videogames in history education, especially for teaching teachers how to utilize these tools in an effective manner.⁴⁵⁶ Education programs should teach their teacher-students how to select historical videogames that align with curricular goals; how to plan and implement the right strategies for lessons with historical videogames; how to develop activities and assessments that facilitate for interpretation and critical analysis; and

⁴⁵³ Dussarps, "Le jeu vidéo médiateur de savoirs en histoire", 22.

⁴⁵⁴ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 15.

⁴⁵⁵ Marcus & Stoddard, "Tinsel Town as Teacher", 319.

⁴⁵⁶ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, "Digital Simulations and Games in History Education", 621.

how to talk to colleagues, administrators, parents, and students, about using historical videogames in their lessons, about why and how.⁴⁵⁷

As historical videogames are continuing to grow in importance within students' historical understanding, it also grows in importance in history teaching as well, and it is therefore important that teachers know how to handle the new pedagogy connected to this, which is teacher education programs' job.⁴⁵⁸ In a similar way to the internet in the past, using videogames in education may be in a transitional phase, where videogames might become more and more used in history education (and in education in general).⁴⁵⁹ Especially as an increasing number of gamers become teachers, as they are more likely to want to use videogames in their lessons, including me.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁷ McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 5.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁵⁹ Wright-Maley, Lee, & Friedman, "Digital Simulations and Games in History Education", 616.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 616.

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