# Those Who Do Not Learn History Are Doomed to Play It
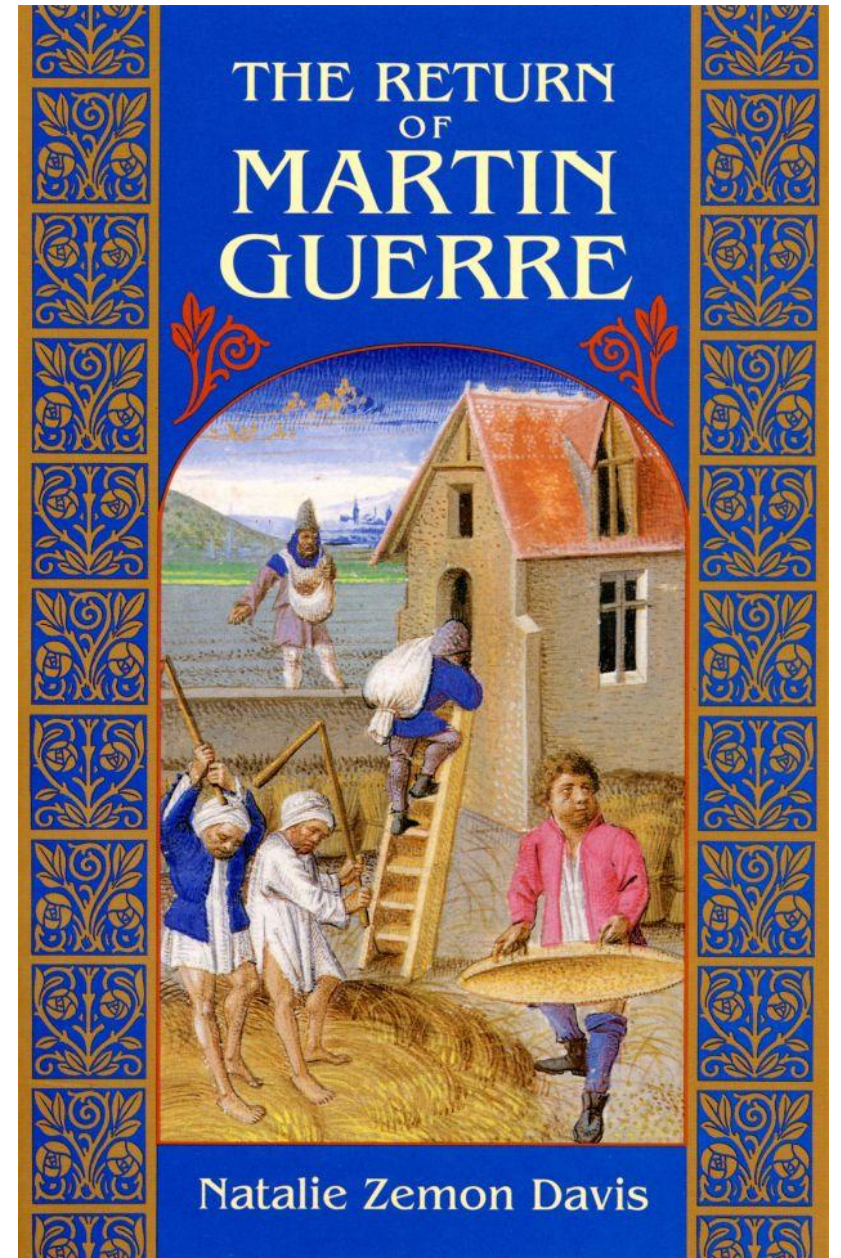
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What if
*The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) was adapted to a popular videogame?

THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE (LE RETOUR DE MARTIN GUERRE) Daniel Vigne, 1982.

Zemon Davis was inspired to write the book by her work on the film.

It would probably look like this...

This game does not exist.

History has been slow to see video games as a valid medium.

The result: audiences play with history, but historians rarely shape how it's represented.

# What if Natalie Zemon Davis was (also) a game creator?

Natalie Z. Davis (1928–2023)



For games to **do history**, historians must go beyond consulting on accuracy.

They should co-create systems that model historical work—not just visual realism.

# How might video games present original historical work?

- **Adaptation: transforming a thesis into a playable prototype.** The game itself functions as a medium of historical argumentation Chapman (2016, pp. 4–5), or as a creative endeavor pursued alongside one's scholarly work.

- **Exploration: The game functions as an experimental space** where historians can observe, manipulate, and reflect on historical processes: From citizen-science or participatory games (René Glas et al. 2019), to computational simulations that generate data (McCall 2008; Schmitz, Vogl, Kaye, & Schlattmann 2024).

- **Dissemination:** embedding games within classrooms, museums, or heritage initiatives, where historians collaborate as co-creators to translate research into public-facing interactive experiences (Champion 2021, Giannini & Bowen 2019, Liarokapis et al. 2025).

- **Practice-based research:** drawing on methods from art and design (Bolt 2007, Candy & Edmonds 2018) to frame games as valid scholarly inquiry and hybrid research outputs. **Here, the act of creation itself produces critical reflection**—advancing both (historical) game studies and the historian's own field through argumentation embodied in design (Society for Artistic Research n.d.).

# Adaptations

How can adaptations be realized in practice? Very few games attempt this.

Indie projects that engage directly with historical research—**"scholarly games."**



*Outbreak* (2009) simulates the 1885 Montreal smallpox outbreak and was co-created by a historian with a focus on **historical accuracy**.

*Astrologaster* (2019), based on the casebooks of early modern physician Simon Forman, was developed with guidance from a **research team**.

*Pentiment* (2022), designed by Josh Sawyer, explores **Reformation-era tensions** through the story of a fictional Bavarian town.

SeaLiT (2022), by historian Apostolos Delis, lets players take the role of a shipowner during the sail-to-steam transition, based directly on his EU-funded research.

Does it reflect Delis's interpretation of 19th-century shipping?

Does its logic align with the **epistemology of contemporary shipowners**?
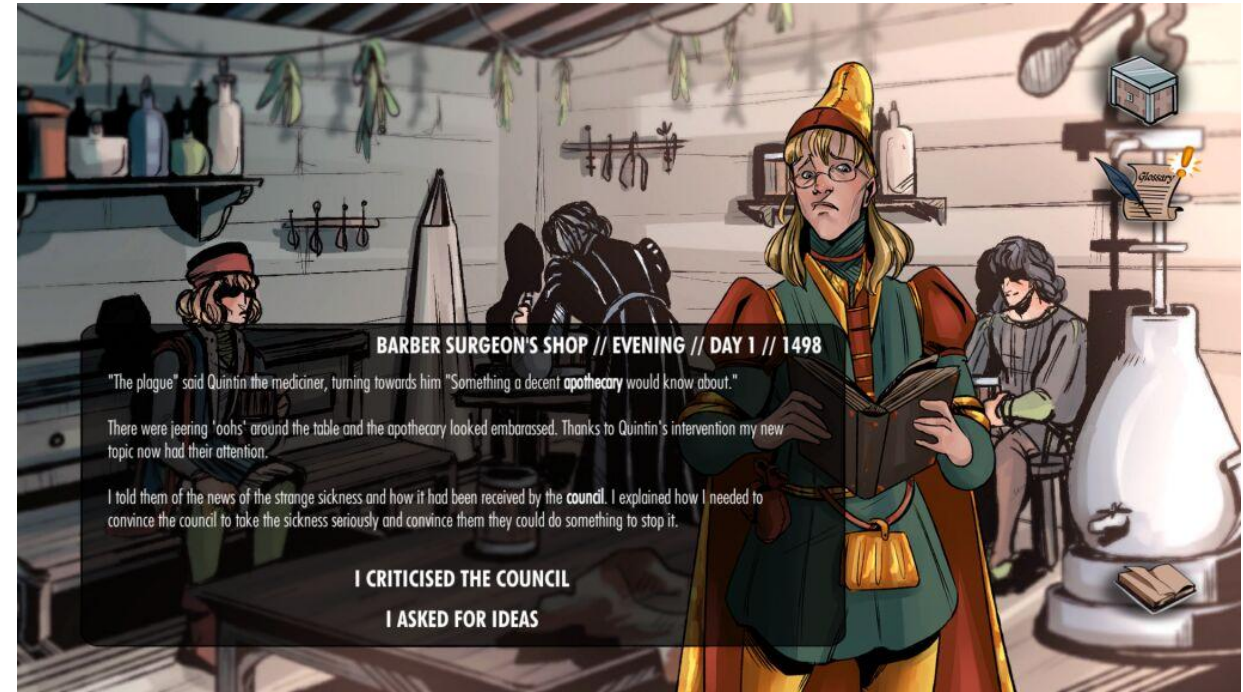
*Strange Sickness* (2022) is one of the few games by historians that draws on archival research—in this case, medieval Aberdeen burgh records—and involves players in the **epistemology of history**.

The lead historian-developer wanted players to experience the **research process** as part of gameplay.

This makes it a clear example of a **"historiographical videogame"**—explicitly engaging with historical accuracy and interpretation.

# The adaptation of a thesis in history into a game system

## Definitions:

- Historiography = *writing history*
- History = *the result of that writing*
- Games that show past settings without interpretation stay **illustrative**, not **analytical**.

## Research Questions:

- How can design processes be adapted to meet historiographical standards?
- What would it mean for historians to treat games as vehicles for "writing" history?
- Should there be a framework for integrating historical inquiry into game design?

# A heuristic tool to bring historiography into dialogue with videogame design

**First axis:** History's tension between micro-focused studies and broader, pattern-seeking approaches.
**Second axis:** Game studies' debate—games as stories vs. games as simulations.

Axes run in parallel. They help organize thought, make comparisons, and spark analysis:

- Which games fit certain historiographical logics?

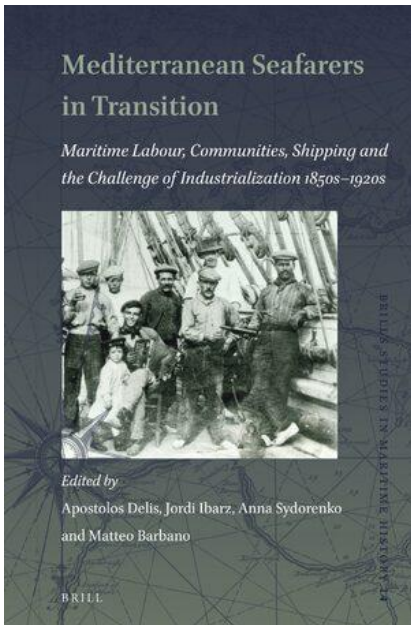- Which historical approaches align with specific game mechanics?
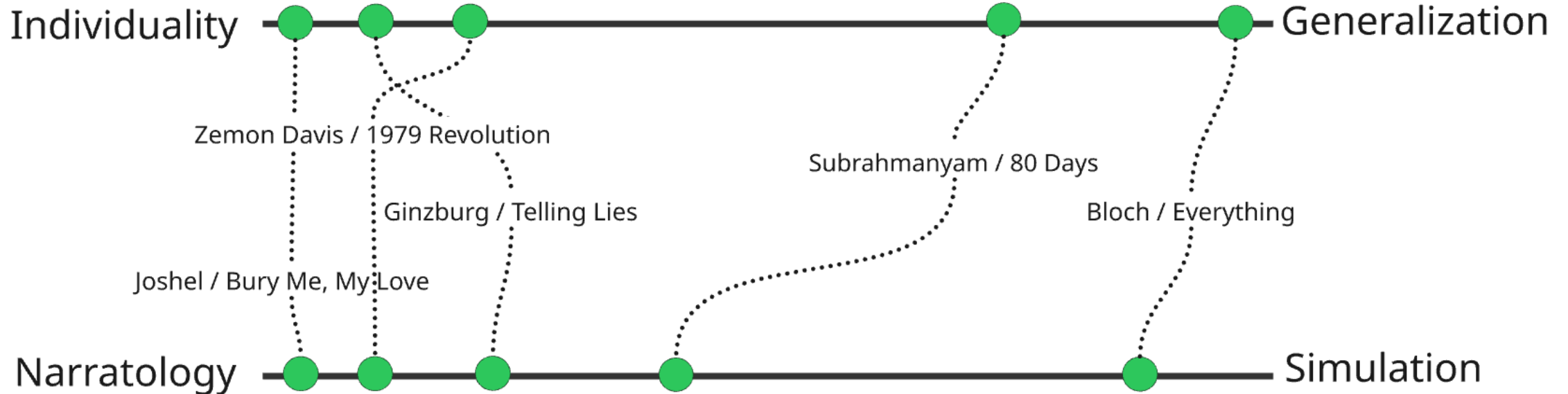
Individuality —————————————— ● Generalization



Narratology —————————————— ● Simulation



Apostolos Delis, Jordi Ibarz, Anna Sydorenko, and Matteo Barbano, *Mediterranean Seafarers in Transition. Maritime Labour, Communities, Shipping and the Challenge of Industrialization 1850s — 1920s,* Brill's Studies in Maritime History, volume 11, Brill, Leiden 2022
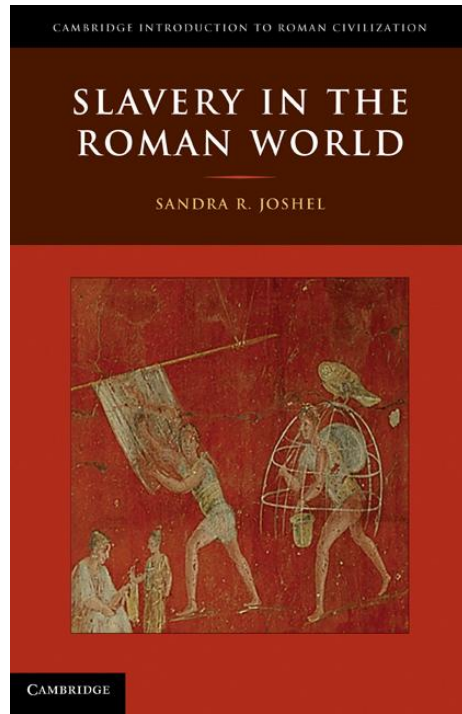
SLAVERY IN THE ROMAN
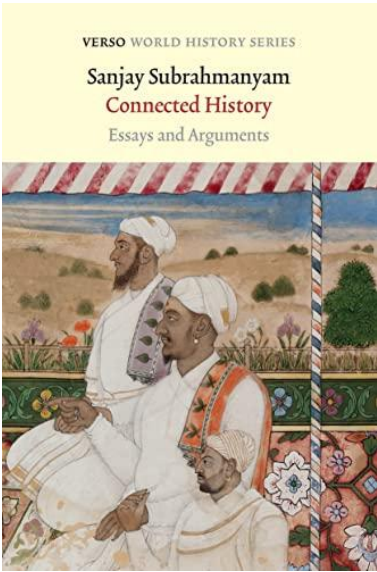WORLD Sandra R. Joshel, 2010

BURY ME, MY LOVE
The Pixel Hunt, 2017
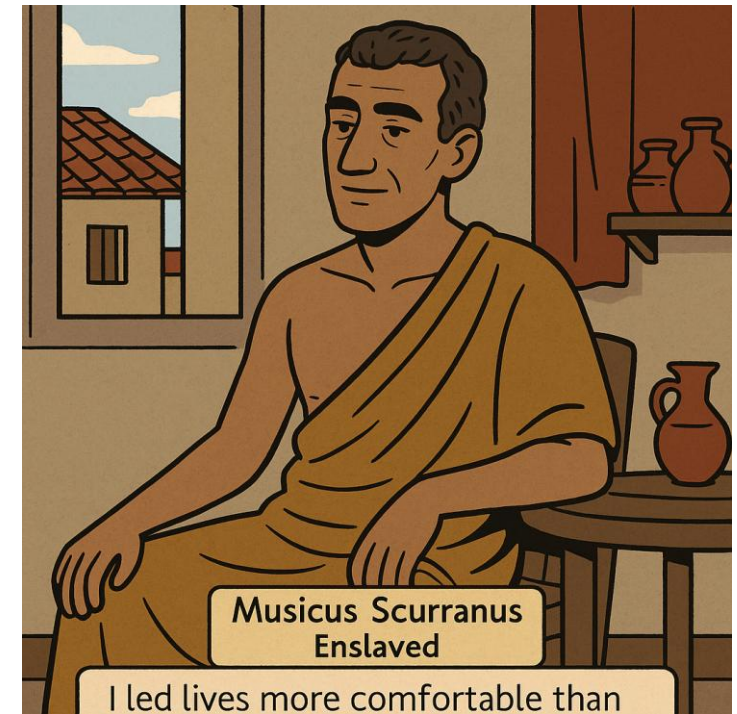
Fictional Visual Novel:
SLAVERY IN THE ROMAN WORLD
Joshel, TBA

My paper applies this framework through hypothetical pairings of classic historical studies and popular videogames.
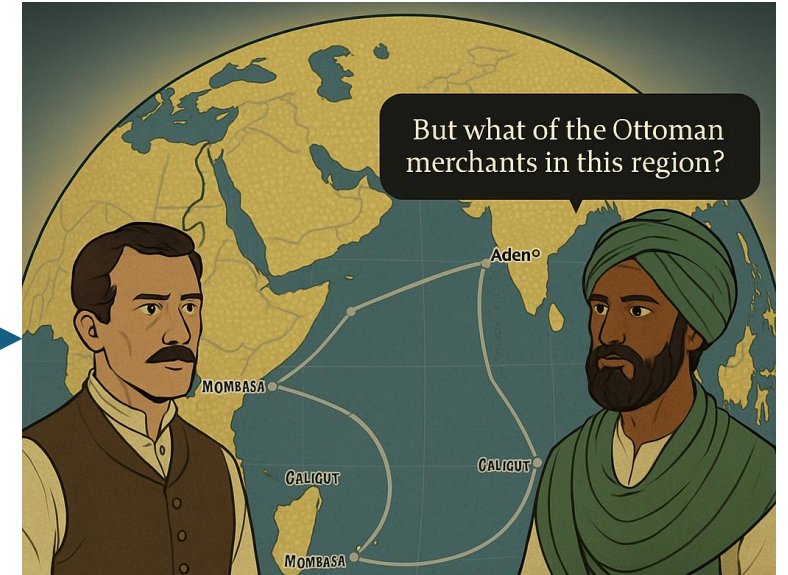
The goal isn't a one-to-one translation, but to explore **if and how games can engage with similar interpretive questions**.

CONNECTED HISTORY... Sanjay
Subrahmanyam, 2022

80 DAYS Inkle, 2014

Fictional Game: CONNECTED HISTORY,
Subrahmanyam, TBA

For Historiography - I used historians' reflections in their works and published reviews.

For Game Systems - I used game creators' interviews and reviews (written or video), showing player and audience perspectives.
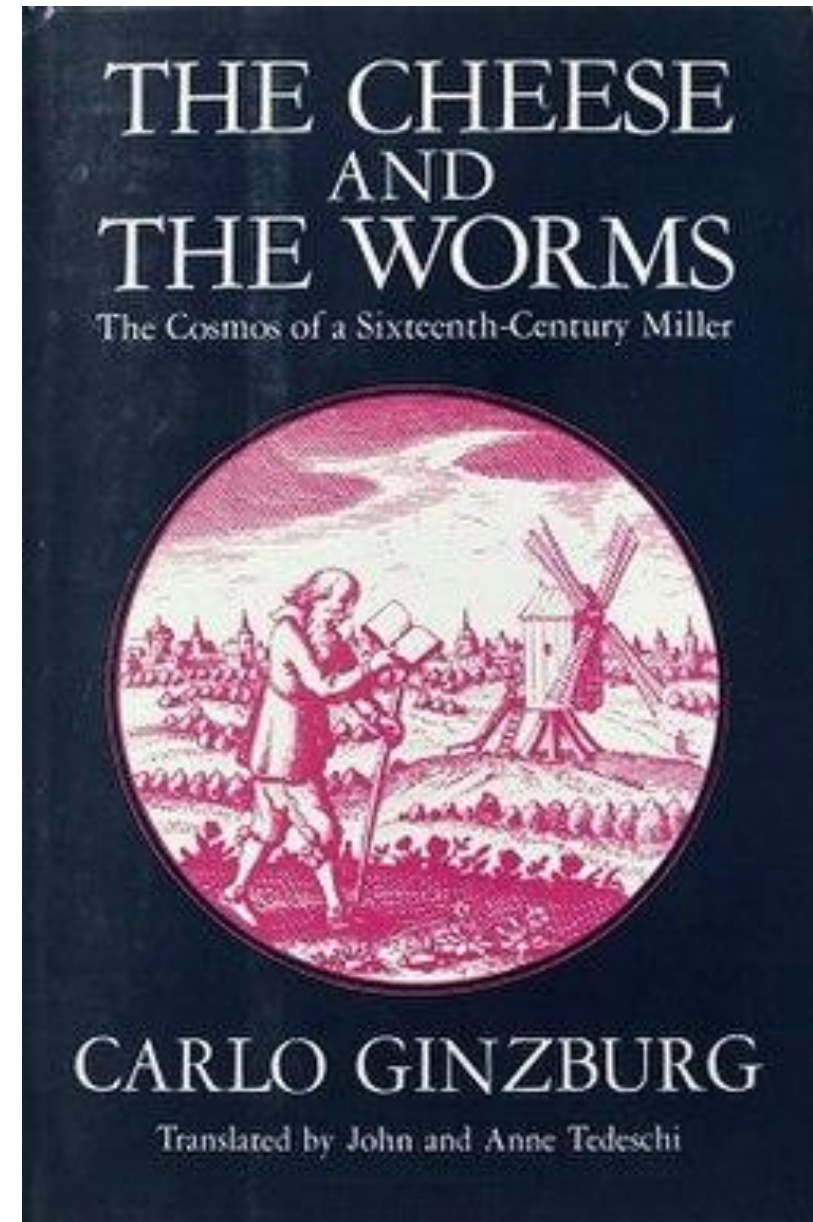
I used key historiographical dimensions: perspectives; causality, continuity, and change; sources and significance; contestability.

HER STORY Sam Barlow, 2015.

TELLING LIES Sam Barlow, 2017.

THE CHEESE AND THE WORMS
The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller

CARLO GINZBURG

Translated by John and Anne Tedeschi

HER STORY Sam Barlow, 2015.

trailer

**Her Story** sits you in front of a desktop computer that's logged into a police database of video footage. The footage covers seven interviews from 1994 in which a British woman is interviewed about her missing husband. Explore the database by typing search terms, watch the clips where she speaks those words and piece together her story.
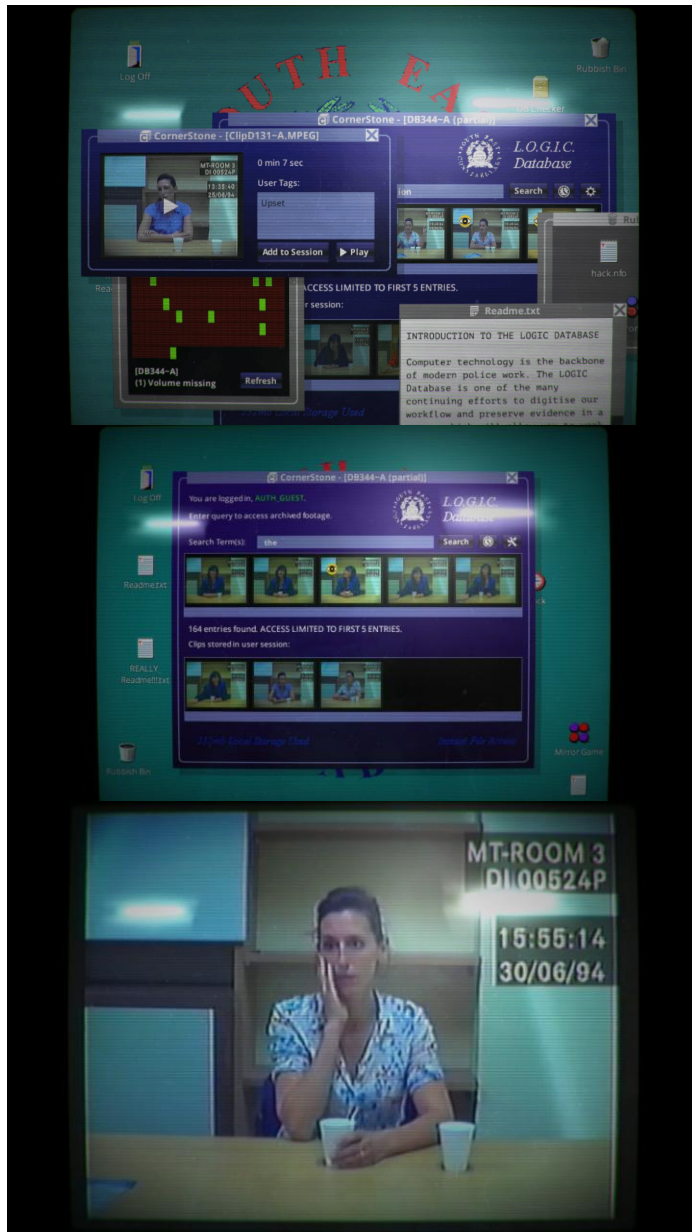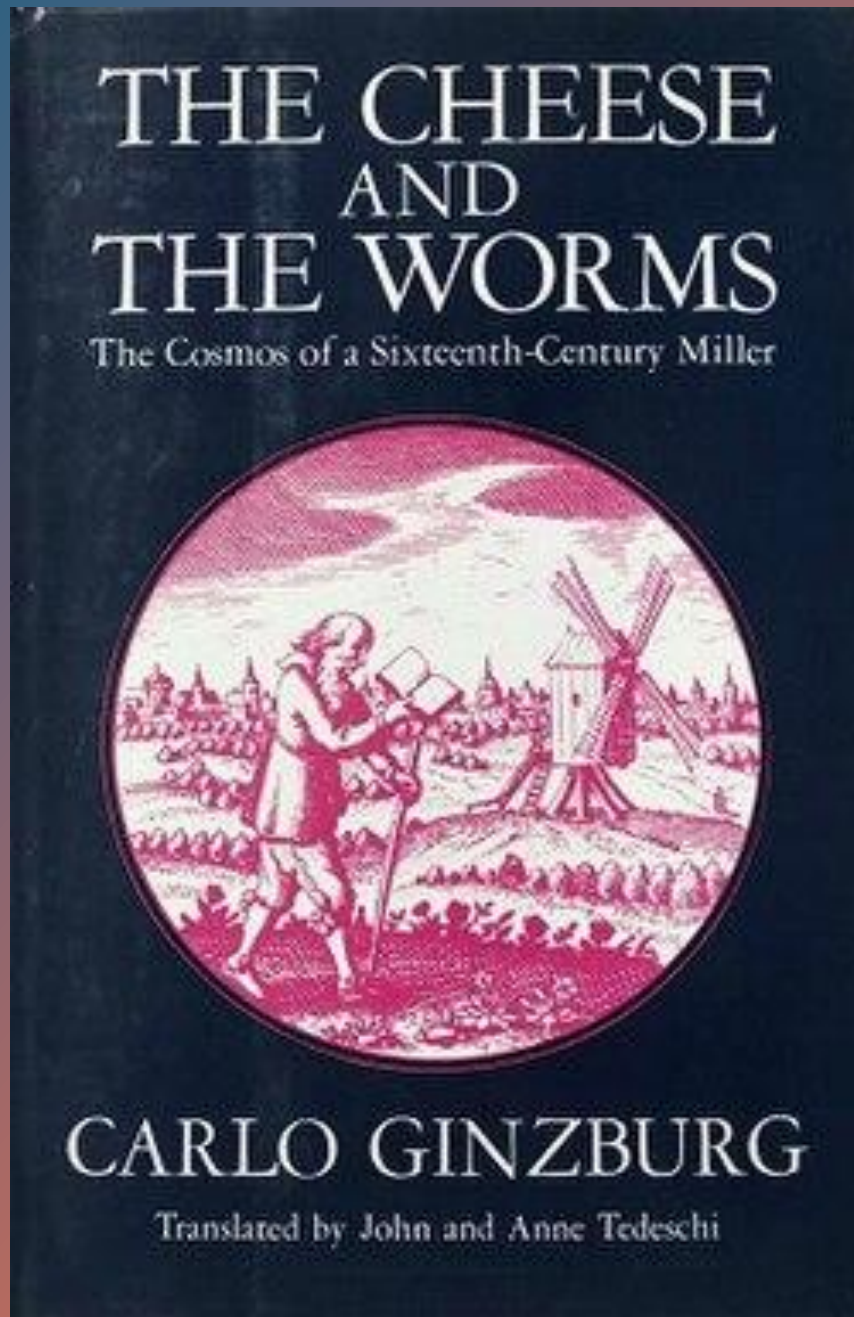
Her Story (Sam Barlow, 2015)

Sam Barlow's interactive films simulate the work of sorting through fragmented data—texts, images, videos—pushing players to infer, cross-reference, and piece together events or identities.

These structures highlight the **subjectivity of sources**—how evidence is shaped by viewpoint and context.

Adapting these models to history pushes us to ask: *Who made this? Under what conditions? What might be missing?*

It sharpens our sense of provenance, intent, and genre—while reminding us that archives often resist clear or final answers.

THE CHEESE AND THE WORMS
The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller

CARLO GINZBURG

Translated by John and Anne Tedeschi

Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980) reconstructs the worldview of Menocchio, a 16th-century miller, from two inquisitorial trials (1584, 1599).

His voice reaches us only through interrogators' notes and transcribed testimonies. This raises problems of evidence—and the deeper challenge of interpretation.
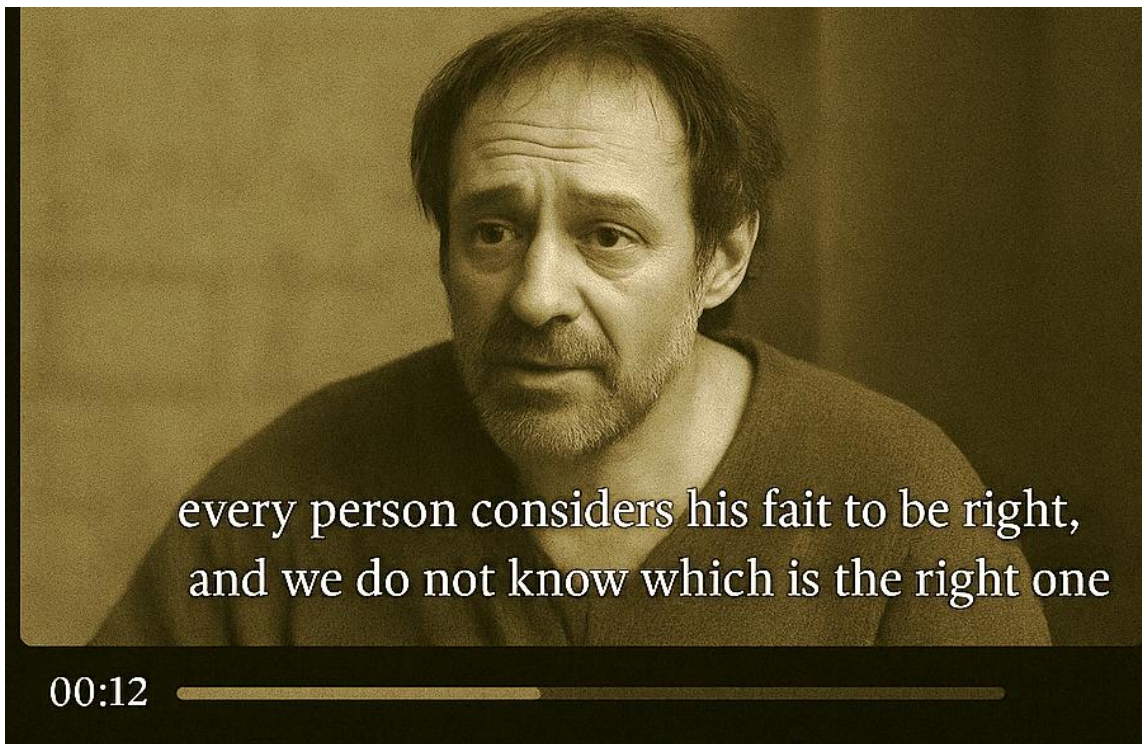
Fictional Game THE CHEESE AND THE WORMS Carlo Ginzburg, TBA.
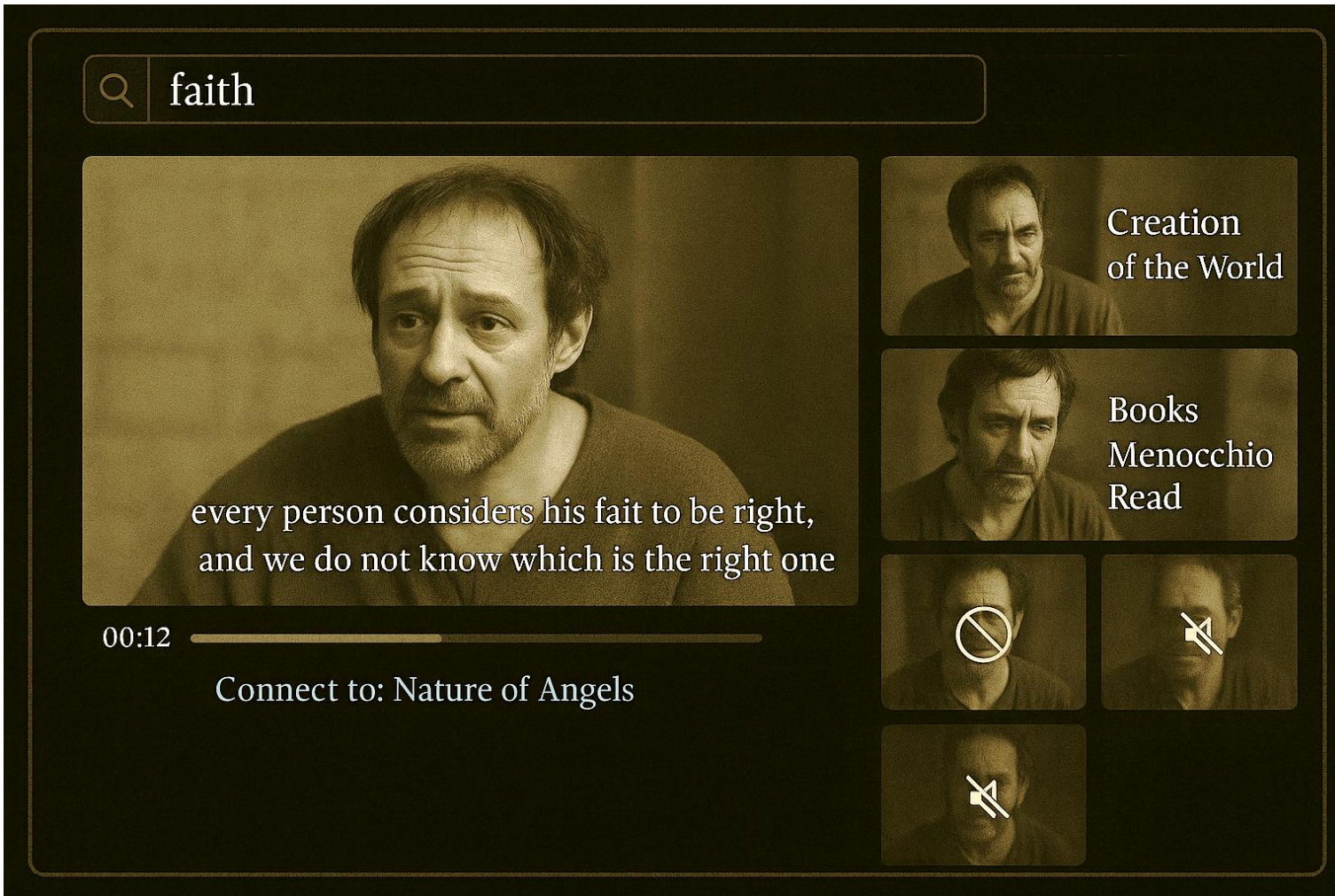
A game based on *The Cheese and the Worms* would need to work on two levels:

As a **primary source**—a narrative built from inquisitorial records.

As a **secondary source**—an interpretation that places one life within wider social currents.

"every person considers his faith to be right, and we do not know which is the right one" [p. 106],

"All was chaos, that is earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and of that bulk a mass formed—just as cheese is made out of milk—and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels." [p. 2]

"I have discussed things with so many people that now I cannot remember who they were" [p. 111],

One design solution is to limit access to documents—so players must read against the grain and reconstruct Menocchio's beliefs from partial records.

Mechanics like *Her Story* (2015)—

where only one side of a conversation appears—could simulate archival asymmetry.

The player's task: piece fragments into a coherent story, mirroring the historian's process.
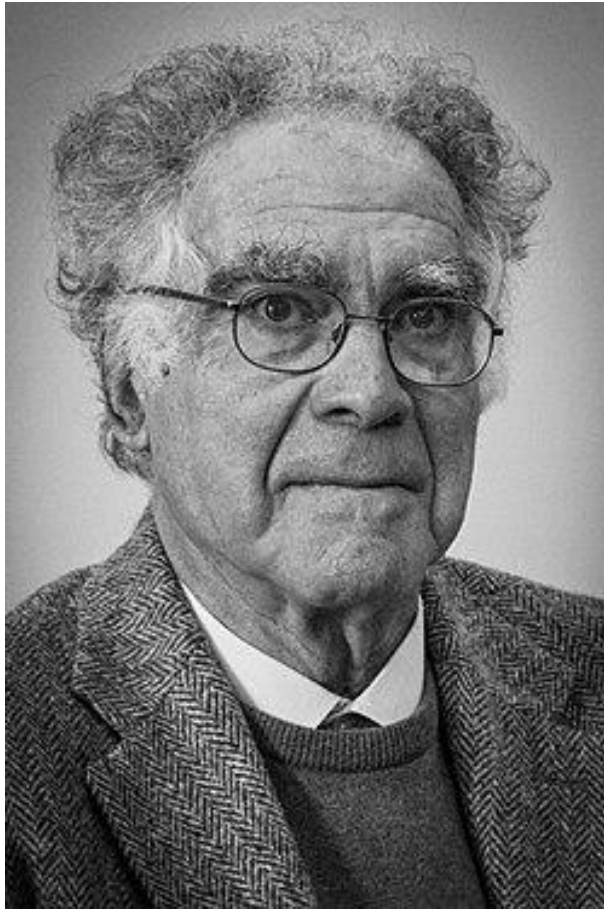
Carlo Ginzburg (1939 - )

The second challenge is tougher: **generalizability** in Ginzburg's method.

Menocchio's story is a window into bigger debates on popular culture—what Ginzburg calls an "autonomous current of peasant radicalism."

He shows how oral traditions, print, and local beliefs shaped this. Printing gave Menocchio the words to challenge what he knew.

And the Reformation gave him the confidence to voice those ideas—to his priest, his neighbors, and finally the Inquisition.
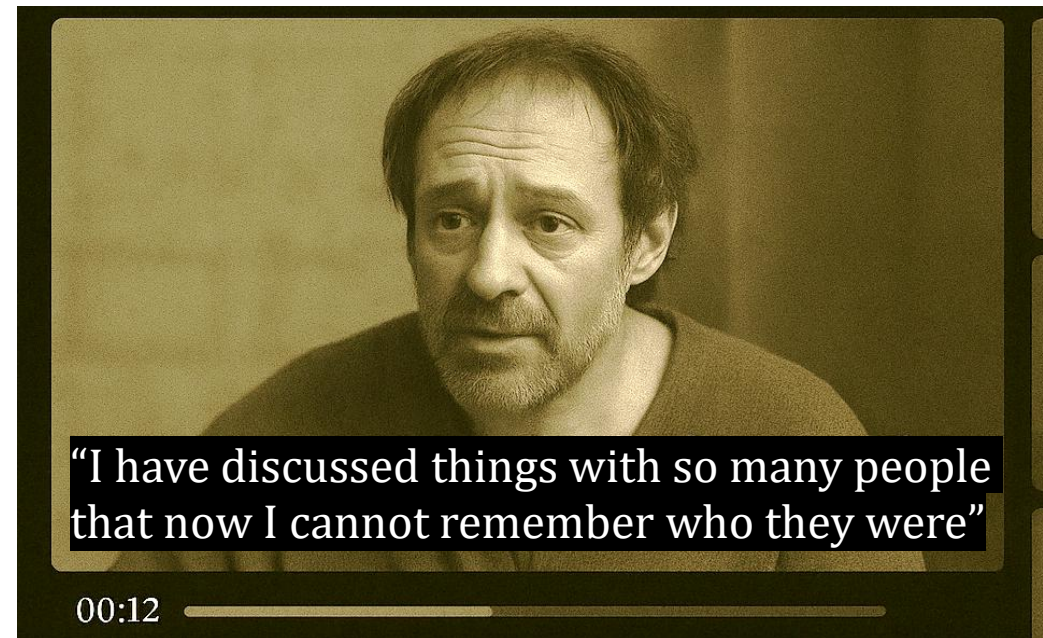
Barlow's games dramatize how evidence is reconstructed.

But they would struggle to capture the wider analytical frame of Ginzburg's microhistory.

Popular consciousness in pre-industrial Europe is hard to turn into gameplay without becoming didactic.

So while a game can simulate inference and archival gaps, it risks losing the historiographical context around Menocchio's testimony.

Individuality ●———————————— Generalization

Ginzburg / Telling Lies

Narratology ———————●———— Simulation
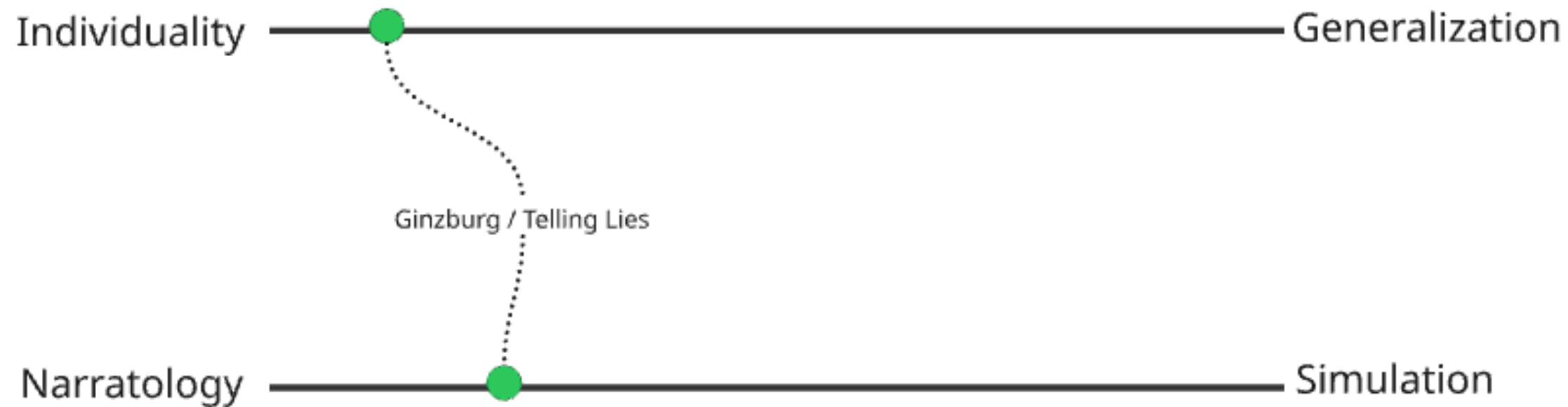
Historians can make their arguments **playable**—by creating games or using them in/as research—and to treat this work as part of both history and game studies.

This is not easy. Many still see games as trivial, most historians lack design skills, and not every argument works in game form. The risks include oversimplification or lack of recognition.

But these are not barriers. They invite us to ask: **when and how can history be best expressed as a game?**

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# Thank you

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ENGINEERING HISTORICAL MEMORY

VISUALISATION SOLUTIONS FOR DIGITAL HISTORY

- [Engineering Historical Memory (EHM)](#)
- open-access research tool for primary historical materials.

-
- open-access research tool for primary historical materials.

# A Ship's Voyage to Cyprus, 1567



Based on a 16th-century logbook, the navigation simulator allows players to explore the ship's performance, practice navigation with sixteenth-century tools, and situate their experience within the broader context of maritime geopolitics.

Data produced through gameplay offers a reconsideration of long-held assumptions about Mediterranean navigation techniques and sailing routes.