Anachronisms, Spaces of Possibility, and History in Digital Games

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Reinhart Koselleck never dealt with history in digital games. But might it not be possible to surmise what he would have said about it? If one follows Koselleck’s own words, indeed.

“What Schiller could have said in 1813, Kleist in 1830, Büchner in 1848 – we will never know. But what Kant would have said about these years, we may extrapolate [...].”

For regarding Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a sufficiently long life and a sufficiently extensive oeuvre stood at the ready to be analysed in order to derive the conditions of possible Kantian statements. Both are also true of Koselleck. So what would he have said about digital games as historical mise-en-scènes in which history can be rewritten? Would he have welcomed them as virtual spaces of possibility? Or would he have rejected them wholesale as anachronistic?

Koselleck and Anachronism

In the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, anachronism as a term describing historical phenomena situated in a temporal context in which they were not to be found in the respective historical situation is always present in the background, because the conceptual histories unfolded in the Grundbegriffe are supposed to serve above all to reveal and to separate the various temporal contexts in order to be able to avoid their remixing. However, anachronism is not explicitly mentioned, at least not as a separate lemma – “Adel” (“Nobility”) is followed by “Anarchie” (“Anarchy”).

Koselleck explicitly used “anachronism” as an accusation against the historian Franz Mehring to criticise his derivation of the (Prussian) revolution of 1848 from the Prussian defeat at Jena and Auerstädt: “Such a segmented and anachronistically supported foundation of tradition means, after all, constructing past bygone reality, perhaps even more than was the case with Treitschke. The question is whether such a wishful image, blanking out the history of success and foreshortening it historiographically, was at all suitable to be presented even for political–didactic reasons.” Koselleck qualified Heinrich von Treitschke’s (1834–1896) efforts in describing the same event in a very similar way: “While for Droysen potential history pointed to the future, Treitschke argues with a potential history of the past (as, incidentally, did the old Droysen). Thus ex post desirabilities are constantly
brought into play, guiding Treitschke’s judgements.” Koselleck criticised this recourse to the past against its own time-immanent objectives as anachronistic, without using the word; it was ideological rather than analytical. 

Anachronism and Digital Games

For half a century now, there has been an enormously successful form of processing and staging history which is necessarily anachronistic and with which historical scholarship has only really been concerned for a little more than ten years: Historically themed digital games. These popular culture history products are necessarily anachronistic (not only) for the trivial reason that highly modern technology is supposed to conjure up media illusions of the past. Rather, it is partly a matter of reproducing certain snippets of real history, reenacting the course of which is the goal of the game; in the interest of reducing complexity, this leads to constructing versions of history just as truncated and ideologically charged as those Koselleck criticised in Mehring and Treitschke. Mostly, however, they offer representations of history that clearly deviate from real history, either due to the interaction between players and the programme, or in order to be able to prepare a stage for the actions of the players.

So, would Koselleck reject history in digital games on principle? No. Because much more frequently than concerns about anachronism, Koselleck made certain statements about the nature of history: it contains recurring patterns that produce uniform but not identical repetitions of sequences of events. “The thought experiment thus aims at theoretically circumscribing all conceivable individual events of possible histories in such a way that they [...] are broken down temporally, as well as at finding the longer-lasting preconditions, precisely the structures of repetition, without which no events would come about.” However, due to the multiplicity and interconnectedness of possible causal factors – and, ultimately, due to human free will – there can be no strong determinism in the results thus produced. Even the history of the Third Reich does not strictly follow from Mein Kampf: “It could still have turned out differently.” History always leaves open spaces of possibility.

What digital games do when they model history corresponds precisely to this understanding of structural history: In the programme, such causal links between events are modelled, and “repetition structures” are built which through the individual and generally unpredictable actions of the players produce contingent events.
So, would Koselleck have applauded the historically themed digital game as a dynamic process model of the interaction of (programmed) structures and (free-will) individual agency? It is, again, not quite that simple. For he insisted on a difference “that must exist between narratives that report on what has actually occurred, or that report on what might have occurred, or pretend as if it had occurred, or that themselves dispense with any indication of reality.” The “compulsory alternative of fictional texts or historical reality,” however, is also inadequate.

**Digital spaces of possibility or anachronistic follies?**

So, would digital games under certain conditions be acceptable as fictional explorations of history? Yes, but only if they depict a realistic open future horizon of the past. Koselleck wrote approvingly of Johann Gustav Droysen’s (1808–1884) writings on Prussian reforms: “They were more than what they realised. They were a history in potential. A history not only postulated, but a possible history whose unfulfilledness called for realisation.” The only caveat was that Droysen's approach no longer corresponded to the contemporary standards of historical scholarship and needed to be critically reappraised.

So, what would Reinhart Koselleck now have said about digital games staging history? He would have seen them as legitimate products of the historical culture of their time, offering undreamed-of possibilities to bring his concept of structural history to life. However, since games themselves are not scientific, for Koselleck they would also require criticism by specialist historians to ensure that they depict realistic and not anachronistic spaces of possibility. Roughly extrapolated, at least.
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Tags: depiction of history / digital games / spaces of possibility

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