

Curated Expressions of Japanese History in *Hearts of Iron IV*

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Abstract

Hearts of Iron IV (Paradox Development Studio 2016) is a digital grand strategy game about the Second World War. Within the game, technology tree diagrams known as National Focus Trees (NFTs) provide sites of curated historical interpretation. The NFTs are a convergence point of system processes and text that present curated interpretations of Japanese history through a European scope. This paper contends that the Japanese NFT produces expressions of ‘authentic-lite rhetoric’: visible interpretations of history made by interactions between computational processes and text. Authentic-lite rhetoric offers an alternative approach for considering the presentation of history in digital strategy games. The paper explores how internal and international aspects of Japanese history are systemically and textually modelled through the nation’s NFT. Japanese domestic history is characterised by a rhetoric of military factionalism. The NFT ascribes computational significance to the failed young officers’ revolt on 26 February 1936. The event is positioned as an epoch-defining moment with causal links to subsequent events in Japanese history. In contrast, Japan’s international history during the decade is conceived as a series of territorial expansions into China. The game argues that Japan’s conflict with China was partly founded on promoting formal ideologies of Japanese racial supremacy and imperialism. The 1937 Sino-Japanese war is depicted as an opportunity to create a significant Japanese industrial base in Asia. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how *Hearts of Iron IV*’s NFTs present curated and inconsistent interpretations of Japanese history through expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric. This unique mode of historical rhetoric projects interesting reinterpretations of Japan during the mid-to-late 1930s.

Introduction

Hearts of Iron IV (Paradox Development Studios 2016) (*HoIV*) aspires to be an unfaltering “Authentic real-time war simulation” of the Second World War (Steam 2016). Yet, considering Japan’s complex history during the 1930s (Doeneck 1991; Dower 2000; Johnston 2020), the game produces inconsistent representations and interesting reinterpretations. Curated expressions of Japanese history are visibly disseminated to the player through both the computational processes and text of *HoIV*’s National Focus Trees (NFTs). The Japanese NFT is a mechanical system of historical progression created through the lens of post-war western narratives. It represents a faultline between textual interpretation and designed computation where curated expressions of the nation’s history are emitted.

This contribution explores reinterpretations of history made by *HoIV* through the Japanese NFT; a technology

tree simulating historical change from 1936 to 1948. By investigating how the NFT models Japanese history, the paper demonstrates the significance of ‘authentic-lite rhetoric’. This novel term is appropriated from the hitherto disparate scholarship of Chris Kempshall (2015) and Ian Bogost (2007). It describes visible historical and ahistorical interpretations made by the interaction between the computational and textual elements of a digital game. Through authentic-lite rhetoric, the paper determines how the Japanese NFT propagates an interesting and inconsistent historical reinterpretation of the nation across the mid-to-late 1930s.

The first section of the paper contextualises *HoIV*, the NFTs, and defines authentic-lite rhetoric. The second section considers how factionalism within the Imperial Japanese Army is modelled in the NFT. Through textual and computational curation, the game places historical significance on the failed 26 February 1936 young officers’ revolt. This domestic event is characterised as Japan’s first decisive step towards a global conflict. Following this



discussion, the paper will explore how the NFT reinterprets Japanese military expansion into China. The game conveys Japan as an exporter of imperial and racial ideologies across Asia. War against China is also cast as an opportunity to secure materials and resources for Japanese military expansion. This paper offers an alternative approach for understanding visible interpretations of Japanese history in digital strategy games by considering the complex rhetorical relationship between computational systems and text.

***HoIIV* in Context**

HoIIV is a digital grand strategy game released to PC systems on 6 June 2016. The player's objective within the game is to manage the affairs of a nation throughout the Second World War. Adopting a global perspective with a top-down view over the world, the player can govern any existing nation, coordinating their economic, military, and political resources to control areas of a map interface (Goodfellow 2008; Hailes 2019). The title is published by Swedish videogame company Paradox Interactive and is developed by Paradox Development Studios (PDS), a subsidiary team of the publisher. From the twenty-first century, PDS have produced historical digital grand strategy games such as the *Crusader Kings*, *Europa Universalis* and *Victoria* series (Baker 2016; McCarthy 2019).

HoIIV is a distinct example of digital grand strategy. Contemporarily, digital strategy games are understood as titles with a top-down visual perspective and consist of building and managing units (Dor 2018). Early digital Japanese titles such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Koei 1985), are potent demonstrations of the grand strategy genre. Within the game, the player adopts a top-down view of China and is tasked with recruiting and controlling armies in order to reunite the country (Kwon 2013, 124). This common objective of conquering and controlling territory is shared by *HoIIV*, although the game provides expanded player agency through additional diplomatic, economic, and political actions (Plunket 2016; Hall 2016).

Adam Chapman (2016, 15) argues that the creators of historical videogames are “developer-historians”. This term emphasises programming historical data into digital games to produce meaning (Chapman 2013, 319). As an evolution of this concept, the paper understands developer-historians as ‘developer-curators’. History in *HoIIV* is

selected, organised, and publicly displayed by PDS. Japanese history is manifested through how the developer-curators balance their understandings of the past and their understandings of game development and audience expectation. Developer-curators manage and reinterpret history to fit into computational and textual structures and to entertain audiences.

Consequently, the historical interpretations that emerge through *HoIIV* are situated within accessible western histories designed for mass audiences (De Groot 2016, 13-15; Williams 2019). These perspectives view the epoch through an overwhelmingly European scope (Kershaw 2015; 2016; McDonough 2011; Overy 1988; 1995; Taylor 1964). Consequently, PDS curate the historical interpretations of *HoIIV* through a euro-centric focus. This perspective is partly born through the geographical circumstances of the company and its primary audience in western markets (Ljungerud & Bricca 2020). It is valuable to determine how Japanese history is interpreted within a title that is skewed towards European experiences of the period surrounding the Second World War.

Introducing the NFTs

There are multiple portrayals of the Second World War in videogames (Chapman 2016a; Kempshall 2019). However, Japan's involvement in the conflict has been the subject of few popular titles. Rachael Hutchinson (2019, 189) argues that from a Japanese perspective, games about the war hold little appeal. This is due to the conflict's outcome and its controversial standing within Japanese society (ibid). Examples of popular videogames depicting Japan during the Second World War include *Battlefield 1943* (EA DICE 2009), *Call of Duty: World at War* (Treyarch 2008), and *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (EA Los Angeles 2003). These are “realist simulations” that convey history through visual fidelity (Chapman 2016, 61). They are also interpretations cast from a predominantly American perspective that remediate imagery from western cinema (ibid; Bolter and Grusin 2000; Linderth 2015).

Digital strategy games convey history through different means, representing the past through systems, data, and statistics. As Chapman (2016, 59 and 70) persuasively states, they are “conceptual simulations” that “enable us to understand and participate in their argument about the past” by abstracting history into dynamic systems and processes. This formal perspective allows historical

game scholarship to shift away from determining the authenticity of a videogame’s visual reflection of history, and instead focus on the unique arguments made by a game’s computational and textual frameworks (ibid, 30-55).

This paper identifies *HoIIV* as a conceptual simulation that significantly abstracts history through its NFTs; a unique form of technology tree system that charts historical progression. The NFTs are distinct to traditional forms of technology trees as systems of technological representation (Apperley 2013, 187; Uricchio 2005, 328). The NFTs chart the course of the epoch, beginning on 1 January 1936, through a branching chain diagram. Repurposing a phrase from Eric Hobsbawm (1995, 3), the NFTs are a digital game model that “understand and explain why things turn out the way they did, and how they hang together”.

Figure 1 illustrates how the NFT system is visually conceived. This specific portion of the Japanese NFT is labelled by the game’s online wiki – a resource maintained directly by PDS – as the “historical branch” (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). This is a decisive rhetorical claim that positions the NFT as an authentic mechanical system which encapsulates a network of accepted historical events.

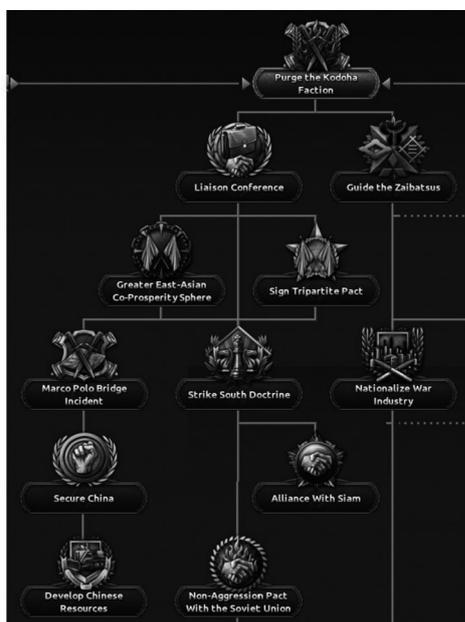


Figure 1: A visual depiction of the historical branch of Japan’s NFT.

At its core, the NFT is a functional mechanic that improves a player’s economic, military, and political position within the game. Progression through the NFT is made by enacting individual historical events, known as national focuses. Completing these events provides numerical and material bonuses, such as an increase in

material resources. Every nation has access to a version of the NFT. However, not all nations possess a bespoke structure. Upon the game’s release, seven nations were given distinct NFTs: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and United States (ReAn 2020). Excluding Japan and the United States, this collection of nations emphasises *HoIIV*’s euro-centric perspective. This is a significant curatorial expression of the primacy of European nations during the Second World War.

Japan’s NFT has changed considerably since the game’s release. As James Newman (2012) argues, videogames are unstable and evolving entities. Multiple versions of *HoIIV* exist; across four years, five significant DLC expansions have been released. These expansions fundamentally change historical interpretations within Japan’s NFT. This paper examines the Japanese NFT from version 1.5 of the game, released on 8 March 2018 (Dauth 2018). This version coincides with the release of the *Waking the Tiger* expansion pack, a release that revised the game’s historical representations of China and Japan, expanding upon “Japan’s imperial ambitions” (Steam 2018). This public statement implies that version 1.5 of *HoIIV* substantively improves the game’s depiction of Japanese history.

Identifying Authentic-Lite Rhetoric in *HoIIV*

Authentic-lite rhetoric is a novel expression of historical rhetoric formed by merging two theories from Kempshall (2015) and Bogost (2007; 2008). Within historical game studies, Kempshall’s (2015, 7) concept of “authenticity lite” suggests that the production of historical representation in videogames is innately limited. The creation of a historical digital game is predicated on compromises between implementing historical knowledge and assembling an entertainment product (ibid, 7-8). Kempshall states that “Neither computer game designers, nor indeed, those who want to play them want authenticity from historical games. They want *authenticity lite*” (ibid). This perspective acknowledges the practicalities of commercial videogame production, understanding that the constraints of digital game development will ultimately produce interesting reinterpretations of history rather than authentic representations.

Bogost’s (2007, 3) theory of “procedural rhetoric” is also integral to authentic-lite rhetoric. The term describes “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions” (ibid, ix). Procedural rhetoric is

disseminated through the computational systems of digital games and attempts to form a persuasive message to the player (ibid, 3). For instance, Nintendo's animal village simulator *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (Nintendo EAD 2005) conveys a capitalist rules system where the player takes on monetary loans to pay for virtual home renovations (Bogost 2008, 117-119). Bogost argues that, through interactions with a designed game system, the player sees tangible benefits of conforming to an anthropomorphic capitalist system, such as increases to the size of their home (ibid, 118).

The disparate ideas of Kempshall (2015) and Bogost (2007) alone cannot account for curated expressions of history within digital strategy games. Instead, the amalgamate notion of authentic-lite rhetoric identifies the multiplicities of historical representation within titles such as *HoIIV*. Authentic-lite rhetoric is a composite form of historical rhetoric defined as the historical or ahistorical expressions produced through a combination or collision between a game's textual and computational components. This definition presents a duality of perspective. It accounts for the limitations of historical representations in digital games as essentially partial and composed by developer-curators. The definition also understands the game's dissemination of historical interpretation as a product of designed computational processes and systems, and selected text.

In *HoIIV*, authentic-lite rhetoric is conveyed through how European perspectives on Japanese history are enshrined in the textual and computational elements of the NFT. The NFTs are a convergence point where diverse expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric are most visible to the player. There is tension within these expressions as the NFTs perform complementing and competing operations. By rhetorical design, the NFTs are historical roadmaps illustrating the progression of the Second World War. Simultaneously, they are a game mechanic; a series of computational processes that exist to artificially improve the player's statistics. These divergent procedures exist within one game mechanic and produce curated interpretations of Japanese history.

Across *HoIIV*'s broader simulation, expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric demonstrate a promotion of European historical interpretations and a relegation of Japanese and Asian readings of the Second World War. The game's limitations of historical interpretation are made clear upon starting a campaign. On the title screen, the player is shown a top-down view of the world map over

Europe (quill18 2019). This perspective is fixed and does not change even if the player decides to proceed into a campaign as Japan. Furthermore, depending on the player's decision, Japanese history in *HoIIV* either begins on 1 January 1936 or 14 August 1939. These are the game's only campaign starting dates; the dynamic and complex histories of all nations across the epoch are funnelled into two narrow timeframes.

The two starting dates align with how western histories understand the outbreak of conflict, such as the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland on 7 March 1936 (Adamthwaite 2011; McDonough 2011). The game's secondary starting point, shortly preceding the German invasion of Poland, reinforces a Western interpretation that the Second World War has a precise starting point of 1 September 1939 (Carrard 2008, 65). These two start dates reinforce the significance of European nations to the conflict and the epoch. Through both system processes and visuals associated with starting a campaign in *HoIIV*, authentic-lite rhetoric sets Japan's involvement in the Second World War as ancillary to the participation of European nations.

For Asian perspectives of the conflict, the two starting dates demonstrate the game's significant limitation of historical representation. Japan's complex domestic and international history is condensed into a reduced scope that does not reflect significant moments in Japanese history across the decade. Most starkly, *HoIIV*'s two start dates bypass the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria (Barnhart, 1996; Iriye 1992, 1). Japan's intervention in China is considered a defining geopolitical event within discourses on the origins of the Second World War in Asia (ibid). As a consequence of this historical limitation, the NFTs do not model Japan's long-term history before 1936. From the outset of a campaign, partial historical interpretations are disseminated to the player by the contours of a curated game system. *HoIIV*'s set timeframes produce an interpretation of Japanese history that is dominated by European perspectives. This reflection of authentic-lite rhetoric presents *HoIIV* as a reductive simulation of a European-led conflict.

Japanese Domestic History in *HoIIV*: Purging the Kodoha

From 1936, Japanese history is curated through its NFT in *HoIIV*. There are seven chained branches within the Japanese NFT modelling economic, industrial, and political

phenomena. For example, two branches model alternative-history possibilities that turn Japan towards Communist or Democratic governments. The historical branch of the NFT (Figure 1) is formally named the ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction Branch’, and the first focus of the branch is titled ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction’ (AkatsukiEmpire, 2019). The nomenclature of the historical branch places importance on the individual focus and characterises Japan’s historical trajectory as contingent upon this event occurring.

The ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction’ focus represents a significant event in Japanese domestic and military history: the 26 February 1936 failed coup by young officers associated to the Kodoha faction. Also known as the Imperial Way Faction, the Kodoha were an influential bloc within the Imperial Japanese Army (Sims 2001, 193). The faction agitated for a return to traditional Japanese Bushido values predating the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and viewed war with the Soviet Union as the nation’s primary concern in order to eradicate Communism (Crosier 1997, 200; Iriye 1992, 32). The Kodoha were a dominant force within the Imperial Japanese Army between 1932 and 1936 (Hata 2007, 8; Palasz-Rutkowska 1990, 64).

Yet, in-game text conveys a reductive historical perspective of the Kodoha. By accessing the ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction’ focus, the player is shown an accompanying pop-up textbox which contextualises the event. The description states: “A new faction has appeared intent to take control of the government and strike north into the Soviet Union.” (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). This text identifies the Imperial Way Faction as a new element within the Japanese military. There is no further historical context given to the player about the faction.

Contrary to *HoIV*’s textual claim, the Kodoha were not novel. Factionalism was rife within the Imperial Japanese Army throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Drea 2003, 76). The Kodoha increased their activity from the early 1930s, expressing dissatisfaction against the terms of the 1930 London Naval Treaty and impending budget cuts to the army (Kingston 2016). During the decade, the Kodoha competed for influence and power against the Toseiha, also known as the Control Faction (Hata 2007, 8; Hoyt 2001, 118-119; Ives 2009, 229). In contrast to the Kodoha’s ambitions for war against Communism, the Toseiha were preparing for a global conflict (Iriye 1992, 32). This war would see the total economic, industrial, and political mobilization of Japan (Burama 2004, 98; Samuels 2007, 27). The Toseiha anticipated a conflict against Great Britain, the Netherlands, the United States, and the Soviet Union

(ibid). These accounts illustrate that factionalism was a significant aspect of the Imperial Japanese Army. In contrast, the game’s description for the ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction’ focus reflects an ahistorical view of the Kodoha as a new phenomenon. This limited textual perspective is partly formed by *HoIV*’s computational constraints of only simulating historical progression from 1936 onwards.

The NFTs more convincingly model the Japanese military’s internal divide through computation. At the top of the NFT, the player is given the decision to pursue the historical focus ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction’, or ahistorical focus ‘Side with the Kodoha Faction’ (Figure 2). In contrast to the sparse description of the ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction’ focus, the visual presentation of two distinct options on the NFT suggests that the Imperial Japanese Army was already divided by factionalism before 1936. These competing focuses produce a strong expression of authentic-lite rhetoric. Through ensuring that the player has to choose between the two factions, the computations of the NFT convey that the Japanese military was hamstrung by internal rivalries that needed to be resolved before an impending conflict.

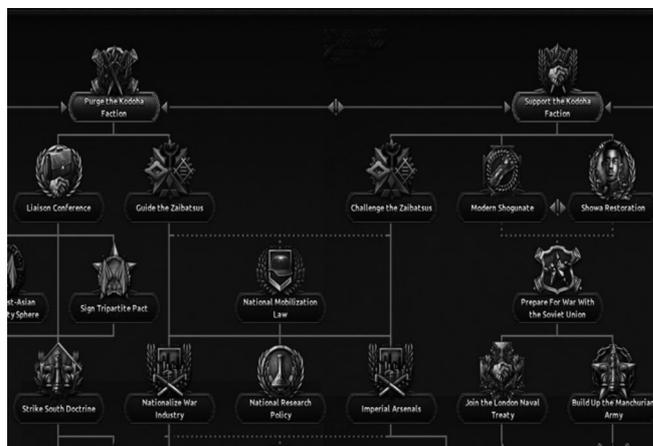


Figure 2: The link between the historical and alternate-history branches on Japan’s NFT.

The structural position of the 26 February revolt on the Japanese NFT is a dominant computational expression of its historical significance (Figure 1). The event sits at the top of the historical branch as one of the first focuses available to the player and conveys a curated image of historical causality between landmark Japanese events during the 1930s. This is evident when considering the game’s 1939 start; upon beginning a campaign from this date the developer-curators present specific historical focuses as already completed, including the ‘Purge the

Kodoha Faction' focus. This presents an expression of authentic-lite rhetoric that the failure of the 26 February revolt, and the diminishing influence of the Kodoha, is a crucial historical event. By constructing a chain of historical events on the NFT, *HoIV* argues that the Kodoha's failure enables the later success of Japan's military expansion into China. For instance, the 'Purge the Kodoha Faction' focus is directly chained to subsequent national focuses that model Japanese military incursions into China. Through this construction, the NFT creates a visible causal link between domestic issues and Japan's external military ambitions in Asia; without purging the Imperial Japanese Army of factionalism, Japan could not successfully wage war against its international enemies.

Historian Ben-Ami Shillony (2015, ix) calls the 26 February officers' revolt the "most dramatic internal disturbance in twentieth century Japan". The revolt was conducted by over 1400 young officers (Iriye 1992, 33). The small force seized the centre of Tokyo, announcing they would not desist until a new cabinet sympathetic to the Kodoha was installed (Shillony 2015, ix). The officers called for a provisional government to be led by General Jinzaburo Masaki (ibid). During the revolt, three of Japan's prominent internationalist leaders were killed: former Prime Minister Makoto Saito, General Jotaro Watanabe and Finance Minister Korekiyo Takahashi (Hata 2007, 10; Kingston 2016; Smethurst 2007). After a declaration of martial law, the revolt was defeated on 29 February (Shillony 2015, ix). The revolt's leading officers were tried in secret and nineteen individuals were executed for mutiny (Kingston 2016).

In contrast to historical accounts, textual components within the Japanese NFT do not establish the Kodoha's abortive coup as a landmark event. The 'Purge the Kodoha Faction' focus does not contain any text describing the events of the revolt. This is a deliberate curation of Japanese history that determines the officer's revolt as insignificant. A small portion of descriptive text is bound into the ahistorical 'Side with the Kodoha Faction' focus (Dauth 2019). Yet, the revolt is described as a purge of "corrupt officials" and "ideological threats" within the Japanese government (ibid). This opaque language presents authentic-lite rhetoric that reinforces the revolt as an insignificant domestic event. This description also reaffirms the predominantly European scope of the game. Through a curation of text, the developer-curators demonstrate a limited understanding of Japanese history by reducing the significance of the 26 February revolt; a

position contrary to historical scholarship. The exclusion of sufficient textual context on the young officers' revolt diminishes its importance within *HoIV*'s conception of the origins of the Second World War in Japan.

While textual elements reduce the significance of the 26 February revolt, system processes associated with the 'Purge the Kodoha Faction' apply historical significance. For instance, by completing the focus, the player is given a constant 10% increase to national 'Stability', an in-game modifier that computationally represents the people's support for the government (Zauberelefant 2020). With a high Stability percentage, the nation receives increases to the production rate of military units (ibid). The 10% Stability increase from the 'Purge the Kodoha Faction' focus is a significant computational boost to Japan's ability to conduct war. Through the player following history and witnessing the failed 26 February revolt, the focus can be determined as a decisive expression of authentic-lite rhetoric. Computations within the Japanese NFT produce numerical outcomes, visible to the player, which position the removal of the Kodoha as greatly beneficial to the nation's future preparedness for war. These computations encapsulate *HoIV*'s inconsistency in historical interpretation. While textual elements relegate the revolt as a minor disturbance, computational processes suggest the event has wider implications for Japan's experience of the Second World War.

To further demonstrate how *HoIV* presents an inconsistent interpretation of internal Japanese history, it is also useful to explore how the simulation models the legacy of the Kodoha. The faction was founded in the late-1920s by General Sadao Araki (Sims 2001, 193). The military ideals of the Kodoha were centred upon a doctrine of traditional Bushido warrior code (Drea 2003, 107-108; Shillony 2015, 18-20). The game makes no attempt to illustrate Araki's impact upon Japanese military philosophy. However, he is included as a recruitable commander (Lillebror 2017). This suggests that, to some extent, the developer-curators understood Araki's historical significance to the Japanese military as a defeated figure. Supporting this claim, Araki's in-game statistics are poor; he is ranked as a level 2 General and does not possess any unique 'traits': statistics attributed to in-game military leaders that bestow statistical bonuses when deployed (ibid). Assigning numerical value to historical individuals is a potent manifestation of authentic-lite rhetoric. For instance, Tomoyuki Yamashita is modelled in *HoIV* as a level 5 General with four unique traits: Brilliant Strategist;

Politically Connected; Trickster; Engineer (ibid). His in-game representation as a high-ranking and talented military leader identifies Yamashita as a significant historical figure. This interpretation coincides with historical accounts of Yamashita as the “Tiger of Malaya”; the military strategist behind the conquering of Malaya and Singapore between 7 December 1941 and 15 February 1942 (DeHart 2013, 507; Shillony 2015, 19). In contrast, Araki has little visibility within the game. He does not possess any unique military traits, and there is no reference to his advocacy of returning Japan to traditional Bushido values (Drea 2003, 107-108). Through both computation and text, *HolIV* produces effective expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric that positions Araki as an insignificant military leader. This characterisation of Araki greatly differs from the game’s portrayal of Yamashita as a renowned leader of the Japanese armed forces.

Japanese International History in *HolIV*: War with China

Specific focuses on the historical branch of Japan’s NFT characterise the nation through “the aggressive conquest of China, Indochina, Indonesia and the Philippines” (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). This is a curated interpretation of Japanese history from western perspectives. For instance, John Dower (2000, 21) describes the nation as “the Great Empire of Japan – spread like a monstrous stain”. During the 1930s, Japan is primarily understood through acts of territorial expansion: “1931 saw the takeover of Manchuria; 1937, the launching of all-out aggression against China” (ibid). Alongside its representation of Japanese domestic history, the ‘Purge the Kodoha Faction Branch’ of the NFT is also a fixed narrative of Japanese history through territorial expansion and imperial empire building.

Within the curated construction of the NFT, the eradication of the Kodoha is connected to Japan’s war against China. However, this historical perspective is contested. Historians argue that Japan’s military endeavours were not contingent on the eradication of the Kodoha (Drea 2003, 107-108; Iriye 1992, 33). Instead, Japanese conflict against China was predominantly caused by economic, industrial, and imperial considerations (ibid). Between July 1937 and August 1945, Japan and China were at war (Mitter & Moore 2011, 226). On the historical branch of Japan’s NFT, the ‘Marco Polo Bridge Incident’ focus reflects the opening developments and escalation of

the 1937 Sino-Japanese War (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). From 7 July 1937, small skirmishes occurred between the nations across the Marco Polo Bridge, southwest of Peking – contemporary Beijing (Gordon 2006, 146). The fighting was initially considered to be a minor isolated affair (Lahiri 1947, 158). However, the clashes turned into a full, albeit undeclared, conflict (Iguchi 2011, 466). Japan conquered most of the China’s eastern seaboard and lower Yangtze valley between 1937 and 1938 (Barnhart 1996, 2; Gordon 2006, 146).

Significant expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric can be determined through how the NFT allows the player to access this event. In order for the player to proceed with the ‘Marco Polo Bridge Incident’ focus, a number of prerequisites must be met. For example, Japan must have first completed the ‘Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’ (GEACPS) focus (AkatsukiEmpire 2019) (Figure 1). This prerequisite presents a racial dimension in *HolIV*’s interpretation of Japan’s motivations to go to war. Historical scholarship argues that racial rhetoric was a core tenet of the GEACPS. A formal bloc of nations under the influence of Japan was an imperial concept based on the ideology of “the superiority of the ‘Yamato race’” (Dower 2000, 22; Koshiro 2001, 426).

However, the prerequisite requirement to access the ‘Marco Polo Bridge Incident’ focus produces an ahistorical interpretation that the GEACPS was in existence before 1937. While the loose notion of an imperial collective of Asian nations was proliferated during the 1930s, the concept of the GEACPS was formally invoked from 1940 (Iriye 1999, 6; McClain 2002, 470). This is a demonstration of how practical videogame development considerations and design constraints impact upon the notion of authentic-lite rhetoric. Through the NFT’s prerequisite requirements, the outbreak of the 1937 Sino-Japanese war is partly understood through a proliferation of imperialist, militarist and racial ideologies. The developer-curators view the GEACPS as a visible outcome of these ideologies. Consequently, historical information is reformatted and made ahistorical to fit this reinterpretation of history. Through this process, partial representations of the epoch are broadcast. These reinterpretations are ahistorical, thematically cohesive, and are pragmatically designed for entertainment purposes. By forcing the player to complete the ‘GEACPS’ focus on the NFT before modelling the Japanese war against China, an authentic portrayal of historical progression is discarded in favour of a designed curation of history. This is still an expression of authentic-

lite rhetoric; a curation of historical events through computational processes that reaffirms the NFT as a game mechanic that exists in order to provide the player an approach to statistically improve upon their starting position.

By ensuring that the player has completed the ‘GEACPS’ focus before the ‘Marco Polo Bridge Incident’ focus, the system processes of the Japanese NFT produce a historical argument that ideologies of imperial and racial superiority influenced Japan towards war against China. The textual description for the ‘GEACPS’ focus reinforces this imperial and racial context: “The time of Western imperialism has come to an end. The peoples of Asia must band together...Asia for the Asiatics” (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). The description, presented by the developer-curators, invokes an argument that Japan was imitating the imperialist expansionism of European powers (Beasley 1987). *HoIV*’s perspective on Japanese colonialism and imperialism is influenced by popular histories which characterise the nation’s external expansion as influenced by contact with Russia, Great Britain, and America during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century (Duus 1998, 1-3). By the 1930s, Japan was a unique non-Western colonial nation, acquiring Taiwan after the First Sino-Japanese war in 1895 and annexing the Korean Empire in 1910 (Wang 2019 1-2).

Upon completing the ‘GEACPS’ focus, the player creates an in-game faction named the GEACPS (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). This is a useful demonstration of authentic-lite rhetoric; both the textual description of the ‘GEACPS’ focus and its computational outcomes emphasise the imperial ambitions of the Japanese regime through establishing a collective of Pan-Asian nations under the banner of Japanese racial superiority. The depiction of Japanese racial and imperial ideology in *HoIV* is underpinned by the developer-curators’ understanding of imperialism as exported by European nations. PDS depict the GEACPS ahistorically as an influential component of Japanese territorial ambitions in China.

Economic and Industrial Factors of the Sino-Japanese War in *HoIV*.

The Japanese NFT projects curated historical reinterpretations concerning the economic and industrial causes for the 1937 Sino-Japanese war. The description of the ‘Marco Polo Bridge Incident’ focus states: “Japan is poor in resources, but our neighbours are not. We must take

from them what we lack, and only require an excuse to begin doing so” (ibid). This text proliferates an argument that Japan instigated a war against China in order to gain access to industrial and military resources. This is a potent claim also present within historical scholarship on Japan’s economical and industrial position. Bambery (2014, 195) argues that Japan lacked a consistent supply of natural resources and did not possess a secure supply of oil. As a consequence of this material insecurity, Japan’s invasion of China was an attempt to seize the nation’s rich iron and coal mines (Gordon 2006, 141-142). Writing shortly after the end of the Second World War, Amar Lahiri (1947, 154) characterises Japan’s invasion in a European context, stating that, “While Germany and Italy resolved to organize a totalitarian bloc in Europe, Japan set in motion a plan to actualize the materialization of a Far Eastern yen bloc.” The historical description for the ‘Marco Polo Bridge Incident’ focus reconfirms western narratives on Japan’s economic and industrial position, suggesting that the Sino-Japanese war was initiated in order for the nation to gain access to natural resources on the Asian continent in order to militarily compete against European powers.

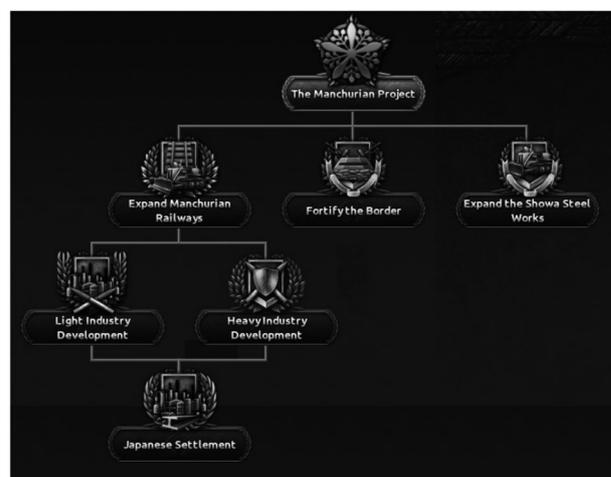


Figure 3: Japan’s Industrial Branch on the NFT

Japan’s NFT reaffirms this popular historical claim through its industrial focuses. Almost all the focuses on the nation’s industrial branch (Figure 3) are related to establishing and developing industry on the Chinese mainland. The economic causes for the Sino-Japanese War are conveyed by the ‘The Manchurian Project’ focus. The focus description states that “While our islands are scarce in useable land, our mainland possessions are not...we can build up on the mainland...a large-scale industrialization program from Manchukuo” (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). This

text disseminates accepted accounts of Japan's colonial ambitions during the period. Japan was the only power in Asia to build a heavy industrial base outside of its native country (Gordon 2006, 141). According to the NFT, Japan's ambition for significant industrial development brought the nation into direct conflict with China.

While *HoIIV* begins in either 1936 or 1939, Japan's military engagement with China during the 1930s can be historically situated in the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The game's exclusion of this event illustrates that the game is not capable of comprehensively representing longer-term historical trends. On 18 September 1931, Japanese and Chinese soldiers clashed in southern Manchuria, "an event which soon developed into what was to be a long, drawn-out intermittent war between China and Japan" (Iriye 1992, 1; Narizny 2003, 210). The Japanese Kwantung Army, stationed in Manchuria to protect the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian Railroad, overran and occupied the territory (Gordon 2006, 140). Japan's invasion of Manchuria was formally signified by the establishment of a puppet regime, Manchukuo (Inoguchi 2015, 305). The territory was conceived as a "corporate state" (Lahiri 1947, 155) predominantly controlled by Japanese industrial concerns. The industrial branch of the Japanese NFT confirms this historical narrative; all the focuses on the branch are related to bolstering Japan's industrial capacity in Manchukuo.

The concept of national self-sufficiency in industrial and military resources was a central tenet of Japanese military planning (Peattie 1975). Industrial self-sufficiency is visibly reflected within the NFT's industrial focuses that statistically increase the player's collection of natural resources. These focuses convey a systemic expression of authentic-lite rhetoric that increasing Manchukuo's industrial capacity was a significant foreign policy and military ambition for Japan. For example, by completing 'The Manchurian Project' focus, the player gains a permanent 10% increase in Stability (AkatsukiEmpire 2019). Furthermore, the player unlocks additional focuses on the NFT's industrial branch that give the player more opportunities to improve Manchukuo's infrastructure, increase its output of raw materials, and reduce the time required to produce military equipment (AkatsukiEmpire 2019).

Through this branch of Japan's NFT, the developer-curators argue that industrial considerations are crucial to Japan. Popular historical discourses also present this interpretation; Kaoru Sugihara (1997) argues that economic

motivations were the central cause behind the Japanese invasions of China in 1931 and 1937. In particular, the 1937 Sino-Japanese War was the continuation of territorial intrusions into China for industrial purposes (ibid). Japanese military incursions against China had begun from the early Showa period in 1926 (Inoguchi 2015, 305; Jansen 1984). From the perspective of the Japanese regime, Manchuria was seen as a vast land that could supply the nation with self-sufficiency in raw materials and foodstuffs (Gordon 2006, 140-142). National self-sufficiency in industrial resources was a core factor that instigated the 1931 invasion (ibid). Some historians argue that the origins of the Second World War can be identified in this conflict (Hobsbawm 1995, 37; Sheftall 2011, 50). The event has also been characterised as the beginning of Japan's Fifteen Years War against the combined forces of China, Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Ives 2009, 1; Koshiro 2001, 426). However, through the designed limitations of its simulation, *HoIIV* cannot illustrate this historical discourse. The game system does not model the 1931 conflict between Japan and China through any means. Even the game's Waking the Tiger expansion (Steam 2018), with a focus on redesigning Asian theatres of the war, does not include additional historical context on the 1931 invasion.

However, there are inconsistent visual representations of previous conflict between the nations. Examining *HoIIV*'s world map from the outset of a 1936 campaign, Manchukuo is represented as a puppet regime controlled indirectly by Japan. Despite its status as a puppet, from version 1.5 Manchukuo is recognised as a full nation, and even possesses its own NFT (ibid; AkatsukiEmpire 2018). Manchukuo's NFT models historical and ahistorical events that allow the nation to either stay connected to Japan or to declare independence (ibid). This is an interesting expression of authentic-lite rhetoric. In order for the player to be able to play as any nation, as highlighted through the game's advertisements (Steam 2016), *HoIIV* is coerced into representing Manchukuo as an established and accepted nation.

Historically, the formal existence of Manchukuo was contested. As a result of the establishment of the state in 1931, Japan began to be ostracized by an international collective of nations (Iriye 1974). The United States and Great Britain would not formally recognize Manchukuo, and both nations were opposed to Japan's renewed war with China (Record 2009, 12-13). The existence of Manchukuo also alienated Japan from the League of Nations (Koshiro

2004, 418). In response, Japan announced its withdrawal from the international organisation in March 1933, citing its dissatisfaction with the widespread condemnation and opposition it received to the establishment of Manchukuo (ibid, 421).

As well as establishing an economical and industrial presence in mainland China, the 1937 Sino-Japanese war intended to force the western powers to recognize Manchukuo as an independent state under Japanese control (Gordon 2006, 142). Together, *HoIIV*'s 'Marco Polo Bridge Incident' and 'The Manchurian Project' focuses reinforce the economical, industrial and political motivations for a Japanese conflict with China as expressed through western historical scholarship. Visible projections of authentic-lite rhetoric are made through computational processes and textual descriptions, producing simultaneously ahistorical and historical reinterpretations surrounding Japan's complex conflict with China.

Conclusion

HoIIV's NFTs are a crucial site where inconsistent and curated reinterpretations of Japanese history are shown to the player through the designs of developer-curators. The NFTs attempt to explain how Japanese history progressed in the mid-to-late 1930s through European perspectives. The textual and computational components of Japan's NFT propagate expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric concerning the nation's domestic and international history in the context of the origins of the Second World War.

Japan's internal history from 1936 is shown as instable. Through the NFT's separation of the Kodoha and Toseiha military factions into different focuses and branches, Japan is shown as being internally affected by competing military factionalism. In contrast, the game's textual information inadequately conveys these fissures within the military. The 'Purge the Kodoha Faction' focus is a historical model of the 26 February 1936 young officers' revolt. However, the game eschews meaningful discussion of the event and instead only produces vague descriptions. This gap in sufficient historical context illustrates the game's fundamental focus on European narratives. In contrast, Japanese perspectives of the epoch are not fully formed. There is an innate inconsistency in how *HoIIV* presents internal Japanese history. This inconsistency is an important facet of authentic-lite rhetoric as a practical expression of history through design compromises and system constraints within digital games. Despite the

vagueness of the focus's text, through positioning the removal of the Kodoha at the summit of the NFT, the game computationally presents the revolt as a significant event. Systemically, the failed revolt makes Japan a statistically stable nation and allows the player to progress onto focuses that target territorial expansion.

The NFT ties China and Japan in conflict. The 1937 Sino-Japanese conflict is partially understood by *HoIIV* as an ideological war to spread Japanese values of racial and imperial superiority. However, the notion that war between China and Japan in 1937 was motivated by the formal ideology of the GEACPS is contested. The formation of a Japanese sphere of influence only occurred from 1940 (Iriye 1999, 6; McClain 2002, 470). In this instance, the Japanese NFT casts historical authenticity aside in favour of creating thematically cohesive gameplay scenarios. Simultaneously, Japan's war with China is portrayed as an attempt to increase the nation's control of natural resources. Through the industrial branch of Japan's NFT, the nation's ambitions in China are understood as opportunities to access significant portions of territory in order to develop a self-sufficiency in raw materials and industrial resources for a coming global conflict.

HoIIV is an underexplored grand strategy game that projects curated interpretations of Japanese history through its computational systems and processes. The novel concept of authentic-lite rhetoric represents an alternative method of analysis which accounts for how the game, and its NFTs, convey history through systems that are limited by the practicalities and realities of digital games as entertainment products. Through outward expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric in digital strategy games, researchers can determine how the many constraints of digital game design produce distinct reinterpretations of Japanese history. This paper understands the NFTs through a dual conception. They are a unique and significant site where the relationship between text and system is both fractious and complementary. The Japanese NFT is a playful site where the developer-curator's perspectives of the Second World War, including their partial historical interpretations and inconsistencies, are disseminated. Programmed into both computation and text, the NFT curates the historical development of Japan through the 1930s into an fundamentally ahistorical system that primarily exists to only improve the player's starting position and produce entertainment.

This paper is not a plea for videogame developers to make their products more historical. Instead, it recognises

that digital game representations of the past are innately ahistorical. The dynamic interplay between a designed system and its text produces unique rhetorical expressions of an imagined history. These subjective interpretations of history within digital strategy games deserve scrutiny; future historical game studies scholarship with *HoIIV* could consider phenomena that are excluded from the game's simulation of Japanese history. Japan has a complex relationship with the Second World War and its military actions in China (Hashimoto 2015; Johnston 2020; Reilly 2011, 468). Hutchinson (2019, 190) makes the persuasive case that "the massacre in Nanjing...the sexual exploitation of women...are all elements of the Imperial Japanese Army's advance into China". The Japanese NFT does not include any references to these events. Through exploring historical interpretations that are not present in the simulation, scholars could identify further curated expressions of authentic-lite rhetoric.

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