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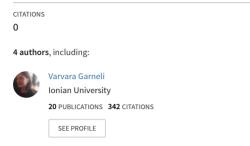
Historical Tabletop Role-Playing Games: Integrating Historical and Cultural Content into the Character Creation Process

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Abstract. Historical Role-Playing Games (RPGs) allow players to immerse themselves in past worlds, experiencing firsthand various social, political, and economic realities. Given this potential, further research is necessary to explore practical and innovative methods for integrating historical information into gameplay mechanics. We developed the Player's Guide (PG) for a TableTop RPG (TTRPG), systematically incorporating social and political elements from a specific historical era. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the educational potential of TTRPGs, offering valuable insights into the role of the PG in enhancing historical understanding.

Keywords: Tabletop RPGs · Character Creation Process · Historical Education

1 Introduction

Historical games like Call of Duty: World War II and Assassin's Creed Origins often reference past events and historical figures or incorporate history as a functional element of the user experience, enhancing authenticity [1]. While some historical games link their content to the past without providing relevant historical information, the interactive nature of commercial game titles can promote innovative and deep communication of historical data, arguments, and debates [2]. In particular, historical RPGs can transcend the limitations of the present and immerse players in the worlds of the past, allowing them to experience firsthand the social, political, and economic realities that shaped previous eras [3], often with satisfactory historical accuracy. More research is needed to investigate practical and innovative ways of historical content integration, engaging players with a variety of historical experiences.

In this study, we will employ TableTop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs), a form of interactive storytelling where players take the roles of characters in a fictional setting, guided by a set of rules and the Game Master (GM) who runs the game. These games combine narrative and mechanics, allowing players to influence the story through their decisions and actions [4]. The integration of historical elements in these games can be achieved through carefully selected narratives and appropriate system design.

Narratively, the games could be based on historically accurate stories, characters, and settings, immersing players in the relevant time period. Mechanically, game systems could incorporate rules that reflect historical realities, such as social hierarchies and economic and political systems [5]. In this viewpoint, a crucial component of incorporating historical elements in TTRPGs could be the Character Creation Process (CCP). This process requires players to design their Player Characters (PCs) by assigning names, backgrounds, and personalities and selecting traits that reflect the historical setting [6]. For example, Ars Magica features a detailed medieval European setting where players create characters deeply rooted in the historical and mythical context of Europe, with abilities that mirror professions and skills from that time.

Inspired by games like Ars Magica[1], our approach will engage players with a historical period, challenging them to understand its key features in order to create characters that align with both the era and their imagination, following the guidelines provided in the Player Guide (PG). By encouraging players to deeply explore their characters' backgrounds and motivations, we aim to foster a strong connection between the player and the character, sparking greater interest in their journey. We believe our work will resonate with Game Designers, History Teachers, GMs, and Researchers, inspiring further exploration and research in this field.

2   Methodology

The CCP involves several key decisions as players design their PCs according to the instructions outlined in the PG. These decisions typically include choosing their PC's class and origin. The class represents the PC's primary role or specialization within the game, ranging from traditional archetypes like fighters, mages, and rogues to more unique ones based on the game's design needs. In addition, players select their PC's origin or background, another crucial element that defines their identity and place within the game world. Origin encompasses factors such as place of birth, family history, social status, and formative experiences, all of which influence the PC's personality, skills, and motivations [7]. By carefully designing the PG, we utilized the CCP as a means to integrate historical content into the game.

2.1   Game Setting

We set the game in 1716 Corfu during the Ottoman siege. At that time, the island was under Venetian control, which shaped its social, cultural, and political dynamics. Corfu's strategic location made it a key Mediterranean trading hub, contributing to its economic prosperity under Venetian rule. Trade brought wealth to the island and facilitated the exchange of goods, culture, and ideas [8]. Corfu became a center where artistic, intellectual, and scientific ideas were exchanged and disseminated [9]. Meanwhile, the military organization of Venetian possessions followed Venice's overarching defensive strategy, aimed at maintaining its territories against Turkish threats and protecting against frequent pirate raids [10].

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[1] https://www.atlas-games.com/arsmagica/.

2.2   Design Process

The first step of creating our PG involved brainstorming and researching to ensure the accuracy of the game's content. We focused on various aspects of Corfu in the early 18th century, including its history, mythology, and social and political settings. Additionally, we delved into details of daily life, such as architecture, habits, clothing, items, names, and even the island's flowers. Key sources included historical texts, records, and literature recommended by historians and local scholars. We then aimed to provide flexible and dynamic gameplay by following an iterative design process, allowing continuous refinement.

2.3   Content Integration

We linked the CCP to the social dynamics of Corfu, influenced by Venetian rule. In doing so, we aligned historical roles relevant to the period with traditional TTRPG archetypes, assigning corresponding responsibilities. Players' choices in this context influence their PCs' statistics, abilities, and health, as well as determine the items they possess. Additionally, we introduced social status to reflect the social hierarchy of the Ionian Islands [11], where society was divided into nobles, townspeople, and commoners [12]. Social class was linked to factors, such as access to wealth and education, relationships and alliances, commanded respect, lifestyle, resources, responsibilities, and societal expectations. Finally, we designed character origins to capture the migratory waves and socio-political dynamics of the time [13], with each origin granting unique attributes that mirrored the historical backgrounds of Corfu's inhabitants.

3   Player's Guide

We developed the PG[2], including instructions about the character creation process, which consists of the following: Classes, Social Status, and Origin.

3.1   Classes

We designed six classes tailored to the historical and social context of Corfu and inspired by popular RPG classes, each with its own unique abilities and role. The Soldier and Rifleman are combat specialists [10], while the Musician [8] and Cleric [12] focus on support and enhancement. The Scholar [8] and Rogue [11] are versatile classes, balancing offense and support. These classes incorporate traditional RPG mechanics while reflecting the island's rich cultural and military history. We also integrated historical elements like items, clothing, and visual representations into the game's art for a more immersive experience (See Table 1).

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[2] https://heyzine.com/flip-book/2957dd0682.html.

Table 1. Character Classes

Name	Items	Description
Soldier	Schiavona[3]	Close-range assaults, significant physical strength, limited mental prowess
Rifleman	Muskets[4]	Precision, firepower. They integrate land and naval elements, tactical versatility in historical skirmishes
Scholar	Encyclopedia	Balanced class excelling in detection and intellectual endeavors; strong intelligence attribute; reflects scholarly traditions and educational institutions of the island
Cleric	Healing scrolls	Supportive roles with healing and defensive abilities. Inspired by the Jewish Community's role against the Ottomans
Musician	Musical Instrument	Enchants allies through music; supports with storytelling; reflects Corfu's vibrant cultural and musical heritage
Rogue	Venetian Daggers	Thrives on espionage and swift maneuvers; excels in reconnaissance and critical strikes; navigates Corfu's underworld and intricate social-political landscapes

3.2   Social Status

Another critical decision is the PC's social class, which reflects the social hierarchy of the Ionian Islands under Venetian rule from the mid-14th to late 18th century. At the top were the nobles, who held hereditary titles and occupied key positions in administration and the military. The middle class, the *Asti*, consisted of professionals, merchants, and craftsmen who drove economic growth. The *Popolari*, or working class, had fewer privileges and performed essential labor [12] (See Table 2).

3.3   Origin

In 1537, the Turks under Barbarossa attacked Corfu but failed to capture the city. They devastated the countryside, enslaving 20,000 people and leaving rural areas deserted [11]. To mitigate further destruction, the Venetians offered land and privileges to settlers. This prompted significant migration from Epirus, Peloponnese, Crete, Venice, and Malta. Many modern Corfiots trace their ancestry to this period, with entire neighborhoods and some villages populated by their descendants [13]. We included the origins from Venice, Peloponnese, Crete, and Hepirus and enriched them with phantasy and cultural elements (See Table 3).

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[3] Venetian sword.

[4] Rifles of the historical era.

Table 2. Character Status

Social Classes	Advantages	Disadvantages
Nobles	Start with ten coins, enabling the purchase of expensive items. High connections and access to exclusive areas due to their names' inclusion in the "Libro d'Oro"	High expenses to maintain a lavish lifestyle. Increased public scrutiny, making illegal activities harder. Lack of practical skills. Difficulty connecting with ordinary citizens
Asti	Start with six coins, providing financial stability. Can navigate both high society and common environments. Bonuses in trade negotiations. Extra item slot	Moderate advantages and privileges. There are no exceptional bonuses. Compromises needed for a balanced approach
Popolari	Strong community ties offering support and local insights. Practical skills in craftsmanship and repair. Bonus in navigation actions and improvised items	Start with minimal resources (2 coins). Financial vulnerability. Social barriers to accessing exclusive areas. Challenges in interactions with nobles and the wealthy

Table 3. Character's Origins

Origin	Attribute's Name	Attribute
Venetian	"The Spider's Bite"	Grants agility, allowing a reroll of failed dodge attempts once per game
Peloponnesian	"The Wrath of Morea"	Offers +2 dice for physical actions at the cost of health once per game
Corfiot	"Botanical Revival"	Enhances healing, granting +2 on healing rolls once per game
Cretan	"Unshakable Morale"	Provides immunity to intimidation and +2 morale points once per game
Epirote	"Endurance of Epirus"	Grants 2 extra energy points at the cost of mental health once per game

4   Conclusions

We designed the PG for a historical TTRPG set in Corfu during the 18th-century Ottoman siege, systematically integrating social and political historical elements into the CCP. Players select Class, Social Status, and Origins to create their PCs, a process that encourages research while tables and images aid their decisions. Our goal was to spark players' historical curiosity, prompting deeper investigation into the past through their engagement with the game. The CCP is designed to involve players actively, motivating them to explore their characters' backgrounds and motivations, thereby fostering a strong connection to their PCs. However, this feature may appeal primarily to players drawn to

this aspect of TTRPGs. Future work will involve systematic testing of the PG and the overall game experience by specialized testers and end users.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the educational potential of TTRPGs, offering insights into the impact of the PG on player engagement with historical content. Our aim was to engage players deeply with the historical material, promoting a deeper exploration of the past and fostering attachment to their characters. However, factors such as player familiarity with TTRPG gameplay and individual preferences should be carefully considered.

Disclosure of Interests. The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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