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LESSON
USING COMPUTER GAME TRAILERS TO VISUALIZE HISTORICAL PERIODS

AUTHOR
ANDREAS MOGENSEN
HF & VUC KØBENHAVN SYD

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This learning design explores how digital media — specifically computer game trailers — can help students visualize and understand historical eras. The activity investigates whether game trailers can enhance students' comprehension of key historical factors and their ability to reflect on the use of public history. It also examines whether this approach can increase motivation and engagement, even among students who are not particularly interested in games.
Through guided questions and structured discussion, students will analyze how history is represented, how narratives are constructed, and how this contributes to their understanding of different historical periods. The activity combines visual and verbal learning, appealing to different learning styles and cognitive strategies.

Subject and level
History B-level, Upper Secondary Education.

Connection to curriculum
The exercise connects to curriculum goals regarding students' ability to analyze, discuss, and evaluate historical periods. It supports students in identifying continuity and change, recognizing key factors in different eras, and critically reflecting on how history is represented and used in modern media.

Didactic and pedagogic considerations
This learning design is based on pedagogical theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, dual coding theory, and motivation through interest. It uses multimodal learning strategies to make historical content more memorable and relatable. By incorporating popular culture, the activity aims to increase intrinsic motivation, foster critical reflection, and build bridges between academic history and public history.

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Time estimate

1–2 lessons or ca. 30 minutes per trailer depending on how you sequence the exercise.

Group size

Class and group discussion

Overall introduction to exercise

Students watch short trailers from historical computer games and use them to identify and discuss key characteristics of historical periods such as the Fall of the Roman Empire, Early Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. They reflect on how these trailers portray historical events, which narratives they emphasize, and how they contribute to the students' understanding of the period. The exercise can be used as an introduction to a topic or as a consolidation after instruction.

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Exercise as presented to the students

Using Computer Game Trailers to Visualize Historical Periods

Purpose:

- Strengthen students' understanding of key historical factors in different time periods.
- Support learning through visual and verbal channels.
- Encourage critical reflection on how history is represented (public history).
- Increase student motivation and engagement.

Content / Materials (find them on youtube):

- Total War: Attila – Intro Cinematic (Fall of the Roman Empire)

- Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia – Alfred the Great Trailer (Early Middle Ages)
- Assassin's Creed II – Official Trailer (Renaissance and Reformation)

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1. Warm-up / Pre-activity discussion

- Briefly introduce the concept of public history and representation of history in popular culture.
- Activate students' prior knowledge of the given time period.

2. Viewing

- Watch the selected trailer(s).
- Students take individual notes guided by specific study questions.

3. Study questions (examples):

1. Fall of the Roman Empire

- **Comprehension**
  - What elements in the trailer show that we are at the end of the Roman Empire?
  - What kind of environment (urban, rural, military, religious) is portrayed?
  - Who are the key figures or groups represented?
- **Analysis**
  - Which factors in the video can be linked to the fall of Rome? (e.g., invasions, political instability, economic issues)
  - How is the Roman Empire portrayed — as powerful, crumbling, or something else?
  - How is the "enemy" shown, and what does that reveal about the narrative?
- **Discussion**
  - To what extent is this a historically accurate portrayal, and what has likely been simplified or dramatized?
  - How does this trailer shape our image of the fall of the Roman Empire?
  - Whose perspective is being told here — and whose might be missing?

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2. Early Middle Ages

- **Comprehension**
  - What symbols or scenes indicate the early medieval period?
  - Who are the main characters or factions?
  - How is Christianity shown or mentioned?
- **Analysis**
  - What role does Christianity play for Alfred the Great in this trailer?
  - Who is the enemy, and how is this enemy portrayed?
  - How does the trailer illustrate power structures such as kingship and the feudal system?
  - How is war and leadership represented?
- **Discussion**
  - How is the medieval period portrayed here compared to how we usually talk about it in class or textbooks?
  - What kind of story about the early Middle Ages does this trailer tell — heroic, religious, political?
  - How does this function as public history — and how might it influence viewers' understanding of the period?

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3. Renaissance and Reformation

- **Comprehension**
  - Where are we geographically, and what elements tell you that?
  - What signs indicate that this is the Renaissance period? (architecture, clothing, inventions, etc.)
  - Which groups or institutions are shown as powerful?
- **Analysis**
  - How is the Catholic Church portrayed in the trailer, and why might that be?
  - What evidence of scientific or artistic progress do you see?
  - How are conflict and power struggles represented in this period?
- **Discussion**
  - How does the trailer romanticize or dramatize the Renaissance?
  - In what ways does it reflect real historical change, and in what ways does it distort it?
  - How does popular culture like this shape modern perceptions of the Renaissance?

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4. Pair/Group discussion

- Students discuss their answers, focusing on historical accuracy, representation, and use of history.

5. Class discussion and reflection

- Groups share their findings.
- Teacher moderates a discussion on how and why these trailers portray history in a certain way.

Conclusion to be discussed with the students:

Using game trailers as historical sources effectively supports students' comprehension of key eras by pairing visual and textual learning. It creates a shared cultural reference point that facilitates analysis and critical thinking. The activity is time-efficient, flexible, and well-suited for both introduction and consolidation of historical content.

This approach can be expanded by letting students play parts of the games for deeper immersion, but even short trailers contain rich academic material for analysis and discussion.

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