Historioludic Mimesis: Revisiting Auerbach in the Age of Historical Games

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Abstract: This essay revisits Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* to examine how the mimetic tradition persists in the digital age. It argues that historical video games, particularly Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series, reconfigure Auerbach's philological realism through the procedural and participatory structures of play. Drawing on Kendall Walton's theory of make-believe, Espen Aarseth's concept of ergodic literature, Alexander Galloway's account of algorithmic control, and Paul Ricoeur's narrative ethics, the paper develops the notion of *historioludic mimesis*: a mode of representing history that transforms reading into performance and interpretation into embodied action. The discussion situates Auerbach's close reading method within the logic of interactive media, where realism arises from attention, effort, and constraint. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise serves as a transmedial case study, illustrating how players traverse historical chronotopes from Renaissance Florence to Abbasid Baghdad, and how agency, knowledge, and empathy are produced within designed systems. By aligning the interpretive labor of the reader with the procedural labor of the player, this essay proposes *historioludic mimesis* as both an aesthetic form and a comparative method. It extends Auerbach's humanist project beyond the text and suggests that digital participation continues his vision of realism as an ethical way of knowing the human through representation.

Keywords: Mimesis, realism and representation, ludic narrative, digital historiography, Auerbach, *Assassin's Creed*

1. Auerbach and the "Representation of Reality"

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) remains the touchstone for any inquiry into how literature renders the real. Yet to revisit *Mimesis* today is not only to retrace the genealogy of Western realism but to confront a proto-audiovisual imagination already latent in Auerbach's method. His comparative history is composed not as a purely linguistic archive but as a succession of scenes—forty textual vignettes that invite the reader to *observe* rather than merely to read. This scene-based composition, as Marcus (2016) suggests, resembles the operation of a slide projector: each fragment of text is enlarged, illuminated, and placed in sequence, producing a visual rhythm that anticipates cinematic montage. Auerbach, in this sense, directs his readers through a projected history of representation.

The visual analogy is not incidental. As Egbert J. Bakker (1999) and Jin Cheng (2017) note, Auerbach repeatedly uses the word *scene*, which appears more than two hundred times throughout *Mimesis*. This repetition betrays a persistent impulse to translate linguistic form into spatial composition. Style becomes mise-en-scène. Where traditional philology traced linguistic shifts, Auerbach transforms stylistic comparison into a visual hermeneutics, one that situates the reader before a tableau of historical life. His realism, therefore, is not a matter of reproducing reality but of *making it appear*—a performative gesture of showing, staging, and framing.

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For Auerbach, representation is inseparable from historical consciousness. "The representation of reality in Western literature," he writes, "develops toward the serious representation of everyday life" (491). This development is not teleological but experiential: each epoch discovers its own syntax for rendering reality perceptible. Style mediates between linguistic form and lived experience, allowing history to become legible through the texture of words. Auerbach's realism is thus a realism of mediation—what he elsewhere calls the "expression of historical experience." To represent, in his vocabulary, is to condense the material density of life into linguistic form while preserving the tension between the visible and the invisible, the ordinary and the sublime.

This conception of *mimesis* differs sharply from both Platonic suspicion and Aristotelian imitation. Auerbach neither condemns nor celebrates imitation; he historicises it. Each mode of *mimesis* reflects a distinct worldview (*Weltanschauung*): the Homeric clarity that leaves nothing unsaid, the Biblical depth that conceals divine meaning within human action, the Dantean synthesis of heaven and earth, the modern novel's immersion in quotidian detail. In tracing these transformations, *Mimesis* turns comparison itself into a mimetic act—the critic imitates the unfolding of history by arranging heterogeneous styles in sequence. Comparison becomes a performance of historical multiplicity.

If Auerbach's history culminates in the modern novel, it also gestures toward a horizon beyond literature. His emphasis on scene, projection, and perspective situates *Mimesis* within a pre-cinematic epistemology: a way of seeing the past through successive images. Marcus's metaphor of the slide projector is telling; the critic's desk becomes a miniature cinema where textual frames succeed one another in light. Auerbach's philology, conceived in exile during the Second World War, already anticipates the technological mediation of memory. What he calls "representation of reality" could equally be described as an early theory of mediation—the recognition that reality is always approached through forms of showing.

Such an interpretation allows us to read Auerbach alongside twentieth-century thinkers of image and simulation. Where Benjamin locates the aura in mechanical reproduction, Auerbach locates it in stylistic density; where Barthes distinguishes *studium* from *punctum*, Auerbach anticipates both through his attention to detail that wounds and reveals. In each case, *mimesis* names a dynamic of presence and absence, a rhythm of appearance that binds aesthetic form to historical being. To "represent reality" is therefore to negotiate the threshold between lived world and mediated world—a threshold that later visual technologies would literalise.

In retrospect, *Mimesis* can be seen as a bridge between the classical and the digital ages of representation. Auerbach's method of juxtaposition, placing Homer beside Virginia Woolf, constitutes an analog form of montage that the logic of film and, eventually, the algorithmic sequencing of digital media would extend. The book's episodic architecture reads like an edited reel of Western consciousness: each chapter a cut, each style a lens. The realist project that began with language now migrates to images, interfaces, and interactive spaces. As visual and procedural technologies have transformed the way we experience history, Auerbach's question—*how does literature render the real?*—returns as a question of simulation: *how does code, image, or play render the real?*

To revisit Auerbach today is to grasp the continuity between textual and digital mimesis. If *Mimesis* represents reality through sequential reading, the contemporary medium of the historical video game converts that sequence into an environment of participation. The player does not merely observe scenes of the past but inhabits them, performing the very act of representation that Auerbach once reserved for style. His "serious representation of everyday life" finds its twenty-first-century analogue in the procedural realism of interactive worlds. In this sense, Auerbach stands as a precursor to what may be called *historioludic mimesis*, a mode of representation in which imitation becomes simulation and observation becomes agency. The following section will explore how this transformation unfolds within the aesthetics of digital play, using Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series as a case study to test how Auerbach's vision of realism might survive and evolve within a world designed to be both seen and played.

2. From Textual to Ludic Mimesis

If *Mimesis* translates history into a sequence of textual scenes, the contemporary historical video game transforms those scenes into procedural worlds. The shift from textual to ludic mimesis is not merely technological; it represents a reconfiguration of aesthetic experience. Reading becomes playing, and the hermeneutic act of interpretation is supplemented, if not displaced, by the embodied act of participation. What Auerbach once achieved through the juxtaposition of literary styles, digital media now accomplish through the orchestration of systems, rules, and environments. In this new configuration, the player assumes a double role as both the observer of history and its re-enactor.

The *Assassin's Creed* video game series (2007–) offers a particularly illuminating example of this transformation. Conceived by Ubisoft as an open-world historical franchise, it reconstructs diverse epochs, from Renaissance Italy to Medieval Baghdad and beyond, through an intricate mixture of architectural realism, archival research, and fictional narrative. The result is a form of historioludic representation that materialises Auerbach's idea of "serious representation of everyday life" within a playable framework. Streets, markets, and domestic interiors become loci of experience through which the player navigates the past. Unlike the reader of *Mimesis*, who contemplates the represented world from the distance of language, the player crosses that threshold and inhabits the very fabric of representation.

At the heart of this transition lies a change in the mode of realism. Auerbach's realism was stylistic, the arrangement of language that allowed ordinary existence to appear as worthy of artistic representation. The realism of *Assassin's Creed* is procedural: it arises from the logic of simulation and the algorithmic reproduction of historical possibility. Each building, crowd, and weather cycle is governed by rules that translate the material past into computational form. The resulting world is not a replica of history but a model of its affordances. In this sense, the game enacts what Espen Aarseth (2007) calls "ergodic realism," a realism sustained by the player's effort. The mimetic act no longer resides solely in style or narrative but in the negotiation between code and action.

This negotiation generates a distinctive aesthetic tension. On the one hand, the player's agency promises a form of freedom that literary mimesis could never provide; on the other, that agency is circumscribed by design, bound within what Alexander Galloway (2006) terms the "algorithmic control" of the interface. The pleasure of *Assassin's Creed* lies precisely in this oscillation between autonomy and constraint, presence and mediation. The player performs the illusion of historical participation while remaining aware of its artificial limits. Such tension recalls Auerbach's own dialectic between appearance and reality, between the surface of style and the depth of historical consciousness. Digital play, in this regard, extends rather than abandons Auerbach's realism.

The *Assassin's Creed* universe also exemplifies what Hayden White (1988) and Robert Rosenstone (2006) describe as the historiophotic turn, the translation of historiography into visual and affective experience. Yet the ludic form adds a further layer that may be called historioludicity: the player's active performance of historical imagination. Through missions, exploration, and choice, the player not only consumes but also co-produces historical meaning. The act of playing becomes an epistemological inquiry, a way of testing the past through interactive scenarios. In Auerbachian terms, this is a radical extension of mimesis in which the representation of reality becomes an experiment in world-making.

Moreover, *Assassin's Creed* foregrounds the multiplicity of perspectives that Auerbach celebrated in his literary corpus. Just as *Mimesis* juxtaposes Homeric clarity with Biblical depth, the game juxtaposes competing temporalities: the historical setting and the modern framing narrative of the Animus. The player oscillates between the past life of Ezio Auditore and the present life of Desmond Miles, mirroring Auerbach's method of diachronic comparison. The game thus literalises his principle of historical layering in which every act of representation contains the trace of another epoch. By embedding history within a metanarrative of technological simulation, *Assassin's Creed* turns

Auerbach's stylistic realism into a recursive system of mirrors, where each layer comments upon the act of representing the past itself.

Crucially, this historioludic structure also raises ethical and epistemological questions. What does it mean to experience history through play? Does participation deepen or dilute historical understanding? The game's appeal to immersion, the promise of being there, both fulfils and troubles Auerbach's ideal of serious representation. It fulfils it by granting everyday gestures, such as walking through Florence or conversing with merchants, the dignity of artistic attention. Yet it troubles it by conflating historical empathy with ludic satisfaction. The risk is that the authenticity of experience becomes subordinate to the mechanics of engagement, turning history into spectacle. In Auerbach's terms, the seriousness of representation risks being absorbed by entertainment.

Nevertheless, this risk is inseparable from the medium's potential. As Rosenstone argues, visual and performative histories construct meaning not through factual accuracy but through affective truth (169). The same may be said of digital simulation: its value lies less in fidelity to the record than in the interpretive space it opens for reflection. *Assassin's Creed* invites players to contemplate the contingency of history and to recognise how every representation, whether textual or digital, filters reality through mediation. In doing so, it reactivates Auerbach's humanist vision of literature as a record of lived experience translated into new material and technological conditions.

Through the transition from textual to ludic mimesis, the work of representation moves from the page to the procedural world, from stylistic observation to interactive performance. The historical video game inherits Auerbach's project of rendering reality visible while transforming the reader's contemplative gaze into the player's embodied agency. In this transformation, mimesis itself becomes a form of play, a process of re-enacting the past to understand the present. The following section will examine how this historioludic aesthetic negotiates the tension between realism and rhetoric, questioning whether digital participation can sustain the ethical weight that Auerbach assigned to literary form.

3. Historioludic Realism and the Play of Make-Believe

Historical video games invite us to rethink mimesis not as imitation but as participation. In the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, history becomes a field of performance where the player embodies what Auerbach called "the serious representation of everyday life" (2003 [1946], 491). The series translates Auerbach's philological realism into digital form: instead of reading historical scenes, the player performs them. This section argues that such performance operates through what Kendall Walton theorised as *make-believe*—a psychological and aesthetic structure in which imagination generates understanding. Combined with Auerbach's historical consciousness, Walton's philosophy clarifies how games transform the hermeneutic act into procedural experience.

3.1. From Representation to Participation

In *Mimesis*, Auerbach defined representation as a process of historical consciousness. To depict reality seriously was, for him, to reconstruct the texture of life through language. The act of description was inseparable from ethical attention. Representation therefore served as a mode of knowing: to write was to interpret the world by observing how human action unfolded in time. This philological form of realism, grounded in close reading, finds its digital counterpart in the procedural form of play. The *Assassin's Creed* series transposes Auerbach's method from the page to the system. Instead of interpreting sentences, the player interprets code; instead of reading about the past, the player acts within its simulation.

Since its first release in 2007, *Assassin's Creed* has become one of the most influential narrative franchises in contemporary gaming culture. Produced by the French company Ubisoft, the series now spans more than a dozen major titles, each set in a meticulously reconstructed historical period:

from Renaissance Italy and revolutionary Paris to Ptolemaic Egypt, Viking-age Scandinavia, and Abbasid Baghdad. The premise is built on a dual narrative: in the present, modern researchers access ancestral memories through a device called the Animus; in the past, players embody those ancestors to relive moments of political and cultural transformation. Each instalment blends open-world exploration with stealth, parkour, and moral decision-making, combining historical simulation with philosophical reflection on freedom, agency, and memory. Its visual realism, archival ambition, and interactivity make it a paradigmatic case for analysing how digital media negotiate the relation between fact and fiction. Few other franchises so explicitly present history as something both *represented* and *played*.

Aarseth's concept of *ergodic literature* helps to articulate this transformation. In ergodic texts, he explains, "non-trivial effort is required to traverse the text" (1997, 1). Meaning emerges not through passive observation but through action that demands attention, patience, and repetition. Such effort parallels the slow hermeneutic labour of Auerbach's philology. To move through a digital city—to climb, listen, wait, and look—is to perform an embodied form of reading. In this sense, interactivity does not replace realism but radicalises it. It turns the reader's contemplative gaze into physical agency, expanding the domain of interpretation from the cognitive to the kinetic.

Bakhtin's notion of the *chronotope* further clarifies this continuity. In the realist novel, he argues, the unity of time and space determines how characters experience existence (1981, 84). Digital environments literalise that unity. Florence or Baghdad is not a backdrop but a living chronotope where temporality and spatial movement are inseparable. The act of walking through streets or synchronising viewpoints corresponds to reading a narrative of space. Architecture becomes syntax; rhythm becomes narrative time. Each gesture, like Auerbach's close reading of a passage, produces knowledge through attention to detail.

The shift from representation to participation therefore marks not a rupture but a translation. Auerbach's humanism survives within the algorithmic logic of play. Where the modernist writer once sought to render experience in words, the game designer encodes it as process, and the player reanimates it through motion. The mimetic act persists, but it now unfolds through the interplay of system and body. Representation becomes performance, and the pursuit of realism becomes a form of lived interpretation.

3.2. The Epistemology of Make-Believe

If the previous section considered how realism migrates from linguistic representation to procedural participation, this section turns to the epistemological question that underlies such participation: how do we know and feel within fiction? Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) offers a powerful vocabulary for understanding this process. Walton argues that all representational art functions as a kind of game in which we imagine ourselves "as if" within a fictional world. "Engaging in make-believe helps one to understand and sympathise with others," he writes, because it allows us to inhabit perspectives that are not our own (1990, 12). The act of pretending is therefore not a matter of deception but a mode of cognition. To enter a fictional frame is to experiment with truth, to explore what Aristotle called "what might happen" rather than what did happen (*Poetics* 1451b).

For Auerbach, mimesis already implied this movement between the real and the possible. His "representation of everyday life" depends on the writer's capacity to perceive ordinary events as bearers of historical meaning. In that sense, both Auerbach and Walton describe realism as an act of imagination grounded in ethical attention. The *Assassin's Creed* series embodies this double orientation. Each game invites the player to perform a credible world that is both historical and hypothetical. The streets of Florence or Baghdad are rendered with archival detail, yet the player's actions within them belong to a narrative of possibility. To climb, to listen, to kill, or to forgive are gestures that combine belief and disbelief, distance and empathy. The player knows that these acts occur within simulation yet experiences them as meaningful encounters.

Walton's concept of "epistemological access to fictional worlds" (1990, 191) illuminates this paradox. Within make-believe, knowledge is produced not by verifying facts but by participating in their imaginative coherence. When Ezio witnesses his father's execution or Basim hears the scholars of the House of Wisdom debate the nature of the soul, the player does not learn history as data; rather, understanding arises from emotional and moral resonance. Robert Rosenstone calls this form of knowledge "emotional truth," which is distinct from factual accuracy but no less real in its effect (2012, 169). Historical play thus becomes a means of entering into the logic of past experience. Through make-believe, the player performs what Auerbach once did through close reading: discerning how the universal is manifested in the particular.

Paul Ricoeur provides a further dimension to this epistemology through his account of narrative. "To narrate is already to choose and to judge," he observes (Ricoeur 1984, 59). Every narrative act constructs a moral and temporal horizon, binding agency to understanding. In *Assassin's Creed*, the player's choices replicate this structure. The option to assassinate or spare a target, to intervene or to withdraw, does not alter the grand arc of history but transforms the player's relation to it. Ricoeur's triad of action, narrative, and responsibility becomes procedural. The player learns what it means to be both subject and interpreter of events. This is a cognitive process that belongs to neither pure fiction nor pure history but to the hybrid field of what might be called *historioludic cognition*.

The epistemology of make-believe therefore reveals the philosophical depth of historical play. Far from being escapist, it extends the humanist ambition of realism into the digital age. To imagine oneself within a reconstructed past is to engage in the same interpretive labour that Auerbach identified in the realist tradition: transforming observation into understanding. The player's participation in these worlds does not collapse the boundary between truth and fiction; it renders that boundary visible and productive. What emerges is a new form of knowledge that is both affective and analytical, grounded in the recognition that the act of pretending is also an act of knowing.

A similar tension between knowledge and imagination appeared to me outside the sphere of games. Visiting the "Meet Egypt" exhibition (2021) in Beijing's World Art Museum, I noticed a label beside a coin depicting Cleopatra that read, "Contrary to modern fantasies, she is unlikely to look anything like the actress Elizabeth Taylor." The comment startled me precisely because it presupposed a cinematic reference for a historical figure. For the Chinese audience, many of whom have never studied Egyptian history, the image of Cleopatra is mediated by film rather than by scholarship. When I posted the label online, a friend responded, "If it weren't for Taylor, I wouldn't know who Cleopatra is." The exchange reminded me of Thomas Elsaesser's question: "Future generations will never be able to tell fact from fiction, having the media as material evidence. But then, will this distinction still matter to them?" (1999, 6). In this instance, the distinction did not matter at all. The cinematic Cleopatra has become a bridge across cultures, turning representation into access. What the exhibition sought to correct was already an example of what Walton would call the power of make-believe: fiction functioning as a medium of knowledge, shaping how history is felt and remembered.

3.3. Ergodic Realism: Reading through Action

If make-believe defines the cognitive dimension of historical play, ergodic realism defines its structural and phenomenological condition. Espen Aarseth coined the term *ergodic literature* to describe texts "in which non-trivial effort is required to traverse the text" (1997, 1). Unlike conventional reading, where the sequence of words is fixed, ergodic texts demand physical manipulation and decision-making. Meaning is generated through motion, repetition, and trial. In digital environments, this effort becomes literal. To play is to read with the body. The controller, keyboard, or movement of the hand replaces the page as the interface of interpretation. The player's gestures—walking, climbing, synchronising viewpoints—form a kinetic syntax through which historical space becomes legible.

This embodied process realises Auerbach's realism in a new medium. *Mimesis* is composed through the slow rhythm of close reading; *Assassin's Creed* unfolds through the rhythm of exploration. Both rely on duration and attentiveness. To understand a passage in Auerbach's Dante chapter requires patient reconstruction of temporal and moral context. To understand Florence in *Assassin's Creed II* requires a similar kind of patience: observing how light changes on stone, how merchants call across the marketplace, how the city's geometry guides movement. These are not decorative details; they are the grammar of experience. Realism here depends on the player's sustained attention to the ordinary, on a willingness to see significance in repetition. The ergodic form turns perception into practice, creating a continuity between philological reading and procedural traversal.

Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* deepens this relationship between action and meaning. For Bakhtin, the chronotope is the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1981, 84). In digital space, this connection becomes literal and dynamic. Each step through a reconstructed city fuses time and space into a single experiential unit. When the player climbs to a high vantage point and activates synchronisation, a recurring ritual in the *Assassin's Creed* series, the resulting panorama functions as both a narrative summary and an interpretive pause. It recalls the moment in *Mimesis* when Auerbach surveys entire epochs through a single textual fragment. Both acts produce a totalising perspective through fragmentary labour. The panoramic view is earned, not given; its comprehension depends on movement and accumulation.

The *Discovery Tour* modes in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) and *Odyssey* (2018) demonstrate how ergodic realism can merge with education. In these non-combat experiences, the player explores curated historical spaces guided by commentary from archaeologists and historians. The structure mirrors a philological seminar: evidence is presented, contextualised, and reinterpreted through active engagement. Learning occurs through pacing, not through exposition. The player must decide where to walk, what to read, and when to linger. The act of exploration becomes a scholarly practice that fuses affect and analysis. The body performs the slow temporality of understanding that once belonged exclusively to textual study.

Such realism is not mimetic in the traditional sense; it is procedural and performative. The truth of the experience lies not in what is seen but in how it is enacted. To walk through a simulated ancient street or to scale a tower in search of perspective is to engage in a phenomenology of history. The world resists instant comprehension, compelling the player to earn knowledge through effort. This resistance, far from breaking immersion, constitutes its authenticity. As in Auerbach's philology, reality reveals itself through labour. Ergodic realism thus extends the ethics of close reading into the domain of play, turning attention into movement and interpretation into embodied practice.

3.4. Algorithmic Control and Ethical Agency

If ergodic realism describes how meaning arises through embodied effort, algorithmic control describes the limits that make such effort intelligible. Alexander Galloway observes that "every act of gameplay is an allegory of control" (90). Digital systems invite participation while simultaneously regulating it. They produce freedom through constraint. This paradox defines the ethical texture of play. Agency in games is never absolute; it exists within parameters that are both mechanical and ideological. To act within a programmed world is to negotiate between intention and limitation, autonomy and obedience. Such negotiation recalls the moral tension that Paul Ricoeur identifies at the heart of narrative: "to narrate is already to choose and to judge" (59). In interactive narratives, this judgement becomes procedural. The player must make choices that are framed by code yet felt as moral decisions.

In *Assassin's Creed*, the player's apparent freedom operates within carefully designed systems of consequence. Each assassination, infiltration, or act of mercy is embedded in a network of scripted possibilities. The illusion of choice conceals an intricate structure of control. Yet it is precisely through this containment that ethical meaning emerges. When Ezio Auditore chooses whether to

kill or spare a corrupt official, or when Arno Dorian navigates the surveillance mechanisms of revolutionary Paris, the player experiences agency as bounded reflection. The decision carries no infinite consequence, but it rehearses responsibility. Ricoeur's triad of action, narrative, and ethics is thus reconfigured within digital design: the story does not merely represent moral conflict, it allows the player to enact it.

Auerbach's realism also depends on constraint. His analyses reveal that representation gains depth when it acknowledges limitation—of perception, of knowledge, of language. The modern subject, for Auerbach, achieves seriousness by recognising the boundaries of understanding. Algorithmic control in games translates this recognition into systemic form. The player's inability to transcend the rules becomes an analogue of human finitude. Freedom is meaningful precisely because it is conditional. The pleasure of play is therefore not a fantasy of omnipotence but an exploration of bounded agency. In this way, digital realism inherits the ethical core of literary realism: both disciplines teach how to act within limits.

This dialectic between freedom and control is dramatized by the series' interface and mechanics. The Animus, the fictional machine that enables the exploration of ancestral memories, literalises the idea that every experience of the past is mediated. Within the storyworld, even the character's memories are structured by software. The player's awareness of being controlled within the Animus mirrors the scholar's awareness of interpretive frameworks. Just as the philologist cannot escape the horizon of textual mediation, the player cannot escape the algorithmic design that shapes perception. The resulting form of reflexivity transforms play into a commentary on its own conditions.

Such structures also have ideological resonance. The *Assassin's Creed* games are preoccupied with surveillance, secrecy, and the tension between individual freedom and systemic order. These themes find formal expression in the design of missions, which reward stealth, patience, and timing. The player must internalise the logic of the system to succeed, learning that resistance operates through understanding rather than rebellion. This procedural ethics aligns with Galloway's assertion that digital play is a "metaphor for control in general" (90). The historical narratives of the series, whether they depict papal Rome, revolutionary Paris, or Abbasid Baghdad, become mirrors for the player's own condition as a subject of governance.

To play ethically, then, is to acknowledge the system and to act meaningfully within it. This recognition transforms interactivity into reflection. The player's moment of hesitation before an action, the awareness that every freedom is designed, is what grants digital realism its moral dimension. In this sense, the game's structure is not unlike Auerbach's prose: both demand that we confront mediation as the very condition of understanding. Algorithmic control and ethical agency together form the realist grammar of play, teaching that interpretation, whether textual or procedural, is always an act within limits.

3.5. Historioludic Realism as Comparative Method

The concepts explored so far—representation, make-believe, ergodic realism, and ethical agency—can now be brought together under the term *historioludic realism*. This phrase designates a new mode of representing reality through digital play, one that extends the humanist project of realism into the procedural and participatory conditions of the twenty-first century. Historioludic realism preserves Auerbach's commitment to the serious depiction of everyday life, yet it reconfigures his philological method through the mechanics of simulation and interaction. To play a historical game such as *Assassin's Creed* is to enact what Auerbach once performed through close reading: to reconstruct human experience within a specific temporal and material horizon. The difference lies in the medium. Where Auerbach sought understanding through language, the player now seeks it through action. Realism becomes an activity rather than a style.

This transformation reveals the continuity between classical mimesis and digital participation. In both cases, knowledge arises through imitation, but the form of imitation changes. Walton's theory

of *make-believe* describes the cognitive process by which imagination yields understanding. Aarseth's notion of *ergodic traversal* explains how this understanding now depends on effort and motion. Galloway's idea of *control* introduces the ethical dimension that converts play into reflection. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that the digital medium does not abolish the mimetic tradition; it renews it. Historioludic realism is therefore not post-realist but meta-realist: it reflects on the conditions of realism itself.

From a comparative perspective, this mode of realism performs the very method that underpins Auerbach's *Mimesis*. His comparative readings juxtaposed Greek epic, Christian scripture, medieval chronicle, and modern fiction to trace how different cultures rendered reality. The *Assassin's Creed* series enacts a similar principle across media and geographies. Its worlds range from Renaissance Italy and revolutionary France to ancient Egypt and Abbasid Baghdad. Each environment translates the same human concerns, including faith, power, and memory, into a new cultural grammar. The player moves across these settings as Auerbach moved across texts, performing comparison through traversal. The medium of play thus becomes a laboratory for comparative humanism, a place where forms of representation and systems of thought encounter one another.

This comparative function extends beyond geography. The franchise itself is a product of global collaboration: developed by a French studio, researched through international academic partnerships, and distributed worldwide. Its historical worlds are shaped by multiple epistemologies—the European archive, Islamic historiography, oral legend, and modern archaeology. When players explore the House of Wisdom in *Mirage* or the Agora of Athens in *Odyssey*, they participate in a dialogue between cultural traditions. These scenes reanimate what Auerbach called the "philological consciousness" that binds understanding to translation (498). Digital media, in this sense, literalise the comparative method by turning cultural translation into spatial and procedural experience.

Historioludic realism also renews the ethical dimension of comparison. Auerbach's realism was never purely aesthetic; it was an inquiry into how human beings appear to one another across difference. The player's encounters with diverse societies reproduce that inquiry in interactive form. Through make-believe and action, one learns not the facts of history but the structures of empathy that make history intelligible. The ethical awareness produced by play, which involves the recognition of agency within systems and the acknowledgment of perspective and limitation, is itself a form of comparative insight. It affirms what Paul Ricoeur termed the narrative bond between self and other, between memory and imagination (59).

The value of historioludic realism therefore lies in its methodological power. It invites comparative literature to move beyond the textual without abandoning its interpretive rigour. The same humanist principles that guided Auerbach's readings, such as attention, patience, and respect for difference, can also guide the analysis of digital culture. Historical games, when read through this lens, appear not as trivial entertainments but as experiments in representation, empathy, and knowledge. They demonstrate that the comparative act can now occur across languages, cultures, and media forms. To play is to compare; to compare is to understand. In this convergence of art, code, and ethics, realism endures as a method of thinking the human through its representations.

4. Conclusion

This study has revisited Auerbach's *Mimesis* in order to examine how the representation of reality transforms within the interactive structures of historical games. In tracing the movement from textual to procedural forms of understanding, it has argued that digital play continues rather than abandons the humanist pursuit of realism. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise, through its intricate reconstruction of past worlds, exemplifies how the mimetic impulse persists in contemporary culture: to know the real by engaging with its representations. What was once realised through language now unfolds through code, motion, and design.

The concept of *historioludic mimesis* proposed here unites several theoretical strands explored throughout the paper. From Walton's make-believe we inherit the cognitive power of imagination; from Aarseth's ergodic theory, the demand for effortful traversal; from Galloway and Ricoeur, the recognition that agency and ethics are born from limitation. Together these frameworks illuminate how digital play transforms mimesis into a participatory hermeneutic. Realism becomes a practice of understanding through embodied action, where knowledge arises from the rhythm of exploration, hesitation, and decision. The historical game thus re-enacts Auerbach's philological realism in procedural form, allowing players to perform the same attention to the ordinary that once defined the literary scene.

At the methodological level, *historioludic mimesis* expands the comparative project of *Mimesis* itself. Auerbach juxtaposed diverse literary traditions to show how cultures shaped the idea of reality. Digital media perform a similar act of comparison across worlds, epochs, and epistemologies. The player's traversal of Florence, Paris, or Baghdad parallels the scholar's traversal of texts: both are acts of interpretation that connect difference through attention. Comparative literature, when extended to the digital, retains its ethical and analytical force. It becomes a transmedial method for thinking about how representation mediates human understanding.

In revisiting Auerbach through the medium of play, this essay has sought to demonstrate that the mimetic tradition endures not as nostalgia but as renewal. The age of historical games re-opens the dialogue between art and reality on new grounds, inviting us to read movement as text and participation as interpretation. *Historioludic mimesis* therefore marks not the end of realism but its continuation in another key, sustaining Auerbach's conviction that the representation of life, however mediated, remains our most enduring way of knowing the human.

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