

The Battle Game at the Bannockburn Experience

William Humberto Huber

Falmouth University
Penryn Campus, Treliever Road
Penryn TR10 9FE
william.huber@falmouth.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

A case study, and media history, of the Battle Game at the Bannockburn Visitor centre, a 30-player digital game installation which was developed from 2010 to 2014, and was installed and debuted to the public in February 28, 2014. The game ran until 2020, when the National Trust of Scotland removed it from the centre. The study places its production in the context of national historical memory, addresses the game's design and its implicit historiographical commitments, and discusses its effectiveness as part of a visitor experience: the battle game was itself a centrepiece of the Bannockburn Experience, an interactive and immersive exhibit run by the National Trust of Scotland.

Keywords

Games as history, design history, historiography, heritage, public engagement, Scottish history

BODY TEXT

The battle of Bannockburn was an encounter between the armies of Robert the Bruce, king of the Scots, and King Edward II of England, and the key battle (though not the immediate end) of the First War of Scottish Independence.

The war itself followed upon the invasion of Scotland by forces under Edward I in 1296, in the wake of a succession crisis in the Scottish court. The details of the war are covered well by historians who specialise on it, and to some extent the specifics of its origins are less important than appreciating the role it plays in the imagination of those who choose to memorialise it and present it to the public today: the battle and its aftermath has become no less than a founding myth for the Scottish nation itself.

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The exact site of the battle remains unknown, with the current site being an estimate based on the description of the battle by contemporaries: no persuasive material evidence has been identified. Nonetheless, based on those descriptions, a battlefield memorial was created on lands donated in 1932 by Edward Bruce, the 10th Earl of Elgin and Kincardine to the National Trust for Scotland. After further land acquisitions at the site, a visitor centre was constructed in the 1960, which was demolished in 2012 and replaced by a new Bannockburn Visitor Centre.

The battle game was itself a centrepiece of the Bannockburn Experience, an interactive and immersive exhibit at the heart of the Visitor Centre. As there are no material elements left from the battle, it was very important that the visitor's centre provide a rich experience. Otherwise, all that one has is an empty field.

The Bannockburn Experience at the visitor centre was designed by Bright White, Ltd, a digital agency based in Yorkshire with a long track record for installing media-rich experiences in heritage sites. The Glasgow School of Art's Digital Design Studio was also involved, producing 3D animations for the immersive (non-game) aspects of the experience, while the battle game was developed by d3t, a game development studio based in Runcorn. Nearly 4 million pounds of funding came from a variety of sources, including Historic Scotland, and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Development began in 2004, targeting an opening date in early 2014: the 700th anniversary of the battle of Bannockburn and — by no means coincidentally—the year that the referendum on Scottish independence was held. The centre was opened in February of that year, while the referendum was held almost seven months later, in September.

The game itself is a compelling and novel blend of digital elements projected onto a physical 3 dimensional surface. Up to 30 players at a time can play. The game is managed by a Game Master who operates a console with the digital game user-interface; players: interestingly, players do not physically interact with the game after pressing a single button which activates the military unit (a squadron) that they command. Ten of the players are assigned to Scottish forces, twenty of them to English forces, reflecting the ratios of the battle itself.

The task of the Scottish players is to prevent Edward from arriving to Stirling Castle to break the siege of the English-held structure by the smaller number of Scottish troops. If Edward is either killed or prevented from reaching the castle, the Scottish troops win; otherwise, the English troops win. Played well, the advantage goes to the English; that historically the Scottish were successful promotes a highly contingent understanding of the event.

Each player, in turn, tells the Game Master where they wish their squad to move and what they wish their squad to do: to attack, to take a defensive position, to seek cover, etc. The players do not have access to the underlying game system, which is managed by software. This makes the game immediately playable by visitors with the barest minimum of a tutorial: instead of focusing on learning a game system or an interface, the players can focus on tactics and the historical context.

Each player makes only two moves during the game, corresponding to the two days of the battle, but much of the game involves coordinating those moves with other players on their side while responding to the moves made by their opponents. Players

also have brief dialogues about what their squads can do with the game master before committing to a decision.

The battle game is more than a simple public education project: it participates in the national mythology of Scotland while being deployed in the context of a political struggle for independence. Bannockburn is the third most visited battlefield in all of the UK despite its lack of any physical artefacts from the battle: the appeal of the site can be attributed mostly to the visitor centre and specifically the Battle Game Experience. The experience, for which visitors would pay as much as 11 pounds, was frequently sold-out weeks in advance. A comparable site, the Culloden Battlefield, also has a digital experience, with a comparable animated battle map, but lacks the playable game, and enjoys far less engagement: about one third of the traffic of Bannockburn. In his 2018 policy report on immersive experiences in Scottish heritage, Murray Pittock [1] attributes this to the importance of allowing visitors to directly engage with artefacts, whether physical or virtual. (Hazifur Rahaman's 2018 paper on digital heritage interpretation expands on this [2]). My perspective is that agency—the ability for the visitors to make meaningful decisions reflecting those which took place historically—is even more effective than immersion or simple interactivity. Players felt as connected to the squads that they controlled through voice commands as they would to any artefact that they might pick up or manipulate. Rhetorics of historical contingency [3] and the exploration of playable contrafactuals [4], [5] are here placed in the service to a narrative of national identity that may have been identified as troubling to the subsequent directors of the National Trust of Scotland, who did not support Scottish independence: despite its success and popularity, it was removed from the centre in 2021, when the centre reopened after the lockdowns of the COVID pandemic.

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