Crusading for Fun and Profit: An Examination of Ludohistorical Mode in the Crusader Kings Community

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CRUSADING FOR FUN AND PROFIT: AN EXAMINATION OF LUDOHISTORICAL MODE IN THE CRUSADER KINGS COMMUNITY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Texts & Technology in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2024

Major Professor: Anastasia Salter
ABSTRACT

How do participants in communities of play centered around digital games engage with history? The historiographic influences of ludic form have been closely scrutinized in recent years, but little attention has been paid to the digital cultures—to the communities of play—which center the discussion and play of these historical games. My study aimed to closely examine one such community centered around the grand strategy game Crusader Kings III, released by Paradox Interactive in 2020. I use discourse analysis together with grounded theory to examine the game Crusader Kings III alongside two primary sites found on reddit and Paradox Interactive official forum. Chapter 1 provides the literature review alongside the project’s methodology, and chapter 2 analyzes the artifact at the center of the study—Crusader Kings III itself. Chapter 3 moves to examine the first major site, the r/CrusaderKings subreddit, and presents the heuristics developed to identify historical discourse alongside the primary discursive genres involved. Chapter 4 focuses on the second major site, the Paradox Interactive official forum, and places the game and community in a temporal context in order to explore how the cyclical and iterative nature of the Games-as-a-Service model acts as a new mode of game production that shapes historical discourse and historiographic consciousness in the community. Chapter 5 then revisits the research questions at the heart of this study, discussing the dominant discourses of historioludic critique and imaginative (a)historical roleplay narration which weave history into play and play discourse. Finally, I present the synthesis of each chapter’s methodological work, a form of discourse analysis—historioludic discourse analysis—that operationalizes historical game studies’ grammars of form into those of mode within the assemblage of play.
Dedicated to my parents, who encouraged me; my grandparents, who inspired me; and my friends, who humored me. You all, like me, have waited seven long years for this.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Full and fair acknowledgements would exceed this document’s remit, so exhaustive-but-brief will have to do. First, I am thankful and grateful for the guidance and assistance of UCF’s Texts & Technology faculty—especially Anastasia Salter, Scot French, Rudy McDaniel, and Connie Lester—who provided support, insights, and pragmatic interventions at critical junctures. Anastasia Salter was especially helpful in navigating the vicissitudes of doctoral study during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Connie Lester offered a valuable window into the practical realities of building and sustaining the digital archives which sustain historical scholarship itself. Critical support also came from the presidential doctoral fellowship I received from UCF as well as the conference funding I received from both the UCF GSA and from the Texts & Technology program itself.

I want to also acknowledge the scholarly community of the Foundations of Digital Games conference, from whom I received critical travel funding as well as a platform and place to present my work. Parts of Chapters 2 and 3 were originally published in the Proceedings of the 16th, 18th, and 19th International Conferences on the Foundations of Digital Games. Parts of Chapter 4 will be published in the upcoming 21st Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association.

My thanks also go to my colleague Daniel King for his unending support and camaraderie, as well as to my friends John, Rynn, and Candace, who—alongside my brother Chris and sister Alina—provided decades of support which weathered (and enabled me to weather) the sturm und drang of these difficult years.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

4X Explorer, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate

AAR After-Action Report

API Application Programming Interface

CK1 Crusader Kings I

CK2 Crusader Kings II

CK3 Crusader Kings III

CTDA Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis

Civ Sid Meier’s Civilization

Civ6 Sid Meier’s Civilization VI

DAR During-Action Report

DLC Downloadable Content

EU4 Europa Universalis IV

FLC Free downloadable Content

FPS First Person Shooter

HGS Historical Game Studies

Hol4 Hearts of Iron IV

GaaS Games as a Service
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>GT</td>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTM</td>
<td>Grounded Theory Method</td>
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<tr>
<td>LP</td>
<td>Let’s Play</td>
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<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>Original Poster</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDX</td>
<td>Paradox Interactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SaaS</td>
<td>Software as a Service</td>
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<td>V3</td>
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CHAPTER ONE: CRUSADING 101: AN INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL GAME CULTURES

"The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been"¹

“While masses everywhere are increasingly accessible targets [for the mass consumption of history], the retorts produced by dissenting minorities also reach a wider audience. While the public today is increasingly international, it is also increasingly fragmented.”²

This dissertation was driven by a fascination with history that it very nearly did not survive. It set out to travel the intersectional domain between an age-old profession, nascent digital platforms, and recent transformations in the practice—at once brand-new and ageless—of making games about the past. The path it set out upon was less of a road than a trail, but one traveled with increasing frequency. The way, I thought, was clear.

This final document was pulled from the wreckage of those ambitions—found at the scene of the colliding crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicized assaults on higher education, resurgence of autochthonous authoritarian movements, and the mental health debts accrued just to navigate the narrowing of the needle’s eye that is graduate school amidst it all. It was triaged—in part—

---

¹ In the original mandarin Chinese: Guanzhong Luo, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, trans. C. H. Brewitt-Taylor (14th c.; repr., Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1991). It is worth nothing that this phrase, while attributed to the text’s original author, is currently believed to be a 17th-century addition. See translator Robert E. Hegel’s notes on the subject: Robert E. Hegel, “Introduction,” in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, n.d. In the original mandarin Chinese, the quote reads: 話說天下大勢，分久必合，合久必分

through the very process it sought to investigate: namely, what happens when someone plays a great deal of *Crusader Kings III (CK3)* and then talks about it endlessly to their friends and colleagues. Its ultimate recovery was due to those social networks in which I was enmeshed, and its arrival at some sort of destination is entirely due to that support which fueled it along the way. Both the questions and their answers are indebted to this journey-as-context.

I offer this more personal narrative out of methodological diligence grown from cautious experience: this study—an ethnographically-inspired project that embedded the researcher into the online community of *Crusader Kings* enthusiasts—placed the sensitivities and proclivities of that researcher at the center of the frame; the methodological armor offered by other approaches might’ve better attempted to ensconce said researcher away from and above such concerns, but the chosen approach did the opposite. As such, my journey critically underpins everything that follows, and readers should understand: this was a bumpy road, and the investigator got bounced around a lot.4

---

3 “Crusader Kings III,” PC[Steam:1158310], *Crusader Kings* (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, September 1, 2020). I’ll be referring to CK3 using both the full name and abbreviation throughout this project. As CK3 is the latest entry in the *Crusader Kings* series, I’ll be referring to individual games in the series as well as the series more broadly.

4 A note on style: in this dissertation, I employ a particularly playful, metamodern, and reflexive style of footnote-based citation and commentary which departs significantly from the more rigid strictures of the major disciplines which share my Chicago-style allegiance. This is done quite deliberately and for several reasons. First, this hybridity reflects the interdisciplinary origins and structure of this project, drawing as it does on the stylistic norms of multiple disciplines to construct this particular style. Secondly, incorporating playful and metamodern styles represent an important nod to the sites and objects of study, which represent nested game-metagame structures (as well as more explicitly metamodern affordances) amidst playful discursive and ludic aspects. Third, the subject material frequently brings the reader and investigator into close contact with difficult and occasionally unpleasant elements—levity and reflexivity, in this context, reflects not just a compensatory mechanism but also the researcher’s own approach to maintaining the necessarily equilibrium required for this project. In short, this stylistic decision is employed to both reflect and manage the professional, methodological, theoretical, pragmatic, and analytical themes of the overall project—so be prepared for some *Crusader Kings* memes and some snarky commentary.
This framing, I hope, prepares the reader: though the project attempts to answer questions situated at the heart of history, games, and digital cultures, the approach is fundamentally social—rooted in play, play cultures, and the current digital platforms in which these things are cultivated. The topic area is broadly interdisciplinary, so a great deal of context drawn from multiple disciplines is necessary to even frame its questions appropriately—and still more esoterica must be glossed in order to begin to understand what was unearthed in the process. Both are exacerbated by the particularities of the central artifact: Crusader Kings III, a digital historical game part of a semi-closed ludic modal ecology (that of CK3 publisher Paradox Interactive’s full oeuvre) which treats overwhelming complexity as a virtue par excellence. The people who play this game love complexity, and thus complexity becomes implicated in any explanatory effort. If the ability to navigate that complexity is the cost of entry into this particular social world, then the world itself introduces still more esoterica and complexity; broad histories, technical quirks, and localized shibboleths are necessary to situate the play discourse and culture which surround the game. This complexity has layers, and the layers of scholarship used to peel it back must first themselves be contextualized. In the study of historical game communities, several fields are implicated: history, game studies, media studies, anthropology, sociology, learning studies, and the studies of wargame and digital cultures provide only the starting point. It is helpful, I think, to begin with history.

In the United States today, History is a discipline under siege. Stirred by political provocateurs, a culture war backlash against movements for racial justice has now mobilized an assault against the entirety of historical education in the nation’s schools. This siege follows decades of starvation, as enrollment in college-level history majors plummets to the lowest point ever
recorded.⁵ Now, perhaps sensing weakness, conservative-dominated state legislatures have armed their militant supporters with an arsenal of new memory laws—legislation which seeks to shape how the past is broadly interpreted by a populace—with which to attack historical education.⁶ These incendiary laws, which are nominally aimed at a graduate-level legal theory, explicitly seek control the tone, tenor, and content of historical education across all levels of the nation’s educational system.

With formal historical education increasingly embattled, forms of informal history increasingly become sites for publics to encounter, negotiate, and contest historical understanding. Far from fading away due to anemic or farcical historical education (an underlying condition which, admittedly, predates these recent trends), past indicators suggest that public interest in history has instead increased in recent decades.⁷ In particular, the rise of digital historical games—digital games that purport to “make meaning out of the past”⁸—reveals a public hungry for vicarious engagement with myriad representations of the past. Underscored repeatedly by extant scholarship,⁹ this popularity has spurred a coincident growth in scholarly recognition and analysis of this new form. Amidst the wide array of popular engagements with history—and

while academic history and historical education hunkers down for a long siege—historical gaming continues to grow and prosper in relative peace.

**Historicizing in the Wild: Towards Research Question Formulation**

It is in this environment—increasingly authoritarian control directed at formal historical education coincident with a rise in public engagement with history via digital games—that the central questions of my work emerge. How, I ask, do players and player communities actually engage with and understand history? While the broad, social motivation for addressing this question has been noted above, this issue becomes all the more pressing due to the current dearth of scholarly research which attempts to specifically address it.

In an earlier (2020) metanalysis, I have showed how scholarship examining digital historical games arises out of several overlapping disciplinary communities, each with differing motivations, foci, and methodological/theoretical backgrounds for research.\(^\text{10}\) Recently grouped into a new interdisciplinary field of its own, historical game studies, a meta-analysis of this field shows five major discursive threads: an examination of media form within the context of historiographic debate, analyses of pedagogical implications for the introduction of historical games (largely, but not exclusively, digital) into formal classroom environments, close readings of digital historical games as texts, integration of digital games into larger historical studies of

intersecting phenomena, and an examination of players and communities of play engaging with historical representations and practice.\textsuperscript{11}

The first four of these discursive threads have largely motivated the fifth, which broadly seeks to ground discussions of historical games in the observed practices of their players. Here we encounter work that uses specific community practices to contest established arguments about the historiographic relevance of digital games,\textsuperscript{12} examines how players take on community roles as public historians,\textsuperscript{13} and analyzes how a particular community organized as an ad-hoc learning environment centered around a historical game.\textsuperscript{14} While these notable works serve as partial answers to my initial provocation, they remain largely limited in scope, with examinations limited to particular practices serving as exemplars of extant theses, and are increasingly disconnected from the ever-changing world of digital games and game communities in the present.

Writing decades after the emergence and popularization of digital games scholarship, it is difficult to extricate the changes which have occurred in games and gaming communities from the ever-shifting scholarship which seeks to analyze it. Nonetheless, the shifts in games scholarship do collectively articulate changes in how games are understood to be played; this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11}Ibid.
\end{itemize}
shifting scholarly view serves to highlight the need for contemporary work to further address questions of play in a historical gaming context. While early digital historical games scholarship (like the larger body of digital games scholarship) focused heavily on the digital game as a particular, fixed artifact played by small groups of individuals, more recent scholarship has turned towards viewing games in a more sociological light, locating the older conception of digital game within a layered network of other physical, social, cultural, and economic phenomena. The frameworks emerging from these explorations have been given different names, including assemblage of play and metagame. Responding to a variety of trends which trouble the older ideas of game, such as the rise in alternate-reality and virtual reality gaming and digital game live streaming, many of these recent works see the necessity in situating a proliferation of game and game-adjacent media forms within broader, more encompassing frameworks than just the game itself.

The proliferation of these public trends and scholarly acknowledgements serves to widen the scholarly gap my work is aimed at. Scholarship aiming to understand the role historical games play in the increasingly complex metagame and assemblage of play must contend with a large set

15 This is foreshadowing the introduction of video game mode to this discussion, establishing distinctions between the production and distribution of digital games during the 90s and 200s versus the predominant patterns in contemporary gaming. Comparably, this period also saw a concurrent and parallel scholarly focus which were largely premised on this pattern. For a more in-depth analysis of the field of game studies during this period, see: Kirk Lundblade, “What Video Games Have Taught Us: Two Decades of Gaming and Learning,” in Historiographies of Game Studies: What It Has Been, What It Could Be, ed. Alisha Karabinus et al., In Press; Lundblade, “Civilizing Civilization (and Beyond).”


of potential sites, including individual play, the achievement metagame, fan sites, message boards, and online distribution platforms—to name a few. Within this wider context, non-scholarly provocations also illustrate the new stakes, such the presence of extremist communities which exploit multiple facets of these complex systems to radicalize and recruit new members. As I have noted, while some scholarship addresses small facets of this larger problem space, no recent work has attempted to build a larger understanding of any one specific contemporary community. This work aims squarely to address that gap, beginning with the specific context provided by a particular historical game, *Crusader Kings III* (CK3). Examining the *Crusader Kings* community thus provides an opportunity to contribute to the field of historical game studies (and its connected fields) by extending the various threads of HGS into the gap—operationalizing and refining the analytical approaches available within the field—whilst also offering a valuable site-specific analysis of an impactful community within the wider ecology of digital historical games. As such, the initial research question becomes:

Q1: How do players of *Crusader Kings III* (CK3)—a particular historical game—and members of the wider community surrounding CK3 engage with, understand, and use history in their community practices?

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20 A full description of CK3—as well as its contextual justification—can be found in the project methodology section of this chapter as well as in Appendix A.
Additionally, during the study, initial exploration of the chosen sites enabled reformulation and expansion of the original question as follows:

Q2: How do self-identified players of Crusader Kings—as well as members of the Crusader Kings online community—engage with, understand, and use history within play discourse at different points of iteration within the game, community, or productive praxis?

Using grounded theory and discourse analysis in an ethnographic context, this study draws upon scholarship from all strands of historical game studies, as well as landmark ethnographic studies of virtual worlds, discourse analysis work centering social media subcultures, and the broad spectrum of digital and analog games scholarship that informs the present context surrounding games which model war and politics in our historicized past. Answering the above question allows this study to begin to answer fraught questions about culture, affordance, and historiographic alignment that scholars of history have long aimed at new media. As I have argued above, a deep evaluation of a contemporary historical gaming community is long overdue.

**Literature Review**

Much of the impetus for the study of digital historical games is rooted in the shifts and turns in historical scholarly discourse, which contest the public legitimacy, academic validity, and general efficacy of digital games for historical purposes. This contestation originates in the broader
historiographic shifts which have opened up deconstructionist approaches to historical

scholarship which, in line with postmodern thinking, asserts that “past events are explained and acquire their meaning as much by their representation as by their ‘knowable actuality’ derived by

conventional (empirical-analytical) epistemological means.”21 This position, challenged by older models of reconstructionist history privileging authoritative scholarly narratives as singular sources of historical truth, centers the author and authorial context in the construction of historical narrative, as well as the mediating role played by the medium itself.

This turn towards examining historical media in light of this historiographic debate has provided numerous precursive theoretical contestations relevant for the study of historical games. Initially building on the deconstructionist model, historians Hayden White (1988) and Robert Rosenstone (1988) centered two key concerns for historical film as a new form of historical media: the analysis of the relative advantages and disadvantages of film as compared to traditional written narrative, and the relative agreement between the scholarly values of academic historians and the previously-identified advantages.22 While this debate begins with historical film, it casts a long shadow over the current discourse on digital historical games.

After an initial rush of early scholarship examining digital historical games on a variety of bases,23 historical games scholarship began to address the broader, more formal questions


23 Most notable here (and less emphasized throughout the remainder of this project) is the content-based, close reading approach used frequently to examine and critique particular historical game titles (typically in a single game) or mechanics (typically across several games). This foundational work preempted and prompted Adam Chapman’s call for a formalist approach (over that of content) which sets the stage for this project. Exemplars of this content-based approach include (but are by no means limited to): Tur Ghys, “Technology Trees: Freedom and
originally posed to historical film; this early scholarship articulated divergent answers to White and Rosenstone’s scholarly provocations, with Uricchio (2005) arguing for a broad alignment between digital historical games and poststructuralist historiography. Conversely, media scholar Alexander Galloway (2006) advances a critique of historical potential which sees historical aspects of digital games deeply constrained by the underlying characteristics of the medium—characteristics which, when applied to historical content, empty the game of historical value by subsuming history itself to the algorithmic control of the medium.24

After this early formal contestation, additional scholarship quickly addressed this central underlying question of historiographic validity, with much of this work specifically pushing back against Galloway’s critiques. The pushback against his critiques generally opens with an exploration of the potential or affordances of the form of digital historical games.25 These arguments are advanced along several distinct historically-relevant discursive lines; first, many highlight the open-ended and fundamentally reconfigurable nature of historical play as one


which allows players to incorporate their own historical understanding into their play experience, which frequently leads to historically-guided play—called historical resonance—and/or players pushing back against perceived historical inaccuracies or inadequacies—a phenomenon characterized as counterplay. Second, arguments frequently invoke the historical lineage of “what if” counterfactual scenarios as historical tools (as articulated by Ferguson (1997)) before articulating the strong synergy between the reconfigurative affordance and the creation of counterfactual interrogatives in ludic form. Third, building on the early formal work, schematizing and further analyzing sub-groups of historical games—typically through the lens of genre—opens up more nuanced articulations of affordance and validity that enable discursive connections between analyses of specific games and the debate over form. Finally, a major thread pivots away from digital historical games to instead highlight how the early critiques of historical games are equally—if not moreso—applicable to traditional historical scholarship in written form. These discursive threads—all of which rest on the historically-distinct aspects of the form—collectively argue for what Chapman calls historioludicity, or “the representation of

27Apperley, Gaming Rhythms.
30Kapell and Elliott, “Introduction: To Build a Past That Will ‘Stand the Test of Time’—Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives.”
history and our thought about it…in visual images…[and] also through rules and opportunities for action and thus, *ludic* discourse.”  

The argument over the larger form of historical games serves as the fundamental pillar on which the field of historical game studies stakes its claims to importance; as such, any scholarship which substantively builds upon scholarship in historical game studies must also reckon with the underlying arguments of form upon which the field is built. From this central reckoning emerges two key components: the first major theoretical grammar wholly belonging to the new field—a spectrum of affordances, genres, and representational styles under which historical games can be analyzed—as well as new terminology seeking to stake out the epistemic viability and distinctiveness found at the confluence of history and games.

**Simulation styles, epistemologies, and genres**

Crucial to any developing field is the construction of specific, nuanced theoretical grammars better able to explicate the objects of study and communicate within the burgeoning field. Within historical game studies—an offshoot of game studies with strong interdisciplinary linkages to history—many of these early grammars seek to reconcile the more conventional media studies and game studies notion of genre with the question of historiographic affordance originally raised by White. Uricchio’s (2005) contribution provides an initial taxonomy, grouping digital games along a spectrum which situates games examining specific historical events—such as famous battles—on one end, and games which instead examine historical processes on the other.

---

31 Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 2016, 22.
32 White, “Historiography and Historiophoty.”
While implicitly (and loosely) mapping to genre, Uricchio’s work is more concerned with the historiographic positioning, defining the ends of the spectrum as “sites to tease out the possibilities and implications of historical representation and simulation. These two extremes have different historiographic appeals.”\(^3\) Thus, the first extreme of Uricchio’s spectrum is characterized by the maximization of historical detail as its primary affordance and constraint, and is tied to the oft-contested notion of historical representation. Conversely, the opposite end’s affordances support a more structuralist historiographic approach due to their dependence on codifying historical principles into algorithmic form; an approach which takes the label of historical simulation. Both ends of Uricchio’s spectrum exist in an uneasy relationship to the past and present historiographic turns in historical scholarship; both ends of the spectrum are characterized by some of the affordances and approaches lionized by contemporary poststructuralist history while nonetheless retaining substantial roots in a structuralist historiographic past.

Though Uricchio’s early formulation is heavily referenced in early historical game studies literature, Adam Chapman (2016) was one of the first to attempt a full extension and reformulation of this work more grounded in the new field.\(^3\) Chapman, building heavily on the work of Uricchio—as well as that of MacCallum Stewart and Parsler (2007),\(^3\) reconceptualizes this division into a spectrum of differing simulation styles, with one end remaining focused on event-based smaller-scale historical scenarios and the other around counterfactual exploration of

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\(^3\)Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016.
large-scale historical processes; these differing simulation styles are labelled realist and conceptual, respectively. Chapman himself characterizes this shift as one from systems largely concerned with the (historical) content being represented to one where the focus is on the styles of representation used. A thorough inventory of Chapman’s listed characteristics reveal his comprehensive approach. First, he incorporates principles which, in a nod to Uricchio, situate the historiographic approaches predominant in each; these are largely centered around the simulative style’s alignment with extant historiographic theory and approaches to presenting history. This is followed by the particular media affordances common to each approach-- a list which includes levels of audio-visual specificity, the player’s diegetic level, interpretive difficulty, ease of engagement with existing historical media, type, and the distribution of data loads in the player-game system.

This expanded system—one which touches on genre, the work of historians, and player/audience receptivity—provides opportunities for scholars of historical games to better situate new work within large bodies of established scholarship relevant to historical games; the historiographic arguments of Rosenstone and White, centered and largely siloed in the discipline of history, are thus brought into direct contact with game studies’ deep interrogation of the medium--such as analyses of genre.  

In addition, the framework’s nod to studies of play, learning, and player behavior also draw closer connections to studies of games more commonly located in the social sciences. Specifically, for studies of communities of play, this framework offers a starting point for analyses of the artifact(s) at the center of these communities, assertions to test against the

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community’s knowledge and behavior, as well as further avenues of scholarly discourse to be integrated into such study.

**Historiographic play: Locating historical engagement practices in/around games**

While much of the early scholarship originated within the broadly construed humanistic fields of media studies, game studies, and history, a distinct vein originated in social science research on pedagogy and play itself. Focusing on empirical studies of digital games’ pedagogical utility, historical games such as *Sid Meier’s Civilization III* were initially studied in the context of secondary and post-secondary history education. Two such studies—examining both formal and informal pedagogical sites—characterize an ideal form of engagement called historiographic play as:

> a form of gaming that uses the game as a site for inquiry, whereby gameplay is an iterative process of observations of game phenomena, trying new game strategies to test particular ideas, and discussing the results (which might include bringing in outside resources, such as texts)

This early model also contained two key corollaries: first, this play involved a well-defined progression of expertise, moving the player from a novice to mastery in a particular domain; this progression exists at the confluence of a number of assemblage elements which extend beyond the game itself. Second, this progression of expertise was identified along two separate, primary

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trajectories—one which saw the game used for increasingly complex historical inquiry (the historiographic play) and another which focused on a purely ludic, game-design approach. This sort of semiotic disruption, also identified in Myers (2005), sees the player developing increasing knowledge of game systems completely separate of any possible historical representation.

This framing of historiographic play thus provides both an initial set of historical engagement practices for examination as well as a comparable set of ahistoric, purely ludic engagement practices coexisting within the same historical assemblage of play. The relationship between comparable practices and other assemblage elements is, as recent research suggests, highly contingent and ephemeral. Early work examining historical engagement in live streaming indicates how historical engagement can rely on complex combinations of presenter, game, and audience in order to elicit historiographic engagement over its opposite, thus implicitly positioning historiographic play within what Taylor calls “the nooks where fascinating work occurs; the flows between system and player, between emergent play and developer revisions…between contested form of play, between expectation and contextualization.”

More recent work by Grufstedt (2022) represents an important progression of this area of study which

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40While Myers (2005) locates this semiotic disruption/severance in player action, Fogu (2009) is far more critical—locating this propensity within the structure of the form itself: “video games have begun to detach the notion of history from its double reference to the past and to the real—‘what essentially happened’—that it had acquired at the end of the eighteenth century.” Claudio Fogu, “Digitalizing Historical Consciousness,” History and Theory 47, no. 2 (May 2009): 103, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2009.00500.x. In doing so, Fogu aligns with (perhaps) the harshest critic of digital historical games, Alexander Galloway (2005), who decries Sid Meier’s Civilization as “the absence of history altogether” in: Galloway, Gaming.

41Lundblade, “Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams.”

bridges past and present approaches to studying historical game communities via an attendant focus on one particular historiographically salient affordance and practice: counterplay.43

Counterplay and counterfactuals

While much of the analysis of form and affordance center on the game itself, one key set of terms—counterfactual and counterplay—centers an aspect of historical gaming which connects developer, game, and player together in historical inquiry. While the idea of a historical counterfactual has a long pedigree in historical scholarship, it was first applied to the historiographic debate over digital games by Niall Ferguson (1997),44 who championed the potential role digital games could play in exploring counterfactual scenarios in a manner aligned with some historiographic traditions. As put forward, counterfactual history in digital games is largely located within the games themselves—by authorial fiat—and are thus produced with the counterfactual examination built in. However, an early scholar of digital historical games, Thomas Apperley, extends this argument significantly by asserting “that the algorithmic code of videogames supports styles of play that utilize the algorithm to execute their own exploration of ideology; by either learning the pattern of the algorithm, or by creating their own variances

43 Ylva Grufstedt, Shaping the Past: Counterfactual History and Game Design Practice in Digital Strategy Games (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2022). The full body of Grufstedt’s work is relevant here, with many publications addressing games tied to the same publisher (Paradox Interactive), period (medieval history), and even occasionally addressing the very same title (CK3) at the heart of this study. For several supplementary selections, see: Ylva Grufstedt, “Unbending Medievalisms—Finding Counterfactual History in Sandbox Games Set in the Middle Ages,” Playing the Middle Ages: Putfalls and Potential in Modern Games, 2023; Ylva Grufstedt, “Counterfactual History and Game Design Practice in Digital Strategy Games,” Ennen Ja Nyt: Historian Tietosanomat 21, no. 1 (August 14, 2020): 86–91; Ylva Grufstedt, “Approximately History: Developer Perspectives on Counterfactual History in Digital Strategy Games,” in Proceedings of DiGRA 2020 (Digital Games Research Association, ACM, 2020), 3. This project also draws on an earlier, antecedent source which takes aim at this very same informal context: Sian Beavers and Elizabeth FitzGerald, “Perceptions, Perspectives and Practices: A Study of the Players of Historical Games,” in Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG (DiGRA/FDG ’16, Dundee, 2016).
44 Ferguson, “Virtual History.”
within it by altering the code.”

This is later refined and incorporated into his model of counterplay, which he defines as “play against the algorithm.”

Opportunities for counterplay and counterfactual exploration are not without considerable constraints. As Chapman (2016) notes, historical games which are designed to encourage deeper counterfactual exploration (his conceptual simulation style) are also largely constrained by ludonarrative structures reminiscent of structuralist ideological notions which frequently serve to guide play along particular ideological lines. This contrasts with the previously-discussed historiographic potential offered by the multiplicity of narrative and problematization of linear historical narrative offered by the simulative structure. In addition, other player-centric limitations—such as limited play time, lower skill, and various forms of disability—can effectively constrain this process. Even in game-related practices which are praised for empowering players, such as game modification, scholars note that the structure of the game-as-software coexists with player community knowledge and programming ability as a set of constraints on and aides to players’ ability to effectively modify the game in question.

With such a varied set of potential constraints and opportunities for expression, it is not surprising that this notion of counterplay and counterfactual exploration is—as the literature suggests—likely to be represented not as one particular and easily-identified play pattern, but instead as its own micro-assemblage of player practices—Apperley (2006) identifies both

47 Apperley, Gaming Rhythms.
document production and modding as practices illustrative of counterfactual play,\textsuperscript{49} whereas I (2021) have advanced the dualistic achievement game and metagame as potential sites of counterfactual play.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, for work seeking to examine counterfactual exploration and play in player communities, scholars must meaningfully examine (a) the frequency and style in which players engage in counterfactual play and discussion of counterfactual play, (b) the ways in which players negotiate the historical space between algorithmically-enacted underlying ideological frame and their own developing agency in play, and (c) how players intermix distinct play practices in order to advance this counterfactual exploration. Notably, counterplay represents a particularly important practice within the temporal and social contexts of individual and collective trajectories of particular collectivities:\textsuperscript{51} signifying development along a trajectory of expertise.

From players to designers: a spectrum of practice

Extant scholarship describes, theorizes, and frames a range of player practices in differing contexts: from explicit authorial intent via game design (highlighting the role of the developers and designers) to expert play and game modification (highlighting the role of the player). It is

\textsuperscript{51} There exist a vast panoply of terms used to characterize groups of individuals organized around play. In this project I’ll be foregrounding and drawing from a few in particular: specifically James Paul Gee’s formulation of Affinity Groups (2003,2007) as well as Celia Pearce’s (2009) Communities of Play. Both terms describe largely self-organizing communities (generally online) which center play of particular digital games. These terms run into some key limitations when attempting to apply them to the constellation of sites—characterized in this study as an assemblage (Taylor) or metagame—which this project ultimately examines. See: Celia Pearce, \textit{Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds} (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009); James Paul Gee, \textit{What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy}, Revised and Updated (2003; repr., Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Taylor, “The Assemblage of Play”; Boluk and LeMieux, \textit{Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames}, 2017.
thus useful to roughly align the designer and player practices invoked in the literature along the line laid out by this early work—a spectrum moving from designer-driven to player-driven. While some practices can be placed close to either end of the spectrum, in the interstices we also note material contestations wherein notable practices emerge as an appropriative mixture of the two; one such example is modding, where players take up design knowledge and terminology as tools for contesting the initial framing provided by the initial developers. Some practices, such as the production of specific document genres described below, largely fit within a larger overarching practice (though they are not exclusive to it). Other categories, such as achievements, occupy multiple positions along this spectrum (with a designer-driven initial system opening up space for player-driven participatory response). While this study largely focuses on player-driven practices, more designer-driven practices form a necessary counterpart to many of these player practices—and thus, must also be considered. I begin here by examining player-driven practices before examining more complex sets of practices which entail consideration of designer-driven efforts. The first of these clusters of practices addresses particular genres of document production which are embedded within trajectories of expertise development and expert play.

*During Action Reports (DARs), After Action Reports (AARs), and expert play*

Scholarship examining player knowledge development reliably positions socially-situated knowledge production as key to developing expertise;\(^{52}\) this knowledge production typically takes on genre characteristics specified by the norms, needs, and culture of the affinity space

within which its author is embedded.\textsuperscript{53} For the Apolyton University community examined by Squire & Giovanetto,\textsuperscript{54} one of the most common written genres took the form of During Action Reports (DARs), writeups submitted by players at various stages of gameplay which presented a multidimensional slice of their approach to play, including high level strategy, key specific in-game actions, and a conventional set of in-game statistics. Here, as in its livestreaming equivalent,\textsuperscript{55} a media-augmented version of the think aloud protocol is often used to explicate as much of the presenter’s thought process and current understanding of the gamestate as possible. Community members then engage in discourse with/between DARs, enabling peer-level comparative analysis of play as well as expert-novice interactions which the researchers term distributed cognitive apprenticeships. Within differing communities, such as the Paradox forums examined by Apperley,\textsuperscript{56} the typified artifact produced within the affinity space is organized differently, instead taking the form of After Action Reports (AARs), which are posted after game completion in order to entertain and provide evidence of mastery. The AAR highlighted by Apperley shows a more narrative flair, with historical positioning and narrative flow emphasized over providing detailed interpretive frames and replicable movesets. A cursory examination of these two community genres found in the literature suggest several key factors to highlight in future studies; these include the role outside historical knowledge/artifacts take in the community’s knowledge production and discourse, how antecedent community interactions are structured, and where/how the act of writing intersects or interrupts the act of play. Both of the above practices are contextualized by the scholars examining them within the notion of expertise

\textsuperscript{53}Gee, \textit{What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy}, 2007.
\textsuperscript{54}Squire and Giovanetto, \textit{“The Higher Education of Gaming.”} March 2008.
\textsuperscript{55}Lundblade, \textit{“Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams.”}
\textsuperscript{56}Apperley, \textit{“Virtual Unaustralia: Videogames and Australia’s Colonial History,”} 2006.
development and expert play—with the ludic-centered trajectory identified by Durga and Squire largely eschewing the historical connection (but still expanding the player’s capacity for counterplay) and the more grounded trajectory pursuing expertise directly as a route to historical exploration and counterplay.

These genres (and their productive practice) offer up an additional lens for analysis: both AARs and DARs can be viewed as emblematic paratexts—texts which surround the main text, transforming how audiences interact and engage with them; in the case of digital games, paratexts such as AARS and DARs present not just a literary and historical practice to be analyzed in its own light, but also as a crucial window into individual play—and without such paratexts, this game narrative “cannot be analyzed as it lasts only as long as the game is played and is available when each action in the game is performed or played out.”57 Entangled as they are within the assemblages of literary production, historical understanding, and community expectations, these paratexts nonetheless offer a critical view into transitory and isolated play experiences which are largely hidden from outside analysis.58 Like live streaming and LPs, AARs/DARs allow for mediated access of transitory play; thus, analysis of these practices together can provide opportunities to analyze this mediated play through the varied forms and affordances which characterize the assemblages in which they are embedded.

58 Consalvo (2017) provides an important critique of the varying disciplinary tendencies to emphasize games-as-texts vs. paratexts within a particular analytical context, arguing for a more flexible approach that better accounts for the sort of inversions/emphases identified in the author’s chosen case studies. This work serves as an important precursor for this project, which aims to heed this call for flexibility in textual emphasis. See: Mia Consalvo, “When Paratexts Become Texts: De-Centering the Game-as-Text,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 34, no. 2 (2017): 177–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1304648.
Frequently, as several scholars have noted, trajectories of expertise development and expert play dovetail with other practices which entail a deeper contestation of the game’s design and underlying arguments; as scholarship has identified, this contestation may even lead to substantive changes to the game against the desires of the original designers. Thus, this next practice—game modification—is nominally player-driven, but also frequently entails appropriating and contesting the role of designer/author itself.

**Game Modification (Modding)**

One of the earliest distinct practices identified in historical games literature, modding refers to the common practice of modifying some aspect of a given game; this usually take place through changes applied through the game’s software code or an exposed API. Through modding, players can not only adjust facets of the game to suit their individual needs, but distribute this altered version of the game to subsets of the playerbase. Within the purview of historical game studies, mods have been located in several key contexts: as a mechanism for contesting authoritative historical positioning,\(^5^9\) a pedagogical practice found in developing historical expertise through play,\(^6^0\) a form of historical reenactment,\(^6^1\) and as a site for exploring community-articulated ideals and understandings of science,\(^6^2\) all of these approaches position modding as a practice which exists between a particular artifact and specific community. While much of this

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scholarship successively emphasizes and valorizes the role of modding and mods, some non-scholarly work has also emphasized the pitfalls of this empowering practice, examining how some political extremists use mods to articulate propagandistic histories and racially-charged futures.\textsuperscript{63} For any contemporary study of historical engagement through play, modding represents one of the key initial practices to identify. In addition, it is worthwhile to note that the emancipatory power of modding and mod creation is materially constrained, to varying degrees, by the game constructs made available for modding (as contrasted with the game systems which cannot effectively be modified or adjusted); in many genres, such as grand strategy games, this can result in central ideological tenets tied to eurocentrism and colonialism that cannot be erased or meaningfully adjusted by mods.\textsuperscript{64}

While modding represents a mixed player- and designer-driven practice, still other clusters of practices are more accurately characterized as a dichotomous pairing of designer-driven and player-driven practices in tandem. These practices largely center around achievements, which provide scholars with a complex designer-driven metagame (which can be analyzed to better understand the designer’s own goals) as well as a site for player-driven response.

\textit{Achievement Metagaming}

Achievements—and their counterparts, trophies—are overlapping subtypes of digital badges which represent a well-defined motif in contemporary gaming; they exist specific combinations of ludic goals and rewards, which—when aggregated into sets tied to specific games—form a

\textsuperscript{63}Winkie, “The Struggle Over Gamers Who Use Mods To Create Racist Alternate Histories.”

competitive metagame surrounding the initial game. While the distinction between achievement and trophy is largely based upon platform nomenclature, this analysis centers on Steam and digital PC gaming platforms, where achievement is the dominant term. Thus, I use the term achievement to characterize this particular sort of badging-based metagame. Here, achievements are included first as a metagame—a “game outside the game”; a system explicitly layered on the initial artifact—and secondly as play practices which, enabled by the presence of the achievement metagame, allow participants to move between game, metagame, and history. Scholarship on achievements is largely rooted in broader pedagogical contexts not specifically tied to history, with some recent work beginning to extend typologies of achievement systems into the assemblage of historical engagement. This work asserts how achievements, viewed as a layer of ludic incentives, can complicate the historiographic affordances characterizing the form of historical games, and how analysis of achievements as aggregate metagames can suggest designer/developer approaches to assessing and understanding historical play. As part of the ethnographic approach which seeks to “follow the artifact,” examining the achievement metagame is essential for characterizing any contemporary assemblage of historical play.

As I have argued elsewhere (2021), achievements (and any such practices tied to them) must be considered in their dual role. First, they should be examined as an extra-telic metagame provided by the initial designers which can incentivize differing relationships with the game and the history it purports to represent; this represents a set of practices located close to the initial design end of the spectrum. Second, they can be considered as a site for player-driven responses to game and metagame itself (a site with some useful quantitative data sources which can position such an exploration).

Methodology

For this project, I sought to understand how history is understood, invoked, and interwoven throughout play and discussions of play surrounding a selected historical game—Crusader Kings III. For the uninitiated: CK3 is the latest (third) entry in the Crusader Kings series, a grand strategy game developed and produced by Paradox Interactive (PDX), a game studio located in Stockholm, Sweden (and also the developer/publisher for several other notable digital historical game series). CK3, as a grand strategy game, places the player into a medieval simulation which interweaves roleplaying game (RPG) elements alongside more abstracted strategic wargame-esque gameplay; attempting to reflect certain medieval political realities, the player is thrust into the dual role of political entity and particular individual together, and must navigate choices situated in the strategic wargame context (e.g. “how do I prevent the invasion of my realm by a

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69Lundblade, “Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams.”
numerically superior neighbor’s military?”) as well as choices within the more explicitly RPG contexts (e.g. “should the heir to my kingdom marry the princess from my belligerent neighbor’s ruling family, or do I marry her to an internal ally in order to shore up internal support?”). The interweaving of these choices comes to a point (often that of a knife) when considering the all-important issue of succession; when the player avatar dies, the player takes control of their heir—usually the child of the former ruler who meets certain shifting criteria within the game’s simulated cultural and legal structure. This system overlaps with inheritance, which determines how the possessions of the deceased are distributed between the new player avatar and eligible non-player characters (NPCs). Thus, the play of CK3 is largely centered around navigating the interwoven concerns of medieval polities as states and the dynastic noble families through which this power is constituted. In a regular play session of CK3, players make decisions about marriage, friendship, rivalry, and intimate political violence alongside choices between resource investment—currency as well as more reputational amalgams such as piety, renown, and prestige—and conducting large-scale actions such as wars and the titular Crusades.

The choice of CK3 was driven by several important methodological considerations. First, CK3’s release was well-timed with my dissertation schedule; CK3 was released initially in September of 2020, which gave me ample time to examine the game—from the perspective of a player (crucial for any participatory approach) as well as that of a scholar—prior to the dissertation.

71Specifically, I was able to publish two scholarly works specifically examining Crusader Kings III prior to conducting my dissertation study: Lundblade, “Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams”; Lundblade, “Crowning Achievements: A Historiouludic Analysis of the Achievement Metagame in Historical Simulation Games,” 2021. Additionally, my previous work with related titles formed a crucial basis for this early analysis, which carries over into preparation for dissertation work in this context: Kirk Lundblade, “How the West (Was) Won: Unit Operations and Emergent Procedural Rhetorics of Colonialism in Europa Universalis IV,” Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds 11, no. 3 (October 1, 2019): 251–70, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.11.3.251_1; Kirk Lundblade, “Oops We Did It Again: Problematizing Climate Change
selection. Subsequently, I sought a title with a large playerbase with broad longevity—the former to undergird the impact of answering my study’s site-specific concerns and the latter to improve the probability that the community in question would persist in some meaningful form through the full expected duration of the study. Given my experience with previous titles produced by the same developer/publisher, Paradox Interactive (PDX), I could also reasonably expect that CK3 would follow a similar release pattern wherein a length post-release content production schedule—coupled with a close family of related titles and a loyal, segmented fanbase—would likely improve the longevity of the study population. CK3’s popularity was instrumental as well—the game had sold over 1 million copies on Steam within the first two months of its release, with over 3 million units sold by the end of this study. Preliminary examination of potential community sites also indicated high levels of activity, with the official subreddit ranking in the top 1% of all subreddits in terms of subscriber base; this, coupled with numerous and well-supported paratextual sites present in community discourse and activity, ensured the sort of rich and heterogenous transmedia landscape desired. CK3 also fit well within the scholarly context of historical games research—CK3 is a popular title with popular predecessor

Chapter 4 delves specifically into the temporal schema and consequences of CK3’s particular content release approach. Chapter 5 also follows this analysis up with a more formal framing of the schema emerging throughout this study: the importance of considering this sort of system of production (particularly as a component of the game’s mode) in the analysis of historical games.  
The site-specific terminology used here is further contextualized and explained in Chapter 3, which centers this and related reddit subdivisions, as well as Appendix A, which features a full glossary of relevant terminology.  
and sibling titles that have received some scholarly attention, but not to the same degree as (perhaps overly) examined series such as *Sid Meier’s Civilization*.\(^{76}\) Finally, *Crusader Kings* has been specifically highlighted and examined for its community ties to extremist groups and their radicalization efforts\(^{77}\)—a significant and obvious potential use for historical engagement that this study would want to potentially include within the sites examined. The game’s medieval(ist) historical grounding also provided rich scholarly context for scrutinizing linkages between medievalism and extremism in digital games in this context, as well as for its prominent bridge between explicit historical grounding and pseudo-medieval fantasy elements.\(^{78}\) This selection provides the central site for this study, and—critically—informsthe project’s data collection and analytical processes.

To develop a deep, ground-level understanding historical engagement in this context, I chose to conduct a mixed-methods study using discourse analysis and grounded theory in order to build this depth of understanding and engagement. While the project began with a wide scope of

\(^{76}\)As I have argued elsewhere (2020), *Sid Meier’s Civilization* (Civ) represents by far the most studied series in historical games scholarship; two of my previous works specifically aimed to bridge discussion of Civ with *CK3* in order to take advantage of this scholarly asymmetry for future study. See: Lundblade, “Civilizing Civilization (and Beyond)”; Lundblade, “Crowning Achievements: A Historioludic Analysis of the Achievement Metagame in Historical Simulation Games,” 2021; Lundblade, “Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams.”


\(^{78}\)Two of the most popular modifications for *CK3* are *Elder Kings*, which transitions *CK3*’s European medieval context into that of the popular series *The Elder Scrolls*, and the *Game of Thrones* mod (which performs the same role for the popular transmedia franchise *Game of Thrones*). Both are examples of what are known as ‘total conversion mods,’ which serve an important ecological niche in gaming spaces: game developers are presented with significant legal barriers to any attempts to ground their games in settings owned by other legal entities, so community-produced game modifications represent a route by which developers can support these conversions (increasing the popularity and playerbase of their core game) without running into legal trouble. During the study’s autoethnographic visit to PDXCON in Stockholm, the importance of this unofficial-but-prominent link between mod developers and PDX developers became clear: several mod publishers professed receiving unofficial support from developers when attempting to produce said mods.
potential sites for data collection, early engagement across multiple sites led—as anticipated during the project’s planning phase—to a narrowing and refinement process that saw the full list of sites drawn down to three primary sites: CK3 itself, the Paradox Interactive official CK3 forum, and the small collection of Reddit sub-communities centered around Crusader Kings. Several minor sites—including in the study’s initial IRB scope—were still incorporated, but in a more minor role: promotional materials for CK3 were drawn from YouTube, official CK3 communication was sampled from Twitter/X, the official wiki was sampled for its public-facing documentation of CK3, and the evolving game and metagame were accessed and assessed within the Steam platform and its attendant metagame systems. Additionally, a small auto-ethnographic component was conducted while attending the Publisher’s annual convention, PDXCON, in Stockholm during September of 2022. Largely, these minor sites served as paratexts incorporated into my analysis of community praxis and as a form of paradigmatic corroboration alongside elements drawn from the primary sites.

The data collection period ran from February of 2022 through February of 2024. Site selection aimed to follow the approach laid out by Boellstorff et al. (2012), seeking to “follow the artifact” was used to define the maximal scope of potential sites—with Crusader Kings III as the central artifact in question. Any public, any open online community incorporating play or play

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79Up through 2019 this was an annual convention, but the global exigencies of 2020 disrupted this annual pattern in predictable fashion. As of February 2024, the 2022 PDXCON was the only conference held since the last pre-pandemic 2019 conference.

80 See Appendix B for the full list of major and minor sites alongside the associated methods and time periods for data collection.

81 The exception being play of CK2 and CK3. I began playing CK2 informally for years before the beginning of this study, in addition to playing CK3 since its release in the fall of 2020. Preliminary examination and analysis of CK3 (via play) thus predates this study—and will likely postdate it as well.

discussions about CK3 that was accessible to the researcher and based in English-language discourses was initially considered at this level. In narrowing site selection, the project chose to emphasize two primary sites which featured comparable datasets for collection (e.g. posts, replies, and metadata), but whose platform architecture and associated culture are drawn from different eras of digital technologies. To this end, I selected a group of subreddits—associated with the pre-web 2.0 content sharing platform reddit paired alongside the official PDX forum, exemplar of the popular Bulletin Board Site (BBS) pattern popular amongst earlier digital communities.

Ethnographic study of comparable digital cultures—particularly those surrounding digital historical games—has limited scholarly precedent, with Owens (2011) examining modder discourse surrounding science and Firaxis’ Sid Meier’s Civilization series. This work, notably, follows Squire and Giovanetto’s (2008) key study of the Apolyton University expert player community, which tracked the knowledge growth and community structure of an educational community centered around improving player knowledge of Sid Meier’s Civilization III. Forums and social communities have played a key role in all three central arguments for the validity of the historical game studies field, with the above scholars integrating historical game communities to articulate a utilitarian value for the field via emphasis on informal pedagogical potential. Further scholarly analysis locates historical game communities as pivotal elements to the historiographic argument as well, locating key player practices, such as counterfactual play.

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83Owens, “Modding the History of Science.”
and analogous historiographic praxis in such communities. While the initial selection of sites was drawn from my personal experience with the game and its community, the final scope and configuration was the result of the continual and iterative analytical process described below.

Data collection across all archival and participant observation sites consisted of the following elements: for the two primary sites, initial collection was programmatically conducted via custom python scripts, which pulled post and comment data and metadata for the daily top posts in each community. After the initial run underwent the snapshot analysis detailed in my (2023) work, participant observation and archival work blended intermittent daily interaction with more visual data collection via screen snapshots. For secondary sites (i.e. reddit, YouTube, PDX forum, and Twitter), collection entirely consisted of comparable screenshot collection via intermittent engagement via web interface. For the autoethnographic observations as well as direct engagement with the central artifact, data collected consisted of written notes—condensed into later analytical memos during analysis—as well as game screenshots and creative narrations produced during the participatory process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this project was conducted via the grounded theory method (GTM) and augmented by a form of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). With grounded

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85 Apperley, “Modding the Historian’s Code: Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination,” 2013; Apperley, “Virtual Unaustralia: Videogames and Australia’s Colonial History,” 2006; Webber, “Public History, Game Communities and Historical Knowledge.”

theory, collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously, part of the “iterative process of moving back and forth between empirical data and emerging analysis [which] makes the collected data progressively more focused and the analysis successively more theoretical.”

Combined with theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and category saturation (Jane Hood’s three distinguishing features of GTM), these aspects formed the centerpiece of my methodological approach: the concurrent coding and analysis of data—conducted from the outset—which proceeded under constant comparison until saturation was achieved. Coding and memo writing followed Saldana (2021) as well as Corbin and Strauss (2015) respectively.

The combined hybrid approach involved periodic use of python scripts to scrape the web for the relevant entries within the targeted sites; initial collection via python enabled durable archives of discourse amidst sites wherein content exists in a perpetual state of flux, modifiable by users, moderators, and administrators over time. Early interactions—prior to developing the critical heuristics discussed in Chapter 3—took on a more structured form, as I reviewed the top ten posts from each site on a daily basis, coding each according to the “in vivo”—and ultimately process coding—schemas as characterized by Saldana (2021). This post coding occurred alongside more freeform notetaking which became the analytic memos as characterized by Corbin & Strauss (2015). Initially, such memos generally centered specific posts, their related codes, or blocks of comments in relation to a post or post code, but as the analytical process

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Bryant and Charmaz, The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory, 1.

Bryant and Charmaz, 13.


Saldaña, The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers.
progressed, these memos became more abstracted and synthetically-oriented endeavors aiming to distill—via CTDA—the emics and etics of historical reference in community engagement. Concurrent with this later-stage analytic abstracting, data collection also took on a more unstructured and purposive bent, with periodic daily engagements with specific sites, subreddits, or aggregate feeds alongside play, analysis of the play metagame, or exploration of paratextual elements found via analytic process to be relevant to community action. Whereas early memoranda asked “what implicit assumptions about the nature of history might be assumed in this particular snippet of conversation?” or “how does this use of specific terminology align with implicit or explicit historical reference?”, later memoranda sought to establish the nature and boundaries of historical, ludic, and historioludic code-switching in community discourse, how the community policed and established its own boundaries of membership, and how play discourse was entangled with paratextual artifacts produced downstream from the immediate play experience.

The goal of GTM with CTDA was the production of new theory capable of framing digital communities’ historical engagement within an interdisciplinary scholarly context. The project’s research questions presupposed an identifiable separation between historical engagement and reference versus an ahistoric (and often explicitly ludic) discursive framing; this supposition is well supported by extant research on other historical gaming communities, but required contextual validation within the study population. Attendant to grounded theory’s de novo

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emphasis, early coding on the programmatic datasets prioritized developing codes alongside categorical distinctions, with the historical code’s rules for inclusion undergoing a separate analytical synthesis which attempted to distill aggregate inclusion criteria for historical codes into comparable categorical criteria; the fruits of this particular labor are discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Categorical synthesis for historicization and historical engagement drove the project’s overall focus on textual discourse over visual, and explicit, emic framings tied to attendant discursive signifiers—a focus on discursive content over issues of circulation, visibility, and governance which is rooted in identifiable processes of signification and meaning-making. This served to then de-emphasize differential platform affordances between the two primary sites, as well as to emphasize discourses which had themselves been elevated via co-mediation between communal actors and platform actants. This emphasis on co-mediation incorporates consideration of the central artifact back into the community, treating Crusader Kings III itself as an evolving actant shaping relevant communal discourse via the agentive restrictions imposed by what Chapman (2016) calls the (hi)story-play-space. The resultant community described should thus be understood as one coextensive between both actors and actants in the assemblage, and the discourses identified as hegemonic, but non-ubiquitous, expressions of communal interest. This view of the proverbial forest should not be mistaken for one of the trees.

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From CTDA the project drew its emphasis on “material and semiotic complexities, framed by the extant offline cultural and social practices its users engage in as they use these digital artifacts.”93 The project’s focus on history—narrative distinguished from fiction by, as Trouillot (1995) characterizes, “collectivities [experienced] need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters to them whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction.”94—requires an approach which considers imbricate cultures and identifies as crucial facets of studied discourse. Additionally, as a study which combines discourse about play with play itself, CTDA’s ability to “simultaneously interrogate culture and technology as intertwined concepts” motivates the interweaving of critical analysis of game, play, and platform into the collectivity I characterize95—building on Taylor (2009)’s assemblage of play—as the historical assemblage of play.96 This project attends carefully to Brock’s call for “interrogation of power relations, in order to tease out the connections between them” to be accomplished via the incorporation of “any critical cultural theoretical framework, as long as the same critical cultural approach is applied to the semiotics of the information and communication technology (ICT) hardware and software under examination and the discourses of its users”;97 the critical cultural framework substituted here is historiographic, drawing primarily upon Michel Rolf-Trouillot’s emphasis on, as Hazel Carby observes, “strategies for countering inequalities of power in knowledge of the past.”98 Through this emphasis Trouillot develops conceptions of power, silence, and their coconstitutive roles in the historical process that this

94Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 11.
95Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 1012.
96Taylor, “The Assemblage of Play.”
98Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, xiii.
study locates within the game, metagames, platforms, and discourses observed. Divergence from CTDA also occurred along important lines, with data collection processes emphasizing discourses which have themselves been highlighted by gamic and platform actants, producing a limited engagement with discourses silenced by or outside of platform affordances in favor of examining these intra-platform hegemonic discourses which elevate silences and absences as part of the “mangle of play” observed in historical contestation. The result of this framing is a collection of chapters which attempt to link particular threads of literature, site, method, and findings into a collective and cohesive whole which attends to this full range of concerns.

Chapter Summaries

The subsequent chapters in this dissertation are organized thematically, following the analytical approach developed over the course of the study. Chapter 2 explores the core artifact at the heart of the study, Crusader Kings III (CK3). In this chapter, I used early examination of the community and game together as a window for building the analysis itself, tying play patterns identified in my play and the play of others to a unique dual diegetic positionality offered by the game. This dual diegesis is rooted first in the game’s genre legacy, with each position exemplifying a particular strand of genre heritage—and thus importing a collection of historioludic signifiers linked to play patterns and culture—that are visible in the complex play narratives produced within the community. Through the combination of god-game diegesis and the more embodied noble avatar’s diegesis, players are provided the opportunity to reject, embrace, or ignore historicization at one level whilst making an entirely different choice at the

other: a common pattern found in play discourse sees the god-diegesis serving as a sort of RPG game master (GM), manipulating geopolitical events in order to facilitate more salacious or engaging narratives at the level of the embodied ruler; in the language of Dungeons & Dragons: taking on the role of GM and Player simultaneously. These and other play patterns echo outward into community discourse, shaping the possibility space for historical engagement with CK3 in profound ways.

Chapter 3 moves deeper into the communal context, centering the first of my two primary sites: the Crusader Kings community’s Reddit presence. In this chapter, I discuss the heuristic developed early in the study to quickly identify community discourse which appears to be engaging in the sort of historicization that Q1 aims to address. In addition, I introduce the two primary discursive modalities which overlapped with historical engagement identified during the study—evaluative critique and play narration—and their taxonomic overlap with said historical engagement. With this structure in place, I also incorporate discussion of the developer’s design practices and how they overlap with the discourse and historicization identified herein. The result considers the impact of the Games-as-a-Service paradigm (a cyclical, iterative process) alongside a more cyclical model of iterative historical production; the combination provide a powerful explanatory framework for the particularities of historical engagement via critique and roleplay both—with offline identities providing motivation and legitimation for online play discourse in a manner that renders visible the tensions between different (predominantly offline) collectivities with divergent or oppositional historicizing processes and perspectives.

Chapter 4 reframes community and game along a more temporal paradigm, examining how the version of Crusader Kings I played prior to—and at the beginning of—this study compares and
contrasts with the version available today. Community critique and contestation is thus considered in this context, with community members arguing for changes to both the game and the metastructural process of its agglutinate design modality. This communal contestation requires players to develop their own methods of analyzing the game and its constellation of hegemonic practices we might call its dominant or preferred readings; my analysis attempts to distill and interrogate this collection of heuristics into a communal decoding praxis that details not only how players read power and control amidst ludic production, but how they align themselves alongside, in opposition to, or orthogonally away from this reading. I show here how players’ historiographic positioning occurs alongside and within a complex structure of GaaS-driven iteration that provides predictable and periodic opportunities for participants to position themselves relative to proposed, defined, recent, past, or wholly imagined changes to CK3. The particulars of this engagement pattern reveal an effort by developers and (some of the) players to bend the proverbial arc of CK3 away from its eurocentric initial framing towards one that is more inclusive of more regional identities and histories not centered in the initial release. This, finally, fully problematizes the notion of analyzing CK3 as a fixed artifact of any sort; asserting a more appropriate perspective rooted in the consideration of mode—including viewing/playing practices and the particular exigencies of production—as integral to the process.

Finally, chapter 5 discusses the significance of my findings, seeking to place the play practices and patterns observed here as contributions to scholarship’s broader understanding of digital cultures and play practices. I reintroduce the historiographic provocation central to Historical Game Studies scholarship—the discursive repartee between Hayden White and Robert Rosenstone over the historiographic implications of the (at the time) new media of historical
film—in order to frame a conversation about the limitations of form as the scope for assessing these particular anxieties. This leads into a discussion of how this project moved from scholarly grammars and tools rooted in consideration of form to those suited to assessment of mode—in effect, the operationalization of historical game studies’ terminology and grammar for the purposes of wider-scoped assessments of cultures of play. This I term Historioludic Discourse Analysis, an approach synthesized out of each previous chapter’s contribution to the overall goals of the study.
CHAPTER TWO: WHAT IS A KING TO A GOD(-HISTORIAN)?: THE
DIEGETIC HISTORICIZED EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CRUSADER KINGS

III

“…and that was to exterminate them all. I went through the list of all characters within the realm, imprisoning and executing every single human there- and since I controlled the entire map, anyone who avoided imprisonment couldn’t flee to another realm but just had to stay while I tried again and again until I managed to arrest them. Since Horse children and Western European human children share the same portraits, I also had to execute every child with at least one human parent- and for good measure, I executed every pregnant mare married to a human or not married at all to make sure none were carrying their children. Harsh measures, and ones that made literally everyone hate me, but absolutely necessary. Just call me Joseph Stallion.”

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Crusader Kings III (CK3), the central artifact of the assemblage of historical play constructed in this project, is commonly approached first not through play, but through play narrative.101 In examining both the CK community and the central artifact, this project argues that play narrative (and its particular complexities) is the crucial explanatory entry point for understanding the links

101 The Crusader Kings (CK) series discourse examined in this project features a prominent subset centered entirely around sharing narratives drawn out of the poster’s (presumed) play experience. While one might reasonably expect the broad range of discourse centered around video games to discuss relevant game narrative, the CK community raises these play narrations into a central position in community discourse. Contemporary CK players, in a manner commonly related to narratives of addiction and subcultural initiation, often recount particular play narratives—delivered via personal acquaintances or digital affordance—as their motivational entry point into the community.
between game, play, community, and broader historicization. Here, the primacy of narrative construction serves as a throughline connecting platform affordances, community culture, historical and historiographic engagement, game and series design, as well as genre lineage into a discursive context dominated by dual—often dueling—diegetic positions used in play narration to contextualize, sensationalize, and (often) historicize the series’ play. Abstracting from the dual diegesis, the central metaphor of dueling duality will persist throughout this project’s explanatory framework. Examples are crucial: before working through the scholarly background for this analysis, we first introduce and examine two examples of communal play narrative, each claiming oppositional collections of signifiers within the game community’s (di/ex)egotical play space.

Our first example might strike the uninitiated reader as unusual. It begins with a king, naturally; but it involves a very different sort of crusade than you might be imagining. You see, this king (the king of Nantes) was most definitely horsing around: after 867 C.E., his (human) Norse enclave in Brittany took on a decidedly equestrian flair, as horses gradually replaced humans in the ranks of the realm’s titled nobility. With a strong stable of willing quadrupedal nobles, the mane thrust of the dynasty became, naturally, to conquer. The foalishness of their neighbors could no longer be tolerated, and thus the Empress Rainbow Dash galloped across Europe in order to reform the broken Roman Empire under her iron hoof. To rule Rome, the dynasty had gone from Norse to Horse in less than a century.¹⁰² This particular story is told through a jocular first-person narrative perspective that begins with a clear objective and then steps through

strategic thought processes and succession of outcomes that ultimately produced the narrator’s goal: to transform one of the game’s historicized dynasties into one ruled not by humans, but by equine nobility.

Our second example stakes out a very different discursive space. It begins in media res with the self-styled Fédération des Communes de France, a collection of peasant communes ruled by the Né du Soleil dynasty for nearly three centuries. This noble line is traced back to the Countess Joan of Orléans, a peasant rebel who founded this dynastic line following acquisition of the county title. Through a broad-ranging articulation of regional history that moves between political maps of counties, duchies, and kingdoms as well as the history of particular cultural signifiers, the present polity’s position in the late medieval period is historically contextualized via voice and structure resembling a typified historian. Through this play narration, a collection of French peasant communes are narratively emplotted within French history in a manner that is simultaneously historically resonant and dissonant, with multifaceted anachronisms woven throughout the counterfactual narrative carefully placed within a liminal historical space.103

These two examples are, quite obviously, very different approaches to Crusader Kings; history is playfully rejected and courted in both, though via entirely divergent discursive modes. One invokes a scholarly and dispassionate voice that performs objective clarity even as it clearly

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103 As of writing, Paradox Interactive’s other (non-CK3) active entries in their flagship historical series are: 2013’s Europa Universalis IV (EU4), 2016’s Hearts of Iron IV (HoI4), and the more recent Victoria III (2022). Together with CK3 these titles cover a continuous historical timeline ranging from 867 C.E. to the late 1950s. Community mods exist which allow players to continue their campaigns through each of these titles in succession via save conversion. Another title, Imperator: Rome (2019) is positioned in the period prior to CK3 and also features a save converter allowing a transition to CK3, but there exists a significant chronological gap between these two titles. See: “CK3”; “Europa Universalis IV,” PC[Steam], Europa Universalis (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, August 13, 2013); “Victoria III,” PC[Steam], Victoria (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, October 25, 2022); “Imperator: Rome,” PC[Steam] (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, April 25, 2019).
points to careful scholarly mimicry—positioning the author as historian even while effacing their own presence, while the other centers the narrator as a player, whose narrative legitimacy is instead grounded in their knowledge of game mechanics and meme culture—history is highlighted here only as a target for annihilation, with the clear ahistoricity of equine dominance demonstrating consummate skill. Upon one axis, however, the two narratives are closely positioned—the paired narrative framings bound the line between diegesis and exegesis closely on either side in a manner that, for a brief moment, reveals its precise location.\textsuperscript{104}From here, however, a missing diegetic perspective is revealed: the player as character—as (a)historical actor—is nowhere to be found. It is this absence—unremarkable in related Paradox Interactive (PDX) titles such as \textit{Europa Universalis IV} (EU4) and \textit{Victoria III} (V3) —that is significant within the context of \textit{CK3}.\textsuperscript{105}

Here is a third example, one located within the author’s own personal history. On a 6-hour drive from New Orleans, racing a hurricane the whole way, my grad school colleague told me the following tale: how the unified kingdoms of Ireland and Norway—united in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century C.E. under an ancient pagan dynasty—threw back the waves of militant Aztec invaders who washed across Europe in a display of counterfactual pre-/post-colonial fury. This story had many chapters, and it told the story of a storied and historically grounded dynasty which had

\textsuperscript{104}In a manner reminiscent of the Squeeze Theorem undoubtedly familiar to any student of introductory calculus. Like calculus, this chapter might also test the Limit of the reader’s patience.

\textsuperscript{105}I frequently refer to PDX titles as a meaningful grouping because (a) overwhelmingly, the developer-publisher’s releases all fit within the same broad genre of grand strategy game; additionally, (b) players of PDX titles tend to signal identification with PDX titles (as a meaningful grouping) as part of their personal identity and communal participation. In other words, this is a distinction relevant to game studies and more formal analysis as well as the emic perspective offered by ethnographic assessment of the community. For a deeper exploration, see the relevant ecological discussion of PDX in Chapter 1. Additionally, recent work by Ylva Grufstedt (2022) engages with the particulars of Paradox Interactive as a meaningful and material grouping for their attendant in-house historical game titles: Grufstedt, \textit{Shaping the Past}. 

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assiduously fought the inexorable encroachment of Catholicism well before it faced the Nahuatl
would-be colonial forces. The story contained enough sex, lies, murder, and incest to fill the
needs of any soap opera. It was the story of a historicized dynasty, counterfactual nation,
salacious cast of anachronistic characters, and (de)motivated grad student all in one. Its telling
required explanations of medieval primogeniture, Norse blood sacrifice, the weirder parts of
Chaucer, as well as the history of Aztec sports—all articulated through interchangeable
historicized and algorithmic contexts mediated by a mutual encyclopedic knowledge of reddit
memes. In this story, the lives and perspectives of the characters—treated in a soap operatic
fashion—took center stage, with the collective story weaving their perspectives into the sort of
dynastic tale which is now broadly recognizable in the pop culture context provided by Game of
Thrones.

The complex and interrelated positionality of these three examples serves as a critical
introduction to this chapter’s argument: that CK3’s hybrid genre heritage—split between
simulationist strategy titles rooted in wargaming and more directly fantastical RPG elements—
provides a crucial lens through which the game’s complex diegesis can be explored. I argue that
play, counterplay, and play discourse in CK3 is continually bound up in a dualist diegetic
position that provides players with complex mechanisms for engaging with or rejecting the
game’s historical signifiers, and that consideration of this complexity is essential to
understanding both the game and the communities surrounding it. In the core sections of this

106 Assiduously avoiding his dissertation in play and the hurricane in the retelling. The attentive reader might
suspect, as the famed digital sage @dril once noted, that this whole thing smacks of gender. We’ll get to that.
107 The sort of tale that typically requires a captive audience and/or a very loquacious interlocutor.
108 While both extant televised Game of Thrones series are applicable, it is the more-recent House of the Dragon that
takes this sort of character-based but dynastic perspective.
chapter I’ll illustrate how the dual diegesis of CK3, read through both story and play, has clear implications for how players relate to themselves and others not just as player or narrator, but as an entwined yet divergent pair of actors. Under this approach, the gordian knot of contradictions which stymie the (comparatively) simple lens of unidimensional historicization are more fruitfully disentangled, revealing how players are enabled, encouraged, and empowered to simultaneously reject and embrace historicity in configurations which meet their rhetorical needs within the assemblage of historical play. In particular, the framing reveals how the constant movement between deific and embodied diegesis encourages a more immanent consideration of the relationship between historical actors and narrators—in effect an affordance that encourages players to pursue their desired form of historiographic resonance. In order to accomplish all of this, the chapter blends and intertwines several strands of scholarship in its effort to connect—in the context of CK3—the study of games to the study of play.

This scholarly framing begins with early scholarship which attended to the anxieties associated with simulation, signification, and historical play; it continues on through an examination of the paired genre lineages—each exemplifying one of the core diegetic positions—which converge in the context of Crusader Kings.

109 By actor and narrator I am referring to Trouillot’s framing of historical engagement modalities—though, as this chapter explores exhaustively, CK players are by no means committed to historical engagement via any one of these modalities.


111 As part of this chapter’s work, further play narrations will be presented which attempt to more closely model the sort of narrations offered up in a site-specific context. In the spirit of this project’s ethnographic approach, these examples are drawn from play sessions conducted by the author during the project.
Background: CK3 and Historical Game Studies

Positioning CK3 within a historical assemblage of play first requires an initial examination of CK3 itself, with the blended genres assigned to the game serving to guide the selection of relevant scholarship.112 The first and most salient of such associations is, of course, its status as a historical game.113 Extant research on historical games—including research examining analog and digital wargames as well as historically grounded approaches to modeling & simulation—provides a critical starting point for this study. We begin with the relatively new field of historical game studies, which examines “what it might mean for the past to be represented and most importantly, played with, in the game form;”114 this field largely emerged out of two early strands of scholarship—one centered on media criticism and the other out of growing interest in the potential utility of historical games in education.115 Out of these disparate works, early

112 As I argue throughout this work, there is a strong link between common contemporary genre associations, marketing language, community discourse, and developer response. Particularly for historical games, genre is also commonly interrogated within extant scholarship.

113 In defining what constitutes a historical game, I align with McCall (2016) in drawing upon two major established definitions. In the first, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007) narrowly define historical games under two criteria: where ‘historical’ is defined to be best understood as a setting which has “a manifest effect on the game experience” and which “has to begin at a clear point in real world history” (p. 204). A broader definition is provided by Chapman, Foka, and Westin (2017), who define historical games as “games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it.” (p. 5). We can clearly place CK3 well within both definitions. While this is a viable approach to begin with in this chapter, chapter 3 will problematize this collective centering of setting over mechanics in historicizing video games. See: Jeremiah McCall, “Teaching History With Digital Historical Games: An Introduction to the Field and Best Practices,” Simulation & Gaming 47, no. 4 (August 2016): 517–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878116646693; Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, “Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?,” Rethinking History 21, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 358–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, “Controversies: Historicising the Computer Game.”


115 The move from more scoped media criticism to formal analysis is largely located in: William Uricchio, “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” in Handbook of Computer Game Studies, ed. J Raessens and J Goldstein, 2005, 327–38. Conversely, while substantive exploration of historical games and learning occurred prior, the most influential representative early work in this vein was: Kurt D Squire, “Replaying History: Learning World History Through Playing Civilization III” (Indiana University, 2004). For a more detailed analysis of the formation and constitutive elements of historical game studies as a field, see: Kirk Lundblade, “Civilizing Civilization (and
theorizing has evolved and progressed over the past two decades, providing numerous analytical tools and formal grammars capable of positioning historical games and their affordances relative to well-developed historiographic and epistemological commitments.

In his foundational monograph, Adam Chapman offers a critical framework for situating historical affordances relative to simulative approaches; following Uricchio’s earlier work, Chapman attempts to taxonomize and build an analytical grammar for examining the entanglement of genre and historicity in the context of digital and analog games. The ends of his spectrum map to a realist simulation style—typified by embodied actors, high audio-visual specificity, generally narrowed scope, and easily related to other audio-visual histories—as well as a conceptual simulation style—with generally disembodied actors, heavy abstraction of audio-

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117 Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016. The shadow of Baudrillard (and Saussurean semiotics more broadly) looms large over all scholarly discussions of simulation. For my source here see: Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Baudrillard’s prescient preoccupations presage precisely the discursive anxieties which emerge surrounding historical games.

118 Uricchio, “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” 2005. Unwilling to fully align the production of history with simulation, Uricchio instead separates simulation from representation (aligning simulation with procedurality) in his analysis. Uricchio’s choice is far from unique; games scholarship (even just historical games scholarship) admits an almost rhizomatic panoply of definitions for this core term. For this project, I highlight a bare few—Chapman, Uricchio, Baudrillard, and a smattering of others. For his part, Chapman does not articulate his usage in-depth, but instead argues that historical games naturally relate to conceptions of simulation found in both history and game studies scholarship and thus, in his context, is less in need of such rich conceptualization efforts (n. 117, p. 83). Nonetheless, his usage seems to align with Salen & Zimmerman’s early approach, which positions simulation as an essential facet of all digital games (as all such games can be viewed as modeling certain aspects of reality/lived experience). Conversely, Uricchio’s approach is better aligned with Bogost (2007), seeing procedurality (a rough correlate for historical simulation) as something with varying weightings rather than forms. This is simulation as process—one essential to both history and games. Quite separate is the concept of simulation as genre—one with its own material lineage, and typified affordances/associations. This chapter will touch on both, and as such will attempt to clearly foreground which usage is being employed. For background, see: Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004); Ian Bogost, Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016.
visual representations in favor of complex rule-driven ludic systems, broader scope oriented towards historical process, and are more aligned with extant conventional scholarly historical discourse. These categorized affordances map broadly to conventional genre elements, with first person shooter (FPS) and action-oriented titles found closer to the realist style and various strategy subgenres more aligned with the conceptual. Under this schema, differing simulative styles are entangled not just with genre, but with competing notions of historiography and historical epistemology.

This classificatory approach is further complicated by the long-running scholarly debate over the troubled relationship between simulation and reality within a ludic context; this discourse was notably litigated early by scholars of games and learning, who—leaning on Baudrillard and the Saussurean semiotics underlying his work—saw learner behavior which refused the educators’ desired signification in favor of a sort of historioludic simulacra precession. In these instances, players refused to connect the ludic signifier to a historical signified—treating game elements as only valid within the context of the game’s ludic systems and rejecting any possible influence via


120 The work of Kurt Squire is particularly salient for the study of historical games in this context; Squire identifies two divergent trajectories of learner expertise—one grounded in increasingly sophisticated historicization, the other in a form of play which rejected historical associations in form of a purely ludic approach. Squire is not alone in using Apolyton University as a case study for the entanglement of simulation, play, and historicity—Myers also examines AU (within a more explicitly Saussurean framework) and identifies prominent user behavior as producing meaning within a ludic context (and thus without any attention paid to the externally-desired signifieds that historical educators emphasize. For this and other scholarship examining AU, see: D Myers, “Bombs, Barbarians, and Backstories: Meaning-Making within Sid Meier’s Civilization,” in Virtual History, Real Fantasies, 2005; Stephen Downes, “Places to Go: Apolyton,” Innovate: Journal of Online Education 1, no. 6 (2005); Kurt Squire, “Designed Cultures,” in Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age, ed. Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kurt D. Squire and Levi Giovanetto, “The Higher Education of Gaming,” E-Learning and Digital Media 5, no. 1 (March 2008): 2–28, https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2008.5.1.2.
historical resonance or dissonance. This critique was not limited to just behavior; early analysis of simulation games located problematic divergences in the construction of the simulation itself—in particular, the process of black-boxing by which the obscuration of the simulation’s own materiality serves to obscure ideological commitments it implicitly or explicitly encodes. These entangled discursive anxieties admit a range of critical valence, with

121 The careful reader might note that my invocation of simulacrum here doesn’t perfectly align with Baudrillard’s; I am instead reading Baudrillard through an imagined perspective that treats reality as the breadth of history that exists outside the magic circle circumscribed by any particular game. Here’s an example: for a reconstructionist educator—who sees history as a practice for building 1-1 representations of the past—might critique game and player behavior based on a first-stage reading of the game as a (more or less) faithful image of an original past. For such an educator, the refusal of signification can be viewed as a retreat into the simulacrum. On the other hand, reconstructionists less sanguine re: historiography and digital games might view the whole historioludic project as a stage two perversion of reality and see the desired project of signification as a dual comparative between historical and historioludic signifiers and a shared signified; under this schema, semiotic severance might be viewed more kindly as an understandable (though insufficient) response to the perversion of reality. Conversely, an educator more aligned with post-structuralist historiography might instead view the rhetorical appeals to historical reality as a stage three elision of the absence of a consensus historical reality altogether, with semiotic severance serving as a correct/valid response to the game’s historicized reality-as-mirage (though it’s worth noting that most post-structuralist historiography stops well short of this sort of extreme position). In effect, I’d like to suggest that it’s no coincidence that strict reconstructionism offers the harshest view on semiotic refusal and simultaneously reflects the philosophical commitments most aligned with a certain pro-capitalist framing of games’ pedagogical value articulated via a particular vein of scholarship (see n. 123 for a particular example of this). Additionally, I’d suggest that the further one progresses towards the extremes of post-structuralism the more understandable this simulacrum-making play practice becomes. To return to Baudrillard: efforts to force historical signification seem to fit neatly into his argument that “the only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production.” Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994, 467.

122 Paul Starr, “Seductions of a Sim: Policy as a Simulation Game,” *The American Prospect* 5, no. 17 (1994): 19–29. Not just concerned with ideological skew, Starr locates simulation as a site for human cognition (with all its embodied cognitive implications e.g. Andy Clark), presciently noting “we shall be working and thinking in sim city for a long time” (p. 9). Considering that Will Wright, Sim City’s lead designer, based his simulative city model off of the widely-critiqued works of Jay Forrester (an MIT cyberneticist and the intellectual progenitor of system dynamics); the wide-ranging popularity of this game and its attendant urban model might seem somewhat distressing. As chapters 3 and 4 will attest, temporal distance works powerfully to solidify the elision of material context via black-boxing. This process of black-boxing is one of the central anxieties which emerges in scholarly analysis of the move from analog to digital wargames (which are functionally simulations of a very particular domain of human activity). In these debates procedurality is located entirely within computational metaphors, moving—as Jim Dunnigan (2000) frames it—from “wetware” to “hardware.” While there is much to say about the anxieties over this computational shift still privileging the computational metaphor for human cognition (in essence conceding the debate from the outset), this debate is outside the scope of this work. For an analysis of Forrester’s work in a simulative context, see: Matthew Wells, “Deliberate Constructions of the Mind: Simulation Games as Fictional Models,” *Games and Culture* 11, no. 5 (2016): 528–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015571182. For Dunnigan’s critical assessment of black-boxing across the analog/digital divide, see: James F Dunnigan, *Wargames Handbook, Third Edition*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press, 2000).
some positioning players and designers as aligned in an iteratively improving educational process, whereas others find a cynic’s wry optimism in the annihilatory clash between designers’ nefarious black-boxing efforts and players’ simultaneous incurious refusal to color within the semiotic lines. Critical to this debate is another key distinction: between the maximalist or minimalist stances on simulation as a process—a process present in analog and digital historical games to greater or lesser degrees—and that of simulation as genre—a set of socially constructed conventions for both design and play rooted in the material histories of the games, their players, and their equipment. Both framings impinge upon these central anxieties; formal analysis remains concerned with simulation-as-process’ entanglement with historical simulation and historiographic affordance, whilst simulation-as-genre centers rhetorical

123 James Paul Gee (2007) expresses this utopian sentiment well: “First, while I talk a good deal about actual video games, I really intend to be discussing the potential of video games. The games get better and more sophisticated all the time and at a rapid pace. Much of what I have to say here will simply get ‘truer’ as the games get yet better.” (p. 10, emphasis mine). Early scholarship on digital games and education often smuggles along several questionable premises, including an underlying spirit of techno-optimism, education as a pure social good, and capitalism as the source of value for both education and games. Even Uricchio (2005) invokes this utopian ideal (though he stops short of fully endorsing it): “Unlike film, computer game remakes are seen as improving with each iteration, pointing among other things to the very different relationship of each medium to its underlying technology” “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” 2005, 328. For more critiquing this phase of scholarship (and to revisit Gee’s desecration of Karl Marx), see: Lundblade, “What Video Games Have Taught Us: Two Decades of Gaming and Learning.” See also: Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy, 2007; Uricchio, “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” 2005.

124 See (n. 121). If, for example, the historical signification desired by educators consists of embracing revisionist historical narratives that simultaneously perverts historicization via the careful assemblage of facts (e.g. perverting a basic reality) and also denies the contingent and power-mediated discourse of history (e.g. an effort to mask the absence of a historical reality), then behavior that suggests a game-as-simulacra perspective might in some sense be seen as both liberatory and indicative of certain metacognitive facilities. In other words: if students are asked to use historical games to repackage idiotic “lost cause” narratives based on flimsy historiography and clear factual error, then a rejection of the entire project of signification might indicate good sense on their part. At the extreme end, failing to embrace this simulacra pattern might indicate a pedagogical failure—efforts made to critique the hypothetical game’s pedagogical and historiographic usage that still rests upon the idea that a real and objective history exists outside the game falls short of the desired matrix-style realization. Of course—for some reason—historians and history educators don’t seem to embrace this sort of extreme position.

125 As (n. 118) addresses, taxonomic approaches built upon simulation-as-process exist in some tension.

126 This is, of course, not an exhaustive description. It is also worth noting that these two framings are commonly invoked alongside each other (and by necessity have some key conceptual overlap)—simulation-as-genre naturally emphasizes simulation-as-process within the social context of design and play.
invocations of simulation alongside the expectations and agentive meaning-making of the players. Both are then often juxtaposed with the historically-articulated distance between signifier and signified found in particular games and their claimed referents.

Consideration of simulation as genre exacerbates these concerns, with the simulation genre’s central premise asserting “that the game is ‘authentic’ to the ‘real’ activity, that the game will be a relatively accurate simulation, which does not subsume the authenticity of the simulation entirely within the demands of entertainment [emphasis mine].”127 In simulation games as such, the primacy of entertainment and the instrumentality of the real is—at least rhetorically—inverted, with authenticity (as an emotive intermediary for the real) serving as a source of enjoyment, often in the deliberate absence of more typified notions of fun. 128 This appeal to a shared reality also invokes claims of objectivity not found in other titles—these simulation games are typified by a blended discourse which invokes notions of art, play, and triviality alongside appeals to a form of scientific rigor recognizable in early 20th century simulative praxis.129 Key in this articulation is the stated fidelity not to the real per se, but to authenticity as

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127 “Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres,” *Simulation & Gaming* 37, no. 1 (March 2006): 12, https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878105282278. This articulated fidelity to authenticity as a proxy for the real (both tied to and removed from historical context) has been the subject of a large body of scholarly work; it may, in fact, be the most urgent, prominent, and popular topic for historical games scholarship overall. For this chapter (per n. 118), the primary focus is on simulation as genre, the history of that genre, its role in the constitution and continuation of audience and audience culture, as well as how that might shape the push-and-pull of play in *Crusader Kings III* (which is quite enough for one chapter). For the more historiographic anxieties tied to digital games as a whole, see chapter 5.

128 In the author’s personal experience, the culture of hobbyist wargaming communities tends to exhibit this behavior pattern: complexity, difficulty, and an often-deliberate masochistic aversion to aesthetic detail serves as a deliberate schismogenic inversion of gaming norms.

129 The influential 20th century work on operations research conducted and published by the US Navy so crucial to the wargames which followed it begins stating “Operations research is a scientific method of providing executive departments with a quantitative basis for [decision-making];” this command and control modelling approach rooted in scientific rhetoric is echoed throughout later invocations of simulative fidelity in games. For the full source, see: Philip M. Morse and George E. Kimball, *Methods of Operations Research*, Dover Books on Mathematics (1946; repr., Minneola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 1. On some of the implications of this C&C philosophy, see:
an emotive intermediary; this selective authenticity is inextricably tied with the remediative influences that, mediated by genre affordances, impinge upon and can be clearly identified within influenced works.\textsuperscript{130} The impact of this inversion extends even to the modality of simulative play, with simulation invoking a more paidean aspect that orients play away from pure ludus.\textsuperscript{131}

This debate informs the stakes and context for CK3’s simulative praxis: the nature of the designed relationship between simulation and reality, its remediative influences (important for the well of extant ideologically-tinged narratives and silences already encoded therein),\textsuperscript{132} and players’ own approaches to meaning-making are thus bound up in the genres and associated affordances by which history is simulated and ludically emplotted. Put another way: anxieties over simulation-as-process and its troubled relationship with reality, history, and notions of authenticity can and should be explored through simulation-as-genre and the gradual co-construction of audience over relevant genre and title histories. In doing so with CK3, the

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\textsuperscript{131} In an intriguing, if coincidental, bit of symmetry, historian Philip von Hilgers locates what he articulates as the original German war game, the Battle of Numbers, in a dispute between rival high medieval religious schools. Von Hilgers’ work positioning the battle of numbers as representationally and conceptually reliant on modeling an older historical period within the philosophical and mathematical framework of the time (and that model’s attendant relationship with emerging social structures) is weakly echoed here by this chapter’s attempts to position the contemporary milieu of Crusader Kings relative to its own historical subject. Intriguingly, von Hilgers also weighs in on the nature of simulative representation called into question by Baudrillard (casting his vote on the side of simulative optimism). For von Hilgers’ full analysis, see: Philipp Von Hilgers, \textit{War Games: A History of War on Paper}, trans. Ross Benjamin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).


aforementioned dual diegesis finally emerges—ready to be positioned within the context of this simulative anxiety and discourse.

Roleplaying as God: Situating CK3’s Simulative Praxis

CK3’s blended epistemology begins with its situated genre context and continues through its implemented affordances—themselves rooted in the series’ ludic ancestry and genre lineage. At first glance, CK3 is clearly kin to publisher Paradox Interactive’s other flagship titles, with its war/strategy game lineage visible in the remediated skeuomorphic tabletop campaign map present in all titles, dividing the known world into various quasi-arbitrary regions which are then assigned to each game’s system for mapping political actors. A familiar approach for strategy gamers the world over: look at the map, choose your faction, conquer the rest. It’s here that CK3 diverges from its cousins—rather than direct control over an abstract polity,133 play is mediated through an embodied avatar enmeshed in social networks with non-player character actors. These characters are modeled using a wide array of typified roleplaying affordances; characters have a full three-dimensional model, core statistics (representing their facility with different types of political and social tasks), traits collected over a character’s lifespan (signifying key events/changes in a character’s life while modifying the core stats), and relationship values and statuses with other actors (modeled via descriptive text tied to a +100/-100 numeric range value, their relationship to the player’s character, and an optional special status such as friend/rival). Later additions to the game also incorporated mechanics long-recognized as central to

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133 e.g., one plays as the Count of Anjou instead of playing as the United States of America. Unlike the USA (unless the “unitary executive” folks have something to say about it), the Count of Anjou is both a polity and a person all in one.
roleplaying games (RPGs): character equipment and inventories. These features can be recognizably identified in historically popular roleplaying titles such as Dungeons and Dragons (with some departures from D&D’s own wargaming lineage such as drastically abstracted systems for hitpoints and personal combat). Given the attendant historical anxieties (as well as the analytical grammar at hand), one might ask where on Chapman’s spectrum of simulative epistemologies CK3 falls? Is CK3 more of a conceptual simulation—with a focus on the abstracted, systems-level historical models which so invite the invocation of procedural rhetoric to complete the interpretive task? For his own part, Chapman himself places the CK series squarely and categorically within the conceptual, but let us also consider the alternative: is CK3 also a realist simulation—with an attendant focus on visual detail, diegetic embodiment, and visual immersion? Here I wish to argue that CK3 is both—far moreso than its past and present kin—and that the blend of realist elements into the conceptual cocktail produces a far more complex relationship between not just the game and existing historical discourses, but between differing playstyles. These playstyles represent the extremes of commitment given to CK3’s mixed diegetic offerings, with most play balancing two

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134 The standard here was set by Dungeons & Dragons, which positions a group of players as individual characters placed into a fantastical medieval world seemingly filled with, well, dungeons and dragons. As prime sources for peril, dungeons and dragons are central because they are also prime sources for valuable loot—often in the form of magical artifacts the characters can equip and collect. Following in D&D’s footsteps, most RPGs up through the present feature the acquisition of equipment and items (with the context of inventory and equipment systems) as a core feature. The fantastical elements of this genre feature lie closer to CK3 than one might expect: while CK3 characters generally don’t acquire flaming swords or magical spells, the sheer aggregate effects of the game’s supposedly-grounded equipment pushes character abilities towards the absurd and fantastical nonetheless. In particular, the fantastical leanings of RPG inventories and acquisitions is communally identified and discussed as part of one particular long-running debate over character longevity (which is buttressed by items and, to some, pushes character lifespans well beyond any historical grounding).

135 Peterson’s exhaustive tome is an excellent source on the history and lineage of D&D, running from Prussian wargames on up through the present day. See: Jon Peterson, Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Aventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games (San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012).
primary diegetic contexts in a manner that places the player’s own play in conversation with itself. This tension is at the heart of any game of CK3, and the internal relationship established in these playstyles has considerable consequences for how the game and its play relate to its complex historical context. This historical complexity cannot be overlooked: entwined with its multifaceted and polyphonic conception of medieval history, CK3’s multifaceted positionality complicates the tension inherent in the blending of history and entertainment. At the end of the chapter, this additional tension will be reintroduced; rendering at last our picture of CK3 play and players at least somewhat clearly.

136 With a game such as CK3, many individual voices and perspectives can be found in the gestalt. Several factors exacerbate this polyphony: CK3 is indebted to and continually disciplined by the standards of its predecessors (see chapter 3 for the role of critique in online discourse), which means that the polyphonic complexity of these antecedent titles is flattened, homogenized, and buried within their successor titles in a manner which requires some form of humanistic stratigraphy to unravel; next, CK3 is a game with a lengthy ongoing development cycle aligned with the Games/Software-as-a-Service (GaaS/SaaS) model discussed in chapter 3—this means that lots of people are adding/subtracting/altering the game over time, and they, as people are wont to do, will change their relation to the game and its represented history over that time; third, a particular labor practice within Paradox interactive gives each employee a regular amount of unstructured work time to add/improve/augment content that they find valuable—this reduces the top-down homogeneity of the game and means that many more employees’ voices and perspectives can be found in the game (and as chapter 4 addresses, these employees bring widely varying historical standards and approaches to their work). Thus, interpreting the game-as-text thus requires something more approaching an exegetical approach identifiable in religious scholarship. Another lens amenable to historians might be that of CK3 as an archive: ever-changing and staffed by a wide range of enthusiastic editors. Both perspectives, when combined with the dual diegesis discussed throughout, give online community members a wide range of options for embodying the voices they read out of the game and present to others. Sometimes, a read voice is embodied and critiqued as a historical actor, other times as an all-knowing process, and chapter 3 will delve into how a reddit community handles this nuance and complexity (because we all know reddit does nuance well).

137 As CK2 designer Henrik Fåhraeus identifies in his 2014 GDC talk, CK2 was conceptualized as an amalgamation of Lords of Midnight (a cult classic wargame/rpg), The Sims, and George R.R. Martin’s Game of Thrones (GoT) series of novels and subsequent TV show. GoT is thus the key identified source of medieval influence here, and this carries over into CK3. For Henrik’s full talk, see: Emergent Stories in Crusader Kings II, Game Developer’s Conference 2014 (San Francisco, CA, 2014), https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1020774/Emergent-Stories-in-Crusader-Kings. Don’t worry: The Sims and Game of Thrones will come up again in this project.

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Assessing *CK3* as a conceptual simulation requires fixing our analytical gaze from a particular position—fittingly, as god-historian—and focuses our scholarly sight on the game’s layered abstractions, complex systems, and historicized interplay. Fixed from this elevated perspective, the dominant scholarly debates concern the procedural rhetorics embedded in these game systems, tendency of players to embrace or reject structured approaches to historical signification, and the troubling interplay between historicized narratives under deific diegesis. A brief critical reading of *CK3* under this lens invites the deific scholar to reenter a scholarly conversation conducted over a decade prior—and is thus by no means novel—but sets the stage for assessment of the particular complexities *CK3* introduces. In line with the chapter’s introduction, many of these salient characterists can be readily identified in emergent storytelling vignettes. Below I offer one such example drawn from play conducted in line with

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138 This is not Chapman’s term, but he does align “god games” with the historian’s diegetic perspective, so…it’s not my fault. NB: there is space between my use of god-historian here in this chapter and Chapman’s own player- and developer-historian terms; Chapman invokes the player- and developer-historian to emphasize the agentive positions of both players and developers in the co-construction of historical narrative in games—these are tied to formal affordances of games more broadly. The god-historian is, I argue, a diegetic position within some such games that emphasizes agency in a different manner. To frame them more completely: the player-historian’s play is balanced between and among the god-historian and historical agent, with the historian’s imprimatur potentially in jeopardy for any part of this ad-hoc trinity. Trouillot (1994) lays this distinction (separate from historical games) out cleanly as one between historical narrator and historical actor.


142 I hereby beg the astute scholarly reader’s patience for retreading ground long-covered by games scholarship. It’s necessary, I promise (and not just to fill out wordcount!) Also: please ignore the wordcount.
this project’s methodology; in particular, this vignette exemplifies a particular sort of top-down ahistoric narrativization that straddles the line between exegesis and diegesis.\textsuperscript{143}

The year is 1044 C.E, and my Franco-Norse Hæsteinn dynasty has seized control over the Empire of France. After finally claiming the Empire title, I’ve ensured my realm won’t be divided when my 76-year-old Emperor (aptly named Ruler McRulerface Hæsteinn) inevitably kicks the bucket.\textsuperscript{144} His health is fair enough for now, so I hopefully have a few years to maneuver. With the ‘Know Yourself’ Learning perk I should have ~1 yr notice of my impending death, so I can afford to plan ahead a bit.

Unfortunately, I have some problems. Eleven problems, in fact. Ruler boi was such a CHAD he fathered eleven sons while conquering all of France—and all of them (except poor Theobald) are jockeying for a piece. I have a lot of accumulated renown, so I can afford to disinherit at least seven of them right now—that leaves 3 sons to deal with if I want to put my heir in the best position possible. But who should be my heir? Should it be my eldest, Studson, who already has 5 kids of his own (after conveniently killing 3 of his own children and his first wife in a berserk rage)? He’s married to his cousin, of

\textsuperscript{143} As part of ethnographic participation in the community, it was necessary to both play and tell stories about CK3 within that communal context. A crucial signifier of community membership is one’s ability to align storytelling with the oft-unstated corpus of approved referents, which includes a range of memes both specific to the CK community and broadly identifiable in wider games culture. \textsuperscript{144} Explaining the referents: 1. the Hæsteinn dynasty is broadly considered to be one of the most popular and overpowered start positions in CK3, so choosing to tell my story using said dynasty is either a sign of oblivious out-group behavior or knowing in-group irony. 2. the name Ruler McRulerface refers to the meme Boaty McBoatface, which is the perfectly reasonable name the internet selected for the UK NERC’s 2016 #NameOurShip online poll. 3. The succession planning and discussion of particular strategic elements (e.g. the Know Yourself perk) indicates a certain familiarity with relevant game mechanics.
They shared the perfect genetic traits, so I was hoping he’d produce the genius children I need (and maybe even some Pure-Blooded ones). Unfortunately, he seems to be in love with his younger sister, and the inbred children their dalliances have already produced are ill-suited to inherit anything. Regardless, I should ensure those kids don’t reproduce at all—a little maiming should do the trick. Alternatively, I could marry them off to the Karlings as a form of genetic warfare (always make sure to weaken the Karlings). Hmm, but I’m getting distracted. Anyway, maybe Studson shouldn’t inherit. Unfortunately, the next best candidate is my youngest, Brugi. He’s not 16 yet, so I don’t know what kind of education trait he’ll get, but I’ve groomed him personally and he’s otherwise got the right genetics, traits, and sexual orientation to succeed. Only problem is if I disinherit his older siblings and leave him to inherit everything, then they’ll almost certainly kill him. Can’t have that.

So I need to kill a lot of my kids. Well, you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, right? I’ll declare war against one of my puny Catholic neighbors (easy fodder for my Viking hordes), force my 9 doomed sons to serve as knights, then send them to storm

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145 Explanation part II: Invocations of Chad and stud obviously recall the incel-adjacent virgin v. chad memetic dichotomy and position ludic success as masculine virility evidenced by both quality and quantity of progeny. ‘Ruler boi’ uses the slang term for boi, which carries a wide range of possible referential implications. In this case it dates me solidly amongst a particular cohort of millennials influenced by a certain Avril Lavigne classic. Cousin marriage is deliberately invoked, as it represents the mildest form of incest valorized by the community.

146 Further explanations: a popular subgenre of posts and playstyle is to essentially breed one’s dynasty to incorporate and propagate several desirable genetic traits modeled in the game—in particular the Pure-Blooded, Genius, Beautiful, and Herculean/Amazonian traits represent the gold standard for genetic attainment. The Karlings are one of the most powerful dynasties at the game’s start, and a popular community practice is to destroy that dynasty through the most inventive means possible (marrying characters with bad genes into their family lines represents a combination of the community’s preoccupation with genetics and this Karling preoccupation). The inbreeding and interfamilial violence is both common and salacious, so it is highlighted here.
the castle gates together—over and over again. Eventually they’ll die off, after which I can disinherit Studson, lock him in prison for his incestuous perversions (thus keeping him from causing too much trouble), and then keep him as a backup I can potentially reinstate if Brugi kicks the bucket somehow. Ok, good plan. I should be able to get this done in less than a year, and then I’ll be set.

Oh, wait, what’s this? I’ve been poisoned? Ahh crap, looks like it’s going to be Studson after all...

Descending from the player’s own position to the lofty diegetic heights occupied by the game’s god-historian diegesis, CK3’s outer structure—its win and loss conditions—form the primary bounds for play. This is also where a critical tension between constituent genre elements plays out, forming the first epistemic fracture between yet another dichotomy of playstyles. As foregrounded earlier, win/loss conditions form one of the primary game structures which has been substantively linked to highly differentiated approaches to play; here they also form a

\[147 This is the exact sort of tactic which is broadly considered to be “game-y” (slang for the sort of purely-ludic approach which eschews and sort of historical play), yet also has some clear and obvious mythological precedents: see the biblical story of King David, Bathsheba, and her husband Uriah found in 2 Samuel:11. For the unfamiliar: King David sees an attractive woman, learns she is married, sleeps with her anyway, and then explicitly instructs his generals to ensure poor Uriah (a noble and virtuous man of the people) is positioned at the front lines of a subsequent battle and then abandoned to die. The subsequent chapter’s deific judgment is, of course, widely ignored—in CK3, the player gets to be both god and man in this little homily. The Bible: critical inspiration for Crusader Kings depravity!

Excerpt of my During Action Report (DAR), covering a 1-year period of my 2021 Hæsteinn dynastic playthrough. The failure of one’s ambitious schemes makes for good stories—though the resultant gameplay position is more challenging. This tradeoff between storytelling and play strategy runs throughout the CK community.

\[149 This particular conversation reaches back nearly two decades to the work of Carr, Eskelinen, and Frasca regarding the relevance of Caillois’ distinctions between paideia and ludus. Critically examining the darling of early historical games scholarship, Sid Meier’s Civilization, Carr (n.131) points out the clear primacy of strategy over simulation (i.e., through Civ’s highly structured win conditions) in that series, but doesn’t close the door entirely on simulative play—which has critical implications for the historiographic play and expertise trajectories described by Squire (n.140). Within the context of Civ, these two approaches to play are substantively at odds—as such, players
boundary line between the simulation and strategy genres as they are formally constituted. Thus, the importance. So, simply put: does CK3 have win/loss conditions? No, but also yes.\textsuperscript{150}

I will explain. While the game itself loudly proclaims the absence of win conditions,\textsuperscript{151} the enmeshed metagame speaks with a quieter yet more insistent voice.\textsuperscript{152} CK3 is, of course, not played in an existential void devoid of context, but within a wider techno-cultural context which ascribes clear objectives via its culture and tools.\textsuperscript{153} The achievement metagame, layered within the assemblage of historical play, serves as one such source of clearly defined goals for play.\textsuperscript{154} Genre reveals another: borrowed expectations come not just from players’ previous experience with related titles, but from borrowed affordances and mechanics (often tracing lines of genre heredity) which themselves have already been learned and taught. Their ready-to-hand

\textsuperscript{150}I hope this was helpful.
\textsuperscript{151}By which I mean they are absent from the chunk of program code you download, and the developers like to remind you of that fact.
\textsuperscript{153}Chapter 1 lays out the beginnings of this historical assemblage of play, while chapters 3 and 4 address the obvious context of community discourse as one such metagame located within the larger assemblage.

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instrumentality is clear: players given armies rarely question their use. What else could their purpose be but to conquer?

If this is not enough, the game does provide loss conditions—the game ends if the player runs out of available avatars and/or valid titles to any counties. Avoiding loss—even in the absence of pure win conditions—points players straight in the same direction implied from the metagame, genre legacy, and mechanics: make the line go up. In particular: if loss can be found in the absence of noble bodies and landed title, then reducing the likelihood of loss requires obtaining more of the same. These conditions impose a boundary floor of ludus in the composition of the play of CK3, with any paidean play resting on top of this bedrock instrumentality. The metagame only emphasizes this instrumental play—if one desires to lead

155 Heidegger’s conceptions of readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand represent the obvious philosophical framing for the previously-discussed simulative anxieties across the analog to digital boundary. We see in Heidegger’s ontology a clear and early framing of the “black boxing” of ideologies—one not limited to a particular level of abstraction. Here I’d like to briefly assert that game mechanics can serve such a role for CK3, and represent a route by which players smuggle in pieces of playstyles under their own noses. For my source on Heidigger, see: Robert Brandom, “Heidegger’s Categories in ‘Being and Time,” The Monist 66, no. 3 (July 1993): 387–409. Also helpful here is the Levels of Abstraction as articulated by: Luciano Floridi, The Ethics of Information (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

156 In other words, avoiding loss requires the careful god-historian to protect noble bloodlines and their claims to land. On the other hand, they can feel free to make use of peasants risk-free: they are an endlessly renewable resource in service to a deific and undoubtedly enlightened purpose. Note: nobles as a social class do well here, but as we’ll see, as individuals they often suffer just as much (if not more).

157 Here I invoke Dan Olson’s (2022) acerbic journalistic critique of contemporary technocratic capitalist movements (e.g. NFTs and virtual environments). I am far from the first to suggest that is no accident that the default modality of strategy games and capitalism both involve endless growth/expansion in service to a form of numeric incrementalism. It is fairly safe to claim that gamers familiar with strategy games will, when assigned territory and positionality in a new strategy game, attempt to acquire more territory/resources. The line, after all, must go up—the alternative is quite literally apocalyptic. Much of historical games scholarship’s relevant critique addresses this issue from a postcolonial lens that focuses on (neo)colonialist elements of this debate. See: Line Goes up: The Problem with NFTs, YouTube video, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ_xWvX1n9g&t=1446s; Dom Ford, “‘eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate’: Affective Writing of Postcolonial History and Education in Civilization V,” Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research 16, no. 2 (2016): 11; Souvik Mukherjee, Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back (Springer, 2017); Sybille Lammes, “Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games and Postcolonial Culture,” Eludamos Journal for Computer Game Culture 4, no. 1 (2010): 1–6.

158 Though expert CK3 play can and often does render this ludic baseline all-but-invisible. This is in direct contrast to the typified expert play of Civ discussed earlier.
Rurik the Troublemaker to form the Empire of Russia, then the god-historian must write the narrative as they are told.

Unlike with Sid Meier’s Civilization (Civ) titles, the imposition and instrumentality of objectives do not deny the god-historian his academic tenure. The objectives pulled from out of the assemblage and up from the game’s code align broadly with popular notions of medieval historicity—if the metagame asks the player to form Russia, this goal is one that—even if it does not map directly—can be reasonably ascribed to Rurik’s dynasty in a historically-resonant fashion. While this particular narrative wagon might jump the rut of pure reconstructivist historiography, it still broadly remains on the wider path of counterfactualism—though retaining a rebellious tendency to occasionally violate even the generous and nebulous boundaries postmodern historiography imposes and thus straying into the dense weeds of alt-historical fiction. Put simply: many instrumental objectives can still be located within the

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159 As per Steam CK3 achievement Land of the Rus. Completing this achievement brings the produced narrative in line with the more stringent notions of historical accuracy, as Rurik’s dynasty is generally considered to be the founder of the Tsardom of Russia.
160 This is not the only context in which narrative production implies a relation of instrumentality between player and game; chapters 3 and 4 show clear social contexts for such a relation. Even god-historians, as it turns out, are still under contract.
161 By this glib phrase I broadly mean that the semiotic severance and de-historicization anxiously described previously were all situated within examples drawn from this game series (Civ being one of the most popular historical game series in both scholarship and popular culture). As I argue elsewhere, there are certain features of Civ and its attendant metagames that push players towards this sort of de-historicized behavior. See: Lundblade, “Crowning Achievements: A Historioludic Analysis of the Achievement Metagame in Historical Simulation Games,” 2021; Lundblade, “Oops We Did It Again.”
162 Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016, 44. See also the 2022 PDX convention’s roundtable discussion with Eleanor Janega and Bret Devereaux: PDXCON Historian Panel, YouTube video, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqZeeFGgsb8&ab_channel=ParadoxGrandStrategy.
165 The alt-historical fictional weeds being a place one is likely to find fascists. They like the weeds.
166 The exact position of which is of course a matter for scholarly debate, though the existence of the boundary is not. Though this debate is largely outside the scope of this work, Trouillot articulates a particular set of
popular narrow and linear conception of history, while many more reside in the more contested but still defensibly-historical space opened up by postmodern reflexivity and attention to contingency.\textsuperscript{167} Thus, for \textit{CK3}, the instrumentality of ludic play goals can blend into paidean simulative immersion in a manner which renders one or the other invisible—with players, developers, and audience all agentively involved in assessing the balance of these elements. This historioludic harmony is, however, not a requirement.\textsuperscript{168} The presence of even broad alignment with historicity all but ensures the emergence of oppositional play—in this case, opposition not to the god-historian as deity, but as scholar.\textsuperscript{169} This counterplay often operates from a contestation of history, rather than a denial, but that need not be so.\textsuperscript{170} To some, historical position imposes a form of instrumentality all its own, and free play can instead be found only through scholarly elision and deific reemphasis.\textsuperscript{171} An example of this god-but-not-historian’s narrative opens this section, with the historian’s role rhetorically and symbolically rejected via epistemological commitments as central and necessary to the practice of history in any era of discourse. See: Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History}, 11.

\textsuperscript{167} Again, it is worth emphasizing the difference between public and popular notions of medieval historicity and contemporary scholarly understandings. These debates are discussed throughout but are particularly emphasized in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{168} Nor is it even particularly common—it is just far more realizable in \textit{CK3} than in Civ, and more of the disharmony comes from competing notions of historicity than from the history/strategy signification debate.

\textsuperscript{169} For my primary source on counterplay (outside of the particular context of historical play), see: Thomas Apperley, \textit{Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global} (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, \textit{Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games}, Electronic Mediations 29 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).


\textsuperscript{171} That is, god sometimes gets tired of being fact-checked— but he (and it usually is a “he”) wants to remain god, you know? Stop criticizing him! Can’t you see this is your fault?
cultural signifiers that encourage locating the narrative within contemporary digital culture instead.

But, as the careful reader may note, there is another set of perspectives lurking behind the god-historian’s all-too-visible hand: that of Ruler McRulerface and Rurik the emperor to-be. While our player in this framing is emphasizing the diegetic position of god(-historian), they still occupy a secondary dual diegetic position as a particular embodied dynastic actor. These diegetic positions are only occasionally in alignment, and much of CK3’s rich complexity comes from the interplay between them. If factors within the assemblage motivate and incentivize play that privileges one diegetic position over another, then it is worth considering how play from that position relates to the minoritized diegetic role. In this case we ask the all-important question: what is a historical agent—even a king—to a god-historian?

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172 Invocations of the contemporary digital incel’s cryptolect (e.g. Chad, stud, etc.) signify the discursive move away from the position of player-historian (and thus rhetorically close off a certain vein of critique) while also solidifying in-group membership. If Studson and invocations of CHADLY behavior were not enough to communicate this move, the name Ruler McRulerface likely informs the reader that we’ve left history far behind. For the definition and exploration of this broader incel cryptolect, see Kelly Caroline Gothard, “The Incel Lexicon: Deciphering The Emergent Cryptolect of a Global Misogynistic Community” (The University of Vermont, 2021). NB: as Chapter 3 will explore, emphasizing contemporary cultural elements does not always necessitate a rejection of the historical—in fact, the dual diegesis of CK3 invites many opportunities to hold both in playful tension.

173 Though decidedly not a historical actor, Ruler McRulerface is diegetically important—so pay attention.

174 The next section will elucidate the legacy and genre history of this diegetic position, but for now just sit tight.

175 This is a useful and common pair of perspectives, framed by relations of power, which have common analogues in our world. Here I wish to emphasize Janet Malcolm’s critical and scathing assessment of the roles of journalists and psychoanalysts (i.e., a position characterized by socially-constructed narrative agency which instrumentalizes the powerful, powerless, and anyone in between). In the context of CK3 Janet’s dialectic of psychoanalytic power is not between two embodied agents (with one dually endowed as narrator) but instead located entirely within one coextensive individual, which invites still further associations from the realm of psychoanalysis. See: Janet Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (Jason Aronson, Incorporated, 1977).
The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak: The Embodied Avatar as Instrumental Subject

At the god(-historian)’s level we are able to contextualize conquest, development, and broad wargaming abstractions only—it is in shifting our gaze downward that the truly salient (and salacious) facets of CK3 emerge. After all: instrumentalization of the secondary diegetic position invites a wide range of possible interactions: the god-gaze might desire conquest above all—to paint the map in the dynasty’s algorithmically-assigned color scheme. They might also desire various forms of managerial-cum-Taylorist maximizations, the small optimizations that often eschew historical signification in their pursuit of either the substance or accolades associated with expert play. Other frequent goals lean into the historian’s mantle, with god-historians directing their secondaries in accordance with (or perhaps against) particularized notions of historical contingency. Romanophilia runs rampant in contemporary historical games culture—and was not out-of-place amongst historical actors written into the game—and thus represents a popular target: will *you* restore the Roman Empire?\textsuperscript{176} If you don’t, someone on reddit certainly will. But there remains a far more interesting vector along which gods interfere with men: sometimes they just want to be entertained. And it is to this purpose that much of CK3 bends itself.

Here the diegetic dualism enters into its fullness: at the higher position, one is allowed to surveil the entirety of the medieval world: viewing the character sheets, documented relationships, relational histories, and present engagements of any of the thousands of individually-simulated

\textsuperscript{176} While the popularity of attempts are unknown, many of the high-ranking accolades seem in chapter 3 feature this particular case.
Helpful lists and filters, coupled with fully visualized character portraits, allows the god diegesis the ability to browse humanity at will. Want to identify all the fertile women within 5 years of your lesser avatar’s current age? You can do that. Do you want all of those women who also have the algorithmically-flagged marker for high intelligence? You can do that too. Want to make sure they’re conventionally attractive? You can view their portraits and decide for yourself, but there’s also a helpful indicator that informs you when the game considers them to be hot.

This informational frame provides us with the crucial ligature between the deific and embodied diegetic positions: armed with the above information, the embodied avatar can be directed to relationally engage with these other simulated characters. Among other options, they can be ordered to seduce, befriend, betray, ingratiate, implicate, or even assassinate their target. This is where the instrumentality of personal entertainment combines/collides with historical narrativization and the grognard’s desire for conquest: marrying your embodied avatar to a particular person might be the critical move that secures more land and title for your dynasty, but

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177 There are some limitations; the game imposes a diplomatic distance mechanic which determines a generous range in which this information and subsequent interactions are available, but in less-stringent play modalities (i.e. while not using the game’s Ironman mode) the player is always able to step out of their embodied context at will. This has, to put it mildly, consequences. Don’t like how your current embodied character is doing? Simple: abandon them to their fate and assume direct control over someone else. Deities can be fickle, after all. If your lesser embodiment warranted fidelity, then they wouldn’t have failed you!

178 Being a god and a human together makes it much easier to identify HOT SINGLES NEAR YOU. Also, for a certain crowd, you can also make sure those hot singles have their genetic purity verified—just a totally normal feature that isn’t troubling at all.

179 If this is beginning to sound like online dating, then we’re all on the same page here. Swipe right to continue reading this chapter.

180 The careful reader will note I’m eliding some potentially key details here: the game’s interface and filtering tools usually are considered non-diegetic elements, after all. However, the god-level diegetic position still has access to all of the information mentioned here—these non-diegetic UI tools simply ease certain use cases. Also, as we’ll see in chapter 3, the historian’s diegesis found in the narration of play (e.g. in AAR/DARs) often incorporates these elements.
it might also just be hilarious. If you want to marry two characters in order to acquire one’s huge tracts of land, you can do that. Want to see what happens when three successive generations of your avatars marry brother-to-sister? You can do that too.\textsuperscript{181} A god’s view is thus often the crucial mediative framing for a complex game of fuck/marry/kill.

All of this means interesting times for the embodied position; \textit{CK3} is, after all, stuffed to the gills with salacious content designed to support medievalish immersion via entertainment.\textsuperscript{182} Dynastic medieval politics (and their contingent focus on personal relationships) form the central organizing metaphor-turned-mechanic for \textit{CK3}, so the relational tasks the embodied agent is directed to perform often trigger or set the stage for events which complicate these tasks. Maybe you tried to have your embodied avatar marry their sibling, but the sibling is in love with their cousin? Perhaps, after having married two homosexual characters of different genders together for instrumental expedience, their strange lack of interest in siring children comes to a head—or maybe this problem is solved with a threesome. Sex is, for obvious reasons both humanistic and historical, a key source of instrumental complication and entertainment for \textit{CK3} players. Sometimes it is subsumed under the larger goal-directed play discussed above, but as events push the player as a whole to consider and empathize with the embodied position, they also provide instrumental goals which implicate the deific position relative to the embodied one.

Event-driven sexual mishaps might prompt the player to consider (from the embodied perspective) how to proceed with a tricky situation, but their salacious salience often means the deific position has been used to instrumentally engineer this embodied catastrophe so the player

\textsuperscript{181} A clear reference to the Targaryen dynasty in \textit{Game of Thrones}. Of course, there’s also a Steam achievement which signifies completion of this particular feat.

\textsuperscript{182} See n. 137.
can pop their popcorn and watch the world burn. Under such a structure, clean distinctions between *paidean* and *ludic* play begin to disappear.

From here we arrive at the primary framing for play that emphasizes the god-game’s diegesis: that of instrumentalization. To answer the earlier question: to a god(-historian), a king is but a temporary, fallible vessel which much be commanded and directed. As we have explored, the god’s gaze gives the player a wide field of view, with substantive knowledge of thousands of other simulated actors as well as a full top-down view of the world as a campaign map; we can view this diegetic position not just through Chapman’s lens—as an affordance which, in a historiographic context, emphasizes abstraction and rule-driven systemization in a manner that more closely resembles a historian’s monograph—but through the simulative anxieties framed in Heideggerian and Sausseurean terms which are concerned with the intended signification and players’ propensity to diverge from it. But, as I have suggested here, this is not and should not be the end of the analysis. For the goal-directed activity which is mediated through this diegetic position also implicates the embodied one, and when the deific is emphasized, the body becomes instrumentalized as the source of limitations.

Strategy gamers are familiar with the consternation involved with directing their various algorithmic agents from on high, but the dual diegesis ensures that the majority of the player’s gameplay involves giving orders to themselves, then grappling with the consequences of failure and limitations which cannot be easily externalized. You gave the orders, but you also failed to

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183 As we will see, the additional layer of community discourse (particularly in visually-oriented domains) provides yet another reason to engineer soap operatic scenarios—for the upvotes, of course. The ability to do this well is a fairly unique form of expert play in the *CK3* community.

184 In *CK3*’s context, one can at last answer the question of whether we humans are the architects of our own failures.
successfully follow your own orders, after all. This creates a particular form of mind-body dualism located entirely within the game under which phenomenological landscape primarily features contesting and lamenting one’s own limitations, with dissociative remove offering a mechanism by which one rejects the embodied diegesis entirely in order to enjoy its suffering and failure. In other words: spiritual reach always exceeds the embodied grasp, and the associated psychological pressures this approximates themselves have compensatory analogues in the game. But this, again, assumes the emphasis of the god diegesis over the embodied; it is time now to briefly address what happens when the emphasis is reversed.

Yes, and…Murder: CK3 Gameplay as Improvisational Content Generation

If play from the perspective of the god(-historian) invites consideration of win/loss conditions and long-term goals, the unavoidable ephemerality of the agent’s diegetic position narrows our temporal scope and invites us to consider proximate, rather than ultimate, objectives. In addition, immersion within and emphasis of the embodied avatar requires the player to mentally construct and maintain a clear boundary between the knowledge frames and interests associated with each position. The player, seeing through the deific position, might observe a distant rival’s numerically-signified dislike coupled with affinity for skullduggery as a threat, but would the embodied position have this knowledge? And if they did, would the mechanical and representational characterization of that particular embodied avatar act the same way the player or their god-level intermediary would? This discourse—litigating the bounds of knowledge/behavior between an embodied avatar and an external perspective—should at first glance be a familiar one to many gamers, as it can be found easily in the realm of tabletop
RPGs. In tabletop RPGs, as in scholarship, this boundary tension is often located within the very particular framing of metagames.

The question of metagaming briefly addressed from the god position takes on a different flavor from the embodied one. While metagaming above acknowledges the non-diegetic goals for play that themselves can be located in another game, here metagaming’s emic use brings us back to what Gygax and Arneson identify as “the use of out-of-character knowledge to make in-character decisions.” This conception of metagame litigates the boundaries between the player’s knowledge—often derived from the play of previous characters as well as the positional knowledge that sharing a physical play space often provides—and that of the character. It also provides opportunities for play around the diegetic boundary itself, with 4th-wall breaks, metahumor, and interweaving discourse providing numerous opportunities for enjoyment as well as a new form of mastery all its own.

Like Dungeons & Dragons, roleplay within CK3 emphasizes the embodied position by litigating the boundaries of the embodied character’s knowledge and personality—but instead of this boundary being drawn between the player and the character, here it also cuts through that secondary deific diegetic position. Done perfectly (and with a less prescriptive conception of

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185 Here at last we come to an interesting coincidence: examining the dual diegesis of CK3 by analyzing the bounds created through emphasis, we see lines of genre heredity that run from the god-game diegesis back to strategy and tabletop wargames as well as lines running from the embodied diegesis back to tabletop RPGs—both of which contain a common ancestor which happens to also have a medieval setting: Chainmail. Funny, that.


187 Boluk and LeMieux, 53:318.

188 The recent film Dungeons & Dragons: Among Thieves (2023) is an excellent case study; the film blends the discursive reflexivity of metamodern films with the diegetic playfulness associated with the best of tabletop RPGs. See: Dungeons & Dragons: Honor among Thieves, fantasy (Paramount Pictures, 2023).
game to begin with), this is simply a deliberate re-drawing of the bounds of the game, with the god’s view symbolically re-labelled from diegesis to exegesis, placed on the same level as the UI. In another sense, the former god-game diegesis becomes an exteriorized and invalidated metagame to be avoided in the course of intended play. Cognitively, this act of agentive reconceptualization allows the player to engage the mental faculties used in tabletop RPG play in order to minimize their awareness and use of the god’s perspective. Rhetorically, we see the boundary between game and metagame as a mechanism for litigating acceptable diegesis itself. All very interesting, but the materiality of CK3’s diegetic commitments differ from D&D’s, and when a total focus on embodied play becomes instead an emphasis (e.g., moving along the spectrum from the extreme towards the middle), some critical facets of the god diegesis reassert themselves. It is helpful here to return at last to the context of history and its implications for our diegesis.

**Conclusion: The Historiographic Implications of CK3’s Diegetic Range**

One of the most powerful features of CK3’s diegetic proclivities is its facility for generating and packaging historically inflected narratives; when diegesis admits both historical agent and historian, the production of narrative naturally arises from the act of play. The production of these narratives can be seen as a reassertion of the higher diegesis—producing stories about dynasties and/or nations themselves—or the emphasis of the embodied in stories of the lives of particular individuals. The proof, as it were, is in the pudding: the ephemerality of embodied play means that its emphasis is more clearly seen in the game’s smaller stories and event-driven interactions, whereas the emphasis of its elevated counterpart lies in the game’s map and dynastic tree. Another clue lies in the mechanisms by which historical resonance is mediated
during play: the dual diegesis means this resonance can be found at the conceptual level—abstracted and mediated through the procedural rhetorics of ludic systems—or at that of the embodied actor—attuned to the visual reproduction of the historical world in which they are to act. For the player motivated by historical engagement and immersion, play dances between systems which emphasize process while placing them close to the production of history, and those which narrow their temporal focus while rendering abstractions concrete. Under such shifts, the meaning of history itself is also thrown into constant flux, between what Trouillot characterizes as history as a sociohistorical process versus history as our knowledge of that process.\(^{189}\) In the play of CK3, history moves rapidly between Trouillot’s irreducible distinction and overlap: history is what happened and that which is said to have happened all in blended mélange. The neophyte player has little control over this semi-cyclic chaotic movement, but expert play in CK3 can be found not just in the external signification scholarship has already examined, but in navigating the movement between these two understandings in order to build one’s own historiographic resonance. From this the expert player can articulate through their own play a vision of the medieval: history that is lived, history that is narrated, or something in-between. As before, another example from the project provides helpful context:\(^{190}\)

\(^{189}\) Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 3.

\(^{190}\) This vignette adopts a more historicized framing at both diegetic levels (though it clearly emphasizes the god-historian’s perspective). While it also carefully references community memes/topics, it does so in order to produce a historically-tinged story that transforms memetic touchstones (the Haesteinn dynasty, chess obsessions, and the Iberian context tied to a particular phase of content release) into something that attempts to blend entertainment with historicization. It emerged from a deliberate exploration of alternate play practices in which I focused on embodied roleplay—the narrative saga of chess murders emerged out of a few chance interactions along the way. Of course, the god-diegesis is not just present in the historian’s narration; once the roleplay saga developed, the deific position was used in order to facilitate the drama—a Dungeon Master to my Player Character, in a way.
“Oh, you’re interested in niche Iberian history? Time at last to tell the tale of the Galician chess murders.

After ruling the kingdom of Galicia for half a century, the ruling norse Haesteinn dynasty had finally gained some measure of acceptance from the local cultures—engaged as they were in a bitter struggle over the future of the peninsula. In 986 the region was, with the alliance between Al-Andalus and Navarre, finally beginning to stabilize. Rulers and nobles breathed a sigh of relief, and collectively looked forward to a more conciliatory period in Iberian politics.

Then, King Harald’s spymaster taught the king’s sons how to play Chess.

Now, to set the scene: this was a time where whole peninsula (possibly the entire world) had awoken to a fever dream of chess obsession\(^{191}\), and King Harald wanted his sons to further assimilate—so they learned chess. His third son Hrolfkr, safely tucked away in the spymaster’s own demesne (for educational purposes), learned chess at the hands of Iberia’s grand master. He was an ill-favored son—by all accounts arrogant, vengeful, and deceitful to his core. The realm’s nobles largely let him be, because he was unlikely to attain any real power in life. This proved to be a fateful mistake.

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\(^{191}\) With the 1.6 patch for CK3—released alongside the Fate of Iberia DLC, the Chess event was introduced to the game. Due to a number of underlying factors, this particular event “fired” at a relatively high frequency and was later toned down to a more reasonable rate. Thus, a large mass of players engaging with the new Iberian content first encountered the high-frequency version of the chess event in their Iberian playthroughs, and a memetically-preserved form of cultural memory still associates chess with Iberia in the CK3 community. This dual writing of history—playing with the trappings of historicized narrative in order to write the author into the community’s own history—represents an example of the sort of historical engagement chapter 3 will examine further.
After the untimely deaths of his elder sons and his father, the new King Hrolfír announced that he would accept any chess challengers who wished to prove their mettle. Hrolfír being by all accounts an awful chess player, many of Galicia’s scheming noble families saw an excellent opportunity to damage the King’s reputation—so they challenged him, and they won. Again, and again, and again. The archives record the King’s losses as well as his steadily declining sanity and periodic mental breaks.

Finally, Hrolfír snapped. For the next two decades, every challenger who successfully defeated the king in a game of chess met an unfortunate end. They choked to death on their dinners, were beaten by mobs in the street, and otherwise ushered off the stage through unseemly accidents. But still the challenges continued. After 40 years of murder, in which chess was largely only played in secret for fear of attracting the King’s ire, the political landscape of Iberia had been reshaped. Too late was the counterreaction, which attempted to shift the political climate away from outright hostility. Hundreds of Iberia’s nobles lay dead, and chess had ushered in a new age of war on the peninsula."

It might seem fitting to end here, but there is one more wrinkle to introduce. The dual position, coupled with awareness of CK3 not as the past per se but as a simulation of it, means that both historical resonance and dissonance can be easily pursued simultaneously—so too can ahistoricity itself. From each particular diegetic context, the game’s affordances support play which can reject historical signification entirely, reify and accept its use, or offer a contestable

192 Excerpt from the After-Action Report (AAR) writeup detailing an Iberian playthrough conducted in June–September, 2022
historicized alternative. One can demonstrate the silliness of the procedural uniformity of the
game’s feudal systems and rhetorics while still attending to the historically embodied subject;
inversely, the conceptual deific diegesis enables the production of historically-resonant narratives
aligned with systemic process while still rejecting and highlighting the historicized embodied
experience. The game’s structure thus opens itself up well to critique and play-as-critique; with
historiographic sophistication found in play with the game’s unavoidable blend of historicized
past and present.193

Thus, we return to our original stories: much of the play of the Glitterhoof saga involves flirting
with the historian’s discourse at the god-level diegesis while utterly rejecting historicity at the
level of the embodied agent. Diegesis becomes a way to play the straight man to yourself: telling
an insane story in a staid manner which refuses to acknowledge its own inanity.194 Centering the
player, dual masteries also enter the picture: the facility with strategy games and their highly
technical play exists alongside a more theatrical expertise rooted in acting as another—with both
linking to external historical discourses in a manner which nuances the acceptance or rejection of
historical signification. For the author’s grad school colleague, the 45-minute scholarly context
provided for his original dynasty thus proves his historical bona fides in a manner which
metatextually signals his deliberate navigation of the historically accurate, counterfactual, and
fantastical in both the playing and telling of the tale.195 In both, the telling of the story itself

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193 I engage with the extensive scholarly discourse surrounding historiography, affordances, and historical media in
other chapters. See chapter 1 for the historiographic context as it pertains to the field of historical game studies
(HGS); see chapter 5 for a more direct revisitation of the discourse between Hayden White and Robert Rosenstone
centered in earlier HGS work.
194 One might even call it “horsing around.”
195 Of course, our two colleagues in the backseat were profoundly uninterested in this tale.
becomes a domain—along with the historical, historiographic, ludic, and memetic—in which mastery of CK3 can be practiced and demonstrated. Demonstrated mastery across all of these domains—as it does within each one—is built upon acknowledged difficulty, and cross-dimensional CK3 mastery often sets itself the great challenge of unifying diametric absurdities.

Here, at last, is one last example: imagine a perfect simulacrum of Danny of House DeVito, positioned as the newly-titled Count of Genoa in 867 C.E., whose dynastic history will be written in the style of Edward Gibbon.\textsuperscript{196} History as past and present, as actor and narrator, and as resonant signifier and playful simulacrum all in one—the product of dissonance and absurdity worked through intense dialectical effort. This, finally, is the dual/duel diegesis of Crusader Kings III at work.

\textsuperscript{196} It is, of course, always sunny in Genoa.
CHAPTER THREE: KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY: TABOO, HISTORY,
AND COMMUNITY BOUNDARY FORMATION

“I messed up by giving equal rights to women, how do I fix the crisis?”

“Walked in on two of my wives getting it on. Nice.”

“Can my wife still get pregnant if she’s brain dead?”

“Accidentally fucked my daughter while trying to assert dominance on my friend.”

“Rituals reflect cultural values, and cultures are inscribed/enacted through the ritualized performances that its members create. On reddit, this means that a series of stock answers, phrases, memetic retellings, and so on becomes ways in which the community reaffirms its culture and membership.”

The Crusader Kings (CK) community has a very particular reputation—one that overlaps and broadly aligns with the platforms on which it is centered. For the first of the community’s hubs,

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197 Collection of post titles drawn from r/CrusaderKings’ top-ranked submissions
199 Throughout this chapter the terms “CK community” and “community” will be used to refer to the self-identified members of the broad, cross-platform Crusader Kings community. When referring to a more specific intersectional identity, such as one who identifies as a Redditor and as a Crusader Kings community member, terms such as “CK Redditor” will be used. For identified membership in the broader penumbra of Paradox Interactive (PDX) titles and their associated community, the term “PDX community” will be used. It is also worth noting that, while identification as a member of the CK community overwhelmingly overlaps with identification as a player of CK titles, there is some mild separation in the form of self-identified community members who assert a sort of outsider, non-player status. In addition, choosing to emphasize one’s identity as a CK player vs CK community member offers a different sort of rhetorical positioning that nuances community discourse significantly—not the least of which is its frequent combination with another sub-group identifier: identification with the play of specific Crusader Kings titles. While this chapter will touch on these narrower identities briefly, their larger explication will be reserved for chapter 4.
the social platform Reddit, the sorts of provocations aligned with the CK reddit community’s identity are not surprising: sex, violence, and the taboo more broadly form a key cornerstone of the community’s perceived identity within the wider reddit ecosystem. After initial exposure to such provocations, one would be forgiven for backing away slowly. Choosing instead to investigate further, one (naturally) finds that such discourse does not represent the entirety of the subreddit’s members, content, or shared emic identity. Various provocations like the above can be found in a heterogenous and homogenous suspension alongside humorous moments of play, memes, narrativized accounts of player campaigns, bug reports, gameplay questions, and extensive critiques of the game itself—often with surprising historical depth. This particular admixture is, broadly speaking, far from unique; as such, examinations of its socializing practices, communal norms, and typified range of actants can offer up a range of insights that are potentially relevant to a wide range of gaming subcultures. Past social movements—such as the events of what is now referred to as GamerGate—have clearly demonstrated the perils of ignoring or discounting the more virulent facets of gaming’s toxic technocultures, and a subcultural centering of historicity opens up more avenues for various forms of radicalization—particularly through the medieval(ist) setting, which provides an additional layer of opportunity

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200 *Crusader Kings* memes come in many different forms and styles; where relevant, the typology and lineage of memes will be explicated when referenced.
201 These most closely resemble established genres of gameplay narration—During- and After-Action Reports (DARs and AARs). These genres of communal gameplay narration are not new to games (particularly historical games) scholars. Chapter 1 addresses this scholarly context in greater detail.
for extremist (largely far-right, nationalist, and white supremacist) movements which already make (and have made) extensive use of medieval narratives.\(^{203}\)

The goal, then, of this chapter is to explore a particular instance of this topical blend in the context of both the culture that sustains it and the context of its central object’s claims to historicity. While incorporating elements from the entire Crusader Kings (CK) community studied in this project, this chapter centers the CK reddit community and, of course, Crusader Kings III (CK3) itself.\(^{204}\) In particular, this chapter focuses on one key site within the CK reddit ecosystem: the r/crusaderkings subreddit.\(^{205}\) As part of the wider effort to place this and other communities within the assemblage of historical play, this chapter incorporates additional subreddits as well as the wider platform-level context of reddit in this process. As such, we begin with theoretical and methodological context for reddit itself before moving to a look at how players of Crusader Kings are (self-)identified across reddit. Following this context, two major

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203 Examples are numerous, but here are a few: First, Call and Lecaque take aim at the role of The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim (a popular game set in a proto-medieval and fantastical pseudo-nordic culture) in promulgating far-right tropes rooted in medievalism underneath the guise of fantasy, while the Institute for Strategic Dialogue specifically highlights the role of Crusader Kings as a tool for far-right radicalization efforts. See: Vaux, Gallagher, and Davey, “The Extreme Right on Steam”; Joshua Call and Thomas Lecaque, “From Hero to Zero: Nationalistic Narratives and the Dogma of Being Dragonborn,” in Being Dragonborn: Critical Essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, ed. Mike Piero and Marc A. Ouellette, Studies in Gaming (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 2021).

204 As per n. 3, I refer to the core game Crusader Kings III using both the full name and its abbreviation CK3— with the same approach applied to other PDX titles referenced. All shorthand used for PDX titles is drawn from contemporary community use. In a nod to community sentiment, this study will (largely) pretend that Imperator: Rome does not exist. See Appendix A for the full list of game titles, platforms, sites, and their associated terminology, as well as the complete ecology of PDX titles and their relevant contextual details.

205 More terminology: When discussing the particulars of Reddit, referential style will follow this chapter’s overall emphasis: the r/crusaderkings subreddit will be referred to as “the subreddit” or as “the CK subreddit” when disambiguation is necessary; adjacent or more peripheral subreddits will be referred to by their official designation (e.g. the r/crusaderkings3 subreddit will be referred to as “the CK3 subreddit.” While I refer to this portion of the study as a single site, this site actually includes several subreddits, beginning with the r/crusaderkings, r/crusaderkings3, and r/paradoxplaza subreddits. A relevant late addition was the r/ShitCrusaderKingsSay subreddit. Other subreddits were examined on background (and/or recurrently appeared in the reddit feed due to unavoidable algorithmic mediation); these include r/AskHistorians, r/eu4, r/hoi4, and r/victoria3. Several relevant subreddits have since been banned and removed by reddit, such as r/2balkan4you. For the full list of sites (and their status at time of writing) which appeared in any phase of my data collection, see Appendix C.
forms of community discourse are discussed to explore the role historicity and historical engagement play in this environment. In doing so, this Chapter argues that historicization serves a tripartite role: as a boundary formation practice, modality for critique, and expertise signifier. As part of boundary formation, historicization joins ludicity and humor as the accepted responses—opposite moralizing and expressions of shock or disgust—to the community’s highly gendered and sexualized discursive embrace of taboo practices. Additionally, as part of the ecology of the reddit-PDX ecosystem, historicization serves as a critical basis for critique of CK3 aimed at altering the game’s future iterations. Taken together, this chapter positions historicization as a critical (counter)hegemonic practice for simultaneously establishing communal identity and participating in the core project of bending the arc of CK3’s development towards communal historioludic aims. Within the context of platform influences and community demography, the broad arc of historicized critique—as an aggregate discourse within the assemblage of historical play—can be roughly plotted.

**Background: Reddit and Crusader Kings**

We begin with Reddit: a content-sharing and aggregation platform which bridges the web 2.0 platform style with that of older internet communities. Reddit as a platform is organized into

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206 It’s worth noting that CK3 mostly steers clear of what Chess (2017) characterizes as the designed identity of female gamers and femininity in games, which may bear on (or merely reflect) the community’s overwhelmingly male demography. See: Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

207 The careful reader will note I am discussing broad, aggregate movements within the community as well as embracing the use of ‘community’ as a unifying term for this analysis of social dynamics. This approach elides many things, chief of which are intra-communal differences, tensions, schisms, and other articulated divisions between members. Chapter 4 will address these deeper divisions by exploring how the very same historicizing practice described here as a unifying facet of communal discourse also serves to divide the community along historical, ludic, and blended (historioludic) lines often rooted in demography, geography, and cultural identity.

208 Massanari (2015) rightfully asserts that reddit is not the same sort of web 2.0-style platform as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, etc.—reddit instead centers the distinctive preferential anonymity and open-source driven
various user-governed communities called subreddits, each of which aggregates, algorithmically sorts, and presents hierarchical tiers of user-submitted content. Users primarily submit posts, which can blend textual, interactive, audio, visual, and filmic elements; however, each post also aggregates a hierarchical tree of user-submitted comments, each of which can have their own array of child comments which (in theory) exist in conversation with the parent. Users can then construct their own personal feeds consisting of content from any number of selected subreddits, or just interact with particular subreddits directly. This admittedly technical gloss elides some of the more humanistic interpretations of the space—such as those found in Massanari’s (2015) in-depth ethnographic study of the platform—which characterize the user-governance structures of older web platforms. However, in the near decade since this study I find more recent evidence that suggests a substantive shift towards the web 2.0 structure of its valley contemporaries. Reddit’s official pivot away from open source began in 2017, when the company archived its open source-repositories and moved primary development to private repos. This trajectory continues up through 2023’s seismic disturbances surrounding API access and 3rd-party tools, a movement which morphed into a top-down crackdown against user governance; such events are suggestive of ownership’s push towards the centralized control and restricted access characteristic of aggressive monetization practices on contemporary digital platforms. In addition, broader practices associated with the creator economy have coincided with burgeoning cross-platform identities that incorporate the practices of these other platforms—a spectrum of anonymity to real identity (with many users occupying a pseudonymous middle ground) appears to be the new norm. In short, efforts towards increasing profitability (by both reddit’s users and owners) rooted in the same economic and cultural ecosystem as the other large contemporary platforms has coincided with a move towards similar affordances and practices on said platform. These changes have, of course, completely succeeded in making these problematic platforms prosocial, profitable, and usable for all. Thanks, Silicon Valley! For Massanari’s pivotal study, see: Adrienne L. Massanari, Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015).

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It’s worth explaining these in more detail. From an interface level, text represents the most common element—each post must have a title, many communities require text-based submission tagging, and some communities require a form of alt text (referred to as R5, a shorthand for “rule 5” in the subreddit). Image (in single-image and slideshow configurations) as well as video are also prominent and directly integrated (and represent the most popular post media type in certain spaces, such as our subreddit). Interactivity exists through the generic Poll post type, and the broadest category simply allows for link submissions to outside content. Our picture is further muddied by the popularity of certain external platforms for inclusive content types, such as Imgur for proper images, Youtube for video, and Imgur (again) for images of large blocks of text. Broadly speaking, certain genres of content also appear to have a platform bias when viewed through reddit links: Instagram for erotic content creators, Facebook for generationally-directed social critique, Linkedin for both pro- and anti-capitalist sentiment, Tumblr for erotic/queer content, and X/Twitter for casual fascism. Of these, Imgur and Youtube represent the most common externally linked web 2.0 platforms in this study’s dataset.

The result is an overall site structure which resembles the tree data structure familiar to any CompSci 101 student. Like a student’s implementation of a tree, the constituent conceptual elements instantiated here don’t always relate properly.
platform as a site for participatory culture rooted in an identifiable and distinctive set of contradictory behaviors.\(^{211}\) Out of many salient observations, a few stand out: Massanari characterizes several broad tendencies at work on the platform, such as a communal desire to cross/eliminate barriers between expert and nonexpert,\(^{212}\) affordance-driven capacity for ideologically-driven reinforcement,\(^{213}\) prosumer-driven modality reliant on user-generated content,\(^{214}\) and the presence of a multi-tiered gatekeeper environment.\(^{215}\) Massanari also offers several key sense-making perspectives of the platform as a whole: reddit as a carnival, performance/ritual, play, community, and platform.\(^{216}\)

Within Reddit, the *Crusader Kings* reddit community exists across a constellation of discrete platform subdivisions, of which the r/CrusaderKings subreddit is the largest and most prominent. This central subreddit was initially created in 2012 shortly following the launch of CK3’s predecessor, *CK2*, as a site for discussing all things *Crusader Kings*. Established well after the official PDX forum, some echoes of the older community can be identified in the formation of the newer.\(^{217}\) In the intervening decade, this reddit community continued to thrive; focusing first

\(^{211}\) Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*.

\(^{212}\) Massanari, 9.

\(^{213}\) Massanari, 9. Massanari is referring to the popular notion of social media as an “echo chamber” in which users (semi)self-select into content which reinforces and reinscribes their own beliefs.


\(^{215}\) Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*, 10. Massanari characterizes human actors as gatekeepers on two principal levels: first, community moderators perform traditional moderation activities (e.g. banning problematic users, removing posts/comments, organizing additional community affordances (e.g. post/user flairs), and interacting with sitewide administrators. Second, the informal group of users who sort by New have significant influence over what sorts of content other users using the default and more popular sorts see. The impact of these two overlapping groups is potentially quite large.

\(^{216}\) Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play*. As we will see, these lenses are particularly applicable to the CK subreddit.

\(^{217}\) While this study covers both sites, my coverage does not go back as far as the founding of either—the pragmatic methodological limitations which impose this reality are no doubt obvious. In addition, these two sites maintain close ties, with many users openly discussing participations on both.
on CK2 before slowly pivoting in recent years to the newer CK3 release. Growth has been consistent: within the timeframe of this study, the subreddit peaked with a userbase of approximately 428,000 subscribers—placing it within the top 1% of subreddits based on userbase size.\textsuperscript{218} As of writing, it continues to grow.

Combined, the slice of reddit observed and analyzed here can be viewed as a content aggregation platform and participatory community whose combined iterative tree structure and algorithmic “bubble up” mediation serves to generate inchoate contradictions as well as surprising syntheses out of lower-level discrete behavioral proclivities. It is a place where users can submit custom Game of Thrones memes, discuss the technical limitations involved in simulating tens of thousands of medieval characters in a game, satisfy (and exult in) certain deviant/taboo/pornographic fixations, as well as discuss the history of the Canary islands (and its relevant historiography) with professional historians.\textsuperscript{219} This forms the substrata for this chapter’s primary site—within which the incestuous, misogynistic, and carnivalesque highlights included here emerge.

From the CK reddit community, lines of influence can be drawn to the other highlighted elements within the broader assemblage.\textsuperscript{220} Built on top of content generated by the font of Crusader

\textsuperscript{218} “R/CrusaderKings,” content aggregator, Reddit, accessed October 11, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/CrusaderKings/. As with all other observations made here, this is at time of writing (and will likely undergo substantive change).

\textsuperscript{219} Sometimes, regrettably, all within the same post.

\textsuperscript{220} See my literature review and project framing in Chapter 1, which draws from T.L. Taylor (2009), Adam Chapman (2016), as well as Boluk and LeMieux (2017) to articulate a complex assemblage of historical, ludic, platform, cultural, political, and meta-gamic structures within the context of extant historical game studies scholarship. For the minimalist set of relevant sources, see: Taylor, “The Assemblage of Play”; Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016; Boluk and LeMieux, Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames, 2017.
Kings gameplay, the community exists downstream from these ludic headwaters—but with a constant pull exerted indirectly on upon the former. This cycle forms the center of this chapter, with the second line—drawn from the communal boundary out to the wider reddit ecosystem—tracing the influential affordance and broad cultural practices from the platform back into the digitally-localized community, a movement between the (digitally) situated and global. Still other lines can be drawn between the CK reddit and other platforms and spaces such as Steam, Twitch, Youtube, and the PDX forum itself; within this particular constellation, the CK subreddit’s sheer size and popularity drives much of this nigh-gravitational influence. In deconstructing this system, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with the boundaries—articulated mechanistically between platforms and their child elements, culturally between the various

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221 Steam, in particular, deserves special mention. With both CK2 and CK3 available on Steam, users have ample opportunity to play both contemporaneously—as well as engage in a form of historicized nostalgia that entangles past and present play. Both modalities can be seen in two major post subgenres identified in my study: in one, participants debate whether they should (individually or collectively) play either CK2 or CK3; ludic, historical, and historiographic comparatives constitute the building blocks of these particular discussions. While contemporaneous play is usually the explicit framing here (as it is afforded a heftier rhetorical weight), remembered play is clearly also an important element (usually entangled with an articulated position strongly in favor of CK3 over CK2). At a narrower scale (and one sometimes implicated in the comments of the former’s initial provocations), participants also articulate largely feature-level debates that directly compare CK2 and CK3’s implementation of various ludic systems and historical concepts—both contemporaneous and remembered play are implicated here. While this chapter largely focuses on the role that critique plays in community discourse and boundary formation, Chapter 4 contains another core part of this discussion: how historical and historiographic critique blends CK3 and CK2 comparatives with articulated structures of historiographic power which themselves echo and amplify prior nationalist, imperial, and colonial projects.

222 The best analogue here might be gravity: in a two-body problem where the masses involved are sufficiently different in order of magnitude, one might be able to satisfactorily predict behavior just by considering the impact the larger body exerts on the smaller one; this is the classic introductory orbital mechanics problem (usually involving a man-made satellite of some kind orbiting a planet or star) frequently given to physics students. However, as the famed interstellar menace Isaac Newton observed, this reified interactivity is fundamentally bidirectional, so this approach falls short under more complex conditions. As a result, problems involving bodies with more comparable masses must also consider the impact the smaller body exerts on the larger one—and these effects become even more pronounced when additional objects are included (such as in the dreaded three-body problem). To return to the point: the CK subreddit is quite large, so we must incorporate a humanistic analogue to the bidirectionality of gravity in our study to explore how the wider reddit community is influenced by r/crusaderkings.
communal identities implicated here, and sociotechnically blending the two. The cyclical, motivated practices of historicization at the heart of this chapter begin here.

Talking like a Crusader King: identity formation in boundary subreddits

It is helpful to begin with reddit and its wider context; after all, reddit as a platform and a culture unto itself provides a foundational context that every community member navigates, as well as a realm in which emic and etic discourse both serve to contextualize the social boundaries between this community and its neighbors: in other words, we can begin by looking at how Crusader Kings players (and the specific CK community itself) are understood and discussed outside of the hardened algorithmic boundaries of the core site. There exists, of course, a subreddit for exactly this discourse: r/shitcrusaderkingssay. Here I have included a collection of posts drawn from this space:

“We should eradicate [sic] the genetically weak off of this planet and breed a strong race with [sic] less probability of genetic diseases or weakness”

“Want your opinion: should I get my wife unalived if she is past childbearing age?”

“My cannibal baby just fucked her servant (wtf??)”

“Why are my sisters breasts this big?”

“I found out my priest fucked two of my wives and I’m too scared to confront him”

“Hi, what are some ways to kill myself as a 9 year old kid?”

223 It is worth noting a key methodological nuance here: during data collection I found myself using reddit’s inbuilt ‘save’ feature to preserve posts such as these within a sort of archive attached to my account. I was able to quickly
At the core of this boundary space is a focus on deviance and taboo: genocide, suicide, pedophilia, cannibalism, incest, misogyny, and extremism-laden language serve the subreddit’s core purpose: negotiating and establishing the identity of the titular Crusader King.\textsuperscript{224} Posts submitted to this subreddit can be viewed as user claims that something within their submission is aligned with the identity of the Crusader King, with upvotes revealing the community consensus. This constructed identity naturally draws from both the self-avowed members of the reddit CK community and the wider pool of redditors to establish an assumed identity for Crusader Kings players, but also serves as a mechanism for recontextualizing expressions found elsewhere on the platform.\textsuperscript{225} Extant discourse is drawn into the CK identity, and clear discursive consanguinity is established between the CK identity and other ludic systems which mirror its discourse. The ligatures between reddit as a singular culture and a collection of cultures are here thrown into sharp relief, as elements of the broader culture are drawn upon to self-consciously define the boundary of a particular subculture. As such, it serves as a critical element of chart the reddit algorithm’s subsequent propensity for selecting and presenting me with comparable provocations as the study progressed. While the frequency of such provocations appeared to be, roughly, consistent throughout my examination of the subreddit, their frequency within my cross-subreddit feed increased drastically in (presumably) response to my selective archival and viewing habits. All this to say: such a discursive selection should not be read as a facile indictment of a community, but instead as an exemplar of boundary formation and communal stereotyping/recognition within a mediative algorithmic context that (often) amplifies the sensational.\textsuperscript{224} Readers of Chapter 2 might ask whether this constructed identity belongs to one of the diegetic frames provided within the game, the more exegetical notion of the player themselves, or something more confined to the identity of those who discuss the play of Crusader Kings (which does not necessarily align with the play of Crusader Kings). Basically, in the last chapter I introduced the split between god and king, with the player themselves waiting in the wings; here we bring the player into the spotlight and add redditor to the mix. So, again, how do these different positions complicate and explicate the above provocations? Naturally, any answer I can offer extends well beyond the bounds of a single footnote, and as such I’ve attempted to respond to this question throughout the chapter.\textsuperscript{225} In the first example provided, a post from the r/intrusivethoughts subreddit (a community ostensibly based around the expression of one’s own disturbing thoughts) is attributed to the Crusader King identity. Most other examples are supplied in the plausibly \textit{ex nihilo} manner of user-created content.
boundary formation between the wider culture of reddit and the subculture of interest here. So why, then, all the misogyny and violation?

The simplest answer is that these things are constitutive of reddit already. If reddit is a universe unto itself, then misogynistic and sexualized discourse constitutes its cosmic background radiation.\textsuperscript{226} Much ink has been spilled over the demography of reddit and its link to the generalized identity of an eponymous redditor; one that, among other things, is assumed to be white, male, and some form of geek/nerd.\textsuperscript{227} The hegemonic and aggregate misogyny which arises out of this demographic skew has also seen substantive scholarly coverage, but what’s important for our discussion is this: this wider misogyny and willingness to engage with the taboo may be present in the wider reddit ecosystem, but its recontextualization here serves a dual purpose. First, language which is known to shock, offend, or transgress is thus cloaked behind invocations of the magic circle—within the context of \textit{Crusader Kings}, this discourse is asserted to be limited to the scope of the game, grounded within the setting, and severed from external moralizing context.\textsuperscript{228} Second, the ability to rhetorically place this language within this boundary serves as an expression of identity and community membership.\textsuperscript{229} A quote in line with

\textsuperscript{226} In that it was there at the beginning, influenced and still influences the system today, and is ignored by many that live within it.
\textsuperscript{227} Massanari, \textit{Participatory Culture, Community, and Play}, 61.
\textsuperscript{228} This move serves to also place this discourse within the historicity—triviality tension at the heart of historical games. Motivated actors can rhetorically disguise their sincerity via rhetorically positioning their discourse within either perspective—either it’s “just a game” and thus can’t be taken seriously, or it’s historicized (and thus a factual claim about the past rather than a moral assertion belonging to the present). Both moves offer different possibilities for refutation and contestation, but the presence of both options allows for a certain amount of rhetorical fluidity and maneuverability in these debates.
\textsuperscript{229} In particular, this type of discourse is generally associated with newer players / community members; many CK subreddit members express negative feelings towards the prevalence of this discourse within their space. Critically, this rejection of this boundary identity is not rooted in the moral language one might use to reject misogynistic statements; this evaluation occurs from the perspective of the subreddit participant (using reddit etiquette, preferences, etc.) or as a historicized/simulative critique. Thus the boundary is reinforced even in critique: rejecting
contemporary political extremism can thus be dually placed into the world of the game and the past it purports to represent, and anyone who expresses moral offense at this maneuver clearly marks themselves on several levels as a member of the out-group. Among the many consequences of this, however, is that the historicity of the game and gameplay are thus the fault lines along which this boundary discourse may be contested, reified, or rejected. To examine this more closely we must now turn to the site itself, r/crusaderkings, and its two major discursive modalities. First, we begin with the prevalence of critique and its attendant consequences for historicity, then we shall turn to the production of historical affect which exists in the shadow of said critique.

“But that’s not historically accurate!”: Critique and historicizing discourse in the subreddit

As discussed in Chapter 2, close examination of how the community employs critique and comparative evaluation in discourse surrounding CK3 provides a window into the community’s shared understanding of history and historiography. In this project’s initial round of coding, implicit or explicit evaluative posts and comments formed one of the core discursive modalities employed by the community; in this subset, invocations of / reference to history and historicity form one of the core components.

While the prevalence of historical referents (and calls to historical accuracy) suggests that historicity forms one of the core evaluative frameworks applied and respected by the CK community, it is far from the only evaluative approach which receives traction. Indeed, the historicity of incestuous conduct and its association with the Crusader King identity reaffirms the insider status of the author just as a moralizing rejection reaffirms an outsider status. Recent work in analogous community sites again confirms the prevalence of historical accuracy as a primary referent in digital game communities’ historicizing discourse. Burgess and Jones also note confusion and ambiguity
possibility of competing evaluative frameworks for historical games has its roots in the genre title itself—between the “historical” and “game” in Digital Historical Game. The scholarly origins of this tension were discussed in chapter 1; now here we are finally turning towards examining how this tension manifests in the CK3 community itself. So, in examining this discursive modality, we must ask: when prompted to evaluate, critique, or otherwise assess the game (or respond to critiques of others), what do CK3 players turn to? When/how do they invoke history or attempt to historicize their evaluations? Exploration of these questions highlights a critical facet of the subreddit and its contextual employment of historical discourse and engagement.

A word on method: for the deep exploration of this discursive subgenre, I followed the methodological guidelines identified in Chapter 1, building these heuristics using the flexibility of grounded theory and discourse analysis while iteratively developing the wider discursive taxonomy. This iterative development produced an early, specific set of inclusion/exclusion criteria for separating critique from other forms of discourse: first, for identifying evaluative discourse, comparative language formed the basic identifier (e.g., “the combat drags on too long” or “should my Mongol Empire be this big?”) along with constructions that explicitly stated a desire for a change to the game (e.g. “maternal and infant mortality rates are inaccurate and should be adjusted”). From these early categorization efforts, the broader principle emerged:

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231 Where, regrettably, concepts such as ludonarrative dissonance and the so-called ludology-narratology debate are also discussed. Read if you must.
critical discourse requires an explicit or implicit comparative that is also identifiable between actual and idealized forms of game or gameplay. The process for assessing historicization followed a similar iterative approach, looking for signifiers out of which larger heuristics could be assembled—which would then enable a quicker assessment of a broader corpus.

Historicization, naturally, proved more complex than the comparatively simple practice of ludic critique; early signifiers were developed not as an exhaustive and definitive outline of historicization but as first-pass signifiers meriting immediate and deeper investigation. First and most obviously, early historicization efforts were identified by invocation of core terms such as history, historiography, and accuracy. The second set centered named references to proper nouns coupled with a context external to the game (e.g. “Pope Jon Paul actually became Pope at the age of...”); these in essence served to fact-check representative claims. The third more nebulous set formed around implied references to either of the above, with unmentioned context used as the basis for evaluative statements (e.g. “characters should rarely live past the age of 65”). Finally, the fourth major indicator was the presence of citation and sourcing practices which, either directly or indirectly, are tied to the norms assumed to belong to historians and the practice of

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232 There exists an important distinction here: among other options, critique can be aimed either an instance of play (e.g. “you should have done X instead of Y”), the structure of the game itself (e.g. “Religion should play a more central role in central European politics in CK3”), or both (e.g. “the game shouldn’t encourage incest-related gameplay so much”). Two different forms of lumping are done here, combining critique aimed at the developers with critique explicitly aimed at the game and then critique aimed at play versus the aggregated game critique. These last two are combined for two key reasons: one, the area of overlap is quite large, and otherwise clear instances of one category are always threatening to turn into the other—attempts to discipline play tend to be deflected back at the game (e.g. “if the devs didn’t want us to use incest they shouldn’t have made it so strong”), whilst critiques leveled at the game are commonly countered by critique aimed at play (e.g. different forms of the gamer classic “git gud”). Secondly, since the core consideration for this study is historicization, the commonalities between how historicization is employed—remaining broadly consistent across these different axes for critique—merits their combination in our ultimate centering of this historicization.
history. Over the initial course of the study, historicizing discourse was ultimately located within any observed meaning-making efforts that linked an in-game signifier beyond the bounds of the magic circle towards a signified rooted in narratives about the past. Attentive to the complexities and nuances entailed by discourse analysis, the resultant taxonomy used in this chapter attempts to account for the boundary complexities and vagaries inherent in analogous analysis—in essence, historicization was classified as either present, absent, or indeterminate/blended; subclassifications were developed to differentiate formal engagement from that point.

Taken together, historicization and critique were identified as strongly-linked, broadly concurrent concepts closely entwined within discussions of Crusader Kings and Crusader Kings III, with the outlier non-overlapping conceptual territories centering notable but less prevalent genres of discourse; one of which, roleplay, serving as the second major discursive context for historicization. The rest of this chapter attempts to present the salient findings emerging out of this taxonomic cross-section, choosing to examine two major discursive modalities (critique and roleplay) and their particular interactions with the historicizing process.

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233 Trouillot has much to say about this point—history as such is distinguishable from pure narrative by the imposed norms largely associated with historians and historical practice which tie narrative to source, argumentation, and fact.
234 A classifier for blended historicization is crucial given the diegetic complexities discussed in chapter 2. Very frequently
235 Given the diegetic dualism discussed in chapter 2, this chapter invokes a more expansive definition of roleplay that incorporates play content that centers both or either perspective; thus, more traditionally-identifiable roleplay (e.g. narrating the lives and stories of a grounded sequence of characters) exists alongside roleplay with a more imperial, state-level progression.
Ludic and Simulative Critique

Evaluative approaches which avoid obvious historicizing generally fall into two broad categories. The first is the more ludic approach, common to games discourse, which centers terminology such as fun, enjoyment, challenge, and balance in the process. While these terms are sometimes invoked within a larger historicizing effort (discussed in the next section), a distinct and notable subset approaches these from a purely ludic perspective which either eschews historical referents or rejects them entirely.

The second evaluative approach falls into an ambiguous space outside of direct historicizing; this approach invokes comparative language to evaluate the game based on how its representations stack up against not present understandings of the past, but understandings of the present (and constitutive features of present reality which were also present in the past). This reality testing categorically highlights places where some aspect of the game diverges from commonly accepted understandings of our shared reality and lived experience. This category is not explicitly historical, and does not explicitly reference past events, names, dates, places, or other data which are commonly labeled as historical facts in relevant discourse. Instead, reality testing instead directly contests elements of gameplay with lived, present expectations. Unlike the explicitly historical categories which follow, reality testing is frequently highlighted for humorous effect, where the immersion-breaking event produces an outcome so absurd as to provoke laughter.
Historicized Critique

By far the most dominant mode of historical engagement in this dataset, historicity critiques invoke notions of a recorded past in order to evaluate and critique the present, past, and future state(s) of the game. Historicity critiques generally make clear the poster’s evaluative framework using terminology such as history and historical accuracy, or by directly referencing names, places, dates, and other commonly-understood historical referents. Through these very direct (as well as more indirect) framings, the community reveals their roughly accepted historiographic commitments and underlying frameworks used for evaluation, as well as the sourcing practices and competing frameworks which are contested by those operating under this historicizing impulse.

Unsurprisingly, the single most common signifier of historical evaluation in community discourse is the use of the term “historically accurate.” A common template involves an initial comparative offered in the initial post (e.g. “Isn’t this character too young to be Pope?”) followed by responses which provide specific historical counterexamples (e.g. “the youngest Pope on record wasn’t much older than that” or “one Pope became Pope between 12 and 20 years old so this is historically accurate”). While explicit initial historical framing is rare in this schema, community responses make clear that many posters (a) view the original comparative as historically rooted, and (b) contest or support that comparison using the same frame. Unlike some of the discursive samples identified by 236, where commentators invoke contemporary

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236 Lundblade, “Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams.”
moralizing in order to critique the presented past, posts and comments under this category make clear that some notion of a historical past is central to their evaluation.

Unclear explicit framing shows the strength and prevalence of the historicizing impulse, as posters then have more of a rhetorical choice for choosing the evaluative basis for their critique—and still frequently invoke historicity to advance their arguments. Unsurprisingly, popular posts within this schema frequently combine this sort of explicitly open comparative framing with humor or innuendo as well (e.g. “is it supposed to be this large?”). Initial posts which leave open the possibility of ribald responses still receive strong historicizing efforts—themselves often continuing the double entendre or provocative language (e.g. “If your Mongol Empire lasts more than 2 centuries you ought to speak to someone”). That historicizing is at least as popular as sexual humor highlights its incredible strength.

The template described reveals a critical facet of the community’s historical discourse: notions of historical possibility or contingency are almost entirely absent (or at the very least are elided by the language deployed). Touted early on by proponents of digital historical games 237, the notion of using historical games to explore what might have happened (as opposed to what did happen) forms a crucial part of early historical games scholarship’s legitimating discourse, and the community’s overwhelming use of specific grounded historical examples to settle historical disputes leaves out any notion of a probabilistic history which might’ve diverged from our own. A counterfactually-grounded assessment of a young Pope might’ve asked could a person have become Pope at a young age—which might involve examining the criterion for selection,

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looking at cases where young candidates for the Papacy were available, or more broadly examining how age, maturity, and adulthood were understood in medieval catholic Europe. Instead, historical accuracy is itself evaluated using specific examples alone.

Beyond contestations of historical accuracy, the imprimatur of history itself—presumably as distinct from fiction—is also invoked or revoked in order to signal approval or disapproval of changes:

Did Pdx change the names of today Ukrainian land to Ukrainian from old slavic in ck3?

Recently I've noticed that Kiev is called, Kyiv and some other places are called in Ukrainian. Is it just me who thought it was Kiev before or did Paradox actually make this change?

Edit: They did. Thanks, I hate it paradox. I prefer the historical names.238

This post is indicative of a common historiographic bias in the CK3 community—the tendency to invoke history as an empirical reality where (a) the facts cited are objectively true, and (b) that the game diverges from the facts presented and, on that basis, must be changed to match. This particular poster disguises this move by locating their subjectivity in a preference for historicity (e.g. as a player) rather than as a player-historian capable of advancing a contestable historical argument; this exemplifies a key characteristic of this underlying objectivist historiography—the roles of the developer-historian and player-historian are erased entirely, with the agency of both reduced to that of developer and player, respectively. In this framing, the player can only

238 Post sampled from r/CrusaderKings in 2022.
explicitly insert themselves into the discursive cycle by (at least on the surface) breaking free of historicity and invoking the more ludically-grounded notions discussed previously.

Within this broad umbrella, historicizing efforts invoke or invite different forms of discourse depending on which aspect of the game is presently being contested. These underlying historiographic impulses broadly align with Chapman’s notions of the epistemological commitments made by differing styles of simulating history; for example, many of the accuracy-based critiques tended to focus on discrete representations: names, dates, symbols, and discrete events (thus aligning with Chapman’s realist style); this realist style, aligned with reconstructionist historiography, centers audio-visual signifiers and narrower, more embodied perspectives that broadly align the player’s perspective with that of the imagined historical actor. Aligned with the epistemological leaning Chapman identifies within the simulative modality itself, discourse centering the realist simulation’s core criteria also broadly aligns with the reconstructionist paradigm; the participants’ notion of history reads here as a linear, 1-to-1 mapping between “the past” and history itself; this linearity is then projected further as an “ought” which provides primary evaluative criteria for the game in all but a small number of accepted extenuating circumstances; as a result, the realist simulative facets of Crusader Kings thus can be tied directly to a form of discourse that shares its focus on the accuracy of particulars.

Conversely, discourse which centered elements of the game that aligned more closely with the other end of Chapman’s spectrum (i.e., the Conceptual simulation style) tended towards a differing historiographic approach. Conceptual simulations are characterized by Chapman as possessing higher degrees of visual abstraction, typically possessing complex rule-driven gameplay systems, and diegetically centering a broader scale and perspective which expand the scope of potential historicization far beyond any imagined embodied actor.242 Discourse centering elements associated with this style tend to, first and foremost, discursively diverge from the previously discussed audio-visual evaluations:243

…I’ve started playing a new game to try and get the domination ending. I began as the King of Leon, which is helpful because his high intrigue means I can expose secrets, use hooks and kill involved rulers reliably.

And yet I am trailing behind the progress towards the conciliation phase. It is closer than I’ve ever been, so breaking a truce or two in the end might get me over the line.

Maybe I’m still not min-maxing enough, but my question is rather this: does the current mechanism of the Opportunity phase reflect the historical situation? If indeed historically the late 11th century was characterized by Opportunity-->Conciliation (I currently feel that there is a bias towards Conciliation unless you really try hard to avoid it), then I am

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242 Chapman, 69–79. The common gaming term “god game” identifies titles featuring this sort of deific diegesis quite succinctly.
totally fine with it. Then the game would accurately simulate that the hostility phase came at another time.\textsuperscript{244}

Notable here is how the discourse on historicity interweaves game mechanics and historical references; the poster here asks whether a period in history is best characterized by a discrete mechanical subsystem (the specific phases of the larger Struggle mechanic). This approach casts game mechanics as historical theories which organize understanding, aligning with the conceptual style and the constructionist historiography it is tied to. The necessary weaving of game mechanics into historicizing is also extended by the weaving of ludic terminology ("min-max") and initial framing (starting choice motivated by gameplay style options) leading into the historical question.

Discussions of these conceptual simulative facets of \textit{CK3} are fertile sites for further examining the interplay between ludic and historical evaluative approaches; engaging in substantive discourse on paradox game mechanics (which have a reputation for complexity) requires ludic expertise but historicizing these mechanics via procedural rhetoric is an additional step not always made (see 5.1). The absence (or direct negation) of this move suggests an opposition (or at least apathy towards) historicizing which matches both the divergent expertise trajectories described by Durga and Squire as well as the semiotic disruption identified by Myers.\textsuperscript{245,246}

\textsuperscript{244} Post sampled from the PDX forum in the summer of 2022.
\textsuperscript{245} Durga and Squire, “Productive Gaming and the Case for Historiographic Game-Play,” 2009; Squire, DeVane, and Durga, “Designing Centers of Expertise for Academic Learning Through Video Games.”
\textsuperscript{246} D Myers, \textit{The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis}, n.d.
However, the *CK3* sites examined here significantly feature the blended historicizing discourse described above, with ludic expertise invoked inside the historicizing frame.\(^{247}\)

Frequently, however, the ludic evaluative framework and the historicizing framework come into conflict. In one example, a poster contesting the presence of a particular gameplay feature (the ability to confiscate the gold from characters banished from the realm) is met with historicizing examples (the prevalence and mechanics of banishment in English and Irish medieval history). The original poster responds with a contestation that reveals the tensions between the underlying evaluative frames:

> It's not fun from a gameplay perspective. If you want to play efficiently, then you’re [sic] expected to cheese banish people for money and not just one time in the campaign. It was never fun each time I did it back in *ck2* times…*Ck2* has no balance and *ck3* started off good but is lacking so much balance still.\(^{248}\)

This exemplifies the common and well-trodden tension in historical games: the tension between historicity and competing ludically-grounded expectations for play. But, whereas in many cases the contestation of fun is argued across differing understandings of history, here the contestation is one of evaluative frameworks themselves—whether gameplay balance or historical accuracy.

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\(^{247}\) It is worth noting that the educational value of games—particularly historical games—has been simultaneously under- and over-stated; my recent work on the early Game Studies scholarship of James Paul Gee has more to say about the early phase of edutainment hype, but lacks one notable facet I’d like to supplement here: paired with a particular generation of scholar’s typified entrance into digital games (beginning with exposure via *The Youths* and continuing to bridge-building between their home discipline and nascent games scholarship) is a growing perspective from *The Youth*, many of whom quickly realized that the educational angle could be rhetorically promulgated in order to secure and protect playtime for themselves. The fact that this generation is now writing scholarship of their own might explain some of the more pointed critiques of early aughts edugame hype.

\(^{248}\) Sampling of response post on the official forum in the summer of 2022.
should prevail. Historical evaluations can also be identified by the presence of sourcing and citation practices; while ludic evaluations generally center the player/poster and their articulations of shared concepts like fun, balance, challenge, etc., the shared historiographic stance of the CK3 community trends towards eliding the self in favor of material facts. These facts are largely invoked without explicit sources provided (implying or occasionally stating specifically that interested parties can do the research themselves). This objectivist framing leaves behind a singular contra-example, a sourcing practice which serves as a variant of the classic argument from authority; outside of personalized notions of expertise and facility with historical concepts (which undergirds a great deal of the argumentation in this domain and represents more standard arguments from authority), a distinct subset of arguments relies on the poster’s own claims to ethnic and cultural knowledge through their personal heritage:

[Comment] On a related note since you're Georgian, what do you think of Georgia's depiction in CK3? Is it mostly accurate? Are there things you'd change?

[Reply] For starters, some general changes would add a little bit of flavor:

There should be no "DUCHY OF GEORGIA", instead there should be "DUCHY OF KARTLI" with the counties of KARTLI, TBILISI & LORI….

In these and similar cases, a variant of the player-historian reemerges, with said player-historian empowered to invoke historicity only within the bounds of a specific claimed identity. Certain identities (largely ethnical/cultural identities represented directly in-game) are thus allowed

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249 Sampling from comment and response attached to a r/CrusaderKings subreddit post from spring 2022.
privileged and authoritative positioning to speak to historical accuracy. However, historicizing and the assumption of the player-historian’s mantle are not so narrowly limited to just critique—the discourse of roleplay, drawn from the complex diegesis of Crusader Kings, serves as the other major genre in which this communal historicizing impulse can be broadly identified.

**The play’s the thing: roleplay across historicity and diegesis**

Outside of evaluative/comparative discussions, the *CK3* community also substantively engages with and discusses the game as a source of imaginative roleplay. Identifiable even from the early marketing copy, *CK3*’s designers and developers invite the players to consider the game not only as a strategic historical title, but as a vehicle for embodied storytelling and roleplaying. Analyzing the community discourse, the result of the game’s focus on roleplay is an alteration of a stable historical gaming discursive genre: the During/After Action Report (DAR/AAR).

Discussed in Chapters one and two, these D/AARs typically present a narrativized account of a series of game sessions—as discussed by Apperley,250 these are typically narrated from the diegetic frame employed by the game in question.251 As a strategy title which, on the surface, ties the player to a high-level polity and empowers them to engage in many of the same state-like practices as comparable titles, one might expect *CK3*’s D/AARs to employ the same state-level point of view (and thus to algorithmically invite players and readers to “see like a state”)—however, in marketing, play, and community discourse this state-level frame of reference is frequently joined by more narrativized, humorous, and individualistic approaches to telling *CK3*

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251 e.g. in “god games” like *Europa Universalis IV* and *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, the point of view is that of the state, though often with the name of a singular ruler attached to it.
stories; it is in this context that the communal identity negotiated at the platform/subreddit boundary also tends to reemerge. Some examples are illustrative:

Figure 1: Selection from a Wojak-style D/AAR (as viewed from the standard reddit thread affordances) 252

252 As per chapter 1, this study attempts to foreground the various mediative influences inherent in the community engagement and data collection processes; showing the platform affordances (slide navigation arrows to the left and right, as well as the vote score and title, clearly place this datum with the browser-mediated reddit context).
One of the most popular subgenres of D/AAR borrows from the popular Wojak meme and its contemporaries (such as the many iterations of the Virgin vs Chad meme); these narrativizations tell the stories of a series of CK3 rulers by blending the memetic iconography of several tranches of internet culture into a narrative mélange. The source memes used in these compositions carry ideological and social implications for the resultant work; the Wojak and Virgin vs Chad memes invoked in this subreddit largely have their origins in what Lankshear and Knoebel term a second wave of memetic practice which increasingly serves politicized and socially divisive purposes. For instance, the Chad iconography used as the base in Fig. 2 originates in the incel community on 4chan’s /r9k/ board and carries with it extensive misogynistic implications, while some variants of the older Wojak meme are used to encode racial stereotypes. In this context, the Chad characterization initially represents an approved form of hypermasculinity and virility (contrasting with an opposite virgin character not depicted). This serves as a resonant image for a game which largely gates progression behind patriarchal parentage and sexual success (i.e., your campaign ends if your ruler dies without having an available valid heir, which usually requires siring children). Next, comparably stylized historical and biographical iconography (a sword, crown, necklace, tattoo, and beer stein) provide characterization and limited historical and ludic context (e.g., the beer stein imitates the

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254 Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, “Memes, Macros, Meaning, and Menace: Some Trends in Internet Memes,” The Journal of Communication and Media Studies 4, no. 4 (2019): 43–57, https://doi.org/10.18848/2470-9247/CGP/v04i04/43-57. More background on the “Chad” meme can be found in Appendix B. For the unfamiliar, the Chad can be roughly understood as a memetic signifier for a particular form of approved traditional masculinity tied to (among other things) virility, strength, and a propensity for violence.
255 Gothard, “The Incel Lexicon.”
in-game icon which indicates the character is a drunkard, while the crown and necklace serve to roughly identify the character’s religious affiliation). Numerous community references round out the meme, which takes its place in a succession of such memes to ultimately produce a serialized narrative about a succession of characters embodied and directed by the poster.

Figure 2: Additional selection from the same Wojak-style D/AAR

Additional panels in the same series more explicitly invoke and incorporate historical referents; here in Fig. 2 the poster imbricates Wojak-style memetic iconography onto a literal Icon of St.
George the martyr; this suggests an emphasis on a certain level of historical affect over a stricter sense of historical accuracy (alternatively, deliberately placing a catholic ruler characterized as an anti-orthodox crusader into an orthodox Christian Icon invites some religiously-charged implications). These blended memetic mélanges nonetheless remain anchored in the same point of view—play is narrativized as a sequence of personalities and personal actions, with historical referents mixed alongside memes to provide personal characterization. Here historical elements are employed on the same level as—and in concert with—established memes; they thus serve to ground the narrative in elements of culture of specific interest to the CK3 community, positioning historicity itself as serving entertainment and identity production within a communal space.

Narrativizations draw not only from the shared language and culture of reddit, but also from sites accepted as sources of historical referents. Found in a secondary style of D/AAR which blends long-form D/AARs with a broader genre of more particularized snapshots of gameplay events, these D/AARs rely on establishing a connection to an extraordinarily popular online resource—Wikipedia. For the Crusader Kings community, Wikipedia serves as an immensely important element in the production of historicity and historical affect—as chapter 4 addresses, the CK3 developer team (operating as designer-historians) openly relies on Wikipedia for their development efforts [cite my own autoethnographic notes from the ‘con]. For the players and player-historians in the CK3 community, Wikipedia operates as the principal source for historicity itself:

“When in doubt [about whether a character is historical], throw [the character’s] name into google and see if a Wikipedia pages (sic) comes up, like with [the example character]
here. Just about every character who I thought was historical has shown up. If they don’t show up, they’re most likely one of the Easter egg characters modeled after the game devs.”

Mediated by googleability—itself a powerful actant—the historicity of an actor is thus determined entirely by their presence in (or absence from) Wikipedia. This framing provides valuable context for the style of narrativization exemplified by fig. 4 below.

257 User comment drawn from the Reddit dataset. Comment is responding to OP’s question about differentiating historical characters from procedurally-generated or developer-created ones.

Figure 3: A D/AAR variant which employs Wikipedia stylings

Here the poster emplots the stylings of Wikipedia over established visual signifiers (map, names, photos). Considering the wider context under which Wikipedia is referenced, its use here in Figure 3: A D/AAR variant which employs Wikipedia stylings thus represents as a natural outgrowth of the community’s valued historical practices; this poster eschews standard narrativization and instead adopts the format/style Wikipedia uses to present historical battles in order to communicate the major moments from a particular war in their campaign.

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259 Taken from a reddit post AAR detailing a portion of the poster’s recent campaign.
Figure 4: The current top-rated post of all time on the CK subreddit is an attempt to use the centrality of key actants (e.g., google) for determining historicity to perform a sort of semiotic reversal in which Crusader Kings stands in for ‘real’ representation.

Here we see not only the use of google and Wikipedia as a critical heuristic for determining historicity, but the influence of the established tension between ludic triviality and historicity—historicity becomes a highly granular label applicable to individually modeled characters within the vast simulation, and external resources such as Google and Wikipedia become tools applicable to the eternal task of litigating this boundary. Thus, one of the core tensions serves to further enmesh the subreddit within an assemblage that incorporates many externalities—Wikipedia itself is but one such source, and a closer look at the production of the above visualization reveals another.
Figure 5 (left): Wikipedia's style and formatting for historical battles.

Figure 6 (right): HTML for Fig. 5. The “battlebox” editor employed by the community copies the exact structure and nomenclature used by Wikipedia.

This stylization is not produced through standard image editing techniques, but through a generative tool—the Wikipedia Military/Battle Box Editor—popular within the community.

The simulative fidelity of this tool extends beyond the purely visual—examination of the HTML and CSS employed reveals a near-exact copy of the nomenclature, structure, and stylings.

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260 Screenshot taken from the Wikipedia page for the battle of Manzikert.
262 “Wikipedia Military Box Editor.”
employed by Wikipedia itself. The resonance between this approach to historical verisimilitude and a broadly well-established fetishistic focus on accuracy as historicity is readily apparent, and suggests a particular extrema on any multidimensional spectrum of engagement.

Another example reveals an additional dimension to this engagement; efforts towards historical affect may not only extend beyond Wikipedia, but may engage with different historiographic perspectives in more complex approaches:

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263 While copying the exact stylings and syntax used by Wikipedia can be viewed here as a particular level of dedication to verisimilitude, the culture and practice of web design suggests a simpler alternative: expediency. Contemporary web browsers allow savvy developers to copy HTML/CSS content out of active sites directly and thus provide an easy approach to duplicating the style of many websites. Laziness wins, again :)

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The Communes of France - My Peasant Republic Styled Run in ironman

Figure 7: Selection from a screenshot/based D/AAR which depicts the poster's cultural representation

The 700 year Old Revolution of Oreleans resulted in a shift of priority for the people of France. Communal living, and greater ri...
Other AARs present at the intersection of several complexities; users adopt the broad language and perspective of historians to present playthroughs which attempt to produce counterfactual historical outcomes out of historically-rooted origins (grounded in directly-borrowed historical names, coats of arms, and other regionally resonant elements). The AAR here reveals how play can both engage with and push against historical narratives simultaneously, but a closer look reveals a deeper complexity that bears on some of our core terminology. It’s worth returning to Trouillot briefly:

Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. The inherent ambivalence of the word ‘history’ in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened.’ The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process. 264

Trouillot’s distinction allows us to complicate our notion of player-historian in order to better understand the above AAR; here the player as historical actor seeking a counterfactual/ahistorical outcome is contextualized with a historically resonant narration which embraces the role of historian—and the historical resonance sought during play more critically engages with historical narrative whilst the narrativization fully embraces the historian’s perspective.

D/AARs and the other narrativization genres provide reveal part of the spectrum of mastery valorized by the CK3 community. While the core of any successful D/AAR is the ability to

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construct a compelling narrative from play, analysis and decomposition of approved community D/AARs reveal the tools and skillsets the community valorizes in the production of said narrative (and thus the role history and historical elements play in a successful composition). Several skillsets play a role in these compositions.

First, while the Wojak D/AARs narrativize via humor and skilled employment of accepted elements of online culture, across the broad sample of similar posts the approval of respondents centers the gestalt narrative, suggesting historical and memetic components are not valued as such, but instead serve as a sort of overlapping idiolect members of the community narrativize from (and thus the desired mastery is that over the idiolect itself). Other D/AARs and historioplay posts seem to require a mix of skillsets: some (such as the D/AAR presented in fig. 8) center instead the ability of posters to narrativize their own navigation of the hi-story play space—a concept employed by 265 to characterize the range of historical resonances and outcomes which can be produced through play of a particular game—and thus produce and share historical resonance with their audience; these D/AARs are praised by respondents for their ability to navigate mechanical complexity at the boundaries of the play space (e.g., posters and respondents discuss the mechanical limitations navigated by the roleplay as well as solutions to the limitations provided by the game such as mods) as well as for producing a sense of realism and grounding via overall narrative structure and imagery employed. These D/AARs which narrativize at the edge of the hi-story play space serve—alongside the popular genre of achievement posts—as a way to demonstrate ludic mastery, but go further by creating a broader

historical resonance via the incorporation of the perceived trappings of historicity: names, dates, places, sigils, and biographic sketches of the “great men” (and women) depicted. Still further samples (such as the Wikipedia battlebox D/AAR-esque posts) demonstrate only a proficiency in tools used to stylize and adopt the historical imprimatur of accepted sources for historicity. A final subset of relatively low-effort posts simply seek to convey (often via one-sentence titles) the absurdity, rarity, or humor of a specific moment of emergent play—these serve as by far the most popular form of approved narrativization.

So far we have explored the external identity negotiated by and applied to the CK community within the reddit ecosystem, examined the primacy of critique as a form of community discourse which engages with historicity, and subsequently explored how a common genre of historical game narration used within the community engages with history in a manner separate from established critique. Now, at last, we are equipped to contextualize the shocking and taboo behavioral presentation amidst these historicizing practices.

**Time is a Flat Circle: Cyclicality in the Assemblage of Play**

In centering the CK subreddit our assemblage of historical play has already grown to encompass many enmeshed actants. First, the examination of critique reveals how the introduction of history into contemporary digital games combines two cyclical processes into a complex and interwoven engagement cycle. First, the paradigm of Games as a Service (GaaS) engages players in providing feedback for future iterations of the game, as Dubois and Weststar

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266 Juul (2020) touches on the industry movement towards this paradigm; he places the “modern casual live game” in a predominantly post-2010 context (opposite the traditional single-purchase AAA game he locates as the dominant functional paradigm between 1980 and 2005). *Crusader Kings III*, following the dominant practice of its publisher PDX, broadly hybridizes the two categories, featuring an initial single-purchase high-budget AAA title, but releasing
highlight for developers, the shifting paradigm from product to service has implications for players and play communities. Many of the evaluative interactions characterized above particularly engage with this cycle: notions of enjoyment, immersion, and challenge (as seen in 4.2) which map effectively to Yee’s established typology for motivation in online games. But digital games which are considered historical invoke a parallel, interweaving process: what Trouillot highlights as the production of history. For Trouillot, history is produced and reproduced through cyclical constitutive processes which themselves are shaped by material realities which insert silences (absences) into history. This framing centers history as a present discourse fueled by “[collectivities’ experienced] need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters to them whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction.” The boundary between history and fiction is one that is always materially contested by those who—in the present—rely on historical narratives to make sense of their own lived experiences and position themselves as part of a collective.

For digital historical games, these parallel productive cycles create complex and powerful interactions. The medium of digital games is still broadly tarred with the brush of adolescence and triviality; early scholarly conceptions in game studies such as the magic circle by necessity frequent paid and unpaid content additions that, for much of the fanbase, transform the title into a sort of opt-in live service game. The recent move towards selling entire “seasons” of content in single blocks parallels the comparable movement in more standard live service games, bringing CK3 ever closer to that categorical paradigm. For background, see: Jesper Juul, “The Independent Mode: A Functionalist Account of Independent Games and Game History,” in *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (Foundations of Digital Games, Bugibba, Malta: ACM, 2020), 104, https://doi.org/10.1145/3402942.3409787. Louis-Etienne Dubois and Johanna Weststar, “Games-as-a-Service: Conflicted Identities on the New Front-Line of Video Game Development,” *New Media & Society* 24, no. 10 (October 1, 2022): 2332–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444821995815.


Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.

Trouillot, 11.
sever any semiotic tie to present realities, implicitly casting the game’s referential contents as either purely fictive or merely irrelevant. Historians encountering digital games invoked similar concerns to critique and dismiss their potential role as historical productions. Even historical game studies, the nascent field formed specifically around the study of such games, devoted much of its early development to advocating for the validity of the medium for productive historical practice. Outside of scholarship, broader cultural notions of games and play also center these fictive and trivial elements. For digital historical games, the mere claim to historicity made by the game and its representations or processes invites contestation of the constitutive identities of its players—with the affective bias already aligned towards fiction. Material realities which exist at the intersection of these two cycles frequently result in unresolvable tensions and conflict points. For the developer-historians, alterations made which respond to ludic feedback and motivations for play in the GaaS cycle (such common flashpoints like the maternal and infant mortality rates in CK3) inextricably alter the boundaries between history and fiction in the cyclical production of history as constituted by the game—these “necessary fictions” are periodically litigated and re-litigated by players and community participants unaware of the explicit compromise (or who, perhaps, disagree with it and its possible implications for their own history). Reversing this process also allows for a particularly salient and effective form of historical contestation, wherein intended historical changes are

273 Lundblade, “Civilizing Civilization (and beyond): A Historiography of Historical Game Studies.”
rhetorically cast as ahistorical by posters who promote a differing historical narrative. This rhetorical move is, of course, not unique to digital historical games, but the tensions involved do provide additional rhetorical cover for this strategy. In addition, close attention paid to the timing for the Kyiv discussion (posted shortly after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine) suggests how these twinned cycles can be bound to contemporary political discourse and flashpoints, which then prompt both developer action and community response.

The confluence of these two cycles also explains a common finding in this research: players arguing for changes to the game from an authoritative position established by their national, ethnic, and/or cultural identities. Trouillot’s notion of history as production provides both the motivation and embodied knowledge required for this mode of engagement: the game’s notion of the players’ historicized identity is at odds with their own, and the players rely on an external shared history to provide a corrective. While historicity here provides motive and means, the GaaS cycle provides opportunity. Ethnicity and culture are explicitly called out and called upon not only to promote or provide expertise, but also highlighted in order to deny the historicizing efforts of others.

The D/AAR genre of historicized posting complicates this engagement further; in service to narrative practices deeply entwined with the game and the broader culture of play, posters negotiate the intersections of broader platform culture, digitally-mediated historicity,

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275 Snyder, “The War on History Is a War on Democracy.”
276 This, naturally, invites a much broader discussion that is somewhat outside the scope of this project and certainly out of the scope of this chapter. Such external sociopolitical motivations do form an important part of Chapter 4’s discussion of intra-communal schism and contestation, and are thus discussed in more detail therein.
277 See the Georgian example above.
278 Again, see the Kyiv example discussed prior.
historiographic delineations between alt-/counterfactual/actual historical play, and the slippery linkages between history-as-narrative and history-as-process. Elements of reddit demography and culture are emplotted within a genre that, encouraged by a dualist diegesis rooted in the core game,\footnote{This is the dualist diegesis I identify at the heart of \textit{Crusader Kings} in chapter 2.} allows community members ample rhetorical space to reject, accept, or playfully complicate their roles as historical agent or historian in their narration.\footnote{And thus to now navigate and comment on the separation between these two definitional approaches to history.} Thus historical affect can still be produced through this playful mix of ahistorical and historical elements, carefully assembled for maximum karma.

The boundary context provided by the second subreddit can thus be more readily understood as a critical component of communal boundary formation—in a communal space where historical affect is entwined with notions of objectivity, neutrality,\footnote{The ties between Wikipedia as arbiter of historicity and Wikipedia's own writing guidelines make this connection explicit.} and rejection of bias, moralizing language (itself frequently prompted by shocking and taboo statements ostensibly rooted in play) reveals the speaker as distinctly removed from any possible role attributable to the idealized Historian. While the use of this language and its overuse within the community itself is frequently contested by community members, a neutral historical affect is used to deliver this meta-critique—further solidifying these misogynistic and taboo discursive forms as tools for revealing in-group/out-group identity. The acceptable battleground for contesting cultural elements of misogyny and sexual deviance is thus confined to historical narrative in a manner which protects provocateurs from direct critique.
Conclusion: Cycles of Ludohistory

The interactions described here—tied as they are to particular social platforms and business models—have numerous implications for games which engage with history in this context. First, if ethnic, national, or cultural identity provide motive and means for contesting history, then the gatekeeping and cultural practices found in the community of Crusader Kings III players (as well as historical gamers and gamers more broadly) offers yet another avenue by which not just the game, but real boots-on-the-ground understandings of history itself can be shaped. If historical game communities (overlapping as they do with the demographics of platforms such as reddit) trend towards identifying as Caucasian and male, then the affinity spaces formed by the historiographic interplay between these two cycles are vulnerable to historical narratives which align specifically on ethnic, cultural, religious, or national grounds favored by the majority in the community\textsuperscript{282}—in fact, research already links Crusader Kings communities on other social media platforms with white supremacist political extremism.\textsuperscript{283} In short, the entwined demographic, economic, and platform-situated contexts of historical gaming communities provide the fault lines along which not just history, but historical collectivities can be shaped.\textsuperscript{284}

These implications redound upon historical game designers, developers, and publishers as well,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{282} James Paul Gee, \textit{What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy}, Revised and Updated (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
\item \textsuperscript{283} Vaux, Gallagher, and Davey, “The Extreme Right on Steam.”
\item \textsuperscript{284} As Mol et al. (2023) note in their response to Sid Meier’s own assertion of apoliticality in Civ, “the simple fact is that Civ is political. Claiming the a-political ‘high ground’—and putting your foot down in your own memoir—as a foundational, highly influential game designer, who made a game titled after himself, in which the player takes on the role of a powerful leader at the dawn of civilization, plainly underlines this point. \textbf{What is more, politics, specifically the politics of making decisions that will shape world history (in your game) is the very promise at the heart of Civ.}” [emphasis mine]. See: Angus A.A. Mol, Aris Politopoulos, and Sybille Lammes, “On Being Stuck in Sid Meier’s Civilization: The Promise of Freedom in Historical Games,” 2023, 2. It goes without saying that—I would argue, at least—CK3, in its content, form, and culture/mode, is similarly political.
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who must contend with platform-mediated communities and their attendant biases interlinked with the negotiated boundaries and identities of the playerbase, whose contestation of play culture and practices draws from the deep well of toxic technocultures and opportunistic historicizing which predate any contemporary digital historical game.285

Many of the play practices described above are not, on the surface, new to contemporary historical games. While many of the community practices encountered in this study are reminiscent of the expertise trajectories characterized by early scholarship, it is worth noting that the constellation and balance of practices have shifted dramatically. In Squire and Giovanetto’s early work, players principally contested the game’s historical arguments via the production of community-shared modifications; 286 nearly twenty years later the GaaS paradigm provides community members with a realistic expectation for future changes to the game to be motivated by and considerate of community feedback. As Squire and Giovanetto note when analyzing game developers, 287 the move from product to service with GaaS invites a paradigmatic change in how games are understood and engaged with. For digital historical games in particular, this opens up opportunities to propagandize and promulgate particular groups’ notions of history beyond the

285 The term toxic technocultures originates with Adrienne Massanari’s (2017) work addressing the gamergate movement and its interlinked platforms (including reddit). Massanari defines these toxic technocultures as “toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming.” This platform-dependent propagation is critical for the examined historical gaming sites, as the numerous affordances discussed in this chapter (e.g. recommendation algorithms, karma and feed sorting systems, and cross-subreddit linking practices) mean that the platform’s broad exposure to these technocultures necessarily exposes the Crusader Kings community on reddit to the very same—and that, through entrance into the reddit community and participation in the battlefields of contestation (Glas 2013), can gain access to and membership within the more restricted BBS sites. This is, of course, not to say that the CK community is entirely comprised of the retrograde activist identities attributed to these toxic technocultures—after all, the moderation practices and boundary negotiations clearly indicate substantive (if inconsistent) efforts to push back against these tendencies. See: Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening”; René Glas, Battlefields of Negotiation: Control, Agency, and Ownership in World of Warcraft (Amsterdam University Press, 2013).


287 Dubois and Weststar, “Games-as-a-Service.”
relatively narrow scope provided by game mods and without the skill required to produce them. These efforts are potentially rewarded via feedback-based codification from developers looking to respond to player evaluations. In short, this assemblage of play provides dominant groups with a larger and easier-to-use megaphone. Much has been made about the supposed empowerment of players in shaping the future of games, but while the tools have become easier to use, the hands holding them remain largely the same.

While this project has largely underscored the ways in which the experiential reality of at least one historical game community has fallen short of the rhapsodized ideals attributed to the medium in early scholarship, it is worth noting these games still represent extremely valuable tools for historians and historical scholarship. Historical games remain extraordinarily popular, and their pedagogical utility is repeatedly confirmed by practicing historians and educators.\textsuperscript{288} For non-historians, especially designers, developers, and scholars of non-historical digital games, this project serves as a provocation: community discourse is largely in the players’ hands, and nothing prevents players from reading historical narratives into games not designed with this in mind. For such games, the modes of discourse highlighted here may become exceedingly relevant. As this study shows, historicity shapes discourse around play wherever and whenever players find it.

\textsuperscript{288} Alexander von Lünen et al., \textit{Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian} (Routledge, 2021).
“[CK3 should not add East Asia to the game map] unless they do all of the other stuff first. If they first add steppe nomads, republics, trade routes, societies, the College of Cardinals, naval combat, and a proper imperial government for Byzantium, then they can add East Asia. But until then, adding EA will just stretch the game too wide.

I don’t want China if China is just going to be Wester Europe in a Chinese costume.”

“Historical narratives are premised on previous understandings, which are themselves premised on the distribution of archival power...in the case of most Third World countries these previous understandings have been profoundly shaped by Western conventions and procedures”

It is perhaps difficult to overstate how different the Crusader Kings III (CK3) of 2020 is from the full CK3 version available today. Combining a steady stream of paid and free downloadable

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289 Emphasis mine. Reddit user post drawn from the summer 2022 portion of the study’s dataset. Comment is in response to a community poll asking if the game map should be expanded to fully include the (roughly constituted) territory of medieval China. Notably, this quote aligns with the minority opposition, with the majority of respondents indicating support for the proposition.

290 Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 55.
content, the CK3 available to players now provides a vastly increased range of game mechanics which, separately and in the aggregate, offer players a significantly differing perspective on the medieval world. While players report that the how of playing CK3 has changed, questions about where this play is located are, perhaps, more difficult to resolve through the usual strategies of either assessing community consensus or directly examining the game itself—and this where is critical, as it also has the potential to produce divergent play experiences. In that sense, to say that this study has examined a single game over the length of the study—Crusader Kings III—would be a misleading statement on two major counts.

First, discussions of CK3 frequently—almost inevitably—invoke or already include discussions of its immediate predecessor, CK2. Even in spaces nominally devoted to CK3—and in discussions explicitly addressing the same—the shadow of CK2 is always felt, with critiques, evaluations, and propositions regarding the game frequently referencing CK2 directly or indirectly. Thus, it is rather more apt to state that this study has examined CK3 as it exists within the lineage of the Crusader Kings series. Secondly, as the questions of where and how suggest, the gulf between the CK3 of 2020 and the CK3 of 2024 is vast—with the game seeing two major content expansions, three regional content additions, as well as 11 substantive ‘minor’ patches.

Typically referred to as DLC or FLC respectively. The release of last year’s Tours & Tournaments DLC seems to have been a watershed point in the game’s development cycle, wherein players reported substantive improvements in their play experience via engagement with the new systems and playstyles they incentivized.

In a local (and far nicer) analogue to Godwin’s Law, the longer any particular discussion continues the more likely it seems that CK2 will be invoked.

Perhaps a resonant analogue to the sort of dynastic practices the game includes.

In referencing CK3 this way I’ll be using the semantic versioning approach common to software development in general—which is, naturally, the very same system used by CK3’s developers. This system denotes changes to software as Major.Minor.Patch—under this schema, 1.0.0 would typically denote the baseline release version, with a move to 1.1 signifying a relatively minor change to the software. Moving from 1.X to 2.X would, naturally, be a signifier for substantive change that, according to convention, typically denotes changes that “break” code

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With still more major additions announced, CK3 will continue to grow and change. Thus, it is perhaps most apt to state that this study has examined not just the Crusader Kings titles and community, but the transformation of both series and community over the course of several years.

This chapter thus attempts to frame the evolution of game and community—specifically examining historicizing practices in this sort of temporal context. With critique and evaluative discourse emerging early in the study as a crucial discursive modality, temporal framing of critique introduces the possibility of change not just to the scholarly analytical process but to the assemblage of affordances and resultant communal culture that change-consciousness brings to Crusader Kings discussions. This change-consciousness prompts immediate questions as to its limits, both real and perceived, which then naturally prompt questions of power—questions about the boundary between possible and impossible (or practical and impractical) as articulated by players and developers both. Questions of boundary and power naturally invite contestation, with differing stances taken by both players and developers on the current state of play—such as the limitations currently imposed on the playerbase’s play patterns and the resultant bounds of historically resonant or dissonant production—as well as future changes to any facet on a range of timescales and assessed probabilities. The temporal context, inviting discussions of power, requires answering questions about reading—in this context, scholarly assessment of the players and community’s own assessment of the game’s structures of dominance which they might wish

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dependent on large parts of the previous major iteration. CK3 has transitioned in ~3 years from version 1.0 to 1.11—11 ‘minor’ patches to the game that, under the PDX development cycle, are generally used to add major FLC systems to the game (as opposed to offering the FLC separately—thus ‘forcing’ adoption of the free content as opposed to making it optional).
to support, alter, push against, or reject entirely. Prominent forms of discourse within the community are thus contextualized as “emergent behavior in games and virtual worlds [which] arises out of a complex interaction between players and the affordances of the play space they inhabit.”

To accomplish this aim, Stuart Hall’s model of encoding/decoding is used to briefly revisit CK3 and identify possible dominant/preferred narratives within the game—a reading which will then be placed alongside data drawn from this study in order to assess the community’s own articulation of these narratives. With this context established, the latter portion of the chapter aims to situate intra-communal contestation which emerges in support of or against these dominant narratives. The resultant analysis reveals a community which reads CK3 as a broadly Eurocentric title which softly bounds individual and aggregate play via resolving questions of content depth and historical (dis/re)sonance in a punctuated, cyclical pattern that prompts several differing phases of entwined player and developer communication. The Eurocentrism of CK3 at launch has, through the particular intervention style of CK3’s regional content additions, shown developer attempts to reduce or eliminate this Eurocentric bias over time, with players (in varying states of validity) contesting or supporting both the specific changes and the pattern of change they reveal. Placed in this context, a key discursive motivator for the community can thus

296 Celia Pearce, Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 24. While Pearce examines virtual worlds as such (e.g. MMOs or other games which are diegetically inclusive of synchronous multi-person play), this study instead takes a largely singleplayer game and examines it with its online community in much the same way.

be expressed as an inchoate, contested, and chaotic attempt to “bend the arc” towards various historioludic possibilities.\(^{298}\) In the CK3 ecology of today, the future of not just one player’s gamestate, but the state of the entire title and series, are up for grabs.\(^{299}\)

**Background: the Semiotics of Historical Games**

The scholarly backdrop for this investigation is, naturally, the field of Historical Game Studies (HGS). As I have argued extensively elsewhere, HGS can be thought of not (yet) as a mature scholarly discipline—with identification of gaps and resultant targeted scholarly effort serving the gradual accretion of knowledge—but instead as a young field better understood as distinct threads, separated by vast chasms formed by methodological, theoretical, and more material divides between its participants.\(^{300}\) In such contexts, identification of gaps is a trivial process; akin to pointing at the grand canyon from a nearby overlook. What is needed—and, indeed, what is far more challenging—is to reasonably propose a strategy for crossing—much less filling—the chasm in question.\(^{301}\) This project in its entirety attempts to traverse one particular chasm: the gap between novel grammars assembled within historical game studies to address key formal questions and the more sociological examinations of players and play communities.\(^{302}\) This chapter, in turn, attempts to cross at one particular and promising point: where players of

\(^{298}\) To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous line.

\(^{299}\) As the examples will show, the use of CK2 to discipline/evaluate CK3 implies a far greater range of stakes—whatever CK3 becomes will have a substantive impact on the (assumed) eventual CK4 release.

\(^{300}\) Lundblade, “Oops We Did It Again.” NB: This work is now several years past, and—even in its time—there exists numerous laudable scholarly works which advanced extant branches and attempted to bridge the various chasms at several points. Chapter 1 provides an effective update on this end.

\(^{301}\) Everyone should have a plan (or, really, a vague proposal) for what sort of insane, megalomaniacal project they would attempt were they to become a billionaire. Readers might be able to guess at mine.

\(^{302}\) Chapter 2 provides a detailed look at the formal and more particularized context that CK3 (as the latest in a series carrying similar design traits) provides, whilst Chapter 3 focuses on the affordances of relevant platforms and the discourse of the culture found therein. So, it’s only natural that this chapter attempts to bring the two closer together by attempting to bridge that gap.
Crusader Kings become the Crusader Kings community—one that has, naturally, already woven a tangled web of discourse between gameplay and social platform.303

Keeping with good scholarly practice, I will first attempt to bridge the gap in theory.304 Stuart Hall’s (1980,1996) model of encoding and decoding serves as the primary vehicle for such an exercise, serving to, as Marris and Thornham’s editorial introduction characterizes, “[clear] the way for further work both textualist and ethnographic.”305 Such framing more than suggests its obvious utility: Hall’s ‘politics of signification’ have natural correlates within the interdisciplinary domain of HGS, and its semiotic backbone is also clearly linkable to HGS’ own history and projects.306 For history, Hall’s “complex structure of dominance” finds its natural companion in Trouillot’s Silencing the Past, where examination of the bounds of history as discourse are rooted in its status as “the fruit of power…[which] itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous.”307 Hall’s articulation, like Trouillot’s, traces not so much a static structure of dominance as the dynamism within structures of dominance;308 the three decoding positions taxonomize the archetypical viewer’s alignment with hegemony as a prelude

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303 The best way to ‘build’ a bridge is, naturally, to find where someone else has already built one and just claim it as yours.
304 Theoretical bridges being much cleaner and easier to design than actual ones (as every neophyte engineering student quickly learns).
305 Hall, “Encoding, Decoding.” One might recognize textual and ethnographic concerns as, well, what this whole thing is about.
306 The circularity of Hall’s formulation also matches well with the cyclicality of GaaS and Trouillot’s model of historical narrative: “Traditionally, mass-communication research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop…it is also possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution, consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a ‘complex structure in dominance’, sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence.” Hall.
307 Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, xiii. Trouillot continues: “The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”
308 In particular, the dynamism and agency of the taxonomized decoding positions comes to the fore.
for framing the contestations which emerge (or fail to)—useful for outlining, as Trouillot does, silences in discourse.\footnote{Hall’s three hypothetical decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and globally contrary.}

The gap between Hall’s grounding in the televisual and contemporary digital games is bridged via several concepts: the primary differential affordances are heightened and scrutinized most within the context of Hall’s third decoding position, where the producer and user are most at odds—in HGS, counterplay, or “play against the algorithm” serves as the most visible exemplar of this position.\footnote{Apperley, “Modding the Historian’s Code: Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination,” 2013; Apperley, \textit{Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global}; De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, “A Playful Multitude? Mobilising and Counter-Mobilising Inmaterial Game Labour.”}

Related anxieties over digital games identify what is arguably a fourth decoding position, one situated in the tension between games’ magic circle (with its impositions on external signification) and the historicizing context which undergirds all historic games: instead of (de/re)totalizing, the user instead refuses any signification beyond the ludic.\footnote{This particular behavior is analogous to a user-driven reframing via a sort of Baudrillardian simulacra, with ideal/pure ludicity proudly eschewing any reality as a valid referent beyond itself. Whether this is the same as Hall’s third position or a novel fourth depends on whether one views “[re]totalizing] the message within some alternative framework of reference” as applicable to designification beyond a ludic simulacra nestled within the magic circle. I’d argue that Hall’s oppositional code requires an analogous frame of reference to the (in this example) historicizing context provided as the dominant reading—counterplay moving towards an alternative history fits under this oppositional coding in a way that the designificatory shrug of pure ludicity does not. In a framework concerned with contestation and response to structure in a cyclical context, this behavior best fits within a new space that can be analogized not as agreement, negotiation, or contestation, but instead as somewhere between a shrug and plugging one’s ears. In a pessimistically liberatory way, such refusal matches well with Baudrillard’s idealized response to the totalizing signification found in modernity—just refuse to play the whole semiotics game! See: Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Simulacra and Simulation}, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1981; repr., Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).}

This particular position has long been theorized and identified within historical games,\footnote{The works of David Myers and Diane Carr are particularly notable here: Myers, “Simulation as Play”; David Myers, \textit{The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis}, n.d.; Myers, “Bombs, Barbarians, and Backstories: Meaning-Making within Sid Meier’s Civilization,” 2005; Carr, “The Trouble with Civilization,” 2007.} and—coupled with the third position’s contrarian possibilities—contrasts the liberatory hagiography of many early digital games scholars against the inflamed historiographic wound still festering from

\footnote{Hall’s three hypothetical decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and globally contrary.}
White and Rosenstone’s discourse over history and film.\textsuperscript{313} Beyond this fourth boogyman, HGS has much to say about the first three positions: Chapman’s (2016) (hi)story-play-space bounds player signification, behavior, and agency within ludic affordance into a single domain of possibility for signification and play—one with new contextual wrinkles rooted in ludic notions such as difficulty vs. player skill as an intermixed, boundary-shaping tension within the formal context.\textsuperscript{314}

It would be nice if this approach was applicable to \textit{Crusader Kings} straight out of the proverbial box—but alas, there are some complications. To start: much of the extant games scholarship invoked thus far belongs to a temporal context in which the fixed, AAA game sold on CD mode of production described the material context of games and games discourse; as Juul (2020) notes,\textsuperscript{315} this mode is now in a sort of ecological decline, with the novel live service game mode serving as apex predator within our ludic ecosystem. While \textit{Crusader Kings} does not fit perfectly within the live service mode as Juul describes it, \textit{CK3} definitively exists far outside his conventional modality—hewing far closer to the structure of live service than many of HGS’ exemplars from an earlier time. Within Crusader Kings’ particular implementation of the GaaS/SaaS paradigm, both structure and struggle have changed and must now be integrated over a temporal axis in a manner which traces a functional trajectory in order to describe the area underneath.\textsuperscript{316} For this chapter, the temporal context of this discursive struggle provides the

\textsuperscript{313} The snarky and reductive distillation of this divide being “player agency good” vs. “player agency bad.” For the historiographic concerns which have been ported over to digital games, see White and Rosenstone’s separate articulations: White, “Historiography and Historiophoty”; Rosenstone, “History in Images/History in Words.” For a breakdown of the early utopian hagiography of digital games, see: Lundblade, “What Video Games Have Taught Us: Two Decades of Gaming and Learning.”

\textsuperscript{314} This particular limitation is the very definition of—to use the contemporary slang—a ‘skill issue.’

\textsuperscript{315} Juul, “The Independent Mode: A Functionalist Account of Independent Games and Game History.”

\textsuperscript{316} The integral serving here as a metaphorical heuristic for finding agency’s area amidst continual change.
crucial bridge between scholarship aimed at an older mode and an aggregate theory effective for this new modality.

After outlining this bridge in theory, it is time to turn to practice; to begin, I’ll presage what much of this chapter will argue: when actually attempting to bridge our chasm of choice, incorporating the collection of discursive practices found in the Crusader Kings community provides an opportunity—or, perhaps, a need—to cyclically taxonomize our temporal trajectory, incorporating as it now does the various phases of product announcement, release, adjustment, and consolidation which are then strung together via marketing praxis along the timeline of interest. With a temporal, periodized context for CK3’s own politics of signification, movements within this project’s assemblage of historical play—particularly its constellation of decoding practices—begin to make sense. This argument, naturally, is built out over the course of this chapter via example and analysis—but first, this chapter’s central site (the PDX CK3 forum) and its cultural/affordance quirks must be introduced.

Beginning with the key affordances of ownership, governance, and structure—especially those which differentiate this site from its reddit counterpart—clear material differences are already

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317 By this I mean that these phases are both distinct and cyclical not because of any cosmic law, but largely due to the best practices found at the synergistic nexus of CK3’s design, development, marketing, and sale practices: content for CK3 is nestled end-to-end repetitively (without overlap) in a successive cycle of announcements, teasers, release, refinement, and rest because this seems to match with how their game design is min-maxed under financial considerations that accommodate the work culture of their corporate headquarters. PDX as a company is, largely, located in Stockholm, Sweden—and Swedish culture trends towards lengthy summer vacations that lead to a predictable yearly lull in game content. Those familiar with Stockholm in the summer vs. Stockholm in the rest of the year will, perhaps, find this understandable.

318 This forum is explicitly labeled as a Crusader Kings III forum, yet for obvious reasons CK2 is still discussed within its bounds; as such, I’ll refer to the forum formally as the PDX CK3 forum, but readers should not infer any attempt to cleave CK3 wholly from CK2 in doing so.
evident; unlike the constellation of reddit sites largely created and moderated by members of the community, the PDX forum is owned, designed, maintained, and moderated by PDX and its staff. Embracing an early affordance associated with the bulletin board design, PDX staff members are explicitly highlighted using special public-facing site roles that, among other things, contrast PDX official posts using archetypical blue text. These PDX accounts take on a range of roles, including participant (e.g. responding to player-created discussions); moderator (e.g. invisibly removing inappropriate content or visibly indicating boundary violations via response), technical support (e.g. responding to community-reported bugs and related issues with the game), and marketer/public relations (e.g. announcing new content, creating and promoting official and regular developer updates). Structurally, the PDX forums exemplify an earlier phase of digital culture and infrastructure than the other digital sites implicated in this project; though some modernized elements have been incorporated, the site is structured in the nearly half-century-old board/thread/reply pattern of classic bulletin board system(s) (BBS); the overall

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319 For the full exploration of the reddit site’s relevant affordances, as well as the associated methodological and analytical considerations, see Chapter 1 (for overall method as it pertains to the site) and Chapter 3 (for reddit specifics). Also see the relevant appendices, which list the various subreddits grouped under the ‘CK reddit community’ analytical category.
320 It’s worth noting that several of the subreddits examined (e.g. r/paradoxplaza) are moderated by redditors who identify as PDX staff members; across all of the subreddits explicitly associated with PDX titles, other users who identify as PDX staff (usually with the ‘PDX’ prefix in their reddit usernames) are frequently active and responsive to community feedback.
321 This, too, is a bit of digital games forum culture—boards hosted by game companies (such as Blizzard Entertainment’s epochal World of Warcraft and its forum) often use blue text (an instance of which is simply called a ‘blue post’ or a ‘blue’) to distinguish official company-associated posts from regular users. As such, references to blue posts serve as a common sourcing shorthand to legitimate or interrogate responses (e.g. “have we gotten a blue post on the subject?”). While this particular piece of shorthand was not explicitly identified in this study’s dataset, PDX posters’ blue text responses still largely serve as materially legitimated responses to various community interrogatives.
322 Driscoll (2022) traces the BBS pattern back to the 1970s–1990s internet which preceded the privatization and popularization of the internet in the early 1990s. Though the pattern originated in this period, its heyday occurred following the aforementioned opening of the worldwide web in the early 90s. Though the software pattern remained the same, this 90s boom was driven by substantive architectural changes that made online participation much easier; pre-90s modem BBS required direct connections from their users to the host (thus drastically limiting capability), a
forum is grouped into different boards (largely divided by game and game series), each of which aggregate threads containing a serialized list consisting of the initial post and subsequent replies. Differing substantively from reddit, the affordances offered by the CK forum push text over image and linear over brachiate discourse.\textsuperscript{323}

User behavior was, over the course of the study, also differentiated between the two sites. Coincident with this textual focus is a far wider range of linguistic engagement; users frequently eschew the internet’s de facto lingua franca in favor of other linguistic identities;\textsuperscript{324} such code switching plays an important role in intra-communal contestation, signifying as it does identities not associated with the de facto collectivity and, as later examples in this chapter suggest, often

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\textsuperscript{323}The tree-like structure of reddit posts and comments often coincides with paired oppositional comments (generally) centering the parent comment—a discursive pattern occurring alongside a supportive affordance. However, the tendency of linear BBS discourse to also follow a for/against positionality debate might remind us to steer clear of simplistic assessments of overdetermined phenomena.
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\textsuperscript{324}While English is still the most common language used, other (predominantly European) languages such as Swedish, German, French, Danish, Norwegian, Russian, and Bulgarian are frequently employed. As we’ll see, linguistic choice is tied to many different rhetorical objectives, such as strategically limiting discursive engagement and various identity formation, alignment, and representational practices.
\end{flushright}
tied to the discourse of nation-states and national identity. Linguistics serves as a crucial entry point; linguist Alastair Pennycook (2008) deftly identifies the link between linguistics and nationalism as a crucial ligature connecting past colonial nationalism (in the service of English and other languages employed by colonial powers) with contemporary linguistic-nationalist linkages promulgated on behalf of linguistic and cultural diversity. In this context, code switching away from English suggests a communal shift away from a shared communal context towards a nationalist sub-cultural position; however, rejection of the linguistic switch may also

325 Scholarship addressing digital nationalism is, to put it mildly, quite extensive; a full treatment of language, identity, and digital nationalism is thus well beyond the scope of this chapter. A few key terms and points of discussion are worth glossing, however. First, for defining a nation (as well as disambiguating it from a state), I turn to Saunders (2011,1): “a nation is any named human population that shares a historical territory, common myths, and historical memories, and enjoys a mass, public culture.” A state, on the other hand, “is a political organization that exercises sovereignty over a defined territory.” The careful reader, who has naturally read Chapter 2 of this dissertation, will undoubtedly zero in on the problems here: first, the obvious one: contemporary notions of statehood can be viewed as anachronistic malapropisms in the context of CK3—revisionist historiography serves as the critical lubricant for a sizeable contingent that maintains this position anyway. Secondly, the dividing line between state and nation in the context of CK3 and play discourse is determined by diegetic positionality: if one is writing from inside the play diegesis (and locating both diegetical positions in the historicized context), then one is playing (anachronistic) statehood; on the other hand, any external diegetic position or acknowledged exegesis is likely to reframe this as playing a nation. Naturally, blending or linking these twin diegetical positions almost by definition serves to reify the very notion of the nation-state. Also, as with the “ironic fascism” touched on in C3, the ambiguity between these positions gives avowed nationalists a lot of rhetorical cover to hide behind. For definitions, see: Robert A. Saunders, Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace: The Internet, Minority Nationalism, and the Web of Identity (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 1. Like early game studies’ anxieties re: digital games as new media, there exists a comparable debate within this space that argues for exacerbatory and attenuative effects of digital infrastructure and culture on 20th century nationalism: for a gloss of this debate, see: Sabina Mihelj and César Jiménez-Martínez, “Digital Nationalism: Understanding the Role of Digital Media in the Rise of ‘new’ Nationalism,” Nations and Nationalism 27, no. 2 (2021): 331–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12685. Also relevant here is the assessment of the role of technologies in the expanding co-construction of nationalism and national identities as illustrated by: Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (Brooklyn: Verso, 1983).

326 “[our contemporary connection] between language and nation has a long history; indeed it was at the very heart of the development of linguistics. Linguistics, as Errington (2008:4) explains, ‘can be regarded as a small, rather special group of colonial agents who adapted European letters to alien ways of talking and, by that means, devised necessary conduits for communication across lines of colonial power.’” As we’ll see in this chapter, anticolonial discourse in the CK community often performs this very linkage between nationalism, identity, and language. For sources quoted, see: Alastair Pennycook, “Nationalism, Identity and Popular Culture,” in Sociolinguistics and Language Education, ed. Nancy H. Hornberger and Sandra Lee McKay, New Perspectives on Language and Education (Multilingual Matters, 2010), 62; Joseph Errington, Linguistics in a Colonial World: A Story of Language, Meaning, and Power (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 4.

327 As chapter 3 articulates, there exists many imbricate identities in this particular assemblage: Title-specific identities, such as Crusader Kings player, CK2 or CK3 player (specifically and oppositionally), or player of any
be employed in order to adopt the invisibility of the linga fraca’s own hegemonic sentiment. Of course, this hegemony is not merely cultural and linguistic—both reality and perception of power can be first examined in the context of CK3’s play and play patterns, revealing a perceived center of play in community discourse.

**A Digital Metropole: Community Articulations of Dominant Readings in CK3**

Examination of the Crusader Kings community reveals a strikingly broad consensus read on CK3’s dominant narrative. This read emerges through the now familiar codes associated with evaluative critique and historicization, with additional context provided by self-reported and metagame-provided play data which provides a context-rich paradigmatic corroboration of this read by grounding discourse in broadly-quantified player behavior. A recent official poll conducted on X/Twitter serves as an effective starting point:

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other specific historical title (e.g. HoI4 or EU4); platform-specific identities: redditor, r/crusaderkings redditor, or a professed reddit outsider; national or regional identities: e.g. Swedish, Russian, German, or Western European, Balkan, American, etc.; professionalized identities, such as game designer, developer, player, historian (sometimes in a specific salient context, e.g. a PDX developer); as well as other broader or narrower identities, such as gamer, male, incel, and “chad.” Language switching represents an extremely powerful mechanism by which specific identities can be discursively highlighted and performed.

328 Nationalism as a label, per Skey (2009), was originally applied to revolutionary efforts to attain statehood for the nation—and to thus be characterized in the metropole as something “extraordinary, politically charged, and ideologically driven” (Billig 1995: 44 qtd in Skey). Billig’s banal nationalism instead labels the invisibly dominant national construction originating in the dominant, established, and predominantly Western nations. Both uses can be applicable here in a variety of ways: users frequently encode both banal and typified nationalism in their play discourse while (occasionally) labeling others’ efforts with the moniker. See: Michael Skey, review of The national in everyday life: A critical engagement with Michael Billig’s thesis of Banal Nationalism, by Michael Billig, The Sociological Review 57, no. 2 (2009): 331–46; Michael Billig, “Banal Nationalism and the Imaginings of Politics,” in Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Belonging and Identity after Banal Nationalism (London: Palgrave, 1995), 307–22.

329 The platform formerly known as Twitter is now branded as X, though adoption of the new nomenclature seems, at time of writing, to be somewhat limited. Attending to the platform’s lengthy history, this project will use the term Twitter to more clearly identify and disambiguate references to this particular platform.
What region in #CK3 is your favorite to play in?

Europe ☑ 89%
Africa 4%
Asia 7%

1,067 votes · 23 hours 8 minutes left

12:13 PM · 9/26/23 from Earth · 4,371 Views

1 Repost 3 Quotes 18 Likes 1 Bookmark

Figure 8: Official CK3 poll results
Here, self-reported play in *Crusader Kings III* has a clear focus; an aggregate favoritism that aligns well with more explicit and accessible data regarding play. Achievement data—drawn from the primary metagame grounded in Steam’s mandatory affordances—corroborates the introductory poll; of the 42 achievements which are regionally locked—either by strict starting or ending conditions or by dependence on regionally-bound mechanics or systems—only five provide play data for regions outside of Europe. Completion rates within that set also suggest how player behavior might align with this focus: one must descend to the 16th most-completed

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330 It’s worth noting the clear limitations of this source: Twitter was not, at any point in this study, identified as a major locus of the CK community—the (relatively) limited engagement with the above poll is suggestive of this narrower selection; the approximately 1k respondents must be contextualized with data drawn from CK3 play and reddit/forum engagement statistics—daily numbers which dwarf the above response rate. Nevertheless, the poll serves as a clear articulation of what subsequent sources will corroborate, as well as an introduction to player response and articulated critique which introduces this chapter’s subsequent discussion of hegemonic contestation. Additionally, as this entire project has argued, the efforts of these respondents and other high-engagement community members can have outsize effects which dwarf the impact of the numerous but disengaged players.

331 See Appendix D for the full temporal range of achievement data. I am treating Mediterranean achievements as European in this context, as they generally include some north African and middle eastern play while still centering the associated European territory. Other caveats: as one can see, completion percentages are (a) overall quite low, (b) limited by prominent known features (e.g., achievements are blocked by non-ironman and modded play), (c) seem to correlate strongly with release dates for obvious reasons, (d) and are clearly influenced by completion difficulty. As such, this data offers us a narrow look at overall play trends which are dependent on an external context that few data escape. Two that are worth addressing specifically are (1) the popularity of Ireland and (2) the Roman Empire respectively. Ireland is well known within the community as “tutorial island,” and since CK2 has served as the game’s structured introduction to a game with a very steep learning curve. As such, its prominence in achievement data is unsurprising—it serves as a rough proxy for tutorial completion under the game’s standardized Ironman settings. The relative popularity of Rise from the Ashes, the achievement tied to recreating the Roman Empire, relative to its difficulty is also worth highlighting. Formation of the Roman Empire in CK3 is a relatively difficult exercise requiring extensive time investment, yet its completion numbers dwarf most regional achievements with far gentler completion criteria. This is suggestive of one key facet of this game’s Eurocentrist elements, a form of Romanophilia that resonates with popular culture writ large—or, perhaps, simply a challenge undertaken because of its difficulty or memetic recognition (this particular example is the very definition of overdetermined). As an example, see the (as of fall 2023) relevant social media memetic interrogative asking how often males think about the Roman Empire. CK3 players do seem to think, play, post, and upvote with Roman restoration in mind.

332 As discussed in my (2021) previous work, this is a fairly complex relationship to assess, with—among other things—difficulty playing a major role in these completion percentages. Another notable factor is discussed in still another earlier (2020) work, wherein I examine Civ6 achievements which introduce a particular type of content into the lategame that, largely due to the influence of play patterns, is rarely encountered at all. Analogously, there is some evidence that content weighted towards later phases of CK3 is less likely to be encountered/experienced by the playerbase. For my earlier work on achievements, see: Kirk Lundblade, “Crowning Achievements: A Historioludic Analysis of the Achievement Metagame in Historical Simulation Games,” in *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (Foundations of Digital Games, ACM Press, 2021); Lundblade, “Oops We Did It Again.”
in order to find a non-European entry—but while this dataset offers us only a limited glimpse at actual play patterns, its far more robust and compelling use is to illustrate the focus of the game’s developer-historians: the base game’s mechanics and attached metagame (achievements) heavily focus on Europe, while the two currently-released content packs with a regional focus—Northern Lords and Fate of Iberia—have centered Scandinavia and Iberia respectively.

Discourse drawn from the primary sites aligns with this quantitative context. Across all sites examined, posters express a range of evaluative heuristics aimed at discussing the game, its developers, and the content cycle—with one core subset uniting to provide a telling community heuristic for assessing the dominant/preferred readings of CK3. Under this heuristic—identifiable via sources across reddit, the PDX forum, and peripheral sites such as twitter—players center regionally-distributed content depth as a sort of changing incentive structure that

333 With chapter 2’s discussion of design polyphony in mind, it’s worth framing a very particular bit of developer commentary from PDXCON 2022: when asked to generate achievement ideas, many developers profess beginning not with high-minded historicism in mind, but with the playful impulse to produce historioliudic puns. Despite their punishing origin, most of CK3’s resultant achievements fall outside of the intertextual joke structure I identify in my earlier (2021) study: the jokes are (generally) contained within the title alone; achievement logic usually embodies some form of historioliudic engagement and references—instead of completes—the joke. More recent achievements released following this study have, however, used the fully intertextual joke structure more prominently. NB: This is not intended to denigrate this design decision—as the astute reader might guess, this project fully supports puns as a pedagogical and rhetorical modality. For my earlier work on historical game achievements, see: Lundblade, “Crowning Achievements: A Historioliudic Analysis of the Achievement Metagame in Historical Simulation Games,” 2021.

334 Here we bring in an important temporal facet of this discourse; namely that it exists within the context of regular content releases—the pace and focus of which are relevant to this discussion. For example: as of 10/23, PDX has announced the 3rd regional content pack, called Legacy of Persia, centering, well, Persia. This of course breaks up the Eurocentric trend—but, as we’ll unpack—is perfectly situated within the overall ecosystem that begins (but not ends) with this Eurocentric facet. The cyclicality of game development and community engagement means that discourses of design, development, and critique exist not just in conversation with each other in the present moment, but also in conversation with their own past stances, claims, and articulated values.
shapes and bounds both personal and aggregate play patterns. Responses to the above poll include several telling replies:

“When most of the DLCs have focused upon Europe, they should finish first. I sincerely wish that in the future there would be something regarding the Mongols/Turks or even India/China. Just a little reason to play that side of the map at the moment”

“Wow based on the vote we need more content for the other regions. I’m finishing a run Europe and have been eyeing Asia for another run in either China or India…”

“Europe is pretty much the only one that has any content. Add more stuff to do in asia”

“The region with all the content sure helps its desirability”

“It’s hard to notice anywhere but Europe. Mostly because you left the rest of the world without big well known characters to play. While in Europe its play these 20 people.”

In the above cases, content depth is clearly read as decisively impacting a form of esteem that directly translates to play—with many players acknowledging the validity of the poll results in a personal context while also expressing a change in content depth that would align their actual play with desired regional interest. This is the first identifiable community definition/heuristic:

335 It is worth noting, again, that this by no means should be taken as an assertion that the entire community thinks and plays this way—contrapositive examples are easy to find; they are just (a) quantitatively in the minority and usually also (b) explicitly aware of their minority position. Secondly, the careful reader will note the poll asks about the community’s “favorite” play region—this, strictly speaking, does not perfectly map to play hours by region. However, examining the replies quickly reveals that many players do link both the self- and poll-reported favorites to playing in those regions.

336 Series of replies to the Twitter/X poll cited in Figure 8.
dominant reading as explicit playing/doing, with developer action (as agentive distributors of content depth) clearly shaping this outcome.

A second heuristic, overlaid with the first, provides an additional evaluative layer that, for the time being, also resolves into the shape of Europe:

**Unloved Nomads**

Why is it impossible to build walls and towers in the steppe? It’s like a plain. And yet, why the Turks, for example, do not have a decision to revive the Turkic Kaganate or the same mechanics of “becoming the greatest khan.” I’m just a Kazakh, and it upsets me that the country that was the largest before him (6.7 century) has not been worked out so well.337

**Paradox, when is the patch for nomads?**

When do you tink there will be a DLC for Asia and will it be at all? I really want to see the elaboration of the mechanics of nomads, especially the Turkic tribes / states and the decision to unify the Turkic Kaganate338

Here, content depth is assessed as a yardstick for dominance in a manner more grounded in representational accuracy and a form of historioludic dissonance found in its absence: ahistoric implementations and absences rooted in the closing off of historicized possibilities are thus identified as a more concrete focusing of the game’s dominant reading—one cannot achieve the expressed historically resonant unification of the Turkic Kaganate if that option is not encoded

337 Original post retrieved from the PDX forum in 2022.
338 Original post retrieved from the PDX forum in 2022.
into the game. The fruits of developer attention—again implicitly framed through content additions and alterations—are thus evaluated through their potential (though currently absent) ability to expand the (hi)story play space and resolve otherwise unresolvable historioludic dissonance for some players. These two heuristics are easily entwined—aligning when content depth resolves, rather than exacerbates, problems with representation and the (hi)story-play-space—but divergent cases are also easy to identify:

**The Guanche nonsense**

I loved when it was announced that more detail was going to be added to the canary islands (and madeira), but the result is really a nonsense:

1- Maidera was not inhabited during the middle ages. It was colonized during the first half of the XV Century. Thus… guanches in Madeira? As historical as Vikings in madeira…

4- In the map, canary islands are HILLS!!! WHAT??!! I live in canary islands and I can assure you that the five western islands are basically MOUNTAINS. Tenerife has the highest peak of spain! And La Palma is the island most sloped IN THE WORLD…

In this case, the perceived increase in representational inaccuracy/dissonance coincides with additive content in a manner that sees the dominance structure of CK3 moving either to include

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339 This is, again, where mods often come into play alongside the critique/advocacy focused in this study.
340 As discussed in Chapter 3, posters in these discussions frequently self-identify as belonging to a particular regional/cultural identity bound up in the region/culture currently being discussed. In this context, where dominance is read as hardcoded limitations (producing dissonance) to the (hi)story play space, it makes sense that those most sensitive to this limitation are those who likely have (a) more knowledge of the region’s history as well as (b) more interest in seeing its representation improved.
341 Original post retrieved from the PDX forum in 2022.
the region or to more thoroughly marginalize it. Eurocentrism, through foundational mechanics included in the game’s launch, is naturally implicated in the above marginalization process:

In some ways it's a side effect of everything being forced into a c. 1200s French feudal model (even the tribals and clan governments are basically feudal with a few bells and whistles); you can't really model very different societies and tech levels at all. So stone age folks are forced to use ships and cavalry and castles and siege weapons because there is no alternative.

Something to keep in mind next time we have one of those "expand the map" threads and someone brings up the Americas.342

Here, as with responses to expanding/improving nomadic cultures, another boundary is read into the dominant reading itself—one that limits not just play patterns and play satisfaction, but the ability of the developers to alter their own dominant reading. The choice to center feudalism—part and parcel of the Eurocentric result identified through any of the above heuristics—is here and elsewhere read as closing off the possibility for even changes desired by developers and players alike.343 This appears to form the final boundary players identify in the dominant reading and its potential for contestation: code, structured to create feudalism, bounds both the (hi)story and design play spaces in its final embrace.

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342 This post was the 19th post in the thread originating with the previous “guanche nonsense” post.
343 Whether or not this assessed limitation on development is accurate is another matter; in the previous examples which discussed nomadic steppe cultures, even posters responding to the original post seemed to disagree as to whether or not their desired changes were even possible. Still more complexity emerges when practicability—often measured in the financial language of development time versus expected sales—is included in the discussion.
Much has been said about how players seem to identify and evaluate dominant readings, and it is worth taking a brief moment to consider their relationship to, well, reality as constituted by the game. Are the (largely) Eurocentric dominant readings associated—via content depth—with play favoritism and resonant play spaces being factually misrepresented, or is it accurate? While a full accounting would take this discussion too far afield, I’d like to quickly examine a few specific game features which, I argue, can be readily aligned with the player heuristics. Such grounding provides a useful starting point for the subsequent section which brings in the complexities of developer action and intentionality via contextualizing CK3’s current content release cycle.

Returning to Crusader Kings III, I’d like to briefly highlight affordances that align with both play shaping and content evaluating heuristic elements. Moving past the most obvious influences—title and marketing language—playable position (structured by interface) offers an obvious

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344 The careful reader might ask why I’m not examining the game for historical (in)accuracies and structural dissonances myself. There are several answers (brevity being one), but the largest is methodological: I am not a historian of the Middle Ages, nor do I have the regional, linguistic, or cultural knowledge to personally evaluate such representations independently from historical knowledge I possess. In other words: I’m not effectively equipped to evaluate specific historical silences and representational (in)accuracies myself—numerous historians, especially the PDX-highlighted Eleanor Janega and Bret Deveraux, have offered such evaluations rooted in their expertise as historians. For some examples of their work, see: PDXCON Historian Panel.

345 The game is called *Crusader Kings*, which tells even primary school dropouts what the game is likely to feature. If that wasn’t enough, said dropouts can also obviously tell that the game’s core imagery features blonde-haired white-skinned people wearing some form of medieval garb. Of course, it’s worth noting again that players have (a) obviously paid attention to the titular focus and also (b) frequently discuss whether or not said Crusades have been addressed effectively or sufficiently. A range of community opinions come up here, with many players speculating as to why the developers have not addressed crusades via post-release content. One such explanation offered is that, perhaps, the developers are loath to draw player/community focus to such a politically-charged topic—but, of course, I have not been able to find any direct or indirect confirmation of this particular theory. It is worth adding that I have also neglected to address the impact/implications of the use of the term Crusade in both the title and gameplay—this is a line of inquiry which deserves its own separate work that is impracticable here; for my own engagement with the term during the project, I have been guided by Gabriele’s (2016) admonitions on the subject: “Is ‘crusade’ useful to us, the namers? I’m beginning to think that it isn’t. It has become a word that carries its baggage invisibly, a multivalent symbol that obscures rather than clarifies, that stands as a cipher for (almost) everything except an actual medieval phenomenon.”: Matthew Gabriele, “Debating the ‘Crusade’ in Contemporary America,” *The Mediæval Journal* 6, no. 1 (2016): 85. The implication that the term exists more comfortably in a contemporary social and political milieu makes its examination in the social context of CK3 even more important and fraught—which, again, regrettably exceeds the scope of this work.
starting point: players starting a new game are offered a highlighted set of starting characters which, the game argues, are especially interesting to play: at launch, the Carolingian rulers formed the central playset highlighted for the 866 start date. The structuring affordance emphasizing certain playable positions aligns well with the comparable player heuristic, and its evaluative result, at launch, is the same: Europe wins again.346 Still more mechanical accretions bias the dominant reading towards euro-imperialist polities;347 even at launch, unique mechanical layers were provided for the Roman and Holy Roman Empires. Other indicators of special attention—such as unique cultures, buildings, religious beliefs, unit types, and regional specialties—also broadly follow this pattern.348 Early play is thus aligned with design and development in centering reading and doing—within the game and metagame—in a predominantly European context. Conceptually, this represents both force and position—clear incentives coupled with an obvious accumulation—that frames the Eurocentrism of CK3 as a classical Newtonian attractor within our assemblage. If a new player wants to, as the game’s

346 The picture changes substantively with post-launch content, which will be addressed in the next section.
347 It is worth reiterating, again, that the presence of unique mechanics for these two empires—while relatively minor—was a significant presence at launch. However, years into CK3’s development cycle these relatively novel additions have long since been dwarfed in mechanical density by the regionalisms proffered by the game’s post-launch content.
348 I’m compacting my argument here in order to avoid belaboring the point. For some additional context: game mechanics tend to include relatively generic systems which are mirrored all over the map (e.g., a series of pseudo-technologies that all cultures progress through) that include unique instances that are intended to represent/model differences belonging to a particular region, culture, or faith (e.g. a specific increase to vassal tax revenue available to rulers of French culture in the late game). The balance of these unique elements (early in the game’s development cycle) heavily favors Europe (though certainly includes important non-European components), which tells us something about what the designers and developers chose to focus on modeling. These unique instances within generalized mechanics are one supporting element of this Eurocentrism; entirely unique mechanics / major alterations to entire mechanics (e.g. the HRE example above) are another such element.
marketing copy declares, “secure and keep [their] place in the history books,” then what better place to start than with the guy on the box art?

There is, of course, one all-encompassing point which must be addressed: the Crusader Kings III that has (largely) been described above is not the same as the CK3 that exists today (at time of writing) or even in the game’s future. The evolution of the game—the arcs of its broad possibility space as well as its narrative center—have, to borrow the phrase, bent (as well as fractured) substantively in the nearly three years since the game’s launch. This can be seen clearly in the game’s major content release timeline:

Table 1: Major content releases for CK3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Area Focus</th>
<th>Content Added</th>
<th>$USD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Release</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>09/01/20</td>
<td>Europe, Eurasian, Steppe, North, Africa, Middle East, India</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>49.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garments of the Holy Roman Empire</td>
<td>Cosmetic Pack</td>
<td>09/01/20</td>
<td>Holy Roman</td>
<td>Outfits</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

349 Paradox Interactive, “Crusader Kings III.” The blonde hair, blue eyes, and Viking paraphernalia more than suggest another popular contemporary historical topic—one deeply tied to white supremacy and various ethno-nationalist movements in a contemporary context. Of course, a certain focus on Scandinavian medievalism might be expected from a Swedish company with a large regional playerbase—“Sweden is overpowered” being one of the most prominent memes across PDX titles (one lampshaded repeatedly by the developers themselves). For a critical analysis of Viking imagery and ethno-nationalism in the related medieval(ish) context of 2011’s Skyrim, see: Call and Lecaque, “From Hero to Zero: Nationalistic Narratives and the Dogma of Being Dragonborn.” Other essays in this collection use Skyrim to interrogate Skyrim’s medieval representations, grounding the gameworld in nationalism, neomedievalism, and frontier rhetoric. Skyrim and CK3 are, of course, very different games with largely divergent portrayals of ethno-nationalist neomedievalism, but Skyrim—as a totemic, highly influential title—provides some contemporary cultural context for such neomedieval engagement. Of course, CK3 and Skyrim are also linked through a particular popular mod for CK3: Elder Kings, which rebuilds CK3 into a simulation of The Elder Scrolls’ series gameworld Skyrim exists within.

350 Proverbially speaking. With console downloads being a primary mode of access there really isn’t much in the way of actual box art available.

351 See Appendix C for the full chronology of CK3 releases alongside my coding of their contents.
CK3’s regionally-focused content over its first three years primarily appears in two different types of content release: cosmetic packs, which provide regionally- and culturally-specific

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352 This is the price listed on Steam as of 2/11/2024. Given the typical price point associated with this content type ($4.99), it is reasonable to assume the additional ‘7’ is in error.
clothing for the game’s characters, and flavor packs, which expand existing mechanics to provide new instances tied to the pack’s cultural and regional focus.\footnote{This means that existing game mechanics—such as the culture system, which modularizes cultures as collections of discrete traditions the player can slowly add, remove, or alter—are augmented with regionally-specific instances (e.g. cultural traditions that require Norse heritage). The presence or absence of mechanical specifics is, alongside a sort of historioludic evaluation of cross-regional mechanics, the primary heuristic used by the community for reading dominant design narrative (see n. 347,348,349 above). Flavor packs also occasionally introduce new game mechanics altogether, such as Fate of Iberia’s Struggle mechanic, which has since been used in the subsequent Legacy of Persia flavor pack as well. For more in-depth explanations of game mechanics, content types, and specific DLC releases, see Appendix B.} A broad view of this schema might see a gradual, community-wide accretion of content largely spread across the entire area of play, whereas a more granular perspective reveals schism and fragmentation not just in regional content depth (dividing players according to their regions of interest for both discussion and play), but also in purchasing practice and overall product selection.\footnote{While the specifics of content sales are difficult to acquire, the wide range of available content, tied to continual player discussion over price points, at least suggests that, amongst members of the community, players are increasingly playing with different combinations of DLC content (and are thus, in a sort, playing divergent versions of *Crusader Kings III* entirely). This is not to discount the vocal contingent of the playerbase that seemingly purchases each DLC and thus remains fully up-to-date with all of the game’s content.} Player discourse must, I argue, be positioned within this iterative context.

As the next section will argue, each major addition is also read as an intentional alteration of the game’s historicized position, and corresponding silences that persist throughout this iterative cycle are periodically re-litigated by the community. It is here, along the trajectory of *CK3*, that communal agency reasserts itself and can thus be emplotted; this agency is located not, primarily, in either the interpretation or play of *Crusader Kings*, but in the perceived ability of community critique to affect the iterative development process.\footnote{Readers might recognize the outline of this argument from Chapter 3’s discussion of the Games as a Service (GaaS) cycle and its relationship to critique more broadly; this chapter retreads some of the same conceptual ground but aims to place this critique in a somewhat different context—one that problematizes hegemonic notions of community and emphasizes the spatiotemporal context of this cyclical contestation.} Three such cases are discussed next, each
woven into the temporal arc of CK3’s iterative development whilst highlighting different facets of discursive contestation.

Fix my history: Community critique in responsive social ecologies

CK3 Bulgaria in 867 inherited the faulty cut down map from CK2. Plovdiv (Philippopolis) was inside Bulgaria for a century at that Point and Beroe province (Zagore province) was inside BG borders since ca 700 AD. The Rhodope mountains provinces (Rhodope and Zherkovo) were also inside the borders, as was Philippi at the Aegean coast.

I understand the logic to try to nerf an already huge kingdom but it could be a nice counter balance to Byzantine overpowerdness to go with historical Bulgaria. That means to ease the conditions for the player (or AI) Bulgaria to form an empire by already possessing more of its historically owned lands and to not get splintered after the death of its rulers, which never happened at that period anyway. Plus Bulgaria is also nerfed already enough by its false religion false culture tribal vassals in the north and the Magyar invasion (which historically happened later).

Otherwise Bulgaria gets to be food for Byzantium 200 years earlier than historical after splintering in game due to succession laws that historically did not exist in Bulgaria. At
the same time Bulgaria should have entered its golden century under Simeon the Great and reached its greatest territory expansion deep inside Greece…

Amidst the community responses which directly target announced or implemented changes by CK3’s developers we find yet another discursive impulse, one which—at first glance—appears to offer a critique without any explicit grounding in developer action; a corroborative motivational factor emerging to end the thread’s long-running debate. Said debate also exemplifies a second, less explicit community-driven heuristic for contesting dominant narrative—one that has much to say about how diegesis, historiography, and ludicity can be employed to advocate for change.

The rhetorical positionality used in the poster’s long-running argument is illustrative. The initial framing diegesis, offered above, is that of the kingdom of Bulgaria—with historically important individuals, such as Simeon the Great, first introduced in the context of their instrumental effects on the state. Within this framing, the poster clearly blends historical and ludic terminology into an entwined historioludic argument for their desired change: ‘nerfs’ and ‘overpoweredness’ draw upon the language of games culture to frame the issue as partially one of game balance, while

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356 PDX Community post sampled in spring of 2022. April 2022 saw both a communal lull and rising tension: the previously-released major expansion, Royal Court, had implemented a costly and broad-ranging system for visually embodying the court life of kingdom- and empire-tier rulers of the game’s central feudal and clan governments. Embroiled in controversy itself, Royal Court still features the lowest Steam rating of any CK3 DLC, reflecting a broad, rough communal dissatisfaction with the release. Simultaneously, the last content release to specifically highlight a particular region was the Northern Lords DLC released a year prior; the subsequent comparable addition, Fate of Iberia, would not be announced until the latter part of the month. This relative distance between content additions centered around geographic/cultural specificity forms the context for this particular case (posted early in the month before the FoI announcement), which achieved popularity and prominence in the forum/dataset absent any explicit and particular action on the developers’ part to serve as inspiration.

357 This is one of the dual diegetical positions explored in Chapter 2.

358 To gloss: a ‘nerf’ is a reduction in the ludic capability/power/strength of a particular game element, most commonly a play option that exists alongside many others (the aggregate selection of which is often framed as a game’s ‘meta’). The term is often associated with the epochal MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW), wherein nerf was most often used to refer to developers reducing the efficacy of a particular piece of character equipment or a set of character class abilities (thus incentivizing players to play different classes/use different equipment). Nerfing is

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adjectival historicity provides the normative rhetoric for the poster’s desired changes. After the poster’s rhetoric positions the developers’ ludic design against a normative, objective, and historical ideal, the detailed critique then runs along lines of borders and rulers.

The underlying historiography here is revealed slowly, but the careful reader might already guess its shape—the tripartite emphasis on monarchic rulers, political borders, and religious interplay dually directs one’s gaze, Janus-like, towards both the historiography of Rankean nationalist scholars in the past and irredentist/revanchist nationalism in our present. Also implicated is the almost universally viewed as an act of power conducted by whoever has control over the relevant codebase (i.e., players are not generally viewed directly as the source for nerfs). The implications being that (a) there exists a normative capacity that the current implementation of Byzantium exceeds, and (b) that a restoration to this norm would represent a ‘balance’ between (presumably) Byzantium and Bulgaria. The reader should hold this presumption in mind, as it will be appropriately challenged shortly.

359 Note the argument’s connection between ahistorical outcomes and configurations (e.g. early Magyar invasion and ‘false religion’/‘false culture’) and a resultant ludic game state (nerfed/unbalanced). Given the poster’s likely status as an ESL speaker, it is tempting to critically assess the loaded phrase ‘false religion’ with more detail, but a much more exhaustive analysis would be needed therein.

360 This particular poster uses ludicity to frame the developer’s actions and historicity to frame their desired changes. This is far from a unique approach, and it has a very particular rhetorical expediency of its own: rather than align with Chapman’s developer-historian vs. player-historian (both blending the ludic and historical), this framing converts the discourse to developer/ludicity vs history, which accomplishes two things. First, it removes the author from the picture, which serves as a mechanism for minimizing individualism and subjectivity while also centering a more objective and far-reaching consensus (a classic rhetorical position that is by no means unique to historical discourse). Second, it subtly strips the developers of their own historical consciousness, which lends rhetorical force to the poster by implicitly denying the developer’s claim to that same objective consensus.

361 Ranke is justifiably linked to (a) a ‘religious historicism’ that moves from the particular to the general by dint of a protestant notion of divinity, (b) what Munslow terms reconstructionist history, an objective and scientific view of historical inquiry, (c) the source-critical method credited with transforming the study of history into one centered around the use of archives to furnish sources. He and particularly his student successors are often associated with nationalist movements as well. The first two points are clearly rooted in the initial case study, the third is brought to bear in the resultant discussion (addressed previously), and the nationalist emphasis is prominent throughout. I draw this framing of Ranke and his work from: Helmut Berding, “Leopold von Ranke,” in The Discovery of Historicity in German Idealism and Historism, ed. Peter Koslowski, 5th ed., Studies in Economic Ethics and Philosophy (Berlin: Heidelberg: Springer, 2005), 41–58; Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “Leopold Ranke’s Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography,” Modern Intellectual History 5, no. 3 (2008): 425–53, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244308001753; Andreas Boldt, “Ranke: Objectivity and History,” Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice 18, no. 4 (2014): 457–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.893658.

362 Whether this specific case counts as irredentist or revanchist could be framed as a matter of discursive contestation—though the poster in question clearly frames it as irredentist. Nationalist historiography is naturally linked to the historici zed project of nation-state formation, which—per Saunders (2011)—began in the mid 17th century following the abatement of Europe’s most recent round of religious conflict. Like most things discussed in this chapter, nationalist historicizing became a tool not just for hegemonic nation-state formation, maintenance, and
omnipresent “great man history” which blends with Rankean nationalism in its concern for particular rulers as drivers of national identity and border formation.\textsuperscript{363} This early framing circumscribes the resultant discursive battleground, as respondents alternately critique and offer up contesting sources in a bid to adjudicate the historicity of the initial claims surrounding Simeon, Bulgarian borders, and religious movements during the period. In addition, as my earlier examinations of Michel Rolf-Trouillot suggest,\textsuperscript{364} claims to historical objectivity blend with the privileging of the OP’s cultural and national identity, which motivates their discursive struggle whilst providing the grounds upon which several arguments are rejected. National identity is here also entangled with language and linguistic positionality, with Bulgarian employed as the language of choice in a substantive fraction of this thread’s posts, thus exemplifying Hagège’s assertion that “to defend a culture is also to defend the language in which it is expressed.”\textsuperscript{365}

It is easy to view any such lengthy back-and-forth found on the internet within a self-contained framing,\textsuperscript{366} but this case reveals its position in the assemblage via two critical passageways. First, the obvious: the selected elements of initial critique rest on specific provincial and titular borders; the characteristics of a particular historical figure of note, Simeon the Great; and the

\textsuperscript{363} The term “great man theory” of history was, of course, popularized by: Thomas Carlyle, \textit{On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History}, vol. 1 (University of California Press, 1993).

\textsuperscript{364} I use Trouillot in this context initially in Chapter 3, suggesting that Trouillot’s centering of history in self-conscious and -constituting communal narrative supplies the means and motivation for these arguments from identity. See: Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History}.

\textsuperscript{365} Quoted from Pennycook (2010), who quotes and translates Hagège’s original French: “défendre une culture, c’est aussi défendre la langue dans laquelle elle s’exprime.” See: Pennycook, “Nationalism, Identity and Popular Culture,” 62; Claude Hagège, \textit{Combat pour le français: au nom de la diversité des langues et des cultures} (Odile Jacob, 2006), 37.

\textsuperscript{366} Possibly linked to the understandable desire to quarantine any sort of digital debate and wash one’s hands of it all.
balance between Christianity and paganism initially present in the area. These are, of course, pulled from the two major ideo-diegetic framings of the game: the wargame god diegesis ascribes neat and transparent cultural, religious, and political affiliations to the nobles and territories it surveils, while the embodied diegesis links character traits with mechanical affinity for certain actions viewed as necessary for aligning with historical narrative. The poster posits new mechanisms to address some of these issues, but all problems, responsive contestations, and proposed solutions exist well within the boundaries set by these ludic diegeses. Thus, the initial and proposed solutions both exist largely in alignment with the game-and engine-based affordances, which themselves align with the invoked historiography. Changes to Chapman’s (hi)story-play-space can thus be articulated within the wider context of what we might term a historioludic design space. This theorized space serves to circumscribe, define, and contextualize communal agency and the ability for dominant readings to be contested—a complex weave of pragmatics, sourced historical grounding, and ludic norms for design and play. The motivation and goal for the above contestation is suggested by the thread’s terminus, as the discussion ends when the posters indicate that a patch to CK3 has, quietly, made the initial border adjustment that the OP advocated—with all involved parties clearly identifying their discourse as

367 Of critical importance here is another buried actor: the game engine. CK3’s game engine represents the hidden and ultimate bounds for this community debate: while developer- and modification-based resolutions to each of OP’s critiques are possible, the whole debate’s reliance on anachronistic and nationalistic ideas of fixed and precise political boundaries is unalterable within the context of this particular game engine. As such, the limitations provided by the engine align with the interests of nationalistic actors in this discourse—any critique of this border problem that might attempt to defuse this nationalist framing is thus ultimately somewhat deflated by the practical impossibility of its implementation. The name for this engine is thus perhaps unsurprising—the von Clausewitz engine. German political ideology thus finds its algorithmic companion within the bedrock of CK3. **** those Prussians!

368 Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 2016.
primary driver for this change.\textsuperscript{369} Thus, the clear objective for this case suggests a possibility for others: the goal driving critique of a dominant reading is the correction or alteration of that reading to the poster’s desire, and such critique is consciously offered with the expectation that it will be viewed and evaluated by not just fellow community members but also those with the power to make the desired change.\textsuperscript{370} This particular desire is notable in comparison to a preexisting outlet within the historical games community: game modifications often serve as the counterplay resolution to proffered critique. For CK3, such critique is rooted in the fertile soil of specific developer actions tied to long-running systemic patterns—the assuredness of future iterations combined with evidence of the evaluation of specific critiques—which coincides with hegemonic change resolving the critique. Next, both conceptually and in the project’s timeline, I present a case where a sort of inverse occurs—specific developer actions explicitly motivate a more systemic and pointed read not just of historical specifics but of historiographic bias and perspective.

\textbf{We don’t like the sound of that: Cyclical provocations and response}

I just found out about next flavor pack being Iberia and I just cannot understand the devs reasoning for it.

\textsuperscript{369} Though it is important to note that no developer jumps in to corroborate their belief. The timing nonetheless renders their assumption quite plausible in my estimation.

\textsuperscript{370} This is an extremely important difference from the much earlier mode of game production present during early historical games research, such as Squire & Giovanetto’s deep dive into Apolyton: historiologic critique was still present (and obviously prominent), but it was not explicitly (or plausibly implicitly) motivated by a desire for hegemonic changes to the title in question’s dominant reading—the possibility of the game’s developers altering the extant game to meet the critic’s desires was somewhere between impractical and impossible (given the obvious impossibility of altering the CDs in users’ possession). Influencing developers may very well still have been a factor—the community had many connections to the Civ development team—but any desired changes to the core title could only plausibly be located in nebulous future releases. This was, obviously, a much lengthier and murkier timeline where influence was more difficult to directly ascribe to proffered critique. See: Squire and Giovanetto, “The Higher Education of Gaming,” March 2008.
I mean one would think flavor for major events and areas would be prioritised. The ones that determined course of events in entire medieval Europe. We currently have ZERO flavor for HRE, close to no flavor for Byzantium, for Papacy, for Merchant Republics, instead we get flavor for completely insignificant stuff like vikings and Iberia, that had very small impact on major events of the timeframe as opposed to Investiture, Pope vs Emperor, decline of Byzantium, Seljuks, Mongol Invasion, what is going on here? What is the next flavor pack, kings of Ireland? Mali Sultanates? Rise of Lithuania? Why for years after release they still did nothing to cover most iconic and fascinating events of the timeframe that truly had global impact?371

While structural factors, coupled with apparent evidentiary linkages, appear to animate a generalized spirit of criticism throughout the community in (relative) perpetuity, particular points within the content cycle seem to provoke increased scrutiny and critique. CK3’s development and communication cycle, located within the forum’s affordances, provides several such flashpoints with regularity. The particular paradigm followed for the bulk of CK3’s development has been thus: broad content announcement, followed by a period of slow depiction of the associated particulars, then content release and finally a lengthy period of post-release responsive alteration. Here, the post-announcement pre-release period provides a particularly illustrative

371 PDX post sampled early in May of 2022, following the announcement of the Fate of Iberia flavor pack on April 19, 2022—but, critically, before the DLC’s actual release on May 31. Developer Diaries released during this timeframe (#s 93–99) provided weekly highlights of specific features included in the upcoming release. The context for this case is thus that crucial evaluative period where the community is being “sold” on upcoming content; actual gameplay is unavailable for critique, so design choices presented in these DDs (including the regional focus of the pack itself) are the most visible candidates for pushback.
period for examination—heightened critique is offered with an explicitly and implicitly sharpened focus: responses to play experience and evidentiary implementation are unavailable, leaving the more abstract intentions and approach read through the announcement itself at the center of the critical gaze.\textsuperscript{372} While the presence of these critiques is patently unsurprising, their various commonalities—rooted in a shared rhetoric, historicizing gaze, and historiography—reveal much about the fault lines within (and animating spirit throughout) \textit{Crusader Kings} discourse. Also highlighted here is the heightened perceived role of announcement as a form of historiographic intent, where historicity and content are entwined at a new level.

First, its value schema: Shared across much of the community’s historicizing critique is the assertion that mechanical depth and specificity should correspond with historical importance.\textsuperscript{373} Posters thus read the developer’s content releases as—individually and in aggregate—historicizing claims which are thus able to be critiqued under a historicizing lens. Most commonly this is done to rhetorically position the developer’s read stance as historically inaccurate, allowing the player to thus supply the corrective (which necessarily entails adding content depth to another region / mechanic that is implicitly or explicitly asserted to be more historically important). My choice of terms bears close examination: while the case here uses the

\textsuperscript{372} Strictly speaking, players’ inability to actually play/experience announced content has never stopped them from critiquing an imagined play experience in lieu of more grounded examples, but it does alter the evidentiary grounds and rhetorical positionality available for these (generally viewed as bad-faith) critiques.

\textsuperscript{373} See n. 336, 337, 338, and 341 for the depth-heuristic discussed previously. While this might seem unsurprising, consider the contenders that this historicizing must—by implication—have superseded. First, material exigencies of development are ignored as causal factors (despite developer diaries and posts emphasizing the weight these internal material factors play)—important considering that this consideration is largely selective (e.g. players often display surprising depth of awareness regarding the limitations and costs of programmatic changes). Second, the realities of game finance are also ignored; one might think the players would cast the developer’s choices here as a cynical marketing ploy made in consideration of their skewed audience demographics, but instead the choice is read as purely historical. This is a powerful position indeed!
language of ‘flavour,’ which might suggest a more visually-focused and realist epistemological bent, mechanical specificity serves as the sole relevant criterion in this case—excluding content which provides region-agnostic mechanics or purely representational elements. Other cases speak to a comparable concern over mechanical depth, but the visual content is still excluded—leaving the collective distribution and pattern of game mechanics as the historical argument. This, of course, reveals the underlying historiographic commitments at play: simulative mechanics, read via procedural rhetoric, align with a constructionist historiography that sees theory play a crucial role in assembling historical narratives. Players read game mechanics as a constructionist assertion of what White calls the laws of historical dynamics. Here, if the value schema emerges from a constructionist historiography, then geography provides one of the fault lines for contestation: here the examples of Iberia and (more recently) Persia contrast with sites largely rooted in Eurocentric concerns.

It is worth dwelling on rhetorical power of this constructionist historiography: at first glance, it clearly serves to emphasize the agency and historical consciousness of the developer—not the player. So why its persistent use by players? I would argue that historiographic framings represent a crucial rhetorical and strategic choice, and while some of my work here suggests that

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375 They list as examples only content releases which add game mechanics to particular regions—content releases which provide pan-geographic systemic changes are not included here, and neither are the purely-visual content packs that add visual differentiation to regions/cultures.
377 Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016, 75; Munslow, Narrative and History, 2019, 18.
379 While the Seljuks and Mongols are most decidedly not European in origin, they do represent a Eurocentric preoccupation with outside invasion—the Mongols from the Eurasian steppe into eastern Europe and the Seljuk Turks from Persia into Byzantium/Anatolia.
players often gravitate towards a reconstructionist paradigm that positions the developers and the
game in opposition to historical accuracy, it is notable that this agentive constructionist take is
used in scenarios where accuracy critiques do not serve the posters’ stated (or likely) aims—
critiquing the implementation of Iberian cultures as historically inaccurate does not serve wider
arguments aiming to redirect content development elsewhere—instead, a rhetorical expression of
developer agency emphasizes the developer’s capacity to bend to the community’s will as well
as provides the rationale for doing so. For the CK community, constructionist historiography
thus serves as a useful historiographic stance when attempting to influence the emphasis and
direction of future content—as well as to criticize the perceived intentionality of new additions.
Here, within the particular constellation of affordances that crystallize precisely in this
announcement period, is a particular variant of what Trouillot terms “archival power”—“the
power to define what is and is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention.”380
Here, the power comes from multiple overlapping affordances: developer intention, entwined
with communal attention, layers on top of a constellation of evaluative contexts to provide the
rough bounds of what, in a particular moment, can be critiqued using specific archives. The
poster, in this specific example, can be seen contesting not just the historical and historiographic
intentionality inferred from the announcement (a reaction to changes to the dominant reading),
but the very archival power which it produces (and thus shapes how the dominant reading can be
further contested). Looking further to other cases, this archival power can be further

380 Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 99.
contextualized within the content cycle—further tracing its temporal bounds while also invoking another subtle constraint on contestation.

The old ways were better: Focus and silence in new content critique

I was promised Jews. I can sponsor Jewish Science but they're even my culture, not Shephardi [sic]. Other than that I haven't really noticed them. I realize that you're not gonna go whole hog and have "Court Jew" as a position because it uhh, might not be taken so well but it's wild that it's still less content than SoA CK2 had on the subject. I wanted a Jewish turnabout of the Iberian situation and some return of the old Jewish court events but if they exist, they sure seem to be subtle!

edit: Jews are coming, hype381

The release of new content, like the period following its initial announcement, provides a powerful stage for another layer of critique and evaluation—one which is still, largely, framed by the recent addition, yet which now offers two vital elements (one dwindling, the other growing): communal attention and aggregate playtime. As play shifts to the new content following release, players are not only able to scrutinize the new material far beyond the abstract evaluation of the announcement period via actually playing the game, but they also benefit from the aggregate attention and interest towards the new content—potentially propelling topical discussion to the fore of community discourse. In the above example, a contestation occurring right within this

381 Post sampled from the PDX forum; it follows only days after the release of Fate of Iberia on May 31, 2022.
post-release period demonstrates not only the intersection of communal visibility and play scrutiny but also the long-running entwinement and gravitic influence exerted on CK3 by its predecessor.\textsuperscript{382}

Building on the post-announcement case, the attentional/intentional focusing in this post-release case invokes the same form of archival power: discussions centering (or at least responding to) the new content are elevated by platform affordances to positions of high visibility, temporarily pushing other discourses out towards the periphery. This archival power, occurring alongside alterations to the dominant reading, provides opportunities to critique these affordance-driven constraints (as in the previous example), but also elevates critique of the altered dominant reading that reveals another soft constraint: the range of normative sources for contestation.

Here, within the momentary bounds of shifting archival power, CK2 is used to identify and discipline CK3’s implementation of particular marginalized representation in Iberia.\textsuperscript{383}

In discursive terms, CK3 functions prominently as an archive and source of historical knowledge in and of itself,\textsuperscript{384} but also as an archive tied to—and disciplined by—its previous titles. Time

\textsuperscript{382} It is worth pointing out here that CK2 had, at time of posting, been released approximately 10 years and 4 months before this post—yet it was still offered as the baseline for comparison. Under that framing, CK2’s influence looms quite large! However, it is worth also considering that, since CK2 followed an analogous development cycle to CK3 (so far), its last content release date serves as a better comparative. The last CK2 DLC, Holy Fury, released on November 13 of 2018—a date much closer to the above post. While the poster in the example case does not offer any deeper characterization of their CK2 play history or pattern, these two dates offer plausible bounds for this user’s initial and formative engagement with the predecessor title now being used as the baseline.

\textsuperscript{383} The phrasing, tone, and commentary on communal stances re: terminology represents a whole different way to approach this case. Any post entitled “Where are my Jews?” is bound to draw some criticism, after all. Whatever the motivation, the post still argues for the filling of a representational absence/silence, which is the focus here.

\textsuperscript{384} The archive is not so much ‘periodically remade’ as it is slowly replaced by a newer instance. Following the archival reimagining of CK2 into CK3, the community entered into a prolonged phase of contentious discourse over which title should be played (rhetorically speaking, playing both is generally not entertained); this discussion often rears its head during other debates over other topics, revealing the primacy of iterative titles as an instance of Trouillot’s “archival power” in and of itself.
and time again, the historicity of CK3 is litigated within the context and standards provided by CK2; the series’ past can thus be used alongside (supporting or contesting) perceived historicity to (de)legitimize the changes made by the successor title; in this particular case, a previously-encoded silence can be identified as an archival flaw that contemporary efforts have failed to substantively address. This, for CK3, forms a part of the community’s well of ‘previous understandings’ which can be brought to bear.

**Conclusion: Bending the Arc of Crusader Kings**

Discussing CK3 is, itself, a game with stakes. For the Crusader Kings community, the present and near-future state of the game is more ante than pot, with the very bounds of possibility for historiouludic medieval representation over a broad temporal horizon as the true stake. The gravitic pull of CK2—its archival power—shapes the game’s imagined past, providing framing and resources for discursive positioning around CK3’s present—all the while bringing the power of precedent as possibility’s guidepost to the fore; articulations of possibility now become near-future realities, which then become precedent for far future iterations. In this context, the community cannot be purely examined as a singular entity—the emergent stakes of power and

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385 In particular, posts following the previous section’s archetypical critique of CK3’s perceived focus on ‘unimportant’ areas draws from the silence in the archive’s contemporary iteration (compared to its previous) as rationale for its delegitimization.

386 The section’s lead quote illustrates this quite nicely. Another popular example category centers past and present deficiencies in the characterization of nomadic cultures—in particular the representation of Asian steppe cultures during the period. If feudalism is, as famously argued Elizabeth A. R. Brown (1974), a fallacious and skewed concept, then reads of the procedural rhetoric of universal feudalism will naturally chafe particularly when viewing cultures far from the European center. Community critiques of CK3’s Eurocentric feudal warping (which creates the absence in question) commonly frames it as something *even worse* than CK2’s own issues with the same. See: Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (October 1974): 1063–88.

387 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 55. “Historical narratives are premised on previous understandings, which are themselves premised on the distribution of archival power.”
possibility invite contestation between and within developer, player, and aggregate collectivities. This broad bedrock of emergent behavior further resolves into distinct phases of discourse based on predictably cyclical communicative and development practices that see alterations to CK3’s trajectory teased, announced, explored, implemented, refined, and then rested in repetition—each phase shaping the continual articulation and struggle over CK3 and the history it represents.

While it is perhaps unsurprising that a game series titled Crusader Kings might center European medieval history and play, what the specific discourse of/around dominance and power reveals is substantive effort—on the part of developers and players alike—to bend this arc towards an inclusive and broad (hi)story play space that provides rich representational and systemic possibilities for regional histories outside the archetypical Euro-mediterranean mainstream. Such efforts are not uncontested, with the (real or perceived) thumb on the historiographic scale blamed by players who desire an arc bent back towards the Eurocentric depth they selectively recall from CK3’s predecessor. To borrow the histioludic schema introduced in CK3: present discourse can be productively viewed as a long-running struggle currently in a phase of pronounced opportunity.\textsuperscript{388} Means, motives, and stakes are all here—the question is now less “what is Crusader Kings?” and instead “what will Crusader Kings become?”\textsuperscript{389}

\textsuperscript{388} The ‘struggle’ mechanic was introduced in the Fate of Iberia DLC; it is broadly used to systemically model long-running sociopolitical contestations that move through distinct (and often cyclical) phases, with the particular implementation of the Iberian struggle including a phase called ‘opportunity.’

\textsuperscript{389} By these I mean “Crusader Kings and the Crusader Kings community.”
CHAPTER FIVE: KINGS, CRUSADES, AND SCHOLARS: SOME CONCLUSIONS ON LUDOHISTORICAL RESEARCH

“We all need histories that no history book can tell, but they are not in the classroom—not the history classrooms, anyway. They are in the lessons we learn at home, in poetry and childhood games, in what is left of history when we close the history books with their verifiable facts.”

Formally, this project began in February of 2022, following IRB approval; however, in another sense, this project began in fall of 2000 when I first sat down to play *Shogun: Total War* on my father’s PC. For what feels like a full 23 years, I remained seated at that PC, playing every subsequent entry in the *Total War* and *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series until I was eventually (inevitably) drawn into *Crusader Kings*, *Europa Universalis*, and *Victoria* as well. During this time, I logged over 6000 recorded hours in these titles, eschewing a portion of my continually-escalating life responsibilities in favor of building (what I might now label as) a sort of historioludic mastery. I was finally driven to test my skills against other players, diving into the *Shogun 2: Total War* multiplayer community—and peaking right as every undergraduate engineer’s rite of passage, senior design, drew me away. At the time, I was ranked as the 7th best in the world.

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391 A “first step into a much larger world,” if you will.
392 This is a drastic undercount: these are only the hours I can specifically confirm via Steam. Prior to adopting Steam in the fall of 2007, I played many of these titles without this platform-level tracking—7 years of intensive childhood play not included in this figure.
393 This was on the 2v2 ladder, so I was a part of the 7th best team/duo—this was not a solo effort. Multiplayer numbers for *Shogun 2* are difficult to acquire, but the approximate playerbase at the time was around 200,00 players,
By the time I formed what would become my dissertation committee, I had long-since transited both of Durga and Squire’s (2009) expertise trajectories repeatedly and across 10+ titles—albeit, not quite at the same time. First came ludic mastery: bounded by the co-constructed impositions of instrumental play, I gained mastery through designification outside of the regime of computation; success came through learning to read the algorithm and its attendant algorithmic gap. This meant learning to eschew even the games’ troubled historioludic representata, de-centering any imagined schema for Japanese warfare and fully embracing the algorithmic gap between the game’s past positionality and the imperfections which seep through the cracks of even the most secure simulation. Again and again, I had learned to “[turn] a [world] back into a data-base.” In one sense, I had spent over a decade of my life performing the very anxiety at the heart of the scholarly provocation which motivated—among other things—this study.

with somewhere around 10% of those significantly engaging in the multiplayer system (the steam achievement archive, as always, provides rudimentary corroboration for these numbers). While this relative ranking pales in comparison to what professional esports players reach in contemporary titles such as CS:Go and League of Legends, it was—for its time—fairly significant.

397 Thanks to the internet, written records preserve my thinking at the time: I (alongside my multiplayer partner in 2v2 matches) developed and openly discussed deliberate strategies designed to take advantage of other players’ adherence to some form of historical resonance. This sort of strategic perspective-taking is, as Sabin (2012) notes, integral to the sort of agonistic, oppositional, and zero-sum play common to games which in some way model the dynamics of warfare. In such cases, my opponents’ historical schema was a weakness to exploit. Quote comes from Golub’s work on World of Warcraft: Alex Golub, “Being in the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism, and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game,” Anthropological Quarterly, Anthropological Perspectives on Knowledge in the Digital Age, 83, no. 1 (2010): 17–45. See also: Philip Sabin, Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).
However, the full story is much more complicated than that: in order to truly excel in agonistic play in a historicized setting, skilled players must constantly navigate the perceptions (and cognitive distortions) held by their opponents—which, for a historical game, meant maintaining a grounding within historicized play that could be drawn on to imagine the self-imposed strategic constraints others labored under; this requires not just traversal of the algorithmic gap, but continual awareness of its precise contours within a sociotechnical system centered on both code and culture. There existed here a form of expertise that required the fundamental ability to code switch between the purely ludic and various café blends of the historioludic preferred by a range of opponents. By the time I had encountered the relevant scholarship, I had already established an understanding of the complexities it had yet to cover. Mine is not a unique path—like many scholars of history and games, I’ve had many years to ponder my personal experience in the light of available scholarship, and I believe my findings—at the very least—provide a path towards appropriately nuancing our discourse as a result.

I begin with this personal narrative under methodologically consonant auspices: as Okely (1992) notes, “in the study of human being by another human being...the specificity and individuality of the observer are ever present and must therefore be acknowledge, explored, and put to creative use,” this dissertation represents my effort to do just that. Before writing my first analytical memo, I had already followed trajectories common to a large set of players and long since earned

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398 Caillois, Man, Play, and Games, 2001. Agon represents the form of competitive, instrumental, rule-driven play for Caillois.
399 One of the most important forms of expertise was, actually, learning how to insult opponents in their native languages in order to goad them into rash action. This is a form of gaming literacy (and a pillar of certain gaming subcultures) not often covered in scholarship (perhaps for good reason).
admission to the community I now sought to enter. It is difficult to understatement the importance of this sort of early admission: a common joke in the Crusader Kings community is that a player stops being a beginner sometime around the 400-hour mark, a temporal period jokingly referred to as the tutorial. Familiarity with other comparable titles required, naturally, a comparable investment: 1600 hours to familiarize one’s self with the current PDX titular canon. I had reached this number well before my committee was even formed. With this ground covered, the formal work began; its fruits are laid out as follows.

The work of this dissertation has been, largely, to bridge the gap between formal analysis of historical games and the sociocultural analysis of the people that play them. Like CK3 itself, it began as one thing, floundered somewhat during the universal cataclysm that was COVID-19, and then subtly and iteratively reformulated itself in the years that have followed. For this dissertation, Chapter 1 provides the “commander’s intent” for this project, providing the purpose, method, and endstate necessary for the reader to flexibly follow my progress through a realm of study that—mirroring the phenomenology of the warring it simulates. It provides some broad social context for historical games, a literature review of its related scholarship, the questions this study aimed to answer, and my plan for doing so. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each centered one core site within the assemblage, each attempting to reconcile the resonances, tensions, and trends between

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401 The exact number varies—usually between 200 and 500 hours or so. While obviously an exaggeration, it contains an obvious kernel of truth crucial to understanding this community: steep time investment in the series serves as a major prestige marker, and failing to reach even this rhetorically-positioned “low” threshold essentially disqualifies a player from meaningful participation in discourse. Of course, on the internet it’s easy to lie about one’s actual logged playtime.

402 In another professionalization analogue, the iterative design cycle at the center of this project imposes a brutal sort of “continuing education” requirement: staying current with each title’s basics requires continual engagement with the game and its paratexts. Maintaining expertise requires significant, continual investment on top of the initial body of experience.
and across all three. Ultimately, each chapter introduced new complexities relevant to the study of historical games and their communities—opening new fronts in the formal grammars for studying historical games by drawing scholarly attention to important and understudied elements of the broader assemblage. The result is an extensive problematization of the very questions which prompted this project, a process rooted not just in this study, but in the years—the histories—that came before. As such, this chapter will briefly cover elements of my background that uniquely prepared me for this dissertation, then move on to the initial formulation of my research question—alongside each chapter’s contribution towards its answer—and bookend that discussion with a reformulation of that initial question. I’ll then briefly revisit some of the cross-chapter conclusions, then discuss the project’s limitations, planned future work, and end with my thoughts on the continuing importance of studying digital historical games and their communities in light of historical game studies’ central provocation and underlying anxieties.

**You’re Gonna be History: Positioning history and historical engagement within *Crusader Kings* discourse**

To frame this study’s contribution, it is necessary to return to the initial research question. Within the ethnographic milieu embraced by this study, my initial research question evolved as deeper engagement with the game and its community revealed the limitations and prepared silences which had been packaged in advance of actual study; this arc, along with the metagame-esque reflexivity which drove the dual operationalization of concepts alongside interrogative reformation, represents another key contribution of the study. So, in that spirit, I’d like to frame the findings within that context—moving from the initial “1.0” research question to the more nuanced “2.0” which it ultimately answers.
Initially formulated, this study asked how members of the *CK3* community (inc. but not limited to self-identified players) engage with, understand, and use history in their community practices. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 form a sequence of thematic explorations that, together, serve as a cautious answer to this provocation. Here, precisely, is my initial question:

**RQ(1.0):** How do players of Crusader Kings III (*CK3*) and members of the wider community surrounding *CK3* engage with, understand, and use history in their community practices?

With Chapter 2, this project began by first analyzing the central artifact, *CK3*, within the progressive context of participatory community engagement and individual play. Using the available and salient corpus of game studies and historical game studies scholarship as a base, I presented the dual diegetic model of *CK3* play, rooting these paired perspectives in the genre-inflected histories of game mechanics, emergent codified tensions found in player discourse, and reflective consideration of the narrative construction process which plays a prominent role in translating play into play discourse. Using Adam Chapman’s formulations of historical resonance, historical dissonance, counterplay, as well as his spectrum of conceptual to representational simulative epistempologies in historical games, I then framed each diegetic position within the context of its particular relationship to historical play and play narration. The first position, the god-level diegesis, remediates and directly translates the affordances of analog wargames alongside those drawn from more recent strategy titles to produce a diegetic position that encourages strategic play in the classic empire-building “paint the map” schema popularized

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403 I use the “1.0” nomenclature as a nod to the computational paradigm applied to *CK3* itself, tracing the evolution of my research inquiry alongside the evolution of the object of study.
within the 4X genre of (historical) strategy games. The second, the embodied ruler, represents the dynastic actor who (at a specific moment in the game’s temporal context) represents the head of the player’s dynasty. Affordances and mechanics tied to this diegesis remediate and reflect those of classic RPGs in analog and digital form, asking the player to adopt the more constrained and limited perspective typified in embodiment.

The confluence of these two diegetic levels operating simultaneously creates internal tensions within the player capable of producing internal contradictions and tensions which can be explored through a variety of metaphorical lenses, including classic psychoanalytic theory. In this study’s explicitly historical context and focus, this dual diegesis and its dueling tensions allow players to—in both play and play narration—engage in acts of historical resonance, dissonance, and outright rejection simultaneously at different levels; ahistoric ludic knowledge, at the level of the god diegesis, can be used to facilitate historically resonant engagement at the level of the embodied actor, and the converse urge to reproduce counterfactual or historically resonant scenarios at the god level can (and frequently do) coincide with the instrumentalization of the embodied actor and their confinement into ahistorical or historically dissonant play patterns. A particular example shows the value of this framing: this frisson of playful and simultaneous rejection and embrace of historicity sees particular play discourses emerge, such as the modeling and embodiment of popular actors and characters from contemporary media into a historicized context, which is then played out via historically resonant play at god level: players telling the tale of Danny of House DeVito, Count of Malta, and the historic conquests of his royal line. Ultimately, this chapter’s analysis of CK3 serves to (begin to) tie elements of play discourse into play patterns found in the game, as well as to begin to link scholarship centering
the form and specific context of historical games to an expanded frame which begins to account for play culture and discourse patterns. Returning to history, the dual diegesis binds Trouillot’s dual roles for historical engagement—as actor and narrator—into a singular play experience unique to the Crusader Kings series. In doing so, this chapter provides a challenge to Chapman’s early assertion as to the value of form over content as well as cautiously reemphasizes the limits of abstraction and generalization in the course of this study.

Chapter 3, building on its predecessor, examines the boundary formation process within the Reddit portion of the Crusader Kings III community, exploring how discourses of explicit and meta-ironic sexism, taboo, and violence reveal the lines drawn between the self-identified members of the CK community and their external reputation co-produced within the network of human actors and algorithmic actants which constitute the platform; this boundary line is identified via the chapter’s primary contribution: an overview of the two primary discursive genres identified within the site which fulfill the scope of this project’s research question—namely, ones that substantively overlap with historical engagement. In order to identify this historical engagement in discourse, I draw on Brock’s Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) alongside Chapman’s historical resonance, dissonance, and counterplay to produce this project’s key heuristics for coding historical engagement in the study. The two major genres—evaluative critique and roleplay narration—are then explored in terms of their approaches to historical engagement, connecting outwards to other actants within the assemblage which are emplotted within these discursive forms. For evaluative critique, both ludic and historical criterion are assembled by players to contest, support, propose, or reject elements of CK3; the distribution and epistemic underpinnings of these critiques align well with the dual diegesis and
its associated simulative epistemologies drawn from Chapman (2016), showing how conceptual and representational perspectives are drawn upon to critique the historical accuracy and absence of various facets of CK3. The second explored genre, narrativized play / roleplay, reveals how the community not only incorporates the diegetic tensions identified in CK3 but is tuned to platform-level cultural patterns as well as bolstered and shaped by particular off-site affordances, such as the prevalence of Wikipedia for determining character’s historical status as well as the role of Wikipedia’s specific stylings in rhetorically bolstering the historical grounding for their narrative efforts.

Both discourses are then tied together within the productive realities of the Games-as-a-Service (GaaS) model which both incentivizes critique and drives repeated engagement with both the game and game discourse. This material context shapes preexisting touchstones, tensions, and tropes, such as the ever-popular litigation between accuracy and entertainment common to historiologic spaces. In this sense, the discourses of roleplay and critique are inflamed by GaaS even as they are continually motivated by collectivities’ need to engage with and establish boundaries between history and fiction.

Chapter 4 follows closely on Chapter 3’s heels, centering the productive structure—GaaS—discussed at that chapter’s end, teasing apart its consequences for CK3, and then reformulating and nuancing the initial research question over the temporal context rendered ever more important by that cyclical process. This chapter applies and adapts Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model to scrutinize how players interpret and position themselves relative to
CK3’s perceived dominant or preferred readings; this is coupled with a brief analysis of the game’s dominant reading drawn from my continual engagement with the game throughout the study. Within the temporal context emphasized by GaaS, I then explore how evaluative critique contests these assembled dominant readings with the aim of altering future iterations of CK3 to resolve the raised issues; the challenges in tying affordances in the assemblage to direct behaviors are met by centering specific discursive cases where players, motivated by a desire to see hegemonic changes to the game, engage in critical and historically inflected analysis which ends when the desired changes are made to the game in its next iteration. Bringing into conversation the critical lens of Trouillot with the formal grammars of Chapman, I frame the CK community’s unique structure of archival power alongside and within the discursively-articulated (hi)story-play-space, which is expanded into a malleable structure bounded in discourse by GaaS’ possibility space as well as drawn inward by the multifaceted inertia—expressed in terms of archival power and the shaping of viewing/playing culture—of CK3’s predecessor titles and its incestuous genre heredity.

The incorporation of the temporal context allows, then, for an evaluation of how the dominant readings I (and some in the community) constructed at the game’s outset have been altered over the course of the game’s development; I argue that CK3 cannot and should not be evaluated as a static artifact, nor as a scalar entity characterized by motion without direction, but instead as an entity acted upon by numerous vectors of powers and possibility driven by elements of its form and mode within the assemblage. Even this movement is comprised of smaller movements, a

discursive analogue to the thermodynamic Carnot cycle which features small movements of expansion and contraction along particular thematic and discursive axes. Particularly, I complicate the notion of the game’s initial Eurocentrism by showing a pattern of developer action and community reaction that gently pushes against certain absences and marginalizations within the initial game. With these contributions, I also reveal the insufficiencies embedded in the original research question’s formulation—expanding and nuancing its framing while trimming important, assumed, and faulty premises from beneath its foundation. The scope expands—from CK3 to Crusader Kings more broadly—and the foregrounded temporal context considers the cyclical and iterative trajectories of game and game culture as sites for inquiry. Thus expanded, the reformulated research question became:

RQ(2.0): How do self-identified players of Crusader Kings—as well as members of the Crusader Kings online community—engage with, understand, and use history within play discourse at different points of iteration within the game, community, or productive praxis?

In sum, this dissertation shows how the Crusader Kings community uses history as a legitimating framework—in tension with others—capable of effecting change in the short- and long-term trajectory of CK3 itself; references to history frequently accompany and legitimate critiques aimed at evaluating or improving the game, with this framework existing in uneasy tension with a more ludically-grounded system for evaluating the quality of digital games. Separately, these frameworks emphasize either the “historical” or “game” “in digital historical game,” with important points of alignment and confluence as well as those of direct and/or
ambiguous opposition. The diegetic complexity of CK3 exacerbates this environment by providing simultaneous dual opportunities for aligning and rejecting the historical and the ludic on different levels. Players can roleplay in a historicized framing (emphasizing the history yet again) whilst conducting their god-level play and its subsequent narration entirely in the blended dialect of reddit memes (emphasizing the game and the platform outside it). This is one popular configuration; another involves careful agnosticism towards historioludic positioning at the level of the embodied agent alongside explicit goals tied to historical resonance at the deific level—often provided within historicized play narration (AARs or DARs) which hide the ahistoric seams required to produce that specific resonance. These efforts to legitimate—against, alongside, or in a more playfully complex alignment with ludic framings—exist within a broad viewing/playing/discourse culture that values historical critique in and of itself—providing, on both major sites, an avenue towards the acquisition of prestige goods such as upvotes. Mixed in is the clear, evident practice of critique offered in order to (at varying scales) effect change in the game—either by directly drawing the attention of lurking developers or by building community consensus in order to pressure desired action. History—with, against, or wholly apart from ludicity—represents a critical literacy for members of the Crusader Kings community. It is, appropriately for this particular community, a tool of power.

**Calling the Banners: Towards Historioludic Discourse Analysis**

Let us turn, briefly, from game to metagame: specifically, the reformulation of this study’s research question over its course and the evolving methods which drove that transformation. I would argue that one of this study’s chief contributions is here, in the meta-analytical process of learning to ask a better question whilst in the process of answering it. The arc of this study has
produced syntheses of my various analytic processes that I became aware of well after realizing I had written them; the steady operationalization of different pieces of Chapman’s formal analytic grammar discussed in each chapter form different parts of (efforts at) a synthetic whole: using the case of the Crusader Kings community (and CK3 in particular) to nuance, expand, and articulate a broader approach to the historiographic questions and anxieties which motivated this study. In this spirit, I would like to briefly offer up some of the results of this synthesis here at the study’s end.

As I have signposted and illustrated above, much of this dissertation’s work involved the complex re-articulation of the scholarly grammars developed for formal analysis within the broader context of CK3 as an exemplar of a unique mode; doing so required the incorporation of more sociological scholarship aimed at virtual worlds, digital platforms, and digital cultures alongside the critical lens of Trouillot’s historiographic explication. This is the undercurrent which guided my attempts to answer the research question, and here I would like to center this approach apart from the question and answer—to briefly, in effect, center the metagame over the game.

As the careful reader will note, a great deal of the analytical work in this project involves effective operationalization and recontextualization of grammars and terminology borrowed from different domains within and adjacent to historical game studies. The situated importance of CK3’s complex diegesis is framed, after all, initially within the language of Chapman’s

405 While the game communities studied here certainly do not qualify as virtual worlds (per Pearce’s taxonomy) or lifeworlds (per Taylor) the ethnographic study of such environs did provide valuable methodological context for this study. Some exemplars have been discussed already, but interested readers should also see: Bonnie Nardi, My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft (University of Michigan Press, 2010); Tina L. Taylor, Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture, paperback (2006; repr., MIT Press, 2009).
simulative epistemological spectrum—the resultant analysis reveals a break with the grammar in its most simple, as well as revealing the important emergent complexities found at points of taxonomic ambiguity. This argument emerged following the initial participatory engagement, observation, and discursive analysis—discourse analysis drawn out of an ethnographic milieu.406 Chapter 3 then adds site-specific context for 2’s analysis, presenting the site-specific heuristic for coding historicity alongside the two primary discursive subgenres associated with its invocation—in doing so, Chapman’s player-historian and developer-historian are again rooted in a discursive context. Chapter 4 folds in Chapman’s invocation of historical resonance, dissonance, counterplay, as well as—crucially—the (hi)story-play-space. Examples from site-specific discourse suggest a more expansive use of the term in a more explicitly temporal context—one that sees the malleability and productive capacity of the (hi)story-play-space as its own critical parameter of any historically-sensitive taxonomy of game modes. Throughout, the historiographic focus of Michel Rolf-Trouillot’s remains pivotal: following in his footsteps, this approach aims to assess “the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”407 Thus collected, historical resonance, dissonance, counterplay, and simulative epistemology take their place alongside the assemblage of play,408 layered metagames,409 and structures of dominance in the expanded scope which has drawn in subreddits, a company BBS, Steam, Wikipedia, Youtube, Twitter, and other sites to join Crusader

406 As I discuss in Chapter 1, this is particularly indebted to Andre Brock’s CTDA: Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis.”
407 Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, xxiii.
408 Taylor, “The Assemblage of Play.”
Kings III and II. Such efforts represent, I hope, a move towards a sort of Historioludic Discourse Analysis capable of scaffolding this approach to studying communities of historical play. This is, naturally, a lofty aim; even within the context of this project and selection of sites, there is still much more work to do. I hope this dissertation represents a first and fruitful step in this direction.
Limitations

HISTORY

GAME STUDIES

FAN / PLATFORM STUDIES

GAMERS ARE SUS
Figure 9: The author's memetic summation of academia's relationship to self-identified Gamer culture

It would, perhaps, be easier to list the capabilities or capacity this study possesses in place of its many limitations: before even site selection, data collection, analytical method, and the pragmatic strictures of doctoral work, this project was highly constrained by the capacities and subjectivities of its author. The first of these is linguistic: I chose to study a global community, but my only fluent language is English; this, naturally, presents some difficulties. English may be the lingua franca of large parts of the internet, but speakers of other languages—particularly when engaging with external sources, texts, and cultural touchstones from outside the English-speaking world—tend towards the use of the relevant language. Technology can cover part of this gap, but it remains wholly insufficient to reach the level of context and nuance required for any form of discourse analysis. In that sense, I have remained all-too-aware that, in this community, there are many discourses—and many attendant silences—which I was not able to examine. Another overlapping limitation was culture; the speaking (writing) of English was consistently packaged with cultural contexts and connotations which I, as an American, was far removed from. It was never far from my mind that I—by dint of my American citizenship and English-language proficiency—entered into this study population from a privileged position (and one from which many of the silences were likely to be invisible). Still another overlap arises out of both of the above: in some online spaces, the absences and silences are not wholly constitutive of hegemonic, top-down processes; many overlapping cultures and subcultures in this space strive—quite deliberately—to remain strategically invisible. Before the first part of my methodology was even laid out, these limitations constrained the degree to which this study
could explore the “uneven contribution” Trouillot takes aim at.\textsuperscript{410} Thus, this study is one largely about and centered on the hegemonic, english-language discourses permitted by practices of platform and community that were deliberately rendered visible to a broader cultural context. It was far more expedient to describe the structure of hegemony than to explore that which it obscured.

Several important limitations were added through choices of theory, methodology, and method. The choice of combining grounded theory with CTDA in an ethnographic context (and then framed within the nascent field of historical game studies) is one that crowded out and excluded many other potentially valuable lenses: fan studies and labor could’ve enabled a deeper exploration of the invisible labor involved in the creation, maintenance, governance, and growth of the game as well as its discourse communities and fan products (e.g. mods, play narrations, strategy guides, and the many, many spreadsheets produced in order to pierce the algorithmic veil). History itself, is of course the most obvious omission: I have eschewed asking historical questions in favor of ones more tied to digital cultures, game studies, and historiography—crowding out questions about historical accuracy, medievalisms, and the way games and game communities act to alter specific aspects of the public’s conception of the past. Additionally, this study has largely left the calls of postcolonial game studies—and the larger corpus of postcolonial scholarship—unanswered; the exploration of these spaces within the context of \textit{Crusader Kings} is, I believe, the study’s most important omission.\textsuperscript{411}

\textsuperscript{410}Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History}, xxiii.

\textsuperscript{411}While my overall body of work does engage with this facet of historical games scholarship, I found that extending postcolonial studies of historical games into the study of historical game cultures (following the overall arc of the study) would be best served by linguistic and cultural knowledge that I was unable to bring to the project unaided. As such, I made the decision to instead center a more broadly historiographic explication of power structures (via
Data collection folds in yet another absence into this study: in collecting data from Reddit and the PDX forum alongside desultory discourses spotted on peripheral platforms, I have made the same choice as the proverbial drunkard—to search for my keys only in the spaces illuminated by streetlight. While I have labored to carefully chart the contours of exactly what was left out, this still leaves those domains unexplored.\textsuperscript{412} One of the most important elements left in the dark: studying Reddit and the PDX BBS means this is—largely—a study not of play, but of play discourse. I have endeavored to explore the game through my own play and scholarly analysis, but the bridge between that and the play discourse I observed remains tentative and sparsely supported by direct examination of others’ play.\textsuperscript{413} Still another comes from the overlap between personal exigencies and the realities of studying a large community: only a portion of community discourse could be collected, and an even smaller portion of this could be examined in-depth: part of this study’s contribution comes from the heuristics developed to narrow this scope as effectively as possible, but this remains a tentative tool not fully fleshed out or supported with more rigorous analysis.

Finally, in adopting certain terminology I have limited this study even further. For one, the choice of “community” to describe the sites, discourses, and individuals studied is one that—yet again—serves to obscure some of the practical nuance; in the \textit{Crusader Kings} community, as I have referred to it, can also meaningfully be examined as a site contested by many distinct subcultures and collectivities—as Trouillot reminds us, today’s public is not the same as, say,


\textsuperscript{413}Lundblade, “Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams.”
Becker’s.\textsuperscript{414} The collision between History and the realities of digital culture all but ensures that subcultures—defined by the distinct narratives entwined within real-world identities—would use this space to contest and oppose the narratives of others. This limitation is, in many ways, one common to studies of digital platforms writ large—where highly-visible global sites obscure the more localized offline imbricate identities and salient collectivities, and where constant iteration of the platforms themselves ensures a certain ephemerality to any picture of the site.\textsuperscript{415} While the consequences of this broad collision are indeed observed in the hegemonic realities centered in this study, their particulars remain unexamined.

\textsuperscript{414}While masses everywhere are increasingly accessible targets [for the mass consumption of history], the retorts produced by dissenting minorities also reach a wider audience. While the public today is increasingly international, it is also increasingly fragmented.” Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History}, 137.

Future Work

As the limitations might suggest, there are many directions available for future work—all of which could helpfully expand and reinforce the framework established here. The first and most obvious directions are methodological: formalizing the evolution of methodology and method used in this project into a variant of discourse analysis—like Brock’s CTDA—specifically

Figure 10: I could replace Chapter 3 with this image, if my committee would let me
tailored towards examining historical game communities. Such work would entail critical and careful definitional delineation of history, historiography, discourse heuristics, and the various historical and ludic signifiers used to identify each form of discourse. Refinement and abstraction of this framework would also be well served by examination of other HGCs centered around titles within and outside the PDX penumbra: the latest PDX mainline title, Victoria 3, as well as the most recent Sid Meier’s Civilization title represent two large-scale prominent candidates. These approaches, taken together, would represent important steps towards the sort of historioludic discourse analysis discussed throughout this chapter.

Another set of possible futures looks to depth over breadth: the limitations described above share a common theme of centering hegemonic discourses over those marginalized at almost any level of affordance; reexamination of the same community with altered methods, literature basis, and scholarly skillset would represent an important improvement in the rigour and granularity of this work. The temporal scope established here could also be followed through the end of CK3’s lifecycle, a point that is likely at least three to four years away. A historiographic analysis of CK3 over the game’s entire lifespan would add rigour and depth to a core dimension included herein. On a more ambitious level: an expansion of method back towards the initial aims and scope could transform this project from ethnographic to ethnography, incorporating the additional sites

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416 Much of this work would involve establishing connections between this critical historiographic approach and CTDA for the purposes of establishing the scope of possible comparatives across frameworks. Increasing specificity is, as always, extremely tempting—but formally tracing possible boundaries for interdisciplinary work is essential. 417Sid Meier’s Civilization VI is the current latest title in the series, but there are—at time of writing—several indications that the release of its inevitable successor is drawing close. Examining Civ has the additional benefit of being perhaps the only historical game more thoroughly studied than those made by PDX. 418 Practically speaking, the best way to do this would likely be through co-authorship with historians experienced with particular historical eras and languages. Another direction would be to collaborate with scholars experienced in studies of online extremism within particular platforms, such as Discord.
and attendant methods necessary to more deeply embed the researcher in the community. The necessities and vicissitudes of graduate work saw a reduction in project scope that could thus be remedied. The final and most ambitious frontier for this project would be the incorporation of another underexamined perspective: that of the developer, Paradox Interactive; interviews with members of the staff and development team would enable important consideration of an entire distinct facet of the mode assembled herein. Such an expansion would allow scholars to ask questions of actors and actants within the developer penumbra, enabling a deeper and more nuanced assessment of how, exactly, player critique and feedback is resolved into developer action.419

Closing Thoughts

This study, as well as the field it draws upon, finds its roots in a very particular provocation.420 This dissertation represents an effort to respond to this provocation, and it follows in the footsteps of other responses, which serve as effective initial guides. Adam Chapman’s (2016) monograph represents an effective and comprehensive starting point; Chapman exhaustively

419 Notable work in this vein has already been conducted by Ylva Grufstedt, whose monograph explores critical facets of game design practice within the genre: Grufstedt, “Approximately History: Developer Perspectives on Counterfactual History in Digital Strategy Games.”

420 Robert Rosenstone’s essay raises at least two questions that should be of eminent concern to professional historians. The first is that of the relative adequacy of what we might call “historiophoty” (the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse) to the at criteria of truth and accuracy presumed to govern the professional practice of historiography (the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse). Here the issues is whether it is possible to “translate” a given written account of history into a visual-auditory equivalent without significant loss of content. The second question has to do with what Rosenstone calls the “challenge” presented by historiophoty to historiography. It is obvious that cinema (and video) are better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of certain kinds of historical phenomena—landscape, scene, atmosphere, complex events such as wars, battles, crowds, and emotions. But, Rosenstone asks, can historiophoty adequately convey the complex, qualified, and critical dimensions of historical thinking about events which, according to Ian Jarvie, at least, is what makes any given representation of the past a distinctly “historical” account?” White, “Historiography and Historiophoty.”
responds to every facet—explicit and implicit—that can be found in White’s provocation, beginning first with its underlying anxiety (framed through centering its scholarly continuity):

Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities...the history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.\footnote{Becker (1931), qtd in: Chapman, \textit{Digital Games as History}, 2016. Chapman invokes Becker for two reasons: to support his pushback against the professionalizing scope he’s responding to, as well as to show the lengthy history (ha ha) of debates over public/popular history. For the full source, see: Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” \textit{American Historical Review} 37, no. 2 (1931): 221–36.}
In invoking Becker, Chapman responds to the underlying notion that digital games—doubly damned by triviality and popularity\(^{422}\)—can be dismissed by historians as inherently ahistorical or irrelevant.\(^{423}\) In doing so, Chapman performs a generational iteration on the typified scholarly

\(^{422}\)Specifically, the triviality associated with games and play tied up in western cultural contexts, as well as their popularity and adoption by the hoi polloi—the unwashed masses we now call “gamers.” While I agree gamers (stereotypically unwashed indeed) are deserving of scrutiny and skepticism, that’s not an effective argument against formal validity.

\(^{423}\)Yes, White & Rosenstone are technically discussing historical film—but by now it should be clear that this argument is applicable to—and has been levied against—digital games in their time, and the argument/anxieties follow the same pattern.
introduction to discussing digital games, rhetorically laying out their (presumably hidden) importance before providing his contribution to their study. Their popularity considered, Chapman turns from Becker’s everyman back to the games themselves, presenting an exhaustive formal grammar on top of arguments for the historicity and historiographic validity of digital games. Chapman covers all of the greatest hits: agentive capacity catapults players and developers into decisionmaking roles much closer to those of professional historians, the logic of procedures adds a new sensitivity to systemic effects and conceptual abstraction, and their combination gives players and developers alike new tools for critiquing newly-visible systems as well as fighting the algorithm itself. This is the last we see of Mr. Everyman, who is no longer addressed head-on and is only glimpsed fleetingly through the back window of affordance.

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424 Early scholarship on digital games followed a remarkable introductory pattern: a scholar relates their skepticism over digital games even as they are inevitably convinced of their value/importance within the context of their own field (usually because they are introduced to games via their children). After a brief introductory examination, they then bridge their home discipline and the study of games by articulating how said discipline can contribute (and, indeed, is essential to) the study of digital games. The end usually either calls for the formation of a new field or directly frames the above contributions as relevant to the field of game studies in particular. As I argue in (2024), James Paul Gee (2003, 2007) is the exemplar of this particular pattern. Here, we see Chapman performing the same play but with the generational twist: the child who learned the value of games must now convince the parent (sometimes through gaming’s version of the oedipal killing of the father: the pwning of (noob) dads in the period-appropriate Call of Duty title). For my analysis of this formative period in game studies scholarship as well as its primary texts, see: Lundblade, “What Video Games Have Taught Us: Two Decades of Gaming and Learning”; James Paul Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy, 2007.

425 This dissertation is incredibly indebted to Adam Chapman’s work: many of the core terms used in this project (e.g. (hi)-story-play-space, historical resonance/dissonance, conceptual and realist simulations, developer- and player-historians) were either introduced by Chapman or heavily adapted and contextualized to the specific examination of digital historical games. While his entire body of work is relevant to this study, a few specific works should be highlighted: Chapman, “Is Sid Meier’s Civilization History?”; Adam Chapman, “Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical VideoGames,” Journal of Digital Humanities 1, no. 2 (January 19, 2012): 42–46; Chapman, Foka, and Westin, “Introduction,” July 3, 2017; Chapman, Digital Games as History, 2016.

discourse. He, as both player and developer, does receive the title of historian, but this is (a) granted by the form, and (b) says very little about what this everyman plans to do with it. This is a shame for several reasons: first, because Mr. Everyman is the one making the history in question—and his methodology does not exist downstream from the form, but is inextricably bound up in its creation, development, and governance. The form was made by Mr. Everyman, and it is his capitalization—as well as his purchasing power—which sustains it. Second: because Mr. Everyman is not an amorphous “gamer” gestalt in a trenchcoat, he’s two pre-teens in that same trenchcoat trying to buy Grand Theft Auto at Gamestop. He’s also three history M.A.’s producing a mod that adds historically-specific mechanics to sub-saharan African cultures in CK3’s 866 start date (drawn from their own diasporic heritage), the junior developer who really wanted to flesh out the Canary Islands and their unique history, the local inhabitant who takes issue with said developer’s ludic model of their own history, as well as the fourteen self-described white identitarians demi-ironically roleplaying their scandinavian heritage (not hate) through Viking purity and supremacy. He is also, increasingly, an amorphous slurry of

427 And let us not forget the load-bearing role played by the masculine pronoun in this metaphor. As Chess reminds us, this masculine formulation for gaming and gamers is doing a lot of work all on its own: Chess, Ready Player Two.

428 Likely (though not assuredly) a product of the studio-specific practice I describe in n. 136 where PDX developers are given unstructured time to work on their own improvements/additions to the game: this unique affordance—tied, as you might note, not to the form but to something else—can be seen in a great deal of the eponymous developer-historian’s craft on display in CK3.

429 A player critique sampled and discussed in chapter 4.

430 They promise, right before the “ironic” genocide gets rolling.

431 This is a good point to mention yet another factor which eased my access into this world via a personal anecdote that occurred during the visit to PDXCON in Stockholm. Upon arrival at the airport’s border checkpoint, the official took one look at me (blonde hair, blue-green eyes, pale skin) and my passport before explaining the meaning of my (Swedish) family name and telling me “welcome home, brother.” I’m not only sitting right in the demographic bullseye for historical games, Swedish fascination with their American diaspora (i.e., my grandparents) means that I’m granted easier access to the cultural context for a Swedish game company than most Americans. NB: my Swedish is still very, very poor.
leveraged investments seeking a short-run positive alpha, as well as a harried lead developer trying not to drown in said slurry.

This is not to denigrate the work of Chapman, White, or Rosenstone—they have argued well and ably for the importance of form, and they have done so within the bounds of their respective fields and the methodologies that circumscribe them. To critique them in this way is, in some sense, to ask them to ask different questions and use different methods entirely: a critique levied frequently across academic disciplines. By itself, this sort of critique is a cheap shot that contributes very little. There are bones to pick within White’s argument, but it is the whole that concerns us here. So, let us be more specific: this whole dissertation is, in a sense, an argument that formal analysis is, by itself, wholly insufficient to the task of understanding the relationship between digital games and history, as well as an argument for a new sort of critical discourse analysis that can—accompanied by the field-specific work of scholars of media studies and history—drastically expand the scope for examining the interrelationships between history and games. This expansion is accomplished by shifting the question from one wholly centered on form to one centered on mode.

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432 For those unfamiliar with investment terminology: an alpha is an expression of a particular market segment’s RoI expressed relative to that of the market as a whole.
433 As an aspiring junior scholar, my capacity to evaluate the work of distinguished faculty should also not be overstated or overestimated. This is where you, dear reader, read the appropriate amount of epistemic and professional humility into my argument.
434 The author fondly recalls his first professional academic conference, where he was introduced to the “that’s nice, but what if your research answered a totally different (and better) question?” genre of interrogative frequently delivered in such contexts.
435 For one: White’s line about loss of content via translation borrows a very Claude Shannon-esque informatics framing for the anxiety it expresses. Like Shannon, White is reaching for some necessary abstraction—in his case, in order to frame his larger questions about form—but that abstraction carries connotations and ideological distortions of its own.
In shifting the question from form to mode, several important transformations occur: first, to even begin to discuss mode we place games within contexts of production and reception;\textsuperscript{436} we nuance our discussion of games by shifting them to sociocultural actants—bound up in interrelational and co-constituitive processes with other actants in the assemblage—rather than products. As Juul (2020) shows, this shift to mode enables taxonomies which incorporate methods of production alongside design & aesthetic norms as well as dominant playing procedures: the “classic” AAA single-purchase game, independent games, as well as live service games are the categories which fall out of this process.\textsuperscript{437}

As I have argued across chapters 2, 3, and 4, discursive engagement with 	extit{Crusader Kings III} is dominated by its unique mode—situated in a hybrid position between Juul’s Single-purchase AAA game and his modern casual live game—which sees a high production value AAA-style game released with a long tail of (free and paid) downloadable content alongside numerous major and minor alterations.\textsuperscript{438} This release cycle is bound up in temporally-bound discursive practices that incentivize players to evaluate, critique, debate, and discuss the past, present, and future of 	extit{CK3} in order to influence its evolution; the (hi)story-play-space offered by the game is itself viewed as a malleable concept—one which the players are empowered to critique and (hopefully) alter to meet their individual and collective desires. Whereas the questions of form

\textsuperscript{436}Juul (2020), quoting Staiger, frames a cinematic mode as constituting “a historical existence, formal and stylistic conventions…, and 'implicit viewing procedures.'” The careful reader can see our classic form nestled within, but it is now itself framed historically and socioculturally.

\textsuperscript{437}Juul, “The Independent Mode: A Functionalist Account of Independent Games and Game History.”

\textsuperscript{438}CK3 is arguably much closer to the AAA game as Juul describes it, but the “single-purchase” clause and attendant focus on primary release over additional transactions does not represent the mode of 	extit{CK3} well. For example, even just considering price, the cost for 	extit{Crusader Kings II} is a paltry $0.00 (free!) for the core game, but $253.75 USD for all of its DLC. Additionally, PDX now offers (via Steam) a $4.99/month subscription to 	extit{CK2}’s DLC in lieu of the $250 purchase—this is clearly several steps removed from the traditional AAA towards the live service/freemium models.
might position responses to the (hi)story-play-space’s constraints under counterplay and the
production of mods (a response to a stimulus players are framed as downstream from), expansion
via mode encompasses play discourse, the economics of production, and the affordances of
entangled platforms such as reddit, steam, wikis, and even classic BBS forums. I have argued in
chapters 3 and 4 that this tangle of affordances complicates the comparatively simpler discussion
of form in a manner which renders its isolated consideration insufficient. Drawing on Trouillot,
this move represents an effort to shift the collective gaze from the form of history (and the
historiographic questions that entails) to its production and the power behind it.439 Chapters 2 and
3 together play their own part, showing how the the particulars of CK3—specifically its unique
diegesis—alters players’ relationship to play and external signification in a manner that gestures
towards two separate sets of playing procedures; this duality can be seen reflected in play
discourse, which is capable of performing acceptance and rejection of historical signification in
the same historioludic context. In this sense, Chapters 2 and 3 present a direct challenge to
Chapman’s call to “[privilege] understanding the videogame form (and the varying structures this
entails) and its integral role in the production and reception of historical meaning, rather than
solely, or even primarily, on the content of specific products as historical narratives.”440 As CK3’s
dual diegesis and its (inbred) genre heredity suggest, the choice between form and content
arrives at a dead end, trapped by its erroneous assumptions. Consideration of mode becomes, in

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439Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, xxiii.
440Chapman, “Privileging Form Over Content,” 41. Elsewhere, Chapman characterizes this formal prioritization as
(in a nod to Gibson) an ecological approach centering affordance. See: Adam Chapman, “Affording History:
Civilization and the Ecological Approach,” in Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History,
ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, 1st ed. (USA: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2013),
61–74.
this context, a way to carefully bridge a general taxonomy with its nestled particulars.\textsuperscript{441} For history in particular, this specificity is key—for “the epistemological break between history and fiction is always expressed concretely through the historically-situated evaluation of specific narratives.”\textsuperscript{442} In that sense, the contingent viewing procedures of Saiger’s mode become, for historical games, historicizing procedures bound up in the rest of the assemblage. Here, then, is the ultimate urgency for this work: as academic history continues its precipitous decline,\textsuperscript{443} examination of the alternate wells from which the public’s historical thirst is slaked become increasingly important—and, as I have argued, so too are the communities that surround them. There is, after all, history to be made.

\textsuperscript{441}We must be like Pitbull, the rapper who demonstrated his synthesis of the global (“Mr. worldwide”) with the particular (“Mr. 305”) in the context of his own artistic production. NB: this is not mine, I’m remembering a tweet I saw years ago.
\textsuperscript{442}Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History}, 8.
This Appendix details some of the relevant game-, site-, and community-specific terminology used in this study.

**Memes, Slang, and other Terminology**

**After-Action Report (AAR):** A genre of post—typically within strategy and historical game communities—which purports to narrate a campaign which the poster has recently completed. Narration is conducted from a wide range of PoVs and stylized perspectives ranging from professional historian to sardonic and jocular contemporary gamer, and usually focuses on specific aspects of play, such as major decisions (and their rationale), entertaining or niche outcomes, and the completion (or lack thereof) of popular objectives.

**Bulletin Board System (BBS) [platform architecture]:** A particular style of web community popularized in the 90s which remediates a sort of digital bulletin board where users can post various communications and reply to the posts of others. This pattern has largely fallen out of style following the rise of social media in the Web 2.0 ecosystem.

**Chad [meme/term]:** Term for a memetic character representing the paragon of typified masculinity. Chad is typically associated with social popularity, physical attractiveness, sexual success (with cis women), and other more contextual markers of success. Typically contrasted with the Virgin character across a wide range of memetic formats, Chad also serves as a epithet, expression of approval, or other connotation applied to an activity or individual.

**Dungeon Master (DM) [term]:** The game participant charged with creating, maintaining, and adjudicating the world in which the other participants (typically called PCs) play. Typically associated with analog tabletop games such as Dungeons & Dragons.
**During-Action Report (DAR):** As AAR, but conducted from a mid-campaign perspective narrating a portion of a campaign which the user has not yet completed. Often incorporates solicitations for advice on future play.

**Game Master (GM) [term]:** Analogous term to Dungeon Master, but applied more broadly outside of that term’s more fantastical, D&D-centric context.

**Redditor [term]:** A user of/on Reddit.

**Subreddit [term]:** A (typically) redditor-created sub-community on the Reddit platform.

**Wojack [meme]:** Meme series claimed by a user named Wojak; originally features a bald man isolated at a social event. The meme series has evolved into a series of faces/characters, usually drawn in the MS Paint style, which form the vocabulary for the full range of wojak memes. Consonant with the meme’s origin, Wojaks typically invoke incel and incel-adjacent cryptolectic shibboleths, referents, and discursive patterns—exemplified by the famous “Chad vs. Virgin” subgenre.

**Virgin [meme/term]:** The distaff/opposite character to the Chad, the Virgin is associated with incel behaviors such as sexual frustration/failure, lack of social acceptance, poor physical health/attractiveness, and contextual lack of social approval & success. Like the Chad, the meme can also be used as a general term to characterize behavior or discourse.
Game Genres

Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate (4X): A genre or sub-genre of strategy games which generally involves expansionist “empire building” gameplay that sees players discovering new territory, expanding their personally-controlled territory, extracting and managing available natural and derivative resources, as well as direct “winner take all” conflict which incentivizes the annihilation of all other polities.

Grand Strategy Game (GSG): Variant of the strategy game genre which is generally limited to Paradox Interactive’s games built on the von Clauswitz engine. Typically demarcated by drastically increased complexity in comparison to more generalized strategy games.

Massively-Multiplayer Online Game (MMO): Genre component defined by large-scale multiplayer, always-online, client-server games. Typically combined with a more traditional genre (e.g. MMORPG). Popular exemplars include EVE Online, World of Warcraft, Everquest, and Ultima Online. Prominent during the 00s, MMO games were heavily studied by games scholars during their apex.

Real-Time Strategy (RTS): Strategy variant built on real-time play with varying game speeds, as opposed to discrete, periodized time increments. Typically associated with faster, more reflex-intensive gameplay.

Role-playing Game (RPG): Broad genre which centers players in control of a single character or small party of characters; this character-centric play often incorporates key mechanical systems such as character statistics, experience, etc. which allow the customization and improvement of characters over the course of play.
**Turn-Based Strategy (TBS):** Strategy variant built on turn-based play where diegetic time is advanced discretely by users, who typically queue desired actions before seeing the results calculated when time is advanced. Typically associated with slower, more deliberative gameplay.

**Wargame:** A genre of games which simulate historical warfare, usually modeling particular eras of historical military action in specific regions of the world. Popularized in 18th-century Prussian professional military training environs, the genre is still largely split between professional and commercial games across analog and digital modalities, and is widely considered a precursor/influence on contemporary digital strategy games.

**Referenced Historical Games and Game Series**

**Crusader Kings (CK) [series]:** A series of historical grand strategy games developed and published by Paradox Interactive. Currently the series has 3 entries, with CK3 as the latest. Entries in the series are set in a 10th–15th-century Mediterranean medieval context, and feature gameplay involving the navigation of interpersonal dynastic politics as an embodied medieval actor as well as more stereotypically state-level operations such as waging war, conquering territory, and managing economic resources.

**Crusader Kings (CK1) [title]:** The first entry in the series released in April of 2004.

**Crusader Kings II (CK2) [title]:** Sequel to the original Crusader Kings released in February of 2012.

**Crusader Kings III (CK3) [title]:** Sequel to Crusader Kings II released in September of 2020. At time of writing, the most recent iteration in the series.
Europa Universalis (EU) [series]: A series of historical grand strategy games developed and published by Paradox Interactive. Currently the series has four entries, with a fifth soon to be released. Entries in the series are set in a 15th–19th-century global historical context, sequenced via five historical eras: the Ages of Discovery, Reformation, Absolutism, and Revolutions. Primarily concerned with state-level actions such as global trade, diplomacy, warfare, and economic development.

Europa Universalis IV (EU4) [title]: Sequel to EU3 released in August of 2013. At time of writing, EU4 is the most recent active iteration in the series.

Europa Universalis V (EU5) [title]: Sequel to EU4 which was quietly teased (though not officially announced) by PDX in an official forum post on March 13, 2024.

Hearts of Iron (HoI) [series]: A series of historical grand strategy games developed and published by Paradox Interactive. Currently, the series has four entries; each is set in a 20th-century global historical context which centers World War II and attendant concerns such as military logistics, large-scale strategic warfare, state-level resource extraction, supply chain management, and both internal and external politics.

Hearts of Iron IV (HoI4) [title]: Sequel to Hearts of Iron III released in June of 2016. At time of writing, HoI4 is the most recent iteration in the series.

Imperator: Rome (Imperator) [title]: A grand strategy game developed and published by Paradox Interactive. Released in 2019, the game is set between 304 and 27 B.C.E. and largely centers the territory of the Roman Empire. Development and support was officially suspended in May of 2021.
**Sid Meier’s Civilization (Civ) [series]**: A series of 4X games developed by MicroPose, Activision, and Firaxis games successively. Currently the series has 6 main entries, with several spin-offs available. Originally created by Sid Meier, the series gameplay largely features abstracted historicized play which ranges from the eponymous founding of modern civilization through a contemporary and near-future political, social, and economic context. Highly abstracted, Civ gameplay sees players taking the role of nation-state avatars such as Abraham Lincoln, Alexander the Great, Gandhi, and Gengis Khan throughout the game’s 2000-plus year timeline.

**Sid Meier’s Civilization VI (Civ6 or C6) [title]**: Sequel to Sid Meier’s Civilization V released in October of 2016. At time of writing, the game is still seeing active updates and support.

**Total War (TW) [series]**: Popular series of hybrid turn-based and real-time strategy games developed and published by Creative Assembly. Entries in the series typically feature different temporally- and spatially-constrained historical conflicts, such as Japan’s *Sengoku jidai* (warring states), Europe’s Napoleonic Wars, and China’s “three kingdoms” periods. The series is known for its distinct hybrid of campaign-level abstracted “god game” turn-based gameplay coupled with real-time army-based RTS battles as a resolution mechanic for campaign-level conflicts.

**Victoria (Vicky) [series]**: A series of historical grand strategy games developed and published by Paradox Interactive. Currently, the series has three entries; each entry is set in a 19th–20th-century global historical context which centers global economic development, trade, colonialism, and social class conflict.
**Victoria 3 (V3 or Vicky 3)** [title]: Sequel to Victoria 2 released in October of 2022. Played in this study during the private screening at PDXCON 2022. At time of writing, V3 is the most recent iteration in the series.

**CK3 Expansions and Flavor Packs**

**Fate of Iberia (FoI)[flavor pack]:** Second Flavor Pack released for CK3 in the Spring of 2022. This pack centers Iberia, expanding various gameplay systems with specific mechanics and representational elements for applicable Iberian dynasties, cultures, characters, and religions. Also introduces the novel Struggle mechanic intended to model regional conflicts over a lengthy timescale.

**Legacy of Persia (LoP)[flavor pack]:** Third Flavor Pack for CK3 released in the winter of 2023. This pack centers Iran and other middle-eastern cultures, characters, religions, and dynasties which are purported to have been historically involved in the region. Adds depth and specificity to Iranian, Turkic, and Muslim gameplay in the Middle East.

**Northern Lords (NL)[flavor pack]:** First Flavor Pack released for CK3 in the spring of 2021. This pack focuses on the region of Scandinavia, expanding various Viking dynasties, characters, cultures, and religious elements—thus offering greater depth, specificity, and historical connections for play interactions with these entities within the game.

**Royal Court [expansion]:** CK3 Expansion released in early 2022 which adds the Royal Court mechanic and setting, emphasizing the interpersonal and relational nature of medieval rule by allowing players to hold court and intervene in various petitions, disputes, and other issues facing their realm. Notably, RC also visually models the throne room in question, adding historicized
representational specificity intended to further ground play in the historical setting(s) and cultures. This expansion remains widely controversial within the community.

**Tours & Tournaments[expansion]:** the second expansion released for CK3 in the spring of 2023 which was intended to more concretely blend character play with the map/setting by introducing systems for character travel between different parts of the world in order to attend weddings, tournaments, and other occasions of medieval importance. Widely considered to be CK3’s most successful and effective expansion to date.

**PDX-Specific Terminology**

**Content Creator Pack:** Content produced in collaboration with an independent content creator.

**Core Expansion:** An upgrade to the core game loop (with a similar wide scope) sized between the size of a Major Expansion and a Flavor Pack.

**Cosmetic Pack:** New character clothing and other non-mechanical visual representation additions, usually focusing on attire and symbology tied to a particular region or culture.

**Developer Diary (DD):** Paradox Interactive’s regular, official communications from the developers (and other staff) posted to the community in order to communicate game changes, new content announcements, content roadmaps, design intentions, and other insights into the past, present, and future state of a particular PDX title.

**Event Pack:** A specifically-scoped selection of in-game events tied to a particular theme.

**Flavor Pack:** Regionally specific content designed to add visual and mechanical flavor to a particular region and its specific cultures, characters, and other game elements.
**Instant Unlock:** Term used for free content tied to upcoming releases. Content usually maps to cosmetic pack material.

**Major Expansion:** Major additions to ‘wide’ systems which affect play across the map. The largest content size.

**Paradox Interactive (PDX) [company]:** Developer and Publisher headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. Relevant titles include the *Crusader Kings, Europa Universalis, Victoria*, and *Hearts of Iron* series as well as *Imperator: Rome*. 
APPENDIX B: FULL SITE AND SUB-SITE LIST
Chapter 1 of this document provides a short list of sites and associated methods involved in this study; this Appendix presents these sites in more detail. See Chapter 1 for a more integratory consideration of these sites and methods within the context of the associated research questions, theory, analysis, and findings. Short descriptions for the listed data collection methods are as follows:

**Archival (A):** The use of web platforms as archival sources of relevant data. Asynchronous collection of posts, metadata, and other relevant material from outside the time window used for participant observation and interaction.

**Autoethnographic (AE):** Data collected consists of personal reflections on the culture, structure, and aggregate interactions involved in the week-long visit to Stockholm in 2022.

**Direct Play (DP):** Single- and multi-player play via Steam on a Windows PC.

**Incidental (I):** Due to platform-level affordances, incidental encounters with other sites occurred via direct links and algorithmic recommendation systems. Sites listed are ones included in the memoranda written during the combined analysis and data collection period of the study—many more were encountered in during the Participant Observation and Archival portions of the study.

**Participant Observation (PO):** Direct ethnographic engagement with community members via synchronous and asynchronous modalities, such as instant messaging, forum posts, and commenting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITE</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Short Description/Title</th>
<th>METHODS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>r/CrusaderKings</td>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>Crusader Kings&lt;br&gt;Crusader Kings is a historical grand strategy / RPG game series for PC,</td>
<td>A,PO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mac, Linux, PlayStation 5 &amp; Xbox</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Series X</td>
<td>S developed &amp; published by Paradox Development Studio. Engage in courtly intrigue, dynastic struggles,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and holy warfare in medieval Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India, the steppes and Tibet. Can you achieve fame and fortune for your noble family, or will your names be forgotten to history?

- r/CrusaderKings3 Reddit Crusader Kings 3
- r/ShitCrusaderKingsSay Reddit A proud bastion of murder, genocide, and incestuous marriage

- r/paradoxplaza Reddit Paradox Plaza
  A place to share content, ask questions and/or talk about Paradox Interactive games and of the company proper.

- r/ElderKings Reddit Elder Kings Mod (CK2|CK3)
  A subreddit dedicated to the Elder Kings mod for Crusader Kings 2 and
Crusader Kings 3
https://elderkings.com

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<th>PDX BBS</th>
<th>Crusader Kings III</th>
<th>A,PO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Crusader Kings III (game) Steam**

Love, fight, scheme, and claim greatness. Determine your noble house’s legacy in the sprawling grand strategy of Crusader Kings III. Death is only the beginning as you guide your dynasty’s bloodline in the rich and larger-than-life simulation of the Middle Ages.

**Crusader Kings II (game) Steam**

Explore one of the defining periods in world history in an experience crafted by the masters of Grand Strategy.

**Crusader Kings III Achievements Steam**

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**Crusader Kings III forum Steam**

Crusader Kings III general discussions I

@paradoxinteractive YouTube

The Paradox group today consists of both publishing and internal development of games and brands. Paradox has a broad portfolio of games,
including Stellaris, Europa Universalis,
Hearts of Iron, Crusader Kings, Cities:
Skylines, Prison Architect, Victoria,
Age of Wonders and the World of
Darkness catalogue…

<table>
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<tr>
<th>@CrusaderKings</th>
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<td>Stockholm,</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sweden</td>
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APPENDIX C: CK3 CONTENT TIMELINE
This Appendix details the content release timeline for CK3 over the course of the study. For the specific content present in each of the listed DLC releases as well as descriptions of each content type, see Appendix A.

Table 3: CK3 DLC Release Timeline

<table>
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<th>ANNOUNCED</th>
<th>RELEASED</th>
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<td>09/01/20</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Cosmetic Pack</td>
<td>11/21/23†</td>
<td>05/14/20</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cosmetic Pack</td>
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<td>05/14/20</td>
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<td>02/08/22</td>
<td>05/21/21</td>
<td>29.99</td>
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<td>04/19/22</td>
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<td>08/31/22</td>
<td>08/31/22</td>
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<td>04/04/23</td>
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<td>Content Creator Pack§</td>
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<td>Event Pack</td>
<td>Q4’24</td>
<td>02/02/24</td>
<td>?</td>
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</table>

* See Appendix A for a description of each of these terms.
† This DLC was bundled with pre-orders and only received a separate release in 2023
‡ Given that every other Cosmetic Pack is either free or sold for $4.99, it is likely this price is in error
§ Officially titled and released as a Content Creator Pack (due to its collaboration w/ a community content creator); content type matches Cosmetic Packs
¶ Currently characterized as an Instant Unlock; content type matches Cosmetic Packs
# New content type introduced in the February 2024 announcement. Replaces the Flavor Pack normally included in this portion of the content release cycle.
APPENDIX D: STEAM ACHIEVEMENT METADATA
This Appendix details the Steam platform achievements, ranked by global completion percentage at time of assessment (January 2024), with regional foci necessitated by the completion logic of said achievement. Examples include “The Emerald Isle,” which essentially requires the completion of the tutorial start location in Ireland (thus indicating by completion percentage how many players have unified Ireland in CK3 up to this point). Notable limitations come from the conditions applied to achievement generation, which require a standardized set of initial game settings—with the ironman setting as a particular stricture. Thus, actual completion rates are much higher. Additionally, the staggered release of achievements makes cross comparisons more difficult; broadly speaking, achievements should be compared with those released in the same content window.

Table 4: Regionally-focused CK3 Steam achievements ordered by global completion percentage (January 2024)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>RELEASE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>REGION</th>
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<td>The Emerald Isle</td>
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<td>09/20</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
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<td>4.8</td>
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<td>09/20</td>
<td>France</td>
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<td>Launch</td>
<td>09/20</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
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