

Gods, Kings, and Historians: History and the Dual Diegesis of *Crusader Kings* in the Assemblage of Play

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ABSTRACT

Digital historical games, in their dual role as game and as history, serve as a source for shaping the historical understanding and consciousness of millions. This paper analyzes the diegetic complexity found within the historical title *Crusader Kings III* and situates it within a wider assemblage of historical play, bridging the gap between close readings of comparable titles and the increasing focus on the complex interactions between games, platforms, and the communities involved. It explores how the genre lineage of *Crusader Kings* supplies a pair of overlapping diegetic perspectives, each rooted in their own ideological framing, that provide a complex and multifaceted playground for historically-aware engagement, revision, and refutation of medieval historicity itself. The analytical approach applied here has implications not just for public history, but for the wider study of history, digital cultures, and the multimodal gameplay enabled by complex affordances.

Keywords

History, historical game studies, *Crusader Kings*, diegesis, embodiment

INTRODUCTION

To introduce the game series and titles at the center of this project—*Crusader Kings*, specifically its most recent iteration *Crusader Kings III* (*CK3*) as well as its immediate predecessor *CK2*)—it best to begin with two examples of the kinds of stories that its gameplay produces.¹ For the first: in a popular community playthrough (u/nanomaster 2016), a *CK2* player takes on the all-important task of using an extremely niche mechanical glitch to slowly, over time, replace their human dynasty with a family of equine nobles—which are naturally then named after characters from the popular “My Little Pony” franchise. Thus, over the course of play, the player transitions from Norse to Horse as they undertake the traditional gameplay actions of waging war, consolidating territory, and establishing inter- and intra-familial relationships. In the second tale, also beginning with a Norse dynasty, we see a more counterfactual narrative with a decolonial twist: telling how the unified kingdoms of Ireland and Norway—united in the 11th century C.E. under an ancient pagan dynasty—threw back the waves of militant Aztec invaders who washed across Europe in a

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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 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 the (de)motivated grad student that wrote it. 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.²

But where, you might be asking, is the game itself? Where, too, is the history it purports to represent? To explore these questions—that is to explore how we get to the wide range of produced narratives about *CK3* from the game’s mechanical and representational elements in a manner that explicates the role of history and historicity—this project turns to an analysis of the diegetic complexities of *CK3* and their role in widening what Chapman (2016) terms the *(hi)story-play-space*. To do so, this work blends and intertwines two major strands of scholarship: what Aaron Trammell (2023) articulates as the study of games and the study of play. In doing so I am following the lead of John Law, T.L. Taylor (2009), Shira Chess (2017), and many others. Here, *CK3* is the sociotechnical actor positioned within our desired context; that context is itself rich and variegated, with T.L. Taylor articulating this contextual complexity as an “assemblage of play.” Moving from this broad approach, the additional contexts provided by the game’s blended genre heredity, its historical associations, and its constituent approach to diegesis, form the core of what I’ll be calling the assemblage of *historical* play. To begin, we’ll need to examine early scholarship that attended to the anxieties associated with simulation, signification, and historical play before moving on to the diegetic complexities found in *CK3*.

BACKGROUND

Positioning *CK3* within a historical assemblage of play first requires an initial examination of the game itself, with the blended genres assigned to the game serving to guide the selection of relevant scholarship. The first and most salient of such associations is, of course, its status as a historical game. 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. Beginning 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” (Chapman, Foka, and Westin 2017, 359). Per my earlier (2020) review of the field, historical game studies 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. Out of these disparate works, early 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 (2016) offers a critical framework for situating historical affordances relative to simulative approaches; following Uricchio’s (2005) 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-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 ludic form of simulacrum.³ This critique was not limited to user behavior; early analysis of simulation games, such as Starr’s (1994) critique of *Sim City* (1989), 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 some (Gee [2003] 2007) 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.

Consideration of simulation as genre exacerbates these concerns, with the simulation genre’s central premise asserting, as Apperley (2006, 12) explains, “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].” 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. 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. Key in this articulation is the stated fidelity not to the real per se, but to authenticity as an emotive intermediary; this selective authenticity is inextricably tied with the remediative (Bolter and Grusin 2000) influences that, mediated by genre affordances, impinge upon and can be clearly identified within influenced works. The impact of this inversion extends even to the modality of simulative play, with simulation—to use Caillois’ ([1958] 2001) terminology—invoking a more *paidean* aspect that orients play away from pure *ludus*.

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,

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. By reading *CK3* through its expression of Chapman's simulative epistemologies, this complex interplay can be explored within the larger context of the game's historicizing processes.

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, the game is clearly kin to publisher Paradox Interactive's other flagship titles,⁴ with its war/strategy game lineage visible in the remediated tabletop campaign map present in all titles. This instance of the classic wargames map—like its predecessors—divides the known world into various quasi-arbitrary regions which are then assigned to each game's system for mapping political actors, dynamically colorizes/labels the map to indicate ownership or possession of these territories, then positions the player's PoV within a diegetic frame that sees them looking down upon a skeuomorphic map. These familiar affordances suggest a familiar approach: look at the map, choose your faction, conquer the rest (known in community parlance as "map painting"). It's here that *CK3* diverges from its cousins—rather than direct control over an abstract polity,⁵ play is mediated through an embodied avatar enmeshed in social networks with non-player character actors and actants. 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 a roleplaying game (RPG) staple mechanic: character equipment and inventories. These features can be recognizably identified in historically popular roleplaying titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*(2012), albeit with some departures from *D&D*'s own wargaming lineage such as drastically abstracted systems for hit points and personal combat.

So at last we ask the question: where on Chapman's spectrum of simulative epistemologies does *CK3* fall? Is it 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? 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 shaped by the intradiegetic entanglements provided by the two primary diegetic player objects, the game map and player avatar.⁶ These playstyles represent the extremes of commitment given to *CK3*'s mixed diegetic offerings, with most play balancing two 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.⁷ This historical

complexity cannot be overlooked: entwined with its multifaceted and polyphonic conception of medieval history,⁸ *CK3*'s multifaceted positionality complicates the tension inherent in the blending of history and entertainment.⁹ Later in this work, this additional tension will be reintroduced; rendering at last our picture of *CK3* play and players at least somewhat clearly.

Painting the Map Red: Wargaming the Algorithm in *CK3*

Assessing *CK3* as a conceptual simulation requires fixing our analytical gaze from a particular position—fittingly, as god-historian¹—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 (Lundblade 2019), tendency of players to embrace or reject structured approaches to historical signification (Squire and Giovanetto 2008; Durga and Squire 2009; Squire, DeVane, and Durga 2008; Myers 2005; Carr 2007), troubling interplay between historicized narratives under deific diegesis, (Galloway 2006) and others. 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 complexities *CK3* introduces.

Descending from the player's own position to the lofty diegetic heights occupied by the game's god-historian diegesis, the *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 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.

I will explain. While the game itself loudly proclaims the absence of win conditions, the enmeshed metagame speaks with a quieter yet more insistent voice. *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. As I have addressed in previous (2021) work, the achievement metagame—layered within the assemblage of historical play—serves as one such source of clearly defined goals for play. 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 instrumentality is clear: players given armies rarely question their use.¹⁰ 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 (that is, one must increase one’s stock of the various resources the game tracks). 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 Rurik the Troublemaker to form the Empire of Russia,¹¹ then the god-historian must write the narrative as they are told.

Unlike with *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI* (2016)—a popular comparable series—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 (Munslow [2007] 2019), it still broadly remains on the wider path of counterfactualism (Ferguson [1997] 2009)—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 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. Thus, for *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. 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. This counterplay—using Apperley’s (2013) framing—often operates from a contestation of history, rather than a denial, but that need not be so. 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. An example of this god-but-not-historian’s narrative can be found in the aforementioned “Norse to horse” story, with the historian’s role rhetorically and symbolically rejected via 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 the various embodied avatars the player controls. 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?

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? 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 characters.¹² 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 provides an objective and numerically discrete hierarchy for attractiveness.

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 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. A god's view is thus often the crucial mediative framing for complex variants of juvenile games such as seduce/marry/kill.

All of this means interesting times for the embodied position; *CK3* is, after all, stuffed to the gills with salacious content designed to support medievalish immersion via entertainment. Dynastic medieval politics (and their contingent focus on personal

relationships) form the central organizing metaphor-turned-mechanic for *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 reasons humanistic and historical, a key source of instrumental complication and entertainment for *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 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.¹³

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 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. One can strive to meet one's own expectations, or one can self-sabotage in a manner that makes for Good Content. But this, again, assumes the emphasis of the god diegesis over the embodied; 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 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.¹⁴ To identify its relevance to our study, we must first return to the notion of metagame addressed previously.

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 Gygas and Arneson identify as "the use of out-of-character knowledge to make in-character decisions" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 53:318). 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 *D&D*, 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 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.

History, lived and written: 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. (Trouillot [1995] 2015, 3) 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 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.

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 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.

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. 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 second tale, the 45-minute scholarly context provided for the teller’s original dynasty thus proves their historical bona fides in a manner which metatextually signals a deliberate navigation of the historically accurate, counterfactual, and fantastical in both the playing and telling of the tale. In both, the telling of the story itself becomes a domain in which mastery of *CK3* can be practiced and demonstrated.

Of course, the option remains to simply just play. Here, at last, I offer the apotheosis of my own *Crusader Kings* engagement: a perfect simulacrum of Danny of House DeVito, the newly titled Count of Genoa in 867 C.E., whose dynastic history will be written in the style of Edward Gibbon. History as past and present, as actor and narrator, and as resonant signifier and playful simulacrum all in one.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Crusader Kings III* (2020) is, naturally, the sequel to *Crusader Kings II* (2012). Given the nine-year gap between the two titles, *CK2* represented the primary entry in the series for a (as of time of writing) far lengthier period than *CK3*. This is but one factor tied to a critical observation I've made elsewhere (2024)—that current *CK3* play and play discourse are strongly indebted to the cultural legacy and strictures set by *CK2*; as such, the discursive examples I draw from *CK2* are still used to frame discussions of *CK3* (and are thus relevant for this grounding this project).

² While these narrative excerpts are drawn from *CK2*, not *CK3*, they remain relevant this discussion. While many of the specific elements present in the *CK2* stories are not currently accessible in *CK3* (the glitch that enabled the first story and the *Sunset Invasion* DLC which enabled the second have not made the transition), storytelling grounded in playful embrace/rejection of historicity remains a central feature of *CK3*. The specific examples also foreground a particular line of contestation—*CK2* is broadly considered to have diverged from historical grounding in its later additions and iterations (thus enabling some of the more extreme elements of the provided examples), and the playerbase continually debates whether *CK3* should return to or move away from *CK2*'s embrace of these aspects. Stories like these, shared within the community, are a valuable mechanism for sub-cultural identification and the promulgation of play culture and values.

³ 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 Sausseurean 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)

⁴ As of writing, these are: *Europa Universalis IV*, *Victoria 3*, and *Hearts of Iron IV*. Together these titles cover a continuous historical timeline ranging from 867 C.E. to the late 1950s. Tools exist which (in theory) allow players to continue their campaigns through each of these titles in succession. In practice they're mostly just broken and buggy.

⁵ e.g., one plays as the Count of Anjou instead of playing as the United States of America. Unlike the USA, the Count of Anjou is both a polity and a person all in one.

⁶ Here I'm invoking Willumsen's definition of player objects as "a concrete and integrated manifestation in the environment which allows the player to interact with other objects in the virtual environment" (Willumsen 2020, 5). For *CK3*, the succession of character-avatars and map-emplotted state/polity serve as distinct (though interlinked) manifestations enabling interaction.

⁷ The astute reader will note that simulative hybridity—at least in terms of Chapman's epistemological spectrum—is by no means unique to *CK3*—most, if not all, digital historical games incorporate elements from the conceptual and representative ends of the spectrum (and thus can be viewed as possessing an aggregate position closer to the middle of the spectrum or evaluated in terms of these smaller units and their discrete epistemologies). What I am arguing here is that *CK3*'s uniqueness arises not out of simulative hybridity but the manner in which it offers two distinct, cohesive, and embodied positions with their own mature diegeses—*CK3* is, in effect, two interlinked games which weave together these two perspectives across the paired embodied perspectives. It is the interplay of these two clear and cohesive diegetic positions, occupied simultaneously by the player, that forms what I argue is the unique diegetic interplay found here in the *Crusader Kings* series.

⁸ 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), 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 popular Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) model—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. 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 future work will delve into how a reddit community handles this nuance and complexity.

⁹ As *Crusader Kings II (CK2)* designer Henrik Fåhraeus identifies in his 2014 GDC talk (2014), *CK2* was conceptualized as an amalgamation of *Lords of Midnight* (1985), a cult classic wargame/RPG; *The Sims* (Charvat and Mackraz 2000), a social simulation; and George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones (GoT)* series of novels and subsequent TV show ("*Game of Thrones*" 2011). *GoT* is thus the key identified source of medieval influence here, and this carries over into *CK3*. While the influence of *GoT* on both design and reception of the *Crusader Kings* series cannot be overstated, a full and appropriate treatment of this relationship falls outside the scope of this work. For an introduction, see: (Carroll 2018; Kirakosian 2021)

¹⁰ Heidegger's conceptions of *ready-to-hand* and *present-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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ It is worth noting that incorporation of the temporal dimension—then read through extant scholarship—provides an intriguing wrinkle. Vella’s (2015) splitting of the playable figure (analogous to Willumsen’s player object) between avatar and character along the (rough) line of player control sets up a complex interplay between the dual diegesis discussed here (where the player avatar maps to both state and embodied figure) and the succession system which sees players breed, guide, and select their next avatar—with the playable figure jumping from character to character, transforming the acted-upon into actor/avatars in semi-inevitable succession; under Willumsen’s (2018) expansion of Vella’s work this occurs via a gradual-then-punctuated increase in both avatar control and character complexity in selected characters (who are usually succession candidates). Under this schema, the CK3 gameworld contains three primary classifications of actors: the current player avatar(s), general non-player characters (NPCs), and non-player characters as available candidates for future avatars. The structure of this continual churn—the intradiegetic assumption of new avatars alongside a Lamarckian selection pressure on candidate characters—serves as another key influence on CK3’s *interdiegetic* relationship between state and embodied avatar.

¹⁴ 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: Gary Gygax’s original *Chainmail* (1971).