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Historical Emulation: How Strategy Games Teach History

A dissertation by Isaiah Reitan, presented as part of the requirements

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Contents

Chapter I: Research Objectives

Introduction

In the past several decades, video games have become one of the most heavily consumed forms of media in the world, growing rapidly into a mainstream form of media entertainment.[1] Though the discipline of history has remained in a precarious position within the public zeitgeist, historical games have enjoyed a general boom in quantity and popularity beginning in the early 2000s.[2] Large game studios, such as Ubisoft and Activision, have maintained several mainstream series with historical settings for over a decade. These titles include commercial titans such as *Call of Duty* and the *Assassin's Creed* series, whose latest entry, 2025's *Assassin's Creed: Shadows*, achieved a player base of over 2 million members within its first two days of launch - a series record.[3] Further, historical strategy games, a genre once thought to be on its last legs, have seen a surge in popularity in the past decade. Market researchers have estimated the value of the strategy game market size as being approximately worth 18 billion USD as of 2033, with an estimated increase in value to between 32-38 billion USD by 2033.[4] In this time, studios such as Paradox Interactive have carved out a name for themselves

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[1]Benjamin Engelstätter and Michael R. Ward, "Video Games Become More Mainstream," Entertainment Computing 42 (2022): Introduction, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2022.100494.

[2]Yannick Rochat, "A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981–2015)," in Video Games and the Humanities, ed. Michał Mochocki (New York: Routledge, 2020), 8, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429345616-1.

[3] Tiffany Chavez, "Assassin's Creed Shadows Surpasses 2 Million Players In Just 2 Days," *9meters*, March 23, 2025, https://9meters.com/entertainment/games/assassins-creed-shadows-surpasses-2-million-players-in-just-2-days.

[4] Business Research Insights, "Strategy Games Market Report Overview," in Strategy Games Market Size, Share, Growth, and Industry Analysis, By Type (Client Type, Webgame Type), By Application (PC, Mobile, Tablet, Others), and Regional Forecast to 2033, last modified August 11, 2025, accessed September 1, 2025, https://www.businessresearchinsights.com/market-reports/strategy-games-market-118765. and Market.us, "Report Overview," in Strategy Games Market, accessed September 1, 2025, https://market.us/report/strategy-games-market/#overview.

within the genre, while industry staples within the genre, such as 2K games, continue long-running historical game franchises.[5]

  With historical games in an apparent age of prosperity, the medium is ripe with opportunities to engage the public with the discipline of history. Academics such as Martin Wainwright and Shawn Graham have recognised this, offering undergraduate courses exploring the historical scholarship found within videogame titles.[6] Further, major game studios such as Ubisoft and Mojang have experimented with utilising video games as an educational tool, in the form of such game extensions as A*ssassin's Creed: Discovery Tour* and *Minecraft: Education Edition*; the latter of which has seen limited classroom application.[7] Yet these examples are anomalies rather than representative of a thriving educational video game market. It would be misleading to say games are commonly recognised or utilised for their pedagogical potential, which scholar Ian Bogost attributes to the medium's lack of cultural respect.[8] This paper explores the pedagogical utility of a specific genre of game, strategy games, in depicting history. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper argues that the pedagogical effectiveness of historical strategy games is contingent upon its utilisation of period-appropriate worldviews as a foundational design framework.

Case Studies and Methodology

  This paper will explore the pedagogical potential of video games within the strategy genre. This comprehensive analysis will be conducted through existing

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[5] Charlie Hall, "Solving Paradox: How the Historical Strategy Game Maker Stayed Alive," *Polygon*, August 7, 2013, https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/8/7/4554042/paradox-interactive-history.

[6] Wainwright, A. Martin. "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games." The History Teacher 47, no. 4 (2014): 579. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264355. and Graham, Shawn. "Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games." In Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning, edited by Jack Dougherty and Tennyson O'Donnell, 151. University of Michigan Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sxgk.18.

[7] Andrew Webster, "Assassin's Creed Origins' Educational Mode Lets You Tour Ancient Egypt Without the Violence," The Verge, February 20, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/20/17033024/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-educational-mode -release and Eadaoin J. Slattery, Deirdre Butler, Michael O'Leary, and Kevin Marshall, "Teachers' Experiences of Using Minecraft Education in Primary School: An Irish Perspective," Irish Educational Studies 43, no. 4 (2023): 965–84, doi:10.1080/03323315.2023.2185276.

[8] Ian Bogost, Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), vii, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5334.003.0001

theoretical frameworks, most extensively the scholarly game construct, procedural rhetoric, and gamification. These frameworks concern themselves with how game designers can effectively construct, present, and teach real-world, or in this case, historical, occurrences. Within that framework, the specific game genre this study focuses on is the strategy game. Strategy games were chosen in place of another genre of historical game, or historical games generally, due to the pedagogical utility of the genre's conventions. The nature of the strategy genre allows for multifaceted interactions with forces of societal development in a way not possible in other genres. A strategy game may allow a player to adjust a country's tariff rates and observe how that affects the standard of living for the nation's population. This systemic framing of history emphasises it as an interconnected developmental process, something far harder to convey in role-playing games, where players typically control a single character and consequently experience historical forces through that more personal, narrow lens. That is not to say that the strategy genre is an inherently superior genre for depicting history, simply that its focus on far-reaching systemic causality lends the genre to narratives of historical development. Just as a film can accurately portray history through the genres of documentary, drama, or comedy, different video game genres can effectively portray history in line with the conventions of their genre. For that reason, a particular area of emphasis will be placed on how strategy games can effectively portray historical systems, as this is a key area of history which the strategy genre's affordances excel at portraying.

This particular study utilises three case studies: *Crusader Kings III* (2020), *Victoria 3* (2022), and *Sid Meier's Civilisation VII* (2025). These games were selected as the latest entries in their respective franchises, representing diverse historical scopes: Medieval dynastic rule (*Crusader Kings III*), 19th-century geopolitics (*Victoria 3*), and historical development *(Civilization VII)*. Each game presents different game design philosophies, defining success in-game differently, and is built upon differing historical worldviews. Due to this distinction in historical perspectives and gameplay mechanics, the three games simulate systemic historical forces but prioritise these forces differently. In particular, it should be noted that *Crusader Kings III* and *Victoria 3* are developed by Paradox Interactive, while *Civilization VII* is developed by Farafax games and published

by 2K Games. This is significant as it necessarily limits the scope of the genre, avoiding strategy game series such as *Total War* and *Age of Empires*. The reasoning for this decision is that each of the three case studies display unique affordances specific to their game, which collectively establish and refine insights throughout the paper. Thus, breadth of analysis across the genre has been traded in favor of relevant design philosophies and historical ideas found in specific games. This larger analysis will involve studying each case studies's design philosophies and historical themes to reveal the pedagogical strengths and limitations of both the case studies and their approaches to depicting history. Through gaining a stronger understanding of the pedagogical effectiveness of these various approaches, further knowledge will be accrued regarding the theoretical utility of the strategy game genre in depicting history.

This examination will be conducted through a distinct qualitative analysis, primarily textual and rhetorical, utilising existing theories of game design and interactive learning to further solidify judgements in line with scholarly understanding. Special emphasis will be placed on a mechanical analysis, understanding how gameplay systems enable critical historical analysis, or necessarily distort history through constraints in game design. In order to reveal the effectiveness of a game's historical presentation in these aforementioned areas, an understanding of the developer's intention, audience reception, and the historicity of presentation must exist. To understand a game's reception and effectiveness in presenting history, the perspectives of public audiences, as well as scholarly and media reviewers, will be reviewed where appropriate. To gather insights into these perspectives, sources such as website forums, game reviews, and scholarly papers will be utilised. Alongside the synthesised interpretation of these games' actual reception, an understanding of the intended reception must be understood to see how well these games execute their presentations. Developer Diaries, published reports detailing the design process and game design philosophy, will be utilised to establish a benchmark for what exactly each game aims to portray. Further, relevant scholarly research will also be utilised to establish the historicity of a game's presentation, in areas where the historicity of a game's presentation of historical events is disputed. Through this methodological framework, an effective exploration will be conducted into how effective a game is in depicting

history, and what about each game's mechanics and design philosophy has led to their respective effectiveness.

Through gaining further understanding of the pedagogical uses of strategy video-games, two interrelated objectives may be achieved: advancing scholarly understanding of games as educational tools, as well as contributing to their broader cultural legitimisation. As to the former objective, exploring the pedagogical strengths of recent popular strategy games will give insights into the broader strategy genre's effectiveness in teaching history. As for the latter objective, video games, as a genre, struggle for acceptance as a cultural medium of expression.[9] This lack of credibility has conditioned the public to engage with games less thoughtfully than other, more culturally prestigious media, dismissing games as distractions with little social or cultural function beyond sensory entertainment and distraction.[10] While it's common for mediums to lack legitimacy in their foundational years, Critic Henry Jenkins claims it's an "incorrect belief that time is a sufficient cure for the relative immaturity of videogames."[11] Rather, he claims what is needed is a greater academic, journalistic, and developmental understanding of how video games work, their language, and attributes.[12] Increased legitimisation of video games will, then, lead to more thoughtful consumption of their content by the public, and culturally incentivise critical engagement with the historical content found in these games.   Through an analysis of recent strategy games and their effectiveness in presenting history, this study will further refine scholastic understanding of how video games may effectively teach history.

Literature Review

In order to ground this study within the contemporary field of historical game studies, key articles will be explored, which showcase questions in the field as well as its current manifestations in academic life. Through understanding these contexts,

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Jenkins, quoted in Bogost, Persuasive Games, viii.
[12] Ibid.

clarity will be provided regarding why key theoretical frameworks relating to historical games have been created, as well as why they are relevant to this study.

A key article in understanding the state of the field is Martin Wainwright's 2014 article, "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games." Within this text, Wainwright explains the aims and insights of an undergraduate university course he teaches, which has undergraduate students analyse games for their historical themes and ideas. Explaining key themes in the course, he emphasises understanding the game mechanics of the course's videogame case studies as being particularly important. This is because, by exploring the game mechanics, one can see what behaviours they incentivise and historical features they emphasise.[13] Of similar significance are his cited themes of western cultural bias and a materialist slant in historical games, which will become evident in this study's case studies.[14] Wainwright's article provides insights into both the state of historical game analysis and how game analysis is applied to a university module environment.

Corroborating many of Wainwright's emphasised themes, Adam Chapman, Anna Fokab, and Jonathan Westin explain the state of game studies and key questions within the field in their 2017 article, "What is Historical Game Studies." Firstly, they raise the point that video games consistently conform to a culturally hegemonic lens.[15] This raises questions regarding historical representation and scope. They also emphasise that while games have great potential as tools for historical engagement, their pedagogical applicability should not be viewed as something which will grow ever more extensive as the technical limitations of games decrease with advancements in computer technology.[16] Rather, video games are a medium constrained by their format, and so understanding the limitations of games is critical to understanding the pedagogical benefits they provide.[17] Other academics have created various conceptual frameworks which address concerns regarding how best to maximise the strengths of the video game medium while sidestepping its limitations to create engaging and

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[13] Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory," 583.
[14] Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory," 583, 585.
[15] Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, "Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?," Rethinking History 21, no. 3 (2017): 365, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638.
[16] Chapman, Foka, and Westin, "Introduction," 363.
[17] Chapman, Foka, and Westin, "Introduction," 367.

educational content. Exploring these concepts will showcase existing scholarly understandings of how to create historically responsible and pedagogically effective games.

  In his 2007 book *"*Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames," Ian Bogost introduces and explores his rhetorical concept, 'procedural rhetoric.'[18] Procedural rhetoric is the process through which games may reinforce views by presenting the player with a simulated logic which incentivises specific interpretations.[19] He explains this succinctly as "a practice of using processes persuasively."[20] Bogost explores the political, advertising, and broad learning applications of this theory, and even emphasises its applications in teaching history.[21] He notes that interpretations of historical development as a causal outcome of systemic forces, rather than individual will, are extremely compatible with procedural rhetoric, as both emphasise how natural laws incentivise specific responses.[22] Bogost does not write on any cases of historical games utilising the concept of procedural rhetoric to great effect, which leaves his work in a very theoretical state, absent extensive analysis of case examples. Further, though he notes the compatibility of procedural rhetoric with contemporary theories of historical development, he does not uniquely explore how procedural rhetoric could be applied to teach history in games, being more concerned with procedural rhetoric's applicability beyond a single academic field.

  Shawn Graham further explores how procedural rhetoric can teach history in his 2015 article "Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games." The article's thesis is that the unique strengths of games as learning tools for history lie in how they intersect with historiography.[23] He explains that game algorithms, which parallel forces of historical development, themselves require a developed perspective on historical development from the game developers who create these algorithms. [24] Providing a practical case of learning historiography through games, he details how

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[18] Bogost, Persuasive Games, 2-3.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Bogost, Persuasive Games, 3.
[21] Bogost, Persuasive Games, 252-256.
[22] Bogost, Persuasive Games, 254.
[23] Shawn Graham, "Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games," in Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning, ed. Jack Dougherty and Tennyson O'Donnell (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 150, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sxgk.18.
[24] Graham, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 150.

students, in his university course on historical games, explore the historiographical claims of games through playing them directly and engaging in critical analysis of their experiences.[25] His concluding observation is that the immersive quality of games allows for a seamless engagement with history.[26] This engagement on a personal level allows players to absorb historical information without necessarily being aware of every detail.[27] While Graham's observations aren't revolutionary, they reaffirm Bogost's conception of procedural rhetoric and expand on it by emphasising the implicit historiography which can be analysed in games' depictions of history. His affirmation that games prove effective teaching tools within his university classes further validates the pedagogical utility of games. This, of course, underscores the significance of this study in further exploring the pedagogical utility of these games.

Further exploration of how procedural rhetoric may be utilised to teach history is covered by researchers Jerremia Clyde, Howard Hopkins, and Glenn Wilkinson, as they themselves consider it while constructing their 'scholarly game' model.[28] In their 2012 publication, "Beyond the 'Historical Simulation," Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson "present a case for a gamic mode of history that focuses on the construction of the historical narrative via procedural rhetoric."[29] The work describes how many of the methodological principles found within text-based scholarly history can be utilised within videogame design theory to create engaging and responsible depictions of history.[30] This assessment was largely in response to games recreating visual-auditory history, but not engaging with historical narratives or theories; treating history as a backdrop rather than a subject.[31] Noting Bogost's claims that recurring procedural occurrences intuitively teach an audience about the underlying mechanisms of a simulation, the researchers argue that a scholarly game should utilise these occurrences to teach its historical claims.[32] They note that learning history through interpreting a game's logic,

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[25] Graham, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 149.
[26] Graham, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 155.
[27] Graham, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 155.
[28] Jerremie Clyde, Howard Hopkins, and Glenn Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation: Using Theories of History to Inform Scholarly Game Design," Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association 6, no. 9 (2012): 3, http://loading.gamestudies.ca.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation," 3-4.
[32] Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation," 6.

via its procedural rhetoric, mirrors real historical analysis, in which there is never an official, objective, historical narrative, but rather certain narratives based on human interpretation of the interconnectivity of events.[33] Though the researchers establish the scholarly game construct as a framework for pedagogically sound game design, their early conception lacks extensive practical examples and case studies, with their main example of a scholarly game being their own upcoming game, *Shadows of Utopia*.[34] The lack of extensive case examples leaves their conception of the scholarly game in a very theoretical state, absent practical examples to analyse or critique.

Author Dawn Spring further elaborates on the scholarly game model in his 2014 article, "Gaming history: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship."[35] In his work, Spring explores the ways in which several historical game titles reflect aspects of the scholarly game model. He specifically engages with popular historical game series such as *Red Dead Redemption, Total War*, and even previous entries into the *Crusader Kings* and *Civilisation* series.[36] While his analysis of these games is brief, it does offer case examples and analysis within the 'scholarly game' framework, giving concrete examples of what a scholarly game is in practice. Through this analysis of case studies, he further solidifies the scholarly game construct and speaks to what makes games pedagogically effective. Spring sums up his findings and further identifies the scholarly game as one which

> "would ground the design process in the historical goals, objectives, or perspective. The mechanics can be drawn from the cultural, economic, political, and social questions being asked, as well as material culture, man-made and natural environments, and the rules can have a context within the historical questions."[37]

The primary limitations found in Spring's work are that the game analyses are so short that little discourse or nuance is available within his work. For example, in none of the games is there a discussion regarding how a scholarly game should address disputed

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[33] Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation," 8.
[34] Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation," 12.
[35] Dawn Spring, "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship," Rethinking History 19, no. 2 (2014): 207-218, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714.
[36] Spring, "Gaming History," 209.
[37] Spring, "Gaming History," 215.

history.[38] These sorts of discussions are important when further solidifying the scholarly game construct. Without a general understanding of how that construct should behave in nuanced or contentious environments, it becomes a weaker model to judge games against.

Alongside procedural rhetoric and the scholarly game model, a third concept must be explored: gamification. Gamification is the process through which game-like elements are added in a non-game context.[39] Notably, while strategy video games certainly constitute a game context, the process of adding game elements to historical presentations, which exist outside the context of game environments, ensures that gamification is conceptually aligned with this study. Further, as will be revealed by the coming articles, there is notable conceptual overlap between both procedural rhetoric and gamification, when the latter is applied to an educational setting.

In their 2020 study, "The Gamification of Learning: A Meta-Analysis", Michael Sailor and Lisa Homner explore the relationship between educational games and educational experiences which have been gamified.[40] They do so as part of a larger study concerned with exploring the effectiveness of gamification and answering how gamification should be approached in a formal learning environment.[41] Regarding this distinction between educational games and gamified learning, they note the interrelatedness, and argue the primary difference is that while a game may build education-focused mechanics as the basis for the audience experience, a gamified learning environment is simply augmenting an existing learning process so that it may be experienced in a more game-like fashion.[42] This is a particularly important observation for this study as gamification is being addressed within the medium of games themselves. In regard to their general claims regarding the educational benefits of gamification, Sailor and Homner conclude that gamification can be understood to reliably enhance educational experiences when utilised responsibly.[43] They especially

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[38] Spring, "Gaming History," 212.
[39] Errol Scott Rivera and Claire Louise Palmer Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement: A Framework," Journal of Further and Higher Education 45, no. 7 (2021): 999, https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875201.
[40] Michael Sailer and Lisa Homner, "The Gamification of Learning: a Meta-analysis," Educational Psychology Review 32, no. 1 (March 2020): 79, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09498-w.
[41] Sailer and Homner, "Gamification of Learning," 77.
[42] Sailer and Homner, "Gamification of Learning," 78.
[43] Sailer and Homner, "Gamification of Learning," 106.

emphasise its cognitive, motivational, and behavioural benefits.[44] Key limitations in the researcher's meta-analysis, as they themselves note, are a lack of sample sizes as well as little analysis into how various comprehensive game design philosophies affect pedagogical utility.[45] Consequently, while the study does emphasise that gamification has general benefits relating to audience engagement, conclusive findings on how to effectively engage in gamification remain limited.

Eroll Scott Rivera and Claire Louise Palmer Garden further explore the utility of gamification and work toward answering how it may be effectively implemented in their 2021 article, "Gamification for Student Engagement: A Framework." The work claims that gamification may be effectively utilised as a pedagogical tool in classroom settings by matching learning objectives with different domains of experience, being cognitive, psychomotor, and affective.[46] By matching these learning objectives with the desired gamified experience, one may accurately choose the correct sorts of game attributes to impose on the experience through gamification.[47] Importantly for this study, Rivera and Garden touch on many themes in gamification, which must be addressed in this research's analysis of strategy games. Notably, they state "gamification works by incorporating the notion of game attributes as tools that modify the sociocultural, structural and psychosocial influences on student engagement."[48] This statement runs parallel to the claims of procedural rhetoric, as both emphasise how game attributes shape audience perception through a particular framing of the audience's environment.[49] Limited examples of gamification within a classroom setting are provided and analysed, such as progress bars and leader boards within classroom settings.[50] While these examples provide a practical basis of analysis, it should be noted that these examples are very limited cases of gamification, as opposed to the comprehensive gamified systems found in this study's case studies. This necessarily limits the applicability of their study to video game environments, or any gamified environment which extends beyond a simple point reward system. Relevant to this

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Sailer and Homner, "Gamification of Learning," 105.
[46] Rivera and Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement," 1009.
[47] Rivera and Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement," 1005.
[48] Rivera and Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement," 1002.
[49] Rivera and Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement," 1002 and Bogost, "Persuasive Games," 3.
[50] Rivera and Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement," 1007.

study, however, is that the researchers note key links between game attributes and specific learning objectives which can be utilised to meaningfully impact student enjoyment.[51]   Their core findings are applicable to the study of historical presentation in games insofar as their findings are reflective of how gamification affects cognitive behaviour broadly, even while their study is primarily concerned with classroom applications.

Gamification is further explored as a tool for teaching history in games by Scott Alan Metzger and Richard J. Paxton in their 2016 article "Gaming History: A Framework for What Video Games Teach About the Past."[52]   Alongside engaging with gamification, the text offers a typological framework for understanding video games' utilisation of historical elements to shape player engagement and incentivise historical reflection.[53] An example they provide is that gamification in the *Civilization* series incentivises certain historical paths of social development through making specific paths more rewarding.[54] While the term procedural rhetoric is not utilised to describe this dynamic, their description of gameplay systems incentivising behaviours is notable and further strengthens the theoretical connection between the two concepts. Metzger and Paxton's work only concerns itself with earlier entries, yet as the series has a consistent overarching gameplay model across entries, many of their insights into the series will have relevance in this study's analysis of the latest entry in the series, *Civilization VII*.

There are also articles which address pedagogical limitations games face as a consequence of their primary status as entertainment and the associated expectations which come with this. Within his 2014 article, "The Eternal Recurrence of All Bits," author Tobias Winnerling speaks to how games engaging with history often divorce themselves from factual history and lean toward an affective historicity, motivated by both popular conceptions of history and audience expectations of what the games themselves should provide.[55] He specifically argues that rather than use time or some

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[51] Rivera and Garden, "Gamification for Student Engagement," 1000.
[52] Scott Alan Metzger and Richard J. Paxton, "Gaming History: A Framework for What Video Games Teach About the Past," Theory & Research in Social Education 44, no. 4 (2016): 532–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2016.1208596.
[53] Metzger and Paxton, "Gaming History," 533.
[54] Metzger and Paxton, "Gaming History," 557.
[55] Tobias Winnerling, "The Eternal Recurrence of All Bits: How Historicizing Video Game Series Transform Factual History into Affective Historicity," Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture 8, no. 1 (2014): 164, https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6432.

other historically neutral axis as a basis for their historical presentation, games, especially serialised titles, focus on their subject matter.[56] This necessarily divorces aspects of a game's historical presentation from factual history. Illustrating his point, Winnerling points to how the titular assassin protagonists, within the *Assassin's Creed* series, always wear cloaks regardless of the historicity of this fashion choice.[57] He notes this wardrobe decision is not motivated by a drive for historical authenticity but rather by audience expectations for consistent iconography within a serialised production.[58] This observation is especially significant as this research's case studies all must balance historicity with their status as entertainment products.

Collectively, these studies emphasise the significance of intentional design in historical games, revealing the need to align game mechanics with historical authenticity. However, gaps remain. Particularly, many of these articles lack extensive practical application or critical case studies. This research significantly aids in filling this gap by providing three comprehensive analyses of recent strategy games, utilising the frameworks explored in this literature review. Further, questions remain regarding the western-centrism of many of these titles, as well as the tension between the historicity and entertainment value of games. This study contributes to this discussion by exploring these ideas within each study and offering broad, theoretical approaches to mitigating these conflicts where possible. This study will now explore how these theoretical frameworks function in practice, beginning with *Crusader Kings III*'s intricate simulation of the medieval world.

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[56] Winnerling, "Eternal Recurrence of All Bits," 163.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

Chapter II: *Crusader Kings III* and Pedagogical Scope

Introduction

Paradox Interactive's *Crusader Kings III* is a strategy game which spans much of Afro-Eurasia between the ninth through fifteenth centuries.[59] *Crusader Kings III*'s gameplay involves the player directly controlling a single in-game character and navigating the socio-political world to attain power. This core mechanic, navigating historical socio-political structures to secure power and ensure a dynasty's survival, frames history not through the perception of state development or geopolitical relations, but through individual ambition and familial legacy. To understand the pedagogical strength of this framing of the medieval world, this paper will analyse the developer's own design philosophy, utilising developer diaries, online forum posts where developers explain the studio's plans and design philosophy. Within Developer Diary #172, the design lead for Crusader Kings III noted their pedagogically aligned vision for the game, stating,

> "Apart from being Grand Strategy Games, the Paradox games have, for me personally, always also been a way to discover the entire world in a given period, something that is both a game and a travel guide to the past."[60]

This prioritisation of the game as a 'travel guide' for understanding the medieval world has allowed the game to develop a unique identity ripe with pedagogical potential, especially valuable given the size of the game's historical presentation. This study will draw from these developer diaries to explore the methodology of the developers in crafting their historical simulation. Further, particular emphasis will be placed on how *Crusader Kings III*'s gamification of history aligns with both the scholarly game model and procedural rhetoric. Through this, one can see how *Crusader Kings III*'s gameplay model both provides historical depth and, paradoxically, limits the applicability of its

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[59] Paradox Development Studio, Crusader Kings III (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2020), PC version, video game.

[60] Paradox Interactive, "Dev Diary #172 – The Full Medieval World," Paradox Interactive Forums, last modified May 5, 2025, accessed July 7, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/dev-diary-172-the-full-medieval-world.1756319/.

historical simulation, thus affording it identifiable pedagogical strengths and weaknesses.

An Experiential and Intuitive Learning Experience

Given that a key motivation for the game development team is *Crusader Kings'* historical authenticity, it should come as no surprise that social and political realities of the medieval world serve as the core historical reality that *Crusader Kings III's* development team built the game's simulation around.[61] *Crusader King III's* gameplay is heavily concerned with portraying the historical goals, objectives, and perspectives, clearly classifying it as a scholarly game under Dawn Spring's conception of the construct.[62] We can see this emphasis through the core gameplay of *Crusader Kings III*. Rather than follow standard historical strategy conventions, in which players directly control a political state, in *Crusader Kings III*, players are only in direct control of a single character at a time, and these characters are the focal point.[63] Players use their in-game character to climb the feudal ladder through marriage or schemes; they attempt to sway religious and secular authorities to further their own legitimacy. When their character dies, players play as the character's dynastic heir, ensuring that the boons from one character may travel to another, while also incentivising players to care about their character's family and dynasty.

Writing on this unique framing of history, in Developer Diary #1, the Chief Creative Officer states,

> "*Crusader Kings* is clearly and unequivocally about individual characters…this
> makes CK most suited for memorable emergent stories, and we wanted to bring
> characters into all important gameplay mechanics."[64]

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[61] Paradox Interactive, "Dev Diary #172 – The Full Medieval World," Paradox Interactive Forums, last modified May 5, 2025, accessed July 7, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/dev-diary-172-the-full-medieval-world.1756319/.

[62] Dawn Spring, "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship," Rethinking History 19, no. 2 (2014): 207-221, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714.

[63] "CK3 Dev Diary #0 – The Vision," Paradox Interactive Forums, last modified 24 October 2019, accessed 7 July 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/ck3-dev-diary-0-the-vision.1265472/?_gl=1*5akv3v*_gcl_au*MTE4MTY0NDUwMC4xNzQ4NTQyNzQx*_ga*NTA2ODIzMzEuMTc0ODU0MjczOQ..*_ga_140E4HWMGE*czE3NDk4MTE5NjgkbzQkZzEkdDE3NDk4MTIwMDEkajI3JGwwJGGgw

[64] Ibid.

By framing the game through the perspective of individual characters, while building the gameplay around interacting with historical systems to achieve historical goals, players intuitively learn about these systems through the personal experience of navigating them. The game's presentation of history at this personal level necessarily humanises its depicted history. Game reviewers have noted, "I almost became protective over my newly found dynasty, filled with newly added 3D character models. I wanted the very best of the best for my children."[65] This emotional dimension has pedagogical utility as it is well established that emotions influence memory retention and recall.[66] This adherence to the scholarly game construct, by grounding the objectives and perspectives of *Crusader Kings III* in real medieval ambitions, allows for deep intuitive learning. Being a scholarly game, the procedural rhetoric of *Crusader Kings III* also contributes to this learning.

Explaining procedural rhetoric, Ian Bogost states,

"Computers run processes that invoke interpretations of processes in the material world…[it entails] the construction and interpretation of a symbolic system that governs human thought or action."[67]

We can see procedural rhetoric effectively utilised in *Crusader Kings III's* gamification. If a player grooms a male heir for leadership and keeps the succession laws clear, then their heir will be able to easily secure authority upon the death of the previous monarch. However, if the succession is in dispute and their heir is unpopular, perhaps as a result of gender or religious affiliation, the game's succession mechanics will react accordingly. Vassals will disapprove of this new monarch who is of the wrong religion or gender, which can lead to related conflicts such as assassination attempts, coups, or outright wars for the throne. Perhaps a successor's ascension is legally strong, being the oldest male heir, but he is unpious compared to his younger brother. This situation can lead to factions forming, wishing to put the younger sibling on the throne. This

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[65] Rich Edmonds, "Crusader Kings III Review: An Almost Perfect Strategy and Role-Playing Masterpiece," Windows Central, 1 September 2020, accessed 7 July 2025, https://www.windowscentral.com/crusader-kings-iii-review.

[66] Vipul Bhardwaj, Shuwei Zhang, Yan Qin Tan, and Vijay Pandey, "The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory," Frontiers in Psychology 8, no. 1454 (24 August 2017): 3, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01454.

[67]Ian Bogost, Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 5, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5334.001.0001.

simulation teaches players to think and behave like a medieval monarch in order to effectively navigate the game world, which is the core of the pedagogical experience. They must take care to ensure authority is secure and their heir is prepared to rule.

The gamification of feudal succession is pedagogically effective due to the authenticity of its depiction of historical facts as well as its simulated reactions to these facts. Historical facts portrayed by the game include the depiction of various succession laws such as Primogeniture, Gravelkind, Ultimogeniture, and Seniority. Through depicting these historical facts, players learn about these succession laws and their practical utility in distributing power down family lines through gameplay. Further, the game's reactions to succession serve as feedback for player actions, which authors Michael Saelor and Lisa Homner argue is essential for the educational value of a gamified experience, going so far as to argue it's a "central experience of serious games."[68] The game's feedback, or reaction, to player engagement with historical facts, is important as it creates the procedural rhetoric which provides the experiential learning environment for players. This logic may seem intuitive, but one hypothetical change in the succession system showcases how procedural rhetoric can teach the wrong lessons if the game simulation is not reflective of historical worldviews.

If we imagine a scenario where a player, whose character is currently a king, simply continued as the next monarch upon that king's death, rather than as the king's specific legal heir, the entire incentive to think in hereditary terms would vanish. Player behaviour would change as the incentives for actions have shifted. In this scenario, players would want the strongest possible character to inherit the throne, regardless of whether that character is their player's dynastic heir. Players would be less concerned with marrying for land, as their player's heir, who will inherit the land upon his parents' deaths, may not be the next character the player is playing as. In its most extreme, this could lead to absolutely absurd ahistorical behaviours, such as players wanting to lose a war over their kingly title to a foreign invader, as when players lose this conflict, they would get to play as the invader. However, as the game currently forces players to play as the legal heir, players are heavily incentivised to ensure their direct lineage holds

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[68] Michael Sailer and Lisa Homner, "The Gamification of Learning: a Meta-analysis," Educational Psychology Review 32, no. 1 (March 2020): 79, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09498-w.

political authority. By extension, they are incentivised to ensure the succession remains clear and their lineage remains politically powerful, unthreatened by rivals. This is procedural rhetoric at play, creating simulations which directly enforce a specific worldview which the player may not otherwise hold or have even been aware of.[69] By marrying the gameplay experience to historical systems in this way, *Crusader Kings III* incentivises players to adopt the perspectives of the time to successfully navigate the in-game world.[70] In this way, players are informed about real history as a byproduct of simply navigating the in-game world.

Limitations in Game Design

Crusader Kings III's scope, covering much of Afro-Eurasia and full of playable characters across centuries, has won the game praise, with game journalist Charlie Hall noting "what's remarkable is the sheer scale of the game."[71] However, this scale comes at a cost. While Afro-Eurasia is depicted to a degree, depictions vary widely in both authenticity and depth. *Crusader Kings III*'s ability to present history falters in areas of the in-game world which are radically different from the core feudal gameplay experience. These limitations are gestured at in Developer Diary #73, in which developers note that non-feudal playstyles "have a…Feudal bent."[72] By this, they mean that in-game, non-feudal social systems still follow an implicit feudal logic, emblematic of the game's procedural rhetoric, even when it's not appropriate for that system. This necessarily limits the authentic representation of societies which exist outside the feudal framework.

An example of this phenomenon can be found in *Crusader Kings III*'s depiction of tribal society. When playing as a tribal chief, players must have access to soldiers. However, because the game's core mechanics are designed around feudal obligations,

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[69] Bogost, Persuasive Games, 5.

[70] Spring, "Gaming History," 215.

[71] Charlie Hall, "Crusader Kings 3 Is One of the Best Role-Playing Games of 2020: An Epic That Breaks Free of the Strategy Game Genre Entirely," Polygon, September 1, 2020, accessed July 7, 2025, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/9/1/21417091/crusader-kings-3-review-pc-steam.

[72] Paradox Interactive, "CK3 Dev Diary #17 - Governments, Vassal Management, Laws, and Raiding," Paradox Interactive Forums, 10 March 2020, accessed 7 July 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/ck3-dev-diary-17-governments-vassal-management-laws-and-raiding.1352640/.

something not prevalent in decentralised, 'tribal' social systems, the game has great difficulty authentically depicting tribal militaries. Unable to redesign the core gameplay system for a relatively small section of the in-game world, *Crusader Kings III* abstracts its depiction of tribal society. Tribal characters do not fund military forces out of their treasury or taxing vassals in times of war. Rather, tribal characters fund military forces through 'Prestige,' an in-game resource meant to emulate the social authority of a character.[73] In some ways, this works as an effective substitute. Sociologists note that "in societies where...horizontal ties of mutual involvement are replaced by hierarchical politics, social capital is absent."[74] Considering the inverse, where horizontal ties are strong and social capital is prevalent, *Crusader Kings*' emphasis on prestige in tribal societies is grounded in real sociological and historical understanding. Emphasising social capital through the 'Prestige' resource is a way for *Crusader Kings* to exemplify how decentralised tribal societies differed from hierarchical feudal ones. The issue with this depiction is not historical inauthenticity but rather that the depiction is a historical abstraction where, in the game's feudal model, there is comparative clarity.

While in reality, currency is an actual quantifiable resource, the prestige of an individual is not. In depicting tribal societies, the substitution of hard financial currency for the abstract 'Prestige' system is emblematic of the loss of historical nuance in the game's depiction of tribal systems. It is a consequence of tribal depictions needing to conform to the feudal lens the game was built on. *Crusader Kings III* struggles to depict individuals aiding one another on the grounds of social acceptance or authority because the gameplay model does not have tools to depict non-legalist, strong social bonds. Consequently, it must translate fluid social relationships into quantifiable, exchangeable resources governed by in-game rules. This is an example of the game's procedural rhetoric working against the game's historicity. Through focusing on simulating a feudal reality, *Crusader Kings III*'s procedural rhetoric teaches ahistorical lessons as game design struggles to depict that which exists outside that feudal frame.

The developers of *Crusader Kings III* seem well aware that their focus on Western feudalism would necessarily lead to less historical depth in areas of the world

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Robert I. Rotberg, "Social Capital and Political Culture in Africa, America, Australasia, and Europe," The Journal of Interdisciplinary History 29, no. 3 (1999): 339, https://www.jstor.org/stable/207132.

further removed from medieval Europe, and have explicitly noted that certain in-game societies, such as Muslim states, were reflective of medieval Europe in a historically inauthentic way.[75] Specifically, the developers note the Clan government form, which serves as *Crusader Kings III's* political emulation of medieval Muslim states, "…is the rough equivalent of the Iqta government in *Crusader Kings II*, though in *Crusader Kings III* it does have a more Feudal bent than it did previously."[76] This developer acknowledgement aligns with statements from game critic site, IGN, who noted their desire for *Crusader Kings III* to have regional variation in historically inspired content to further depict the historical nuances of the era.[77] Aware of these pedagogical limitations and public responses to them, Paradox Interactive utilises 'expansions' to *Crusader Kings III* in an attempt to remedy these shortcomings in presentation. Expansions are additional content that add new features to the game, available for purchase. *Crusader Kings III* expansions tend to focus on further exploring aspects of the medieval world, such as regional cultures or court intrigue. In an expansion, *Legacy of Persia*, a primary aim of the developers was to "more closely represent the familial struggles of the powerful clans of the time and the bureaucratic apparatus that backed their interests."[78] Persia was chosen as the region of focus for this expansion because the area was "within the top ten most picked starting locations and the most popular one outside of Europe."[79]

This approach, of post-release regional contextualisation in order of player interest, is an intelligent monetary decision as it allows the core gameplay style to be fully realised when the game is initially released, and for subsequent profit from expansions to fund regional content. However, it does create pedagogical limitations as, without a monetary incentive, a region may remain undeveloped. This can create problems where underrepresented regions may not see further historical depictions due to a lack of profitability, despite them needing further exploration to achieve a similar

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[75] Paradox Interactive, "CK3 Dev Diary #17" and Paradox Interactive, "Dev Diary #136 - Our Vision for Persia," Paradox Interactive Forums, October 11, 2023, accessed July 7, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/dev-diary-136-our-vision-for-persia.1601384/.
[76] Paradox Interactive, "CK3 Dev Diary #17"
[77] Leana Hafer, "Crusader Kings 3 Review: Long Live the New King of Historical Strategy," IGN, originally posted August 31, 2020, updated March 29, 2022, accessed July 7, 2025, https://www.ign.com/articles/crusader-kings-3-review.
[78] Paradox Interactive, "Dev Diary #136."
[79] Ibid.

degree of historicity as more popular regions. Still, even when these regions prove popular and receive further exploration through expansions, the historicity of their expanded portrayal can remain contentious.

As of June 2025, Paradox has released five expansions focused on giving further historical detail to previously underrepresented regions through the introduction of new gameplay systems. Despite this, the only one of these expansions to hit above a 'mixed' average review rating on Steam, a popular online game store, is *Roads to Power*, with an 84% approval rating, beating out the other four expansions with averages of 53-66%.[80] These scores, being written by players who have simply bought the content, are not necessarily representative of the historicity of each expansion, but they do serve as effective shorthand for how favourable the content was. They are also, tangentially related to an expansion's pedagogical effectiveness in that low reviews would suggest the content is not engaging in some way. Comparatively, *Roads to Power*'s favorability suggests that it is an engaging and well received expansion and thus an effective case study for how *Crusader Kings III* may add further historical details.

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[80]*Crusader Kings III: Northern Lords*
Paradox Development Studio, "Mixed" (Steam review aggregate, accessed 7 July 2025),
https://store.steampowered.com/app/1303183/Crusader_Kings_III_Northern_Lords/#app_reviews_hash.
Chart Data: "66% positive (1,078 reviews)."

Crusader Kings III: Fate of Iberia
Paradox Development Studio, "Mixed" (Steam review aggregate, accessed 7 July 2025),
https://store.steampowered.com/app/1303184/Crusader_Kings_III_Fate_of_Iberia/#app_reviews_hash.
Chart Data: "53% positive (807 reviews)."

Crusader Kings III: Legacy of Persia
Paradox Development Studio, "Mixed" (Steam review aggregate, accessed 7 July 2025),
https://store.steampowered.com/app/2313540/Crusader_Kings_III_Legacy_of_Persia/#app_reviews_hash.
Chart Data: "57% positive (581 reviews)."

Crusader Kings III: Roads to Power
Paradox Development Studio, "Very Positive" (Steam review aggregate, accessed 7 July 2025),
https://store.steampowered.com/app/2671070/Crusader_Kings_III_Roads_to_Power/#app_reviews_hash.
Chart Data: "84% positive (1,946 reviews)."

Crusader Kings III: Khans of the Steppe
Paradox Development Studio, "Mixed" (Steam review aggregate, accessed 7 July 2025),
https://store.steampowered.com/app/3315510/Crusader_Kings_III_Khans_of_the_Steppe/#app_reviews_hash.
Chart Data: "64% positive (554 reviews)."

Crusader Kings III's 2025 expansio*n, Roads to Power,* further enhanced the game's representation of the Byzantine Empire.[81] Previously depicted as a state practising feudalism, this expansion gave the Byzantine Empire an "imperial government" which allowed for entirely new game mechanics within the empire, reflecting its unique political identity. The new "imperial government" gamifies the historical Byzantine administration into a navigable simulation, much in the same manner as one can navigate *Crusader Kings III's* feudal system. There is a new point system, similar to 'Prestige,' that the player must manage called 'Influence.' Influence may be used to request governorships throughout the Byzantine Empire or even to vie for the position of Emperor. This portrayal is reflective of the Byzantine 'theme' districts, provincial administrative territories organised around local military and social administrative responsibilities.[82] Just as thematic governors and generals gained influence and power through military and administrative control, players in the Byzantine Empire collect 'Influence' points to lobby for governorships, reflecting historical political climbs for power.

Yet, the abstraction of the process in which one vies for positions of political authority, as being a case of acquiring quantifiable 'Influence' points, gamifies the experience in a manner not representative of lived reality compared to how feudalism is portrayed. Where feudal gameplay may have the player engage in marriage alliances to secure military strength and possibly inherit land, imperial gameplay has players build vineyards to gain more Influence, which can be used to lobby for governorship positions. If these gameplay mechanics were used to portray feudalism, it could manifest as players marrying into a powerful family and, in doing so, win points to spend on troops or land. In this hypothetical, the game would still depict the importance of political marriages, but navigating accompanying systems, such as land inheritance, would be lost. As *Roads to Power* abstracts the process of gaining political power as a game of collecting Influence, it similarly loses opportunities to depict the lived reality of historical figures navigating these systems. *Roads to Power*'s abstraction creates a

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[81] Paradox Development Studio, Crusader Kings III: Roads to Power (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2025), PC version, video game.

[82] Warren Treadgold, "The Persistence of Byzantium," *The Wilson Quarterly (1976-)* 22, no. 4 (1998): 76, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40260386 and George Ostrogorsky, "The Byzantine Empire in the World of the Seventh Century," Dumbarton Oaks Papers 13 (1959): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/1291126.

transactional and pseudo-material certainty on what is, in reality, an unquantifiable process.

The reason for *Roads to Power*'s necessary abstraction of power climbing within the Byzantine Empire is a byproduct of it being so foreign to the initial design for the base game. Creating a system as intuitively in-depth as the game's depiction of feudalism would likely require a complete recreation of base game mechanics so extensive that it would be akin to building an entirely new game. This is, understandably, not feasible given the scope of these expansions. Consequently, through *Roads of Power*, we can see that while dedicated expansions can enhance a historical depiction, they face an uphill battle against the base game mechanics. All game depictions have a limited scope, and so focusing that scope will necessarily enhance the depiction of the area of focus at the cost of other areas which lie outside that focus.

Conclusion

Crusader Kings III serves as a fine case study of effective historical depiction within a video game environment. Through a game design philosophy focused on emulating the medieval world through its gameplay systems, *Crusader Kings III* effectively teaches players much about the medieval world. Yet the game struggles in depicting non-feudal social systems, as they are distinct from the feudal system the core gameplay is modeled around. The developers signal awareness of this unbalance in historicity across the game world, and consider it unfavourable.[83] Yet, the problem's continuation across five years of development, even in areas which receive expansions, suggests the issue of unbalanced historicity can not be answered by simply adding more gameplay systems to depict these non-feudal regions. The reasoning for this is that constructing a base gameplay system around specific historic societies necessarily makes subsequent depictions of foreign civilisations more difficult. Yet, it's worth noting that these difficulties are only relevant when they come into play, and that if *Crusader King*'s world were limited to Feudal Europe alone, this would not be an issue at all.

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[83] Paradox Interactive, "CK3 Dev Diary #17" and Paradox Interactive, "Dev Diary #136."

   This suggests an unexplored element to the scholarly game model, that being questions of scale of historical depictions and how they relate to depth. The sheer scale of *Crusader Kings III*'s historical simulation makes a degree of depth throughout its world, comparable to its feudal game mechanics, unfeasible. A possible solution to this asymmetry would be *Crusader Kings III* limiting its scope to areas more attuned to its core game mechanics. This approach could make the final gameplay experience more historically authentic, even though it would come at the cost of limiting the scale of the game's world. There are practical limitations to this proposed solution, namely that economic incentives push for games to portray what is popular, as we can see with *Crusader Kings III*'s developers plainly stating that regional interest from players is the primary motivator in choosing what topic should be turned into a paid expansion.[84] This means that, practically, within a commercial game market, limiting scope to ensure historicity at the cost of damaging audience interest may be unfeasible. Still, limiting scope does serve as a theoretically sound way for a game to ensure strong historicity in historical presentation. This does not mean a game's historicity necessarily benefits from depicting less with more depth, but rather that a precision in the overall scope of depiction can limit an asymmetry in historicity. Continuing into this study's next chapter, we may see how a shift in scope affects a game's historicity and, consequently, pedagogical effectiveness.

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[84] Paradox Interactive, "Dev Diary #136."

Chapter III: *Victoria 3* and the Scholarly Game Construct

Introduction

Victoria 3 is a Grand Strategy game set in the Victorian age, developed by Paradox Interactive.[85] Like *Crusader Kings III*, *Victoria 3* also conforms to Dawn Spring's conception of the scholarly game model, which allows the game's procedural rhetoric to teach players about historical perspectives and circumstances. However, *Victoria 3* shifts away from *Crusader Kings*' feudal-centric frame and towards a lens of social and material changes in the Victorian era. This provides *Victoria* with unique affordances to analyse, differentiating it from *Crusader Kings III*. *Victoria 3*'s developers speak of the game's distinct identity in the 57th Developer Diary. In this Diary, they proclaim "we call it a society builder grand strategy game, where the focus is to shape your chosen country's population, economy, and laws to navigate the power struggles, revolutions, and devastating wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries."[86]

This chapter explores the pedagogical effectiveness of *Victoria 3* by first establishing how its core mechanics align with the scholarly game model to strengthen its historicity in line with the developer's stated objectives. Afterwards, this chapter will examine how the game's historically grounded, materialist worldview creates a cohesive framework which enables a broad depiction of global societies without sacrificing depth. In this way, one can see how *Victoria 3*'s approach to historical presentation circumvents issues present in *Crusader Kings III*, as well as where *Victoria* itself is limited by its lens.

Procedural Rhetoric and the Scholarly Game

Victoria 3 conforms to the scholarly game model through presenting a narrative of national progression throughout the Victorian age, as it was understood within that

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[85] Paradox Development Studio, Victoria 3 (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2022), PC version, video game.

[86] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 Dev Diary #57 – The Journey So Far," Paradox Interactive Forums, August 31, 2022, accessed July 15, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/victoria-3-dev-diary-57-the-journey-so-far.1540349/.

historical era. What this 'progression' looks like, for a player's nation, is somewhat dependent on what the player considers worth pursuing. However, the avenues the game presents to the player are representative of the historical perspectives and objectives of the real Victorian age. Explicitly stated in-game objectives include gaining economic dominance with your nation, becoming a military hegemon, or forging an egalitarian society.[87] Gameplay systems are navigated by players to achieve these goals. This grounding of player objectives in the historical perspectives of the time is, of course, a key component of the scholarly game construct.[88] Further, the gameplay being constructed around such historical activities as the establishment and maintenance of international trade routes, industrialisation, and social, political, and economic reform ensures the gameplay mechanics emulate Victorian statecraft, ensuring procedural rhetoric informs players of these perspectives and objectives.

A chief example of *Victoria 3* basing its gameplay mechanics in the historical perspective of the time can be seen with its 'pop' system. Pops are representative of the people within a state in *Victoria 3*, each pop belongs to a certain socio-economic class and, within that class, takes up certain professions depending on availability. In Developer Diary #1, *Victoria 3*'s lead game designer explains that while player action affects the pops in their nation, it will, by design, rarely benefit all of them.[89] Different 'pops' will have different material desires and expectations depending on their profession, whether as a rural aristocrat, industrial capitalist, shopkeeper, labourer, or peasant farmer.[90] Certain pop groups, such as the landed aristocracy, will push for economic protectionism and social conservatism, while others, such as labour unions, will push for industrialisation, job growth, and worker protection. If these 'pops' are too dissatisfied, due to a combination of anger at the current political establishment and lack of material needs being met, this will lead to a legitimacy crisis in the government, which can, in turn, lead to political gridlock and even civil war. Consequently, players are

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[87] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 Dev Diary #52 – Player Objectives," Paradox Interactive Forums, June 29, 2022, accessed July 15, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/victoria-3-dev-diary-52-player-objectives.1533661/.

[88] Dawn Spring, "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship," Rethinking History 19, no. 2 (2014): 215, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714.

[89] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 Dev Diary #1 - Pops," Paradox Interactive Forums, May 27, 2021, accessed July 15, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/victoria-3-dev-diary-1-pops.1476573/.

[90] Ibid.

generally incentivised to manage their society in a manner which keeps a coalition of interest groups content enough for the nation to remain internally secure. Building luxury goods factories will please upper-class pops, but these goods are worthless for the working class. However, a basic textile factory will reduce the demand for basic clothes, increasing quality of life for the working class, but cutting into the profit margin of the upper class who own competing textile factories. This balancing act is a core gameplay component of *Victoria 3*, turning the game into a historical tale of managing class tensions and navigating these relationships to shape society as the player sees fit.

These aforementioned gameplay mechanics reflect Victorian perspectives on class society, which authors such as Paul Johnson note as being extremely significant to the Victorian worldview, as evident in how it affected civil law in England.[91] *Victoria 3*'s gameplay mechanics also emphasise materialism as a driving force for societal change, a commonly held view by scholars. Authors Ariane de Waal and Ursula Kluwick note a "broad canvas of materialist positions in the Victorian age"[92] The materialist-oriented and historically grounded nature of this perspective, combined with the universal nature of its claims, provides a consistent framework which *Victoria 3* utilises to depict its world. This universal lens incentivises players to intuitively view the world through a materialist worldview. This is both an example of a scholarly game building its gameplay around historical perspectives and procedural rhetoric, reinforcing a perspective through simulating its logic as dominant.[93]

Worldview Informing Game Design

Victoria 3's class-focused, materialist themes are heavily influenced by 19th-century Marxist philosophy. As the procedural rhetoric of Victoria 3 necessarily reinforces a worldview it is built upon, players have been able to see this influence in the gameplay, as is evidenced through online forums discussing the Marxist elements of

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[91] Paul Johnson, "Class Law in Victorian England," Past & Present, no. 141 (1993): 147, http://www.jstor.org/stable/651032.

[92] Ariane de Waal and Ursula Kluwick, "Victorian Materialisms: Approaching Nineteenth-Century Matter," European Journal of English Studies 26, no. 1 (2022): 6, https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2022.2044143.

[93] Dawn Spring, "Gaming history: Computer and video games as historical scholarship." Rethinking History, (2014): 215. and Bogost, Persuasive Games, 5.

Victoria 3.[94] Yet, disparate player conceptions of a game's underlying worldview are not strictly evidence that the worldview is intentional. While game developers for *Victoria 3* have not made official statements explicitly authenticating Marxism's connection to *Victoria 3*, the lead designer for *Victoria II* has.[95]

In a public lecture session, lead designer for *Victoria II*, Chris King, stated the game utilised a Marxist framework to cleanly marry various aspects of the world together.[96] He explains the *Victoria* series has always been heavily economically focused, and developers needed a way to incentivise players to engage in other behaviours of the era, such as imperialism.[97] As Marxism was both a philosophy of the game's era, and a philosophy which explains the motivations behind so many of the real-world systems and behaviours which *Victoria* emulates, it served as a theoretical base to build gameplay around.[98] King stated, "Marxism takes a very deterministic approach to history…so it converts very nicely into game mechanics."[99] King's statements on Marxism informing the game design o*f Victoria II*, have direct implications on Victoria 3. This is particularly significant as the *Victoria 3* development team has, in *Developer Diary #0*, stated "our ambition is to create a worthy successor that stays true to the core values of the Victoria series."[100] While Victoria 3 diverges from Victoria II in a few notable ways, namely its presentation of warfare, the core Marxist framing of its socio-economic framing was preserved between entries.[101]

Supporting the *Victoria* series' strategy, of a particular historical philosophy or worldview serving as the foundation for a game's design philosophy, is Professor Shan Graham, who makes a parallel observation. He notes that "the rules of games

[94] u/GloboHomie2000 [Reddit user], "Victoria 3 is a Marxist Video Game," Reddit post, *r/victoria3* subreddit, April 1, 2023, accessed July 15, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/victoria3/comments/128md9m/victoria_3_is_a_marxist_video_game/ and Albatross, "This is the best marxist education game out there" (Steam Community discussion, Victoria 3 forum, November 19, 2022), accessed July 15, 2025, https://steamcommunity.com/app/529340/discussions/0/3549427890062760700/.
[95] Chris King, "History and Game Design" (lecture, Game Developers Conference, 2016), video, published by GDC Vault, 21:24–25:00, accessed July 15, 2025, https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1023446/.
[96] King, "History and Game Design," 21:24–25:00.
[97] King, "History and Game Design," 21:24–25:00.
[98] King, "History and Game Design," 21:24–25:00..
[99] King, "History and Game Design," 20:10-20:32.
[100] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 - Dev Diary #0," Paradox Interactive Forums, posted September 25, 2021, accessed August 28, 2025, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/victoria-3-dev-diary-0.1475078/.
[101] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 - Dev Diary #0."

represent something of how the gamemakers/players view the world's workings"[102]
Victoria 3 reflects Graham's statement, but adopts an existing worldview to inform game design, rather than create an implicit worldview reflective of implicit assumptions about the world. Yet, *Victoria 3*'s adoption of 19th-century Marxism should be understood as a foundational influence, rather than a system the game universally conforms to. The game's framing of society existing within three economic strata, rather than a transhistorical binary of working class and owner class, is reflective of this. In this particular example, the non-Marxist three-strata model is a more conventional model of understanding Victorian society, as noted by R.S Neale.[103] Consequently, King's statements of the *Victoria* series' Marxist influence should not be taken to mean the game series is exclusively Marxist in its framing or ideology. Rather, the logic of the game's simulation is broadly informed by Marxist theory as a base, while individual depictions within that broader Marxist framework may diverge.

    To see how Marxism, or any expansive existing worldview, serves as the basis of game design mechanics, we can look to Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson's statements on how scholarly arguments relate to game design. They note:

> "The scholarly historical argument itself consists of facts that are converted to evidence and arranged according to a set of rules for that particular argument via interpretation. The gamic mode of history [as utilised in the scholarly game model] is an application of procedural rhetoric that takes advantage of the processes inherent in scholarly evidential relationships to express these arguments as games."[104]

In line with these authors' insights, one can see how the Marxist worldview can organise disparate ideas into a coherent vision for a game. There are numerous historical facts that the *Victoria* series wishes to portray, such as class conflict, colonialism, technological progress, and social reform. These facts are, of course, used as evidence in a number of theories and worldviews. *Victoria 3* utilises Marxism's arguments to

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[102] Shawn Graham, "Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games," in Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning, ed. Jack Dougherty and Tennyson O'Donnell (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 150, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sxgk.18.

[103] R. S. Neale, "Class and Class-Consciousness in Early Nineteenth-Century England: Three Classes or Five?," Victorian Studies 12, no. 1 (1968): 6, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3826429.

[104] Clyde, Hopkins, and Wilkinson, "Beyond the 'Historical' Simulation," 6.

construct the way in which historical facts should interact with one another, and the simulated world at large. This, in turn, leads to a game which necessarily follows the logic of a Marxist conception of the world and reinforces it through procedural rhetoric.

To see the application of Marxism in the game as it is played, we can see how procedural rhetoric incentivises players to adopt Marxist conceptions of historical development to the benefit of their chosen state. One guide, published by The Gamer, entitled *The Best Strategies for Russia in Victoria 3*, recommends rapid industrialisation, quickly adopting laissez-faire policies in order to attract capitalists to invest in Russia's infrastructure, and pitting the newly economically powerful intelligentsia and industrial capitalist factions against the aristocracy in order to abolish serfdom, further weakening the Tsarist regime and allowing for future socio-political reform.[105] If the player is unable to quickly reform Russia through this method, the guide argues, "your only option is revolution if you want to keep up economically with the more modernised of the Great Powers."[106] Through this strategy, the guide argues Russia will be able to quickly overcome early-game issues, such as its largely agrarian economy and political stagnation, and continue on as a competitive capitalist state in a healthy position for further development.[107]

This guide showcases foundational ideas of Marxist philosophy, including the transitory nature of social development, which views capitalism as the next economic development after feudalism.[108] Describing this process within chapter 3 of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, as it is reflected in *Victoria 3*, Friedrich Engels describes capitalism as a great "transformation of industry" away from the medieval production, which he regarded as being of small scale, "primitive, ungainly, petty."[109] *Victoria 3*' portrayal of Capitalism as a superior stage, and more specifically an evolutionary inevitability in socio-economic development, as a byproduct of its material efficiency, reflects these views. Further, The Gamer's strategy guide also emphasises the role of material forces shaping conflicting desires in various political interest groups, as is

[105] Matt Arnold, "Victoria 3: Best Strategies For Russia," The Gamer, December 16, 2022, accessed August 26, 2024, https://www.thegamer.com/victoria-3-russia-strategy-guide-tips/.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Freidreich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," chap. 3, Marxists Internet Archive, last modified 2003, accessed August 26, 2024, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch03.htm.
[109] Ibid.

evidenced by The Gamer's recommendation to empower the intelligentsia and industrial capitalists as an oppositional force against the aristocracy, due to them having conflicting class interests, making them natural enemies.[110] Writing on this phenomenon, Karl Marx comments on this directly in the first chapter of The Communist Manifesto, arguing

"The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'"[111]

Alongside providing engaging gameplay, *Victoria 3*'s emphasis on constructing its world through Marxism, a universal theory grounded in the game's historical period, ensures a wide range of political states may be consistently portrayed with similar degrees of depth using *Victoria 3*'s gameplay model. This runs in contrast to *Crusader Kings III*, which needed regional-specific gameplay systems to be created in order to depict certain historical circumstances. This is unnecessary in *Victoria 3* because the game depicts its historical era through a universal historical framework, and so all that needs to be portrayed is that which exists within that framework.

An example of how this framework can lead to historically authentic depictions is evident in *Victoria 3*'s depiction of East Asia. When the game begins in 1836, East Asia is home to numerous countries with large populations and limited industrial capabilities. Some, like the Qing dynasty, may have the existing material power base to secure their immediate regional security, but the entire region is underprepared for any serious incursions by Western powers. Consequently, gameplay in East Asia involves rapidly industrialising and passing through western-style legal and economic reforms to achieve material abundance and security from Western interests. This process is reflective of, though not exclusive to, Marxist conceptions of historical development, whereby societies must go through an era of capitalist industrialisation to progress through a

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[110] Arnold, "Victoria 3: Best Strategies For Russia."
[111] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, chap. 1, in The Communist Manifesto (London: Marxists Internet Archive, 1848), accessed August 26, 2025, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm

stage of societal advancement.[112] In some ways, it could be argued that this limits historicity in East Asia, as it ignores perspectives originating in that region and, instead, places a Eurocentric framing onto the landmass, supposing that those societies were underdeveloped and that being developed meant conforming to a Western, capitalist model of state building. However, this perspective, which advocated for advancing society through a Western conception of progress, represents a real historical viewpoint adopted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in East Asian countries. Japan's Meiji era is, of course, a well-cited case of westernisation. Senior Lecturer Ayelet Zohar notes that the era saw Japan

> "explore and adapt Western ideologies, technologies, practices, political and financial systems, industrial and scientific knowledge, with the end goal of situating Japan on a new stage of development paralleling that of Europe, where the Japanese 'race' was equivalent to the 'white race' of Europe."[113]

Author Christian Müller similarly notes the late Qing dynasty began making conscious efforts to emulate westernisation as early as the 1840s, and more intensely from the 1860s onward.[114] He notes that while the Qing dynasty's westernisation was less extensive than Japan's, state officials did seek to understand the western socio-political model and reform China into a middle ground between the old Qing imperial system and the western international model.[115] Through these historical examples, we can see that when Victoria 3 presents a framing of history, which posits that non-Western countries must catch up through transforming their state into a Western-compliant model, it is depicting a real historical perspective and trend. In this sense, the Eurocentric framing can be understood as a metanarrative about westernisation, grounded in global perspectives of the time. Consequently, this allows *Victoria 3's* universal framing to remain historically valid despite its Western-centrism.

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[112] Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," chap. 3.

[113] Ayelet Zohar, "Introduction: Race and Empire in Meiji Japan," The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus 18, no. 20 (October 15, 2020): 1–2, https://apjjf.org/2020/20/Zohar

[114] Christian Müller, "Between Adoption and Resistance: China's Efforts of 'Understanding the West,' the Challenges of Transforming Monarchical Legitimacy and the Rise of Oriental Exceptionalism, 1860–1910," in International Flows in the Belt and Road Initiative Context, ed. Hing Kai Chan, Felix Kin Shing Chan, and David O'Brien, Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3133-0_10

[115] Müller, "Between Adoption and Resistance," 2.

The Limits of the Historical Perspective

While *Victoria 3*'s materialist and western-conformist perspective creates a historically grounded lens to depict its world through, there are areas of the in-game world where gameplay designed around political reform, industrialisation, and international trade are insufficient for portraying the reality of their historical situation: indigenous and aboriginal tribes. The issue with depicting these groups is not at the same level as *Crusader Kings III*, which required new gameplay models to be created to emulate different societies, but is emblematic of Victoria 3 facing similar methodological challenges. The issue is not that *Victoria 3* can not depict all aspects of the Victorian age; there are limitations in the historical depiction of all societies in the game. Rather, the problem lies in that depicting some societies through the framework of *Victoria 3* would not make for an engaging gamified experience. An uncontacted tribe in Brazil could be depicted within the game's existing trade networks, and this could be done in a historically authentic way, but the only information would be that the tribe is exporting nothing. Further, depicting these groups similarly to the aforementioned East Asian example presents issues with historicity. The probability of these indigenous people being able to transform into industrial nation-states within the depicted era is extremely tenuous at best.

Aware of the anomalies that indigenous depictions represent in an otherwise widely applicable gameplay model, *Victoria 3* takes a measured approach in their depiction. In-game, a special type of political entity, 'decentralised nations,' was introduced to depict aboriginal and indigenous groups who existed independently of larger states yet lacked international recognition or the material might to maintain their self-determination in the era.[116] Decentralised nations are the only nations in the in-game world which are not playable. Beyond that, diplomacy is far more limited with these nations than with other political entities in-game. Unlike other entities, decentralised nations can not be allies, trade partners, join economic or political

[116] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 Dev Diary #33 - Decentralized Nations," Paradox Interactive Forums, last modified October 13, 2022, accessed October 26, 2024, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/victoria-3-dev-diary-33-decentralized-nations.1509966/.

spheres of influence, or engage in or be engaged by anyone in diplomacy.[117] The only interactions other nations may take towards decentralised nations are initiating colonisation of their territories, at which point a de facto war will be triggered between both nations.[118] However, unlike when centralised nations engage in conflict, wars with decentralised nations are not registered in the game as formal military conflicts, and no foreign powers have opportunities to intervene.

Decentralised nations are notable for how distinct they are in gameplay, or lack thereof, from other nations. Yet, their limited interactivity begs questions regarding why they should be depicted at all, as on a gameplay level, they are nearly non-existent. Their lived reality does not map onto engaging gameplay within the existing gameplay model of *Victoria 3*, as is evident by their inability to take any action on the map. Yet, this portrayal makes more sense when viewed from a scholarly, rather than gameplay, lens. In *Victoria 3*'s Developer Diary #33, Paradox states

> "In *Victoria 3*, decentralised nations exist to address both the issues of gameplay and better representation of indigenous peoples. No matter where an empire tries to colonize, someone already lives there. They're organized, although they don't have the same level of international recognition and administrative organization as, say, Congress of Vienna attendees."[119]

Decentralised nations appear, then, to largely exist to provide historical representation and avoid historically problematic portrayals of the era. It should be noted that before *Victoria 3*, decentralised nations did not exist.[120] The land which nations colonised may list an indigenous population living on it, but no political or social entity was listed as being the organised body these people lived under, propagating an "empty land myth."[121] *Victoria 3* changes this framing by depicting the 'uncolonized world' as indeed inhabited, just not recognised as legitimately inhabited by Western powers.[122] This aids the historicity of *Victoria 3*'s presentation while keeping indigenous inclusion in line with the game's broader narrative framing.

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[117] Paradox Interactive, "Victoria 3 Dev Diary #33."
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.

Victoria 3 chooses to depict Aboriginal people, in the form of decentralised nations, insofar as it helps with the historicity of the game and does not clash with the game's focus on Western-centric historical development. Further validating this decision, one can look at an opposite approach, in the form of *Crusader Kings III*. As explored in its own chapter, *Crusader Kings III* attempts to depict non-feudal relations after building the game's base mechanics around feudalism, and this has led to significant challenges hampering the final presentation of non-feudal societies. *Victoria*'s decision to limit its depiction of Aboriginal societies can be understood as a lesson in restraint and understanding of scope.

Alongside this takeaway, it should also be noted that the game's portrayal of decentralised nations demonstrates a key pedagogical strength of its design. That strength is that the existing game mechanics incentivise future development to adhere to the historical worldview it uses as a reference. The game's Eurocentric, Marxist-influenced lens produces mechanics that logically marginalise indigenous peoples, a limitation born of the game's adopted historical worldview that is, itself, historically authentic. This creates a self-reinforcing system where a design founded on a specific historical worldview generates mechanics consistent with that worldview. This showcases the effectiveness of this design philosophy, while also highlighting the significant responsibility which should be taken in choosing which historical perspectives to replicate.

Conclusion

Victoria 3 tells a story of Western-centric socio-economic development and geopolitical conflict throughout the Victorian age. This story is framed through a Marxist-influenced, western-centric conception of historical development, which, being a universal system, allows for *Victoria 3* to portray much of the globe through a single gameplay model. Rather than focusing on depicting the differences between these societies, the game grabs disparate nations and tells a narrative of them travelling through a specific conception of historical progress, grounded in the historical perspectives of the time.   In doing so, the narrative framing of *Victoria 3* incorporates

the scholarly game model while allowing for *Victoria 3*'s gameplay model to effectively depict a wider spectrum of socio-political organisations than was possible with *Crusader Kings III*'s feudal-centric framing. Still, there are limits to what *Victoria 3*'s gameplay model can depict, as evidenced by the limited portrayal of decentralised nations. However, this should not be strictly considered a failure of *Victoria 3*'s design philosophy, but rather as an example of restraint in scope, allowing for a tighter focus. The key takeaway with Victoria 3's decentralised nations is that the base of a game's design will always limit what said game may depict. Yet, by depicting a historical perspective, rather than a historical environment, games are necessarily less limited as a worldview. This is because a worldview can have an understanding of a wide array of environments, while distant historical environments will be less compatible. For this reason, *Victoria 3*'s effective scope of presentation, within its gameplay model, is larger than *Crusader Kings III*'s. As a result, *Victoria 3*'s greatest pedagogical achievement is its successful marriage of a universal gameplay system to a specific historical lens, allowing it to simulate the 19th century with exceptional coherence. Continuing into *Civilization VII*, we will explore how adopting a contemporary, rather than historical worldview affects a game's historicity.

Chapter IV: *Civilization VII* and Historicity

Introduction

   Sid Meier's Civilization VII, developed by Firaxis Games and published by 2K Games, is the latest entry in the long-running turn-based society management series, *Civilization*.[123] In the *Civilization series*, players lead a civilisation from the year 4,000 up to the modern era. As *Civilization* is an extremely popular and long-running series, it has been the topic of significant scholarly analysis.[124] Authors Adam Chapman, Anna Fokab, and Jonathan Westin note that the *Civilization* series has been a popular case study as a consequence of the series' embracement of its medium's affordances in portraying history.[125] Yet, they note that as the historical strategy genre has seen new approaches to presenting history, many of which overcome limitations in historical depictions which *Civilization* has struggled with, *Civilization*'s scholastic influence has waned.[126] Analysing key criticisms of the series' historical depictions, which has continued into *Civilization VII*, and examining how it relates to the scholarly game theory, will reveal why *Civilization VII* faces issues in historicity where other strategy games do not.

   A regular critique of the *Civilization* series, as noted by Adam Chapman and other scholars, is its framing of history as being a deterministic process inevitably heading toward the modern world.[127] This criticism is further supported by numerous claims that *Civilization*'s worldview echoes contemporary views of historical development. Examples include scholars Scott Metzger and Richard Paxton, who note similarities between *Civilization*'s ecological determinism and Richard Diamond's 1997

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[123] Firaxis Games, Sid Meier's Civilization VII (New York: 2K Games, 2025), PC version, video game.
[124] Wainwright, A. Martin. "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games." The History Teacher 47, no. 4 (2014): 582. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264355. and Ana Bijsterveld Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games: An Analysis of How Civilization V Represents the Past," Nations and Nationalism 28, no. 4 (2022): 1316, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12845.
[125] Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, "Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?," Rethinking History 21, no. 3 (2017): 362, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory," 582. and Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games" 1318. and Chapman, Foka, and Westin, "Introduction," 367.

thesis on that very subject.[128] Further, Ana Muñoz notes strong similarities between the series' metanarrative and Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History' thesis, which had been published in 1991, just two years before the first *Civilization* game was released.[129]

There are nuances in *Civilization*'s presentation on historical development which make directly equating the game's outlook as synonymous with Fukuyama and Diamond's ideas questionable. However, as will be explored further in the chapter, there is significant methodological overlap between both *Civilisation* and contemporary history perspectives, which were popular in the series' formative years. This is relevant as it reveals that it is contemporary, rather than historical, views which serve as the foundation of *Civilization*'s metanarrative framing of historical development.

Yet, this begs the question of why *Civilization*'s contemporary perspective is a negative aspect of the series. One may disagree with *Civilization*'s assertion that historical development inevitably leads toward our modern reality. Yet, while an interesting area of debate, this perspective is not concerned with the pedagogical effectiveness of *Civilization*, and thus is not directly relevant to this study. The more relevant area of contention is that a certain ahistoricism seeps into historical presentations when history is presented through a presentist framing, applying modern views back onto depicted history. This criticism, of presentism in historical depictions, is explained succinctly by Robin Wells, who argues that a presentist view of history makes comparative judgement impossible.[130]

It is this emphasis on contemporary and presentist perspectives which places the *Civilization* series outside the scholarly game model, which would rather have games focus on the historical perspectives and objectives of the depicted time.[131] As a consequence, the procedural rhetoric of *Civilization* distorts history by framing historical actions as being in implicit service of building toward our modern world, despite

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[128] Scott Alan Metzger and Richard J. Paxton, "Gaming History: A Framework for What Video Games Teach About the Past," Theory & Research in Social Education 44, no. 4 (2016): 548, https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2016.1208596.

[129] Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games," 1316.

[130] Robin Headlam Wells, "Historicism and 'Presentism' in Early Modern Studies," The Cambridge Quarterly 29, no. 1 (2000): 52, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42968037.

[131] Dawn Spring, "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship," Rethinking History 19, no. 2 (2014): 215, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714.

historical actors working under a plethora of worldviews incompatible with *Civilization*'s framing. This historical distortion is not an isolated anomaly but rather an inevitable effect of *Civilization*'s presentation being built around a contemporary framing of historical events.

By exploring key gameplay systems present in *Civilization VII*, an understanding of the game's worldview and how procedural rhetoric enforces it will be uncovered. Following this, a critique of this worldview, as a lens for depicting history with significant pedagogical shortcomings, will be conducted. This will demonstrate the importance of the scholarly game model, as the consequences for deviation from it will be unearthed. Further, this exploration will showcase why the pedagogical utility of games is so contingent on an emphasis on historical perspectives.

Gameplay Systems and Metanarrative

Civilization VII subscribes to a contemporary framing of history, which is largely deterministic, and frames entities, such as civilisations and historical individuals, in a pseudo transhistorical manner. The procedural rhetoric of *Civilization*'s gameplay necessarily emphasises the existence of historical facts while deemphasising the specific relationship these facts have with the historical environment they are in. Two gameplay systems will be analysed to both establish the gameplay model of *Civilization VII* as well as explore the game's metanarrative and its manifestation through procedural rhetoric. The first, the 'Ages' system, is a brand new gameplay addition unique to *Civilization VII*, the second, the 'Tech Tree,' is a staple of the series, though its specific iteration in *Civilization VII* will be the iteration focused on.

Writing in Developer Diary 1, the *Civilization VII* development team speak of this new 'Ages' system, stating that "Ages represent a significant gameplay evolution for *Civilization*."[132] This system differentiates *Civilization VII* from previous entries in that it splits the game into three ages: antiquity, exploration, and modern. In each age, a Civilisation will change into a new one, befitting this age. Pharaonic Egypt, for example,

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[132] 2K Games, "Dev Diary: Ages," Civilization VII, last modified , accessed August 30, 2025, https://civilization.2k.com/civ-vii/game-guide/dev-diary/ages/.

can always become the Abbasid Caliphate during the game's Exploration Age, but may also transition into Mongolia if they have an abundance of horses.

While this change in the series' game design may be seen as further depicting the nuances of transitions in societal development, it does raise many questions. Mongolia's existence is portrayed as being contingent on horses, alluding to the Mongolian steppe tribes. Yet, this generalisation of what constitutes Mongolia as a historical identity, to the point where Pharaonic Egypt may outright become Mongolia in-game if they have an abundance of horses, does not lend itself to a deep historical understanding of either society's actual development. An Egypt which utilises an abundance of horses would, literally, be Egypt with horses. The implication that *Civilization VII* presents, if this is meant to be taken literally, is that there is a transhistorical quality to a Civilisation's identity, and that this identity is one other's can shift to. Yet, this seems disingenuous, artistic presentation does not necessarily equate to actual worldview, especially when the presentation is as stylized as *Civilization*'s. Key observations with this new Ages system is that it frames historical ages as inevitable and identifiable forces which affect those living in them, rather than contemporary framings of the past. It also frames the specific contemporary framing it invokes as being inevitable. The Antiquity Age always leads to the Exploration Age which always leads to the Modern Age. This further emphasises the series' deterministic and contemporary framing of events.

Returning to Developer Diary 1, it is noted that this system was primarily built around concerns of practical gameplay design, despite there being a certain element metanarrative alignment with the larger series.[133] The 'ages' system largely exists to address long standing criticisms with gameplay in previous entries, where players could get too strong too fast, leading to boring and unchallenging gameplay.[134] The developers note that by forcing players to choose new civilisations to play as in each Age, this new system mitigates 'snowballing' by creating a soft reset.[135] The acknowledgement that the system was built to address gameplay criticisms, suggests the 'age' system was primarily constructed around gameplay considerations, and that

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[133] 2K Games, "Dev Diary: Ages."
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.

the historical grounding of the mechanics was a secondary consideration. This is an important observation going forward, as though the game still presents history through a metanarrative, it suggests aspects of this metanarrative presentation will take a backseat to engaging gameplay.

Civilization VII's procedural rhetoric also manifests in its 'tech tree' system, which showcases the game's deterministic, and universal conception for historical progress. Within the *Civilization* series, the tech tree is a gameplay system where players must unlock an advancement or 'technology', corresponding to real historical innovations. Unlocking a technology gives the ability to work toward unlocking the next technology in a linked chain. These technologies give benefits such as access to better soldiers or increased production efficiency in factories. Within *Civilization VII*, these technologies are categorised into two distinct types, scientific and cultural technologies. These scientific and cultural advancements are unlocked using corresponding Science and Culture points. Players must build cities and buildings to generate points. These points are then used to unlock advancements in the tech tree, which give benefits to future construction and resource generation. This creates an effective gameplay loop which, through procedural rhetoric, emphasises the optimisation of societal production of these points. This tech tree system portrays history as being largely deterministic, as advancements are locked behind prior discoveries. The historicity of *Civilisation VII*'s tech tree must be taken on a case-by-case basis. In-game, discovering masonry is a prerequisite for discovering the wheel within the tech tree. While there is an intuitive logic to the tech tree, founded on historical narratives of technological progress, real history is less universal than it is portrayed in-game. An example, in *Civ VII*, can be seen in how pottery must be discovered prior to discovering writing. Historically, while early writing has largely been linked to pottery, often being written on clay tablets, this was not universal.[136] This is noted by Professor S.H. Hookes, in *The Early History of Writing*, who states that while writing was often written on clay, the abundance of papyrus reed in Egypt made it an outlier in this trend.[137] *Civilization VII*'s depiction of socio-technological development in its tech tree may be understood as a depiction of

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[136] S. H. Hooke, "The Early History of Writing," Antiquity 11, no. 43 (1937): 274, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00012862.
[137] Ibid.

common historical trends, rather than a specific claim that all historical development must take the routes portrayed in-game. However, absent the recognition of alternative models of development, *Civilization* necessarily reinforces a universal model of development which is uniformly placed onto all of its depicted societies.

The tech tree serves not only as a manifestation of a deterministic worldview, through portraying technological and cultural progress as a quantifiable, linked chain of cause and effect, but also contributes to the game's enforcement of a core maxim of the series. This maxim, articulated by media scholar William Uricchio and further affirmed by Martin Wainwright is "'the more efficient production, the more advanced the Civilisation."[138] The procedural rhetoric, as evident through the technology-production dynamic in *Civilization VII* encapsulates this maxim. Points must be produced by buildings to unlock more technologies. These technologies unlock new gameplay features which can be used to more efficiently gain points. This feedback loop is at the heart of *Civilization*'s gameplay and encourages players to engage with a linear conception of historical development as optimally as possible.

This begs the question of where this development leads. The game has several independent victory conditions related to economic, scientific, cultural, and military strength. Developing one's civilisation, through efficient production of resources related to these conditions, is paramount to securing victory. Through its gameplay model and victory conditions, *Civilization* presents its historical metanarrative. In this metanarrative, civilisations progress through a linear path of societal development, and those who do so most efficiently 'win' history. The presentist nature of this framing is further emphasised by social and cultural innovations unlocking different modes of societal organisation, which are presented as direct upgrades from, rather than alternative approaches to, previous modes of social organisation. In *Civilization VII*, the final available government forms are Authoritarianism, Bureaucratic Monarchies, and Elective Republics. This framing cleanly ends every game of *Civilization* with the world being broadly reflective of modern society, with the game's procedural rhetoric framing this as a historical inevitability born from deterministic causality.

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[138] William Uricchio, as quoted in A. Martin Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games," The History Teacher 47, no. 4 (2014): 584, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264355.

Many scholars have noted this contemporary worldview in the series. Doctor Eva Vrtačič states, "*Civilization* is played like a race toward a particular state of affairs, representative of (a romanticised version of) contemporary Western reality."[139] Further, writing on *Civization V*, and emphasising the western-centric perception of historical development, author Malte Wendt similarly critiques this perspective, stating,

"the universal technology tree…[manifests] the imperialist idea that a nation that has not developed certain Western technologies or cultural standards represents a past stage of Western society and will therefore always lack behind the Western pion."[140] This historical metanarrative, of a linear deterministic path of civilisational progress, aligns with contemporary, Western-centric conceptions of history, if in an oversimplified manner.

As noted previously, this metanarrative has structural similarities with Francis Fukuyama's 1992 essay, *The End of History*. Within this text, Fukuyama posits Western liberal democracies are the final stage of societal organisation, citing the inability of alternative political and economic systems to compete with these countries in the 20th century.[141] Author Andrés Muñoz argues that the *Civilization* series' specificity of the final government forms being a western model, which manifests its superiority in-game through dominance within scientific, economic, military, and cultural arenas, aligns the series with Fukuyama's thoughts.[142] Yet, the validity of Muñoz's claims is contingent on whether these final government models presented by *Civilization* are western. Within *Civilization VII*, the final models are Authoritarianism, Bureaucratic Monarchies, and Representative Republics. These are quite vague identities which do not cleanly align with a specific cultural model of statecraft. 'Authoritarianism,' as an explicit government model, is particularly questionable as the term is largely pejorative and broad enough in

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[139]Eva Vrtačič, "The Grand Narratives of Video Games: Sid Meier's Civilization," Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology 3, no. 2 (2012): 100, accessed August 5, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290565973_The_grand_narratives_of_video_games_Sid_meier%27s_civilization.

[140]Malte Wendt, "Narrative Representation and Ludic Rhetoric of Imperialism in Civilization 5" (MA thesis, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, 2018), 40, accessed September 1, 2025, https://www.anglistik.uni-kiel.de/de/fachgebiete/kultur-und-medienwissenschaften/popular-culture/materialien/MA_Wendt_Narrative%20Representation%20and%20Ludic%20Rhetoric%20of%20Imperialism%20in%20Civilization%205.pdf

[141]Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," The National Interest, no. 16 (1989): 3, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184.

[142]Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games" 1316.

its meaning that it could apply to a wide range of political states, both historical and modern. For this reason, it may be unfair to cite *Civilization*'s metanarrative framing as being synonymous with Fukuyama's 'End of History' thesis. Fukuyama is specifically arguing that liberal democracies are the final form of civilisational development.[143] Even if one accepts that *Civilization VII*'s final political models are western in origin, it is a leap to say that the western origin alone makes these governments reflective of the liberal democracies which Fukuyama is explicitly endorsing. The game offering conclusive political models not explicitly characterised as liberal democracies runs in contrast to Fukayama's appraisal of liberal democracies specifically. Still, the broader teleological claims shared between Fukuyama and *Civilization VII*, that 20th-century political and economic models are superior to past systems by the nature of their historical dominance, give them notable similarities.[144]

Pushing back against Muñoz, A more accurate parallel between Fukuyama's thesis and *Civilization* historical framing is that their shared metric for what constitutes progress is a Western-derived, teleological model. The 'Ages' system posits three chapters: antiquity, exploration, and modern, which are not universal framings of history but rather western models. The technology tree presents a single, mandatory path of advancement that culminates in the scientific and industrial standards of the modern West. This is a form of dialectical thinking that argues that the 20th-century Western nation-state is the implicit 'end of history,' as the game offers no alternative paths of development. Yet, powerful political entities in our contemporary world contest this claim, undermining *Civilization*'s framing of the nation-state as the conclusive final evolution of a civilisation. A notable detractor from *Civilization VII's* claim is the Communist Party of China, who have most recently reaffirmed, in the country's 2022 constitution, that "the party's highest ideal and ultimate goal is the realization of communism."[145] This shows that *Civilization VII*'s view of modernity as the final stage of social development, is not unanimously agreed upon framing of historical development, but rather a contested lens tied to the very nation-states it affirms. Thus, *Civilization VII*

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[143]Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 3.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Constitution of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2022), published October 26, 2022, accessed August 30, 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/26/content_WS635921cdc6d0a757729e1cd4.html.

can be understood as pushing a western-centric, contemporary, and deterministic framing of historical development through the procedural rhetoric of its gameplay systems. Continuing into the next section, we will see how this breakage with the Scholarly Game model, in favor of its own contemporary worldview, hampers the pedagogical capabilities of the game.

Pedagogical Limitations of a Contemporary Framing

While the *Civilization* series presents a clear worldview of history, it is a contemporary, rather than historical, view. This breaks from Dawn Spring's conception of scholarly games, which should ground their historical perspectives in the attitudes of their periods.[146] Consequently, while the procedural rhetoric of *Civilization* teaches its conception of history well, it does not convince audiences or scholars of that conception's validity.

Speaking on the series' contemporary framing, Doctor Eva Vrtačič has accused the series of being outdated and ideologically foolish for its western-centric, conformist metanarrative.[147] Audiences have similarly critiqued the Western-centric models of *Civilization VII*, in one forum, published days after the game's release, hundreds of comments discussed their desires for victory conditions less contingent on a Western framing of history.[148] These are criticisms relating to the validity, rather than effectiveness, of the game's presentation. Only the latter is immediately relevant to a study on how games can teach history well. Still, the former accusation, that the game's historical perspective is not valid, is still relevant insofar as it suggests *Civilization*'s presentation of its history is not making a convincing argument for its held views.

Civilization VII faces these criticisms because its nonconformity with the scholarly game construct detracts from its pedagogical utility, leading to a limited historical

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[146] Dawn Spring, "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship," Rethinking History 19, no. 2 (2014): 215, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714.
[147] Vrtacnik, "Grand Narratives," 92.
[148] CivFanatics Forum, "Civ 7's Victory Paths Can Use Some Work to Feel Less Western-Specific," forum thread, 2025, accessed August 5, 2025, https://forums.civfanatics.com/threads/civ-7s-victory-paths-can-use-some-work-to-feel-less-western-specific.694262/.

portrayal of questionable historicity. By constructing its in-game world around a modern perspective of history, the gameplay of *Civilization VII* runs into significant difficulty in emulating its historical setting. This is because the procedural rhetoric is focused on exploring modern, rather than historical, perspectives of a time period, and so gameplay is necessarily shaped around modern rather than historical objectives. A comparative analysis between *Civilization VII* and *Victoria 3* will illuminate these difficulties.

Civilization VII* and *Victoria 3* share many structural similarities. Both have gameplay systems structured around a metanarrative of history. These metanarratives emphasise material conditions shaping historical development as well as historical development being largely deterministic. Further, both are Western-centric in their outlook. However, as discussed in its respective chapter, *Victoria 3*'s metanarrative is heavily inspired by 19th-century Marxist conceptions of history. Meanwhile, *Civilization VII*'s metanarrative is a modern, Western-centric view, reflective of Fukuyama's *End of History*.[149] As a consequence of utilising historical perspectives to frame its world, the gameplay systems of *Victoria 3* has the player engage in specific activities which occurred during the game's depicted era and were considered significant by those living in that time. Players must, for example, manage the socio-economic demands of their nation's social classes. Managing these demands requires economic development, and this incentivises behaviours such as economic imperialism, lobbying for new taxes or tariffs, and formal trade agreements between nations. The gameplay of *Victoria 3*, focusing on the historical objectives of the era, ensures that its procedural rhetoric intuitively teaches the player about the era. However, in *Civilization VII*, the modern metanarrative leads to the game's procedural rhetoric reinforcing modern values, rather than the historical perspectives of the depicted civilisations. A player in *Civilization VII* will be focusing on the production efficiency of various points throughout the game, even when these points, and their collection are not reflective of the values of the historical era. For example, A game of *Civilization VII* may have a player controlling medieval-era Normans and directing it toward rapid scientific advancement through the construction of educational facilities for the purpose of gaining a technological advantage over neighbouring civilisations. This is a case of *Civilization*'s gameplay

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[149] Vrtacnik, "Grand Narratives," 92 and Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games" 1316.

incentivising players to behave in a way not necessarily reflective of actual history. While in an alternative history scenario, medieval Normans *may* have engaged in a centuries-long technological race to gain some advantage over neighbouring states, it would have had to be a result of specific historical circumstances. Yet, *Civilization* does not model the nuances which would lead to these different historical circumstances; it treats a modern conception of social progress as an absolute, transcending history. Consequently, divorced from any motivations grounded in their time periods, the behaviours of in-game civilisations and players controlling them are necessarily ahistorical.

This is not to say that all in-game civilisations behave the same; they don't. Rather, it is to say that their behaviour is ahistorical, as, absent any precedence for their behaviour, no historical context can be learned from the gameplay. Yet, where civilisations are portrayed as distinct, similar issues of ahistoricity emerge. In-game civilisations are given certain boosts to emulate attributes their historical counterparts are popularly known for. An example can be found with Britain who, like all civilisations, is given several unique buffs which it is known for historically. One is 'Pax Britannica,' which increases production efficiency in factories. Yet, while modelling a real historical construct, the game requires no prerequisite to be met, aside from the game having reached the year 1750, for Britain to unlock this buff. This divorces the concept of Pax Britannica from all historical context beyond the period in which it occurred.

Defenders of this abstracted portrayal of history may point out that the game does not seriously expect viewers to believe historical development is as oversimplified as portrayed in the game. Rather, this portrayal can be understood to simply be depicting a caricature of historical civilisations, rather than a substantial portrayal of them at any given point in time. However, this defence is pedagogically questionable. The *Civilization* series' story is of civilisational development throughout human history, and so failing to depict how civilisations develop uniquely beneficial attributes seems to run contrary to this story's key themes. Further, on a pedagogical level, a historical depiction's pedagogical effectiveness is limited if one is unable to connect causation to the history being portrayed.

Writing in *Gaming History: A Framework for What Video Games Teach About the Past*, Scott Metzger and Richard Paxton note significant issues in existing gamified depictions of history. *They* warn that gamification often prioritises gameplay over historical depiction, "seeking less to teach what is known to the player than to make the player comfortable."[150] They warn that players with limited historical knowledge may be unable to recognise generalisations as academically sound versus reductionist and fantastical.[151] This insight is significant as, within *Civilization VII*, the plethora of historical generalisations, combined with a contemporary worldview which many players may already accept uncritically, falters in creating a pedagogically sound environment for engaging with a given game's portrayal of history. Absent historical context for many of these generalisations, such as the aforementioned Pax Britannica, even insightful players are unable to learn about the historical causality which informed what history is depicted.

Conclusion

Shawn Graham argues that

"If the process of history is composed of both selection (of facts) and assembly (of a convincing and sound narrative), then the kind of assembly that a video game allows is both good history and good pedagogy because the player actively constructs (reads) 'history as a process' rather than grand narrative."[152]

This perspective provides valuable insights into why contemporary, rather than historical, metanarratives are so uniquely damaging. The historical metanarrative is not the assembled narrative of historical facts; it is among the historical facts being presented to the player. Meanwhile, a contemporary metanarrative does not allow players to learn history because the 'assembly' has already occurred. In the case of *Civilization VII*, there can be no reflection on how a society should advance through

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[150]Metzger and Paxton, "Gaming History," 556.
[151]Metzger and Paxton, "Gaming History," 557.
[152] Graham, Shawn. "Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games." In *Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning*, edited by Jack Dougherty and Tennyson O'Donnell, 151. University of Michigan Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sxgk.18.

history, because the game already tells players what is optimal through gameplay constructs such as the technology tree. Even on a historiographical level, analysing *Civilization*'s portrayal of history is impossible without external reference, as procedural rhetoric ensures the entire game world conforms to its contemporary lens. This is in contrast to a game grounded in historical perspective, where one may learn about what was emphasised within that historical perspective. This ensures that, regardless of the validity of a historical perspective, at a minimum, players are learning about history in that they are understanding the historical views of people living in the past.

Further, *Civilization VII*'s insistence that optimal societal development universally follows a Western model of progress, regardless of historical or situational context, leads to significant ahistorical tendencies. These stem from the game's disinterest in portraying the unique historical systems that actually shaped social development. Instead, its lens presents history as a deterministic march through the centuries, inevitably culminating in the present day. This metahistorical portrayal divorces the game's world from any real historical context, resulting in an ironically ahistorical *historical simulation*. This situation is noted by Robin Wells, who states "one of the problems with a presentist view of history is that comparative judgement becomes impossible."[153]

In short, the pedagogical limitations of *Civilization VII* are largely a consequence of its contemporary framing. Firstly, because the specific framing is disinterested in portraying the mechanics of historical causality, it only depicts the chain of causality as it occurred. This leads to players being unable to interpret historical development while playing a game about that very thing. Secondly, by adopting a contemporary view of history, the game necessarily emulates contemporary views, leading to the game's procedural rhetoric teaching a modern, disputed understanding of history rather than history itself. This second point is not necessarily an issue if one supports the game's worldview, but it does necessarily limit the effectiveness of the game's potential scope as it is inherently tied to a contemporary worldview of history, rather than to history more directly. Continuing into this study's final chapter, we will synthesise insights gathered

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[153] Wells, "Historicism and 'Presentism," 52.

from each case study to cement an overarching takeaway regarding how the strategy game genre may adopt certain practices to teach history more effectively.

Chapter V: Summary and Reflections

Key Observations

This study's analysis of three games in the strategy genre has affirmed, refined, and expanded on existing theories of game design. Passively, the coherent utilisation of gamification, procedural rhetoric, and the scholarly game, without finding any areas of contradiction between them, further strengthens their collective validity as conceptual tools for game design. General claims made by these concepts have similarly been further validated through analysis of the case studies, a notable example being procedural rhetoric's central claim, that games enforce their perspectives onto players through simulated logic. This affirmation is important as, due to their limited utilisation in game analysis and lack of explicitly confirmed utilisation by game studios, their validity is largely theoretical.

In addition to verifying these concepts, expansions have been made. Most notably, the scholarly games' claim that games should be based on historical perspectives and objectives has been refined. This study has found that games should adopt a specific perspective of a historical era, and that the perspective chosen necessarily shapes the range of pedagogically effective historical portrayals. A more universal scope, such as the Marxist lens of *Victoria 3,* provides a wide scope. Meanwhile, *Crusader Kings 3*, which focuses on the perspectives of medieval rulers, gives a more humanised and personal experience, at the cost of a more limited scope of presentation. *Civilization VII* illustrates that while a contemporary lens may be used as a framing device for a historical presentation, it can lead to contortions in history to fit a modern narrative, and is liable to become presentist.

Insofar as this study creates a new framework from these observations, it can be understood as follows: Games should frame their presentation around historical perspectives relevant to the time period. These perspectives should accurately portray the nuances of the primary focus of a game's simulation. Where a game's focus is broad, a more universal worldview may be warranted as a framing device. Conversely, where the focus is narrower, the perspective may shift to that of an individual social caste's lived experience. When depicting aspects of history outside the primary focus,

careful steps should be taken to ensure authenticity without contorting these historical facts to fit into the game's central perspective. When contortion would be necessary for a substantial depiction, a more limited portrayal is warranted.

Areas for Further Exploration

While the specific case studies chosen vary greatly in their approaches to both game design and historical presentation, they still only represent a small, if influential, part of the strategy game genre. While there are clear, notable distinctions between *Crusader Kings III* and *Victoria 3*, their development by the same game studio suggests underlying commonalities which may not be transferred across game studios. In tandem, while *Civilization VII* reveals issues with a contemporary framing of history, further case studies may verify if this is an inherent flaw which is inevitable when using a contemporary frame or if these shortcomings may be circumvented. Further qualitative research utilising other strategy games from other game studios, such as entries into the *Total War* and *Age of Empires* series, could further refine key observations made in this paper. Similarly, this paper's suggestion of a historical perspective improving historicity could be applied outside the strategy genre entirely. Games in other genres, such as *Assassin's Creed,* may be analysed concerning how a contemporary versus historical perspective influences audience understanding of the historical era. Taking case studies which have varying budgets and scales of production could provide insights into how monetary restraints may affect the optimal lens a historical game utilises. Broadly, knowledge of the pedagogical utility of strategy games, and games in general, could benefit from further case studies utilising the insights which were both used by, and made from this study.

Another possible area of scholarly expansion involves analysing how the presentation of historical perspectives may be better refined so that audiences can critically reflect on those perspectives. The chosen case studies showcase the power of procedural rhetoric, and *Crusader Kings 3* and *Victoria 3*, with their historical perspectives serving as the framework for the game's simulated logic, teach about the

views of people in that time. Yet while, say, *Victoria 3* accurately portrays a historically authentic, Eurocentric view of the Victorian era, the game does not provide many opportunities for players to directly reflect on, and form their own opinion of, this historical perspective. Players can not, through interaction with the in-game presentation, critically reflect on whether framing the Qing dynasty through the frame of 18th-century Western views is a fair portrayal. This is because the player, without the outside knowledge the game doesn't provide, has no way to reflect on whether they agree with the presented historical views. A possible answer may lie in portraying the edges of a historical perspective, to show the player the limits of the views of the time. *Victoria 3* depicts indigenous people, through decentralised nations, in a manner reflective of how the Western world interacted with and understood them. This portrayal is noticeably limited compared to their portrayal of other societies. This clear deviation in depth of presentation may signal to players that the lens the game utilises is necessarily limited and, thus, an unreliable narrator. There is great potential in further refining this unreliable narrator concept, as it can further invite players to critically reflect on such topics as the ideological biases of a worldview, even as they experience that worldview first-hand. This unreliable narrator framework could be developed into a conceptual model of historical presentation and significantly refine the pedagogy of strategy games.

Final reflections

This study has demonstrated that historical strategy games possess significant pedagogical potential when their design is grounded in period-appropriate worldviews, rather than imposed contemporary narratives. *Crusader Kings III* and *Victoria 3* demonstrate how aligning game mechanics with historical perspectives fosters intuitive, experiential learning, while *Civilization VII* reveals the limitations of contemporary meta-narratives and presentist framings of history. The effectiveness of these games as educational tools is contingent on their ability to simulate historical systems authentically, allowing players to engage with history through experiential learning. However, challenges remain in balancing scope with depth, avoiding biases in historical

framing, and encouraging critical reflection on the historical perspectives presented. Future development in the genre should prioritize intentional design that not only replicates historical worldviews but also invites players to question and contextualize them. By doing so, strategy games can further develop, not only as mediums of entertainment, but as powerful tools for historical pedagogy and public engagement.

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Legacy of Persia (57% positive from 581 reviews).

https://store.steampowered.com/app/2313540

Roads to Power (84% positive from 1,946 reviews).

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