

Ideological Narratives of Play in *Tropico 4* and *Crusader Kings II*

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ABSTRACT

Ideology and its function in digital games has received considerable scholarly interest in the field of game studies, though only more recently has criticism interested itself with the ideological implications of game mechanics in conjunction with a game's representational content. Relying on an Althusserian definition of ideology, this paper builds upon the existing methodology of procedural rhetoric to examine the ideological functions of serious games, before addressing the necessity for a process of ideological analysis suited to the vast majority of commercial digital games. Through the close study of two games, *Tropico 4* (Haemimont Games 2011) and *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio 2012), and the examination of their representational components, the game mechanics they deploy, and the emergent narratives that unfold during play, this paper works to lay the foundations for an analytical framework designed for the close ideological reading and analysis of popular digital games.

Keywords

Ideology, procedural, narrative, play, simulation

INTRODUCTION

Exploration of ideology in digital games is not a new phenomenon, and over the past two decades game studies critics have thoroughly discussed and analysed the overtly representational ideologies communicated in and around games, notably in regards to representations of gender (Cassel and Jenkins 1998, Beasley and Collins Standley 2002, Carr 2006) and race (Leonard 2006, Everett 2009). With the debate between narratologists and ludologists drawing towards a desirable synthesis and the field of game studies arriving at a broader, more inclusive critical view of what digital games are and what they can do, so too can the analysis of the ideological workings of digital games evolve to the next level. The work of researchers like Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca, both of them also game designers, has been ground-breaking in developing our

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understanding of the ways in which digital games convey ideology through overt representational means as well as through conscious design choices made during their development and specific interfaces and game mechanics given to the players. Increased awareness of such methods has broadened the potential uses of digital games, notably in the field of serious games, designed for activist, political, or corporate purposes. These explorations of the ideological potential of digital games cover two extremes of the medium's capacities, on the one hand primarily concerned with the overt representational schema of games, and on the other with the means by which digital games can become persuasive, didactic, or propagandistic. Theoretical and practical design concepts such as Ian Bogost's articulation of "procedural rhetoric", or Gonzalo Frasca's explorations of the ideological potential of the simulation, place considerable emphasis on the various methods and techniques at a game designer's disposal to craft the ideological content of a game. Though the definition of procedural rhetoric seeks to apply to the varied ways in which all games convey persuasive or emotional content to their player, the concept only partially approaches the complex, pre-existing ideological relationships between game creators, their games, and the players who interact with them. This is particularly true in the context of an Althusserian understanding of ideology where each of these actors plays a part in the subjectifying process of interpellation by ideologies and, in turn, participates in their propagation. At the heart of these complex relationships is the act of play itself. By looking closely at the ideological narratives of play through their base components, the specific mechanics deployed in a game, we can begin to understand the way in which games that have no overt, designer-driven ideological agenda can still contain within them the mechanics that provoke in the players an engagement with ideological content, and which define the specific interpellative methods of digital games. In doing so, we seek to establish the foundations for an analytical framework aimed at the close study of discrete game mechanics' ideological significance, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of game's ideological narratives of play. In this instance, the term "ideological narrative of play" is defined broadly as the sequence of events taking place during a session of play which shape the player's reactions to and understanding of the game's explicit and implicit ideologies. The examination of such narratives of play is what can reveal the ideological depth of commercial games which, unlike serious games, do not seek to prioritize the spread of overt ideological content. To sketch out the beginning of a framework by which these ideological narratives of play might be rigorously analysed, we will take the example of two recent strategy games, *Tropico 4* (Haemimont Games 2011) and *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio 2012). Both games rely on historical backdrops as the foundations for their settings, respectively a Caribbean archipelago from the start of the Cold War to the present day, and Medieval Europe, North Africa and the Middle-East from the 11th to the 15th century. Through differences in emergent narratives, game mechanics, and the player's modes of interaction with these games, we will show how these two games deploy quite different techniques for player engagement, which result in quite distinct ideological narratives of play.

ALTHUSSERIAN IDEOLOGY

Beginning any discussion on ideology can only benefit not from an extensive overview of the evolution of the concept through the ages, but rather to a better understanding of its articulation by French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. Althusser articulates ideology as the representation of the imaginary relationships between individuals and their conditions of existence, or more specifically the relations of production and the relations that derive from them (1984, 39). These imaginary relations are what cause the distortions that take place in ideology, where referents may and do differ considerably from their ideological

representation. Furthermore, Althusser argues that ideology itself is a pervasive and permanent phenomenon, one that is “omni-historical” (1984, 35). Despite this, successive incarnations of ideology change over time, embodied within the material practices of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as religious, educational, familial, legal, political, or cultural ISAs (1984, 17). Despite the existence of these ISAs, ideology exists primarily for and because of each and every subject, who is never free from the interpellating power that ideologies have and which make him or her their subject, as much as they make him or her an actor in the spread and persistence of these ideologies (1984, 45-47). Interpellation is best understood as the capacity for an ideology to hail an individual subject, catching their attention and by doing so integrating them within the set parameters of said ideology. Thus every subject is permanently engaged with ideological processes: either they internalize them and function according to the accepted practices of the ISAs around them, or they become subjected to the equally material repressive State apparatuses, namely the police or the justice system, which enforce ideological conformity on subjects who do not function “by themselves” as expected (1984, 55). As Bogost notes in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Althusser's analysis of ideology and its functions was later developed by theorists Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Bogost also makes the claim that digital games are particularly suited for visualising the ideological distortions that Althusser posits as a primary determining component of all ideology, and political games in particular:

Videogames that engage political topics codify the logic of a political system through procedural representation. By playing these games and unpacking the claims their procedural rhetorics make about political situations, we can gain an unusually detached perspective on the ideologies that drive them (Bogost 2010, 75).

Given the Althusserian notion of every individual being a subject constantly being interpellated, such a detached viewpoint from which to examine ideologies would indeed be priceless in understanding their effect upon us, and how they might distort our perceptions of the real, an advantage which the procedural capacities of digital games provides.

PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

The concept of procedural rhetoric articulated by Ian Bogost is one that underpins his exploration of the ideological potential for digital games, and serious games in particular, be they for political or activist purposes. For Bogost, procedural rhetoric is a new type of rhetorical discourse, intrinsically tied into the rule and procedure-based workings of the computer (and, by extension, of digital games), rife with potential ideological use, calling it “the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular” (2010, 3). Notably, this definition puts procedural rhetoric in firmly within the context of digital media, and therefore in opposition to previous media and other methods for persuading consumers and audiences. Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric is also close to Gonzalo Frasca's earlier articulation of simulation, where simulation is understood as an alternative to narrative (2003, 6). Frasca argues that whereas the closed system of a traditional narrative is limited in representing the potential for political change, a simulation offers its designer more tools to depict how such change may come about, or how likely it is for change to happen (2003, 6). Both Bogost and Frasca, as noted earlier, have designed games as well as researched them. They have also,

individually or working together, put their theories of procedural rhetoric and simulation to practice with serious games that explore how best to use game mechanics to expose certain ideologies. A notable example would be the games produced by NewsGaming, and Frasca's *September 12th* (NewsGaming, 2003). In the latter, the player controls an American bomber overlooking a Middle-eastern city, populated by inhabitants and the occasional terrorists, who can be killed only by slow, inaccurate bombardment which causes considerable collateral damage. In the aftermath of these bombings, the surviving bystanders mourn the dead innocents, and out of their number new terrorists spring, perpetuating the cycle of violence. As Aaron Delwiche notes, the game's strength does not lie in its rudimentary graphics or systems, but rather in the interaction between the game's content and the player: "The persuasive power of this simulation rests on the interactive loop between the player and the game itself" (2007, 102). Delwiche's comment underpins and supports Bogost's definition of procedural rhetoric, which in large part relies upon the analysis and creation of serious and political games.

Nevertheless, in a game like *September 12th*, the simulation aspects are limited to the player's potential for either destructive action or appeasing passivity, which severely limits his or her agency. This lack of agency for the player is part of Frasca's ideological goal in making this game, procedural rhetoric in this instance being deployed to represent the quandary posed by a specific geopolitical configuration, in this case the "War on Terror". In this, *September 12th* compares to games like Molleindustria's *Unmanned* (Molleindustria 2012), where the player is placed in the role of a US Air Force drone pilot. At the heart of this game's procedural rhetoric is the stark contrast between the tedium of the pilot's daily routine and the implicit heroism often associated with military duty or the glorification thereof. Further contrast is provided between the player character's management of his everyday life and the destructive capacities of the drone warfare that he is an active participant in. A split screen is used to potent effect in order to juxtapose the elements of duality in the protagonist's daily life. Additionally, the simple mouse-based control scheme applies to every element of the pilot's simulated life, from shaving to bombing live targets, further reinforcing this overlap between virtual and everyday violence and tedium. This intentional and striking dissonance echoes the almost indiscriminate destruction that is given to the player to practice in *September 12th*. The scope of Frasca's game is not to posture on all the complexities of the War on Terror, but to heighten the player's awareness of the cyclical nature of its violence, just as *Unmanned's* goal is to critique the implications of drone warfare on the individuals that are tasked with conducting it. Through their narrow rhetorical and ideological scopes, these games provide basic units for understanding the principles and the potential efficacy of procedural rhetoric as a design tool for games with a political agenda.

In addition to serious games, procedural rhetoric is a framework that is at its most evident in didactic or propagandistic games. *America's Army* (United States Army 2002), produced by the United States Army, was initially developed as a combat simulation game striving for realism in the representation of combat missions and military training, and designed as a recruiting tool. A notable characteristic of the game is the existence of a multiplayer mode where both sides view themselves and their team as the US soldiers, and the enemy team as the terrorist, through a permutation of the character models (Bogost 2007, 78; Konzack 2009, 39). This unwillingness to have any game produced by the US Military situating a player in the place of one of the United States' enemies efficiently shows that *America's Army* is above all a piece of political propaganda (Delwiche 2007, 92; Konzack 2009, 39). Also interesting in this respect are clones of this game or type of game genre, which reverse the ideological perspective while retaining

something of the procedural rhetoric of the politically charged, if not propagandist, shooter game: Syrian game *Under Ash* (Dar Al-Fikr 2001) and *Special Force* (Hezbollah 2003), released by the Lebanese Hezbollah (Delwiche 2007, 91-92; Galloway 2004). As Alexander Galloway notes, by placing the player in the position of, respectively, a Palestinian during the intifada and a Lebanese Islamic fighter, these games affect a reversal of *America's Army* ideological premise, be it only cosmetically in the case of *Special Force*, or on deeper, more ideologically significant terms in *Under Ash*, where violence against civilians is penalized and the realities of the conflict and its impact on civilian populations is emphasized (2004).

What of games, however, where foregrounding didactic, educational, or propagandistic content is not a priority for the developers, the publishers, or the consumers? Though procedural rhetoric and the strength of the simulation in creating an ideological narrative of play are, as we have seen, demonstrably useful when designers set out with the goal to create games where such rhetoric is front and centre, this does not negate the ideological potential of commercial games that do not set out with didactic aims. By looking at the specific parameters of representational elements, time, player embodiment, and player choices, we will begin to understand the mechanisms behind the creation of each game's dominant ideological narrative of play.

REPRESENTATIONAL ELEMENTS: HISTORICAL GROUNDING

Both *Tropico 4* and *Crusader Kings II* are situated within specific historical contexts, drawn from or inspired by history. These two games can thus be seen to rely in part on what Alexander Galloway calls “proto-realism” (2004), which some games seek out to perform often necessary social critique. However, both games can also be said to avoid the ideological forthrightness of games like *America's Army* and its successors, which wear their ideological affiliations in connection with this “proto-realism” on their sleeves, and which we can find deeply embedded within their every theme, setting, and design. *Tropico 4*'s overt approach to its own historical background is mediated through the lens of parody, satire, and caricature, with every nation, faction, and their respective representatives treated in an irreverent and knowing manner, a trademark of the game series. *Crusader Kings II* takes itself and its period more seriously, while still leaving some space for emergent comedy as we will discuss later. Paradox's game intends to represent the grim reality of that period of history, and yet the game's ideological content is not foregrounded either as an intended educational or didactic objective. For these games' predecessors in the strategy and grand strategy genres, such as the *Civilization* series or the *Europa Universalis* series, William Uricchio suggests that the use of historical simulation encourages “a more abstract, theoretical engagement of historical process” (2005, 330). Unlike their predecessors, however, both these games deploy methods of player engagement that leads to this theoretical engagement becoming fully realized and concrete, rather than abstract and theoretical. The simulation mechanics featured in these games bring the player to recreate and reconstitute ideological and political forms of the period through the act of play. In the case of either game, one must look deeper than surface themes or apparent mechanics to understand this ideological potential.

Both of these games deploy considerable resources in order to set themselves squarely within the context of the historical periods they seek to represent or parody. *Tropico 4* is not only a banana-republic simulator focused primarily on city building and population management much like its three predecessors, it is a banana-republic simulator initially

set during the Cold War. The setting's thinly veiled resemblance to Cuba is all the more transparent by the prominent presence of the USA and USSR in the game, thematically as well as mechanically. Both superpowers intervene to assist, providing foreign aid to the player's growing nation, but can also interfere as potential enemies. By proxy, they also act as regulators of the decisions the player makes when building up the island and caring for its people. As its title suggests, *Crusader Kings II* is a grand strategy game covering the period from 1066 to 1453, at the high-time of the Crusades. Mechanics simulating the Crusades are only a fragment of the simulation's scope, the game also featuring dynastic and realm management, military and cultural expansion, and religious conflicts. Furthermore, both games rely heavily on the players as ideological subjects and the context in which the games are experienced as cultural objects. The caricatures that depict the foreign leaders and national faction heads in *Tropico 4* rely on the players' knowledge of history and politics as much as on their appreciation for popular culture and humour. As shown below, the portrait of Marco Moreno, the rebel leader who occasionally plagues the islands of Tropicco, is plainly a caricature of Che Guevara, while US Senator and eventual president Nick Richards needs little introduction (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Marco Moreno, Rebel Leader, and Nick Richards, US Senator

A considerable amount of the game's humorous ambitions hinges upon the presupposition that the player has the necessary cultural and historical grounding to recognize the stereotypes of the sultry Russian KGB agent on one hand and the overbearing, aggressive American ambassador on the other. The game relies upon this knowledge and therefore the player's status as subject to the representational, social, and cultural ideologies surrounding the Cold War, in part to enhance its comedic value. This reliance upon the player's pre-existing ideological awareness also serves to further ground the game historically and ideologically within its period, as seen from the vantage of a post-Cold War world. Though a comedic angle is not necessarily incompatible with realist or semi-

realist social critique, the humour of *Tropico 4*'s setting does not affect the realism of the simulation. While the game's campaign features incongruous situations, such as diverting the course of a nuclear missile by building a high number of wind turbines, the individual components of the island all work as realistically as they can within an only moderately stylized simulation. Citizens require housing, go to work, have needs such as food, healthcare, and entertainment, and the game models population density, crime rates, pollution, and many more realistic criteria common in city management games. This is the "congruence requirement" that Galloway argues is necessary for realism, or proto-realism, in digital games, and without which the potential for social critique of realism would be unachievable (2004). Indeed, this functional coexistence between satire on one hand and realistic simulation on the other is a key factor in opening up the ideological potential of the game beyond its overt components.

Comedy is less overtly forthcoming in *Crusader Kings II*, though the game was advertised in part by a series of short comedic promotional videos based around the seven deadly sins which feature as traits that characters, playable and non-playable alike, can possess (Paradox Interactive 2011). Evidently much less satirical than *Tropico 4* in its representation of the time period it simulates, what these videos showcase is the emergent comedy that underlies much of the gameplay in Paradox's game. When present, comedy serves to further underline the grim realism of the game's setting. This takes place for instance when the player is placed in the role of a noble yet too young to rule, and whose ambitious regent tries numerous times to assassinate in increasingly desperate ways. Speaking to Rowan Kaiser, the game's project lead and designer, Henrik Fåhraeus nevertheless notes that *Crusader Kings II*'s most outstanding features are present out of a desire to model a historical reality: "Of course, we wanted intrigue and vicious backstabbing in Crusader Kings II, since it was so sordidly common in real medieval history" (Kaiser 2013, 1). Despite the game's overtly grand strategic view of history and geography, the game's commitment to historical accuracy as modelled through simulation is what creates the most interesting aspects of its ideological narrative of play. Just as *Tropico 4* relies on players' expectations and knowledge of the Cold War, *Crusader Kings II* also uses players' expectations and familiarity with the simulated period's culture to further establish its proto-realism. Notably, every character modelled in the game is characterized by a number of strengths and flaws, chief among which are their virtues and vices, adapted from the seven deadly sins and seven heavenly virtues of Christian doctrine. By mirroring the period's deeply religious cultural and political practices by way of specific game mechanics, *Crusader Kings II* seeks to enhance its own verisimilitude and historical veracity through the remediation of ideological concepts into the experience of play. In doing so, it contributes to establishing a portion of the ideological background which the player is invited to participate in, and become a subject of. Alongside numerous other personality traits, family history, and religious and cultural affiliations, these sins or virtues also affect inter-personal relationships, affecting aspects of the simulation ranging from the respect of a courtier for his liege to the affection of a queen for her husband, or even dictate the likelihood of conflict between two feudal lords, the chance of rebellion, or even the risk of being assassinated. Careful selection and prioritization of these traits becomes an essential facet for the player to manage. These are but a few examples of how each individual action and decision that the player makes on his path towards optimization contains an ideological implication. These serve as building blocks towards reconstituting the simulated ideology of the period, and opportunity for reflection thereupon.

TIME: FICTIONAL, FLEXIBLE

In contrast to the careful work of historical grounding that represents the majority of the representational work they perform, these two games prominently feature fictional time as a key game mechanic. Respectively spanning decades and centuries, *Crusader Kings II* and *Tropico 4* employ this fictional time to allow the player to progress through the chronologically linear structure of the game. Jesper Juul describes fictional time as an important factor in the half-reality of games, particularly when the relationship of game time to play time is altered or alterable (2011, 143; 159). In both examples, time can be paused at will, but it can also be set to progress at a relatively slow pace, or to move so fast that days, weeks, even years pass by within seconds, effectively allowing the player to “jump ahead” or “freeze time”. This mechanic is an important contributing factor to the ideological detachment that Bogost argued is one of the advantages of procedural rhetoric (2010, 75). As the player is not restrained by the pace of the game, but rather controls it and can speed through at his own peril, both games' sense of historicity is put into better perspective. Furthermore, fictional time is highly significant in examining ideological narratives of play because it allows the player to enact specific policies or choose particular courses of action with ideological implications, but also to see the consequences of such a decision. The expanded time span and the player's unhindered control over its progression adds further credibility to the simulation by reinforcing the significance of the discrete choices made by the player and their ideological significance. As time unfolds and new choices are made available, the aftereffects of earlier decisions are still affecting play. This chronological continuity therefore contributes towards making the player accountable for their decisions to themselves, and not to a more-or-less arbitrary morality system determined by the game. The outcome of the player's actions remains determined by the set rules and parameters of the simulation, which could be said to form a moral logic within the game. However, the game world must remain consistent for the player to be actively engaged with it, even if it does not need to be entirely transparent. This consistency implicitly makes the player feel solely responsible for the outcome of his or her actions. In reality, of course, the predetermined nature of any digital games' rules system will always contain some elements of bias. However, if these outcomes are predictable and replicable, or avoidable if undesired, then the player will accept his responsibility as the generator of the primary input which led to that specific outcome. This has the potential of creating a reflective loop, allowing the player to acquire more knowledge and expertise about the game systems and the parameters of the simulations, but also to actively engage with their choices and their ideological implications in a very concrete manner.

Furthermore, this apparent flexibility of the games' fictional time is lacking one important dimension – it is impossible in both games to reverse time. Overlooking the meta-mechanic of loading a save game, which cannot be said to fit within the same logic of a game's fictional time, this inability to go back has considerable ideological implications. Indeed, these games give the players all the tools to see the outcome of their actions, but not the means to reverse them by changing past choices. Though a player may choose to start a new game session, within the framework of a single discrete session, a player's chronological progression is restrained towards the future. It could be said that this participates in further establishing the verisimilitude of the game world. However, the player's inability to control time in this way also participates in the reflective loop involved in making the player have to handle the immutable consequences of his past actions, both in real time and within the fictional time of the game.

EMBODIMENT: ONE AGAINST MANY

Tropico 4 and *Crusader Kings II* take particular care to model individuals, even if not every character modelled as such is significant. It is in this aspect of the simulation that we may begin to perceive the mechanics responsible for the different ideological narratives of play offered in these two games. On the island of *Tropico*, every citizen has individual needs and faction sympathies, which vary depending upon player decisions, actions, and the availability of certain services or facilities, and can become part of and form families of other Tropicans. This modelling of families is also very much present in the Europe of *Crusader Kings II*, where entire dynasties ranging from Emperors to Barons are rendered by AI agents, unlocking considerable potential for positive and negative interactions between all levels of rule. The player is a limited omniscient actor in both games, embodied by the avatar of “El Presidente” and a series of nobles descended from whichever historical character the player initially chose in *Crusader Kings II*. These avatars are vulnerable, despite the player's near-omnipotence within the limits and parameters of the simulated game world. This combination of limited omniscient perspective and embodiment serves the dual purpose of respectively empowering the player and creating attachment to the avatars. Rather than being a faceless, God-like being, this embodied omnipotence renders the choices and decisions the players make all the more meaningful, and their avatar's power, or impotence, all the more viscerally engaging.

Despite these similarities in the embodiment of the player characters, the two games differ at the intersection between what Jesper Juul calls the games' “fictions” (2011, 21), the representation of non-player characters in the simulation, and the player's own drive to succeed at the game. In *Tropico 4*, the combination of these factors drives a player towards finding a way to please as many of the island's citizens as they can, despite the dictatorial potential for the Caribbean archipelago and its ruler. Meanwhile, in *Crusader Kings II* the ruthless intrigue, backstabbing and forced marriage mechanics at the player's disposal create an ideological narrative of play where religion matters only for its political implications, family is only worth expanding to secure one's dynasty, and where assassination, conspiracies and bloodthirsty ruthlessness are not only desirable, but essential methods and qualities that the player needs to hone to survive and ultimately succeed at the game.

On one of the many islands of *Tropico*, the player is El Presidente, embodied by a customizable avatar that can either be male or female, with varying appearances, personalities, and backgrounds, ranging from a tyrannical right-wing dictator to a peacefully elected, left-wing author. These backgrounds provide the player with certain modifiers in their relations with the numerous factions that make up the Tropic population, foreign powers, or give an advantage to the island's economy, or any other number of factors. More importantly, however, they also add a certain dimension of role-play to the player's incarnation of El Presidente. Once on the island, the player is presented with a limited starting budget with which to start developing his or her island. It is here that the ideological narrative of play comes veritably into effect, once the player is immersed within the satirical Cold War environment of the island of *Tropico*. Within the game world, starting conditions and player choices have very real implications for the running of the island, potentially provoking the dissatisfaction of any of the eight factions and their members with your decisions. Attempting to deal with this dissatisfaction incentivises the growth of your economy, if only to provide housing and health services to your population. The bird's eye view of the island combined with the player's

possibility to zoom in on each individual citizen provides the option for closer insight into the everyday lives of each modelled citizen. Despite this level of detail, however, in the act of play itself, one rarely finds oneself paying too close attention to the everyday lives of ordinary Tropicans, unless one is looking for a criminal to arrest. In this singular aspect, *Tropico 4* comes closest to accurately modelling the relationship between a dictator and his subjects, no matter how willing they are to keep him in power and how enlightened or benevolent his policies might be. While they exist largely as faceless numbers on a sheet, or small sprites walking the streets and clogging up the island's roads, the determining factor of the ideological narrative of play is the need to keep even these dehumanized masses happy, regardless of their specific proclivities.

In contrast to *Tropico 4*'s dehumanized modelling of the population, *Crusader Kings II* injects humanity and more nuanced modelling into the game mechanics of the grand strategy genre which is otherwise mostly devoid of human elements. Paradox's game assigns individual traits to player and non-player characters, and bases much of the game's dynamic political and familial systems upon these traits and their respective affinities. In doing so, every modelled character becomes an important cog within the greater simulation, and the player learns to value and monitor these individualized traits. This embodiment of both the player and the non-player characters, all characterised by the same flaws and strengths, not only creates engaging interpersonal play, but also conveys the fundamental importance of such interpersonal relationships, adversarial as they might be, within the context of a feudal society. Evidence of this type of visceral engagement can be found in player commentary of the game, and most of these accounts or write-ups take the form of personalised narratives that simply recount the inherently dramatic outcomes of a session of play in *Crusader Kings II* (Kaiser 2012, Sands 2013, Goodfellow 2012). What these narratives of play put forward is a good overview of the game's ruthless artificial intelligence and the equally ruthless actions a player must take in order to succeed in the game. They also all reflect the same kind of player engagement with the game world and its ideology. More importantly, despite the tales of failure and betrayal, players' enjoyment of these stories and their part in them is evident in the effort put into composing these write-ups, as well as their online dissemination. This concordance between game systems and the ideological frameworks of feudal Europe is effective in creating compelling gameplay. It also participates in the better assimilation by the player of the game's dominant ideological narrative of play due to the player's embodiment within the game is placed alongside NPCs that are placed on an almost equal footing.

PLAYER CHOICES: CARROT VS. STICK

Though *Tropico 4* gives numerous options for El Presidente to be a tyrant, primarily in the form of edicts which, for example, allow for the suppression of liberties or the enforcement of religious doctrine, the player's primary concern as guided by the game's parameters is with winning the game. Optimizing the management of their island is the path to this outcome. The dictatorial options create strife, dissent, and unhappiness, leading in turn to higher disturbances and less productivity on the island. Though it is possible to select these options, they provide disadvantages rather than advantages, and therefore go against what a player is most likely to choose in his or her need for optimization. The game therefore drives the player behind El Presidente to create a society where a majority, if not the totality, of factions represented in the population are satisfied with his rule, which means catering to everyone's needs. As Lars Konzack has noted, the classic city management game *SimCity* (Maxis 1989) has often been criticised

as a simulation of the ideology of consumerism (2009, 35). Like the eponymous city in *SimCity*, Tropicico must grow in order for its population to thrive. However, in *Tropico 4*, the importance of keeping the local population happy lest they vote you out or rebel against your rule means that as your economy grows, so must your services, from schools to hospitals, from better housing to more elaborate entertainment choices. Salaries must be raised to increase job satisfaction, which in turn directly increases productivity. In the end, the outcome of most *Tropico 4* games is not a dystopian hell of an island with its haves and have-nots, ruled by an iron-fisted military and a power-hungry dictator who finds large support in some factions, and generates open outrage from others. Nor is it a layered, pyramidal society where wide gaps in salaries are employed as an engine of mass-consumption. Rather, the optimal outcome is a socialist, if not outright communist, society, where salaries are high and equitable, housing is free and education, healthcare, and liberty are all rated as high as pollution is rated low.

The framework of the simulation at the heart of this game and its specific configurations therefore guide the player towards realizing that the happiness of the totality, rather than the mere majority, of these virtual citizens has a direct correlation with the player's success. Though the player is given the tools to be a tyrant, the tools to be a benevolent leader prove more efficient in securing the free, un-coerced approval of your island's citizens. Bridging somewhat that half-reality, and deploying a procedural rhetoric that is more a side-effect than a deliberate choice at the heart of its design, the dialogue between the game and its player steers this latter towards an ideologically charged narrative of play, which implies that socialist utopias are not that impossible to achieve after all. This utopian dimension is enhanced by the virtual time that allows the player to see the beneficial effects of such policies in the long run. This grants further credibility to a political alternative that the player ends up creating out of the sole drive of optimizing their island society based on the best parameters of the simulation. Despite the outwardly satirical treatment of the Cold War and its various extremes and factions, therefore, the ideological narrative of play in *Tropico 4* supports a coherent and potentially far-reaching reflection on possible systems of rule, brought together from each discrete and disparate decision made by the player. Not purely rhetorical, this ideological narrative relies as much on the player's own ideological sensitivities and awareness of the existence of this type of political utopia as it does upon the parameters of the game that make it achievable.

In "Cyber-Utopias: The Politics and Ideology of Computer Games", Tom Henthorne returns to the ideological significance of *SimCity*, but most importantly explores the potential of game-based cyber-utopias for opening up fields of ideological inquiry, discovery, and experimentation: "They are able to present positive, utopian visions of the future in a compelling manner, thereby enhancing their ideological impact" (2003, 75). Henthorne argues that this is something literary utopias are generally incapable of doing, which further enhances cyber-utopias' subversive potential. Indeed, in the domain of digital games as in other media, a suggestion such as the one seen in *Tropico 4* regarding the potential viability of a socialist/communist model for a happy society is remarkable, if not potently subversive. While *Tropico 4* borders on the utopian, however, a game like *Crusader Kings II* veers sharply in the opposite direction in its representation of a much earlier political period, the High to Late Middle Ages. The political skulduggery, incestuous family manipulations and constant risk of assassination, or merely a poorly timed death by injury or sickness pushes the player to be as ruthless as they can. Unlike in *Tropico 4*, where El Presidente's death means the end of the game, *Crusader Kings II* places the player in the skin of a dynasty rather than a single character. When your initial

character dies, you become this character's designated heir. If your character has no heir and dies, or his/her heir is not of the same dynasty, then the game is lost. This single aspect of the simulation is at the source of most of the game's challenges, and accurately represents the dynastic and familial pressures experienced among the nobility during this period of history, and which were inherent to the feudal system. For example, the negative trait "kinslayer" can be acquired if the player publicly executes or assassinates a close member of his current avatar's family, or is caught trying to kill them. However, the negative trait is not earned if an assassination is conducted in secret. Even killing relatives is thus not completely off the table in order to achieve one's goals, as long as it is done carefully. The possibility of infertility, the need to keep one's dynasty afloat with numerous heirs, the ambition of your vassals, and the many succession laws in existence in Europe at the time – all these mechanics combine to create an explosive and extremely volatile game environment, where the player's ruthlessness is rewarded, if not openly encouraged.

Unlike the utopian cast of *Tropico 4*'s ideological narrative of play, therefore, *Crusader Kings II* revisits the High and Late Middle Ages with a distinctively grim, if not outright dystopian view of the functioning of feudal politics, conveying the inherent misogyny, cruelty, and amorality of the period's underlying ideologies by having the player not only step in the shoes of a feudal lord, but also act out, on their own initiative, the ruthless crimes they must commit and callous judgments they must make in order to succeed in the game. Similarly to *Tropico 4*, the ideological narrative of play in Paradox's game is crafted from each discrete decision that the player makes throughout his successive incarnations. Indeed, the consequences of certain acts can still be felt centuries after the initial choice was made by the player, or after an event that was precipitated by the player's actions. Where the player's drive towards optimization in *Tropico 4* favoured the use of ultimately positive tools for progressive socio-economic change, the player in *Crusader Kings II* is driven by the ruthlessness of the AI and the parameters of the simulation to make use of every tool at his or her disposal, including the most barbaric. This situation is compounded by one of the game's most potent challenges: the player is, in a large way, playing against himself. A character will for instance seek to have a large pool of heirs to minimize the chances that he might die heirless. Yet once this initial character dies, the newly "inherited" character may have to face off against his numerous siblings, most of whom will have no qualms about pressing their lesser claims or assassinating their siblings. This additional dimension is defined less by the mechanics of the simulation than by the player's understanding of these mechanics, the internal logic of the simulated world, and his or her attempts to hedge their bets against the unforeseeable, arbitrary outcomes that are inherent to it. *Crusader Kings II*'s ideological narrative of play is therefore the stick to *Tropico 4*'s carrot. By providing only a bad option and an even worse one, Paradox's game channels the player towards enduring play that remains effectively challenging because the player is generating challenges for his future self, as a player and as a dynasty. That very few "good" choices, morally or ethically, are offered to players in the course of the game, and that the selection is more generally in shades of dark grey, serves as the foundation for an ideological narrative of play that does not fail to indict the injustices and tyranny of feudal governance, an indictment that can only truly be experienced through the act of play and the narratives that arise from it.

CONCLUSION

As with the communication of any ideology, the ideological narrative of play is an interaction between subjects. However, it becomes apparent upon detailed analysis of

experiences of play, through close examination of the game mechanics and simulation parameters that enable them, that the mediating agency of the game itself, understood as the act of playing, is very far from being a neutral factor. On the contrary, perhaps because of its nature as a highly collaborative cultural medium in its production, but also in large parts due to the combined pressures of players seeking to explore all potential facets of a simulation and designers seeking to maximize the appeal of their product by anticipating such demand, the very procedural nature of games renders them as much facilitators of challenging ideological narratives of play as they can be potential instruments for ideological control, subversion, or dissemination. Though a large part of the responsibility for which of these a game becomes is in the hands of the game creators, consciously or not, the mutual process of interpellation surrounding the digital game object also provides considerable ideological agency to the players. We would further argue that the two apparently conflicting ideological potentials can be, and have been, present simultaneously in certain games. Just before apportioning the bulk of this ideological responsibility to game developers, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter remark that games present the same potential for containing challenges to ideologies as cinema, music, or literature do (2009, 194). However, in such media, dominant ideologies often coexist with inherent criticisms of the same. Victorian popular fiction, to take only one example, can be read as promoting the ideology of Imperial expansion and colonialism, but also contains within it the seeds of self-criticism of those same systems it overtly promotes. Close analysis of ideological narratives of play makes it evident that this is also true for digital games, in particular ones that are not designed with activist, political, or didactic design strategies, but through which ideology is still inevitably conveyed. The existence of this potential for ideological fluidity in the complex interaction between player, designer, and game, which takes place through the act of play, can only truly be captured through the close analysis of narratives of play, as play is the ultimate realization of the game as a cultural object. Influenced at once by the context of their production, the circumstances of their consumption, and the procedural parameters of their simulations, digital games therefore embody the fluctuating relationship between authors and their audience, successful analysis of which must imperatively pass through close analysis of the mechanics of play. Through the further development of a framework concerned with the analysis of such discrete game components as representational elements, time, player embodiment, and player choices to examine these dominant ideological narratives of play, we may reach a better, broader understanding of the ideological functions and methods of all types of games, which may not only better shape their critique, but also potentially inform their design.

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