Conceptualizing Social and Political Conflict in Games: Hegemony, Agonism and the Post-Political in *Crusader Kings II*, *Democracy 3* and *SimCity*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most games use conflict—understood either as a competition between specific subjects, or more broadly as a player’s struggle with the game system in order to overcome its challenges and/or achieve the best score—as their core mechanic. Conflict is thus a very common theme of games: they often depict wars, revolutions, political struggles, or individual, character-based conflicts. Inevitably, these representations are intertwined with social and political discourses, and the interplay between the construction of these depictions and their ideological context is a vital field for cultural analysis.

The presentation aims to propose an interpretational framework for conflict in strategy and economy games, using the concepts developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The games chosen as examples – *Crusader Kings 2* (Paradox Development Studio 2012), *Democracy 3* (Positech Games 2013), and *SimCity* (Maxis 2013) – will be analyzed in terms of different constructions of hegemony (understood as a contingent, unstable space of political articulation integrated by discursive nodal points [Laclau, Mouffe 2001]) in the simulated societies. I will assess whether the conflicts are depicted in an antagonistic or agonistic mode as described by Mouffe (2005), and evaluate the depictions of society and their conflicts as political or post-political. The theoretical conclusions will be based on close reading of the games, aided by procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007).

*Crusader Kings II* is a complex strategy game set in the medieval Europe. The player assumes roles of consecutive rulers from a dynasty, and the game encourages to expand the realm ruled by the player, both through diplomatic means and military advances. While the game is centered around wars, starting one requires a legitimate *casus belli*, and is typically aimed at securing a specific goal rather than eradicating an enemy completely. Wars are justified by conflicts of interests rather than ethical claims and values (like personal revenge or national superiority), thus the opponents are depicted as equal adversaries respecting each other’s legitimacy rather than enemies that should be eliminated. This difference is characteristic for Mouffe’s distinction between agonism
and antagonism: the former allows for a common field of articulating specific interests and competing with other groups, while the latter divides a social space into friend/enemy and good/evil dichotomies (2005). In Crusader Kings II, the possibility of agonism is guaranteed by the hegemony of feudal order which serves as a commonly accepted framework. The possibility of religious wars (and of assuming roles of non-Christian rulers, enabled in the expansion packs), however, makes antagonistic modes of conflict more common.

Democracy 3 puts a player in a role of a leader of the ruling party in a modern democratic country. The aim is to manage the budget and policies; the game is continued when the player’s party is elected for the next term. In Democracy 3, various strategies and political ideologies may lead to success: the gameplay’s outcome is mapped on a two-dimensional chart of political ideologies. The bars of support of 21 voter groups are among the most important indicators during the gameplay. Usually, every decision pleases one group or more and displeases others. In Democracy 3 every voter belongs to more than one group, making their political affiliation complex and non-obvious; the size of the groups may also change over time. In Laclau’s and Mouffe’s terms, it can be described as overdetermination of subject positions: the field of identities which never manage to be fully fixed (Laclau, Mouffe 2001, 111). Field of discursivity of Democracy 3 is thus pluralistic and contingent; the game attempts to simulate a strongly political (in Mouffe’s terms [2005]) struggle. Even if elections depict a two-party system, multiple subject positions (and the choices given to the player) establish a relatively open model of politics.

SimCity, the latest installment of a city-building series, is seemingly similar to Democracy 3 in terms of player’s tasks of managing the budget and policies, and also offers insight into lives of particular citizens. However, despite being a fairly complex sandbox mainstream game, SimCity does not offer much of a political plurality; building and maintaining a city is a technocratic task, following the neoliberal logic. The fixation of the political discourses of the game is strengthened through certain design choices, such as the lack of mechanism of election for the mayor’s office, or the detached position of the player’s character in general. SimCity is thus a post-political game, in which the technocratic democracy pictures itself as the final, “obvious”, unquestionable system where the political conflict is marginalized (Mouffe 2005).

In the conclusion of the presentation I will outline the possibilities of applying this framework to genres other than strategy and simulation games.

BIBLIOGRAPHY