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Medievalism in Finland and Russia

Particularizing the Universal

8

Particularizing the universal

Medievalist constructions of cultural and religious difference in

Crusader Kings II

Jere Kyyrö

Introduction

This chapter analyses the representations of culture and religion in *Crusader Kings II*, a digital game developed by the Swedish developer Paradox Development Studio and published by Paradox Interactive. The main focus is on the ways in which the game system (including the game rules, graphical representation and naming of game concepts) works to produce an effect and a feel of particular cultures and religions in a medieval setting, and how digital games should be approached as cultural products. Special attention is paid to representations of Northern Europe. My argument is that through a process of ‘particularization’, which is at some points superficial, apparently different cultures and religions are represented as fundamentally similar. This type of particularization not only results from the programming paradigm the game engine builds on, but especially from the cultural presuppositions and metamediavalist conceptions held by the game designers, which lead to quite different areas and populations being moulded to follow similar paths of

development. These presuppositions and conceptions include the projection of modern national states – along with other contrafactual or modern reconstructed entities, such as a medieval ‘Kingdom of Finland’ or neopagan groups – on the past, as well as the so-called world religions paradigm. As part of the contemporary popular cultural medieval imaginary, the game provides a platform for imagining the origins of the present religio-cultural situation, alternative historical developments and religious and cultural change in general.¹

Crusader Kings II is a grand strategy game set in medieval Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Downloaded by more than two million players,² the game has various add-ons, and its sequel, *Crusader Kings III*, was released in September 2020. The game is thus an example of a successful medievalist popular cultural product. The add-ons have expanded the original release’s game map to include parts of Central, South, South-East and East Asia. It is, according to Adam Chapham, an open-ontological game, which does not tie the player to strict historical narratives, but nevertheless uses framing goals and particular events that encourage the player to adapt his/her ludonarrative (i.e. the actual narrative unfolding through the gameplay) towards real historical events, simultaneously allowing the enactment of contrafactual ludonarratives.³

As A. Martin Wainwright points out, *Crusader Kings II* is more individual-centred than most state-oriented games in the grand strategy genre.⁴ This is in line, however, with the dynastic and non-nationalist nature of medieval power structures.⁵ After all, the objective in the game is to keep the player’s dynasty alive and in power, as the player controls one character at a time and, ultimately, a dynastic continuum of characters. Otherwise, the player is free to choose his/her objectives, but for example the selected players’ ruled territory (his/her demesne), social organization, player’s character’s culture and religion set the limits for the objectives in the near future.⁶ When the player’s character dies, the player then moves on to control the character next in line of succession, inheriting his/her predecessor’s properties and holdings according to the laws currently in effect. Keeping the dynasty alive and in power requires planned marriages and intrigue against one’s rivals, ruler and/or vassals.

The duality of the state and character orientations is well demonstrated in the following. In addition to a mosaic-like game map, which is divided into provinces that consist of holdings and assemble as duchies, kingdoms and empires, there are characters that comprise the courts of rulers and have various personal traits. Each holding, province, duchy, kingdom and empire has a character as their ruler. The laws in effect and the level of technology define how many holdings one character may effectively hold. In the game, there may be independent vassal kings/queens, dukes/duchesses and counts/countesses. Barons, bishops and mayors, who rule a sub-province holding, cannot be independent; emperors/empresses are always independent, unless they are consorts. Both the provinces and characters each have one religion and one culture (e.g. ethnolinguistic groups such as Anglo-Saxon, Berber or Magyar) that may change during the course of the game through specific game events.⁷ Additionally, the game features several inheritance systems (e.g. agnatic or cognatic, gavelkind or primogeniture) that can be changed under certain conditions and accord to the player's culture and religion.

The player may choose from several historical starting dates,⁸ but the overall time period is 769–1454. The original version of the game, which was released for Windows on 14 February 2012, had the player start in the year 1066, and characters other than Christian could not be played. Since 2012, fifteen downloadable content packs (DLCs) have been released, which have expanded the playable cultures, religions, territory and time period.⁹ For example, *Monks and Mystics* (released in March 2017) adds playability of religious characters, and the *Holy Fury* content pack (released in November 2018) allows the player to design pagan religions. However, these two packages are not my focus at this time. Additionally, the core game rules, as well as the division of the game map into provinces, have changed somewhat in the various versions of the game. This chapter is based on observations made during the writer's playing experience, mostly with v.3.3.3 but also earlier versions, including the content packs *The Sword of Islam* (2012), *Legacy of Rome* (2012), *The Old Gods* (2013) and *Charlemagne* (2014). Additionally, game script files that define certain game mechanics, as well as Crusader Kings II Wiki, which is a knowledge repository

maintained by the players and modders of the game and contains descriptions of most of the game mechanics, have been consulted for additional information.

Digital games and representations of cultures and religions

In games research, various approaches may be taken. Perhaps the most relevant distinction is between the ludic and narrative approaches. The researcher may focus on actual gameplay, game worlds and game systems, but also on aesthetics.¹⁰ In regard to historical games, how the unfolding of history is presented is relevant.

Crusader Kings II does not rely on preset historical events, but on so-called triggered events that take place when certain conditions are met. The game narrative unfolds through an interplay of various factors and rules. In this kind of setting, the game rules and variables that structure the unfolding of the game are just as relevant from the point of view of the study of representations as the textual or visual elements of the game.¹¹ Jeremiah McCall calls this kind of approach, which focuses on ‘how the systems and processes of the past functioned’, ‘conceptual simulation’. He writes: ‘*Crusader Kings II* does not show how medieval barons lived but tells about the political fragmentation of medieval Europe.’¹² This unfolding of a narrative through actual gameplay – which is conditioned by the game’s rules system – is captured very well by Chapham’s concept of ludonarrative mentioned earlier.¹³ When analysing digital games in terms of historical representations, singular historical facts should not be the focus. Instead, the analysis should concern the mechanics that control the unfolding of the game.¹⁴

Studies on cultural representation have often focused on specific oppositions between dominant and dominated cultural groups – such as between the Orient and Occident¹⁵ – or, more generally, the West and the Rest.¹⁶ Often in discourses about others, the modern Western cultures have been set as the model against which the other cultures have been evaluated. Representations of cultures and cultural differences also function as means of imagining an ‘us’ separated from the other.

Along similar lines, within the study of religion, the understandings of religion in general and representations of particular religions have been critiqued on the basis of their Western-centrism: more than often than not, the prototype of religion has been Protestant Christianity.¹⁷ More recently, the discussion has focused on the so-called world religions paradigm, prevalent in both academic and more popular discourses, where the ‘big five’ (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism), sometimes with a few additions, comprise the prototypical model of religion. Typically, this approach emphasizes religions as ‘-isms’, coherent systems with sacred texts, dogmas, places of worship and so on, thus making forms of folk religion or indigenous religions into special cases of religion.¹⁸ What is common to these conceptions is that they focus on interaction between the universal and particular forms of culture or religion, and how often the dominant Western culture or religion takes the place of the universal, thus making the non-dominant, non-Western forms unusual examples and objects of exoticism.

While the earlier discussions have emphasized the cultural–geographical dimension of difference, in this case the temporal dimension is also relevant. The trope of ‘medieval’ has several functions in contemporary media culture: similarly to the discourse of cultural difference, it functions as a repository of meanings, which may be utilized, for example, in imagining a nation’s past glory or as a slur for contemporary practices deemed non-modern.¹⁹ *Crusader Kings II* provides representations of exotic medieval cultures, such as pagan Germans, Fenno-Ugrians and Slavs.

In *Crusader Kings II*, the interplay between the universal and particular is manifest on many levels, including the game’s concepts and rules, as well as pictorial and textual representations of places, characters and events. *Crusader Kings II*’s game engine is programmed in object-oriented C++ language.²⁰ Typical of object-oriented languages is that they employ abstract classes whose attributes or variables are inherited by the child classes, and these classes are blueprints for the actual objects.²¹ While it may be argued that the duality of particularism and universalism is a feature of game design inherent to the object-oriented programming paradigm and the thinking related to it, it is nevertheless important to analyse *how* this

particularization – that is, creating actual instances of culture and religion based on a common class – is made, as the choices in this regard are by no means limited.²²

Particularizing cultures and cultural change

As the game's title suggests, it is a sequel to *Crusader Kings*, which was released in 2004. Jason Pitruzzello writes:

Although the vast majority of strategy-oriented video games depict culture in the Middle Ages in monolithic and unchanging terms, *Crusader Kings* depicts culture as mutable. Members of the ruling class or the people they rule can change culturally, mimicking to some extent the kinds of cultural change found in England and elsewhere in the period. As digital medievalism, *Crusader Kings* models cultural change in the Middle Ages rather than merely assigning cultural labels to people and geographical areas of Europe at specific chronological dates. The game attempts to avoid anachronism through historically based systems of gameplay, rather than through rote inclusion of historical facts.²³

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The same thing may be said about the sequel, *Crusader Kings II*, although I would like to point out that there is still a relative degree of 'merely' assigning culture and monolithicism of culture. In the game, the universal models of culture and religion are particularized in various ways, as I will demonstrate.

The main view in *Crusader Kings II* opens up as a world map, which is divided into county-sized province-tiles (see [Figure 8.1](#)). The player can toggle between several map modes, which distinguish the provinces with borders and display by colours the different levels of economic development, dynasties, political entities and opinions towards the player, as well as different cultures and religions, to name a few. Each province has one culture and one religion, both of which may change over the course of the game. Likewise, each character has one of each, not two or more.²⁴ Religion and culture are inherited from one's

parents (usually their father) or taught to a child by a tutor, or they may be changed – actively or passively – through special events. In a sense, religious and cultural change are always ‘total’; there are no in-betweens or hybrids. Especially interesting are situations where a new culture begins to emerge. For example, English culture starts to appear in provinces – as triggered events, discussed previously – ‘if a Norman ruler owns an Anglo-Saxon province after 1100’, or for Frankish culture switching to ‘French, the province owner must have either Frankish culture or any culture from the Latin group’.²⁵ These preset conditions that do not allow imaginary new cultures – that would emerge on the basis of, say, Arabic and Pictish or Finnish and Russian culture – are a way of guaranteeing that the game’s history maintains some semblance with the historical narrative we know. In other words, they retain historical particularity.

One important aspect of the game is its moddability (as in ‘modding’, from ‘modification’).²⁶ The game is based on the Paradox Development Studio’s Clausewitz engine, which employs plain text scripts that are readable and can be modified by any user with a basic text editor. These include the descriptions of cultures and religions. The specifications on culture are stored in a certain file (‘00_cultures’), which includes the names of the cultural groups, particular cultures and some specific information. Thus, it would be fairly easy for a modder to change some basic rules of the game. For example, the file defines the graphic features of the North Germanic group. Its subgroup, Norse, has its own graphical and colour specifications, lists of male and female names, and information on the display of titles and suffixes and prefixes used with dynasty names and patronyms. An interesting feature is that some personal names have variants in different languages. Thus, in Finnish culture, Erkki is an analogue for Erik, Auni doubles for Agnes and so on. The names of the dynasties are listed in another file (‘00_dynasties’). Some dynasties, such as the Persian Kârawân, have only the culture defined, while others have religion and other specific aspects (e.g. their own colour) defined as well. New dynasty names are created during the game by adding a place name and a culture-specific suffix or prefix. Thus, a Swedish dynasty created in the game when a non-noble character is granted a holding could be, for example, ‘af Åland’. However, for many cultures, such as Finnish or Russian,

only an English 'of' prefix is used for newly created dynasties. The particularization of cultures and cultural groups is thus made with rather few variables, if we look at the level of the game's script. Similarly, the provinces have alternative names, which change according to their ruler's culture: Lapland's alternative names for Finnish and Sámi rulers are 'Lappi' and 'Sápmi', and 'Finland' may also be 'Finnland' or 'Suomi'.

The graphics variables affect the portraits of the characters (e.g. [Figure 8.1](#)). These include headgear, clothing and hairstyles. Interestingly, the facial features of the characters are not based on their cultural characteristics. In the game files, each character has an 11-letter string of letters called 'DNA', which is inherited from one's parents and does not change during the character's life. This string defines the facial features of the characters, as well as the colour of their skin and hair.²⁷ The hereditary characteristics of the characters in the historical game starts are set, but again, when the game unfolds, the genetics of the characters in future generations are not bounded by culture but depend on the choices made by human and non-human players. The selection of facial features, clothing and hairstyles can be expanded by culture-specific portrait and clothing packs that have been published independently or as part of larger DLCs. Similarly, several unit and councillor packs have added to the visual particularity of the cultural groups in the game.²⁸

Focusing on the representation of Northern Europe in the game, the main cultural groups are North Germanic, Finno-Ugric and East Slavic. Early in the game, the North Germanic group is represented only by the Norse culture, which may develop into Danish, Norwegian and Swedish variations. Conversely, the East Slavic group is represented in the game at first by Ilmenian, Severian and Volhynian cultures, which may develop into the Russian culture. All the cultures in the Fenno-Ugric group (i.e. Finnish, Sámi, Estonian, Komi, Khanty, Nenets, Mordvin and Meschera) are present early in the game. These cultural mechanics drive the in-game development towards a specific kind of state formation. For example, the player is able to create a contrafactual Russian Empire, supported by a shared Russian culture before the Mongol conquest, if the character rules all the required kingdoms and is him/herself a Russian.

At the beginning of the different paths of play (with given start dates; see note 8), there are several historical characters and dynasties to choose from. Several character portraits even include links to respective Wikipedia pages. Nevertheless, sometimes blanks have been filled with imagination. In the historical start of the Viking Era, the contrafactual Finnish chiefdoms and high chiefdoms²⁹ are ruled by dynasties with names that refer to Finnish tribes: for example, the high chief of Karelia is Tuure Karjalainen and the chief of Häme (Tavastia) is Mielus Hämäläinen. These surnames are also popular modern Finnish surnames. Similar logic can be found in the names of the East Slavic tribal dynasties – Seversky and Volynsky – in an earlier historical game start of 769. Other more or less common contemporary Finnish surnames, such as Itkonen, Korhonen, Virtanen, Lononen and Kemiläinen, are also present. Although the history of the Itkonen family can be traced to the 1600s,³⁰ for example, such dynasty names are products of the historical imagination. As such, they produce a certain type of historical particularity, which allows the roots of modern Finland to be projected to the Early Middle Ages.

An additional feature that conditions the unfolding of the game is the concept of *de jure* holdings. Each province is part of a *de jure* duchy, which is part of a *de jure* kingdom, while each kingdom is part of an empire. A player who holds a title has a claim to all the minor *de jure* holdings of the title. Possessing a claim to foreign territory means that the character may legitimately declare war and attempt to conquer the claim. Additionally, if a *de jure* title does not exist *de facto* (not a term used within the game), a player with enough minor holdings of a specific title can create it. The existence of the *de jure* titles creates a kind of ‘conditioned teleology’ or, using Chapham’s terminology,³¹ frames the player’s goals: by conquering or inheriting certain provinces, the player may create a kingdom, thus supporting a more stable realm and increased ability to expand even further.

In the game, there are indeed several non-historical *de jure* titles, such as the Kingdom of Finland and the Empire of Scandinavia. The existence of these titles directs the gameplay towards contrafactual ludonarratives. In most cases, the function of the *de jure* titles is to increase the possibility for the

ludonarrative to unfold towards an actual, predetermined post-medieval state – such as the Russian Empire or the Kingdom of Finland. For the creation of some titles, there are special requirements for the ruler's culture and religion. For example, to usurp or to create the Kingdom of Sweden, the ruler him/herself must be Swedish, and the creator of the Kingdom of Finland must belong to the North Germanic or Finno-Ugric culture group.³² Many of the Iberian kingdoms require that the founder is a Christian, thus tying these kingdoms to the historical narrative of Reconquista.³³

These rules connect the ludonarratives to certain cultures. Contrary to these predetermined or conditionally teleological mechanics, however, there are also mechanics that make constructing and maintaining non-predefined realms easier. The de jure ownerships may change over time. If an empire, kingdom or duchy controls a lower-level title for a certain amount of time – usually 100 years – without interruptions, the latter will become a de jure part of the former.

Representing religions

Crusader Kings II features several religions and religious groups. The contents of one religion resemble those of other religions. Their structure and function within the game are similar, and the differences appear mainly on the surface: for example, pilgrimage made by Christian characters to various places is named differently depending on the religion; called *Hajj* for Muslims, it may be made to Mecca. The images of some events are also different. Similarly, while playing a character of an Eastern religion group, *piety* is called *karma*.

In general, the game operates on the basis of division into three social domains: the nobility, the merchant class and the religious class. These are represented by the holding types: the barony, the city and the bishopric. This basic model also works in the Islamic and Eastern worlds, but with different names. Additionally, the prefeudal world is represented by tribal holdings, where there is no difference between baronies and cities. In this mode, a province may include only one tribal holding, alongside a religious holding. A tribal player may adopt feudalism when certain conditions are met, which causes the existing tribal holding to transform into one or more baronies and/or cities. In *The Republic* DLC, the player may also

play as a merchant republic, which is ruled by the merchant class and has a distinct system of inheritance. The religious states are generally not playable.

Each character in the game may have three types of capital: *gold*, which can be used to build different buildings in the holdings, to hire mercenaries and to give as a gift to another character; *prestige*, which affects a character's relations with her/his noble vassals and is especially important for pagan rulers, who may use it to raise a tribal army; and *piety*, which affects a character's relations with religious vassals and the head of the religion. Different amounts of these forms of capital are required for certain actions, such as creating a kingdom or performing a religious ritual. These types of capital are accumulated at different rates by different character traits (cynical, zealous) through actions (e.g. declaring a holy war) and events. The three types of capital are also connected to the three types of social domains and holdings – the towns, castles and churches.

Each religion also has a religious authority factor, which is affected by several other factors, and several holy sites, which are bishoprics in a certain province. Additionally, the more holy sites of a religion are controlled by rulers of the particular religion, becoming more important as the religion's authority is increased. Another significant factor is warfare: lost or won holy wars also affect religious authority. If a religion's moral authority is low, it may lead to heresy and revolts breaking out.

Some religions have religious heads: Catholics have the pope, the Orthodox Church the ecumenical patriarch, and the Sunni and the Shia their own caliphs. Some of the Christian heresies (e.g. the Fraticelli, Monothelites, Iconoclasts, Paulicians) have heads, while some (Cathars, Waldensians, Lollards, Messalians, Bogomolites) do not. Pagan religions do not have religious heads, but dating from the *Holy Fury* expansion pack, when a pagan religion is reformed, the ruler making the reform becomes the head of the reformed religion.³⁴ Reforming a pagan religion thus makes it more similar to Christianity and Islam. For reformed pagans, as well as Muslim rulers, it is possible to be simultaneously a king or emperor and a religious head; this is not possible for Christians. This has several bonuses, including, for example, the ability to declare a jihad or its counterpart, a Great Holy War.

Religion and culture both affect diplomacy, a game concept that concerns intercharacter relations, and a ruler's ability to govern areas: having a religiously and culturally homogenous realm or demesne is easier to rule, and counties or vassals with the same religion and culture as the rulers are less likely to revolt.

A player may change the religion of a character or province by using a religious advisor to convert them. The characters and provinces of a specific religious group (e.g. Orthodox and Catholic, both being Christian) get along with each other better than with others (e.g. Romuva and Suomenusko, both pagan groups). The same goes with the cultures and culture groups of counties and characters: for example, Finno-Ugric Estonians and Finns are more apt to cooperate together than with Saxons, who belong to the Germanic group. Both religions and cultures may have affinities. Characters are not able to have multiple or syncretistic religious identities, or pay their respects to many religions. Thus, different religions are containers with contents, as seen in the organizational structures of the churches or religion-related activities (e.g. pilgrimage) that increase the player's piety.

In *Crusader Kings II*, the influence of a so-called world religion paradigm³⁵ is evident. Conversion to a religion is always total: except for the *Monks and Mystics* DLC, the character can only have one religion, and there are no hybrid religious identities. However, the personal characteristic of 'sympathy towards religion X', which may be gained after conversion, is a way of modelling hybrid religiosity within the given framework by making the person more accepting towards characters of his/her former religion. This kind of conception of religious identity as exclusive and confessional seems to be based on a Judeo-Christian prototype.

The religions are divided into groups (Christian, Israelite, Islam, Pagan, Mazdan, Eastern) that share some qualities. Pagan religions allow more open declaration for war, but on the other hand, they are more prone to attacks from other religions. Additionally, pagan religious rulers may not upgrade their tribal holdings to feudal ones, or adopt feudalism, unless they reform their religion or convert to a non-pagan religion. Pagan reformation makes the religion more organized and similar in structure to Catholicism or

Sunnism. One of the perks of reforming a religion is that it allows the player to declare a Great Holy War, which is similar to a Catholic crusade or Muslim jihad, as it allows conquering larger areas than most other forms of war. The religions in the pagan group represent an earlier evolutionary stage of religion, which goes hand in hand with the tribal social structure that may develop into a feudal one.

Another special case of religions is represented by heresies. It is possible for non-pagan religions to have heresies that can take over the whole religion (e.g. under certain conditions, iconoclasm may become the Orthodox mainstream). The Eastern religions, which are playable in the *Rajas of India* expansion (2014), are an interesting case: they are an organized religion, but they do not have heresies. Instead they have branches, such as Mahayana and Theravada within Buddhism. The rulers may also change their religion at will once during their life – for example, from Hinduism to Buddhism – which is not possible for characters of non-Eastern religions. The pagan religions do not have heresies, but if they reform, the older version (e.g. Old Romuva) will become a heresy of the Reformed Romuva, again demonstrating the development model of religions from paganism to full-fledged religions.

In the case of the representation of North European forms of paganism, an interesting feature is the naming of these religions. The Norse and Slavic religions are co-terminous with the cultural groups, and then there are the Romuva and Suomenusko, which correspond to areas inhabited by Balts and Fenno-Ugrians. While researchers tend to group the various folk religions of the real-world cultures along with the cultural groups, the names Romuva and Suomenusko unambiguously refer to the contemporary revival or reconstructionist movements of ethnic pagan traditions. The term ‘Suomenusko’ (a translation of ‘Finnish belief’) has been used by Finnish Pagan reconstructionist groups – such as Taivaannaula (who do not consider themselves as pagan), Karhun kansa and Pakanaverkko – to refer to Baltic Finnish rather than general Fenno-Ugric ethnic religious traditions. As a neologism, the term is connected to the organization and discourses of the Finnish alternative spiritual field.³⁶ However, the name has fallen out of favour, and for example the Taivaannaula organization has since 2017 renounced the use of the term because of its nationalist

connotations and exclusivity towards Karelian customs.³⁷ Romuva is the name for a modern revivalist movement with its roots in early 1930s Lithuania, which gained officially recognized status in 1992.³⁸ Thus, it is rather striking that the Slavic and Germanic pagan religions are referred to by the names of the cultural groups – not, for example, by the terms Rodnovere or Ásatrú.³⁹

This disparity was also noted by the user Merkatz on the forum of the Steam gaming community, sparking a discussion with multiple replies.⁴⁰ Discussions like these are good examples of how players who critique historical games are taking part in a public historical discourse.⁴¹ One possible explanation for this naming practice may be that the Slavic and Germanic neopaganisms and related contestations were more familiar to the game designers than those related to the Baltic or Baltic Finnish. In these two cases, the game system builds contrafactual historical continuity between modern religiosities, analogically with the situation, where the Kingdom of Finland and the Empire of Scandinavia exist de jure.

Religion is a key component in warfare, and warfare is a significant element in the game. Religion affects who may attack whom, and religious differences bring about new types of casus belli. Pagans may conquer small areas even from realms with rulers who have the same religion. Christians may declare holy wars on pagans and Muslims, but not other Christians, except if they are heretics. Conquering areas is much more difficult in a situation where there is a lack of religious differences. Wainwright writes that *Crusader Kings II* and another medievalist strategy game, *Medieval II: Total War*, ‘do not have to speculate on, for instance, whether one religion is more pacifist than another in order to model the diplomatic obstacles present between religiously dissimilar factions’. Although there are different mechanics involved with how to launch a crusade or jihad, the most important function of religious differences is, as Wainwright notes, the ability to forge alliances and arrange royal marriages.⁴²

Overall, the dynamics of the game emphasize the cultural and religious homogeneity of a realm: the more diverse the realm is, the more difficult it is to control. This, along with anachronistic de jure holdings that fill the gaps of historical narrative, points in the direction of representations of medieval states and

ethnicities produced by eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century historiography and philology, which promoted romantic nationalist conceptions by creating visions of ethnic nations.⁴³ *Crusader Kings II* adds another link to these medievalist representations, which are prevalent in modern popular culture.

Nevertheless, if a player is to create a large empire, diversity cannot be avoided. While a character with suitable traits and good advisors may be able to assimilate the realm by converting, this may lead to further schisms. On the other hand, the game's technology system has a progressive tolerance factor, which lessens the tensions between cultures and religions. Additionally, adopting a non-pagan religion or reforming a pagan religion allows adoption of feudalism or a republic, which opens up more possibilities for economic and legal development, and, accordingly, integration and expansion of the realm.

Conclusion

Crusader Kings II is an example of an ambitious attempt to model culture and religion, reflect their changes on individual and socio-geographical levels, and demonstrate their effect on politics. The cultural and religious choices and settings affect the gaming experience through audio-visual elements, text (including the names of game concepts), narrative and game mechanics. The representation of culture and religion in *Crusader Kings II* employs a strategy that I have called 'particularization'. By particularizing a common model of culture and religion, the game system produces an experience of specific cultures and religions. In this sense, I argue that a fruitful approach is to look at how this particularization is made. While the practices between different cultures are mostly similar, on the surface level they are particularized. In fact, the process of particularization of religion and cultures works on two levels in *Crusader Kings II*.

First, there are particularities that affect the gameplay via game rules; second, there is the more superficial level, which includes the iconography and other visual representations, colours, graphic user interface (GUI) design, audio-visual cues and naming. The naming takes place in relation to the whole range of game concepts, such as the holding types and ruler titles. Additionally, the possible names of characters depend on their cultural and religious background, just as the names of realms change according to their

rulers' culture. There are neither hybrid cultural forms nor syncretic religions, but new cultures do emerge from older cultures under preset strict conditions, constructing a conditional teleology that channels the development of the ludonarrative in certain directions. These strategies of particularization provide ways of producing a feel of cultural and religious difference while simultaneously guaranteeing that the unfolding ludonarratives retain sufficient resemblance to known history.

When we look at the representation of north-east European regions in the game, with their Baltic, Finno-Ugric and Eastern Slavic cultures that have gone through different developments than those of the Western European areas, it is evident that the game system produces contrafactual ludonarratives, such as the (pre-Mongol conquest) Russian Empire or the medieval Kingdom of Finland. The game's rules system is not well suited for representations of such historical situations where the territorial state does not (yet) exist.

Interestingly, there are more differences between religions, namely, between organized and pagan religions. The pagan religions may become organized and gain several benefits by reforming. The main effects of this reformation are that it allows transformation of the society from tribal to feudal, and the waging of more extensive wars against realms of different religions. Thus, the organized religions (i.e. different forms of Christianity and Islam) represent the prototypical – or universal – religions into which pagan religions can develop, which is typical of the world religions paradigm. This religious development is connected to other forms of development as well. While the particularization itself is built into the core of the object-oriented language paradigm, the ways this particularization is done reflects the culturally shared meaning systems. After all, programming is conceptualization. The ways in which the various cultures, religions and states are programmed and scripted reflect cultural and religion-related models and prototypical thinking. For example, the game engine's bias towards religiously and culturally homogeneous states is a product of both the programming paradigm and widely shared, culturally constructed metaconceptions about culture and religion.

Finally, I would like to address the issue of how *Crusader Kings II* may be situated in the context of struggles over the meanings of culture, religion and history. Andrew B. R. Elliott points out that the medieval may act as a repository of meanings which may be employed to various ends. Both jihadists and counter-jihadists employ the trope of the medieval and project the roots of the conflict between civilizations to medieval times.⁴⁴ At first sight, it is clear that *Crusader Kings II* focuses on warfare, and merely the mention of ‘crusades’ in the title hints towards those medievalisms that project the idea of ‘clashes of cultures’ – namely, the West versus Islam – onto the medieval past. Some of the game mechanics even project the roots of modern states to medieval times. The religious and culture-related dynamics of *Crusader Kings II* allow imagining of the medieval roots of present times in various ways.

This is not the whole story, however. The game contains a plethora of historical, religious and cultural concepts and practices, as well as geographical locations. While their occurrence in the game may not be always accurate, playing the game may inspire one to learn more about them. Furthermore, the conceptual simulation of systems and processes of the past may have pedagogical value, and various representations in the games may spark discussions about interpretations of the past.⁴⁵ As a medievalist cultural product, *Crusader Kings II* can be played and enjoyed by Islamophobes as well as radical Muslims, those who dream of a greater past for his/her nation, those interested in learning about historical processes and various cultures in medieval times, and those who simply find entertainment value in a medieval setting.

Figure 8.1. Screenshot from the cultural map and King Hakon’s character window of a game starting in 936, *Crusader Kings II*, © Paradox Interactive, 2012. Contrast added for clarity.

¹ See Elliot in this volume.

² SteamSpy, ‘Crusader Kings II’, no date, available online: <https://steamspy.com/app/203770> (accessed 17 October 2020).

³ Adam Chapham, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practise* (London: Routledge, 2016), 110, 129, 232.

⁴ A. Martin Wainwright, *Virtual History: How Videogames Portray the Past* (London: Routledge, 2019), 77.

⁵ Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway, C. 900–1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 108.

⁶ For a further analysis of the objective-setting in Grand Strategy Games see Robert Houghton, ‘If You’re Going to Be the King, You’d Better Damn Well Act Like the King: Setting Authentic Objectives to Support Learning in Grand Strategy Computer Games’, in *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, ed. Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 186–210.

⁷ The game map is a realistic world map, and the cultural and religious areas are fixed in each historical starting dates. The *Holy Fury* expansion, however, added the option of creating a shattered world, where the historical, cultural and religious data are mixed when the player chooses a random start, see ‘Random World’, *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 21 April 2020, available online: https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Random_World (accessed 18 June 2020).

⁸ Cf. Jeremiah McCall, ‘Video Games as Participatory Public History’, in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David M. Dean (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 408.

⁹ In the version 3.3.3 the start dates and the names of the corresponding eras or historical situations are following: 1 January 769, Early Middle Ages; 1 January 867, Viking Age; 7 August 936, The Iron Century; 15 September 1066, High Middle Ages; 26 December 1066, William the Conqueror; 1 April 1081, The Alexiad; 1 January 1187, The Third Crusade; 16 May 1204, The Latin Empire; 1 February 1220, Age of the Mongols; 1 May 1241, Rise of the Hansa; and 1 January 1337, Late Middle Ages. The game provides a short description of each era, and suggests interesting characters to be played by the player.

¹⁰ Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, and Jan Wysocki, ‘Theorizing Religion on Digital Games – Perspectives and Approaches’, in *Religion in Digital Games. Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Simone Heidbrink and Tobias Knoll / *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014): 5–50; Andrew B. R. Elliott and Matthew W. Kapell, ‘Introduction: To Build a Past That Will “Stand the Test of Time” – Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives’, in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew W. Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1–29.

¹¹ See also Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens, ‘Modeling Indigenous Peoples: Unpacking Ideology in *Sid Meier’s Colonization*’, in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew W. Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 91–2.

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- ¹² Jeremiah McCall, 'Playing with the Past: History and Video Games (and Why it Might Matter)', *Journal of Geek Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 31–2.
- ¹³ Chapham, *Digital Games as History*.
- ¹⁴ Adam Chapham, 'Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical Video Games', *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2012): 42.
- ¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978, London: Penguin Books, 2008).
- ¹⁶ Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in *The Formations of Modernity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 275—320. In digital games, see Mir and Owens, 'Modeling Indigenous Peoples'; Manuel Alejandro Cruz Martinez, 'Playing with History's Otherness. A Framework for Exploring Historical Games', *DiGRA/FDG '16 – Proceedings of the 2016 Playing With History Workshop* 13, no. 3 (2016), 1—5.
- ¹⁷ E.g. Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbound Categories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).
- ¹⁸ Suzanne Owen, 'The World Religions Paradigm. Time for a Change', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (2011): 253–68.
- ¹⁹ Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle-Ages in the Twenty-first Century* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017); Elliott in this volume.
- ²⁰ 'Clausewitz – Game Engine Written in C++', *MYCPLUS/com*, 29 March 2020, available online: <https://www.myplus.com/featured-articles/clausewitz-game-engine-cplusplus/> (accessed 18 June 2020); 'Scripting', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 29 May 2020, available online: <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Scripting> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ²¹ See Andreas Schwill, 'Cognitive Aspects of Object-Oriented Programming', *IFIP WG 3.1 Working Conference 'Integrating Information Technology into Education'*, 1994.
- ²² Although the *Crusader Kings II*'s historical accuracy is not at my focus here, in his analysis on the representations of the crusades in digital games, Robert Houghton has duly pointed out that the 'broad and open-ended nature of Grand Strategy Games' may lead to oversimplification. In other words, the game's open-endedness is the reason for the lack of historical particularity. Robert Houghton, 'Crusader Kings Too? (Mis)Representations of the Crusades in Strategy Games', in *Playing the Crusades*, ed. Robert Houghton (London: Routledge, 2021), 71–92, 73.

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- ²³ Jason Pitruzzello, 'Systematizing Culture in Medievalism. Geography, Dynasty, Culture, and Imperialism in *Crusader Kings: Deus Vult*', in *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. David T. Kline (London: Routledge, 2014), 45.
- ²⁴ *The Monks and Mystics* DLC allows the player to secretly profess another religion that he/she publicly claims to follow, 'Societies', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 23 May 2020, available online: <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Societies> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ²⁵ 'Culture', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 24 May 2020, available online: <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Culture> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ²⁶ 'Modding', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 6 May 2020, available online: <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Modding>; Gareth Crabtree (accessed 18 June 2020); 'Modding as Digital Reenactment: A Case Study of the Battlefield Series', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew W. Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 199–212; McCall, 'Video Games as Participatory Public History'.
- ²⁷ 'Portrait Modding', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 17 February 2020, available online: https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Portrait_modding (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ²⁸ 'Graphical DLC', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 22 January 2019, available online: https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Graphical_DLC (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ²⁹ According to Sami Raninen and Anna Wessman, the historical Viking Age local social organization in Finland was looser, and there is no evidence of established local leadership or an early stage of state formation. Neither did Finnish or Sámi identity exist. There were signs of local feuding, but not necessarily large-scale warfare. See Sami Raninen and Anna Wessman, 'Finland as a Part of the "Viking World"', in *Fibula, Fabula, Fact: The Viking Age in Finland*, ed. Joonas Ahola and Frog, with Clive Tolley (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society), 333.
- ³⁰ Juho Vilho Itkonen, *Itkosten suku 1, Varhaisvaiheet vuoteen 1700* (Helsinki: Itkosten sukukunta, 1987), 36.
- ³¹ Chapham, *Digital Games as History*.
- ³² As of version 2.0, however, these limitations apply mostly to non-human controlled players.
- ³³ 'Kingdoms', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 26 April 2020, available online: <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Kingdoms> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ³⁴ 'Religious Head', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 30 May 2020, available online: https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Religious_head (accessed 18 June 2020); 'Religion', *Crusader Kings II Wiki*, 19 May 2020, available online: <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Religion> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ³⁵ Owen, 'The World Religions Paradigm'.

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- ³⁶ Iiro Arola, “‘Ni sit mä tajusin, et on muitakin kuin minä’ – Suomenuskoisten sosiaalinen identiteetti’ (MA diss., Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, 2010), 8; Mika Lassander, ‘Pakanuus nykypäivän Suomessa’, in *Monien uskontojen ja katsomusten Suomi*, ed. Ruth Illman, Kimmo Ketola, Riitta Latvio, and Jussi Sohlberg (Tampere: Kirkon Tutkimuskeskus, 2017), 207–9.
- ³⁷ ‘Kysyttyä’, *Taivaannaula*, 31 October 2015, available online: <https://www.taivaannaula.org/yhdistys/kysyttya/> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ³⁸ Rasa Pranskevičiūtė, ‘Contemporary Paganism in Lithuanian Context: Principal Beliefs and Practices of Romuva’, in *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson (London: Routledge, 2014), 78.
- ³⁹ In the game’s sequel, the *Crusader Kings III*, there are some changes in the naming: Romuva has become Visdilist, Slavic Paganism Slovianskan and Germanic paganism Ásatrú, while Suomenusko has remained.
- ⁴⁰ ‘Suomenusko and Romuva’, *Steamcommunity.com*, General Discussions, 19 October 2015, available online: <https://steamcommunity.com/app/203770/discussions/0/483367798514314443/> (accessed 18 June 2020).
- ⁴¹ McCall, ‘Video Games as Participatory Public History’.
- ⁴² Wainwright, *Virtual History*, 149.
- ⁴³ Patrick J. Geary, ‘European Ethnicities and European as an Ethnicity: Does Europe Have Too Much History?’, in *The Making of Medieval History*, ed. G. A. Loud and Martial Staub (York: York Medieval Press, 2017), 66.
- ⁴⁴ Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media*, 136, 138.
- ⁴⁵ McCall, ‘Video Games as Participatory Public History’; McCall, ‘Playing with the Past’.