

# Deus Vult, the Representation of the Conflicts with the Religious Other in Grand Strategy Video Games: Crusader Kings

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This article aims to define the relationship between grand strategy video games and religion to cast more light on the issue of representation of and the conflict with the religious Other in this media. The specificity of the depiction of religions in *grand strategy* video games lies in the military orientation of their gameplay, their apparent aseptic presentation of data and their emergent narratives. Thus, an analysis of this genre necessarily implies an approach to its formal elements, such as gameplay mechanics and its contents, including explicit narratives, shown in these games. In order to attempt this analysis, two main trends of thought are presented. The first critically approaches *grand strategy* computer games as carriers of discriminatory and violent ideologies. Several theories defend that an inherently military and intolerant character of video games can be traced to the military technological development and the remediation of board war games in the twentieth century. The second conceives gameplays as opportunities to construct and deconstruct religious world views actively. It has often been defended that, given a chance to assume the role of a character with different religious beliefs from their own, players are pushed to understand and act according to the systems of values of the religious Other. The case studies of *Crusader Kings II* and *Crusader Kings III* are presented to explore these two theoretical trends through the strongly religion oriented content and military-focused mechanics of these particular video games. As a result, this article argues that *grand strategy* video games allow players to experience different religious world views from a first-person perspective and develop their emergent narrative.

*Keywords: religion, representation, ideology, Game Studies, grand strategy games*

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## Introduction

The problem of religious and cultural representation in video games has recently been a place of intense academic discussion (Campbell and Grieve, 2014). Since developers often reflect their worldviews in games, the debate over the impact of world power relations on computer games and their players is crucial to understand the creation and reproduction of discriminatory ideologies in this particular media. This article aims to look at the theoretical reflections made over the existing relationship between *grand strategy* video games and religions using both *Crusader Kings II*

(*Crusader Kings II*, 2012) and *Crusader Kings III* (*Crusader Kings III*, 2020) together as a case study. *Grand strategy games* were chosen because they represent games that focus on the mobilization of resources to obtain specific goals by a political body, being duchies and kingdoms the most frequent examples of such political entities.

### **Theoretical approaches: mechanics, narratives and religion in grand strategy video games**

The origins of video games can be traced to the evolution of board wargames; the former were developed through a process of remediation of the latter. The first aesthetic strategy used to recreate board games in a new media, as described by Deterding (2009), was the representation of a board game through software directly, as exemplified by the *Civilization* series (*Civilization I-VI*, 1991). An opposite aesthetic decision was made for games like “first-person shooters”, which try to hide the actual mechanics behind the game and seek an immediate immersion of the player into a virtual environment. The last kind of remediation presented by Deterding is a hybrid of both: hypermediacy. Some developers chose to embrace the new games format and decided to make the rules and algorithms more visible to the player, flooding him with data and information. However, this hypermediacy makes games more immediate because by building layers of maps and statistics, they push players to take the role of a real world-like military commander (Deterding, 2009).

Along with the remediation strategies, several narrative resources are also employed for making the mechanics of a computer game more immersive. Of particular importance for this study is the usage of what Gregory, following Umberto Eco, called *Neomedievalism*. This narrative category consists of developers representing medieval motives and themes through contemporary values to make in-game features, tasks, and goals more familiar to the player (Gregory, 2014).

From a religious perspective, several video games also incorporate religious contents, making experiencing them culturally closer to anyone with a religious background, not necessarily believers (Gregory, 2014). Anthony (2014) categorized games into *allomythic* games that enable players to experience events like pilgrimages, theological debates or specific funeral rites, and *theoptic* games, which show the virtual world through a “god-like” perspective.

### **Are video games evil?**

Taking the example of remediation as a starting point, the “immersion” through a computer is problematic on many fronts. For instance, a game developed through hypermediacy will tend to hide certain information from the player, such as rules or algorithms behind the gameplay. Board wargames had to be learned and “executed” by the players themselves, which implied an absolute awareness of the rules and mechanics at work. Compared to their predecessors, video games have the advantage of being “self-executable”; a person only needs to sit in front of the screen and play without throwing dice or calculating probabilities. However, games developed in this way put in motion what Deterding called “Black box Syndrome” (Deterding, 2009), meaning the active hiding of the mechanics behind the game from the player. Such syndrome becomes an issue when we acknowledge that mechanics always carry a specific ideology within them.

Let us remember that the origins of computer games were also linked to military usage. As such, the mechanisms of video games tend to replicate the mental perspective that gave birth to cybernetics in the first place: preemption (Crogan, 2011). Playing a computer game makes players participants of

the modern military narrative, which locates success after a correct calculation of the results of certain events in the future. These events can be related to climate, economy, or an enemy's strategy, and the correct prediction of them and the elaboration of a consequent course of action is the key to control and victory.

An approach from a religious perspective shows several issues as well. In a thorough study about the representation of Islam in different aspects of video games, Šisler showed how the cultural baggage carried by game developers usually marks the presentation of certain traditions by those developers. Thus, stereotypes and cultural invisibility have high chances to appear, especially acknowledging the importance of "power relations in global cultural exchange" in shaping religious representation in video games (Šisler, 2014). However, it is worth noticing that Šisler makes a thorough analysis of a *grand strategy* game, and the results are less negative at first glance. The author observes some neutrality in the depiction of religions made by *Civilization IV* because all of them are reduced to a compound of bonuses that a player can achieve by creating/joining them. By depicting all religious traditions in the same way and incorporating them in a system of numbers and statistics, the game does not discriminate nor flatter any of these traditions.

At a second glance, however, two approaches critically engage with the assimilation of different traditions under the same data management system in computer games. Again, the military origin of that data management, shown by Crogan (2011), is already embedding specific ideology into the mechanics of a game. Furthermore, following Wark (2007), aseptic data management "is the American dream", proving how everybody can reach success through resource and space management. This scholar draws her conclusions from a *grand strategy* game, negating any possible "neutral" vision of its gameplay, because "when playing *Civilization III*, it doesn't matter if the civilization you choose to play is Babylon or China, Russia or Zululand, France or India. Whoever wins is America, in that the logic of the game itself is America" (Wark, 2007, 54).

### **Are video games any good, then?**

Previous arguments presented game worlds as the opposite of real worlds. However, from the perspective of social phenomenology and sociology of knowledge, "they are not 'unreal' but are human worlds revealed to be symbolic universes accessible through a machine" (Waltemathe, 2014, 239). Departing from this observation, based on Schutz's phenomenological theory of the life-world, Waltemathe equates video games and their role in society with humour. Same as good jokes, computer games provide a place for reflection on broadly held systems of values, like religion. They allow players to enter a symbolic virtual universe, in which they can think about the world of working in daily life from an outside perspective and come back to the latter bearing no consequences. Despite its potentially dangerous effect, which is "religious tradition due to their experimental nature", they do so in a painless way (Waltemathe, 2014, 250). The consequences of the choices made by players stay in the game worlds, even if those choices imply moral decisions that echo a real-world ethic system (Waltemathe, 2014).

The critical studies mentioned above also focus on developers and videogames, assuming that players accept and reproduce the narratives they experience. De Wildst and Aupers concentrate on the players' experience, surveying 20 individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Their main conclusion was that players tend to treat games as chances, "laboratories", in which they can assume the role of a racial or religious Other and reflect on this new perspective. Even further,

they claim that “by playing atheists, Christians, Hindus or Muslims in games, players may become aware that the absolute truths they were raised with are culturally contingent and replaceable by alternatives – both historical and fantastical” (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 14).

### **Crusader Kings II and Crusader Kings III**

#### *A critical approach to being a Crusader King*

CK games reveal themselves as great examples of what Deterding (2009) called “hypermediacy” aesthetics. Players dive into a map that can be configured following different layers, ranging from political boundaries to geographical depictions of the terrain or even the area of influence of the existing religions. Despite the amount of information CK shows (see Figure 1), the Black box Syndrome (Deterding, 2009) is strongly noticeable in the emergence of events in-game, in the form of randomly generated vignettes. CK also uses the usual mechanics of a modern wargame, based on the logic of preemption, present in video games since their origins in the development of computer cybernetics for military uses (Crogan, 2011). By hiding this logic through the Black box Syndrome, CK delivers a military ideology to the players, under the dressing of a medieval set narrative.



*Figure 1. The game allows opening several different windows to manage different aspects of the political entity the player is ruling (Crusader Kings III, 2020). The in-game screenshot has been taken by the author.*

CK are neomedievalist games (Gregory, 2014), meaning they show Middle Ages aesthetics through a modern narrative, a strongly West-centred narrative. One of the critical differences between CKII and CKIII is the usage of the seven sins and the seven virtues from the Christian tradition by the former. The earlier released CKII transforms those features into personality “traits” that a character

may develop (Lucat & Haahr, 2015), being those based on the Christian virtues more desirable than those found on the sins. However, several other examples show how both games employ Western and Christian categories in their construction and, standing out as the most striking of them, are Crusades.

Crusades are not the only kind of *Great Holy War* available in the game since all religions, if they achieve a certain amount of importance within the game-world, allow their believers to conduct this kind of conflict. The scope of a Christian *Great Holy War*, in-game “Crusade”, is the same as the Muslim *Great Holy War*, named in-game “Jihad”. Equalizing all religions under their capability of conducting *Great Holy Wars* makes the narrative of *CK* problematic at many levels. First, as several scholars have pointed out, *jihad* is a very complex concept that is hardly related to a Crusade. Eller concludes that “while *jihad* can mean something akin to holy war, [...] not all *jihadis* are holy or war nor are all wars *jihad*” (2011, 269). Furthermore, the very concept of “holy war” is a European invention (Eller, 2011), which makes the whole mechanic of the *Great Holy War* in *CK* a projection of a European understanding of what “holy” and “war” mean. Therefore, religions in the series are pluralistic only in appearance since they are all conceived following the same rule. The narrative used for depicting holy wars as “conflicts that any religion can declare within the game” is flattening the fundamental differences between those religions and favouring the Christian model above the rest.

Like most *grand strategy* games, *CK* are *theoptic* games (Anthony, 2014). The god-like point of view in which the video games are presented to the player is constructed using several elements, being the listing of all in-game characters and the aerial “God-Eye” view over the map great examples of those elements. The first allows players to visualize every character involved in politics within the map frames (which only includes the northern part of Africa, Europe and the Western half of Asia), even if it is impossible to interact with those characters due to their remoteness. The second one gives the feeling of total control and surveillance over the territory framed by the map, as aerial view is historically linked with those meanings (Kaplan, 2017).

*CK* games also borrowed their depiction of religions from the classic *grand strategy* games. Similarly to the concept of holy war, all religions are reduced to “a complex system of effects and bonuses” (Šisler, 2014, 125). Using hypermediacy, *CK* presents layers of information that do not establish any differences between world views, besides increasing or decreasing the opinion (measured by numbers) of other characters about your avatar. This usage of cold numbers and data to equalize religions, as argued before, can be interpreted as inherently American (Wark, 2007).

### *Role-playing the Other*

Players seem to have the chance to engage with different religions since *CK* allows them to choose and experience any religion practised in the Middle Ages within the delimited territory. Their *allomythic* features push players out of their world-vision, suspending their own beliefs and immersing them into new perspectives. The ability to make players enter a real, although symbolic world, separated from the “working in daily life” or “real” dimension of life, allows a painless reflection upon the elements that integrate the latter. Individuals are thrown into a virtual space, in which their actions are going to have consequences only within the limits of that world itself (Waltemathe, 2014).

*CK* games show themselves as a laboratory. Players do not have to profess a different faith entirely, nor change their cultural background to experience a different one from their own, following de Wildst and Aupers' conclusions (2019). However, being pushed by the *allomythic* character of the games, players have to rethink their own system of values within the virtual space while playing the role of a character that does not share that system. Thus, the Western narrative, embedded in the games, is "decoded" by the players, who tend to reflect on the worldviews actively presented to them.

A general perspective on the mechanics of the game points out the importance of the role that players have as subversive agents of the ideology carried by those mechanics. Data and statistics management are processes used by the game and integrated into narrative layers that do not show a conventional kind of narrative. Given the tools of dynasty politics, feudal politics, and *grand strategy* game mechanics (Lucat & Haahr, 2015), *CK* presents an emergent narrative created in a balanced way between the input of players and the rules that they have to follow. Given their *sandbox* game character (they allow players to develop the virtual in-game world in almost infinite ways by themselves, within the rules given), all mechanics and narratives deployed by *CK* games are there to serve the players in their own story-building. As a result, gameplays can develop in several different outcomes, such as a coronation of a gay witch-king in Jerusalem or a conquest of Rome that ends with the devouring of the Pope himself (Hall, 2020).

### Conclusions

Both theoretical perspectives explored by this article about *grand strategy* games in general, and *Crusader Kings* in particular, do not seem definitive. The overwhelming exposure of players to several layers of information, organized in maps, vignettes and menus by *Crusader Kings II* and *Crusader Kings III*, although immersive, is not transparent. They deliver a military ideology based on preemption while also flattening religions under a Western-born logic, exemplified by their representation of Crusades. However, *CK* games are also defined by the chance they give players to "role-play the Other". In other words, they force players to submerge themselves painlessly into a different worldview during the gameplay. Additionally, the narrative developed by *Crusader Kings* is an emergent narrative, meaning it is built by the players themselves, opening a space for the deconstruction of the ideologies mentioned and creating counter-discourses within the game. Deeper considerations about *grand strategy* games and their relations with ideology demand acknowledging the complexities of this issue.

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