

12

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

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This chapter addresses the impact of play objectives on player interaction with grand strategy games set in the Middle Ages and the impressions of history they acquire from these games. To this end, this chapter will first suggest a framework for the classification of game objectives and consider the differing ways in which different objectives can influence the player. On this basis, the chapter will then address the impact of the objectives of Grand Strategy Games on the behaviour of their players, and argue that the inauthenticity of these objectives has a distorting effect on players' perceptions of the Middle Ages and a negative impact on their experience of the game. Finally, the chapter will use a case study of the medieval grand strategy game *Crusader Kings II*¹ to consider the effect of the removal of game objectives on player behaviour in game.

Historical computer games in general can be immensely powerful tools for the portrayal and communication of information and ideas. Their potency in this regard has been demonstrated by numerous studies,² and has led to the use of historical games as teaching tools at several levels of education.³ The communicative importance of historical game worlds

or aesthetics has been acknowledged: games can present not just literature, but audio and visual environments.⁴ The detailed reconstructions of medieval and early modern cityscapes in the *Assassin's Creed*⁵ series or the meticulous recreation of vast and obscure aristocratic family trees in *Crusader Kings II* can serve as useful introductions to the worlds they present. Indeed, the 'Discovery Tour' downloadable content for *Assassin's Creed: Origins*⁶ is designed specifically with educational intent and acts as a pseudo interactive museum exhibit (a 'living museum').⁷ De Groot has criticised games for a perceived inability to move beyond this representation of data,⁸ but the potential of game rules and mechanics to convey historical ideas and theories has been discussed by a growing range of authors.⁹ The *Civilization*¹⁰ series provides a potent and interactive explanation of many driving forces within human history,¹¹ even if its representations of the past are sometimes two dimensional or socially or intellectually problematic.¹² Although players may retain some distinction between history as presented in game and actual history,¹³ there is overwhelming evidence for the influence of games on players' perceptions of the past.¹⁴

However, while the impact of game worlds and mechanics on their players' formative understanding of a period have been considered in some depth, the influence of game objectives (ranging from victory conditions, to subquests, to Steam achievements) on players' perceptions of the past has not been considered in any great depth. Elliott and Kapell have highlighted the connection between ahistorical rules and ahistorical outcomes: players will typically play to win, so inauthentic objectives will lead to inauthentic behaviour.¹⁵ This is an important concept which needs to be investigated further in relation to the formative impact of digital games on their audience: game objectives have a massive potential to change the way players act and hence how they think about the subject matter of the game.

Game objectives are important in historical games as they form one of the principle means by which a game may influence player behaviour and hence can play a major role in structuring the player's perceptions of the past.¹⁶ Whether the completion of objectives is required to progress through the game, to receive some mechanical advantage, or simply to gain a purely cosmetic reward or acknowledgement, game objectives form an easily recognised framework for the player and encourage them to act in a particular manner. Within historical games this can encourage the player to act in a manner befitting their character and period, or to embrace a different and alien set of ideals. Used poorly, they can

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encourage erratic and inconsistent play or rob the player of agency by restricting their choices and input thus reducing the impact of the game.

This influence over player agency ties objectives strongly to the most potent influencing element of digital games: their interactive nature.¹⁷ This interactivity demands the engagement of the player with the environments and rules of the presented world in order to progress and ultimately complete the game.¹⁸ Requiring attention in this manner ensures a deeper learning experience for the player than that provided by more passive literary or visual media,¹⁹ strengthening the power of the game to influence its audience.²⁰ Their interactive nature also demands that games present coherent and complete, if abstract, worlds.²¹ They must provide an environment which can be fully explored and manipulated by the player, one which is visibly consistent and holistic and hence apparently authoritative. This can easily cement the image of periods, characters, and events presented by the game as the foundation of a player's knowledge. As so much of a game's educational impact is based on the interactive nature of the medium, it is of fundamental importance for the game's objectives to encourage exploration of the game world in a constructive manner.

Furthermore, game objectives can influence roleplay which emerges through the game. The interactive nature of games gives the player an unrivalled audience-centric experience of their world. The player is the driver of the game's story and to a certain extent they come to embody the character or force they control.²² The player can develop an almost personal connection with the game world. Objectives can influence roleplay by encouraging specific player actions through rewards (providing mechanical advantages, granting cosmetic options, or changing narratives) or through coercion (demanding actions be completed to progress or win the game). They can hence change how players perceive their characters and their behaviours, goals, or morality.

This roleplaying element is particularly important when considering the learning impact of historical games. As McLaughlan and Kirkpatrick have demonstrated, roleplay encourages a deeper engagement with the subject matter of the game and can hence play a substantial influencing role on the player's understanding of this material.²³ Roles assigned to players can also strongly influence player behaviour.²⁴ Players of historical games are encouraged by the nature of the medium to roleplay as figures from the actual, fictional, or

mythological past. This may be concrete and defined, as in Western RPGs such as *Baldur's Gate*²⁵ or *The Witcher*²⁶ where gameplay and mechanics revolve around roleplay. The roleplay may be looser and more incidental, as in *Thief: The Dark Project*²⁷ or *Assassin's Creed* where the player takes control of a specific character, but has limited agency in their actions. Roleplay can be abstract, as in *Civilization* where a player acts as a totemic and immortal force driving their people's destiny, but nevertheless has opportunity to play to a particular ideal or world view. In each of these cases the player can occupy the complex bimodal relationship with their Avatar as identified by Burn: sometimes the player plays as their Avatar, sometimes they observe the Avatar's story.²⁸ In any event, this element of play demands that the player engage with the gameworld in a deep manner which is unique to this medium. Furthermore, their own actions and decisions will inform a player's understanding of the period presented. Roleplay and the player agency it represents can therefore greatly reinforce the impact of a game.

As a result, if a game is to provide an image of the past which is useful for historical study or even research, it is beneficial for that game to make use of objectives which guide the player towards gameplay which is consistent with the carefully prepared game world and game rules. In short, the game objectives must be authentic. They must encourage the player to act in a manner in keeping with the character they assume. They must encourage roleplay without restricting player agency.

Accuracy, authenticity, and realism in historical computer games are remarkably slippery terms and often mean different things to designers, players, and scholars with marked divisions within each of these groups.²⁹ It is important to emphasise that games can never be truly 'accurate' recreations of past events nor should they be designed to be this way. No matter how meticulously a game world (whether for a digital or board game) is designed, any pretext of accuracy is shattered as soon as play begins.³⁰ As the player takes actions and the game reacts to these actions divergences from history occur and multiply exponentially. For a game to be truly 'accurate', any elements of interactivity and play must be removed, undermining the core nature of the game and turning it into a documentary: a valuable item, but nevertheless a very different form of media from a game. Games cannot be historically accurate in the traditional sense.

Games may nevertheless contain historically authentic or realistic components,³¹ and in the case of historical games such authenticity is often a desirable trait. Through the world they present they can display information and images of the past. Through their rules and mechanics they can show functioning historical models and theories.³² Through their play and dynamics they are able to encourage players to engage with the past in innovative ways.³³ This is beneficial for academic purposes, but is also desirable for an improved game experience through greater immersion, and for commercial purposes as a substantial portion of the player base of historical games demonstrate a preference for ‘accuracy’ or ‘authenticity’ in these games under the correct circumstances.³⁴

Discussion of accuracy in games generally focuses on reconstruction of aesthetic game elements: outfits, locations, and weaponry are frequent themes. While authenticity in these areas is desirable for the sake of immersion, this is a rather superficial issue for historical games. While games can be, and are, used as sources of data this is a capacity which they share with other media.³⁵ A more important, but less frequently discussed, issue is that of mechanical authenticity: the presentation of working abstract models of the historical world which can be used to introduce players to historical theories.³⁶ There are often limitations here, but these models can act as influential and valuable learning tools. Authentic gameplay – having players behave in a manner befitting their characters – has barely been considered but, as outlined above, these elements have great potential for learning and viewing the past.

Grand Strategy Games are particularly relevant when discussing the impact of objectives as they have a substantial capacity to influence their players’ perceptions of the medieval period (or indeed any other period of history). These games give the player control over a kingdom, empire, or other polity, often in the form of an immortal and unseen influencing power. The player is typically granted near total control over the political, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and (above all) military aspects of their faction and competes against rival powers for supremacy. Games of this genre require the player to interact extensively with vast and complex interlocking models of every element of their chosen polity: the player must become intimately familiar with the presented workings of their empire to ensure victory.³⁷ Furthermore, the complexity of these games contributes to their appearance as authoritative sources, a pretence supported by pseudo-academic elements within games (such as in game encyclopaedias and hyperlinks to external websites), This is an accepted version of a chapter published by Bloomsbury in *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, available at <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/middle-ages-in-modern-culture-9781788314787/>.

and by declarations of historical veracity by their creators. Through their complexity and typically free roaming nature these games also provide their players with a great deal of agency, allowing them near infinite meaningful pathways through the game. For these reasons games such as those of the *Civilization* series can strongly influence players' perceptions of the past and can be very effective in the classroom.³⁸ However, the very factors which can make these games so effective as learning tools can equally lead to the propagation of inconsistent or otherwise problematic views of the past.

Classifying Objectives

A substantial variety of objectives exist within digital games. Andersen et al. highlight a distinction between primary objectives (those which are required to complete the game) and secondary objectives ('optional challenges that reward the player upon completion or simply exist for their own sake').³⁹ This distinction between mandatory and additional goals is important, but does not quite encapsulate the full spectrum of game objectives. Therefore, this framework may be fruitfully expanded and elaborated to consider the following four types of objective:

- 1) Core or Victory Objectives – the end goal of the game which must be completed to win.
- 2) Primary or Progression Objectives – which must be fulfilled in order to advance through the game.
- 3) Secondary or Beneficial Objectives – which are not required to complete the game, but nevertheless provide some narrative or mechanical advantage or change.
- 4) Tertiary or Challenge Objectives – which provide no substantive in game change and which exist solely as achievements for the player.

Within these categories there is substantial variation. Objectives may be established through in game narrative, additional materials, or through indications outside the game whether from the games' creators or its players. They may be established at the start of the game, revealed as the game progresses, or hidden until they are accomplished. Objectives may be prescriptive, dictating player actions at the expense of freedom of exploration. They may be

less stringent, allowing greater player agency. However, whatever their form, they share the ability to steer player action to varying degrees and in several ways.

The most fundamental objectives are victory conditions: the circumstances which must be met to complete the game. Grand strategy games tend to present these goals at the outset. *Medieval II: Total War*⁴⁰ informs the player of their objectives (conquering a set number of provinces or defeating a specific rival or rivals) through its 'Faction Selection' screen at the start of each new game. Role playing games more typically present victory conditions through narrative over the course of the game. *Baldur's Gate* introduces the ultimate goal of the game gradually and alongside the plot over seven chapters.

Victory objectives guide the actions of any player attempting to complete the game.⁴¹ To win a game of *Medieval II: Total War* the player must defeat particular rivals and control a certain amount of territory: England must defeat Scotland and France and hold at least fifteen regions. While it is technically possible to eliminate rivals through extensive campaigns of assassination and to acquire the requisite number of regions through purchase or bribery, the impracticality of these methods and the pretext of the game dictate that warfare and conquest form the central activity throughout the game. In order to complete this ultimate victory objective the player is led to concentrate on military matters and the management of an empire necessary to support them.

Many games present the player with a choice of victory objectives. *Civilization VI*,⁴² a grand strategy game which gives the player control of a civilization from 4,000 BC to the near future can be won in five ways. The 'Domination' victory condition requires the player to conquer the capital cities of all the other civilizations. 'Science' requires the establishment of a colony on Mars, 'Religious' demands that at least half of the cities in each civilization follow the religion controlled by the player, and 'Culture' necessitates the creation of a tourist industry strong enough to dominate the world. The final victory type, 'Score', simply requires the player to survive until the end of the game (the year 2050 by default) and gain the highest score based on the size and achievements of their civilization.

The various victory objectives presented by *Civilization VI* and other games can dictate player behaviour to a significant extent, especially when playing on the higher difficulty levels of the game when computer-controlled rivals receive numerous advantages over the player

or are designed to conduct near perfect play. To win the game on these higher difficulty levels, the player is almost required to plan their path to victory from the very first turn. Early settlements must be established where they will be effective immediately, but also where they will best be able to make use of resources in the late game sometimes relying on developments which will not occur for hundreds of turns. For example, Mountains and Rainforests are initially of little agricultural or economic use but can be harnessed to support scientific research in the later stages of the game. This long-term planning can extend to the choice of civilization for a particular game as the unique advantages afforded to each civilization dictates that some are better able to achieve certain victory conditions than others. For example, Arabia receives bonuses to scientific research for each religious building within its empire and for each city which follows the civilization's religion globally. Arabia is therefore at an advantage over many other civilizations in securing a scientific victory.

Beyond these overarching victory objectives, many games incorporate intermediate or incremental progression objectives. These goals do not end the game, but must be completed before victory conditions can be met. A common format of such progression objectives are game levels which must be completed sequentially. The campaign mode of the real-time strategy game *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings*⁴³ is a paragon of this model. The game presents several campaigns to the player allowing them to explore the game's presentation of the achievements of various historical figures such as William Wallace, Frederick Barbarossa or Genghis Khan. These campaigns consist of a series of scenarios which must be completed in order: to complete the William Wallace campaign, the player must progress through seven scenarios going through the raising of forces, forming alliances, fighting the Battle of Stirling, and culminating in the Battle of Falkirk. Each of these scenarios consist of several further progression objectives which must be completed in sequence to complete the scenario.

These progression objectives micromanage the actions of the player – enforcing particular behaviour while reducing player agency. A player working their way through the William Wallace campaign in *Age of Empires II* has their route to victory set out in some detail through the scenarios and progression objectives within each of these scenarios. The player has control over their military and civilian units, the construction of buildings, and the development of their society, but this is constrained by the requirements of the progression

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objectives. The player follows the designers' script quite closely and has little meaningful freedom to dictate the development of the narrative.

Beneficial objectives change the game in some, usually positive, manner but are not required to complete the game. These often take the form of optional missions or side quests. For example, over the course of a game of *Medieval II: Total War* the player will receive missions, such as conquering a particular settlement or securing peace with a rival, assigned by the pope, council of nobles, or various guilds. If the player completes these missions, they receive rewards including additional troops or funds. *Baldur's Gate* presents the player with numerous optional subquests ranging from clearing a basement of rats to storming an enemy stronghold. In exchange the player receives mechanical advantages: they are rewarded with funds, more powerful weapons, experience points to strengthen their characters, or access to new characters. These objectives are not compulsory – the player may ignore them and still complete the game. However, the rewards received for their completion can aid the fulfilment of progression objectives and victory objectives through their provision of mechanical benefits to the player.

These beneficial objectives influence player actions in a different manner from victory or progression objectives. Where progression objectives dictate player actions, or at least demand that they must complete some of a range of possible actions, beneficial objectives exert softer influence. The player is drawn to behave in a certain manner because it will provide an in-game advantage. The potential receipt of powerful military units in *Medieval II: Total War* draws the player to attempt faction missions as these units can provide an immediate and often significant strategic advantage. The rewards for completing sidequests in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*⁴⁴ are even more lucrative: many unique and powerful items, such as *Carsomyr* arguably the best weapon in the game, are available only through the completion of these beneficial objectives.

Like beneficial objectives, challenge objectives are wholly optional and are not required to progress through the game. However, challenge objectives are distinguished by the nature of their rewards which provide no in-game advantage and typically do not alter the game in any substantial way. Many first-person games like *Assassin's Creed* encourage the collection of items or tokens from obscure or hard to reach locations encouraging

thorough exploration of the game world. However, any rewards received from completing these objectives are purely cosmetic. Many challenge objectives are only recognised outside the game through Steam Achievements, Playstation Trophies, or other similar methods.

Despite the superficial nature of the rewards, these challenge objectives can strongly influence play, as demonstrated by the substantial completion rates listed on Steam. These objectives often encourage the player to act in an unintuitive manner but nevertheless provide a motivation and direction for play. Anderson and his co-authors have demonstrated the influence of these challenge objectives in practice: unless they align closely with the progression objectives they can easily draw players into different behaviour.⁴⁵

Game objectives are therefore hugely varied, but all have the potential to influence the actions of their players. On the macro scale, victory objectives encourage particular behaviour of their players throughout the game. Progression objectives steer players through the game with some limited options, restricting player agency to control their behaviour. Beneficial and challenge objectives drive players in a different way, presenting them with tangible or intangible rewards for actions which are not required for the game. In combination, these various objectives provide game designers with a substantial variety of means to manipulate how their players play and hence how they experience and think about the game's content.

Within historical games, whose content focuses on history by definition, this process plays a leading role in influencing the player's perceptions of the past. The player undertakes the role of their in-game character and consciously or unconsciously associates their in-game behaviour with the actions and goals of their avatar. As game objectives can influence this behaviour they have substantial potential in guiding learning through play, but can also be hugely detrimental if employed carelessly.

Influential Objectives in Grand Strategy Games

Grand strategy games have perhaps the greatest potential to influence their players' understanding of the past through their detailed mechanics and apparent authority, but this is almost universally limited or undermined through actual gameplay within this genre. Players typically revert to certain common patterns of behaviour: classified by Emrich in 1993

in relation to *Master of Orion*⁴⁶ as exploring their environment, expanding their territory, exploiting resources, and exterminating rivals.⁴⁷ This '4X' system of gameplay emerged organically and unintentionally from early grand strategy games such as *Civilization* and *Master of Orion*,⁴⁸ but the system is now almost universal within grand strategy games as a genre. Players are encouraged and expected to expand their power and territory rapidly, aggressively and violently.⁴⁹

This is problematic from a historical perspective as the geo-political behaviour represented by this form of play very often diverges considerably from the attitudes and actions of the rulers and groups represented in game. '4X' games represent hugely aggressive, combative, and expansionist forms of rule which only reflect a very narrow and extreme section of polities throughout human history. This disconnect has been raised most visibly through a series of public controversies such as the representation of the Cree in *Civilization VI* which was condemned for its imposition of imperialist values and goals on the indigenous nation.⁵⁰ More generally, these games tend towards a euro-centric and colonialist perspective and hence provide a rather skewed vision of history and the marginalisation of 'barbarian' or 'native' peoples.⁵¹ They present a Whiggish vision of deterministic progress.⁵² Many players of these games have noted the absurdity and historical implausibility of such continuous expansion.⁵³

The representation of the rulers and polities of the Middle Ages through the dynamics of these games is particularly problematic. Players are encouraged or required to expand their kingdoms to implausible borders and to do so primarily through military force, but this places them firmly at odds with the aims and behaviour of most medieval rulers. There were obviously substantial variations across the geographical and chronological scope of the period, but medieval rulers nevertheless had very different motivations and objectives from their modern counterparts.⁵⁴ Centralisation of power into the hands of an absolute ruler was impractical (if not impossible). Instead rulership was generally accomplished through the construction and manipulation by the king of systems of alliances among the magnates of a kingdom.⁵⁵ Although warfare was undeniably a key role of medieval monarchs,⁵⁶ this formed only one part of their portfolio. These rulers were also administrators,⁵⁷ creators and enforcers of laws,⁵⁸ and representatives of their faith.⁵⁹ The emphasis placed on military expansion in these grand strategy games is largely divergent from the actions, capabilities, This is an accepted version of a chapter published by Bloomsbury in *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, available at <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/middle-ages-in-modern-culture-9781788314787/>.

and goals of medieval kings: inauthentic play is encouraged undermining the utility of these games as presentations and discussions of history.

These extreme, almost megalomaniac, dynamics of '4X' games are driven in large part by their objectives. As noted above, the victory conditions of *Medieval II: Total War* demand the conquest of a vast portion of medieval Europe almost inevitably driving the player towards military expansion. Even when other victory conditions are available, conquest is typically the most straightforward way to win. Of the range of objectives presented by *Civilization VI*, 'Domination' requires the conquest of every rival capital city (the first city constructed by each civilization). This can be a difficult and lengthy task, but the overarching objective is clear and concrete from the very start of the game. By comparison the 'Cultural' and 'Religious' victory conditions rely on the accumulation of 'tourism' and 'faith' respectively, abstract concepts given numerical value, in order to complete equally abstract and shifting goals. Conquest orientated victory conditions are typically more intuitive if not necessarily easier than other options drawing a substantial proportion of players to this style of play.

This focus on conquest as the main victory condition is particularly pronounced when these games deal with the Middle Ages. Of the five victory conditions presented by *Civilization VI* only 'Domination' and 'Religious' are achievable during the medieval portion of the game. 'Cultural' and 'Science' require technologies from more modern periods while 'Score' requires the play to the end of the game's timeframe. The image presented through the game's victory conditions corresponds with typical popular perceptions of the Middle Ages as violent and religious, devoid of culture, and scientifically backwards.

Beneficial objectives in grand strategy games also tend to focus on warfare and their rewards are often military in nature. The missions presented by the 'Noble Council' of *Medieval II: Total War* often revolve around conquest. Most notably, the player can receive missions to take a settlement of an existing enemy or to annex a settlement of a currently neutral neighbouring power. Through these objectives, the player is encouraged to continue an ongoing conflict to gain territory or to initiate a war for the same purpose. The rewards for the 'Noble Council' missions are semi-randomised but always include a strong probability of receiving additional military units, often the best units currently available to the player. The

player is guided towards expansionism through these objectives and granted the means to expand further through their completion.

Beyond this problematic focus on expansionism, the lack of intermediate progression objectives within grand strategy games emphasise planning in the extreme long term. *Civilization VI* with its 6,000 year time span is a clear example of this, but even games set wholly within the Middle Ages such as *Medieval II: Total War* require the player to develop strategies over centuries of game time. While medieval rulers (and indeed ancient and modern rulers) evidently did think to the future to a certain extent, looking to secure the succession for example, these games tend to place too great an emphasis on multi-generational planning over the consideration of concerns within the ruler's own lifespan. Through gameplay generation after generation of kings or emperors strive for the same, typically extremely expansionist, objectives.

The omission of intermediate progression objectives also tends to distance the player from the world presented in grand strategy games. Play of these games, particularly at the higher levels of difficulty or multiplayer competition, often focuses on the intricate balancing of the various abstract values within the game to gain marginal benefits over opponents. A plethora of strategy guides and forum threads are devoted to establishing optimal play. Because of this trend players often engage with these games as puzzle solving exercises rather than roleplaying opportunities or explorations of historical periods.⁶⁰

The absence of distinct progression and beneficial objectives for different factions and rulers within grand strategy games presents a very flat image of the Middle Ages and the different polities which existed during this period. The victory conditions for *Medieval II: Total War* are fundamentally similar for each faction: defeat a predefined rival faction or factions and conquer a certain number of provinces. While different rivals and numbers of provinces are required, the essence of the objective does not change. The goal is conquest whether the player takes the role of a king of France, England or Scotland; the Emperor of Byzantium; the Fatimid Caliph or the Seljuk Sultan; or the Doge of Venice or Consul of Milan. Each of the rulers of these various polities held fundamentally different ideologies and goals, of which military expansion was only a small factor. By reducing these factions to two dimensional facsimiles, the creators of the game have undermined any historical nuance in the period.

The objectives present in medieval grand strategy games therefore tend to restrict play and induce players to act in an ahistorical manner. Most notably, victory conditions and beneficial objectives often encourage the prioritisation of aggressive expansion over all other activities thereby simplifying and undermining the representation of medieval rulership within these games. The nature and distribution of these and other objectives also encourage an emphasis on excessively long term strategies and a distancing of the player from the subject matter of the game, further reducing the ability of the games to usefully portray the role of medieval kings and other rulers. A lack of diversity in objectives for very different factions and individuals cements these issues and presents a further challenge in the representation of ideologies and practicalities of rulership in this period. For a genre otherwise well placed to communicate information and ideas about the medieval world, these shortcomings in objectives are particularly damaging to the games' ability to present and discuss history.

Historical and Ahistorical Play in *Crusader Kings II*

Crusader Kings II represents an important, if not completely successful, step away from the typical focus on conquest through game objectives in medieval grand strategy games.⁶¹ The game is designed to represent historical systems and societies in a deep and considered manner. Game mechanics are complex and designed to encourage historically feasible outcomes. Furthermore, these mechanics place substantial emphasis on non-military activities ranging from diplomacy and family politics, through economic management, to maintenance of personal piety and prestige. The effectiveness of military conquest is muted through various mechanics which limit the speed at which territory can be acquired and even whether the player is able to initiate a war.⁶²

Several simple but fundamental differences in game mechanics further distinguish *Crusader Kings II* from most other games of the genre and further reduce the prominence of aggressive expansion within gameplay. The player takes the role of the head of a medieval dynasty rather than the leader of a medieval polity and while this family does rule lands they are distinct from them. It is perfectly possible gain or lose control of different counties, duchies, kingdoms, and empires over the course of the game or to install independent dynasty members in positions of power across the map. This encourages a historically authentic focus

on succession and the maintenance and management of different sections of the family tree. Military action can play an important part in the development of family power, but it is not the only or even most important element here.

This focus on dynastic leadership is tied to mechanics surrounding character development and roleplay.⁶³ Unlike the totemic and abstract rulers of the *Civilization* series, players of *Crusader Kings II* are cast in the role of distinct individuals with complex and evolving strengths and weaknesses. A character may be an able steward, but naïve to the world of intrigue. They may be a poor soldier but a learned scholar. Many of these qualities are driven by personality traits: ‘Paranoid’ characters make better spies while ‘Gregarious’ individuals are stronger diplomats. This is all relayed through a character sheets similar to those found in roleplaying games and the presence of different traits and abilities allows different reactions to in game events. As a result of this complex system, it is often beneficial to play to a character’s strengths rather than invariably focusing on all out warfare, potentially encouraging the development of roleplay or emergence of narratives.⁶⁴

Aggressive expansion is further marginalised as the game does not restrict play to the highest tiers of society. While the player may choose to play as an independent king or emperor, they can also play as vassals or even sub-vassals of these powerful figures. Gameplay typically focuses on the politics and intrigue within medieval polities, often over and above relationships with external powers. A great deal of gameplay is devoted to activities within the player’s kingdom rather than external expansion.

Most importantly, *Crusader Kings II* is a game with very few objectives. Victory objectives have never been a focus for the designers or for the majority of players. The only nod to a victory condition is in the form of a dynasty score awarded at the end of the game or when the player quits. With no victory conditions there are likewise no progression objectives to direct the player. Beneficial objectives do exist in the form of character ‘ambitions’ such as ‘amass wealth’ or ‘become paragon of virtue’ which require the player to accumulate set amounts of money and piety respectively in exchange for mechanical rewards. However, the majority of these objectives and rewards are unrelated or only tangentially connected to warfare. There are a more substantial range of challenge objectives presented through steam achievements (136 at the time of writing), but the majority of these are also

unrelated to warfare. The designers of the game provide very little direction for play, and what direction is given does not focus on conquest. The players are largely left to set their own objectives.

To gauge the impact of this near total absence of objectives a brief, informal and open survey was conducted on the *Crusader Kings II* reddit. A single question was asked: 'What goals do you set yourself when you start a game?' 121 comments were received in response. Participants were self-selecting and anonymous, answers were reflexive, and there was no attempt to verify their relationship to actual playstyles. However, while the survey is of limited use in quantitative terms, the qualitative nature of the results provides a basic but significant illumination of the impact of the limited objectives within *Crusader Kings II* on player behaviour.

None of the respondents reported that their chosen goals were influenced by the victory conditions or 'ambitions' (the victory objectives and beneficial objectives respectively) provided by the game. This is perhaps unsurprising given the low-key role of these elements within the game design, but it is still noteworthy as it underlines the almost objective-free nature of the game. Players overwhelmingly chose their own objectives in the absence of any strong steer from the designers.

While none of the respondents reported being influenced by progression or beneficial objectives, several indicated play led by challenge objectives in the form of Steam achievements.⁶⁵ This small group of responses highlight the impact which purely cosmetic official goals can have on player behaviour. Challenge objectives have the potential to steer players towards authentic (or inauthentic) play.

Most respondents however reported setting their own goals. These included a vast and varied range of objectives, many of which were non-military or non-expansionist in nature. Several looked to extend their family's influence over multiple independent realms rather than conquering and consolidating a single polity.⁶⁶ Many of these players specifically emphasised that their goal was to achieve this dynastic hegemony through non-military means; most typically through strategic marriages and intrigue.⁶⁷ Other players set objectives which completely ignored expansion, looking instead to create a dynasty which dominated science and medicine,⁶⁸ trade and economics,⁶⁹ or culture.⁷⁰ One reported focusing on the

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manipulation of other realms and funding proxy wars without engaging in conflict themselves.⁷¹ Another simply sought to produce a large dynasty.⁷² Simply surviving was a core goal for some players,⁷³ some of whom deliberately selected precarious positions to increase the challenge.⁷⁴ This substantial range of objectives matches the diverse mechanics within the game. Players are able to engage extensively with *Crusader Kings II* without making substantial use of the military mechanics and are hence able to set an array of objectives in several fields.

Numerous other respondents reported setting roleplaying objectives for each character they played.⁷⁵ In many cases this roleplay was led by the ability statistics and traits of the character.⁷⁶ This focus on roleplay among a substantial minority of the player base reflects the mechanical design of the game and the corresponding focus on individuals and dynasties rather than faceless polities. Furthermore, by following the relatively authentic (if abstract) models of characters' personalities presented within the game players tend towards behaviours which are authentic to their characters. Through these roleplay led objectives players can gain a more informative experience of the world presented in *Crusader Kings II*.

Many players reported deliberately limiting the expansion of their realm.⁷⁷ These limits were often arbitrary and self-imposed, but some players used game mechanics to limit the size of their kingdom in a more organic manner allowing them to retain an expansionist bent but ensuring they could never retain substantial conquests.⁷⁸ Some players restricted their expansion even further, avoiding independent rulership and instead seeking influence within their Lord's realm as important vassals.⁷⁹ The motivations behind this approach varied: some players attempted to create artificial semi historical boundaries around and within their realm,⁸⁰ others limited expansion to enhance the challenge posed by the game and their enjoyment of play,⁸¹ some sought to create and maintain an 'aesthetically pleasing empire'.⁸²

It is important to note however that despite this range of goals conquest remained the core objective for most respondents. In a substantial minority of these cases this violent expansion was fairly restrained and tended towards historical or semi-historical goals. Several players sought to match or exceed the achievements of actual medieval dynasties or polities.⁸³ Notably, this focus on great dynasties was far from universal: around the same number of respondents reported a preference for more obscure historical families and

characters.⁸⁴ A likewise substantial range of players sought to re-establish empires of the ancient world.⁸⁵ These groups of players reverted to the typical expansionist goals of grand strategy games, although they justified this expansion to an extent through their understanding of history.

Most players who set conquest goals for themselves placed no limitations on their planned expansion,⁸⁶ often specifically aiming for the conquest of the entire game world.⁸⁷ There is nothing inherently wrong with this type of play, and indeed it can be immensely entertaining. However, the popularity of unabashed conquest displayed here suggests that even the complex and varied game world created by the designers of *Crusader Kings II* with its open-ended play and objectives has not overcome the tendency towards expansionist goals propagated within the grand strategy genre as a whole.

The sparsity of formal objectives in *Crusader Kings II* seems therefore to have encouraged a greater range of play. A small group of players looked to the challenge objectives to guide their play, but the majority set their own goals. These goals were varied and often incorporated non-military and non-expansionist objectives and several players demonstrated reflexive roleplay based on the characteristics of their characters. While conquest was the dominant objective for the majority of players, the conquest was often driven by perceived historical goals. By reducing the visibility and impact of progression, beneficial, and challenge objectives the creators of *Crusader Kings II* created a play environment which allowed players to pursue their own goals. These goals, possibly because of the historical credentials and mechanics of the game and possibly because of the typical audience for historical grand strategy games, tended to have a historical bent.

The impact of this approach towards objectives should not be overstated. Conquest remained the primary objective for most respondents, and threads on the *Crusader Kings* reddit and forums demonstrate the appeal of world conquest to many players of the game. This is quite possibly a consequence of the broader trends within grand strategy games which encourage military domination. Despite its differences from other games in its genre *Crusader Kings II* shares many aesthetic and mechanical qualities with other grand strategy games and these may well invite player assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious, about the nature and objectives of the game. Conquest objectives have been removed or downplayed

in *Crusader Kings II*, but in the absence of a distinct goal players continue to use these expansionist objectives on an informal basis.

More generally, the lack of objectives within the game leaves players without guidance. As demonstrated above, play often focuses on reconstructing historical goals, but with very limited direction within the game the player is responsible for establishing the nature of these goals. If, as was the case with many respondents to the survey, the player is relatively well informed with regards to the period of the game then this agency can provide a great deal of scope for constructive and informative play. If however the player has little knowledge of the period this freedom of action does nothing to inform them of the goals and attitudes of medieval rulers.

Conclusion

The objectives of historical computer games can influence gameplay and the player learning experience in several ways. In the case of grand strategy games set in the Middle Ages, game objectives generally encourage violent expansion in a manner and on a scale very much at odds with the goals and actions of actual medieval rulers. As a result, the dynamics of these games provide a misleading representation of the medieval period and feed into a narrative of the Middle Ages as an overwhelmingly violent and war-torn era. By removing and limiting these conquest orientated objectives the creators of *Crusader Kings II* have influenced the playstyles of several players encouraging a move away from territorial expansion and encouraging play based in other socio-political areas and on roleplay. However, this influence has been limited by player preconceptions regarding the period and influenced by other games of this genre which have led a substantial number of players to retain a focus on military conquest. Furthermore, the removal of victory conditions and progression objectives denies the player fundamental guidance with regards to how their character should behave. Removing troublesome objectives is insufficient to overcome their legacy. To facilitate authentic play it is necessary to create authentic objectives.

There are several ways in which the objectives of grand strategy games could be adjusted to better present the medieval world and its rulers and to encourage more 'authentic' play. The introduction of victory conditions which are not focused solely on warfare would be an important first step in this regard. A more meaningful development of

the score system employed within *Crusader Kings II* is a possible solution. Rewarding players with points for actions in keeping with their role as ruler is an abstract and blunt method of changing behaviours, but can be an effective one. Such a system was implemented within the original *Medieval: Total War*.⁸⁸ In this case the majority of points were awarded for holding particular territories, but with some alteration this could easily form the basis of a broader system of scoring encouraging more balanced and authentic play.

Such a points system should also encourage more diverse play and greater player agency than the rigid victory conditions of most grand strategy games. Games with a single victory condition coerce their player towards a playstyle which will achieve that victory. Games with multiple victory conditions provide some variation, but as it is usually still necessary to focus on a single overarching goal, often from very early on in the game, play is often restricted to one of a very finite number of core pathways. Receiving points for actions and achievements in a variety of socio-economic areas would provide a stronger basis for hybrid playstyles and support changes of approach within a campaign.

Another potential approach would use progression and beneficial objectives to guide player behaviour on a smaller scale. Players could choose from a small range of objectives based on their ruler, polity, and situation within the game and would gain points or mechanical advantages for achieving these goals. Examples of similar systems exist within the grand strategy genre such as the mission system of *Europa Universalis IV*,⁸⁹ but these often focus on military objectives and are can be overly prescriptive encouraging nations to expand their interests in the same directions as their historical counterparts with limited regard for the geopolitical situation within the current game. The 'wishes' system employed within *The Sims 3*⁹⁰ provides the player with a selection of short term goals for their characters based on their current situation which serves as an effective guide to player behaviour within that sandbox game and a similar system could provide a more useful model with a stronger focus on the personal qualities of a medieval ruler. A similar system appears to be under development for the forthcoming *Crusader Kings III*⁹¹ whereby characters accrue 'stress' when they take actions contrary to their personality traits.⁹² Such a model for game objectives would allow for easy variation of goals across different characters and polities and create a deeper experience. It could also encourage an emphasis on shorter term goals better reflecting medieval attitudes and realities.

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A more drastic measure towards increasing player focus on the short term would be to base objectives and even victory conditions on the lifespan of individual rulers. Play could be limited to a single king with victory determined by achieving certain objectives or by accruing sufficient points over their reign. Such systems exist informally in 'succession games' where a string of players take control of a faction in turn, passing control on to the next player when the protagonist dies. Formal implementation of such succession games raises some design issues, but these are far from insurmountable.

These methods all rely on an increased emphasis on roleplay within grand strategy games. They require rulers to be viewed as distinct and unique individuals with varied and changeable motivations. This demands a move away from the totemic rulers of traditional grand strategy games such as *Civilization* in favour of the more personal models presented by *Crusader Kings II*. There are various ways in which this could be accomplished but this will inevitably require a more careful consideration of the nature of the grand strategy genre.

More careful curation of game objectives would also aid the expression of history in other periods and in other genres of game. Megalomaniac conquerors were very much in the minority throughout the course of history and a more careful consideration of the aims of Roman emperors or American presidents would facilitate the development of a stronger understanding of history among the players of games set in the ancient or modern periods. Outside the grand strategy genre, roleplaying games could look more closely at medieval moral systems when constructing their own alignment systems. Combat simulators could base their victory conditions more heavily on the goals of medieval combatants.

This move towards greater authenticity of objectives has applications beyond the educational and academic spheres. Various designers are looking to objectives as a means to reinvigorate this genre, changing game dynamics to produce a more interesting experience (particularly in the often repetitive end-game) and greater replayability.⁹³ As indicated above, a substantial section of the playerbase places emphasis on the historical authenticity of these games. In some cases this extends to demands for more authentic objectives and gameplay, such as facilitating the meaningful play of an empire in decline.⁹⁴ Authentic play can be beneficial from commercial and recreational standpoints.

There are of course limits to this approach. The creation of authentic objectives relies on an understanding of the goals of the player character. Discerning these motivations is subjective and often controversial. This issue can be mitigated to a certain extent by basing objectives on paragon models of the period: while it is very hard to establish the motivations of individual kings, models of ideal rulership are readily available throughout most of the medieval period. Numerous works such as the *Administrando Imperii*,⁹⁵ *Gesta Chuonradi II Imperatoris*,⁹⁶ and *Vita Ludovici regis*⁹⁷ were written primarily to provide a guide for young rulers while an even more substantial pieces of literature went to great lengths to present their protagonists acting as paragon models of rulership (and their antagonists as imperfect foils). Games can reproduce these models of rulership even if they cannot depict the exact goals of specific rulers.

More importantly, for a historical game to retain its utility as a learning and research tool its objectives must not be so prescriptive as to remove, or greatly reduce, player agency. The interactive and player driven nature of computer games are vital and unique elements of this medium and form the basis for much of their learning potential. Zealous implementation of objectives may corral players into authentic behaviour, but this could easily destroy the player's free will undermining their ability and desire to explore their environments and experiment with game mechanics. Authentic objectives have great capacity to enhance the learning experience provided by computer games, but great care must be taken to ensure that the end product remains a dynamic experience: that it can still be considered a game.

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⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Houghton, 'It's What You Do With It That Counts'; Alex Wiltshire, 'How Crusader Kings 2 Makes People Out Of Opinions', *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, 11 November 2016. Available online: <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2016/11/11/crusader-kings-2-characters/> (accessed 10 May 2018).

⁶⁴ Bertrand Lucat and Mads Haahr, 'What Makes a Successful Emergent Narrative: The Case of Crusader Kings II', in *Interactive Storytelling*, eds. Henrik Schoenau-Fog, Luis Emilio Bruni, Sandy Louchart, and Sarune Baceviciute, (Cham: Springer, 2015).

⁶⁵ 'I usually play for achievements' (Ignis92); 'I mostly just find an achievement I haven't done and work on that' (DOLamba); '[I] try a[n] achiev[e]ment' (Dzharek); 'every new campaign I start is to get 3 - 5 new achievements' (Colonel_Chow); 'Achievement hunting' (Creative_Username_44).

⁶⁶ 'I try to spread my dynasty to as many kingdoms as possible' (capt_pessimist); 'I try to play as a kingdom and spread my lineage around the map without making my own realm too big.' (wrongbuton); 'I try to get my dynasty on as many thrones as possible!' (sabersquirrel); 'My primary goal is to give the Dynasty as much land as possible.' (NorthAndEastTexan); 'Sometimes I'll play, not to rule the most land myself, but have my family be in a position of power, with every major kingdom and empire ruled by my dynasty.' (Pixel871).

⁶⁷ '[I expand] without wars. Just your ability to plot and play the game of thrones.' (Lord Hawkman); 'I like to play long game marriage/intrigue' (bloodofkorne); 'I try to use unorthodox methods such as expanding purely through marriage.' (Mage13lade).

⁶⁸ 'I keep myself as small vassal in HRE, honing my knowledge skill to the max so I can be the Court Physician of my liege - basically creating the dynasty of doctors and scientists' (The_Heichou); 'I like the fact that you can do some preliminary science' (Sansophia).

⁶⁹ '[I] play Merchant [R]epublic, and my goal is to have all sea trade posts on a map.' (andrewwewwka); '[I conduct] land reforms within the realm for stability, and [spend] money on building cities for additional income and infrastructure.' (Mage13lade).

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⁷⁰ 'One of my goals is always to be the new cultural centre of the world.' (Peanutcat4).

⁷¹ 'I love shaping/influencing the world outside my realm. I usually build my empire so that I have very high income. Then I use the money to fund other realms' wars, support underdogs, depose foreign rulers, install claimants etc...' (__october__).

⁷² 'I like to [...] Have heaps of kids.' (dunnymunch).

⁷³ 'Survival is the main goal' (ElagabalusRex).

⁷⁴ 'My jam lately is limiting myself to a single kingdom [...] and trying to hold out against larger neighbors' (mister_accismus).

⁷⁵ 'my favorite way to play the game is by playing to my character's personality as much as possible to create personal plot arcs' (TheMeatiestRocket); 'I would have side objectives for each character and try to make an interesting story for each character while going towards the ultimate goal.' (SentientHAL); 'I play a lot more around the role playing aspect of the game.' (Big-Island); 'The most fun for me is to make an interesting story and personality for each ruler' (5firtrees).

⁷⁶ 'I'll usually do what my character's traits tell me to do. Rulers who are masters of intrigue try to assassinate their way to the top. Diplomats through marriage. Marshals through bigger army diplomacy.' (medokady); 'I [...] roleplay the situations according to the character's traits' (itssofluffie); 'sometimes I will do a roleplay game, where every decision is based on my character stats and traits' (Pixel871); 'I play Crusader Kings II for the 'Role-Playing' [...] The traits within the game help a lot with this.' (X_Clint_Beastwood_X).

⁷⁷ 'My main objective usually ends up being to set myself up for a solid but not overpowered realm by the end of the game' (HijabiKathy); 'After getting to a place of power I'm content with, I just strive to keep the dynasty in power.' (itssofluffie); 'I've really tried to avoid forcing as rapid expansion as I can and instead see what happens when I dedicate prolonged periods of time to peace.' (TurrPhennirPhan).

⁷⁸ '[I'm] forcing myself to stay gavelkind [an early form of succession which divides the father's lands between his sons], so every time my character dies the realm shatters, and [I] have to choose where [t]o expand next.' (lokhrohk).

⁷⁹ 'I like to play as a count and ascend to be a regional power in a Kingdom or Empire.' (Blasoon); 'Started at the beginning as Count Loup in southern France. Never declared war, worked my way up in the Benedictine order, gave money, built churches.' (NotGoodAtCleverNames); 'I'm trying to do a full game from 769 to the end without going any higher than duke rank.' (SeeEmmDee).

⁸⁰ 'I usually try to make my realm as de jure as possible, in the sense of making sure all of my vassals control the land that people think they are entitled to control without making any one of them too powerful.' (medokady); 'I always try to keep my vassals cleanly inside their de jure dutchies/kingdoms using any means' (Dark__Pearl)

⁸¹ 'I try to avoid blobbing [expanding excessively] because there's a point where that becomes too repetitive for entertainment value.' (OctoberNoir).

⁸² 'I try to make the most aesthetically pleasing empire/kingdom while also remaining a world power.' (Admiral_Aenoth).

⁸³ 'I also like to recreate historic empires but better' (TheEpicCorvix); 'Like starting as Count Robert Capet of Liege in 769 start and get Capet to the top of the list. Or the last Karling [Carolingian] in the 1066 start.'

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(DOLamba); 'I try and follow the historical rise of a dynasty, then avert their fall' (NoctisRex); 'I've also played through most of the neat historical figures like Charlemagne, Rurik, and Ragnar.' (FloridaMan_69); 'I'll more often than not have kind of a "phase", usually started by gorging on wiki page after wiki page of a certain country or ethnic group.' (PM_ME_YOUR_EMRAKUL).

⁸⁴ 'I like to play historical underdogs or also-rans and elevate them out of obscurity' (PlanetOfHats); 'I like to play some random irrelevant character, try to do something very ahistorical and see how it plays out.' (Kosinski33); 'I enjoy winning with the historical 'loser' [...] I also like starting with dynasties when they are insignificant or weak (NoctisRex); 'I like to play as those who historically died out.' (ziggymister); 'I like taking historical losers and underdogs and making them into superpowers'(The_Vulture1).

⁸⁵ 'the restoration of Persia, two restorations of Rome [...] and I'm currently trying to restore Alexanders empire starting as the count of Philippopolis.' (CMGA99); '[a] reformed Rome complete with re-unification of the Catholic and Orthodox Church, and also a Persian Empire that worships the sun.' (Simmons_M8); 'to restore the Achaemenid Empire' (Senza32); 'reforming Rome and uniting the Arab and European worlds under Roman (Catholic) rule.' (OranjePatriot); 'Become the emperor of the Roman Empire as a Catholic' (EastGuardian); 'Either restore Rome or make Alexander proud and invade India' (Renegard); 'restore Carthaginian control of the Mediterranean' (Hatlesspider); '[as the Byzantine Empire] do reconquests that would make Justinian proud' (Peanutcat4); 'restoring the Kingdom of Israel' (The_Vulture1); 'restore the Roman Empire' (Norse_Emperor).

⁸⁶ 'see how large I can get' (Sparkyninja); 'conquest, trying to get as much land as possible' (The_Heichou); 'try to form Empires. Mainly through conquest and military might.' (vttheawesome); 'amass as much power as I can' (miauw62); 'Blob' (Deflatrriot), 'climb the ladder and become the most powerful warlord on the block' (FloridaMan_69); 'go from count to emperor, and spread the dynasty wherever possible.' (LostThyme); 'conquer as much as I can' (wstudholme); 'Conquer land and kill people' (aaragax); 'get as much territory as possible' (LosEagle); 'Crush my enemies' (SotiCoto); 'I just like the typical start-as-a-count-then-become-an-emperor scheme.' (ARADPLAUG); 'try to conquer something.' (skadefryd).

⁸⁷ 'Usually world conquest' (Ganduin); 'I've done the whole paint the world my colour thing' (ehkodiak); '[I] make a bid for the world.' (JakobTykesson); 'destroying everything' (lkmertgurcan); 'aim for world conquest' (HSTEHSTE); 'conque[r] the world [...] with murder and gold' (mrMalloc); 'to conquer the world' (Cathsaigh).

⁸⁸ *Medieval: Total War* (Activision, 2002).

⁸⁹ *Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox Interactive, 2013).

⁹⁰ *The Sims 3* (Electronic Arts, 2009).

⁹¹ *Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Interactive, 2020).

⁹² Paradox Interactive, 'Dev Diary #9: Lifestyles', *Crusader Kings III*, 14 January 2020. Available online: <https://www.crusaderkings.com/news/dev-diary-9-lifestyles> (Accessed on 22/4/2020)

⁹³ Floyd and Portnow, 'Strategic Uncertainty'; Smith and Johnson, 'Soren Johnson on challenging the norms of 4X games'.

⁹⁴ Ortega, 'Representing the Past', 4.

⁹⁵ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. Gyula Moravcsik, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967).

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⁹⁶ Wipo, 'The Deeds of Conrad II', in *Imperial Lives and Letters of the Eleventh Century*, trans. T. E. Mommsen and K. F. Morrison (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1962).

⁹⁷ Suger, *The deeds of Louis the Fat*, eds. Richard Cusimano and John Moorhead (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

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