Crusade Kings Too? (Mis)Representations of the Crusades in Grand Strategy Games

Grand Strategy Games – which cast the player as the ruler of a kingdom or other medieval polity – vary substantially in their scope, detail and focus but almost invariably equate 'medieval' with 'crusader'. This may take the form of minor cosmetic features as in the *Civilization* series which do not fundamentally change how the game is played but root its theme within the historical period. There may be more dramatic mechanical elements such as the dedicated crusading system in the *Medieval: Total War* games. Most blatantly, the centrality of the crusades may be suggested through the title of the game as is the case with the *Crusader Kings* series. This privileging of the crusades is perhaps unsurprising as the movement has provided source material for games across all genres, but the tendency may be particularly pronounced amongst Grand Strategy Games. This genre tends to focus on armed struggle as this is comparatively easy to model and is traditionally viewed as the central appeal of the genre.[i] The crusades are one of the most easily and widely identified conflicts of the period and are hence a natural fit for such games set in the Middle Ages.

This focus on the crusades provides substantial potential for a deep consideration of the events which could cement a stronger understanding of the period and challenge the misuse of the crusades in the modern world for political means. But, as tends to be the case with games across genres, Grand Strategy Games typically fall short in their representations of the crusades. In this chapter I will argue that several of the most serious of these shortcomings are the consequence of limitations imposed by design constraints and by the expectations of the genre held by its players and creators.

Grand Strategy Games can be especially influential over their players' understanding of the past.[ii] These games are complex and often intricately detailed, presenting the player with quantified data pertaining to their kingdom and those of their computer-controlled opponents,[iii] and giving the impression of a thoroughly researched and authoritative source.[iv] This detailed data set is required for the construction of the game's mechanics which presents an argument about how the medieval world functioned allowing the player to engage with these mechanics to develop an understanding of cause and effect.[v] Further, the player must engage with these mechanics and the arguments they represent in order to progress in the game.[vi] They must learn the game's version of history.

Although these qualities grant games of the Grand Strategy genre the potential to be powerful teaching tools,[vii] they can spread outdated or questionable visions of the past just as effectively. This is an issue as Grand Strategy Games often present problematic or limited visions of history.[viii] Beyond the underlying issues present across historical games of all genres, Grand Strategy Games possess additional baggage: they are usually especially Eurocentric;[ix] their play tends towards imperialism;[x] they often present history as a pre-ordained chronology of progress towards enlightenment;[xi] they tend towards abstraction of complex issues.[xii] These games have difficulty representing complex events like the crusades which do not fit easily with the core mechanics of the genre.

It should be noted that many of these issues can be resolved through more careful and considered game design. More nuanced objectives and mechanics can encourage play away from the standard model of technological progress.[xiii] Consideration of history from a global perspective, consultation with representatives of different cultures, and more meaningful mechanical distinctions across

historical cultures could provide a more thoughtful and thorough model of the past. [xiv] Tighter chronological or thematic focus can allow deeper mechanics and an avoidance of oversimplification.

But the creators of Grand Strategy Games face several underlying difficulties which emerge from the tension between the complex nature of the crusades, and the design conventions, technological limitations and player expectations which govern the mechanics and approach of this genre. These issues limit the ability of designers to alter the game's model and hence its representation of the crusades, even though there is a growing demand for a more detailed exploration of these events and several design studios have demonstrated a willingness to devote resources to this end.

In this chapter I will use examples from the *Civilization*, *Medieval: Total* War, and *Crusader Kings* series of games to highlight three core issues which limit the ability of games of this genre to provide a deep representation of the crusades:

1) The broad and open-ended nature of Grand Strategy Games leads their creators to present oversimplified and arbitrary explanations for the causes of the crusades.
2) The tendency of these games to focus on the highest echelons of political society restricts the ability of their creators to depict the composition of the crusades with sufficient nuance.
3) Traditional structures governing victory conditions and other objectives within this genre of game and the expectations this has built within the playerbase has limited their capacity to consider the goals of the various crusaders.

I will then use *Holy Fury*, the recent expansion for *Crusader Kings II*, as a case study of a recent attempt to develop a more detailed consideration of the crusades and argue that while this is a substantial improvement, it is nevertheless hindered by the conventions of the genre. Throughout the piece I will argue that the creation of a more nuanced representation of the crusades requires a substantial and fundamental change in approach.

The Causes of the Crusades

Although the crusades appear widely within Grand Strategy Games, the creators of these games almost universally ignore the causes of the movement. Most representations of the crusades within these games are triggered by arbitrary actions by the player or a computer actor. In *Civilization II* the military unit 'Crusaders' is unlocked through the research of the technology 'Monotheism' while the unique building 'King Richard's Crusade' may be constructed after acquiring knowledge of 'Engineering'. *Medieval: Total War* requires a player or computer actor to construct a series of buildings before creating a 'Crusade' which may then be targeted against a non-Catholic faction. In each of these cases, the crusades are inevitable regardless of the situation within the game.

This is an unsatisfactory approach. The causes of the crusades were complex and remain a subject of academic discourse. They were driven by events over the preceding centuries including the claim to a clerical monopoly on violence through the Peace and Truce of God movements and Church sponsored military action,[xv] the rise of a culture of pilgrimage to Jerusalem,[xvi] and the centring of the Pope on the international stage through the Investiture Contest.[xvii] The arbitrary triggers used by *Civilization* and the *Medieval: Total War* games ignore these elements and present the crusades as an inevitable and straightforward conflict.

In principal Grand Strategy Games should be powerful and versatile tools for investigating the causes of the crusades. Presenting Cause and Effect is one of the greatest strengths of these games in the classroom.[xviii] By interacting with detailed mechanics, their players consider abstract but holistic explanations of historical systems.[xix] By experimenting with different sequences of actions, these players can observe the designers' explanation of the causes of historical events.[xx] There is little

reason in theory why games of this genre should not be able to provide a deep and developed consideration of the causes of the crusades.

In practice though, the creators of Grand Strategy Games face design and commercial constraints which restrict their ability to address the origins of the crusades in depth. This is primarily because of the discord between two fundamental issues: the open-ended nature of Grand Strategy Games; and the resources required to simulate a unique series of events such as the crusades.

Grand Strategy Games are the antithesis of linear narrative. Broad victory conditions are assigned, but players receive little guidance in achieving these objectives.[xxi] Players of these games have a huge amount of agency and a corresponding ability to create unexpected and improbable outcomes. Furthermore, various computer controlled actors react to player choices and the developing environment with their own goals beyond the player's control. The game world therefore evolves in organised chaos. The possible versions of history produced by these games are effectively limitless and although creators usually attempt to guide this towards a realistic or balanced emergent history there is little they can do in the face of a determined player or a particularly unlikely set of events. This open-ended gameplay is a fundamental element of grand strategy games and forms a large part of their commercial and educational appeal.

Because of this free form play, there is no guarantee that the situation which prompted the crusades will develop within the game. The carefully curated databases of characters and land holdings within *Crusader Kings II* allow play from as early as 769, long before the emergence of crusade ideology and from this point of divergence, it is perfectly possible for a vastly different geo-political situation to emerge by the end of the eleventh century. The *Civilization* series, which uses randomised maps and a very abstract model of religion, can allow for even more divergent outcomes: Jerusalem, Christianity or Islam may not exist; the most holy city of Christianity may be Beijing; or the concept of Crusade may be embraced by Taoism.

From an academic perspective the possible absence of the crusades within a game spanning the Middle Ages is not an issue. The main educational and scholarly value of structural simulations is their ability to present explanations of the factors behind events rather than meticulously reconstructing the past.[xxii] If causes for the crusades don't emerge, it follows that the crusades should not occur. If the game mechanics allow for the possibility of the crusades under certain circumstances, the absence of these events in a particular playthough does not negate the academic or learning value of the game.

However, this situation is problematic for commercial game designers who are ultimately constrained by the expense of modelling the crusades.[xxiii] New game assets are required such as models for military units. Deeper representations of the crusades require the modification of mechanics or creation of entirely new gameplay elements to allow and encourage the player and computer controlled actors to engage in these expeditions and to deal with the new geo-political situation they create. Preparing a detailed rendering of the crusades requires the commitment of substantial time and resources,[xxiv] and this is difficult to justify unless they will occur in most games.

This places conflicting demands on the creators of these games. Grand Strategy Games allow player agency as part of their core appeal and so need to allow the possibility that the events which instigated the crusades will not occur. But the work required to adequately portray the events of the crusades demands the curtailment of that agency: if the crusades are modelled in depth through the game, then player actions must not be allowed to disrupt this core element. Designers have addressed this issue in several ways, but each of these marginalise the causes of the crusades. The *Civilization* series avoids the problem through its abstract representation of religion as a whole,[xxv]

which uses the crusades as flavour for the medieval period rather than a substantial set of mechanics. *Medieval: Total War* presents the crusades as distinct events with their own mechanics, but ensures that they will occur by limiting player' agency. *Crusader Kings II* makes use of a dynamic set of triggers to instigate the crusades but provides a very limited explanation for their causes: they will happen automatically if certain key cities such as Rome or Constantinople are held by non-Christians after a certain point in the game. The developers of these games dedicated substantial time and effort in constructing the mechanics and audio-visual resources which support their presentation of the crusades and need to be certain that the majority of players will be able to engage with these mechanics. For this to happen, the crusades must occur in almost every playthrough and so the causes of the crusade must be presented in an arbitrary manner.

Participants

Within Grand Strategy Games the crusades are almost invariably presented as driven by the great rulers of Christendom: the emperor in Germany and the kings of Europe. These figures are shown dictating the targets of crusades, commanding armies in the field, and ultimately gaining control of conquered territories. Lesser magnates such as dukes or counts are generally marginalised or ignored outright.

Again, this simplified presentation is problematic for scholarly discussion of the crusades. The participants on the crusades were diverse. While several crusades were led by kings and emperors, secular magnates from across Europe invariably played a decisive role.[xxvi] Bishops and other clergy participated, acting as sacral support but also in a logistical or even military capacity.[xxvii] The Italian maritime cities supported expeditions.[xxviii]

This discrepancy is largely a consequence of the centring of kingdoms and their rulers as the driving force of history within these games an consequent marginalisation or absence of other figures. The *Civilization* series typically provides around 6,000 years of play, but the player acts as a single totemic ruler throughout this period. *Medieval: Total War* provides a superficial representation of dynastic rule, but ultimately the ruler and their family is present only in support of the mechanics of the kingdom. This focus on polities as player characters restricts play to the highest levels of society so there is no opportunity to experience *Civilization* or *Medieval: Total War* as the Count of Toulouse or similar magnate. There are clear design and accessibility factors behind this approach, but restricting play to the rulers of medieval realms in this way creates a fundamental problem when these games address the crusades. As there are no autonomous magnates, the crusades in these games must be led by kings. Events similar to the First Crusade, driven by powerful magnates rather than the rulers of kingdom,[xxix] cannot happen.

This king-centric gameplay also stymies games' representations of the Crusader States and casts them invariably as colonies of their home kingdoms. As these games do not include magnates in their crusades, they have no ability to detail the political and cultural complexities of the kingdoms created in the wake of the crusades. For example, a successful crusade in *Medieval: Total War* results in the creation of an enclave in the Holy Land (or occasionally elsewhere) ruled and administered directly from the home kingdom. Any Crusader States created through the course of the game will be colonies of a single European power and will be drawn inexorably into the conflicts of their European ruler. While the polities constructed by the first crusaders certainly displayed some colonial traits and characteristics, the model of the Crusader States as proto-colonies was common throughout most of the nineteenth century, first as a defence of modern colonial claims to the Middle East then as a condemnation of colonialism in the region,[xxx] more recent scholarship underlines the shortcomings of this model. The Crusader States were certainly supported militarily and financially by the European kingdoms and could often be influenced by the rulers of these

entities but, unlike modern colonies, they were functionally independent and did not channel resources back to their kingdoms of origin.[xxxi] The distinction is important, but lost in the representations within most games.

Even *Crusader Kings II*, which includes characters from broader social strata, struggles with these issues. The game models a rudimental feudal system, allowing play over four societal levels (Emperor, King, Duke, and Count) and including computer actors at two further levels (Baron, Unlanded). Most of these characters are vassals of some sort and a substantial part of the game mechanics address the horizontal and vertical socio-political interaction of this array of figures. This model allows the presentation of crusades led by Dukes or Counts, but in practice, most crusades in *Crusader Kings II* are dominated by kings and result in the establishment of a home ruled colony – even a magnate led expedition results in the creation of a mono-cultured kingdom ruled alongside lands in Europe.

Objectives

The motivation to crusade within Grand Strategy Games is almost inevitably the expansion of the player's domain. Although these games often include other mechanical and narrative elements to encourage the player to embark on crusade in the form of beneficial character traits, additional free military units, or more abstract rewards such as piety and prestige, conquest remains by far the most visible motivating factor.

This is a vast oversimplification of the diverse and changing motivations of the majority of crusaders.[xxxii] These nuances are hard to identify with any degree of certainty, but it is implausible that all the participants on these expeditions held a unified and persistent goal.[xxxiii] Although some crusaders such as Bohemond of Taranto or Baldwin of Boulogne openly sought personal conquest,[xxxiv] it is almost certain that the majority of crusaders did not share this goal. It seems that pope Urban II initially planned to return Jerusalem to the hands of the Byzantine Emperor, rather than any of the participants,[xxxv] thus realising the grand plans of Gregory VII.[xxxvi] At the very least, while the expedition was certainly intended to conquer lands, there was no clear idea about what to do with these lands once they were conquered.[xxxvii]

Furthermore, very few crusaders remained in the Holy Land.[xxxviii] Crusaders such as Robert Curthose, Hugh of Vermandois, and Stephen of Blois held substantial lands in Europe and demonstrably intended to return to these territories.[xxxix] As Jotischky suggests, even those crusaders such as Raymond of Toulouse and Godfrey of Boullion who did settle in the Levant did not necessarily intend to do this when they took the cross: accounts of them giving up their lands prior to leaving for Jerusalem are retrospective and may represent the revision of events to better suit the narrative of legitimacy and piety claimed by these figures and their successors.[xl] While the crusaders were certainly concerned with conquest, for most participants this conquest was not for personal gain.

Instead the majority of crusaders must have been compelled to crusade by other factors. The promise of indulgence provided moral motivation.[xli] Crusading could be politically opportune: the clusters of minor lords who accompanied their neighbouring great magnates may have sought stronger connections with these powerful figures,[xlii] and these magnates took a substantial portion of their vassals with them. [xliii] Emperor Henry IV seems to have attempted to assert his authority through his abortive commitment to a penitential war in the East in 1103 which made no mention of his rival Pope Paschal II.[xliv] Family groups often crusaded together, and family tradition and connections certainly played a role in motivating later crusaders, including the extensive network of northern French magnates which came to rule over much of the Crusader States.[xlv] The prospect of plunder and prestige may have motivated some crusaders,[xlvi] although the costs involved in

crusading surely limited their viability as profit turning ventures.[xlvii] While the involvement of the Italian merchant cities seems to have been primarily motivated through piety, the expansion of trade routes may have also been a motivating factor.[xlviii]

These complex and varied motivations are ignored or marginalised in favour of simple expansion of personal territory because the underlying nature of Grand Strategy Games demands or at least encourages conquest and domination through their victory conditions.[xlix] Even games with multiple paths to victory such as *Civilization* almost inevitably include world conquest as an option, and typically this is the easiest or otherwise most attractive approach.[l] These violent tendencies are actively encouraged through the design of most Grand Strategy Games: in many cases the vast majority of game mechanics focus on warfare or activities in support of warfare.[li] *Medieval: Total War* is a particularly clear example of this tendency with its focus on real-time battles. This tendency towards violent expansion is so endemic to the genre that it influences player expectations and behaviour even in Grand Strategy Games which discourage warfare.[lii] As economics, religion, and diplomacy are peripheral to this focus on armed expansion it is unsurprising that crusades are presented as another tool to this end.

Holy Fury

Holy Fury addresses some of the issues discussed above and provides perhaps the most developed presentation of the crusades in digital games. Game mechanics have been introduced or modified to more closely reflect the broad motivations of crusaders and the complex and fragmented states they created.

The territorial rewards for crusading are curtailed. Players may still choose to claim the crusade target for themselves, but they are encouraged to select an unlanded beneficiary from within their family as the independent recipient of the spoils of conquest. This installation of relatives is the assumed process for AI controlled actors and moves away from the model of crusading for the sake of personal territorial expansion.

Beyond this, a successful crusade no longer leaves its most active participant in sole control of the new kingdom and able to distribute its lands to his followers freely. Instead, the lands of the kingdom are distributed amongst the beneficiaries of each of its members. The aftermath of a victorious crusade to Jerusalem now typically results in the new king of Jerusalem controling only the area immediately around the city with the rest of region from Sinai to Tripoli in the hands of his new vassals: a diverse range of incoming magnates. Each of these figures brings the baggage of pre-existing loyalties, rivalries and ambitions from their European dynasties. Additional independent crusader states similar to the County of Edessa or Principality of Antioch may be established during the crusade itself. The result of these changes is an independent and fractious kingdom much closer in composition and politics to the actual crusader states.

Perhaps more importantly, the scope of non-territorial rewards has been extended substantially. Participants on a crusade now receive a portion of the 'War Chest' comprising gold and relics donated by Christian magnates which means the expeditions can now be a lucrative means of gaining wealth, piety and prestige. Participants in crusades may earn 'Crusader Bloodlines' which provide a range of bonuses to the character and their descendants. These rewards are abstract and not always rooted in reality, but nevertheless present a broader range of motivations for the crusaders.

However, although *Holy Fury* presents a more nuanced vision of the crusades there are still shortcomings within its model. Most significantly there is no explanation for the causes of the movement as providing more detailed mechanics here could prevent the crusades from occurring at

all. The culturally and politically complex Crusader States which emerge within the game are an important development, but these polities are still based around the limitations of the game's feudal model. Providing a greater range of motivations to crusades beyond territorial acquisition is likewise significant, but its success appears to be limited as players of the game still tend towards territorial expansion above all else.

Conclusion

Creators seeking to represent the crusades through Grand Strategy Games face a number of fundamental issues as a consequence of the nature of the genre and the expectations of its players. The degree of player agency typical within these games in combination with the resources required to portray them leads designers to ignore the causes of these events to ensure that they occur in each playthrough. The limitation of player and computer controlled actors to the level of kings and emperors presents an abstract and substantially limited representation of a crusade movement dominated and led by monarchs and the crusader states as a series of anachronistic colonies ruled directly from their home kingdoms. The tendency within Grand Strategy Games and amongst their playerbase to focus on personal conquest and military domination over every other aspect of rulership distorts and simplifies the motivations of the crusaders.

To address these issues and create a more nuanced and considered representation of the crusades it is necessary to reconsider the core elements of Grand Strategy Games and our expectations of them while retaining their ability to engage with complex historical issues in a deep and thoughtful manner. The developers of *Holy Fury* have addressed some of these issues to a certain extent through the modification of the mechanics of *Crusader Kings II*, and have created a more thorough exploration of the crusades as a result. The result is impressive and highly laudable. But their efforts have been hampered by the underlying mechanics of the genre, and the expectations of the game's players. In *Holy Fury* the crusades remain an isolated modification of the core rules of the game rather than a part of a dedicated model constructed from the ground up.

Most fundamentally then, crusades must form an integral element of a game's mechanics. They should not appear as an abrupt and unexplained change to gameplay. Nor should they exist as a scripted series of preordained events. The causes of the crusades need to be considered in more depth and this will require modelling of Church reform, papal and imperial rhetoric, relationships between Western and Eastern Christianity and their leaders, and a range of other factors. This will allow the player to interact with the various elements presented through the game and to explore the causes of the crusades by adjusting these elements and experiencing different outcomes.

This interactivity and player agency presents the possibility that the crusades will not take place in every playthrough and this necessitates a different design approach. Resources should not be focused solely on the representation of the crusades themselves, and their military elements in particular, but rather should be distributed more evenly across the themes and issues which are connected to the crusades more broadly. The crusades should be modelled as part of a broader consideration of religious change and global relationships. This wider distribution of mechanics and supporting assets could substantially mitigate any concerns about wasted resources from crusades which didn't happen.

A more substantial mechanical division between character and territory could help to resolve the restrictive issues around the portrayal of the participants in the crusades and their motivations within Grand Strategy Games. The ability to play as a character without a defined landholding could ease the movement of figures from Europe to the crusader states and could better represent powerful magnates relinquishing their European lands to facilitate their expeditions. This could be

accompanied by a shift to a more role-play orientated model could provide additional motivation for characters to embark on crusade.

A change in objectives away from global domination would also be beneficial in explaining the motivations of crusaders.[liii] The benefits of crusading beyond territorial acquisition presented in *Holy Fury* could be expanded. Victory conditions other than conquest could be introduced. Beneficial or challenge objectives could be created in the form of missions rewarding the player for participating in a crusade without acquiring lands.

This analysis highlights more general difficulties faced by creators of Grand Strategy Games dealing with the Middle Ages or history more broadly. There are fundamental limitations in the use of the same simple abstract mechanics to model events over a broad chronological or geographic scope. As a result, while wide ranging games like *Civilization* can certainly be useful, more narrow but deeper explorations of a particular period or event could be of scholarly value in different ways. Violence and warfare remains at the heart of almost all Grand Strategy Games, but this often undermines their representation of the past. Likewise, a focus on roleplaying individuals rather than commanding a polity as a faceless omnipotent ruler could allow for a deeper representation of many historical events allowing a more vibrant exploration of the past.

Beyond the educational benefits, a more thorough and focused representation of the crusades could be commercially attractive and may help to create more entertaining games for a particular audience. Although the most vocal demands for historical authenticity in games relate to the veracity of material culture,[liv] a substantial section of the playerbase of Grand Strategy Games is concerned with the way in which a game presents historical arguments through its mechanics and objectives. There is therefore a potential for more detailed games to command a large audience – as evidenced by the large following of the various *Paradox Interactive* games. A shift in game mechanics may engage new users and could provide a different experience for existing players. The effort behind *Holy Fury* is demonstrative of a willingness among commercial game companies to invest in the production of games which provide a deep consideration of the crusades and the success of the expansion suggests a substantial demand for this approach. *Holy Fury* is limited by the mechanical framework in which it was created, but is indicative of a broader trend towards more diverse representations of the crusades and the middle ages more generally. Likewise, the emergence of new approaches to medieval rulership and politics in games outside the Grand Strategy genre such as *Mount and Blade* and *Reigns* highlight the possibilities of this medium. Digital games have substantial potential as tools for interacting with the medieval world and these developments may allow more expression of the role of medieval monarchs, not only as rulers of kingdoms, but as Crusader Kings too.

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