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Special Issue

Peripheral Religions and Games

edited by

Carolin Puckhaber, Aska Mayer and Knut V. M. Wormstädt

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Nerfing My Religion. A Cognitive Mapping of Faiths in Crusader Kings III and Europa Universalis IV

Christopher McMahon

Abstract

This work will primarily engage with the Ásatrú and Hussite faiths in Crusader Kings III and Europa Universalis IV respectively. The aim of the analysis is to determine the narrative and mechanical reasons and potential affects of the inclusion of religions as mechanics within videogames. In exploring these issues, it can be considered how peripheral or lesser-known faiths can be understood and interpreted from their presence within the gaming medium. Cognitive mapping will be used to highlight areas of ideological significance within the play-space enabled by the game. This methodology is informed by the work of McMahon (2022), which uses directives for the player from a schema of how the videogame can be engaged according to certain ideological positions that arise from an interpretation of design intentionality. These directives are framed as questions that the player asks of the game. Providing answers to them allows for an analysis of structures and affects within the play-space. The methodology for this work will involve a mapping of the buffs and debuffs each faith receives as play unfolds according to likely design intentionality (following missions, established paths, or completing logical objectives). The reasoning for this follows the logic that the player will seek to min-max their capabilities (minimise loss, maximise gain), optimising the operation of the religion with regards to game's mechanics. Significantly, what certain nerfs and buffs suggest about each religion, and when and how these handicaps or advantages occur, are how the player will form an understanding of the faith they are engaging. This exploration will provide critical insight into the purpose of including such religions within grand strategy and roleplaying games, noting the substantial appeal of being able to engage with potential alternate histories.

Keywords: Paradox, Grand Strategy, Speculation, Cognitive Mapping, Min-Maxing, *Crusader Kings, Europa Universalis*, Ásatrú, Hussite, gamevironments 22

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Historically themed grand strategy games are vast in form and function, and there are a lot of them with different unique selling points. What is arguably a unifying feature of them is the ability of their players to roleplay history. This playing out of history is a learning experience of sorts, but it can also tell us about what different subjectivities and motives the player brings with them into the play-space. Our consumption of the game as players often needs to be contextualised beyond motivations, with ideological forces and multiple subjectivities considered. Within this work I seek to incorporate these observations in explaining how peripheral religions in grand strategy games allow for speculative play whilst also potentially being tainted by external subjectivities that would alter this speculation. Ultimately, this can provide insight into how peripheral religions and alternative histories have significant appeal to the player and how speculative play can be affected by external subjectivities that perforate the play-space. To give specific form to this insight, I am aiming to answer the following question: how can alternative histories in videogames alter the perception of peripheral religions?

The focus of this work will be the Asatrú faith in *Crusader Kings III* (CK3) (2020) and the Hussite faith in *Europa Universalis IV* (EU4) (2013). The reason for selecting these faiths is due to their peripheral nature compared to more central religions. Knowledge that I have derived from the videogames would suggest that both religions were peripheral compared to Catholicism as a/the central religion of Europe at different points in history. Both can serve as an example of how a videogame can produce an alternative history exploring how a peripheral religion could have become

more central and what would have had to occur for this to happen. There is also a personal element to selecting these religions that I admit is highly situational. The knowledge I have of these religions is almost entirely derived from my engagement with them via videogames. The Norse Gods especially have made for rich gaming content, with games like *God of War* (2018) and *God of War Ragnarök* (2022) introducing many to depictions of Thor, Odin, Freya, and more. Saying that, I have not played either of those games so the knowledge through which I am assessing and understanding their religions comes from the application of my own procedural literacy playing grand strategy games like CK3 and EU4. My own subjective position in relation to this analysis adds to its ability to illustrate the significance of speculative forms of alternate history and of buffs and nerfs in relation to the tenets, beliefs, and (real or otherwise) histories of a particular faith. How history and religions are perceived can be influenced in this way.

Cognitive Mapping, Min-Maxing, and Speculation

The purpose of a cognitive mapping exercise is to make ideological and affective significance visible. The approach was initially outlined in *The Corruption of Play* (McMahon 2022) and generally involves identifying a player subject position in relation to the videogame(s) being studied and a set of directives for play that appear logical according to the videogame structures and the motivations of the player subject (McMahon 2022, 69-75). Cognitive mapping can be understood in relation to Ruffino's articulation of creative game studies. This is a mode of writing and intervention in games and gaming culture that can be intuitive and performative (Ruffino 2018, 12). It is a malleable method that can be adapted to suit a particular mode of enquiry, one that is intuitively guided towards and looking for significance. Additionally, the performative element of the method comes in the researcher

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colliding with the game, maybe even inhabiting a particular role or subjectivity. For the purpose of this analysis, I position myself as a player who wants to explore an alternate history via peripheral religions who is also mindful of maximising the mechanical benefits the religion offers me in-game. My collision with the selected videogames will be what prompts insight.

I argue that autoethnography is often a necessary component of studying videogames due to their complex textuality and the interaction of human and non-human agencies. Deshbandhu (2023, 280) describes videogame play as a "personal and intimate journey for the player" and that as researchers we need to understand the multitude of ways games can be played and develop new play practices.

Deshbandhu (2023, 280) continues stating that it is of "paramount importance for us as researchers to look beyond the need for data that supports or conforms with existing theory and meanings and to find scenarios that require newer theoretical understandings that are fueled by researcher reflexivity." I view cognitive mapping as such a practice. The play practice requires my own reflexivity for the analysis. I can attempt to position myself as a player in malleable ways in order to unpack the significance of different ways of playing and reacting to the game itself.

Beginning first with the more gamic element of the player motivation, I will need to employ strategies that are mindful of how I maximise benefits to me as the player. Min-maxing is a strategy within videogames, especially roleplaying games, in which the player maximises particular abilities or stats whilst neglecting or placing minimal focus on non-desirable stats or abilities. Min-maxing is also a practice within Paradox grand strategy games, in which players seek to optimise specific buffs or values within the game. This is more of a shifting signifier for seeking to optimise gameplay, rather than having a strict definition. For example, in EU4, the player may carefully

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consider how and where they spend their manna points (admin points, diplo points, mil points) for the development of provinces so they are most efficiently implemented. They would enable and engage with mechanics that would lower the development costs and then carefully consider the order in which they spend the points and where they are spent.



Figure 1: The "Develop Province" menu and the modifiers that can determine development cost. *Europa Universalis IV* © Paradox Interactive.

As illustrated in Figure 1, there are multiple mechanical elements to consider when developing provinces in EU4. For example, shortly after developing Zhorelec, it may no longer become the cheapest province so one would next develop Zemplin. If the player were to continue to spend development points in Zhorelec as it became more

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expensive, they would know they could have been more efficiently spent elsewhere. The player may even go as far as to use spreadsheets to aid them with the calculations and ensuring the efficiency of their actions, tracking the influence of different game elements. I would argue that the motivations behind this can be explained by wanting to appease entrepreneurial subjectivities. The time-consuming nature of the activity would disrupt the roleplaying potential of the videogame. The consciousness through which the players would have to consider the calculations, especially if they are using an Excel sheet, would serve to disrupt the play-space itself. From my time playing the games within this paper, I cannot imagine that Jan Hus or Ivar the Boneless would use Microsoft Excel.

As well as the entrepreneurial subjectivities that inform the logics of min-maxing, there is also a speculative connotation of perceived positive and negative impacts of mechanics. *Speculative*, or speculation, here is drawn from Kunzelman's work in which he outlines *mechanics of speculation* within videogames:

"A mechanic of speculation is a way of affording a player the capability of thinking that the next moment, the next interactive micro instant, could produce anything at all. Within this context, speculation is the exercising of the human capacity to think of the world in the way that it isn't, even in the smallest ways and for the smallest amounts of time, hearkening back to the speculative philosophy of the early modern period. Instead of the specter of speculative fiction, which might conjure up genre trappings, the mechanic of speculation is about the exercising of a specific mode of thinking the human relation with the world and how that world might be." (Kunzelman 2022, 4)

The actions that will result from our actions within the videogame allow us to speculate about what could be. For example, exploring an alternative history. This is what can give videogames significant affective potential. Kunzelman (2022, 159) discusses the affective potential of videogames, stating "if we imagine affect as a kind

of free-flowing connective energy that is made to move constantly, and immanently, through all things, then the moment that a person looks at a game is one in which an affective relationship is established." As we encounter the game we form our relationship with it, and our emotional response being bound up in our relation to the game, our position within broader ideological structures, and experience. This begins the process in which our reactions and algorithmic agencies negotiate and collide throughout play.

In discussing how Frostpunk (2018) approaches climate change Kunzelman (2022, 167) observes that "our affective relationship to climate change is processed through an allegorical or metaphorical set of aesthetic and mechanical affordances." In the case of *Frostpunk* the player mostly manages Hope and Discontent metrics in order to avoid a game loss. As will be detailed in relation to the games that are the focus of this work, the player's procedural literacy is drawn from to understand that there are bad choices and bad things that they have to deal with. Players can develop shortcuts in registering the abstract result of different decisions according to the videogame's design, quickly determining what is good and bad depending upon mechanical context. This can be simple in many grand strategy games or management simulations as the colour green likely indicates a buff or a positive benefit to the player and the colour red will indicate debuffs or nerfs that have a negative effect for the player. To use *Frostpunk* again, I may be met with an event prompt that informs me a child was injured whilst at their job. I am given two options: (1) "Give this kid a day off," resulting in a worker being unavailable for the day but Hope will rise slightly; (2) "Scold this child for being careless" resulting in Hope falling slightly. If I am playing in a mechanically minded way I can ignore the narrative element of this relating to child labour and a child being injured at work and view it in terms of its mechanical implications. As the player I would weigh up the cost-benefit of losing economic productivity to slightly boost the Hope metric or retaining economic

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productivity (something that is of vital importance when playing on the higher difficulty levels of this game) for a slight penalty to the Hope metric. Mechanically speaking at an early point in the game the option to scold the child makes sense, what would give the players pause here (hopefully) is the narrative context in which players are scolding a child for being injured at a job they made them do.

Part of the speculative potential I am choosing to engage with is the ability to construct an alternative history. This is a significant component of the appeal of games like CK3 and EU4. Apperley (2018, 16) observes how players of such games "establish negotiated positions in relation to the 'official' history presented, which draw on their own experiences of local and popular culture," unpacking the complex way in which popular perceptions of history are open to interpretation. Apperley refers specifically to official histories which are open to localised interpretation but as this study's focus is peripheral religions, there is a notable chance that a player engaging with these alt-histories will be encountering peripheral faiths for the first time. This relates to Loban's observation (2022) that engaging with histories via games like EU4 is part of a larger whole of informal learning, with the player being motivated to learn more outside of the game. Additionally, Grufstedt (2021, 87) highlights how "it seems counterfactual history in games provide an opportunity to study and discuss both history and game design in tandem." The alternative history is presented in the game both textually and mechanically. Significance lies in more than what is seen, with beneficial or detrimental mechanics suggesting how an alternative history can be understood in a positive or negative sense.

In this respect I view CK3 and EU4's approach to religions as similar. The player's ability to roleplay, enhance, and expand historically peripheral religions is the speculative function of the game. The way the player makes sense of the play is via the interaction between textual context and mechanical consequence. The game effectively needs to balance this for the speculative process to unfold in a way that

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engages the player. A useful concept to give form to this requirement is that of defamiliarisation. This concept is drawn from the work of Thompson (1988, 11) who observes that art can have a renewing effect on our "mental processes" as art can move us to different subjectivities and transport us to different forms of reality. This is not dissimilar to Kunzelman's outline of speculation. If we are to consider videogames as being a medium capable of significant speculative and imaginative potential, acknowledging how they can disrupt the subjectivity of the player is essential. This is also why it is so significant to consider how the play-space can be influenced by forces external to it, such as the insidious presence of entrepreneurial subjectivities that are difficult to shake off. The much broader rationalisation of our time and energy around perceived productive and beneficial uses can conflict with the seemingly unproductive, uncertain, and non-sensical actions within play. As such, the speculative function of the videogame is in conflict with broader ideological forces outside of the game that the player brings with them and the mechanical language of algorithmic limits.

As has been argued by Stang (2019), the notion of interactivity is overapplied in relation to videogames and player agency is somewhat illusionary but "while this illusion of agency is problematic, it allows developers and players alike to engage with questions of ethics and morality." I would argue that we (as players) must effectively buy into our agency feeling consequential and the videogame needs to convince us to do this via a process of defamiliarisation. The game needs to convince us, at least temporarily, to shed external subjectivities and motivations and be as within the play-space as we can be. Agreeing with Stang's argument, true agency in relation to the videogame lies beyond the scope of the object itself. The negotiation between the player and the game is highly subjective and contextual. This also complicates how a game can be understood to be reinforcing dominant ideologies and again highlights the importance of autoethnography within play. Lundblade

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highlights how procedural rhetorics across the *Europa Universalis* series (and other games within the genre):

"are iteratively and incrementally codified with a reverberating effect that has the potential to drown out any original scholarly understanding, replacing any potential nuanced model of history with the codified unit operations of European dominance economic exploitation, technological determinism and sub-national marginalization." (Lundblade 2019, 267)

I am not disagreeing with the possibility for this to occur; there will be players that find an affirmation of these understandings of history, but games within the grand strategy genre also provide the same room for a subversion of history. From my own study of the games, I do not believe the game design is trying to convince me of a particularly correct form of history. Instead, I have an opportunity to reflect on how history unfolds. Procedural literacies themselves are subjective to each player, again stressing the importance of autoethnography within the study of play and games.

Given the variety of ways in which these games can be played, there are a number of points and ways of playing that the analysis could follow. In order to highlight the peripheral nature of these religions, the gameplay studied will primarily position the religion of focus as moving from a peripheral position to a central or at least more prevalent position. With the concepts that have been engaged with so far, this cognitive mapping exercise will be informed by attempting to play out a particular form of alternative history, whilst also considering how min-maxing would influence the playthrough.

To summarise the proposed approach, an autoethnographic mode of playing through peripheral religions in CK3 and EU4 implementing min-maxing strategies will be used to point towards speculative potential and the effectiveness of defamiliarisation within the play-space. This approach is underpinned by an

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interpretation of Bogost's (2007) work on procedural literacy. In discussing *Europa Universalis* and other games, Bogost (2007, 255) notes that the player toying with history "open[s] a simulation gap for the player to interrogate." This suggests that:

"procedural literacy means more than writing computer code; it also comes from interacting with procedural systems themselves, especially procedural systems that make strong ties between the processes in a model and a representational goal – those with strongly argued procedural rhetorics. Otherwise said, we can become procedurally literate through play itself." (ibid.)

The speculative function of playing with the forces of history and the mechanics of the videogame are the formal elements through which the player reads the scenario they are creating and moving through. The different forces involved in this are not stable, clearly defined elements, however. As has been discussed in relation to min-maxing, ideological subjectivities can shape the interpretation of mechanical information and influence player action. Additionally, affective response is not purely grounded in design or player intention, as the player interpretation of the correct, proper, interesting, or optimal ways to play are relational to objects beyond the gaming situation (such as entrepreneurial subjectivities or paratextual objects like achievements that rationalise action or generate gaming capital).

The final assessment of the exercise will be a review of the tensions between speculative motivations and min-maxing according to the various buffs and nerfs that result from different decisions and processes. In reviewing what narrative and mechanical information is available to a player, directives can be answered that provide insight into the broader significance of the representation of these religions. For this study, I will ask:

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- 1. What alternative history can I play towards?
- 2. How am I mechanically encouraged to play?

The logics behind these questions are designed to reveal insight into the different forces at work in the videogame. They also cover the potentially broad range of questions that will arise from play, such as: How are players constructing an althistory? What alt-history can they build? What bonuses, penalties, obstacles, rewards occur for players? Both of the defined guiding questions will ultimately have intersecting answers so both will be addressed in tandem at the conclusion of the playthrough. Additionally, games like CK3 and EU4 can frequently be patched or altered. All information was correct at the time of writing but may be subject to change.

Finally, this work is situated within understandings that promote the study and engagement with peripheral faiths to enhance an understanding of history and culture. Kniss (2014, 364) discusses the river of religion, stating that "we need a richer understanding of this river with more accurate explanations of its dynamics. We can make progress on this goal, but only by paying adequate attention to religion's tributaries, eddies, and crosscurrents." Historically themed videogames present an opportunity to engage with peripheral religions when there is otherwise limited opportunity, be it that it is a religion confined to a particular time period, or that the faith itself is geographically concentrated. To borrow Kniss's terminology, players of games can begin to comprehend the tributaries, eddies, and crosscurrents that have occurred within the development of religions and their followers. When studying mainstream religion Kniss (2014, 364) stated that is necessary to "eschew unidimensional binary conceptions," and players in exploring an alternative history can

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complicate history and potentially enhance their understanding of how certain religions are positioned as central and others peripheral.

To distil this methodological approach to its core components, it is an autoethnography that involves the researcher playing with particular motives and goals, that I call directives. These directives are given the form of a question that the researcher answers via play. The answers to these questions reveal insight into possible patterns of play within the videogame. Part of the reasoning for this particular form of methodology is the epistemological assumption that every individual's play with a particular game will be unique to them, regardless of how linear or fluid the videogame is itself. How that person plays, how they are affected by play is influenced by a myriad of social, political, ideological, cultural, and economic factors. This can also be viewed as a limitation of the methodology as it does rely on the play and affective impact on the researcher themselves in order to highlight significance.

Ásatrú Adventurers

The Ásatrú faith appears in CK3 primarily as the faith of Norse cultured peoples. There are two start dates within CK3 at the time of writing: 867 and 1066 CE. In the 1066 start date, the Ásatrú religion could already said to be more peripheral, as Christianity appears to be established throughout Northern Europe with only a handful and characters still showing as following the Ásatrú faith. For the purpose of this study, in order to highlight as many mechanical elements relating to Ásatrú as possible, I have chosen the 867 start date and the character creator option. This way I can attempt to optimise my character according to the buffs and nerfs that exist when the player character follows the Ásatrú faith.

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Figure 2: Character creator religion information for Ásatrú in CK3. *Crusader Kings III* © Paradox Interactive.

In Figure 2, the first information the player sees should they choose to construct a character of the Ásatrú faith are the tenets of the religion, effectively the central principles of the religion itself. From this, the player would infer courses of action in relation to how Ásatrú roleplay would unfold and any potential mechanical benefits in relation to game procedures. The tenets of the Ásatrú faiths are as follows:

- 1. Patron Gods: Players can select a personal avatar and gain related bonuses.
- 2. Warmonger: The player receives mechanical penalties for being at peace (rather than in a state of war). The player receives an automatic Casus Belli against neighbouring rules, the player can use an Invasion *casus belli* once per lifetime, and members of the clergy can serve as commanders of armies.

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3. Blót: Executions earn piety, and players able to host a Grand Sacrifice once a decade (impacting prestige and popular opinion).

The instance of executions earning piety via the Blót tenet is especially significant as normally executions would *cost* piety for most faiths. Festival-like events are also related to the Blót tenet in which sacrifices can be made (the objects sacrificed can be determined from multiple choices by the player). This can lead to beneficial opinion modifiers for those also following the Ásatrú faith, but can negatively affect the opinions of those following other faiths. These mechanical elements position the Ásatrú faith in opposition to other religions operating within the same regions, such as Catholicism and Insular Christianity. The Ásatrú faith reads as one which values sacrifice, and executions appear to have a ritual-like function.

The Warmonger tenet effectively makes conquest easier for the player. Rather than having to spend time and in-game currency and/or making strategic marriages to generate *casus belli* (the justification for a war), I inherently have one against neighbouring rival faiths. When this ease of justified wars is coupled with receiving negative modifiers whilst at peace, I am encouraged to be at war as often as I possibly can be. From what I understand, the faith demands I am at war, and when I am at war I can execute prisoners to gain mechanical benefits.

Also, within the character creator menu, I can select my player-character's Personality and Other Traits. When following different religions, different character traits can be categorised as Virtues or Sins. I set up my character to be as virtuous as possible, so they are a vengeful, brave, wrathful, one-eyed poet.

Figure 3: The virtuous traits of an Ásatrú character. *Crusader Kings III* © Paradox Interactive.

Figure 3 also demonstrates how these traits would lead a character to be Martial orientated. Wrathful benefits the martial skill, Vengeful benefits Prowess, and Brave benefits both. Each virtuous trait provides the player with a +10 opinion modifier with other characters that follow the Ásatrú faith, +1 Piety per month, and a +10 opinion modifier with vassals with the Zealous personality trait (all these numerical values are listed in green in-game).

The traits which would have been seen as sinful are Deceitful, Craven, and Forgiving. Each sinful trait would lead to a -10 opinion modifier with followers of the Ásatrú faith, -1.0 Piety per month, and a -10 opinion modifier with vassals that have the Zealous personality trait (all numerical values are listed in red in-game). This infers to me as the player the worst way to play as an Ásatrú follower is to have a character who is a duplicitous coward capable of mercy. Likewise, making decisions within my

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roleplay that can be deemed deceitful, cowardly, or merciful will negatively impact me with various negative modifiers.

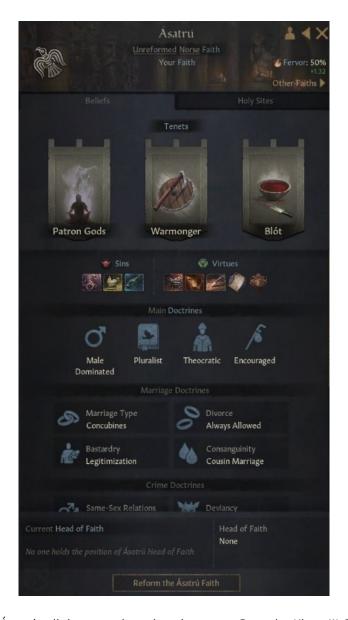


Figure 4: The default Ásatrú religion overview given in-game. Crusader Kings III © Paradox Interactive.

Figure 4 gives an overview of the Ásatrú faith, allowing the player to see the central doctrines, tenets, and current fervour levels of the faith (the higher the fervour the more righteous adherents believe themselves and the faith to be). The overview gives the impression of a patriarchal faith, encouraging me to favour playing with a male

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character so as not to receive negative modifiers. The Male Dominated doctrine of the Ásatrú faith results in the following: there are male-only and male-preference succession laws; the claims of women can only be pressed against other women; children, incapable rulers, and women do not get implicit claims on their parents' titles; women cannot be granted titles; only men can be appointed to certain Council positions; and all Ásatrú followers have a -10 opinion modifier towards female rulers.



Figure 5: Ásatrú holy sites. Crusader Kings III © Paradox Interactive.

In Figure 5 the Ásatrú Holy Sites and their benefits are listed for the player. Notably, the holy site at Paderborn is highlighted in red in both the list and its on-map icon. This indicates to the player that it currently belongs to the *wrong* faith. As long as a character (player or non-player) that follows the Ásatrú faith controls the Holy Site then all Ásatrúans receive the buff. Of the ten buffs available via Holy Site ownership, seven are directly linked to martial or prowess elements of the game. This again leads me as the player to preference maximising my martial and combat abilities. For example, owning the Jórvík Holy Site boosts the player's prowess by +1 for each level of devotion they have and increases the effectiveness of their knights by +20%.

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As I play through the game different decisions both major and minor become available. Some of these decisions relate to the Ásatrú faith and provide benefits when completed. A decision that I can make quickly is to Determine Personal Deity, a decision enabled by the Patron Gods tenet.



Figure 6: Determine Personal Deity decision. *Crusader Kings III* © Paradox Interactive.

I can select between Devotee of Odin, Devotee of Ullr, Devotee of Thor, and Devotee of Freyr, with each providing at least two mechanical benefits highlighted in green.

Devotee of Odin provides +2 Intrigue and +0.03 Piety per Dread each month.

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Devotee of Ullr provides +3 Martial, +50% movement speed in provinces affected by Winter, and +2 Knight combat advantage in provinces affected by Winter. Devotee of Thor provides +2 Stewardship and +3 Prowess. Devotee of Freyr provides +25% Fertility and +0.10 Control Growth per month. In terms of a min-maxing strategy, becoming a Devotee of Ullr is the best option. Not only does this provide three buffs rather than two, but it allows me to maximise the Martial skill which is the skill that is continually buffed as I engage with the mechanics of the game that most benefits a player of the Ásatrú faith. Additionally, it is one more skill value point than the other deities offer. Why take two Intrigue points when I could have three Martial points? If I am optimising then I would take the most buffs and the most powerful ones, so Devotee of Ullr is the logical choice, barring any situational demands on the player.

One decision in particular that was influential in terms of playing out an alt-history of the Ásatrú faith was to Forge the Jomsvikings. The effects of this decision can be seen in Figure 7. In CK3, Holy Orders are independent military organisations that benefit the faith they are aligned with. Taking this decision will make the player the patron of the Order, granting them a range of martial buffs, opinion modifiers, and increasing the fervour of the Ásatrú faith. The flavour text for this decision also allows me to contextualise the peripheral nature of the Ásatrú faith within in-game contexts, and how I might go about reversing that:

"The Old Ways are dying. Daily, Abrahamics lure away our smallfolk with promises of eternal life for all, our adventurers and colonists adopt foreign gods wherever they land, and even reformists within Scandinavia want to make us more like the peoples of Cross and Moon. No more. All loyal Ásatrúans must band together, to guard against change and blasphemy!" (CK3)

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Figure 7: The Forge the Jomsvikings decision. Crusader Kings III © Paradox Interactive.

This sets the scene for the player as fighting against the tides of history. This flavour text positions the Ásatrú faith as oppositional to the central faiths of Christianity and Islam. Here a strong connection is made between establishing a Holy Order in order to wage wars in defence of the Ásatrú faith and to prevent it diminishing.

There are five CK3 achievements that contain the word "Ásatrú." Four of these five achievements can be said to be conquest orientated. The achievement Far from Home would require the player to reach the Indian Ocean and hold (likely by

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conquering it) an island within it. Miklgarðaríki requires you to hold (potentially conquer) a large designated area of the map. Vladimir's Second Choice, whilst requiring the player to convert from the Ásatrú faith, would have them convert all of Russia (likely by controlling it, again probably by conquering it). King of all the Isles requires the player to control all the islands in the Atlantic and Mediterranean (again, likely by conquest). Achievements can be significant paratextual elements that can motivate the player towards a digital reward that can function as a form of gaming capital. Having this many conquest-orientated goals also signals to me that this is likely a way I should be playing as Ásatrú characters.

Reviewing the interaction and constriction of the Ásatrú faith we can then ask the guiding questions. Firstly, what alternative history can I play towards? Secondly, how am I mechanically encouraged to play? The answer to both these questions after playing feels quite straightforward: the player should conquer land in order to prevent the diminishing of the faith and make use of the multiple marital and combat buffs that the faith enables.

Given that CK3 is also a roleplaying game in which the player embodies a particular character and not just a state, the game encourages the player to behave in certain ways if they are to be *more* Ásatrú. Roleplaying as a character that is brave, vengeful, wrathful, one-eyed, and a poet was beneficial, whilst being and acting in ways that were cowardly, deceitful, and forgiving led to negative modifiers and consequences for my character. As well as personality traits, the game encouraged me to stick to male characters. It feels clear that I am engaging with a martial and patriarchal faith and being rewarded with significant military and combat orientated buffs for leaning into it, veering away from the core tenets and doctrines of the faith would punish me with negative modifiers.

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Hussites and Holy Roman Empires

In the 1444 CE start date of EU4, the Hussite faith is located within Bohemia (or Moravia, if the player chooses to release it from Bohemia and play as this nation). Upon starting the game as Bohemia, the player is confronted with a pop-up event that supplies information relating to the historical context of the Hussite Wars and the accompanying mechanical consequences. The player would also initially be Catholic, only having the choice to change the course of history by converting to Hussite shortly after.



Figure 8: Pop-up event relating to the Hussite Wars. Europa Universalis IV © Paradox Interactive.

As can be seen in Figure 8, the player is informed that the modifier Hussite

Destruction will impact the player for 30 years or until they complete a mission (a set

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of requirements need to be met and then the player can manually complete a mission). As is noted in red, the player's provinces will start with Devastation and they receive -10.0% National Tax Modifier and -10.0% Manpower Recovery Speed, nerfing their economic and martial abilities.

One of the formal elements of EU4 are Missions. As has been noted, the player can complete a Mission to remove the de-buffs related to the Hussite Destruction modifier. It would be reasonable to assume that Missions indicate a preferred way of playing, as the player is frequently rewarded with benefits for engaging with them.



Figure 9: The lower section of the Bohemian mission tree in EU4. *Europa Universalis IV* © Paradox Interactive.

Missions are presented in a mission tree, with the player completing a Mission as a prerequisite for the next. Figure 9 displays a section of the Bohemian mission tree that contains four Missions that refer to the Hussite faith. These Missions are tied to

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whether or not the player has Hussite as the official state religion. These will be discussed in more detail as they become relevant to the playthrough.

During my playthrough, the Return of the Hussites! event occurred slightly over two years of in-game time. This is displayed in Figure 10.



Figure 10: The Return of the Hussites! event. *Europa Universalis IV* © Paradox Interactive.

Selecting the first option will replace the current Catholic ruler and heir with Jirí and make Hussite the official state religion of Bohemia, allowing you to begin converting Catholic provinces with Missionaries (a nation has a certain number of Missionaries that will convert a provinces religion over time for a cost. The ability and cost of the Missionaries can be affected by modifiers I could pick up as I completed missions). Jirí's stats of 5/4/3 (meaning he will generate 5 Administrative skill points, 4 Diplomatic points, and 3 Military points per month) make him a good ruler in the

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mechanical sense (the maximum point generation total available per point is 6), so placing him on the throne can often be advantageous to the player.

Now with Hussite as the state religion, the player can complete the related Missions and access to the faith relevant mechanics.



Figure 11: Religion mechanics of the Hussite faith and the first half of the Church Power mechanics. *Europa Universalis IV* © Paradox Interactive.

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Figure 12: The second half of the Church Power mechanics. *Europa Universalis IV* © Paradox Interactive.

Figures 11 and 12 detail the mechanical benefits of the Hussite faith. All faiths have general benefits that are inherent to them, for example the Catholic faith provides +1 Tolerance of the True Faith and +1% Missionary Strengths vs Heathens. The Hussite Faith provides +2% Missionary Strength vs Heretics and -5% Shock Damage Received for the player's armies. As well as these benefits, the Hussite faiths generate Church

Power points. The player can spend 100 of these points to activate one of the benefits (known as Aspects of Faith) listed in Figures 11 and 12, the player can have up to three of these benefits active at one time. The mechanical benefits are listed in green, signalling to the player the many positives they could obtain. For example, the player could simultaneously have Bread and Wine, Sola Scriptura, and Taborite Resurgence active. This provides +1 Tolerance of the True Faith, +5% Goods Produced Modifier, -10% War Score Cost vs Other Religions, and +20% National Manpower Modifier (these are what I picked for the playthrough). These are substantial social, economic, and martial buffs that make it easier to make money, field large armies, and acquire territory in a peace treaty that ends a war.

As my playthrough progressed I could complete the relevant Missions. The first Missions I could complete were Recover from Hussite Wars and Hussite Resurgence. Recover from Hussite Wars, once activated, removed the earlier mentioned province devastation and gave a modifier with the following buffs: -1.00 National Unrest and +12.00 Ducat Yearly Tax Income. Hussite Resurgence could be activated once the three states in Bohemia had been converted to Hussite. Once completed, the mission allows Praha to become a Hussite Centre of Reformation for 100 years (this will spread the religion to surrounding provinces without the use of Missionaries) and the player gains the Spread the Word of Hus modifier which grants a -33% cost for enforcing religion through war for 25 years. After completing Hussite Resurgence I can complete Defenestrate the Heretics. This mission requires one of the following to be true: either 30 provinces owned by the player or non-tributary subject of the player follow the Hussite faith, or 10 countries (excluding the player's) have Hussite as the state religion. Once complete, the mission unlocks the Rekindle the Hussite Wars Aspect of Faith for the player (this provides a casus belli against neighbouring states that follow heretical or heathen religions) and Bohemia gets the Defenestration of

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Prague modifier which gives +1.00 Diplomatic Reputation and +1.00% Missionary Strength vs Heretics until the end of the game. The final Hussite-related Mission is Hussite Empire, and it requires the player to either be on the winning side of the Religious League War or be emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (and either have the Holy Roman Empire have a treaty of religious peace or an official unchangeable religion). Once this mission is completed by the player when they activate an Aspect of Faith there is a 25% chance that 25 Church Points will be refunded. Also, the player gains the Pravda Vítezí modifier, granting -5.0% Power Costs for 20 years. The game rewards me with powerful modifiers for following the mission path.

After playing for slightly over 100 years of in-game time I managed to establish the Hussite faith within a significant portion of Europe.



Figure 13: A map of religions in an alternate history of Europe. *Europa Universalis IV* © Paradox Interactive.

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Figure 13 displays the geographic distinctness of the faiths within Europe, with the Hussite faith dominating Eastern and East-Central Europe. Interesting quirks within the map, such as an Anglican Scottish Highlands and a Protestant Naples are indicative that the player's agency is not the only force producing this alternative history. As far as I am aware, my play had no impact on these two things occurring.

External to the game object itself again are achievements. As has been noted, achievements are significant in relation to Paradox games, and there is an EU4 achievement relating to the Hussite faith. There is one achievement in EU4 containing the word "Hussite." The achievement itself, Veritas Vincit, requires the player to make the Hussite faith the official faith of the Holy Roman Empire, moving it from the periphery to the centre. As was noted in relation to the CK3 achievements, the player can see the percentage of players that have this achievement. This allows the player to contextualise their play and allows the achievement to operate as a form of gaming capital. A user's Steam profile allows them to showcase their rarest achievements (in relation to the percentage of players of the game that have them). Just having these achievements to aim for gives an indication of a potential alternative history the player could explore. In this instance, it is a reimaging of the Holy Roman Empire and the religious landscape of Europe. It can also make the play feel more productive, appeasing entrepreneurial subjectivities.

As with the Ásatrú faith, we can conclude by asking the guiding questions. First, what alternative history can I play towards? Secondly, how am I mechanically encouraged to play? The Hussite faith may not have been as obviously a martial-orientated faith as Ásatrú in CK3, but I did find I was encouraged to frequently enter into wars and spread the religion by force. This was enabled by modifiers that strengthened my Missionaries, increased my Manpower reserves, made it easier to take more provinces

in a single peace deal, and made it easier to force my religion upon others via a peace treaty. The Aspects acquired via the Church Power points suggested to me that the faith could be associated with popular support (due to the significant Manpower buff and high tolerance for followers reducing National Unrest) and expansion (based upon the ability to acquire more in a peace treaty than I otherwise would have).

In order to convert with my Missionaries, I had to control the territory directly or it needed to be controlled by a vassal (who I could have to enforce my religion opinion, leading to an increased Liberty Desire and negative opinion modifier in relation to the player). I could also make Hussite the state religion of nations controlled by the AI if I was in a war with them and I had enough War Score to add Force Religion to the peace treaty. As with CK3 and the Ásatrú faith, I am encouraged to conquer territory or at least enter into wars.

Peripheral Religions and Speculative Motivations

Kunzelman observes in relation to the mechanical and formal function of climate change within *Civilization VI* (2016), that the current articulation of history reads almost as the logical result of history because of the structures and processes within the game (2022, 153). What peripheral religions offer is a means for roleplay and speculation and to defamiliarise history. The, ironic, centrality of peripheral religions in the formulation and design of many Paradox games speaks to what videogames can do with peripheral histories. They allow for playful speculation: the player can toy with the paths of history and religions themselves, structuring an elaborate alternative history via their play.

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It should be highlighted that the mechanical functions of strategy games themselves may have helped create a bias towards conflict as the means through which a religion could move from the periphery to the centre. In turn, shaping perceptions of many peripheral faiths within history being martial and conflict orientated. It is quite often that conquest via war is the simplest means through which to expand in grand strategy games, especially CK3 and EU4. It is feasible that during these playthroughs that I could have used strategic marriages and intrigue to spread the Ásatrú faith in CK3, but this would have left a lot to chance and the process would have been significantly slower. Likewise, in EU4 I could have emphasised diplomatic gameplay and attempted to vassalise surrounding nations or even attempted to control the Holy Roman Empire by improving relations with those around me and only later evangelising the Hussite faith once established as a Catholic power. Again, this would have left a lot to chance and been very time-consuming. Instead, I leant into minmaxing strategies, optimising my in-game strength to reach my goals faster. Playing this way meant the process of defamiliarisation created an alternate history shaped by war.

As with how Kunzelman (2022, 152) notes the "sharp algorithmic limits" of a videogame, there is a limitation on how we can speculate, how a videogame can defamiliarise, and what a player can achieve. In the spirit of min-maxing I tried to complete my objectives as quickly as I could, and this led me to conquest and war more often than not. I may have been left with the impression that conquest and war has led to the current formation of religions, but what the play has provided me with is contextualising knowledge of what these peripheral religions are. The algorithmic limitations and attempting to appease entrepreneurial subjectivities meant I engaged and speculated in a specific way. If I wanted to take my time, experiment, fail, and not optimise I could have had different outcomes and affects as I played. The algorithmic

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limits of the game need to be considered in tandem with ideological limits and motivations of the player.

To address the research question (how can alternative histories in videogames alter the perception of peripheral religions?), videogames present an opportunity through which history itself can be played with. A playful alternative history provides an opportunity for the player to reinterpret history via their procedural literacies and the affective potential of the videogame. A mechanically focused method of play (minmaxing) allowed me to develop a particular understanding of faiths that would have otherwise been completely outside of my knowledge. However, it is reductive to say that videogames reinforce a particular view of history, as to the individual player they could also reveal the forces (economic, cultural, ideological, etc.) that lead to the understanding of history that we have. The player is in a contradictory position in which a command of the algorithmic procedures of the game allows them to play (and speculate) to their fullest but if this relationship is so close that the mechanical functionality is all the player sees (green numbers good, red numbers bad), then the speculative function suffers. For example, EU4 procedural rhetorics are as much a critique of colonialism as they are a reinforcement of European domination. Speculative roleplay, min-maxing runs, or achievement hunting are valid and subjective ways to play, and they can exist in an uneasy relationship within the same playthrough. The colliding motivations of each reveals the significance of player and algorithmic agencies within the play-space. In arriving at this conclusion, I can emphasise the significance of autoethnographies when engaging with play in videogames. Despite the subjective limitations of the study, constructing specific patterns of play (via a cognitive mapping exercise for example) can present a nuanced picture of the potentials of a videogame and how they can achieve seemingly contradictory affects and effects.

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