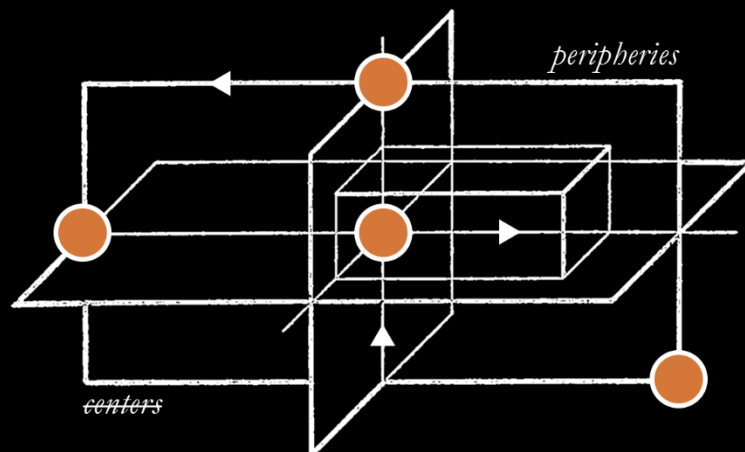


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 narrative



Peripheries – Title Image. Image by Aska Mayer. CC BY-NC.

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

The focus of this work will be the Ásatrú 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







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:

27

"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

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



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.

31

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











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.





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

37

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

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

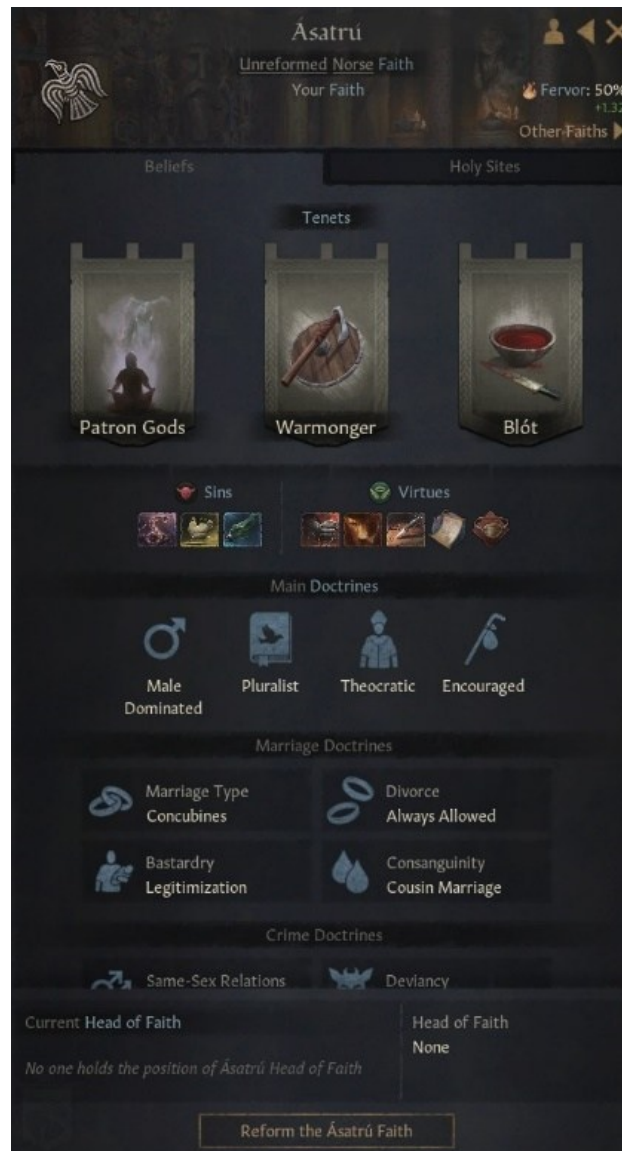


Figure 4: The default Ásatrú religion overview given in-game. *Crusader Kings III* © Paradox Interactive.

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



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.

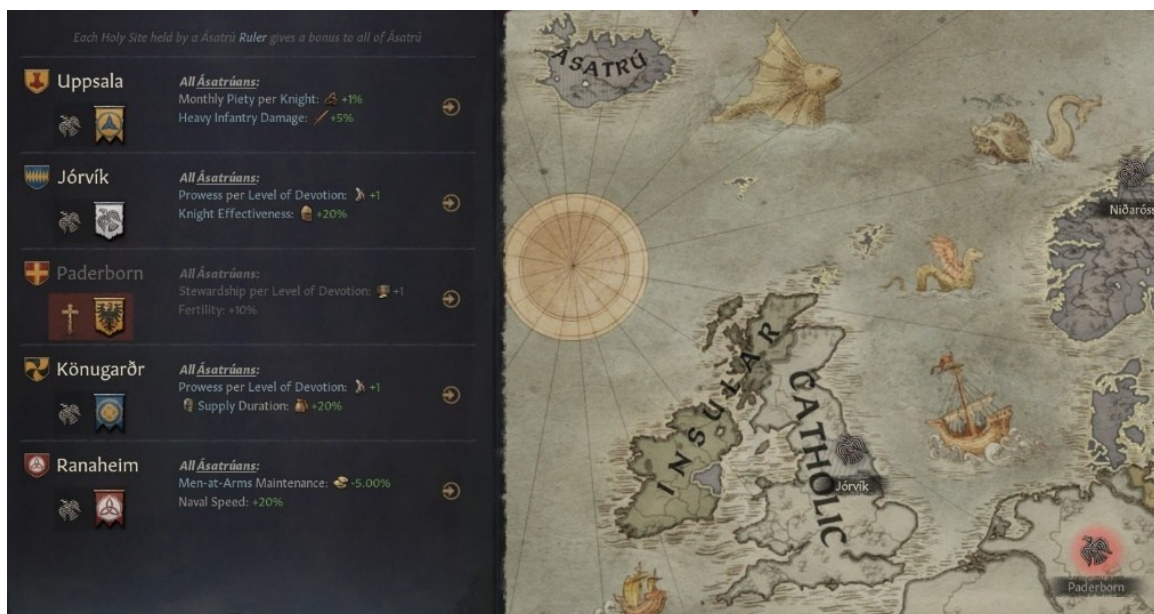


Figure 5: Ásatrú holy sites. *Crusader Kings III* © Paradox Interactive.

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 Jörvík 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%.

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.

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)



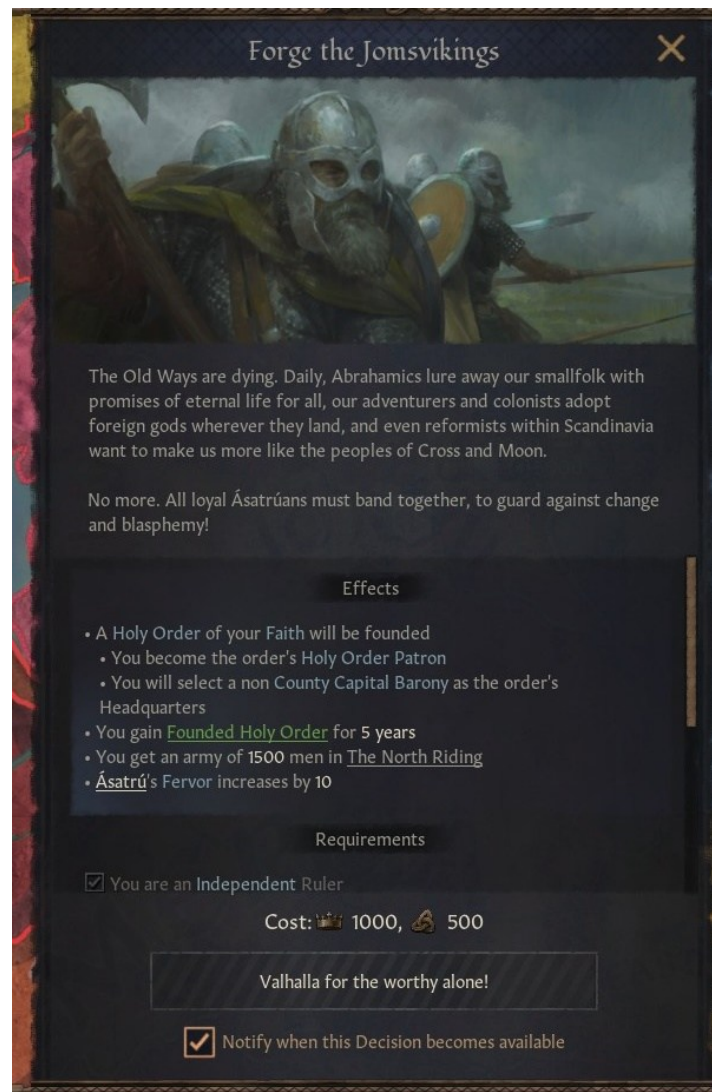


Figure 7: The Forge the Jomsvikings decision. *Crusader Kings III* © Paradox Interactive.

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

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.

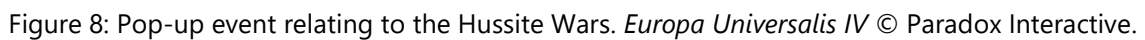
Reviewing the interaction and constriction of the Ásatrú faith we can then ask the guiding questions. Firstly, what alternative history can I play towards? Secondly, how am I mechanically encouraged to play? The answer to both these questions after playing feels quite straightforward: the player should 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.

43

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.

[illegible]

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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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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 Jiri 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). Jiri'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



[illegible]

47



Europa Universalis IV © Paradox Interactive.



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









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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