

What Makes a Successful Emergent Narrative: The Case of Crusader Kings II

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Abstract. Though sometimes placed in opposition to digital games with authored narratives, simulation games and their primarily emergent narratives do not necessarily lack emotional depth and complexity, and can engage players in intellectually and emotionally engaging narratives. Through the close analysis of Paradox Development Studio’s highly successful grand strategy game *Crusader Kings II*, we examine how the various layers that constitute that game’s narrative as well as specific game mechanics assist in the creation of highly individualized narratives of play. By deploying hybrid narrative techniques that rely as much on the systems of the simulation as they do upon the actions of ambitious autonomous agents and scripted vignettes, *Crusader Kings II* provides a striking example of how a game can strive to accurately depict a historical period as well as the complexities of its social, cultural, and familial structures, and succeed in crafting engaging interactive stories out of this simulation.

Keywords: Emergent narrative · Digital games · Simulation · Emotion · Family

1 Introduction

In an essay published earlier this year in *The Atlantic*, Ian Bogost makes the bold claim that “Video Games Are Better Without Characters” [1]. Seizing upon the closure of Maxis Emeryville, the studio behind *SimCity* [2], Bogost decries what he perceives as the bias in recent digital games production towards making games that emphasize the representation of individuals and their stories, rather than of systems and their flaws, which he argues simulation games are best suited to convey and represent in potentially intellectually or ideologically challenging ways. Even as he contrasts simulation games with those he more readily associates with “identity politics”, Bogost does not go so far as to state that greater popularity for such simulation games would prove entirely salutary for the games industry and the gaming public in general. However, his spirited defense of the simulation genre that was the hallmark of Maxis’s output, with such titles as *SimCity* and *The Sims*, strikes a particular chord when he addresses the perceived opposition in certain sections of the digital games industry between the emergent narratives borne out of games like *The Sims* and the “emotional nuance” [3] that can, supposedly, only arise from authored digital narratives. This perception of opposition, be it qualitative or measured in terms of player engagement, between emergent narrative and

authored content is nothing new in the field of interactive digital narratives, or of digital game studies [4]. Simulation games of the type that Maxis produced have been described as environments that create emergent narratives, with *The Sims* serving as the prime example behind, notably, Henry Jenkins's articulation of the concept [5]. Though Electronic Arts has turned a page of digital game history by closing down Maxis, simulation games that fully display the capacity these types of games have for creating emotional nuance through emergent play are still being made, and enjoying considerable popularity, despite Bogost's somewhat pessimistic stance. Indeed, some recent entries in the genre have displayed some of the ways that emergent narrative techniques, in conjunction with simulation systems, can produce engaging player experiences.

Through a close analysis of these systems at play in one such game, Paradox Development Studio's 2012 grand strategy game, *Crusader Kings II*, derived from extensive play of numerous game sessions, we will propose that this game has at its core hybrid narrative techniques which could be applied to other games of its genre, but which also prove relevant for interactive digital narratives in general. Through its reliance upon the concept of the family as both a mechanical and narrative cornerstone, *Crusader Kings II* creates a compelling historical sense of time as well as a jarring, entertaining, and emotionally potent representation of the medieval era and its politics. Furthermore, the use of scripted vignettes in conjunction with the largely emergent narrative arising from the experience of the game's simulation results in a strong sense of player engagement within the personal narrative of the dynasty they play through the ages.

2 Emergent Narratives and Emotional Actors

In "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", Henry Jenkins used Maxis's own *The Sims* to describe emergent narrative as one of numerous models for narrative possibilities in digital games: "Emergent narratives are not prestructured or preprogrammed, taking shape through the game play, yet they are not as unstructured, chaotic, and frustrating as life itself" [5]. The use of *The Sims* to illustrate this example of a narrative form in digital games is fitting, given the game and its successors' function as sandbox or "doll-house" games. Yet Jenkins also highlights the narrative satisfaction that arises from playing the game, as well as the emotional satisfaction for players that arises from characters having "desires, urges, and needs" of their own [5]. Marie-Laure Ryan has argued, with reference in part to *The Sims*, that digital games have only so far tentatively approached dramatic narrative plots that "knot together several destinies into a dynamic network of human relations and then disentangles them to let characters go their own way" [4]. However, in *The Sims* and other simulation games, it is those drives and desires present in the characters that give them some measure of personality. In turn, this makes the emergent narrative resonate with players, depending on their level of control.

It has also been argued that, in certain interactive digital storytelling systems, the interaction between autonomous characters does not always lead to interesting stories, at least from a spectator viewpoint, if not from that of the interactor [6]. In connection with a game like *The Sims*, where the player is a disembodied puppet-master controlling his Sims, this may seem like quite a valid observation. However, the importance of such

independently motivated agents is not to be understated in the way that an emergent narrative as Jenkins described it can and should rely upon them to create a narrative that involves the player. A game like *Crusader Kings II* demonstrates that such emergent narrative techniques focused on character interaction, as found in dollhouse simulators like *The Sims*, can be successfully integrated within another genre of simulation game, otherwise not bearing the hallmarks of complex narrative ambitions. Indeed, *Crusader Kings II*'s lead designer, Henrik Fåhraeus names *The Sims* as one of the influences behind the game, and certain shared mechanics are quite self-evidently at play, such as systems for modelling interpersonal relationships [7]. This mechanic of balancing positive and negative relationships is fully realized through *Crusader Kings II*'s opinion system. Every autonomous agent in the game, as well as the player's current character, are characterized by a number of traits which carry opinion modifiers that affect a scale of -100 to 100 in characters' mutual opinions of one another. Complementary and opposing traits create tensions between the various agents and the player's character, which in turn drives a great deal of intrigue, betrayal, and conflict. This opinion system, by which every single individual in the game world is represented, is what creates the dynamic by which interpersonal relationships affect in meaningful ways the conduct of geopolitical actors, and in turn the player's narrative experience.

3 The Hybrid Storytelling Techniques of *Crusader Kings II*

Crusader Kings II relies largely on emergent narrative, part of which arises from the complexity of the simulation and the alternate histories that can be played through it. Due to this, but also to the emotional complexity of independently driven agents, *Crusader Kings II* deploys a layered, hybrid array of storytelling techniques. Through analysis of the different narrative layers present in the game, as well as the constituent mechanics that play a part in delivering or generating both scripted and emergent narrative content, we may begin to understand the game's success and popularity, which may be explained by its ability to create emotionally and intellectually engaging stories.

3.1 Narrative Layers

Crusader Kings II is an entry in the grand strategy genre of digital games, which most often involves highly complex political, military, and economic simulation, but rarely gives much consideration to the place of the individual. This is true of some of Paradox Studio's other grand strategy games in later historical periods, such as the *Europa Universalis* series and the *Victoria* series. The period covered by *Crusader Kings II* itself spans from as early as the year 769 to 1453, placing feudal politics and wars of religion at the heart of the game. The well-established importance of interpersonal relations in feudal politics [8, 9], however, resulted in the design necessity of modelling of individual actors who, from courtiers to lords, bishops, and kings, would interact with one another to demonstrate the volatility and constraints of medieval society. Fåhraeus himself remarks upon the comparative uniqueness of this type of interpersonal gameplay within the grand strategy genre [7]. We would argue, however, that the game is not, as Fåhraeus

puts it, *all* about the characters. Indeed, the characters and feudal politics in which they participate are but one of many overlapping narrative layers. These narrative layers instruct and feed into one another, and are primarily distinguished by the level of detail in their approach to the game world, from the broad, macro perspective of the narrative at the grand strategy level, to the much more detailed and complex dynamics of the interpersonal politics at the feudal and dynastic levels. The multiplication and diversity in their scopes and approaches to the simulated game world is what makes these layers responsible for the hybrid narrative techniques deployed by the game.

Grand Strategy. The grand strategy layer is the least detailed of the three at play in *Crusader Kings II*, and also the one most typical of the grand strategy genre, concerns itself with such key game modes as the player's management of his military, economy, religion, and other such systems that govern the provinces and territories that the player rules over, from a barony to an empire. The fact that actions in this layer affect territories and nations rather than individuals makes it comparatively less detailed than the other two. This layer is the one through which the player can most readily experiment with and experience alternate histories, as their influence in the game world expands far beyond historical realities. The ability to pause but also to advance time to experience years in the space of a few minutes of real-time further enables this realization of alternate histories over the game's lengthy timespan. The narratives at this layer are primarily depersonalized except where they intersect with the two other layers.

Feudal Politics. The second narrative layer found in the game is turned more inwards than the previous one, and is one degree more detailed. It is also where the opinion system truly starts to come into play. At this level, the player, through their character, must learn to deal with the disagreements, petty rivalries, or open rebellion that stem from agents with varying personalities and ambitions. The friction caused by the opinion system truly brings the fractious nature of feudal politics to life as it drives agents and player alike towards conflict or its suppression, in a constant state of flux and instability. However powerful a feudal lord can become, and even if they rise to become kings or emperors, the ambitions and desire for power of their vassals always creates an unstable matrix of relations that can easily be upset by interpersonal conflicts. This narrative layer adds further complexity to the geopolitics of the previous grand strategy level, as a feudal lord must balance expansion and conquest with internal politics.

Dynasty Politics. The third narrative layer is intricately connected to the first two, but is of even more direct concern to the player as it is the condition of their continued ability to play the game. Indeed, the player in *Crusader Kings II* is embodied through time as one member of a certain dynasty, and then as that character's heir when this first character dies. If this dynasty dies out, then the game ends for the player. Dynastic maneuvering designed to stop this from happening is therefore an important drive in the navigation of both the expansion of territory and the feudal politics this involves, as familial concerns take on considerable mechanical as well as narrative and emotional significance. This narrative layer is therefore concerned with familial matters, including marriage and the raising of children. As such, it is the layer in which most attention is given to the traits that inform the

opinion system. On this layer, interpersonal relations go beyond the purely political to enter into more intimate dynamics.

These different narrative layers allow for the player to have a variety of viewpoints on their character's place in the game world, on continual sliding scale of detail. This in turn participates in the creation of a layered narrative of play where the player's experience is a combination of grand strategy, feudal politics, and dynastic alliances.

3.2 The Opinion System

Primarily driving two of these narrative layers is the opinion system. Every character in *Crusader Kings II* is characterized through a number of ways: their name, portrait, culture, religion, attributes, and traits. A character's portrait changes and ages with time, and their culture and religion can also change. A character's attributes – in five categories: diplomacy, martial, stewardship, intrigue, and learning – broadly represents their base ability at certain types of action, and are in turn influenced by traits. These traits, which are acquired partly through inheritance and partly through the education that a character receives from their guardian, are, in conjunction with a character's culture and religion, some of the factors that most influence the opinion system. It is through guardianship that a character also acquires their education trait, which instructs the attributes most favored by the character, but which can also range from incompetence to great skill, depending in part on chance and in part on the quality of the guardian's own education trait. Chief among these traits are the seven cardinal sins and virtues of Christian doctrine, which provide advantages or disadvantages, and also importantly which mirror one another so that a character with a particular vice will be negatively disposed towards a character who possesses the corresponding virtue.

This acquisition through education, as well as the western and religious denomination of many of the most common traits, participate in an ideologically weighted characterization of the game's individual characters. This is the outcome of design choices made to emphasize the game's situation in a precise historical moment where the importance of family had a real bearing on not only feudal politics but succession matters, the application of justice, and more [8]. These traits, and in particular virtues and vices, play a double role. On the one hand, as the player comes to see these vices and virtues as little more than mechanical advantages or disadvantages, this deconstructs their potential moral significance, potentially serving as a critique of medieval Christian doctrine and its arbitrary moral categories. On the other hand, the terminology employed for these traits and their integration within the historical and cultural background of the period further encourages the player to engage with the narrative experience of the game. The oppositional nature of many of the traits reinforces a conflictual duality as a core concept of these medieval societies depicted, which accordingly instructs the player's reading of their experiences of play.

The depth, yet ultimate simplicity and transparency, of the trait system is essential to the player's engagement with the game's emergent narrative. However, this simplicity does not detract from the overall narrative experience of the game, or the player's engagement with it. On the contrary, it serves the depiction of a world where politics are not concerned with concealing its actors' vices, virtues, and ambitions, but rather with

what volatile and unpredictable consequences emerge when these collide. With all but a few violent actions, such as assassination, strictly limited by the parameters of the simulation and believable conduct in a feudal society, the player is often powerless to completely stop, alter, or even predict the outcome of interactions between his character and the agents, or between the agents among themselves. This powerlessness should not be conflated with a lack of agency, however. It is merely one of many narrative junctures that occur emergently, and which give all the more significance to the player's choices and actions to overcome the challenges posed by those situations.

3.3 Family Ties

Family and its representation is one of the key components of the narrative experience in *Crusader Kings II*, where these interpersonal and familial relationships are positioned with regards to the player in a way that renders them uncanny, in the Freudian sense of the unsettling juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar [10]. Indeed, these familial relationships are somewhat familiar, whether through more or less idealized popular representations of the middle-ages, but also through the simple presence of the base unit of the family. Simultaneously, however, the game's representation of the family is also thoroughly unfamiliar, particularly in the dehumanizing treatment of family members as little more than tokens of exchange in a patriarchal and largely homosocial system in which, for instance, female characters are primarily leveraged towards the formation of alliances or the acquisition of prestige, the game's point system. The dynastic layer of play encourages a certain type of familial politics where emotion is subordinate to pragmatism, and where familial affection often weighs very little compared to other concerns and the negative balance of opinion traits. These familial politics change depending on the culture, religion, and government type in play. The feudal ruler of a western kingdom will want to marry his children to form powerful alliances and potentially acquire new titles, while the leader of a republic will try to keep as many male relatives at court so that they may expand the family's trade empire further.

Family in *Crusader Kings II*, therefore, is at once a game system – the means by which the player ensures the survival of their dynasty, and through which they acquire even greater prestige –, a social system – one in which misogyny is the rule, and laws of succession determine your relatives' opinion of your character –, and a narrative system. This last is as much an output of the first two systems as it is a consequence of the player's relation to the uncanny family systems that they have to interact with in their experience of the narrative of play. Even as they exploit their family for political aims, they must also protect against the ambitions and betrayals of close relatives. The mechanical focus of the former does not, however, reduce the emotional impact of the latter. Indeed, the current player character's treacherous uncle can be the previous character's own brother, and one of the sons of the character before him. The attachments formed by the player with their character's progeny therefore have a high chance of being reversed as older bonds of familial affection and obligation grow weaker over time, and are steadily replaced in the agents' priorities by the pursuit of personal power.

3.4 Scripted Vignettes

Having addressed the primary emergent components of *Crusader Kings II*'s interactive narrative experience, we must look at how these interact with the scripted vignettes that punctuate the game over time. These vignettes have a certain predetermined chance of occurring if certain criteria are met. Some are linked directly to and affected by player choices, such as the process of educating a child. Others are far more arbitrary in their occurrence, such as the possibility of giving life to a suspected demon-spawned child, who wreaks havoc around him from the earliest points of his life, potentially even killing his siblings. Yet others are linked to a particular culture, religion, or government type. The player of a Venetian Patrician family, therefore, will at some stage have the opportunity to embark on a narrative chain surrounding an ongoing rivalry between their family and another Venetian ruling family, potentially featuring a remediation of the tragic outcome of *Romeo and Juliet*. Just as the demon-child is a remediation of *Rosemary's Baby*, these vignettes are often knowing, and occasionally participate in the grim gallows humor that occasionally appears in the game, though the parameters of the simulation themselves eschew humor in favor of rigorous pseudo-realism.

Whether their appearance is arbitrary or linked to player choices, however, these vignettes are at once enriching and disruptive for the narrative experience of play. They enrich the player's narrative experience by bringing additional opportunities for characterization and player choice. While a player may pick only optimal choices, they may also choose non-optimal, if dramatic choices, or be forced to choose between two equally unpleasant options, if they can choose at all. Though the repetitiveness of these vignettes hinders their narrative impact over time, they remain an important narrative element that contributes flavor to the game experience. Simultaneously, these vignettes are also disruptive, if not intrusive, within the flow of the game but they are so in a deliberate manner. Very often they arise and have the effect of disrupting, or interrupting the smooth progression of the simulation. Even taking into account the unpredictability involved in the simulation elements of the game, these scripted events further contribute to that unpredictability. The fact that they appear on written pop-ups in the center of the screen and address the player directly in the second person further emphasizes their marked difference from the rest of the emergent gameplay and narrative. These vignettes function as a break within the overall emergent narrative of the game, but also as a form of embellishment of the familial chronicle that a game of *Crusader Kings II* depicts. As a break, they almost serve as a type of punctuation that, in coordination with the emergent narrative, further engages the player with the game, their dynasty, and the events that surround them by creating additional memorable moments.

4 Conclusion

The close analysis of *Crusader Kings II* has revealed the potent effect of combining a complex simulation with ample allowance made in the game's design for the appearance of emergent narratives on a number of layers. This, in conjunction with scripted vignettes that serve to punctuate the experience of the emergent narrative creates a greater sense of personalization to the experience of the game. Returning to Ian Bogost's initial article,

it becomes apparent that the statement that simulation games without characters are “better” than games that do overlooks simulation games where characters feature prominently in both the game’s systems and narrative potential. While the characterization in *Crusader Kings II* is unscripted and tied primarily to the opinion system, agent interactions can create and contribute to narratives of great emotional depth, primarily connected to the representation of family, in much the same way as scripted interactive digital narratives. Furthermore, this capacity for emotional depth does not negate the potential for ideological critique and reflection that a simulation game can offer. The misogynistic, patriarchal, religious and despotic cultures of the middle-ages are represented in *Crusader Kings II* warts and all, and the experience of the game’s emergent narrative often invites the player to reflect upon the unconscionable actions they are led to undertake and the consequences of their acts. It is no doubt in large part due to its hybrid approach to interactive digital storytelling that a game like *Crusader Kings II* can have the best of all worlds in this regard, and invite all at once ideological reflection and the enjoyment of exciting narratives to play.

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