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Influencing Players' Perceptions of the Past:
Video Game Mechanics Representing
Medieval Marriages and Betrothals

By

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Abstract

A growing body of scholarship in recent years has been dedicated to how video games represent the medieval past. Several game theorists and historians have put forward claims that historical video games make arguments about the past through their designs to the general public. This study focuses on how the process of representing medieval marriages and betrothals through game mechanics in Paradox Interactive's *Crusader Kings II* influences players' perceptions of the purposes behind medieval European marriages and betrothals between aristocratic families. Examining the language and context of histories published prior to the release of *Crusader Kings II* reveals some historians' arguments about why aristocratic marriages and betrothals occurred. Purposes of alliance, political stability, and establishment of peace are some arguments that surface. Using a ludic analysis, it becomes clear that the first two purposes can be represented in *Crusader Kings II*'s mechanics, but the establishment of peace cannot. Contextually and linguistically analyzing *Crusader Kings II*'s players' stories reveals they consistently return to the reasons of alliance and political stability but omit the reason of establishing peace. Players recount the game's implicit argument that it has made through its mechanics' representation of medieval marriages and betrothals. This study helps better understand how historical video games argue about the past but also reveals how that form of argument influences players' perceptions of the past. It also helps better understand how interactive media is being used as a conduit to present historical ideas, such as representing medieval marriages and betrothals through gameplay mechanics.

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Historical Video Games: Lucrative, Popular, and Argumentative

Game journalists estimated in 2019 that “[t]here are now more than 2.5 billion gamers across the world” who spent a collective “\$152.1 billion on games[.]”¹ As context, influenced partially by the COVID-19 pandemic, the video game industry is beginning to financially eclipse movies and North American sports combined, with expectations of revenue reaching \$179.7 billion for 2020.² The industry is growing quickly and fueling it is undoubtedly its consumer: the player. This is no small niche hobby that is confined to an isolated community, but has instead undergone a metamorphosis into a worldwide industry that deserves attention for its revenue generation alone. However, this shift in the scale of how many players there are should also draw interest. As growth in the global market continues to advance healthily, it seems that the quantity of players is not going to shrink drastically in the near future.³

Along with the industry’s consistent expansion comes the historical video game genre, which possesses the ability to engage players in part of a larger discourse surrounding a game’s historical topics and settings. Indeed, Andrew Denning, in his exploration of “how the gamification of the past influences the public understanding of how history happens” concedes that “[v]ideo games are a primary medium through which the public consumes history.”⁴ Notably, *The American Historical Review* has begun soliciting reviews of video games and notes how Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed* titles are “enormously popular historically based video games”

¹ Tom Wijman, “The Global Games Market Will Generate \$152.1 Billion in 2019 as the US Overtakes China as the Biggest Market,” *Newzoo*, June 18, 2019, <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-generate-152-1-billion-in-2019-as-the-u-s-overtakes-china-as-the-biggest-market/>.

² Wallace Witkowski, “Videogames are a bigger industry than movies and North American sports combined, thanks to the pandemic,” *MarketWatch*, last updated January 2, 2021, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/videogames-are-a-bigger-industry-than-sports-and-movies-combined-thanks-to-the-pandemic-11608654990>.

³ Wijman, “The Global Games Market,” <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-generate-152-1-billion-in-2019-as-the-u-s-overtakes-china-as-the-biggest-market/>.

⁴ Andrew Denning, “Deep Play? Video Games and the Historical Imaginary,” *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (March 2021): 182, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhab002>, PDF file.

that often offer an “initial impression of historical epochs, characters, and events” for players.⁵ With popularity comes financial success, especially for games set in the Middle Ages. Game journalists estimated in 2020 that *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla* – set during the early Middle Ages – sold more than 3.5 million copies worldwide during its launch week alone, breaking Ubisoft’s previous launch week sales records for *Assassin’s Creed* games.⁶

Historical video games are not just popular or lucrative; they also influence their players’ perception of the past. Adam Chapman has argued that within “the history of games, games are *primary* sources, evidence of the medium’s past. Comparatively, in historical game studies, games are critiqued as *secondary* sources that offer narratives and argumentation about the past.”⁷ While Chapman’s claim that video games are primary sources deserves further study and application in the field of video game histories, his assertion that they are also secondary sources ascribes that they are narratives reliant on primary and secondary sources that can make arguments or offer debate about the past in the form of a ludic construct. For instance, a game acting as a secondary source may be set during D-Day from the perspective of an Allied soldier. The game’s weapon design may be taken from WWII blueprints of weaponry or archival film footage taken during the invasion. The design may also insist on representing a particular type of fragmentation grenade used by the player upon landing on the beach. The design may also include other types of fragmentation grenades to acquire or use after the initial landing has occurred and the Allied grenades have been depleted. The representation of a player being able to use and acquire weaponry both designated from Allied supplies and weaponry found on the

⁵ “Video Game Reviews: Introduction,” *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (March 2021): 214, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhab188>.

⁶ Tom Phillips, “Valhalla is the biggest Assassin’s Creed launch ever,” *Eurogamer*, ReedPop, last updated November 18, 2020, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2020-11-18-valhalla-is-the-biggest-assassins-creed-launch-ever>.

⁷ Adam Chapman, “The Histories of/in Games,” *ROMchip: a journal of game histories* 1, no. 1 (July 2019), accessed April 10, 2021, <https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/70>.

beach may argue, (consciously or not), there was a scarcity of munitions post-landing; Allied familiarity with Axis weaponry was part of Allied training; or even the particular physical makeups in the type of fragmentation grenades. Another game with the same setting and plot may use the same base code from the first game or the same blueprints for its weapon design but restrict players to only use weaponry supplied by the Allies. Thus, the narrative changes and pushes back against the idea that Allied soldiers did use Axis weaponry found during the invasion or at least had access to it. Within this example, both games offer narratives that debate each other while working with primary sources to produce a product. The difference is in the rules or functions of the game in relation to weapon accessibility, acquisition, or aesthetic that produce slightly different narratives. Alternatively, as a primary source, these games may allow us to see the concerns of a design team over the pervasiveness of military violence perpetrated by a standardization of weaponry.

Similar to a secondary source, any game that involves historical game design is also making an argument about history, regardless of genre or playerbase. Patrick Harrigan has argued that “game design is an argument. A historical game design makes an argument about history. As scholars we evaluate those arguments, and as citizens we engage with them, pushing back against myths, half-truths, and fantasies.”⁸ His claim implies that engagement with a historical video game is a form of public discussion between designer and players. We can think of players as participants, willing to listen to the argument game design is making. That can also mean that a participant’s perception or understanding of the past can be shaped or changed by the implicit or explicit argument presented by a game’s design. If only a small fraction of the players in the world are engaged in playing a historically set game, and that game’s design is making an

⁸ Patrick Harrigan, “Game History as Public Debate,” *ROMchip: a journal of game histories* 1, no. 1 (July 2019), accessed April 10, 2021, <https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/75>.

argument about the past – by the sheer fact that it is historically set – that means there is not just the opportunity to entertain, but to shape perceptions of the past in the day-to-day lives of thousands of players.

Game design can shape public perceptions of the past through many elements, including aesthetics, narrative designs, and textual references. Game design also influences how players see the past represented in the present. Indeed, Denning asked, “How does playing with history mold historical thinking?” and focused his research and autoethnographic methodology on gaming’s influence on “public understanding of how history happens: who matters; what factors shape historical change; the sources from which game writers, artists, and engineers construct the past; and the metanarratives and philosophical understandings of history that the games impart.”⁹ Outside of his own experience as player, he investigated how the *Wolfenstein* games have “become embroiled in contemporary politics”¹⁰ admitting his work “examines only one genre of video games (the first-person shooter) in one historical setting (Nazi Germany) rendered through one aesthetic lens (alternative history)”¹¹ but observes “the immersive audiovisual worldbuilding of videogames... makes them particularly rich texts.”¹² A major aspect of historical game design and worldbuilding is the ability of gameplay mechanics to represent the past; thereby, arguing and influencing through that representation.

Gameplay Mechanics Representing the Medieval Past and Influencing Player Perception

I use the term “gameplay mechanics” (or simply “mechanics”) to be rules or functions of gameplay that allow a game to be played. Mechanics bind both player and game to a system or

⁹ Denning, “Deep Play?,” 182.

¹⁰ Denning, “Deep Play?,” 195-196.

¹¹ Denning, “Deep Play?,” 190.

¹² Denning, “Deep Play?,” 186.

multiple overlapping systems. Systems and mechanics act as guides to how player and game may respond to each other's actions, allowing designated reactions to occur and gameplay to commence.

Scholars have shown that video games are capable of representing the Middle Ages through many different aspects of gameplay, including mechanics. Daniel Kline succinctly says that “medieval stories, themes, characters, and tropes, persist into the present and are transformed in the contemporary world of digital gaming[.]”¹³ Focusing his research on how tensions in medieval culture and religion might be represented in a video game, Jason Pitruzzello analyzed the systems of culture and religion in *Crusader Kings: Deus Vult*, and found that its mechanics involving systematizing culture allow players “to avoid anachronism by participating in the kinds of cultural and religious shifts that occurred [in the Middle Ages].”¹⁴ He denoted specifically that *Crusader Kings* differs from other games in its genre for its mechanics' ability to show the Middle Ages as culturally rich, multilayered, and “that it accomplishes this without using narratives of renaissance or progress to modernity [which] makes it far more medieval than even its name suggests.”¹⁵

We can consider the act of representation of the Middle Ages through mechanics to be a form of digital translation, even if it is not a completely accurate translation. Kline further states that “[m]istranslation’ is after all still a form of translation, and... gaming has developed its own history, genealogy, and forms of digital translation... they [video games] appropriate and

¹³ Daniel T. Kline, “Introduction “All Your History Are Belong to Us”: Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages,” in *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203097236>, PDF file.

¹⁴ Jason Pitruzzello, “Systematizing Culture in Medievalism: Geography, Dynasty, Culture, and Imperialism in *Crusader Kings: Deus Vult*,” in *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. by Daniel T. Kline (New York: Routledge, 2014), 51, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203097236>, PDF file.

¹⁵ Pitruzzello, “Systematizing Culture,” 51.

translate the raw material of the Middle Ages[.]”¹⁶ In this process - this highly selective act of translation - game designers choose the most important topics for their video game to translate into a digital representation of the past.

An important topic necessary for translation and representation from the Middle Ages would be dynastic politics that were partially facilitated by marriages and betrothals between aristocratic families. Addressing government and politics in medieval Europe, Robert Bartlett says, “It was not elections or referenda that shaped political life, but the births, marriages, and deaths of the ruling family.”¹⁷ Seymour Phillips, while discussing the royal marriage of Edward II states that, “marriages were invariably arranged for reasons of political advantage or to advance a diplomatic agenda.”¹⁸ Marriage is also an act of forging kinship relations. Aline Hornaday, on kinship as social and political control in the Middle Ages, asserts that “at all levels of community the invisible glue of kinship cemented factions and bound families together for mutual help, even though that help could oppose kindreds in deadly conflict.”¹⁹ Betrothals were promises to be married and could be part of a negotiation process conducted without either individual present. Families could arrange betrothals between family members, renegotiate them, or even outright break them as part of diplomatic and political strategy. Marriage, and by extension betrothal, had an important role in forging powerful political and societal structures.

This does not mean that marriages or betrothals are either medieval in origin or solely tied to the Middle Ages. Throughout history we can look to many powerful families across the

¹⁶ Kline, “All Your History,” 3.

¹⁷ Robert Bartlett, *Blood Royal: Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

¹⁸ Seymour Phillips, *Edward II*, The English Monarchs Series (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 481.

¹⁹ Aline Hornaday, “Early Medieval Kinship Structures as Social and Political Controls,” in *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, Garland Medieval Casebooks, vol. 15, (New York and London: 1999; digital printing New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2008), 21, Ebscohost, Adobe Digital Editions PDF file, citations refer to the 2008 digital printing.

globe that have shaped our current world. However, the purpose behind marriages and betrothals is often a driving force behind the plots in *The Lion in Winter*, *The Tudors*, *Game of Thrones*, and countless other popular representations of medievalism and neomedievalism. Historical video games are another popular representation of medieval European history and, as has been previously discussed, can argue, and thereby influence, through game design. As a part of game design, mechanics representing medieval marriages and betrothals could influence players' perceptions of medieval marriages and betrothals.

By limiting our historical scope and topic, we may better focus on how the mechanics within a digital representation shape player perception of important topics, such as purposes behind medieval marriages and betrothals. *Crusader Kings II* is a grand strategy, role-playing video game published by Paradox Interactive which temporally spans the Middle Ages from 796 A.D. to 1453 A.D. If this game has an objective, it is structured around continuing a family dynasty; distinctively marking what sets this title apart from other video games in the genre. The player is neither an omniscient ruler of a nation-state guiding it towards modernity nor are they the nation-state itself focused solely on empire-building across the medieval world. The player is forced to always think in terms of the family. Are there plenty of heirs? What territorial claims are produced by marriage and childbirth? What other family is able to exercise their will enough to make an acceptable political ally? These are just a few questions the player must ask themselves during gameplay, and since they only have control of one character at a time, players have limited perspectives and capabilities even if they are a mighty emperor.

Even from a limited perspective of several individual characters, many of the game's numerous mechanics are structured around representing medieval dynastic politics between aristocratic families. Gameplay mechanics are a part of that historical game design, but they also

can represent the past. Historical game design is also making an argument about the past; therefore, it is possible that a player can become influenced by that process of representation through gameplay mechanics. I claim that the process of representing historical marriages and betrothals through the mechanics of marriage, betrothal, alliance, and non-aggression pacts, influence *Crusader Kings II* players' perception of the purpose behind medieval historical marriages. This helps us better understand how gameplay mechanics shape players' perceptions of the past but also helps us better understand how historical concepts like dynastic politics are presented to the public through interactive content, like video games.

***Crusader Kings II* Gameplay from Thematic and Technical Perspectives**

To better understand how gameplay mechanics can shape player perceptions we must briefly address *Crusader Kings II*'s gameplay, thematically and technically. The gameworld spatially encompasses the world from the western shores of Iceland to the eastern mountains of India; from the northern fjords of Norway to just past the tip of the Horn of Africa. The entire gameworld is broken down on a map into territorial counties, duchies, kingdoms, and empires that scale from the lowest of baronial tiers inside of counties to the heights of potentially continent-spanning imperial tiers. Each title falls within a theoretical *de jure*²⁰ structure; counts and countesses are ruled by dukes and duchesses with dukes and duchesses ruled over by kings and queens and so on. In practice, however, this becomes extremely messy and *de facto* authority becomes apparent within a few minutes of gameplay. For example, a king of England may inherit the duchy of Normandy from his uncle. The king of France is still the nominal overlord of

²⁰ For specific examples of what constitutes *de jure* and *de facto* rulers please refer to Paradox Wikis, "De jure – Crusader Kings II Wiki," CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified August 14, 2020, accessed May 2, 2021, https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/De_jure.

the duchy, but if the kings find themselves on opposite sides in a war, levies from the duchy of Normandy will fight on the English king's side since he is their direct overlord as duke of Normandy. In this example, the king of England is represented as the *de facto* authority in the territory rather than the *de jure* authority possessed by the French king. This is to say nothing of the differing laws and cultural norms between the kingdoms that potentially have to be negotiated in this type of political situation.

In short, the game is massive and extremely complex, because of this enormous scale and detailed structure we will focus primarily on the perspective of a European Catholic ruler. The game has the player choose a ruler within spatial and temporal constraints and consistently continue to play as that character until their death with each in-game day passing at the rate of approximately one and a half real-world seconds on the slowest of player-controlled game speeds. Upon the player character's death, the game will continue, so long as the player's heir, (which is not always their child), has the same dynasty at the time of the current player character's death. The player character's heir will become the new player character. One of the few methods that will result in a "Game Over" is for the player character's heir to possess a different dynasty than that of the player character when the player character dies; if this is not the case, the game will continue until 1453.

At the technical level, gameplay occurs overlooking an in-game map that can be navigated with the arrow keys or by pushing the mouse cursor to the edge of the screen; the mouse wheel can be rolled, zooming the camera in and out to better view labelled territories. Left-clicking counties will highlight the territory on the map and open a window showing its hierarchal position in a realm and the character who owns the county, along with other administrative details.

The player controls their character through a series of user interfaces via buttons and menus that help dictate both the personal and political lives of their character. For instance, to become married a player must first use their mouse and left-click their character's portrait on the main screen, which will open up their character's panel. Left-clicking the "Arrange Marriage" button on the character panel will open up a submenu containing a list of possible spouses along with various information such as their name, age, dynasty, social rank, personality traits, and physical traits.

Generally, the list is limited by geographic proximity to the ruler pursuing the marriage but may be sorted by factors, like age, to better choose a spouse. Right-clicking the portrait of a potential spouse in the list will open up yet another submenu allowing a summary of the effects of the marriage, including political ramifications – such as non-aggression pacts – that could come from the marriage. The submenu also displays if the proposal will be accepted; hovering the mouse above the "yes" or "no" will reveal a tooltip box telling why the "yes" or "no" is the current decision from the responsible party for the proposed spouse, such as a liege, father, or mother. The proposal from this menu may be sent by pressing the "Send" button. If the proposal is accepted, the marriage will commence, and a ceremonial event may occur.

The final submenu can also be reached by right-clicking a character's portrait to open a smaller menu and left-clicking the "Arrange Marriage" button there. This will allow a marriage arrangement between the right-clicked character and a character from the player's court.²¹ Betrothals can be conducted in a similar manner with the exception being that one of the characters be under the age of sixteen and the button used to open the list or submenu is labeled "Arrange Betrothal." These physical input methods allow us to understand that the game design

²¹ Two characters in the same court that do not possess land holdings can be arranged to be married to one another instantly without sending a proposal.

allows many player choices but does not readily dictate why a choice in spouse or betrothal is made. The interfaces allow the player to see some political consequences of their actions but only the player understands why they chose a specific marriage or betrothal out of many options.

The game relies on copious conditional structures to facilitate gameplay and these structures depend on “if-then” logic to perform functions. That is to say, *if* a condition is fulfilled *then* an effect may happen. For instance, if a male character is age sixteen or older, if they are unmarried, if the proposal is agreed to, if the spouse is female, and if they are not members of a religious order that forbids marriage (e.g., a monk or nun), then the two individuals can marry. Each “if” must be an affirmative for the game to allow the marriage to commence, at a technical level. Even some historic events, like the Crusades, must meet temporal, spatial, political, and religious conditions in order to occur. However, conditions can be affected by helpful or harmful modifiers, or even random number generation to simulate chance. These intricate, logical conditional structures underpin the technical capabilities of the game and enable its mechanics to function as designed. However, it is the mechanics that enable representation of complex, detailed lives in noble families across the Middle Ages and shape player perception of the purposes behind medieval noble marriages and betrothals.

Tracing the Process: From Histories, to Digital Representations, to Players’ Stories

In order to demonstrate how the gameplay mechanics of *Crusader Kings II* shape the perception of purposes behind marriages and betrothals between noble families, we will first contextually and linguistically analyze how the popular histories of medieval kings written by Frank McLynn, Marc Morris, and Ian Mortimer discuss purposes behind medieval families’ marital unions or promises of such unions. Chronologically, we will also apply this method to

Seymour Phillips' scholarly work on Edward II of England showing that the purposes behind aristocratic marriages and betrothals are similar to those in presented popular histories. Then we will move to an analysis of the gameplay mechanics, or a ludic analysis, in *Crusader Kings II* to show how these purposes potentially become represented in the digital setting. Finally, we will contextually and linguistically analyze the stories of gameplay experiences created by players found in *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery* and textual stories found on the *Crusader Kings II* After Action Report (AAR) forum. This allows a comparative investigation into how players discuss their characters' families' marriages and betrothals in their own stories.

Books produced by historians create the foundation of this study because they are precisely the types of historical works game designers consult in the production of their historically set video games. These books can provide historical game design with a wealth of scholarship from which to draw creative, representational ideas for gameplay mechanics. Trin Tragula, a content design lead for *Crusader Kings III*, noted in his developer diary on *Europa Universalis IV*, (another Paradox Interactive title spanning the late Middle Ages through the Napoleonic Wars), that consulting history books is an initial step in the research process.²² While it may be argued that primary sources could provide a better foundation, we should consider that most game designers will be limited by their language and availability barriers. Archangel85, a content designer for *Hearts of Iron IV*, (another Paradox Interactive title centered around World War II), when answering questions regarding historical research and game design, stated, "I've found that... the lack of English language sources was a major issue when trying to do

²² Trin Tragula, "EU4 - Development Diary - 2nd of May 2017," *Europa Universalis IV*, Paradox Forum, May 2, 2017, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/developer-diary/eu4-development-diary-2nd-of-may-2017.1018557/>.

research.”²³ Simply put, most members of the design and production teams will not learn Latin or always seek out a primary copy of a document to craft their games. It is much more likely that secondary and tertiary sources make up the majority of sources consulted during the design and production process. Books are also our best type of source because while historians may be consulted, they cannot possibly always be available for a question that comes up in a design meeting or during a scripting session. A book can be purchased by a development studio and kept for consultation indefinitely. Additionally, when asked if direct consultation with historians occurred, Archangel85’s response was “[G]enerally, no.”²⁴

For this study, secondary sources provide the foundation to trace how video games shape their players’ perceptions of the past and these histories fall into the category of biography. Thematically, gameplay is structured around playing out unwritten biographies of medieval rulers one at a time. This also makes choosing histories of individual rulers as our foundation important to this study. These particular sources are chosen for their temporal proximity to the design and production of *Crusader Kings II*, as they were all produced within ten years of the game’s release. In translative terms, we can think of secondary sources as have already gone through a rigorous translated and edited process from many primary sources to a particular argument that an author is trying to make about their topic. We should consider that this is not one translation but many; primary sources are used to craft secondary sources, secondary sources are used to design game mechanics, while game mechanics influence what is important for the player to retell in their own accounts of gameplay.

²³ Archangel85, “Thesis : History in Video Games (information request),” Paradox General Discussion, Paradox Forum, August 6, 2017, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/thesis-history-in-video-games-information-request.1038179/>.

²⁴ However, Archangel85’s general response was playfully preceded by, “Well, Paradox hired me, and I have a piece of paper from a university saying that I have an MA in history, soooo...” See Archangel85, “Thesis : History in Video Games (information request),” <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/thesis-history-in-video-games-information-request.1038179/>.

Rather than focus on the aesthetic elements of game design as Denning has, this study will treat *Crusader Kings II* as a ludic object rather than text; thus, better understood by investigation of its mechanics and thereby those mechanics' influence on players. Furthermore, this study examines those mechanics within the grand strategy genre and in the medieval setting while retaining Denning's assertion that "games shape public perceptions" and that they "develop certain historical faculties quite well, while ignoring others entirely."²⁵

Part of Pitruzzello's analytical method to discover how mechanics represented and systematized culture and religion involved surveying scholarly secondary and tertiary sources' language and context, authoritative on the matter of culture throughout the Middle Ages, and compared these to the game's mechanics surrounding both individual and territorial culture and religion.²⁶ Indeed, Pitruzzello's comparative method sits at the heart of this study but he stops just short of investigating the real player. His study focuses on the perspective of the "implied player" or the "role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to 'exercise its effect'."²⁷ While the role of the "implied player" is important to studying the potential of players' gameplay actions in any ludic analysis, the real player must also be included to better answer how gameplay mechanics shape player perception of the past. By investigating players' stories as well as the implied player's potential ways of fulfilling their role, we are better able to understand how mechanics shape the real player's understanding of the purposes behind medieval noble families' nuptials and betrothals.

²⁵ Denning, "Deep Play?," 182, 192.

²⁶ Pitruzzello, "Systematizing Culture," 43-44, 46, 51.

²⁷ Espen Aarseth, "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player," in *From Literature to Cultural Literacy*, ed. by Naomi Segal and Daniela Koleva (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 184, PDF file.

When the game is completed or the player decides to quit before 1453, a chronicle²⁸ is generated of their gameplay experience alongside a final prestige score and a list of rulers they have played as over the course of the game.²⁹ This chronicle is written by the game and can be accessed by the player during the gameplay experience, but the game can only record certain events, such as deaths, marriages, or title acquisitions. William Cronan has demonstrated that “the principle difference between a chronicle and a narrative is that a good story makes us *care* about its subjects in a way that a chronicle does not” and argues that “[w]hen a narrator honestly makes an audience care about what happens in a story, the story expresses the ties between past and present in a way that lends deeper meaning to both.”³⁰ If this is true, then the chronicles produced by the game are vastly lacking in meaning or care and stand simply as a list of chronological events. Players begin to ascribe meaning and care to what is important – at least to them – about their experience by giving narrative accounts of what occurred during gameplay. For instance, some players may use the chronicle to gather date details on memorable battles or the births of characters that will change the family’s fortunes in their stories. Others may write as they play, giving meaning to segments of play that merely are recorded in the chronicle; while a marriage may be recorded, the purpose as to why it occurred is not. Players give meaning by telling readers why those unions were pursued or events surrounding those unions; thus, they provide explication of what they consider to be the most important in their experience and understanding. We can think of this as another form of translation, since they are translating their

²⁸ For examples of events that can potentially generate in the chronicle see Paradox Wikis, “Chronicle events – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified November 5, 2017, accessed April 10, 2021, https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Chronicle_events.

²⁹ *Crusader Kings II*, v. 3.3.3 (SOHY) (Paradox Interactive, 2012), Microsoft Windows 7 64-bit or later/Mac OS X 10.11 or later/Linux Ubuntu 16.04 x64 or later, produced by Johan Andersson, game design by Henrik Fåhraeus and Chris King.

³⁰ William Cronan, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1374-1375, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079346>, PDF file.

gameplay experience into a narrative for others. The stories are particularly rich texts that allow us to see what was important enough to be included and how these inclusions are related to gameplay mechanics.

These stories also take many different forms: oral retellings, first-person narrative accounts, published anthologies, or even third-person accounts of classes about these fictive histories. By taking a larger sample of the types of stories we can see not just what a company considers is important to publish, but also how this community communicates to one another. Regardless, as has been noted, many of these stories consistently return to discuss or contain details surrounding *why* marriages and betrothals were made for their characters and their families in specific ways that the gameplay mechanics have enabled them to recount. This is not to say that this video game alone is the *only* interaction these players have had with the medieval world, but since they have gone to the extra effort of producing stories about their experiences then we can say that this was important enough to them to be preserved for others. Thus, we can safely assume what was recorded in the stories is of significant importance to them in the ways they discuss reasons behind medieval noble matchmaking.

It must also be admitted that these players are the ones who have taken the time to record their experiences in one fashion or another; however, there are other players who do not record their experience. This study of course is not meant to speak for all players of *Crusader Kings II*, but without being able to read a player's thoughts, this provides a method to answer how their perspectives on the past have been influenced by interactions with the gameplay mechanics' representations of the past. To take the unrecorded experiences of other players into account not only would require a significantly different approach but we must respectfully accept that they hold this experience with the game to be a private one. Since these stories are publicly available,

this also entails that they fall into a broader discourse: they are meant to be available to the public. If video games are indeed capable of arguing in and producing public debate, then a publicly available story should be of the greatest importance to us.

Medieval Marriages and Betrothals: For Alliance, Stability, and Peace

We will first turn to Frank McLynn's *Richard and John: Kings at War* to begin building our foundation and observe some of his arguments as to why aristocratic marriages and betrothals occurred. McLynn constructs a chronological comparison between the lives of Kings Richard I (r. 1189 - 1199) and John (r. 1199 - 1216) of England from their early years, across the challenges of their reigns, through the deaths of both, and into the mythic legacies they left behind. His attempt is to present both impartially to find whether the stereotypes of "good" King Richard and his "evil" brother King John have any validity. He focuses on many of their military challenges, and how they handled political crises and disputes with other rulers.

McLynn opens his comparison of the brothers by briefly recounting their father's – Henry II of England's (r. 1154 – 1189) – military exploits. "In 1159 Henry asserted his right to the city [of Toulouse] as part of the 'dowry' consequent on his marriage to Eleanor [of Aquitaine]" and he assembled a huge host to take the city by force.³¹ McLynn states that "an important ally in the war against Toulouse" was Count Raymond Berengar of Barcelona (r. 1131 – 1162), who "made a treaty of alliance [with Henry] and sealed it with the betrothal of the two-year-old Richard [Henry's son] to one of the count's daughters."³² Here we can clearly see that a military ally was gained for Henry by the betrothal of his son to the count's daughter; thus,

³¹ Frank McLynn, *Richard and John: Kings at War* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 19-20.

³² McLynn, *Richard and John*, 21.

according to McLynn, Henry's reason behind this betrothal was to gain a political and military ally.

McLynn does not limit this reasoning to the English kings and their allies. By mid-1193 King Philip Augustus of France (r. 1180 - 1223) was militarily attempting to take control of the entire duchy of Normandy, which had been a source of constant contention between the French and English kings since the Norman Conquest in 1066. The French king made some territorial gains in his campaign but was stalled outside Rouen.³³ Philip tried a different tactic on August 15, 1193: marriage to Ingeborg, daughter of King Cnut VI of Denmark (r. 1182 - 1202), (incidentally, Cnut had a claim on the kingdom of England).³⁴ McLynn specifically states that "Philip had contracted the Danish marriage in the first place simply and solely to gain access to the large Danish fleet, which he hoped to use for an invasion of England."³⁵ Here, the alliance is conducted between the kings of Denmark and France but to seal it the marriage between Ingeborg and Philip takes place so that both kingdoms may work towards the common goal of invading England. McLynn argues that the reason behind Philip and Ingeborg's marriage is to solidify another military alliance.

Military alliances are not the only thing that are accomplished by betrothals and marriages between aristocratic families. If we return to McLynn's account of Henry II's early reign, it is painted as a consistent military struggle with his French counterpart, Louis VII (r. 1137 - 1180); the two are constantly at odds over territorial rights across much of modern France. "At a peace conference in Montmirail in January 1169, when both sides had wearied of

³³ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 234-235.

³⁴ McLynn states Ingeborg of Denmark is the daughter of Cnut VI of Denmark; however, she was the sister of Cnut VI of Denmark. Since her father was deceased, her brother arranged her marriage. In this study, I refer to her as Cnut VI's daughter because that is how McLynn has written his argument; see McLynn, *Richard and John*, 235.

³⁵ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 235.

the interminable war between them,” Henry announced, in anticipation of his taking the Cross, he wanted the future of his holdings settled prior to his departure.³⁶ After dividing his lands between his sons, Henry and Richard, the sons would do homage to Louis for the French holdings of Anjou, Maine, and Normandy and Aquitaine, respectively. McLynn writes, “[T]o seal the compact, Richard would be betrothed to Louis’s daughter Alice (Alys).”³⁷ This betrothal is conducted as part of a method of achieving future political stability and as part of the process of making peace between the Capetian king of France and the Plantagenet king of England. McLynn makes the point that the betrothal between Richard and Alice is part of a method of negotiating and establishing peace.

Marriages between dynasties could have been part of peace-making process but that process was not just occurring in Europe. In 1191, while on crusade in the Holy Land, King Richard was faced with new logistic difficulties for the crusader forces after the battle of Arsuf and the capture of the city of Jaffa.³⁸ In a peace negotiation with the Muslim leader, Saladin (r. 1174 – 1193), “pointing out that the war was futile and cost too many lives”³⁹ Richard put forward that Saladin’s brother “Safadin should marry his [Richard’s] sister Joan” and establish them as rulers of Jerusalem dividing Palestine between themselves and Saladin along with the surrender of the True Cross and other administrative details for the future of the region.⁴⁰ Even though McLynn notes that negotiations fell through after this point, he still makes his point that this suggested marriage between Richard’s sister and Saladin’s brother was a method to establish

³⁶ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 21.

³⁷ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 21.

³⁸ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 191-193.

³⁹ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 193.

⁴⁰ McLynn, *Richard and John*, 194.

peace between the two leaders and to work towards a common goal of maintaining peace and stability in the region.

We can now move on to some of Marc Morris's arguments about the purpose behind medieval aristocratic marriages and betrothals. Morris's *A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain* constructs a chronological biography of King Edward I of England's (r. 1272 - 1307) life and military deeds across Britain and abroad in order to demonstrate his dramatic influence in the development of a British identity that can still be seen today. A major part of Morris's work involves the role of family connections in Edward's life that enabled his military feats; these connections begin with military alliances forged through marriage.

Early in his narrative, Morris briefly recounts the territorial gains and losses of the Plantagenets and Capetians from William I of England's (r. 1066 – 1087) famous conquest to the early reign of Henry III of England (r. 1216 – 1272).⁴¹ Henry's father, King John, had lost considerable holdings, leaving the English rulers only a modicum of control over the duchy of Gascony. In order to secure his Continental holdings from further French invasions, Henry sought an ally in the region, like his grandfather and namesake had done. Morris claims, "It had been for this reason, and to keep up the continuing competition with France, that the king [Henry III] had sought a wife from Provence."⁴² Henry's marriage to Eleanor, the daughter of Ramon Berenguer IV, Count of Provence, [r. 1209 – 1245] brought an alliance that he hoped would help him "regain the territories his father had lost."⁴³ Morris explicitly states, "It was with this ambition that he set out for France" which, ultimately, resulted in a disastrous campaign.⁴⁴ King

⁴¹ Marc Morris, *A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain* (London: Windmill Books, 2009), 14.

⁴² Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 14.

⁴³ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 14-15.

⁴⁴ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 15.

Louis IX of France (r. 1226 – 1270) also married Eleanor’s eldest sister, Margaret, eighteen months prior to Henry’s and Eleanor’s wedding;⁴⁵ thus, Morris claims that family alliances were being constructed in preparation for war. His claims allow us to see that marriages between families are being used to create military allies; the purpose behind those nuptials is the goal of conquest or defense against it.

We have seen that betrothals can be used to negotiate and establish a peace, but marriage can also be a way of maintaining peace. Morris draws attention to many important marriages that were being conducted between England and Scotland in the thirteenth century; not the least of which occurred in 1221, when “Henry III’s sister, Joan, was married to Alexander II of Scotland [r. 1214 – 1249] and, thirty years later [when] Alexander III [r. 1249 – 1286] married Henry’s daughter Margaret.”⁴⁶ Despite this, and relatively good relations throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Morris points out that there were many times that tensions over English overlordship and the precise location of the border between the two kingdoms came into contest when England faced crises elsewhere.⁴⁷ In contrast, “[t]he result of the royal wedding in 1251 was not hostility but increasingly warm and friendly relations.”⁴⁸ Morris paints a veritable rose garden of affection between the two families created by these marriages, concluding that “[t]he evident affection between the English and Scots now that they were part of one extended royal family meant greater political co-operation, not increased friction.”⁴⁹ While there had been skirmishes and wars between the kingdoms in the past, royal marriages were a means of

⁴⁵ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 14.

⁴⁶ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 243.

⁴⁷ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 244.

⁴⁸ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 244.

⁴⁹ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 244.

establishing and maintaining a peace between the two kingdoms. Morris's points argue that the intent behind these marriages was to maintain peace and stability between the two realms.

Domestic stability, especially during a transition of power, was no less important in the Middle Ages than it is today. To keep internal stability, Edward I called together a conference of his family members and the episcopate at Amesbury in 1290. It was principally concerned with the English succession after his death and his mother, wife, Edmund of Lancaster (his brother), William de Valence (his half-uncle), and, curiously, Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester (r. 1262 – 1295) were all recorded in attendance.⁵⁰ Edward's only surviving son was Edward of Caernarfon, a two-year-old child at this point, and since all of his older sons had died this left a concern that little Edward would precede his father in death. This was obviously a deeply family affair but also a huge political concern for the kingdom.

Why is Gilbert de Clare present at this dynastic gathering to ensure political stability? He was neither a member of the episcopate nor a family member. Morris makes it very clear that de Clare was "about to enter this family circle by virtue of his impending marriage to Edward's daughter, Joan. Indeed, Earl Gilbert's presence... was most important, for the king's daughters were to be his back-up plan" in the succession.⁵¹ Historically, England had not fared well when it came to female rulers. Even though Henry I (r. 1100 – 1135) was adamant that his daughter, Matilda, would rule after him, her cousin, Stephen, (r. 1135 – 1154) was crowned king and a horrific civil war, known as the Anarchy, ensued only to be ended by Matilda's son, Henry II, being crowned king after Stephen's death.⁵² Being aware of this bloody history, "[a]ll those gathered at Amesbury agreed that, in the event of Edward's death, and the premature death of his

⁵⁰ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 234.

⁵¹ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 234.

⁵² Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 235.

only son, the kingdom would pass to the eldest of his five surviving daughters.”⁵³ At this meeting of close relatives and important political players, Earl Gilbert is in effect agreeing not to pursue his future wife’s claim. Edmund of Lancaster and William de Valence are both important members of the English royal family who could claim power in a messy succession and factionalism could occur between them throwing England into political instability. Many family members are working together as allies trying to ensure a smooth transition of power in the event of a succession crisis. According to Morris, the impending marriage to Joan is a way of ensuring de Clare, as a powerful and influential magnate, did not go against the royal family’s wishes, and create political instability.

Seymour Phillips’s *Edward II* is a definitive biography on all aspects of King Edward II of England’s life and reign (r. 1307 - 1327). It covers administrative, social, military, political, judicial, legislative, and economic aspects during the monarch’s reign in extensive detail. These details are used to craft a literary portrait of the king and the indelible mark he left on the image of English kingship. Similar to the popular histories, Phillips’s academic work is filled with matrimonial decisions made with political intent.

By 1324, the English and French were at war again over the issues of border disputes in Gascony and Edward II of England’s lack of homage to King Charles IV of France (r. 1322 – 1328) for the duchy.⁵⁴ The war saw territorial gains for the French in September of that year, but preparing to continue the struggle, Edward II “requested military assistance from the rulers of Aragon and Castile, and proposed a marriage between his elder son, Edward earl of Chester, and the daughter of the king of Aragon.”⁵⁵ Phillips notes the alliance was ultimately discarded in

⁵³ Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 234.

⁵⁴ Phillips, *Edward II*, 461-464.

⁵⁵ Phillips, *Edward II*, 466.

1325 to be reworked into a double marriage alliance with Earl Edward marrying Alfonso XI of Castile's (r. 1312 – 1350) sister and Alfonso himself to Eleanor, Edward II's daughter.⁵⁶ Both instances are examples of proposed marriages between royal families to cement their military alliance against the aggressive actions of Charles IV. Phillips's points are clear that the intent behind these betrothals is one involving the acquisition of allies for military purposes.

The negotiations over this particular conflict were to be conducted with French and English royal families in mind as well. On November 15, 1325 Edward decided to send an embassy to Charles to discuss terms of peace and “[t]hey were authorized... to negotiate for the return of the lands in Gascony and Ponthieu occupied by the French king's forces; [and] to be prepared to discuss a marriage alliance if the king of France were to make the suggestion[.]”⁵⁷ Phillips argues that the purposes of these potential marriage alliances were a method to bring an end to military strife and usher in peace as part of a larger negotiation process.

Isabella of France, (Charles IV's sister and Edward II's wife), left for the continent to aid negotiations in March 1325 and by September a peace was hammered out.⁵⁸ Part of the peace entailed that her son, Edward earl of Chester, would be transferred the duchy of Aquitaine by his father, Edward II, and the younger Edward's uncle, Charles IV, would receive the boy's homage for the duchy.⁵⁹ Everything went accordingly. After, however, Isabella shockingly refused to return to England⁶⁰ and retained possession of her son, the heir-apparent to the English kingdom. “Edward, duke of Aquitaine, count of Ponthieu and earl of Chester, and Philippa, the daughter of William, count of Hainault, Holland and Zeeland [r. 1304 – 1337] were formally betrothed”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Phillips, *Edward II*, 466.

⁵⁷ Phillips, *Edward II*, 468.

⁵⁸ Phillips, *Edward II*, 471-478.

⁵⁹ Phillips, *Edward II*, 478-479.

⁶⁰ Phillips, *Edward II*, 485.

⁶¹ Phillips, *Edward II*, 500-501.

after much negotiation by Charles IV and Isabella. Phillips makes it abundantly clear that “[i]n return... the count of Hainault undertook to provide troops for the planned invasion of England.”⁶² This may have destabilized the future marriage alliance with the Castilian king, but it is also another example of a betrothal being used to secure a military alliance between two aristocratic families with the common goal being an invasion of England. Phillips argues Edward’s mother used this betrothal between the families to secure troops for an imminent invasion; thus, also arguing, the purpose behind this betrothal is to secure a military ally.

Ian Mortimer’s *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III; Father of the English Nation* is a biography of King Edward III of England (r. 1327 - 1377) from the social perspective of how Edward may have seen himself as a king, how he may have envisioned kingship, and how those around him may have viewed him as king. Ultimately, these points return to how these perspectives of “the Perfect King” have shaped English ideas of kingship during and after his rule. Though much of the book is dedicated to Edward’s image as a courtly knight and military commander, Edward’s life and reign were also bound by dynastic political dynamics beginning with his own marriage.

Strikingly, we can see an inversion of the more traditional betrothal or marriage as a way of making and maintaining peace. In the years following Edward II’s deposition – following his wife and her lover’s successful invasion – Edward III, still a boy, found himself with severely curtailed royal authority. His mother, Isabella, and her lover, Roger Mortimer held *de facto* authority in England. To make matters worse for the young king, war had broken out along the northern border with Scotland, as the issue of borders and Scottish independence had resurfaced. Even more dismally, England – and Edward personally – had suffered defeat and embarrassment

⁶² Phillips, *Edward II*, 501.

on the battlefield⁶³ and the kingdom was forced to make peace on unsavory terms. In addition to renouncing his and his ancestors' claims on Scotland, recognition of the borders during Alexander III's reign, and several other humiliating conditions, "[o]ne of his [Edward's] sisters would be forced to marry the heir to the kingdom of Scotland, David, the eldest son of Robert Bruce[.]"⁶⁴ His sister, Joan, was chosen to marry David (r. 1329 – 1371) and "[p]eople had already cruelly renamed her 'Joan Makepeace,' as if she were just a diplomatic tool. He [Edward] refused to attend the wedding."⁶⁵ In an attempt to pressure the young monarch into attending, "[i]t was argued that this would damage the value of the alliance; but in Edward's eyes there was no alliance, for there was no peace."⁶⁶ While Edward had neither the political capital to prevent the marriage of his sister nor the wish to see it conducted in the first place, Mortimer argues that the marriage was intended as a way to make peace between the two kingdoms and to solidify the agreements made between them. In addition, the language used in Joan's epithet drives home the point that her marriage – and her familial relation to Edward – was meant to help create peace between the kingdoms. Mortimer lets us see that Joan's marriage to David was meant to create an alliance because of Edward's reaction against it. Thus, Mortimer argues the purpose behind Joan and David's marriage was to bring about lasting peace and, perhaps, establish a political alliance.

After becoming the *de facto* authority in England by executing Roger Mortimer and seizing any political control his mother exercised through him, Edward III devoted time to building a family with Philippa of Hainault. To this, Mortimer explicitly states, "More children

⁶³ Ian Mortimer, *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III; Father of the English Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 59-63.

⁶⁴ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 68.

⁶⁵ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 71.

⁶⁶ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 71.

meant more possible marriage alliances, and Edward soon began considering how to best marry off his family. His daughter Isabella he planned to marry to the heir of the Castilian throne.”⁶⁷ Edward’s brother John would “marry Mary, daughter of the lord of Coucy”⁶⁸ while he (Edward) made an attempt at negotiating “a marriage between his three-year-old son, Edward, and a daughter of Phillip of France but worsening relations between the two countries... ended that.”⁶⁹ Mortimer refers to Edward’s intended marriages for his family members as “international match making”⁷⁰ but why? War broke out with France as King Phillip VI (r. 1328 – 1350) sent troops to confiscate the duchy of Aquitaine in 1337.⁷¹ Edward looked to his allies across Europe, some within the heart of the Holy Roman Empire, to form a powerful coalition against Phillip that, according to Pope Benedict XII (r. 1334 – 1342) and Ian Mortimer, “was to last for the lifetime of Edward and Ludwig [of Bavaria and Holy Roman Emperor, r. 1328 – 1347] and their sons. Further marriage alliances would bind the allies closer together.”⁷² Mortimer argues that the purposes behind these many marriage alliances and betrothals were not only used to help create military allies against Phillip, but also with more marriage alliances the coalition could create lasting stability in the region.

These historians have crafted their arguments regarding the purposes behind aristocratic marriages and betrothals from primary and secondary sources. These arguments are used to develop overarching arguments in their histories about the kings’ lives they are researching. Within the arguments of these histories, both popular and academic, three purposes behind aristocratic marriages and betrothals begin to emerge. The first is that marriages and betrothals

⁶⁷ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 113.

⁶⁸ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 113-114.

⁶⁹ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 114.

⁷⁰ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 114.

⁷¹ Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 140.

⁷² Mortimer, *The Perfect King*, 144.

between medieval noble families were used to create allies to either assist in military aggression, like Phillip Augustus's marrying Ingeborg of Denmark to invade England, or defense against invasion, such as Henry III marrying Eleanor of Provence. The second purpose is that marriages and betrothals could be used as a method of creating stability between two polities, such as Edward I's aunt and sister marrying into the Scottish royal family. Stability could be ensured internally as well; for example, Edward I's daughter, Joan, married the influential earl, Gilbert de Clare. The third purpose is that betrothals and marriages were part of a method of making peace and, hopefully, maintaining it between two warring families. Two examples of this are Henry II and Louis VII making peace by the betrothal of Richard and Alice at Montmirail, and Joan and David being married despite Edward III's wishes. This is not to say that these are the *only* reasons behind those marriages. However, as we will see, the first two purposes make a "successful" translation into the gameplay mechanics of *Crusader Kings II*; however, the third purpose makes no reappearance at all in the game's representation. This will affect what enters into the stories, and thereby the perceptions, of the game's players.

Gameplay Mechanics Representing Alliances and Political Stability but Lacking Peace

Now that we understand that medieval marriages and betrothals could be used to establish alliances between families; develop political stability in a region; or establish peace, we can now shift our focus to how *Crusader Kings II* can represent these reasons through gameplay mechanics. The first gameplay mechanic we will observe is that of marriage, since it is extremely important to any player that wishes to continue their gameplay experience. As previously noted, in order to continue playing the player's current character cannot die without

an heir of their dynasty or else it results in a “game over.”⁷³ Depending on the succession laws associated with the player character’s titles,⁷⁴ one of the easiest ways to ensure a continuum of gameplay is to have a legitimate child and the simplest way to attempt that is by marriage.

Therefore, the most efficient method to avoid a “game over” is for the player character to marry and hope the marriage produces children.

While it is possible to have illegitimate children⁷⁵ outside of marriage and legitimize them, marriages not only produce legal heirs they also allow the formation of pacts with other rulers. In-game marriages are the most common and effective method for forming alliances. The most immediate effect of digital marriage is that characters “are automatically engaged in a non-aggression pact to another ruler if close relatives are involved in marriage.”⁷⁶ An in-game non-aggression pact’s most basic function is to form “an agreement between two rulers not to attack each other”⁷⁷ and close relatives are considered to be “siblings, half siblings, parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces” along with the spouse, if they belong to the same dynasty.⁷⁸ For example, if playing as a duke of Lancaster the player may use the diplomatic action mechanic “arrange marriage”⁷⁹ to try and arrange a marriage for their

⁷³ Paradox Wikis, “Game over – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified November 18, 2020, accessed May 2, 2021, https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Game_over.

⁷⁴ For examples of the different types of succession laws and a broad overview of succession see Paradox Wikis, “Succession – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified April 15, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Succession>.

⁷⁵ For an extensive overview of bastard mechanics see Paradox Wikis, “Bastard – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified September 22, 2019, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Bastard>.

⁷⁶ Paradox Wikis, “Marriage – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified April 16, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Marriage>.

⁷⁷ Paradox Wikis, “Alliances – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified March 4, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Alliances>.

⁷⁸ Paradox Wikis, “Dynasty – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified February 6, 2020, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Dynasty>.

⁷⁹ For an overview of the complex diplomatic action mechanic and how marriage matches are adjudicated see Paradox Wikis, “Diplomatic actions – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified January 1, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Diplomatic_actions.

nephew to the digital king of France's daughter. If the king of France agrees to the marriage, and if the proposed husband and wife are sixteen or older, the marriage can occur immediately. There will be an automatic non-aggression pact created between the two rulers with no further input required from the player. We will return to the non-aggression pact, but it is important to understand that establishing the pact is an initial step to creating an alliance.

To clarify, alliances in *Crusader Kings II* are considered to be another type of pact and are "additional agreements to call each other [rulers] into most wars."⁸⁰ Clearly these are designed with military intent in mind but that does not define whether the alliance is offensive or defensive in nature. That is to say, an ally may be called into a war that a ruler has started or may be called in to defend a ruler against a military foe. While it is not possible to form an alliance with a vassal or a liege, only rulers that have a non-aggression pact between them or are close relatives may form alliances.⁸¹ A queen of England may form an alliance with her husband, the duke of Toulouse, if he is *not* her vassal, because they automatically formed a non-aggression pact upon marriage. If she marries her son to the mother of the king of Aragon, then they, (the rulers), may form an alliance since the married couple are close relatives to the rulers. However, marrying a cousin to the king of Aragon will not result in a non-aggression pact between rulers, and therefore not an alliance, because a cousin is not considered a close relative in-game. Additionally, two dukes that are brothers within the same kingdom, (or even in separate kingdoms), may form an alliance after creating a non-aggression pact since they are close relatives. However, if one of them should inherit a kingdom, and become the liege of the other, the same two brothers cannot form an alliance, only a non-aggression pact. Once an alliance is

⁸⁰ Paradox Wikis, "Alliances," <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Alliances>.

⁸¹ Paradox Wikis, "Alliances," <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Alliances>.

established the “Call to arms” diplomatic action may be used when one of the rulers is engaged in a war to call their ally into the war on their side.⁸²

This interplay of marriage and alliance gameplay mechanics represents military or political alliance as the purpose behind marriages between noble families, similar to how our histories have portrayed those purposes, like with King Philip Augustus marrying Ingeborg, daughter of Cnut VI of Denmark, to try and secure the Danish fleet to invade England. We have also seen a similar case when King Henry III married Eleanor of Provence, daughter of Count Ramon Berenguer IV, to secure an alliance with the count to both help him, (Henry), regain territories lost to the French kings by his father and to help defend his dwindling holdings on the Continent.

We must also consider that the betrothal mechanic will result in a non-aggression pact and ensures that “[r]ulers cannot declare war on other rulers if close relatives are betrothed.”⁸³ For in-game purposes, “[a] *betrothal* is a commitment to a future marriage once both parties are over 16”⁸⁴ since a non-aggression pact is formed from the betrothal between the two rulers this also allows for a military alliance to be contracted between the rulers. While betrothals can be broken by either party, this is a clear representation of betrothals being used to form military alliances, such as when Henry II betrothed his son, Richard, to Count Raymond Berengar of Barcelona’s daughter, gaining an important military ally to assault the city of Toulouse. Another example would be young Edward, duke of Aquitaine and Isabella of France’s son, being betrothed to Phillipa, daughter of Count William of Hainault, to acquire another military ally for

⁸² Whether or not the ally can be called into the war or will accept is decided by many factors, including player choice, that can be found at Paradox Wikis, “Alliances – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified March 4, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Alliances>.

⁸³ Paradox Wikis, “Marriage,” <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Marriage>.

⁸⁴ Paradox Wikis, “Marriage,” <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Marriage>.

Isabella and Roger Mortimer's successful invasion of England and overthrow of Edward II. Therefore, the game can also represent the purpose behind betrothals being a military or political alliance.

Non-aggression pacts are not just a prerequisite for forming an alliance. To better understand how these pacts also create and maintain political stability, we must first briefly overview opinion and faction mechanics. All characters possess an opinion numerical value of each other ranging from -200 to +200 and "represents the degree to which a character likes or dislikes another. Having high opinion with someone will lead to friendlier behavior and accept more requests therefrom. Conversely, having low opinion may trigger the character to be more hostile, joining factions or plots against the other."⁸⁵

In-game, "[f]actions are organized groups of vassals, united against their liege for a common purpose."⁸⁶ Factions can form for a variety of reasons, from installing a different liege, to seeking independence from the current liege entirely. Each faction is started by a vassal, (who becomes the faction leader), and then other vassals may join if they are inclined; however, vassals cannot join or lead more than two existing factions.⁸⁷ Many vassals with low opinions will create factions that are powerful enough to challenge the ruler. That being said, a few powerful vassals with low opinions can throw the ruler's holdings into chaos as well. Everything depends on the military strength of the faction and the will of the faction leader, as they are responsible for judging when to send an ultimatum to the liege. If the liege rejects the ultimatum

⁸⁵ Paradox Wikis, "Opinion – Crusader Kings II Wiki," CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified April 15, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Opinion>.

⁸⁶ Paradox Wikis, "Factions – Crusader Kings II Wiki," CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified April 12, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Factions>.

⁸⁷ Paradox Wikis, "Factions," <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Factions>.

civil war will erupt. This decision will completely destabilize the liege's realm, with the leader of the faction rallying the disgruntled vassals to militarily enforce their demands.

A method of establishing non-aggression pacts throughout a ruler's domains is important because "a non-aggression pact between a vassal and a liege prevents the liege from revoking the vassal's titles... [it also] prevents the vassal from joining or creating a faction."⁸⁸ By marrying close relatives into powerful families among the liege's direct vassals, the liege is able to create a stability within the realm because the most powerful vassals will be unable to join factions against the liege. Thus, weaker direct vassals can join factions but without the support of the most militarily powerful vassals it becomes much less likely that a faction will ever achieve the required military strength to challenge the ruler leading to a more politically and militarily stable domain overall.

The stability that is provided by marrying into powerful direct vassals' families in-game is a representation that is very similar to the methods Edward I employed in marrying his daughter, Joan, to his vassal and powerful earl, Gilbert de Clare. He was preparing for the future stability of England in case his son preceded him in death, potentially resulting in an unstable political environment for his eldest daughter. While there is no way of knowing whether de Clare would have pressed his wife's claim to the kingdom if a daughter had succeeded Edward I instead of a son, there is the clear indication from Morris that the meeting at Amesbury was to lay the groundwork for a stable transition of power.

While in-game non-aggression pacts within the ruler's domain are effective tools to create domestic political and military stability, there is also the benefit to marrying close relatives into aristocratic families outside of the immediate domain. As briefly noted, the non-

⁸⁸ Paradox Wikis, "Alliances," <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Alliances>.

aggression pact is used to ensure neither ruler will attack the other. For example, a digital duke of Brittany may marry his daughter and sister to the grandson and nephew of a king of England, respectively. While neither may wish a military alliance to spring from the unions, the non-aggression pact formed by both marriages can prevent the rulers from attacking the other over several generations. This will allow the rulers to focus their attentions and resources on other external and internal threats such as rebellious factions from within or attack from an external polity such as the digital kingdom of France. Several generations of non-aggression pacts between rulers' family members will develop a situation similar to that created by Edward I's aunt and sister marrying into the Scottish royal family. Thus, the interplay of the non-aggression pact, marriage, and betrothal is capable of representing the purpose behind aristocratic unions as a means of achieving greater political stability within and without a ruler's lands.

Crusader Kings II's game mechanics are capable of representing many situations relating to marriage and betrothal operating as means of achieving political stability or military alliance. We may think of this as a "successful" type of translation from the secondary sources to the digital representation. This gamification of the past is similar to the past. The process of representing historical marriages and betrothals through the mechanics of marriage, betrothal, alliance, and non-aggression pacts, influence *Crusader Kings II* players' perception of the purpose behind medieval historical marriages. As we will see in their stories, players recount alliances and stability as reasons why marriages and betrothals were made between aristocratic families.

However, there exists no mechanic in *Crusader Kings II* that establishes peace through betrothal or marriage. There are only three options to end a war via treaty: enforcing demands,

declaring a white peace, or surrendering.⁸⁹ None of these allow marriages or betrothals to be used as part of a method of establishing peace. Therefore, there is no way to represent the purpose of establishing peace in noble marriages and betrothals through gameplay mechanics. As we will see, this lack of representation creates a lacuna in the translation from secondary source to digital mechanic that will influence player perceptions.

Players' Stories and Their Perceptions of Why Marriages and Betrothals Occurred

Now, we will move into players' stories to see how a translation from game mechanic to story takes place. *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery* is an anthology of twelve short stories inspired by *Crusader Kings II* with five of the stories' authors being winners of the short story contest conducted by Paradox Interactive in 2014.⁹⁰ The stories are various third-person narrative accounts from characters "set in the era of Crusader Kings 2, that is between 769 AD... and 1453."⁹¹ These even include a section after the accounts entitled "In Actual History" to describe where the stories fit within history and begin to branch into fiction before a brief biography of the author is given.

One of the early stories is set in a fictive history wherein the descendants of Ivar the Boneless conquer the Scottish tribes and forge them into a realm under the harsh rule of the Northmen. Anderson Scott's account focuses on the waning hours of the fictive King Ivar III of

⁸⁹ Paradox Wikis, "Warfare – Crusader Kings II Wiki," CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified January 23, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Warfare>.

⁹⁰ For rules of the contest and its announcement see Tomas H, "Tell Your Story of Crusader Kings - Writing Contest!," Crusader Kings II, Paradox Forum, August 20, 2014, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/tell-your-story-of-crusader-kings-writing-contest.796603/>; for a full list of winners and brief descriptions of their stories see Tomas H, "Crusader Kings II Short Story Contest 2014 - The Winners!," Crusader Kings II, Paradox Forum, December 1, 2014, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/crusader-kings-ii-short-story-contest-2014-the-winners.820557/>.

⁹¹ Tomas H, "Tell Your Story," <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/tell-your-story-of-crusader-kings-writing-contest.796603/>.

Scotland, “*when Scotland was plagued with war*”⁹² and begins with the birth of the king’s seventh son. The king, upon discovering the sex of his newborn child, begins a frustrated rant that includes the telling line “I have been promising the King of Denmark a bride of my family for years”⁹³ but there remains the question of why Ivar is so upset. As the story progresses, it reveals that the realm has been terribly mismanaged under the mentally unsound Ivar III to the point that the king’s castle has fallen under siege by a large, disgruntled army of peasants while the king’s army was raiding in England.⁹⁴ Clearly, the war is *against* the king. From the perspective of gameplay this was most likely a peasant revolt and not a result of a faction formed against the king. Nevertheless, the game classifies peasant revolts as wars and, as such, allies can be called into them. Ivar’s marshal reveals that the king’s forces are “outnumbered and lack any significant forces which could make up those numbers [of peasant soldiery] in quality.”⁹⁵ To make up the difference, Ivar had planned on forging an alliance by betrothing his hoped-for daughter to a son of the Danish king; thus, bringing an ally into the war to aid him. The anger at the child’s sex is also anger that no troops from the longed-for alliance will arrive to relieve the defenders, as we will recall, the most common method for forging an in-game alliance is through betrothal and marriage. We can see that the purpose behind betrothal here, and ultimately marriage, is to acquire a military ally; this is very similar to historic motives behind forging alliances through marriage and betrothal. Scott understands this purpose and finds it important enough in his tale to include as part of the reason Ivar’s reign – and life – draw to a close in the ensuing battle with the peasant revolt. Scott’s perception of the implied betrothal and marriage

⁹² Anderson Scott, “King Ivar,” in *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery*, ed. Tomas Härenstam (n.p.: Paradox Books, 2014), 25, PDF file.

⁹³ Scott, “King Ivar,” 25.

⁹⁴ Scott, “King Ivar,” 25, 32-33.

⁹⁵ Scott, “King Ivar,” 34.

between the fictive rulers is that it would have formed an alliance that could be used to quell the revolt.

This perception of the purpose behind marriages and alliances continues in the online AARs of the game's community. These accounts of gameplay take many narrative forms from first-person short stories; to third-person accounts of fictive history classes, such as a story about a series of lectures on a fictive dynasty's rise to prominence on the European stage; to "found" primary sources, like fictive diaries written by the player's character. EtzelHoveri tells their story through a third-person restricted narrative from the perspective of a university instructor teaching a class on the Balog dynasty and their ascendancy in the eleventh century through Hungarian familial politics to become major player on the European stage. EtzelHoveri's expects the reader to associate the tale they are about to tell as one similar to that of the historic Hapsburgs, as the instructor for the class states, "They [the fictive Balogs] like the Habsburg's [*sic*] of Switzerland went from ruling a minor country, in their case Hungary, to become Kings and Queens of Europe."⁹⁶ The count of Gemer⁹⁷, Tamas Balog, (the player's character) finds himself a minor power surrounded by many stronger powers that may try to annex his territory. "In an attempt to ensure the security of his position [*sic*] Tamas married Lanka Arpad. This woman was the sister to the three great Dukes of Hungary; Laszlo of Transylvania, Lampert of Ungver, and his own liege Geza. He knew that these three men were the true powers of the [Hungarian] Kingdom even though they only controlled a third of the entire land."⁹⁸ This passage reveals that in

⁹⁶ EtzelHoveri, "Class on the Balog Dynasty," Crusader Kings II – After Action Reports (AAR), Paradox Forum, February 16, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/class-on-the-balog-dynasty.586361/#post-13442409>.

⁹⁷ In-game, the county and title are referred as "Gömör;" this difference may be a result of the player's linguistic settings in-game or keyboard setup when writing the AAR but here I will refer to them as "Gemer" as it is what the player says about their experience.

⁹⁸ EtzelHoveri, "Class on the Balog Dynasty," February 16, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/class-on-the-balog-dynasty.586361/#post-13442409>.

response to being in that precarious position amid these potential rivals for territory, the player chooses to engage in a marriage that will result in a non-aggression pact between several greater powers and bring stability to the region, rather than attempting to militarily secure wealthier lands and troops via warfare. They perceive the purpose behind this marriage is to create stability and avoid future conflicts, similar to its historical purpose.

Most tellingly, when EtzelHoveri's instructor discusses Hungarian military expeditions towards the Black Sea, he describes two marriages Tamas makes between his second and third daughters to powerful nobles – the heir to the county of Trencin and the count of Terebovl – but he asks the class the question, “Does anybody understand why?”⁹⁹ The class responds with, “‘Allies.’ ‘Family ties.’ Spreading the family across the east” while the instructor reacts in the affirmative that these are all correct answers.¹⁰⁰ This reveals that not only does the player understand that the purpose behind these in-game marriages were to establish political allies but also that they expect others to understand this from their tale.

LordTempest's “The Struggle for Britain: A Gwynedd AAR” focuses on the Briton¹⁰¹ Duke Bleddyn of Gwynedd, and his attempt to unite the British Isles under his rule.¹⁰² In order to do this, Bleddyn enacts several alliances with other medieval rulers to be used to assault and defend against his Saxon and Norman neighbors' military campaigns and, of course, these alliances are forged by marriage between their close relatives. Describing the marriage

⁹⁹ EtzelHoveri, “Class on the Balog Dynasty,” Crusader Kings II – After Action Reports (AAR), Paradox Forum, April 8, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/class-on-the-balog-dynasty.586361/#post-13442409>.

¹⁰⁰ EtzelHoveri, “Class on the Balog Dynasty,” April 8, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/class-on-the-balog-dynasty.586361/#post-13442409>.

¹⁰¹ While the game design and mechanics involving culture use the term “Breton,” I will use the term Briton here because it is the term the author deems appropriate and important to their story. A brief overview of cultural mechanics, including terminology, can be found at Paradox Wikis, “Culture – Crusader Kings II Wiki,” CKII WIKI, Paradox Wikis, last modified April 28, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://ck2.paradoxwikis.com/Culture>.

¹⁰² LordTempest, “The Struggle for Britain: A Gwynedd AAR,” Crusader Kings II – After Action Reports (AAR), Paradox Forum, February 16, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-struggle-for-britain-a-gwynedd-aar.586428/>.

arrangement “[f]or Cadwagan, Bleddyn's eldest son and heir, the Duke chose one of the most eligible single women in Christendom, Princess Adelheid of the Holy Roman Empire. Next to the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor was the most powerful man in Europe, and a most powerful ally in times of need.”¹⁰³ For this player, Cadwagan’s marriage was made with a clear purpose of securing a powerful ally in mind. More tellingly, we can see that LordTempest equates marriages with political alliances when they succinctly state, “marriage between noble houses means alliances.”¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, describing Bleddyn’s early familial marriages, they write, “Bleddyn wasted no time in arranging marriages and betrothals between his family and the other noble houses of Europe. Most, if not all these matches were made for political reasons, rather than [*sic*] for such lofty ideals like love or compatibility.”¹⁰⁵ Clearly, LordTempest, equates the purpose behind medieval noble marriages and betrothals as politically motivated, which is very similar to how the arguments in the above histories portrayed them. In this case, the mechanics have reinforced this purpose behind medieval noble marriages.

We will briefly stay with this AAR because it also reveals that LordTempest – via his player character of Bleddyn – uses marriages and betrothals between noble families to secure stability in a shifting political landscape. In *Crusader Kings II*, the Norman Conquest is never a consistent event that will result in William the Bastard’s conquest of England. This war is being waged between Hardrada, Godwinson, and de Normandie at the *exact* same moment Bleddyn is maneuvering to conquer the British Isles. “Bleddyn's eldest daughter Gwenillan and the widowed

¹⁰³ LordTempest, “The Struggle for Britain: A Gwynedd AAR,” *Crusader Kings II – After Action Reports (AAR)*, Paradox Forum, February 28, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-struggle-for-britain-a-gwynedd-aar.586428/page-3>.

¹⁰⁴ LordTempest, “The Struggle for Britain,” February 28, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-struggle-for-britain-a-gwynedd-aar.586428/page-3>.

¹⁰⁵ LordTempest, “The Struggle for Britain,” February 28, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-struggle-for-britain-a-gwynedd-aar.586428/page-3>.

King of Scotland, Malcolm III”¹⁰⁶ were married first. Then, aware that the ongoing conflict over the English throne could shift in any direction, Bleddyn formed “alliances with the British powers, for he not only entered in an alliance with the Kingdom of Scotland, but with two of the three... competing powers for England. His [Bleddyn’s] third son Madog married Harald Hardrada’s eldest daughter... Ingegerd” while his “youngest son Iorweth was betrothed to Adele, the six year old [*sic*] daughter and eldest child of William of Normandy.”¹⁰⁷ We will recall that the matchmaking here will result in non-aggression pacts with the digital Malcolm III of Scotland, Duke William of Normandy, and Harold Hardrada of Norway. Bleddyn is preparing for two out of the three claimants to seize the English crown but intends to stop any future conquest short of his lands through the unions between their families. He is preparing for Godwinson’s victory by creating an alliance with the king of Scotland, (assuming Godwinson’s forces are depleted enough for the Scottish-Briton alliance to match this force), while simultaneously preventing any Scottish aggression against him. These marriages and betrothals will result in external stability for the smaller dukedom as there will be less powerful forces in the British Isles that will actively seek to assault Gwynedd. From these passages, the purpose behind these marriages and betrothals is to establish stability after the war is over and ensure peace continues for the duchy of Gwynedd. This is not to say that these marriages and betrothals were used as a method of negotiating or establishing peace. However, LordTempest understands marriages and betrothals were used and uses them to create stability in the region *after* peace had been established.

¹⁰⁶ LordTempest, “The Struggle for Britain,” February 28, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-struggle-for-britain-a-gwynedd-aar.586428/page-3>.

¹⁰⁷ LordTempest, “The Struggle for Britain,” February 28, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-struggle-for-britain-a-gwynedd-aar.586428/page-3>.

Returning to *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery*, James Mackie’s “The King” focuses on the reaction of the young girl, Gisele, to the news that she is betrothed to the king’s eldest son. Mackie, speaking on the “medieval growth of the Frankish realm” and “Norman expansions of the 11th century” in his “In Actual History” section, insists a “web of marriage alliances spanned the [European] continent. For these... elites, family and politics were one in the same, and betrothals and marriages were absolutely key.”¹⁰⁸ While Mackie admits his story, “could have occurred anywhere [in medieval Europe]. Children were placed in arranged marriages for political gain[.]”¹⁰⁹ We can see here, too, that Mackie equates the purpose behind marriages and betrothals between noble families to be one of political alliance, but he also extends this to the broader European continent and even feels that it is important enough to his gameplay experience and story that he draws particular attention to it within the “In Actual History” section of his tale.

If we look at Gisele’s impression of her family in Mackie’s story, she recalls that “Her father, Guy, was a powerful lord, ruling their extensive lands firmly but fairly.”¹¹⁰ Further, she remembers that her father always “acted with decorum, embodying everything which Gisele thought a noble ruler should be. Frankly, in this part of the realm, her influential family had been Kings in all but name.”¹¹¹ From Gisele’s perspective her father is a good nobleman, a fair liege lord to his vassals and a just steward within a large territory of the realm, but we must also look at this information from the fictive King Eduard’s perspective in relation to gameplay.

¹⁰⁸ James Mackie, “The King,” in *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery*, ed. Tomas Härenstam (n.p.: Paradox Books, 2014), 214, PDF file.

¹⁰⁹ Mackie, “The King,” 214.

¹¹⁰ Mackie, “The King,” 198.

¹¹¹ Mackie, “The King,” 198.

By Gisele's attestation, her father is a very powerful landholder that has the respect of his vassals; thus, his political attentions are freer to focus on the politics of the realm rather than his own lands. If he chose, he could form a faction with other vassals to press their agendas within the realm and could have the potential to create chaos in the form of a civil war. At the very least, the digital king would have to acquiesce to their demands to avoid open conflict, but it is still doubtful those demands will align with the king's political goals. Furthermore, as he reasons with the young girl over the intended marriage, King Eduard acquiesces, "[W]e could do with better relations in this part of the realm[.]"¹¹² This passage is telling because it is clear that the king and vassal have had a breakdown in relations. Perhaps, Guy has already joined a faction against the king, and a vassal that acts like a king in all but name is, at best, a frustration to the realm's politics in-game. Nevertheless, it would appear that the solution to this potential instability is to form a non-aggression pact between liege and vassal through the betrothal of their children. We will recall that vassals cannot join or form factions if vassals form a non-aggression pact with their liege. Without powerful vassals, like Guy, forming or joining factions, they become less of a political problem for King Eduard. Thus, this will lower the potential for political instability and wars. Mackie clearly perceives the purpose behind this betrothal to be a method of achieving internal political stability and includes it in his story.

The fictive King Eduard also briefly gives us a look into the purpose behind his own marriage. While convincing Gisele that she needs to be a good queen and not necessarily a good person in the future marriage, he gruffly lets it slip that he, "[o]nly married the Queen because we needed her family's troops... probably the nicest thing I can say about her, to be honest."¹¹³ While we do not know the specifics about the conflict or potential conflict the king needed

¹¹² Mackie, "The King," 211.

¹¹³ Mackie, "The King," 213.

troops for, he admits that the reasoning behind his own marriage was that to obtain a military alliance. Mackie continues to show that he perceives the purpose behind marriages between noble families to be one which secures political, and by extension, military alliances.

Importantly, at the time of writing, the purpose that marriages or betrothals between aristocratic families were part of a method of establishing peace never occurs in any of the player stories in *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery* or in the “LibrAARy”¹¹⁴ of AARs for *Crusader Kings II*. Players demonstrate they understand that marriages and betrothals between medieval noble families were conducted to secure alliances or were used to maintain political stability. Players give importance to these reasons by including them within their narratives. These purposes behind marriages and betrothals between noble families are similar to the reasons historians have used in their own narratives, as well. However, there begins to form an omission in the stories when it comes to marriages and betrothals being used to establish peace.

The absence of marriages and betrothals as a peacemaking tool in narratives is linked to the absence of its representation in game mechanics. EtzelHoveri’s “classroom” format used in their story suggests that they may have taken a class in medieval politics. The “In Actual History” sections in *Crusader Kings II: Tales of Treachery* suggest that there has been an exposure to medieval political history independently of playing *Crusader Kings II*. Indeed, it is probable that many players have had some engagement with medieval history prior to playing the game. Regardless, players do not recount stories of marriages or betrothals being used to establish peace; players do not give this reason importance in their stories when it comes to dynastic politics. Even if players know that marriages and betrothals were used to help establish

¹¹⁴ Ioki100, “CK2 AAR LibrAARy Reporting Thread - Report New AARs Here,” *Crusader Kings II – After Action Reports (AAR)*, Paradox Forum, February 15, 2012, <https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/ck2-aar-library-reporting-thread-report-new-aars-here.586195/>.

peace, the game's mechanics' representation of the purpose behind these nuptials and promises takes precedence over the historical purposes in player stories. The lack of peace being established through marriages and betrothals in player narratives is directly related to its lack of representation through gameplay mechanics. Thus, we can see how players' perceptions are directly influenced by *Crusader Kings II*'s ability to represent (or misrepresent) the purposes behind medieval aristocratic marriages and betrothals through gameplay mechanics.

Conclusions on the Process of Representation Through Gameplay Mechanics

Among some of the history books published during and prior to the development of *Crusader Kings II* three purposes surface in regard to the reasoning behind marriages and betrothals between noble families. The first purpose is to form alliances, political and military. The second purpose is to create and maintain internal or external political stability. The third purpose is to be used as a method of establishing peace between warring families. The first two reasons of alliance and stability transmit into the digital setting. They become represented through the gameplay mechanics of alliance, non-aggression pact, marriage, and betrothal; however, marriage or betrothal as a peacemaking tool does not transmit into any gameplay mechanic. When players write their stories of their experiences, they give meaning to why their characters and those characters' family members, pursued differing avenues of marital unions. This allows the ability to observe what they consider to be the most important motivations behind these marriages and betrothals. When players describe the events surrounding their characters' marriages or betrothals they come to the reasons of alliance or stability behind those nuptials or betrothals. These historical purposes have become reinforced through their representation via game mechanic.

However, players do not recount ending wars or forging treaties using familial marriages or betrothals as part of a negotiation process, as there exists no mechanic as a reference point for this in-game. That is to say, there is no representation of this purpose through game mechanics. Within the player discourse surrounding medievalism in *Crusader Kings II* there begins to form an omission that has been influenced by an omission within the game's mechanics. Peace cannot be established through a marriage or betrothal negotiation in-game, as there exists no mechanic to accomplish this. Peace also is not established through marriages or betrothals in players' stories. If a player does understand that marriages and betrothals between aristocratic families could have been used to establish peace, they still do not record it in their stories. Player perception of the reasons behind aristocratic marriages and betrothals is influenced enough by the lack of representation in gameplay mechanics to cause players to exclude establishing peace as a purpose in their stories. These stories give meaning, care, and show what players perceive important enough to include. The importance of this historical peacemaking purpose becomes, at least, diminished within player perception, if not "lost in translation" entirely. Thereby, the process of representing historical marriages and betrothals through the mechanics of marriage, betrothal, alliance, and non-aggression pacts, influence *Crusader Kings II* players' perception of the purpose behind medieval historical marriages and betrothals.

There is the crucial element of time to be considered for any future research on this title and its players. On September 1, 2020, *Crusader Kings III* was released marking the end of *Crusader Kings II*'s "lifecycle;" updates, expansions, and hotfixes will soon stop completely, and the larger community will move on to discussing player experiences in the sequel. Admittedly, this study has given focus to the textual aspect of players' stories but there are other stories that are visually and orally engaging that deserve further research. This study has also

focused on a single game and genre when there are many other titles produced during this time that could be approached from a narratological or aesthetic analysis. Furthermore, this study has used players' stories but a digital ethnographic method using players' interviews could provide another way of approaching how video games shape players' perceptions of the past.

Nonetheless, this helps us better understand how video game design makes arguments about the past through their mechanics. These mechanics influence players' perception of the historic past. *Crusader Kings II's* gameplay mechanics, consciously or not, argue that marriages and betrothals were used to establish alliances or political stability but were not used in establishing peace. Warfare or the avoidance of warfare is always associated with aristocratic marriages and betrothals and retellings consistently associate these two together; however, peacemaking through marriage or betrothal does not enter the discourse. This reason becomes less important because it does not seem to be considered valuable enough to record or develop as part of a story.

This study also helps us better understand how multimedia is being used, implicitly, as a conduit to spread historical ideas to the general public. Game mechanics are a primary method of engagement between medium and player but as a form of representation they can influence what concepts become reinforced or left by the wayside. Gameplay mechanics can successfully represent the purpose of an alliance or stability that was created through marriages and betrothals between families. Players remember this and recount it through their narratives. The pitfall is that when historical ideas such as marriages or betrothals as peacemaking tools become excluded through mechanics, they may become "silenced"¹¹⁵ in player discourse. Game mechanics are part

¹¹⁵ For an example of the power of "silencing" see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Three Faces of Sans Souci: Glory and Silences in the Haitian Revolution," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 31-69, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.04595>, PDF file.

of a way of influencing collective memory, in this case, the collective memory of motivations behind medieval marriages or betrothals in noble families.

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