Open Library of Humanities

The Illusion of Accuracy: Simulating the Crusades in *Ancestors Legacy* (2018)

Juan Manuel Rubio Arevalo, Central European University, AT, jm.rubio120@gmail.com

Ancestors Legacy is a 2018 real-time strategy video game set in the Middle Ages. The game was developed by the controversial Polish studio Destructive Creations, whose members have been accused of sympathizing and supporting far-right movements online. This ideological support can be seen in their video games, some of which have included the use of crusading medievalisms in line with the civilizational-conflict narrative often espoused by far-right movements: i.e. the idea that Christianity is embarked in a never-ending battle with Islam and other cultures, of which the crusades are just an episode. Nevertheless, *Ancestors Legacy* categorically condemns the crusades as unfair and hypocritical, a statement backed by a reasonably accurate recounting of the events. Upon closer inspection, however, this accuracy is superficial and molded by a larger ideological framework about the Middle Ages and the crusades. This article argues that the game occupies the dissonant space of condemning crusading but adopting it as an unavoidable part of the clash of civilizations that lasts until this day, hence justifying the player exercising the very violence it condemns. This is an example of what Adrienne Shaw has called the tyranny of realism: an obsession with accuracy in video games, based on hegemonic and audience-driven perceptions of the past that do not allow for a critical and emancipatory approximation to history.

Introduction

Ancestors Legacy is a real-time strategy (RTS) video game developed and published in 2018 by Polish studio Destructive Creations. Set in the Middle Ages, *Ancestors Legacy* follows the top-view click-and-drag gameplay present in other famous RTS titles such as *Age of Empires II*, *Warcraft III* or *Star Craft II*. The player must defend their base, collect resources, recruit armies, and develop technologies to defeat their opponents. As in *Age of Empires II*, *Ancestors Legacy* also has a single-player campaign mode which follows the exploits and deeds of medieval figures. Each of these campaigns are divided into five narratively-driven scenarios, in which the player reenacts the lives of famous kings and warriors from the medieval past. The Middle Ages portrayed in *Ancestors Legacy* are characterized by violence, warfare, hypermasculinity, racial homogeneity, cruelty and religious intolerance. The latter two are especially intertwined, since the game portrays a medieval world in which warfare is at its most gruesome when faiths and cultures clash, like when Viking raiders attack Christian lands and, crucially, whenever the crusades are involved. Of the nine campaigns that the game offers to the player, two of them are set in crusading scenarios: the Prussian rebellion of 1260–1274 against the Teutonic Knights, and the recapture of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187.

The way in which *Ancestors Legacy* portrays the Middle Ages is not exceptional; there are many cultural products that show the medieval as a dark era of religious intolerance and conflict.[1] However, this case is particularly interesting when we consider Destructive Creations' problematic relations with far-right movements and ideas. As the German website *Keinen Pixel Dem Faschismus!* — an initiative by media professionals, research collectives and developer studios to promote anti-fascist values and inclusive spaces in gaming — points out, members of the developer team have been involved in right-wing, neo-fascist and neo-pagan groups, and/or have promoted neo-fascist ideas online (Keinen Pixel Dem Faschismus, 2001). In this sense, *Ancestors Legacy*'s approach to the Middle Ages and crusading gains further relevance due to the potential links between video gaming and extremist movements highlighted by various authors. For example, Megan Condis (2020) has noted that since the 1980's and 1990's the video game industry has most predominantly marketed its products towards a demographic that is also most prone to be recruited by far-right groups: working class, white men who are offered a masculinist power fantasy through gaming, allowing them to escape the constraints of the real world, and who feel that their place of cultural preeminence is being threatened by feminism and multiculturalism. For example, Condis recalls the

---

[1] For titles on the use of the Middle Ages in media, the creation of genres and tropes about this period and their impact on gaming see: (Brandenburg, 2020; de Groot, 2009, pp. 133–145, 208–216; Elliott, 2011; Haydock, 2007; *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, 2008; Young, 2016).

case of #GamerGate, an online campaign against feminist and anti-racist video game critics under the disguise of corruption in gaming journalism. The campaign was avidly used by online far-right groups to recruit new members, using gaming culture and representation to introduce gamers to ideas like the 'Jewish Question' (Condis, 2020: 144–147; Euteneuer and Meints, 2020). This is further facilitated by the way in which Nazism and other extreme ideologies are portrayed in gaming: either encapsulated by superhuman fictionalized villains, like in the game series *Wolfenstein*, or by empty shells of endless enemies that the player shoots, where none of the elements that define these ideologies are present (like racism or genocide), as happens in games like *Call of Duty* (Condis, 2020: 149–150). Critics like Emil Lundedal Hammar (2020) have taken this observation further to argue that the favoring of right-wing ideologies in video gaming is rooted in the very production practices around games and the demographics within the industry.

Others have pointed out that the implied epistemological claims behind the simulation of the past, and the necessary simplification of history to turn it into a virtual ludic experience, carry political messages — conscious or otherwise. Jörg Friedrich (2020) has shown how focusing on the conflict side of World War II (as in popular games like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* series)[2] perpetuates the 'clean Wehrmacht' myth due to the simulation's unwillingness to deal with the horrors of Nazism both for political and economic reasons. This simplification of the past for ludic purposes facilitates the reproduction of ideological myths, meaning 'a political or ideological statement (with implied instructions for actions…) that has taken on the appearance of naturalness and is therefore (often) not understood as such by game developers and players' (Pfister, 2020: 50). In this way, history in games emphasizes eventfulness — a notion that the game only transmits facts as they happened (dates, events, characters) — and not its narrative and constructed nature. This is liable to reproduce problematic understandings about history, such as the notion that the West constitutes the historical experience *par excellence*, as happened with Sid Meier's *Civilization* series (Friedman, 2005; Poblocki, 2002; García Martín, Cadiñanos Martínez and Martín Domínguez, 2020).

It is important to highlight here that this is not a problem of accuracy. The potential problems with games like *Civilization* or *Call of Duty* is not whether the historical information itself is wrong: the Industrial Revolution *was* preceded by the expansion of European colonialism and the Enlightenment, and Berlin *did* fall to the Soviets in 1945, as both titles respectively show. The issue lies with the economic incentives and political

---

[2] *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* are two of the most famous first-person shooter franchises, with multiple titles set in WW2. The former has been especially influential and popular, with the franchise surpassing $20 Billion in revenue in 2022 (Obedkov, 2022).

considerations behind the perceived expectation of the audience. These narratives tend to center hegemonic understandings of the past and reproduce potentially dangerous understandings of history, while shielding their narrative decisions under the guise of accuracy, in what Adrienne Shaw (2015) has called the *tyranny of realism*, which refers to an over-concern with perceived accuracy which obscures the ideological understanding of the period by the developer, while stifling the emancipatory potential of interactive media like historical games.

In this paper, I explore and analyze how *Ancestors Legacy* approaches the topic of the crusades considering Destructive Creations' game record and the interactions of some of its members with far-right ideologies. I will argue that *Ancestors Legacy* occupies a dissonant space in its understanding of crusading and the Middle Ages, in which the superficial accuracy and condemnation of crusading clashes with the game's broader understanding of the period and interreligious relations in the Middle Ages, which more closely resembles far-right ideas of hypermasculinity, violence and the clash-of-civilizations narrative. At a deeper level, the grey area in which *Ancestors Legacy* situates itself further highlights some of the epistemological problems behind the simulation of history in video games: the often-superficial nature of nuance and accuracy in gaming when this relates to preconceived notions about the past, political concerns, and audiences' assumed expectations. This means that this article is less concerned with the 'accuracy' of the game (I will argue the game is superficially 'accurate') than the function this accuracy serves in Destructive Creations' understanding of crusading and the Middle Ages.

Destructive Creations, the Far-Right and Crusading Medievalisms

Destructive Creations is a Polish studio established in 2014 which has successfully developed and published four video games: *Hatred* (2015), *IS: Defense* (2016), *Ancestors Legacy* (2018), and *War Mongrels* (2021). The studio has often found itself in disputes around the sympathies for far-right groups and ideologies manifested by several of its members. According to the website *Keinen Pixel Dem Faschismus!,* issues first arose in October 2014 during the development and production of *Hatred*, Destructive Creations' first game which garnered much controversy. *Hatred* is an isometric shoot 'em up title in which the player embodies 'The Antagonist': a trench-coat wearing, young, dissatisfied, resentful white man who ventures on a killing-spree in New York City. The game does not give much justification for the violence; the 'Antagonist' simply claims that he is sick of the world and, knowing he will not survive the shooting, is determined to take as many people with him as possible. In the game's trailer, still available on the studio's channel on YouTube, after stating vague reasons for the mass-shooting, the

'Antagonist' ominously says: "My genocide crusade begins here",[3] which was one of the slogans under which the studio advertised it (Hall, 2014). Among the uproar generated by *Hatred's* violent premise, critics of the game pointed out the sympathies held by several members of the studio (including the CEO) for far-right Polish groups online. These groups include Liga Obrony Rodziny (League for the Defense of the Family), ONR (National Radical Camp) and MW (All-Polish Youth); the last two organizations have the main goal of creating a Catholic state in Poland. Both the CEO of the studio and members of the developer team responded to these accusations by claiming that their freedom of speech and association gave them the liberty to 'like' any group they saw fit on social media, and that they condemn Nazism since members of their families were executed by the Nazis during WWII. They also accused the portal *Polygon*, one of the sites that covered the controversy, of interviewing biased sources (Hall, 2014).

Regardless of Destructive Creation's counterclaims, it is possible to find far-right ideas and tropes in Destructive Creations' games. The 2016-game *IS: Defense* is the most obvious example. *IS: Defense* is a turret-survivor game in which the player embodies a NATO soldier responsible with defending European beaches from an all-out scale invasion of the continent by ISIS. In this fictitious future (and now past) 2020, ISIS has managed to take control of the whole of Africa and the Middle East, placing them in a favorable position to invade Europe. The gameplay consists of the player defending an immovable position using a turret, while trying to repel a never-ending onslaught of enemies until they are eventually overrun. The kills from each game stack-up and once a determined number of enemy NPCs have been slayed, the player moves to the next level. While defending their position, the player can use rocket launchers, machine guns, and call-in other NATO soldiers and aerial support. As mentioned, *IS: Defense* came out in 2016 against the background of the 2015 migrant crisis, and it reinforces the migrant-terrorist-menace conflation often used by right-wing movements and politicians. Some ISIS soldiers arrive in dingy boats, their faces covered to emphasize their dehumanization (which does not happen with the NATO soldiers), and some are even depicted as suicide bombers with explosives attached to their bodies (**Figure 1**). Moreover, some of the achievements that the player can unlock reinforce this idea both with racist and medievalist overtones: the 'shish kebab' achievement is unlocked upon killing 100 suicide bombers; if the player kills 1,000 terrorists, they unlock the 'Jan III Sobieski' achievement, named after the King of Poland who defeated the Ottomans in 1683 at the gates of Vienna; and, if the player completes the game, the 'Crusade complete' achievement is granted.

---

[3] Destructive Creations 2015 *Hatred Gameplay Reveal Trailer (new version)* [video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-tdEYapPXdY [Last Accessed 27 January 2024].

Figure 1: Suicide ISIS soldiers in *IS: Defense* (2016). Screenshot taken from author's gameplay. The game's theme and aesthetic recalled right-wing fears about refugees and terrorists.

The use of crusader themes for a game about ISIS and contemporary Europe is not altogether surprising if one considers how conservative movements, including far-right organizations, tend to frame the crusades. Heavily influenced by the aftermath of the War on Terror and contemporary tensions around the growing migration from the Global South, the crusades tend to be romanticized by these movements in a clash-of-civilization narrative in which interreligious/interracial conflict is inevitable. The idea that the Western world is in a civilizational conflict with Islam, of which the crusades are analogous, has been a key element of the narrative of the War on Terror since 2001. Bruce Holsinger recalls how the Bush administration equated its Islamist enemies as belonging to a 'medieval world' — a sudden temporal irruption of a past long overcome, characterized by violence and primitiveness. This messaging was constantly used both by government and Republican members of Congress (Holsinger, 2007: 6). More importantly, both Bush and Donald Rumsfield used religious and Holy War rhetoric to justify their actions in the Middle East, such as the former claiming that his actions in Iraq were instructed by God, and the latter filling his security briefings with crusading and biblical imagery (MacAskill, 2005; Schneider, 2009). This rhetoric, which denies the modern nature of contemporary Salafi Jihadist Islamist movements and the Western response to them, aided in the obfuscation of the reasons and logics behind the War on Terror and used a clash-of-civilizations narrative that ignored the contingencies and historical context that birthed the crusades and 9/11. It is important to highlight that

the enemies of the War on Terror were also happy to adopt this medievalist rhetoric, which fits a longer tradition of equating the crusades with Western actions in the Middle East.[4] Osama bin Laden promptly called the War on Terror a crusade against Islam in the aftermath of 9/11, and ISIS later perpetuated it in its magazine *Dabiq* (a name itself loaded with clash-of-civilizations symbolism as the place for the apocalyptic battle between the Caliphate and the Roman Empire at the end of times in the Muslim tradition), where crusader rhetoric was constantly used (Awan, 2020: 8).[5]

The clash-of-civilizations perspective of the War on Terror and the crusades was also present among those who criticized the invasion. Bill Clinton, despite not opposing the War on Terror itself,[6] argued that the crusades were a long-lasting cause of it at Georgetown University in October 2001.[7] Furthermore, cultural productions that opposed the War on Terror often equated it to crusading. The 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven* by Ridley Scott follows the fictionalized life of Balian of Ibelin, the defender of Jerusalem in 1187 who, as an agnostic, is doubtful of religion in general and its weaponization for violence in particular. In opposition, crusader figures and the Templar leadership are shown to be fanatics, more committed to wanton destruction, war, and their own ambitions than to any semblance of Christian piety — a criticism of Western actions in the Middle East (Rhodes, 2020).[8] As Hillary Rhodes points out, the fact that pro-jihadist virtual spaces adopted visuals and scenes from the film for recruitment, while also ignoring its overall condemnation of religious violence, is testimony of how much the film equated the crusades to the War on Terror (Rhodes, 2020: 47−49). Ironically, far-right movements have also adopted the film's portrayal of the Templars for their own understanding of interreligious relations (MacLellan, 2019). Another illustrative example is the 2007 video game *Assassin's Creed*, set in a double timeline between the contemporary world and the Third Crusade (1189−92). At one point of the game, one of the characters reflects on the state of the world in the twenty-first century in comparison to the 1190s, claiming that "the world is a mess, it's pathetic really, you've seen it first-hand yourself: a thousand years between you and your ancestor and society remains just as barbaric".

---

[4] For surveys on the survival of the memory of the crusades in the Muslim world see: Hillenbrand (2018, chap. 9); Phillips (2019, chaps. 23–26).

[5] It is difficult to get legal access to ISIS' now defunct magazine. However, searches in Google images allow access to some of the texts where Crusading motifs were used, such as the slogan 'Until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq', first portrayed in the first issue 'The Return of the Khilafah' (July 2014), or the fourth issue titles 'The Failed Crusade' (October 2014).

[6] Tsui has pointed out that the anti-terrorist rhetoric prevalent during the Bush administration had its origins in the Clinton years. See: Tsui, 2014.

[7] Madden, T F 2009 Inventing the Crusades. *First Things*. https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/06/inventing-the-crusades [Last Accessed 3 February 2023].

[8] For further analysis of *Kingdom of Heaven* within the context of the War on Terror see: Schlimm (2010).

More recently, the far-right has adopted the crusades and the Middle Ages as ideals reflecting their understanding of contemporary politics.[9] As in the case of the first years of the War on Terror, crusading medievalisms have been used by far-right extremists to justify their murderous actions against Muslim communities. Both Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant[10] (individuals responsible for the 2011 mass-shooting in Norway and that in New Zealand in 2019, respectively) referenced the crusades as justifications for these massacres. Interestingly, far-right groups and individuals have also used the image of the crusade against non-Muslim political rivals. As Andrew Elliott recalls, Breivik claimed in his manifesto to belong to a larger organization called the Knights Templar who are 'Destroyers of Marxism and Defenders of Christendom' (Elliott, 2017: 132). This use of crusading and holy war rhetoric has been expanded beyond the traditional scenarios of the War on Terror. It has been used by the American right to promote the selling of weaponry (Lecaque, 2022a); Templar crosses could be seen both in Washington during the January 6th insurrection and at the 'Unite the Right' rally at Charlottesville in 2017; Catholic Identity Conference, an American Catholic organization that rejects the resolutions adopted at Vatican II, held a conference in Pittsburgh in October 2022 initially titled 'The Crusade Has Been Called: The Kingship of Christ vs the New World Order';[11] and despite not having a crusading tradition like the one in the West, Vladimir Putin's regime has doubled-down its holy-war Christian rhetoric to justify its war of aggression in Ukraine (Huttenlocher, 2022; Lecaque, 2022b). It is important to note that this is not a phenomenon limited to the Global North. Luiz Anchieta Guerra (2022) has written on the use of crusader medievalisms by Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil, and in Colombia Catholic laypeople have created an organization called 'Centro Cultural Cruzada' (Crusade Cultural Center) which, despite not being a far-right movement but a more mainstream conservative Catholic one, also uses the image of the Wars of the Cross (the Center's emblem is a crusader knight) to oppose the left-leaning policies of president Gustavo Petro.[12]

---

[9] The far-right tends to see in the Middle Ages an ideal society where Europe was racially and religiously homogeneous, with clear and strict gender rules, and with strict patriarchal structures that idealizes male violence. For an overall assessment on how the Middle Ages are appropriated by contemporary extremist movements, see: Kaufman and Sturtevant (2020).

[10] Tarrant reproduces a version of Urban II's speech at Clermont to call on potential readers to carry out similar violence. Although the form of the text points towards a translation, I have not been able to identify the Medieval source. See: Tarrant (2019: 35).

[11] The conference was accompanied by a banner image of four Templar knights kneeling behind a priest, still visible in their website. See: Lecaque (2022).

[12] The center describes its purpose as having a special commitment to denouncing the evils of communism, especially reflected in cultural Marxism that aims to put an end to the last customs inherited from the Christian West, inspired by the traditional teachings of the church.' See Centro Cultural Cruzada 2023 *Sobre Nosotros* [website]. https://cruzada.

The Superficial Accuracy of *Ancestors Legacy* and the Tyranny of Realism

We can see, then, that the way in which Destructive Creations uses crusading images in titles like *IS: Defense* fit within the larger civilizational conflict rhetoric present in the War on Terror and in contemporary far-right movements. At first glance, such a correlation makes the depiction of the crusades in *Ancestors Legacy* a cause for surprise. Considering games like *IS: Defense* and the studio's record with far-right ideologies, one might justifiably expect some defense or exaltation of crusading. Nevertheless, the game does the opposite. *Ancestors Legacy's* narrative about the crusades consists of a constant and unapologetic condemnation of the wars of the cross both in the Saladin and Teutonic Knights campaign. In both cases, the narrative is framed from the perspective of the enemies of the crusade, the Muslims and the Pagans of Northern Europe. For example, when introducing the first scenario, Saladin speaks of the First Crusade thus:

> Only a hundred-years ago the Christians fought against us in their so-called 'Holy' Crusade. Deceived by their leaders and the Vatican,[13] the Crusaders believed their bloodshed and ransacking of our lands to be a holy act. This glorified slaughter of our people, legislated by Satan himself dressed in papal robes, resulted in the conquest of Jerusalem (**Figure 2**).

This messaging is consistent throughout the campaign, not only in the way in which Muslim generals describe the crusaders, but also in how some Franks talk about the crusade. In the final episode, in which the player must lay siege and capture Jerusalem, the crusaders trapped inside the city discuss their disillusionment with the whole endeavor, with one of them crying: "I've had enough of this shit. If I make it out alive, I'm going to sail to Italy. A new life, they said, a chance for salvation they said. Horseshit!". In the case of the Teutonic Knights campaign, the story is narrated by Herkus Monte, a disgruntled Knight and Prussian leader of the revolt that took place between 1260−1274. In the first scenario, the actions of the Teutonic Knights in the Baltic are described as cruel and devastating, with those who resisted being murdered

---

co/tfp-en-colombia/ [Last Accessed 27 January 2024]). A public manifesto used to be available in the Center's website, which is available using archive.org's WaybackMachine, on the capture of August 5th, 2022. The manifesto calls Petro's election 'the biggest disaster for culture and Christian Civilization [sic] in our national history' and accuses him of seeking to establish "atheist communism" in Colombia'. The site, which reports on news concerning the Center's interpretation of events taking place in Colombia and Latin America, can still be visited through the following link: https://cruzada.co/ [Last Accessed 27 January 2024].

[13] This mentioning of the Vatican is an anachronism in itself, since the papacy did not establish itself at the Vatican until the end of the 14th century during the Great Schism.

legislated by Satan himself dressed in papal robes,

Figure 2: Introductory scene to the Saladin campaign, where the evil of the crusades is firmly stated. Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

or submitted to slavery with the knowledge and consent of the papacy. Furthermore, the Christianization of pagans is equated to propaganda, and later in the third scenario new crusaders are described as bandits, low-lives and criminals, who are more interested in gold than religious piety.

The fact that the game offers a rather accurate portrayal of the events appears to reinforce *Ancestors Legacy*'s messaging on crusading. Both campaigns follow an accurate chronological order, with small deviations for narrative and ludic purposes, like the Teutonic Knights being victorious at Pokarwis in 1260, or Reynald of Chatillon dying in Ascalon instead of Hattin. Furthermore, some minor details seem to point to consultation of primary sources, at least in the case of the Teutonic campaign. Here, a likely source is *The Chronicle of Prussia*, written between 1331–1335 by Nikolaus von Jeroschin, a chaplain that joined the order when Gottfried von Heimberg was commander of Königsberg (1326–1329) (Fischer, 2010: 5). During the first scenarios, a group of Prussian elders are burned inside an inn, which seems to be inspired by a burning of Prussian elders in a castle, as von Jeroschin narrates (**Figure 3**). In this case, the burning of the elders is portrayed as an act of betrayal by the order, instead of retaliation for an attempted murder as mentioned in the source (Fischer, 2010: 135). Likewise, the fourth scenario in which the player must capture Herkus Monte in a forest is reminiscent of the way in which von Jeroschin describes it, although his death

is postponed as an epilogue to the campaign.[14] A similar appreciation can be made of the Saladin campaign, although it is more difficult to pin any specific source since the Sultan is a more famous historical figure.[15]

Figure 3: A group of Prussian elders are burned inside an inn during the first scenario of the Teutonic Knights campaign. Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

At a first glance, there is nothing too egregious in terms of accuracy in the way in which the game simulates the Prussian rebellion of 1260 and the fall of Jerusalem in 1187. Upon closer inspection, however, both campaigns' tone is not consistent — neither narratively nor ludically. *Ancestors Legacy's* narrative about the crusades is dissonant with a ludic approach that demands the player engages in the violence being constantly condemned. In this way, the crusades are ludically represented as a damnable but unavoidable episode in a larger civilizational conflict that takes place whenever religions meet, as I will illustrate below. This approach to crusading matches other far-right medieval tropes found in the game. Here, the Middle Ages is seen as

---

[14] The text reads: 'Suddenly, Brother Helwig von Goltbach and a few men came upon the evil man without warning and without even knowing he was there. They joyfully went up to him and seized him and hanged him from a tree (which was what he deserved), running him through a sword. So the devil's warrior died and reaped what he had sowed' (Fischer, 2010: 159).

[15] Here I must clarify that I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to contact the developers at Destructive Creations to ask them about historical consultation in the development of *Ancestors Legacy*. This lack of confirmation means that these statements are an educated guess.

a period of racial and religious homogeneity which is shaped by the violent deeds of powerful hypermasculine warriors and their armies. This ludic approach to the crusades is consistent with how Destructive Creations used crusading images in previous titles like *IS: Defense.*

This phenomenon of superficial accuracy obscuring the ideological framework of historical narratives in games (and other media) is a symptom of what Adrienne Shaw (2015) has called 'the tyranny of realism'. In her analysis of the 2012 game *Assassin's Creed 3*, Shaw points out how the game's attempt to portray the American Revolution from the 'nuanced' perspective of a Native-American (which seeks to question both the revolutionaries' and royalists' intentions behind the conflict) is undermined by the game's commitment to portraying the American Revolution as an absolute good, despite the fact that the 19th century saw the displacement of the native population by the United States. Shaw argues that the game could not escape this because its framing was one that the assumed audience (white, male and Western) would be most familiar with and find to be 'more accurate'.[16] In this way, Shaw agrees with William Uricchio's assessment that video games, in their attachment to a particular form of accuracy (names, dates, places), tend to reproduce certain hegemonic historical narratives that facilitate their use by radical political movements (Uricchio, 2005). This is not to mandate that the game must necessarily explore counterfactual scenarios. Rather, the commitment to a hegemonic historical narrative framework, hidden behind superficial accuracy, functions to deny the exploration of alternative perspectives on historical events; further highlighting, in this case, notions of teleology and unavoidability around religious medieval violence and how it (supposedly) relates to the present.

I believe that this dissonance is particularly pronounced with the case of the crusades due to their curious position as a ludic historical space. On the one hand, the crusades are a highly politicized and contentious historical topic, often used by violent organizations both in the Christian and Muslim worlds. Simultaneously, however, and despite sectarian and violent rhetoric that demonizes the other, the crusades are playable in a way in which other polemical topics, like the Holocaust or slavery, are not.[17] It is evident that historical distance and the ambiguous historiographical tradition of the crusades as both romantic and barbaric play a key role in the playability of

---

[16] For Shaw, *Assassin's Creed 3* undermines its goal of approaching the issue from the perspective of a Native American in various ways: the narrative is mainly about the war and not native peoples, the gaming experience does not reflect the racial prejudice against the embodied avatar, the player is not allowed to side with the British, highlighting the inherent goodness of the Revolution, and the practical invisibility of slavery. See: Shaw (2015).

[17] Although an imperfect metric, the fact that searching for games with the word 'holocaust' or 'slavery' on the *Steam* online store threw 18 and 107 games respectively, versus the 537 titles that came out when searching for 'crusade' helps to convey how present crusading is in popular gaming when compared with other controversial topics.

crusading.[18] However, these games still must find justification to demand engagement with such violence. Much has been written about the crusades in video games and a complete review of the literature would be impossible within the framework of this article; however, it is important to highlight some ideas. The crusades form a key part of the worldbuilding of medieval games, be they historical or fantastical; the wars of the cross, or the figure of the holy warrior play key roles in titles as dissimilar as *Crusader Kings 3* and *The Witcher.* Hence, games have been useful in introducing this phenomenon to a larger audience. Nevertheless, they tend to simplify the crusades, with gameplay often centered on the Western experience of crusading, and based on outdated information or historical fiction — such as clash-of-civilizations narratives, which allows for the player to engage in this form of violence (Houghton, 2021a). Elliott and Horswell (2020) accurately argue that games often take established tropes about the crusades (clash-of-civilizations, holy (hypocritical) warriors, occultism and relics, etc.) and readapt them depending on the game's historical agenda.

However, consistent is a lack of historical explanation about the reasons behind crusading. In general terms, the crusades (or crusader themes) tend to be used in games in two ways: either as a background for the story (which very often reinforces problematic notions such as orientalist perspectives of the Middle East or the strengthening of hypermasculine traits like in *Assassins Creed* or *Dante's Inferno*),[19] or as a game mechanic focused on the 'how' (the warfare and managing depending on the game) instead of the 'what' and 'why' of crusading as in *Crusader Kings* (Houghton, 2021b). Interestingly, this also applies for games that use crusader themes set in fantasy or science fiction (Wenskus, 2021). Both of these approaches are key for a game like *Ancestors Legacy,* which is strictly about warfare and violence. Different from other RTS games, *Ancestors Legacy's* procedural rhetoric is strictly about conflict: every building the player builds is related to the war effort (with the partial exception of religious buildings), the player can only recruit military units, and every technology is aimed either at speeding resource gathering or improving soldiers.[20] Also, the game offers no diplomatic options. In *Ancestors Legacy* it is impossible to come to terms with enemies and alliances are

---

[18] For a good summary of the historiographical tradition of the crusades, see: Tyerman (2011).

[19] For some reading on the use of crusading as background in *Assassin's Creed* and *Dante's Inferno*, see: Komel (2014); Chirilă (2021); Buzay and Buzay (2015); Chadwick (2014); Welsh and Sebastian (2014); Lewis (2021).

[20] Procedural rhetoric is the way in which games convey arguments through the interaction of rules, actions and consequences. This means for the case of historical video games that the type of gameplay actions and objectives are informed not only by the way a historical period is understood, but also what about that period the developer wants to highlight. So, for example, the fact that *IS: Defense* does not really allow for a victory against the invading ISIS forces but only for a doomed resistance until the player is unavoidably overrun conveys a dark message of the threat that Destructive Creations imagine Muslim migration pose to the European continent. For more on procedural rhetoric see: Bogost (2007; 2008); Brandis (2020).

fixed, unless the game changes them mid-scenario for narrative purposes. In this way, political and religious rivalries become almost irreconcilable, which is key for the way in which the game frames crusading. The fact that the only way of achieving victory in the game is through military means accentuates the point. For Destructive Creations, the Middle Ages is essentially a period about war and violence, with little regard for technological, intellectual or civilian achievements. This is particularly poignant in the game's representation of Saladin.

Different from other depictions of the sultan like the one in *Kingdom of Heaven* or 1963's *Saladin the Victorious*, this is a Saladin who is both angry and fanatical, obsessed with Jihad and vengeance. He is 'the sword of Allah' who gets rid of the 'filth of the infidels', sparing the lives only of those who are willing to convert to Islam, while executing all others. In this campaign, other characteristics associated with the sultan such as generosity, justice and mercy are replaced by a version of Islam that is inherently violent, militant and ignores its cultural achievements in this period.[21] The last scenario, 'The Siege of Jerusalem', nicely exemplifies such themes. Here we can see details that point towards the game's concern with research and accuracy. As portrayed in our sources, the siege takes place through the northern wall of the city (Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad, 2002: 77), and the terms under which the city is surrendered match those mentioned by Ibn al-Athir.[22] However, the tone and resolution of the scenario go hand-in-hand with an understanding of Islam that is more akin to what one can expect from *IS: Defense.* From the beginning, Balian of Ibelin is shown as the more rational adversary, insisting on negotiation; Saladin is obsessed with vengeance. Although our sources mention that the weakening of the northern wall forced the negotiation, in the game this only happens once the citadel has been reached, forcing the player to be 'Allah's wrath' by killing and pillaging inside Jerusalem. Finally, and most ominous, once the scenario is over Saladin agrees to let the Christians of Jerusalem who do not convert leave, but the tone has more sinister implications. During a scene where chained Christians can be seen marching through the desert while being whipped by Muslim soldiers under the ominous eyes of hungry vultures, Saladin says:

> The Christian citizens of Jerusalem will be judged accordingly. Those, who value their
> false God above Allah will soon face their sentence in the endless desert as exiles. If

---

[21] This is not to say that Saladin could not be violent or zealous, as our sources like William of Tyre attest. However, many of the virtues associated with the sultan (such as generosity, wisdom, mercy and justice) are recognized by William despite having every reason to fear and hate the Sultan. For framing of Saladin, see: William of Tyre (1943; 359, 394, 405, 408, 480). For a more holistic approach on the memory of Saladin, see: Phillips (2019, chaps. 22–26).

[22] According to Ibn al-Athir (2007: 332), Balian threatened to destroy the Mosques upon the Temple Mount and kill all the Muslim prisoners if terms were not agreed to.

their God is as merciful as they say, then they will find a safe passage home. If not – I hope Allah will save their lost souls (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Christian prisoners from Jerusalem are taken into the desert by Muslim soldiers under the sight of hungry vultures. Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

Finally, after explaining how the Third Crusade ended in a truce between Muslim and Christians, Saladin brings the whole campaign to a resolution by saying "We will never allow any Christian Kingdom to gain influence or jurisdiction over this territory ever again. This is the will of Allah. May his peace be with us always". These words are uttered as spots of blood cover a map of the Mediterranean from south to north, a visual seeming to imply the advance of Islam into all of Europe, apparently predicting how conflict will continue until this day (**Figure 5**). The dissonance between what the Sultan says and the visual rhetoric that accompanies the message (mercy and peace through the execution and elimination of the other) highlights the dissonance that is common in *Ancestors Legacy*'s simulation of crusading: superficial accuracy of the events seeks to highlight its criticism of Christian religious violence, while using an ideologized historiographical framing that shows the events to be unavoidable and, hence, inviting the player to participate in such violence. In this way, as the tone and visual rhetoric also reinforce, the game naturalizes the ideological premise that Muslims and Christians are caught in an irreconcilable civilizational conflict.

Figure 5: Saladin stands in front of a blood-spattered map of the Mediterranean. Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

Ancestors Legacy's portrayal of the Saladin campaign points to an understanding of the crusades and the period driven by notions of authenticity instead of accuracy. Different but related to accuracy,[23] authenticity points towards preconceived ideas and expectations that have 'little to do with verifiable historical fact', despite being 'predicated' on the 'existence of an objective and knowable historical truth' (Young, 2021: 29). Due to history's representational nature, our understanding of the past (academic or 'popular') is always mediated by a series of elements: contemporary concerns and ideas, personal experiences, methodological and technological limitations, popular expectations and institutional support.[24] Through the reproduction of determined interpretations of the past in media, entertainment, and academia (among other channels), society creates a cultural archive or data bank of images of the past from which designers take imagery and tropes in their reconstructions. Such is the case with the clash of civilizations narrative around crusading, a trope heavily influenced by a long historiographical tradition and the concerns of the War on Terror

---

[23] The debate around historical authenticity is too extended to discuss at length in this paper. For some key readings see: (Chapman, 2016, chap. 3; Pfister, 2020; Beavers and Warnecke, 2021; Salvati and Bullinger, 2013).

[24] Several authors have pointed out that many of the medievalisms that we see today reproduced in media do have an academic origin in the nationalist projects of the 19th century, proving the importance of politics and institutional support in the configuration of our historical consciousness. For more, see: Skottki (2018); Utz (2016; 2022); Simmons (2016); Matthews (2015).

(Wolterink, 2017: 10).[25] Therefore, as Helen Young in her piece about authenticity and race in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* points out,[26] authenticity:

> … is a discourse that circulates through processes of production and consumption to manage anachronisms and inventions and the constraints of form, genre and audiences' expectations, resulting in representation that is 'historical' in the sense that it has the character of History (emphasis in the original): it is socially and culturally constructed, but also widely understood as objectively true (2021: 30).

The larger right-wing framing in which the crusades are portrayed in *Ancestors Legacy* is an example of this form of authenticity. For example, the game emphasizes a society in which hypermasculine warriors take the front stage position through their belligerent deeds,[27] while women are practically invisible and present only as victims of violence or subservient political chips to be traded in marriages.[28] More telling for our case, however, is the issue of race. *Ancestors Legacy* emphasizes the right-wing imagined racial homogeneity of medieval societies (Kaufman and Sturtevant, 2020: 25–27). The omission of the many cultures that interacted during the Middle Ages becomes less surprising if we consider that, as the site *Keinen Pixel dem Faschismus* points out, members of Destructive Creations have favored movements that seek to create an ethnically homogeneous Poland (Keinen Pixel Dem Faschismus, 2021). In this way, the title of the game itself is suggestive: whose ancestors and what legacy? This is a question too large for this article, but there are two elements worth mentioning. First, of the five factions in the game only one is non-white, which points to an understanding of the period that shows a nationally-diverse but racially-homogenous Europe threatened by a homogenous Arab-Muslim other. In this case, the medieval 'ancestors' legacy' at

---

[25] The idea that the crusades were part of a civilizational conflict is an old one, with the modern intonations we recognize today being first used by some Enlightened writers and, more importantly, by nationalist and imperial writers in the 19th century. See: Tyerman (2011, chaps. 3, 5, 6, 8).

[26] *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) is a Czech video game developed and published by Warhorse Studios. The game is set in medieval Bohemia, aiming to create a completely accurate representation of its historical setting. Despite the accuracy of its simulation at an aesthetic level, the game was criticized for its depiction of race in the Middle Ages, which undermined its claims about historical accuracy.

[27] A central figure in *Ancestors Legacy's* advertisement and gameplay is the hypermasculine, semi-naked Viking warrior. In *Ancestors Legacy*, Vikings are tall and powerful warriors who fight 'like brothers' and are often contrasted to more effeminate figures like monks in Ulf Ironbeard's campaign. A romanticized version of the Viking world, one that is racially homogeneous and inhabited by masculine warriors and subservient wives, has become a key cornerstone of how the far-right conceptualizes the medieval world, idea that is often reproduced in popular media. For a concrete recent case of the adoption of Vikings in media by the far-right see: Rose (2022).

[28] For a general review on how extremist movements use the Middle Ages to exalt values like gender roles, race homogeneity, and hypermasculinity see: Kaufman and Sturtevant (2020).

stake in the crusader campaigns are both 'nation' and 'religion/race', which highlights the game's understanding of interreligious relations in the Middle Ages (and today) as essentially confrontational. Second, as the same site recalls, the last letter ('Y') in the game's logo is an alzig rune, popular among neo-fascist movements who support this understanding of relations between 'West' and Muslims.

In this sense, the game's emphasis on the 'Arabness' of the Muslims is crucial. More often than not the Muslim forces are called Arabs, despite the fact that Saladin was a Kurd and most of his armies were composed of a combination of Egyptians, Arabs and mostly Turks. This use of the term Arab betrays a modern understanding in which Muslims are shown as one homogeneous group while hiding the divisions present within the Muslim world; divisions which more often than not were bloodier than the fight against the crusaders. Within the narrative of civilizational conflict, internal divisions are disregarded in favor of war against the other. One particularly illuminating example takes place during the Fall of Jerusalem. At one point, the player is tasked with protecting Saladin's camp at night from saboteurs. Very quickly it is revealed that these are Isma'ili assassins, the Shi'ite sect that occupy the nearby fortress of Masyaf. In shock, one of the guards exclaims: "But they are Arabian soldiers! Why would they serve these infidels?", with another one answering: "They serve whoever pays best. And, after many years of the invader's rule, there are many Arabs who have betrayed their faith" (**Figure 6**). Here several modern misconceptions are at play: the equating of Arab to Muslim, the understanding that an Arab siding with Christians can only be understood in terms of racial/religious betrayal, and the assumption of Muslims to be homogenously opposed to the Western Christians, disregarding the fact that the assassins were Shi'ite who famously tried to assassinate the Sunni Saladin twice. It could be argued that these are conventions that the developers are using to communicate a simplified story, but that is precisely the point. In a game concerned with the accuracy of its representation in several cases, these selective simplifications (what Salvati and Bullinger would call 'selective authenticity') betray a right-wing vision of the crusades specifically, and of the Middle Ages more broadly (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013).

Until this point, we have seen how *Ancestors Legacy's* ludonarrative depiction of the crusades exemplifies Shaw's tyranny of realism, where superficial accuracy hides an ideological framing of the crusades as a condemnable but unavoidable civilizational conflict. To do this, the game relies on an authentic larger framework of the Middle Ages that excuses for the player the engagement with the violence the title narratively condemns. This tension becomes even more evident during the Teutonic Knights campaign, where it ends up causing a real ludonarrative dissonance. Before

Figure 6: A Muslim soldier is shocked by the religious/racial betrayal of the 'Hassasins' (sic). Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

moving forward, it is useful to offer a short recount of the Baltic Crusades and their historiographical tradition in Poland, since Destructive Creations is a Polish studio. Crusader activity against the Slavs of the Baltic first took place during the Second Crusade (1146 −1148). Although these first actions led to limited results in terms of conversions, it managed to submit a series of pagan rulers in the region and establish tributary obligations on them by German and Polish nobles, which was in line with previous commercial and bellicose interactions in the region (Christiansen, 1980: 48−69; Gładysz, 2012: 67−95). After this, crusading in the Baltic became more recurrent, which led to the establishment of bishoprics and new military orders in the region, like the Bishopric of Riga and the Sword-Brothers in 1200.

After 1237 the Teutonic Knights, who first arrived in the region in 1229 when Emperor Frederick II and Polish duke Conrad of Masovia granted them the region of Chelmno, became the main crusader force in the region (Gładysz, 2012: 210). Different from other orders like the Templars or Hospitallers, the Teutonic Knights were given a free-hand in the region to launch crusades, recruit and directly administer any conquered territories in the Baltic, leading to the formation of an independent monastic Teutonic Knight state (Tyerman, 2008: 703). In 1243, the Order received Prussia as a fiefdom from the pope, cementing the Order's rule in the region (Gładysz, 2012: 211); the Prussian

Rebellion in *Ancestors Legacy* takes place within this context. The Order's creation and sovereignty over their own state placed them into direct conflict not only with the pagan Prussians and Lithuanians, but also eventually with the other Christian kingdoms in the region, especially Poland (Szybkowski, 2017: 61). In 1308 the Teutonic Knights took control of the city of Gdańsk (Danzig), where they executed many Polish civilians. This event set the Knights and the Polish Crown into a collision course which manifested in multiple wars during the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1387, Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila married Queen Jadwiga of Poland, which united the crowns of both realms. This, together with the key conversion of Jogailla, who took the name Władysław II Jagiełło, destroyed the ideological foundation of the Teutonic Knights' presence and actions in the region. Finally, a Polish-Lithuanian army led by King Władysław Jagiełło destroyed the main army of the Teutonic Knights at Grünwald-Tannenberg in 1410. The Order never recovered militarily, with the Grandmaster becoming a vassal of the Polish Kings in 1466 (Szybkowski, 2017; Tyerman, 2008: 674–712). After the defeat of the Teutonic Knights, a historiographical tradition developed among Polish writers all the way to the 20th century, a tradition that showed the Order as an inversion of Christianity's values: they were liars and murderers, demons dressed as monks, just as in *Ancestors Legacy* (Kozuchowski, 2019).

This historiographical background is what makes the ludonarrative design of the Teutonic Knights campaign so surprising. Previously, I mentioned that the campaign is narrated from the perspective of Herkus Monte, the leader of the Prussian Revolt, which (in line with what to expect from a Polish studio) allows for the game's condemnation of the Northern Crusades. However, and contrary to what might have been expected, the player is asked to carry out these actions by playing as the Order instead of the rebels, which ludonarratively probably made more sense. The game shows the Baltic crusades as a colonial quasi-genocidal endeavor in which bandits, propagandists and robbers seek to claim a land that does not belong to them and create their own 'nation' in the region. The fact that the game uses 'nation' to refer to the Teutonic monastic state, and that neither the Hospitallers nor Templars are even mentioned in the Saladin campaign, betrays an interpretation of the Baltic Crusades influenced by the Polish nationalist tradition (**Figure 7**). Again, this is to be expected, not only because it comes from a Polish studio, but also because this interpretation fits the game's larger framework of an ultraviolent Middle Ages giving birth to modern European nations through war and competition. Even the criticism of Christianity is not that surprising if we also keep in mind that some of the members of Destructive Creations also support neo-pagan groups (Keinen Pixel Dem Faschismus, 2021).
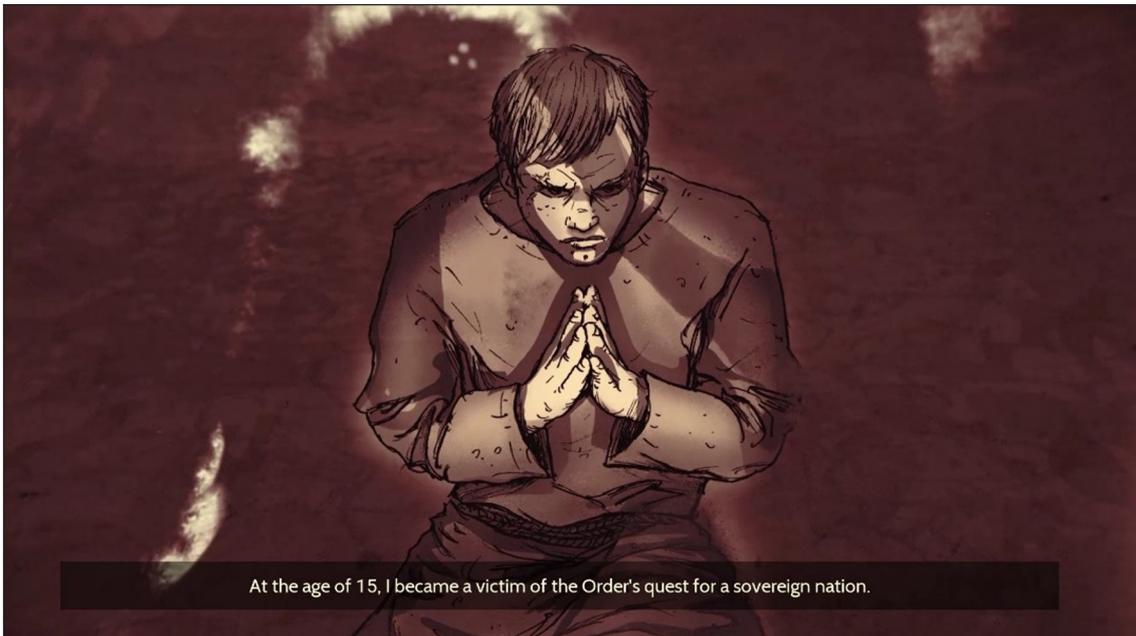
At the age of 15, I became a victim of the Order's quest for a sovereign nation.

Figure 7: Introduction to the Teutonic Knights campaign showing Herkus Monte being converted to Catholicism. Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

The surprise lies in a Polish game that condemns crusading in general, and Teutonic crusading in particular, in the harshest terms imaginable (and rightly so), while demanding the player experiences these events from the side of the bloody conqueror: The Christian Teutonic Knights. In this campaign, the player must strategize, ravage, kill, and subjugate a population with whom the narrative clearly sympathizes, and all in the name of a hypocritical Church. In no other campaign of the game is the ludonarrative dissonance so severe, which is only highlighted by the objectives of some of the scenarios. Of the five scenarios of the campaign, only scenarios one ('The Knights of the Cross'), three ('The Battle of Christburg'), and five ('The Battle of Lidzbark') give the player freedom to pursue the goals of the scenario.[29] Of these, the first and last highlight the genocidal violence implied by the campaign's narrative. In the first scenario, Herkus Monte is sent to negotiate a truce with a group of Prussian elders who quickly are betrayed by the Knights and burned alive inside of an inn, as already mentioned. What follows these treacherous actions is the complete destruction of every single Prussian settlement in the map, including betraying the city of Pokarwis which the player is charged with defending for most of the scenario. In the game this

---

[29] This means that the game does not narratively guide the actions of the player (nor hand-hold them) but that it only provides the general objectives and it is up to the player to fulfill them using the tools provided by the scenario.

gruesome betrayal and massacre ignites the Prussian rebellion, with Monte swearing revenge against the cruelty of the Teutonic Knights. From here on, the religious and violent rhetoric is increasingly highlighted to the point that in the final scenario, the Battle of Lidzbark,[30] the player must destroy every single Prussian building and kill every single unit, with the game providing a counter that lets the player know how many are left (**Figure 8**).

Figure 8: In the last scenario of the Teutonic Knights campaign ('The Battle of Lidzbark') the player is charged with eliminating all units and buildings, with the game providing a counter with how many are left. Screenshot taken from author's gameplay.

Once more, it is important to highlight that the way in which the Teutonic Knights are depicted is less important here than the fact the game demands the player embodies the side whose violence is constantly being condemned; embodiment which permeates the experience of crusading in *Ancestors Legacy* (and video games at large) and cannot easily be reproduced as directly in other forms of media. If we accept Gonzalo Frasca's definition that to simulate is to 'model a (source) system through a different system which maintains some of the behaviors of the original', then when *Ancestors Legacy* simulates the crusades, it is immediately making a series of claims about the truthfulness and objectivity of its representation even if, as we have seen, this 'objective past' corresponds more to notions of authenticity (Frasca, 2003: 223; Schut, 2007: 228). This 'objectivity'

---

[30] During the 13th century, Lidzbark was a pagan fortress captured by the Teutonic Knights. The town fell to the Prussians during the rebellion, only to be later recaptured. Von Jeroschin does not mention any specific battle as the end of the rebellion, hence this final scenario is one of the narrative liberties *Ancestors Legacy* adopts for ludic purposes. For more on the medieval Lidzbark see: 'Lidzbark Warmiński – Bishop's Castle', n.d.).

is highlighted by the embodied actions that the player carries out in this virtual space, and enhanced by the audiovisual cues that powers the immersive experience.[31] According to Torben Grodal, this immersion takes place because video games engage each part of the cognitive processes we use in our daily lives (perceptions, emotions, cognitions and actions).[32] The way in which *Ancestors Legacy* looks, sounds and plays has a key role in the selling of this 'illusion of objectivity':[33] the player interacts with a past that 'looks and sounds' the part. This is not to suggest that video games are vendors of illusions about the past, they are just another mean through which we can make history. In fact, I believe that they can afford a special form of historical experience that can be fun, nuanced and empathic, while also allowing us to question hegemonic narratives that naturalize violence.[34] That is why the tyranny of realism can be so pernicious: because in a game that only emphasizes a naturalized understanding of interreligious/intercultural violence, and whose ludonarrative demand victory every time, *Ancestors Legacy* cannot imagine an experience from the perspective of the victim with whom it so openly sympathizes.[35]

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that *Ancestors Legacy* engages with the crusades and the Middle Ages through the tyranny of realism, meaning how superficially accurate facts hide ideological historiographical frameworks. While at a narrative level, and based on a fairly accurate simulation of the events and scenarios, the game condemns crusading as a vile, hypocritical and violent endeavor, its tone and game mechanics betray an ahistorical understanding of the phenomenon in which medieval religious/racial conflict is shown to be inevitable. The reason for this is an understanding of accuracy

---

[31] I follow Janet Murray's definition of immersion, as recovered by McMahan: 'the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus… in a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible… the enjoyment of immersion is a participatory activity' (McMahan, 2003: 68).

[32] Grodal exemplifies this process with facing a monster in a game. First the player notices the monster (perception), which can be followed by a sense of fear (emotion), a plan of action (cognition) and then shooting it (action) (2003: 131).

[33] For McMahan, the correspondence between the expectations of the player around graphics, audio, actions and the way the world correspond to these are key in creating a sense of 'presence' in the virtual space (2003: 68–69, 72–75).

[34] Allison Landsberg (2003) has coined the term 'prosthetic memory' to describe a form of experience that media can offer to promote empathy at a large social level that could, eventually, help in the transformation of oppressive social structures. I believe that videogames, with their affordance for embodied experience, are well equipped for this.

[35] Two other campaigns in the game offer a similar dynamic. In the campaign about Edward the Confessor, the player fights on the side of the king while the story is narrated from the side of the Duke of Kent. However, here the conflict is presented in political terms, which avoids the harsher language present in those in which different religions clash, like the crusading and Viking campaigns. When playing as Harold Godwinson, the player can only experience victory over Harald Hardrada, with the gameplay cutting right before the defeat at Hastings, which only takes place in cutscene. In both cases the player is only allowed the experience of victory demanded by the gameplay, limiting a historical interpretation that questions the violence.

that is shaped by right-wing tropes about the Middle Ages: civilizational conflicts, racial and religious homogeneity, and a hypermasculine military ethos that mould the whole experience. In this way, *Ancestors Legacy* undermines its own criticism of crusading and its questioning of this sort of violence. In a game in which history is driven by powerful male warriors and kings, a scenario like the civil war between Baldwin III and Queen Melisende in the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1152−1154,[36] which would have allowed for a broader questioning of the political and religious dynamics behind the Western presence in the Holy Land, is not possible. In a game that emphasizes military victory above any other scenario of medieval life, dissenting voices that could question the violence itself have to be ignored. In this way, the Saladin campaign offers a version of the crusades in which societies with different religions can only achieve peace through bloody means all the way to this day. Concurrently, the Teutonic Campaign offers a crusading experience in which the player must carry out unjustifiable violence because the accuracy constructed by the gameplay demands so, despite the acute ludonarrative dissonance.

I want to conclude by remarking that this analysis and criticism of *Ancestors Legacy* is not a call for the whitewashing of crusading history. Indeed, the crusades were violent campaigns that imposed much suffering upon those who fell to the swords of the crusaders; nor is *Ancestors Legacy* entirely wrong in its evaluation of the Baltic crusades, since they were driven (among other reasons) by colonization and rapaciousness. However, they were not unavoidable, nor was violence the only way in which societies with different cultures and religions interacted in the Middle Ages, or today. A concern with the historical record and the accuracy of the events does not need to exclude non-hegemonic understandings of historical phenomena. In his analysis of *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, Emil Ludendal Hammar shows how, by exploring non-hegemonic experiences, in this case via a former slave in the 18th century Caribbean, video games can offer nuanced approximations of polemical topics while also being commercially successful (Hammar, 2017). I believe that simulating the crusades in gaming demands similar nuance. Video games can offer an experience of the past that is not replicable in other forms of media, and we should harness this potential to explore history responsibly in a way that allows us to have fun, but also to question both the way our societies work and the historical myths built around them.

---

[36] Between 1152 – 1154, Baldwin III, who had ascended to the throne of Jerusalem as a minor in 1143, managed to claim full power over the Kingdom from his mother Queen Melisende in a bitter civil war that divided the Kingdom's nobility. For more on this conflict and Melisende as a figure see: Barber (2012: chaps. 7–8); Morton, (2020: chap. 5); Park (2021: 25–41).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Ali' Izz ad-Din Ibn al-Athir al-Jazari 2007 *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-Kamil fi'l-Ta'rik. Part 2: The Years 541–589/1146–1193: The Age of Nur al-Din and Saladin*. Richards, D S (trans.). New York: Routledge.

Anchieta Guerra, L F 2022 The Internet Crusade against Communism: Political Neomedievalism in Twenty-first Century Brazil. In: MacLellan, R (ed.) *The Modern Memory of the Military-Religious Orders*, *Engaging the Crusades*, *volume seven*. London: Routledge. pp. 91–110. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003200802-7

Awan, A N 2020 Weaponising the Crusades: Justifying Terrorism and Political Violence. In: Horswell, M and Awan, A N (eds.) *The Crusades in the Modern World*, *Engaging the Crusades*, *volume two*. New York: Routledge. pp. 4–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351250481-2

Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad 2002 The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin. Richards, D S (trans.). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Barber, M 2012 *The Crusader States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Beavers, S and **Warnecke, S** 2021 Audience Perception of Historical Authenticity in Visual Media. In: Alvestad, K and Houghton, R (eds.) *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*. London: Bloomsbury. pp. 74–89. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452.0013

Bogost, I 2007 *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5334.001.0001

Bogost, I 2008 The Rhetoric of Video Games. In: *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth*, *Games and Learning*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. pp. 117–140.

Brandenburg, A 2020 "If it's a fantasy world, why bother trying to make it realistic?": Constructing and Debating the Middle Ages of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. In: Lorber, M and Zimmermann, F (eds.) *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*. Bielefeld: Transcript. pp. 201–220. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454206-011

Brandis, R 2020 Tracing the Past with Digital Games. Historical Procedural Rhetorics. In: Lorber, M and Zimmermann, F (eds.) *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*. Bielefeld: Transcript. pp. 93–116. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454206-006

Chadwick, O 2014 Courtly Violence, Digital Play: Adapting Medieval Courtly Masculinities in Dante's Inferno. In: Kline, D T (ed.) *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge. pp. 148–161.

Chapman, A 2016 *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Historical Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Chirilă, O.-A 2021 "Show this fool knight what it is to have no fear": Freedom and oppression in Assassin's Creed (2007). In: Houghton, R (ed.) *Playing the Crusades*, *Engaging The Crusades*, *Volume five*. New York: Routledge. pp. 53–70. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293269-4

Christiansen, E 1980 *The Northern Crusades: The Baltic and the Catholic Frontier 1100–1525*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

Condis, M 2020 Hateful Games: Why White Supremacists Recruiters Target Gamers. In: Reyman, J and Sparby, E (eds.) *Digital Ethics: Rhetoric and Responsibility in Online Aggression*. London: Routledge. pp. 143–159. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429266140-9

de Groot, J 2009 *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.

Destructive Creations 2014 Hatred Gameplay Reveal Trailer (new version). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytdEYapPXdY [Last Accessed 4 June 2023].

Elliott, A B R 2011 *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Elliott, A B R 2017 *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc16jn7

Elliott, A B R and **Horswell, M** 2020 Crusading Icons: Medievalism and Authenticity in Historical Digital Games. In: Lorber, M and Zimmermann, F (eds.) *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*. Berlin: de Gryter. pp. 137–155. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454206-008

Euteneuer, J Meints, J 2020 It Was Just a Joke. Demagoguery, Humor, and Video Game Streaming. *Gamevironments, Special Issue: Democracy Dies playfully. Three Questions –Introductory Thoughts on the Papers Assembled and Beyond*, 13: 358–381.

Fischer, M (trans.) 2010 *The Chronicle of Prussia by Nicholaus von Jeroschin: A History of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, 1190–1331*. New York: Routledge.

Frasca, G 2003 Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. In: Wolf, M J P and Perron, B (eds.) *The Video Game Theory Reader*. London: Routledge. pp. 221–235.

Friedman, T 2005 Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity and Space. In: Smith, G (ed.) *Discovering Discs: Transforming Space and Genre on CD-ROM*. New York: New York University. pp. 132–150. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814786734.003.0008

Friedrich, J 2020 You Do Have Responsibility! How Games Trivialize Fascism, Why it Should Concern Us and How Can We Change It. In: Lorber, M and Zimmermann, F (eds.) *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*. Bielefeld: Transcript. pp. 259–276. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454206-014

García Martín, R., Cadiñanos Martínez, B. and **Martín Domínguez, P** 2020 The Face of Authority through Sid Meier's Civilization Series. *Gamevironments, Special Issue: Democracy Dies playfully. Three Questions – Introductory Thoughts on the Papers Assembled and Beyond*, 13: 139–173.

Gładysz, M 2012 *The Forgotten Crusaders: Poland and the Crusader Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Leiden: Brill. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004223363

Grodal, T 2003 Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles: Video Games, Media and Embodied Experiences. In: Wolf, M J P and Perron, B (eds.) *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge. pp. 129–155.

Hall, C 2014 Hatred, Free Speech and One Developer's Connections with Poland's Far Right (correction). *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/2014/12/18/7417045/hatred-free-speech-and-one-developers-connections-with-polands-far [Last Accessed 2 June 2023].

Hammar, E L 2017 Counter-Hegemonic Conmemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry. *Rethink. Hist*, 21: 372–395. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256622

Hammar, E L 2020 Imperialism and Fascism Intertwined. A Materialist Analysis of the Games Industry and Reactionary Gamers. *Gamevironments, Special Issue: Democracy Dies playfully. Three Questions –Introductory Thoughts on the Papers Assembled and Beyond*, 13: 317–357.

Haydock, N 2007 *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Haydock, N and **Risen, E L** 2008 (eds.) *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Herbst Buzay, E and **Buzay, E** 2015 Neomedievalism and the Epic in Assassin's Creed: The Hero's Quest. In: *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press. pp. 113–132.

Hillenbrand, C 2018 *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315063003

Holsinger, B 2007 *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism and the War on Terror*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, LLC.

Houghton, R 2021a Introduction: Crusades and Crusading in Modern Games. In: Houghton, R (ed.) *Playing the Crusades, Engaging the Crusades, Volume Five*. London: Routledge. pp. 1–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293269-1

Houghton, R 2021b Crusader Kings Too? (Mis)Representations of the Crusaders in Strategy Games. In: Houghton, R (ed.) *Playing the Crusades, Engaging the Crusades, Volume Five*. New York: Routledge. pp. 71–92. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293269-5

Huttenlocher, A 2022 Putin's War is Also Kirill's Crusade. *libmod.de*. https://libmod.de/en/putins-war-kirils-crusade-huttenlocher/ [Last Accessed 3 February 2023].

Kaufman, A S and **Sturtevant, P B** 2020 *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Keinen Pixel Dem Faschism 2021 Destructive Creations: Zwischen Neo-Faschismus, Neuheidentum, Antisemitismus und antimuslimischem Rassismus. https://keinenpixel.de/2021/09/29/destructive-creations-zwischen-neo-faschismus-neuheidentum-antisemitismus-und-antimuslimischem-rassismus/ [Last Accessed 2 March 2023].

Komel, M 2014 Orientalism in Assassin's Creed: Self-orientalizing the Assassins from Forerunners of Modern Terrorism into Occidentalized Heroes. *Teor. Praksa*, 51: 72–90.

Kozuchowski, A 2019 The Devil Wears White: Teutonic Knights and the Problem with Evil in Polish Historiography. *East Cent. Eur*, 46: 135–155. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/18763308-04601008

Landsberg, A 2003 Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture. In: *Memory and Popular Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 144–161.

Lecaque, T 2022a Christian Nationalists and the Holy Gun Crusade. *Relig. Dispatches*. https://religiondispatches.org/christian-nationalists-and-the-holy-gun-crusade/ [Last Accessed 2 June 2023].

Lecaque, T 2022b The Far-Right Embrace of the Knights Templar isn't Just About Faith, Tradition or History — It's About Hate. *Relig. Dispatches*. https://religiondispatches.org/the-far-right-embrace-of-the-knights-templar-isnt-just-about-faith-tradition-or-history-its-about-hate/ [Last Accessed 2 June 2023].

Lewis, K J 2021 "I'm not responsible for the man you are!": Crusading and Masculinities in Dante's Inferno. In: *Playing the Crusades, Engaging the Crusades*. Routledge: London. pp. 30–52. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293269-3

Lidzbark Warmiński — Bishop's Castle n.d. *Anc. Mediev. Archit*. https://medievalheritage.eu/en/main-page/heritage/poland/lidzbark-warminski-bishops-castle/ [Last Accessed 4 June 2023].

MacAskill, E 2005 George Bush: "God told me to end the tyranny in Iraq". *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/07/iraq.usa [Last Accessed 4 June 2023].

MacLellan, R 2019 Far-Right Appropriations of the Medieval Military Orders. *Mediev. J*, 9: 175–198. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1484/J.TMJ.5.119916

Madden, T F 2009 Inventing the Crusades. *First Things*. https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/06/inventing-the-crusades [Last Accessed 3 February 2023].

Matthews, D 2015 *Medievalism: A Critical History*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782043973

McMahan, A 2003 Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games. In: Wolf, M J P and Perron, B (eds.) *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge. pp. 67–86.

Morton, N 2020 *The Crusader States and Their Neighbours: A Military History, 1099–1187*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198824541.001.0001

Obedkov, E 2022 Call of Duty Franchise Surpasses $30 Billion in Lifetime Revenue, with its Sales Topping 425 Million Units. *Game World Obs*. https://gameworldobserver.com/2022/06/09/call-of-duty-franchise-surpasses-30-billion-in-lifetime-revenue-with-its-sales-topping-425-million-units [Last Accessed 9 October 2023].

Park, D E A 2021 The Memorialisation of Queen Melisende of Jerusalem. In: Horswell, M and Skottki, K (eds.) *The Making of Crusading Heroes and Villains, Engaging the Crusades, Volume Four*. London: Routledge. pp. 25–41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293283-2

Pfister, E 2020 Why History in Digital Games Matters: Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths. In: Lorber, M and Zimmermann, F (eds.) *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*. Bielefeld: Transcript. pp. 47–72. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454206-004

Phillips, J 2019 *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin*. New Haven: Yale University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300249064

Poblocki, K 2002 Becoming-state: The bio-cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization. *Focaal – Eur. J. Anthropol*, 39: 163–177.

Rhodes, H 2020 Medievalism, Imagination and Violence: The Function and Dysfunction of Crusader Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Political World. In: Horswell, M and Awan, A N (eds.) *The Crusades in the Modern World, Engaging the Crusades, Volume Two*. New York: Routledge. pp. 41–57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351250481-4

Rose, S 2022 Norse Code: are White Supremacists Reading Too Much into The Northman? *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/apr/22/norse-code-white-supremacists-reading-the-northman-robert-eggers [Last Accessed 4 June 2023].

Salvati, A J and **Bullinger, J M** 2013 Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past. In: Kapell, M W and Elliott, A B R (eds.) *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. New York: Bloomsbury. pp. 153–169.

Schlimm, M R 2010 The Necessity of Constant Criticism: A Postcolonial Critique of Ridley Scott's Kingdom of Heaven. *J. Media Relig*, 9: 129–149. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2010.500967

Schneider, N 2009 Remembering Rumsfeld: The Defense Department Gospel and America's Desert Crusade. *Relig. Dispatches*. https://religiondispatches.org/the-defense-department-gospel-and-americas-desert-crusade/ [Last Accessed 3 March 2023].

Schut, K 2007 Strategic Simulations of Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History. *Games Cult*, 2: 213–235. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412007306202

Shaw, A 2015 The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in Assassin's Creed III. *Load. J. Can. Game Stud. Assoc*, 9: 4–24.

Simmons, C 2016. Romantic Medievalism. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 103–118. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781316091708.008

Skottki, K 2018 The Dead, the Revived and the Recreated Past: "Structural Amnesia" in Representations of Crusade History. In: Horswell, M and Phillips, J (eds.) *Perceptions of the Crusades from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century, Engaging The Crusades, Volume One*. New York: Routledge. pp. 107–132. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351250443-6

Szybkowski, S 2017 Two Local Empires in Confrontation: Poland and Lithuania Competing with the Teutonic State to Dominate the Southeast Region of the Baltic Sea (the End of the Fourteenth to 1409). In: Możejko, B (ed.) *New Studies in Medieval and Rennaisance Poland and Prussia: The Impacts of Gdańsk*. London: Routledge. pp. 60–73.

Tarrant, B 2019. *The Great Replacement*. 8ch.net. [Last Accessed 3 March 2023].

Tsui, C K 2014 Tracing the Discursive Origins of the War on Terror: President Clinton and the Construction of New Terrorism in the Post-Cold War Era (PhD), University of Otago, Dunedin.

Tyerman, C 2008 *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Tyerman, C 2011 *The Debate on the Crusades*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Uricchio, W 2005 Simulation, History and Computer Games. In: Raessens, J and Goldstein, J (eds.) *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 327–338.

Utz, R 2016 Academic Medievalism and Nationalism. In: D'Arcens, L (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 119–134. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781316091708.009

Utz, R 2022 The Great Complicity: Medievalism and Nationalism. *Medievalists.net*. https://www.medievalists.net/2022/01/medievalism-and-nationalism/ [Last Accessed 2 June 2023].

Welsh, T J and **Sebastian, J T** 2014 Shades of Dante: Virtual Bodies in Dante's Inferno. In: Kline, D T (ed.) *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge. pp. 162–174.

Wenskus, R 2021 A Sacred Task, No Cross Required: The Image of Crusading in Computer Gaming-Related Non-Christian Science Fiction Universes. In: Houghton, R (ed.) *Playing the Crusades, Engaging the Crusades*, Volume Five. New York: Routledge. pp. 12–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293269-2

William of Tyre 1943 *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea: Volume II*. Babcock, E T and Krey, A C (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Wolterink, J 2017 Authentic Historical Imagery: A Suggested Approach for Medieval Videogames. *Gamevironments*, 6: 1–33.

Young, H 2016 *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315724843

Young, H 2021 Race and Historical Authenticity: Kingdom Come: Deliverance. In: Alvestad, K and Houghton, R (eds.) *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*. London: Bloomsbury. pp. 28–42. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452.0009