AFTR-ACTION REPORTS IN EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV

How do AARs represent the past?

Vera Lakmaker

334976

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Date: 12-07-2021

Supervisor: Dr. Pieter van den Heede

Second reader: Dr. Robbert-Jan Adriaansen

The illustration on the cover is the starting screen of *Europa Universalis IV* developed by Paradox Interactive Studios

Abstract

Video games offer a unique way to engage with history since they allow the player to consume history by reading texts and watching (historical) cutscenes. They provide a mode of interactivity that allows the player to play around with the history set by the developer-historian, which leads to the exploration of history in the game. What remains relatively unexplored concerning the study of historical games is how players give meaning to their gameplay activities and how they appropriate game content. An expression of gaming that has remained underexplored by academics is the After-Action Report (AAR). The AAR is a form in which the consumption and production of history by the player comes together. An AAR based on a game can be understood as: "a prevalent form of fan literature in which the player constructs personal narratives about the game by recounting their gameplay".

This thesis aims to study After-Action Reports as a paratextual expression of contemporary historical culture. It aims to answer the following research question: How is the past represented in After-Action Reports for the game Europa Universalis IV? To answer the question, this thesis first looks at how history is presented within the game *Europa Universalis IV* through a reflection about historical research performed by the developer and through analysis of individual game components. Second, this thesis looks at the dominant narratives expressed in AARs by analysing narrative elements like time, space, cause-effect, characters and narrator as formulated by *Narrative as a Formal System* by Bordwell and Thompson. This thesis aims to establish patterns within the dominant plotlines that can be found within these AARs. Lastly, this thesis will look at the interactive aspects of AARs and how the dynamic interactions between participants influence the way AARs write stories about the past.

Keywords: After-Action Report, historical culture, paratext, ludonarrative, *Europa Universalis IV,* video game.

Preface

Video Games have always been a passion of mine. They have the unique ability to tell stories through a unique way we can interact with these stories. With this thesis, I hope to make people aware that video games have this amazing ability and that video games can affect the way we view and interact with history.

The writing of this thesis has been an emotional rollercoaster for me. Nine years ago, a lot of life-changing events happened within the timespan of a month which triggered a long lasting depression. Despite being in a very dark place, I did finish my university courses, while simultaneously working in the games industry as a freelance reporter. Unfortunately, I was never able to finish my thesis and after university I had to start a new job outside of the games industry. The years passed, and my hope of ever finishing what I started faded.

Then, one year ago, I lost my job. However, I saw this as an opportunity to finish something that I wanted for a long time, my master thesis. Right before starting, I was also offered a job in the games industry once more. For the first time in nine years, I could finally combine the two things I love: games and history.

I first want to thank my thesis supervisor, dr. Pieter van den Heede for introducing me to the interesting world of AARs and for all the support and feedback given to me during the writing of this thesis. I want to express my gratitude to dr. Robbert-Jan Adriaansen for the possibility to start studying again, for acting as the second reader and for all the feedback during the Research Workshop.

I especially want to thank my mother and my love Mark for their emotional support and their belief in me. I want to express my gratitude to my employer, Gameye for allowing me to take the time to finish my studies. Without Gameye's help, I would not be able to finish this thesis. Last, I want to express my thanks and love to my father. Paps, even though you are no longer physically with us. Thank you so much for giving me the love of history. You were the reason I started studying history, and you are the reason why I am finishing it.

Vera Lakmaker

Antwerp, July 2021

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Chapter 1: What are AARs?

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, the argument has often been presented that the interest in history is in decline.[1] People seem to study less history at universities, and there is a worry about the future of historical studies.[2] This worry might be valid if one accepts that professional historians can only do proper historical research by writing academic papers.[3][4] However, if one looks at history depicted in popular media and especially video games, a different trend can be observed. According to MarketWatch.com, the video games industry was estimated to reach $179.9 billion in revenue by 2020 vs Hollywood's $100 billion in revenue. Therefore, digital games are more popular than Hollywood.[5] Among the most popular games are historical ones like the *Civilization series* with 33 million copies sold and the *Assassins Creed* franchise.[6][7]

Video games offer a unique way to engage with history since they allow the player to consume history by reading texts and watching (historical) cutscenes. They provide a mode of interactivity that allows the player to play around with the history set by the developer-historian, which leads to the exploration of history in the game. Thus, the player is 'doing' history through ludic means. As a result, the player can both consume and produce history.[8] One popular genre of video games is the Grand Strategy Game (GSG). GSG is a subgenre of strategy games. The player takes control of a nation for hundreds of in-game years and influences its success through economic, political, military and diplomatic means.[9] A common goal in this subgenre is to conquer the world through conquest.

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[1] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 13.

[2] Chapman, 13.

[3] Chapman, 14.

[4] Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History : Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2016), 5, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640754.

[5] Wallace Witkowski, 'Videogames Are a Bigger Industry than Movies and North American Sports Combined, Thanks to the Pandemic', MarketWatch, accessed 11 July 2021, https://www.marketwatch.com/story/videogames-are-a-bigger-industry-than-sports-and-movies-combined-thanks-to-the-pandemic-11608654990.

[6] Dean Takahashi, 'Civilization: 25 Years, 33M Copies Sold, 1 Billion Hours Played, and 66 Versions', *VentureBeat* (blog), 18 February 2016, https://venturebeat.com/2016/02/18/civilization-25-years-66-versions-33m-copies-sold-1-billion-hours-played/.

[7] Nellie Andreeva, '"Assassin's Creed" Live-Action TV Series In Works At Netflix As Part Of Content Deal With Ubisoft', *Deadline* (blog), 27 October 2020, https://deadline.com/2020/10/assassins-creed-live-action-tv-series-netflix-content-deal-ubisoft-animated-anime-series-1234603834/.

[8] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 32–34.

[9] Daniel Moregård, 'Stellaris: Console Edition - Grand Strategy Isn't Just for PCs Anymore', *Xbox Wire* (blog), 22 January 2019, https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2019/01/22/stellaris-console-edition-grand-strategy/.

GSGs allow the gamer to consume history set by the developer and to compare it with their own historical experience and knowledge.[11] People experience history through these games, which have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of history. They provide "a playground of the past".[12]

What remains relatively unexplored concerning the study of historical games is how players give meaning to their gameplay activities and how they appropriate game content. An expression of gaming that has remained underexplored by academics is the After-Action Report (AAR). The AAR is a form in which the consumption and production of history by the player comes together. An AAR based on a game can be understood as: "a prevalent form of fan literature in which the player constructs personal narratives about the game by recounting their gameplay".[13] The player constructs their historical narratives based on the game they play. The history might be counterfactual, but that does not have to be the case. One can find these AARs on historical forums, and they are read and discussed by an online community.

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[10] The24thPegasus, 'First World Conquest!', Reddit Post, *R/Eu4*, 28 January 2019, www.reddit.com/r/eu4/comments/aktcas/first_world_conquest/.

[11] Tom Apperley, "Counterfactual Communities: Strategy Games, Paratexts and the Player's Experience of History," *Open Library of Humanities*, Volume/issue number 2018, https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.286.*Counterfactual Communities: Strategy Games, Paratexts and the Player's Experience of History. Open Library of Humanities,. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.286/, abstract,*

[12] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliot, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, 1st ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 29–31.

[13] 'After-Action Report', TV Tropes, accessed 15 November 2020, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AfterActionReport.

This thesis will look at how these narratives are constructed and how they represent the past. What are the dominant narratives within these AARs, and how do they portray history? Is the AAR only a fun way to read about the game, or is it a tool that allows the player to reflect on the past? Game researcher Souvik Mukherjee argues that paratexts, like the AARs and Let's Plays (video playthroughs by gamers), have not received much scholarly attention yet.[14] It is a reason to further empirically research this topic on how these narratives represent the past.

2 Research Question and Sub questions

This thesis will focus on the historical narratives that are put forward within these AARs. To do so, I will look at the game *Europa Universalis IV* (hereafter: EUIV). EUIV is a grand strategy game developed in 2013 by the Stockholm-based game company Paradox Development Studio. In EUIV, the player controls a nation through 1444-1821 to become a dominant power on the world stage.[15] I have chosen this game because it is often seen as one of the more popular games in this genre. The game has much content that allows players to play long games (called campaigns). The game does not have a primary objective, so it is up to the player to decide what he/she wants to achieve in the game. Therefore, the game is perfect for the creation of an AAR. The game gives the player total freedom to create their narrative.[16] To empirically research the AAR based on EUIV, I want to propose the following research question:

How is the past represented in After-Action Reports for the game Europa Universalis IV?

To answer my research question, I will answer the following sub-questions:

How is the past represented in the game Europa Universalis IV?

What are the dominant narratives that are expressed in the After-Action Reports based on Europa Universalis IV?

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[14] Souvik Mukherjee, 'Shapeshifting Stories: Reading Video Game Stories through Paratexts', in *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, ed. Souvik Mukherjee (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 110, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137525055_5.

[15] 'Beginner's Guide - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 24 January 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Beginner%27s_guide#Other_countries.

[16] '10 Best Grand Strategy Games Of All Time, Ranked', TheGamer, 22 June 2019, https://www.thegamer.com/grand-strategy-games-best-ranked/.

How can we characterise After Action Reports as a form of historical configuration more broadly?

Question 1 will focus on how history is represented in Europa Universalis IV. I will give an in-depth analysis of the gameplay elements. I want to understand the mechanics of the game and how it represents history. If one does not understand the game, one cannot fully understand what is happening in the AARs from a gaming perspective.

Question 2 will focus on the analysis of the AAR themselves. To analyse what the dominant narratives are, I will look at what is often identified as core components of a narrative: characters, time and space, cause-effect and overall plot. To research this, I will use an iterative approach to the framework of Bordwell and Thompson. It means that I will analyse the sources multiple times to get a better overview of their structure. The framework will be my point of departure to establish the narrative elements of these AAR. The details will be further discussed in the methodology section.

This thesis focuses on the narrative analysis of the AAR. I also want to analyse the creative processes of writing an AAR. It will not be the main objective of this chapter. Nevertheless, understanding how these AARs are constructed will help me better understand the AAR as a medium of configuring the past.

During the research, the reader will see that the AARs is more than a recount of gameplay. AARs deal with the process of creating a story about the past through narrative emplotment (historical configuration, see paragraph 3.1). How do elements like player interactivity and historical discussion affect the creation of the story? Question 3 will aim to explore if it is possible to understand AARs as more than merely a narrative tool to represent the past.

In the next paragraph, first, I will discuss the theoretical concepts that will be used in this thesis. Secondly, I will aim to establish the general ideas regarding history in games and paratexts through a literature review. Third, I will discuss the nature of the sources, including their advantages and disadvantages. Last, the methods that will be used for this thesis will be discussed.

3 Theoretical concepts and Literature review

3.1 Historical Culture

In the introduction, I stated that history is getting more popular through different media like games, while the role of the historian as an authority is in decline. Is there a way for historians to deal with this trend in academia? Historical culture might be the concept to answer this question. The notion of historical culture allows for a better understanding of "the dynamic interaction between human agency, tradition, performance of memory and historical representation and dissemination".[17] According to Fernando Sánches-Marcos, historical culture offers a different way for humans to understand the "effective and affective relationship" with the past.[18] Historical culture is an umbrella concept defined as "people's relationship to the past". According to Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, historical culture can be analysed on three levels:

- Historical narratives of the past
- Mnemonic infrastructures.
- Underlying conceptions of History.

According to Grever and Adriaansen, telling stories about the past goes through a process of "(re)mediation, appropriation, dissemination and transmission of substantive interpretative framework" by people who share stories of the past.[19] It results in historical narratives of the past in tangible outlets like schoolbooks, museum exhibitions and video games, and intangible outlets like re-enactments and rituals. According to Grever and Adrianssens, the historical configuration is related to the "process of narrative emplotment."[20] The term derives from Paul Ricoeur's model of mimetic narrative. Narrative emplotment deals with "the act of telling or receiving a story, the actual configuration of a given plot – the story as told, or as read".[21]The mnemonic infrastructures refer to the time and space in which historical experiences can be remembered. These mnemonic infrastructures can be ceremonies, national calendars, museums and archives, for example.[22] The third element, underlying conceptions of history, is essential to understand narrative and

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[17] Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, 'Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited', in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, ed. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 73, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52908-4_4.

[18] Fernando Sánches-Marcos, 'What Is Historical Culture? – Culturahistorica.Org', accessed 24 May 2021, https://culturahistorica.org/what-is-historical-culture/.

[19] Grever and Adriaansen, 'Historical Culture', 78.

[20] Grever and Adriaansen, 78.

[21] Joe Baker, 'Configuration and Narrative Emplotment', Medium, 24 October 2017, https://figuration.al/configuration-and-narrative-emplotment-649c1500f317.

[22] Grever and Adriaansen, 'Historical Culture', 79.

mnemonic infrastructures. These two levels are defined by ideas of history, but the underlying conceptions can alter the way humans think about history. According to Grever and Aadriaansen, historical cultures always think about what the past is and how the past, present, and future relates to each other.[23]

Jörn Rüsen argues that "historical learning has two sides: an inner and outer side". [24] The first consists of the individual, the personal side: historical consciousness. [25] The second can be defined as historical culture, which contains every organisational body that allows for historical learning. It forms a collective way of collecting historical knowledge.[26] Historical culture includes everything that can connect individual historical consciousness to society. [27] It includes everything from schoolbooks, museum exhibitions and even video games or AAR.[28]The latter is the reason why the concept of Historical Culture is essential. Historical culture provides a broad and dynamic framework to study historical expressions (like AARs) in (modern) society. Historical culture allows for a multi-perspective approach to research AARs.

3.2 Video Game/Simulation

What exactly is a game? Eric Zimmerman defines a game as "a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behaviour, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome."[29] He sees playing a game as something voluntary. Rules provide structure for the game, and they restrict and limit the player's action. They are artificial because the game takes place in a world that is defined by artificial features. A contest of power defines all games since in every game, one can find a form of conflict between one or more parties that results in a conflict. It results in a quantifiable outcome since the conflict must be resolved.[30]

Gonzalo Fransca distinguishes games as simulations because they expect and react to certain incentives like the input from pushing buttons. Games respond to a set of conditions determined by the incentives. These elements can be used in a simulation to model a system that

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[23] Grever and Adriaansen, 84.
[24] Grever and Adriaansen, 75.
[25] Grever and Adriaansen, 75.
[26] Grever and Adriaansen, 75.
[27] Grever and Adriaansen, 75.
[28] Grever and Adriaansen, 75.
[29] Eric Zimmerman, 'Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games', 7 July 2004, http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/narrative-interactivity-play-and-games/.
[30] Ibid.

reacts to certain system behaviours.[31] In some theoretical perspectives, history can also be understood as the simulation of historical processes.[32]

What is a video game? Video games are known as "computer games", "electronic games", or even "digital games". Grant Travinor argues for adopting "video game" as terminology because "it is the term that dominates current usage, and because it has the virtue of referring to the visual aspect of games that seems crucial to their definition."[33]

3.2.1 Historical Games

Over the past few years, the relationship between games and history has received an increasing amount of scholarly attention. In the book *Digital Games as History, How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, historian Adam Chapman aims to provide a general characterisation of how video games represent the past and the opportunities they offer players as a mode of engagement.[34] In the book, Chapman tries to provide a framework for the analysis of historical games. The framework attempts to "describe the nature of historical representation in digital games, and it seeks a way to describe digital games' potential use as systems for "historying".[35] Chapman defines 'historying' as "the unclosed action of making histories".[36] He argues throughout the book that "there should be a serious consideration of the nature and possibilities of digital forms as a historical form since its significant presence and usage in popular culture".[37] According to Chapman, "they engage and deploy recognisable historical epistemologies, theories, debates, types of argumentation and narrative conventions".[38]

Based on the argumentation of Chapman regarding the popularity of history in games and the unique interaction with history, Chapman et al. argue that there are different research traditions within historical game studies. Examples include historical representation of games, history-related practices of gamers or how games could be integrated in history education. Writers like Jerome de Groot and Alun Munslow argue that historical games can "create meaningful engagements with the past and have the potential to both determine and reflect how we both

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[31] Gonzalo Frasca, 'Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology', in *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 223, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700457-17.
[32] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 67.
[33] Travinor.
[34] Adam Chapman, 14.
[35] Chapman, 26.
[36] Chapman, 26.
[37] Chapman, 201.
[38] Chapman, 206.

collectively and individually think about, understand, negotiate and talk about that past in the present".[39] The style of a historical game determines the type of content of the game. Each specific video game form represents the past based on their own "rules of engagement", and it should be thought about based on its "terms". The last and most essential perspectives are that historical games are indeed able to relate to history. [40]

Jerimiah McCall argues that video games "qualify as a medium that can do history and communicate aspects of the past".[41] According to him, video games are a form of public history, which he defines as "a communication of the past crafted outside traditional media with little or no academic historians' involvement".[42] This latter is also accepted by scholars like Adam Chapman and Nick Webber. Games can be counted as historical when a game has a starting point in world history, and history must affect the rest of the game.[43]

3.2.2 Simulation Styles

Many scholars have tried to categorise historical games into different categories and styles. The general idea is that the styles can be divided into two genres that have developed over time. Ester MacCallum-Steward and Justin Parsley see two different design approaches in historical games. The first focuses on history within a limited scope that focuses on one specific battle and avoids complex historical narratives, while the other approach "excessively exploits the idea of counterfactualism".[44] They argue that this is often done as a "get out clause" if the history turns into a controversy or wrong.[45]

William Urrichio puts the ideas of MacCallum-Steward and Parsley into a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, some games reconstruct a historical setting as accurately as possible. A few examples of these games are *1967 Grand Prix Legends* (based on a real-life 1967 race) and *Battle of the Bulge* (based on a particular WWII battle). The time and setting shape the game.[46] According

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[39] Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, 'Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 360, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638.

[40] Chapman, Foka, and Westin, 360.

[41] Jeremiah McCall, 'Playing with the Past: History and Video Games (and Why It Might Matter)', *Journal of Geek Studies*, 23 April 2019, 29–30, https://jgeekstudies.org/2019/04/22/playing-with-the-past-history-and-video-games-and-why-it-might-matter/.

[42] McCall, 30.

[43] McCall, 30.

[44] Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler, 'Controversies: Historicising the Computer Game', n.d., 205.

[45] MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 205.

[46] William Uricchio, 'Simulation, History, and Computer Games', in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies* (Mit Press Ltd, 2011), 328.

to Uricchio, games like *Grand Prix* and *Battle of the Bulge* allow the player to engage in a "what if" scenario set in a particular past.[47] At the other end of the spectrum, some games, such as *Civilization* and *The Oregon Trail* deal with historical processes abstractly and structurally. These games allow the player to assume a godlike role. The player must make strategic decisions and must cope with the consequences. The constraints of the historical setting do not limit these games, yet they are built on visions and theories for long term historical development. A player can also engage in speculative "What if"- scenarios.[48]

Adam Chapman agrees with Uricchio's ideas. He calls these sides of the spectrum the "Realists Simulation Style" and the "the Conceptual Simulation Style".[49] The realist style tries to "show the past as it appeared to agents".[50] It focuses on both the audio-visual representation, so the player quickly understands it, and on being as genuine and authentic as possible.[51] Chapman argues that the Conceptual Simulation Style "tells us about the past without purporting to show it as it appeared".[52] This style is represented by visual simplicity, but the rules are often abstract and complicated. It requires a higher level of interpretation and a basic understanding of history by the player.[53] Chapman acknowledges that his idea of the Conceptual Simulation Style is closely linked to Urrichio's idea. However, Chapman uses the concept of procedural rhetoric, a concept introduced by Ian Bogost in 2007. Procedural rhetoric describes "the persuasive/expressive aspect of games that functions through rules, challenge and opportunities for action".[54] He argues that real-world processes and systems can be represented using virtual game processes when considering this concept.[55]

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[47] Uricchio, 'Simulation, History, and Computer Games' 328.
[48] Uricchio, 238.
[49] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 46.
[50] Chapman, 66.
[51] Chapman, 66.
[52] Chapman, 56.
[53] Chapman, 56–57.
[54] Chapman, 57.
[55] Chapman, 57.

3.3 (Counterfactual) Narrative and Ludonarrative

Simulation differs from a narrative, but what exactly is a narrative?[56] A narrative is "a story or a description of a series of events".[57] "It is a telling of a story to explain and analyse events and human agency to increase understanding".[58] A narrative might contain a plot. It may include a trend or the narrative might be determined by "a set of determinative values or goals".[59] It is the historian who gathers facts, gives meaning to them and forms a narrative. [60] A narrative is always personal, and the question remains if a historian's narrative can be regarded as valid. It is generally accepted that if many historians write about the same kind of history, it must be true. If different historians draw the same conclusion about a historical event based on different data, this can be considered valid. Thus, the historical narrative can be true, while fictional narratives can never be true.[61] In the end, historical narratives are always a representation of the past, presented by a historian. We must be aware that history always deals with the humanistic interpretations of the past. This is especially the case when creating a (historical) narrative.

What is the value of studying fictional narratives if they can never be regarded as valid? Some scholars do see value in analysing counterfactual narratives. According to Riyukta Raghunath, "(a counterfactual historical description is) an exploration of a what-if scenario with some speculation of the consequences of a different result".[62] Raghunath argues that researching counterfactuals is interesting because it is "a kind of thought experiment where the author takes as their starting point an existing historical situation and changes it to explore the world of what-if scenarios".[63] Niall Ferguson also emphasises the importance of counterfactuals in his book *Virtual History*. According to him, counterfactuals are an essential way people learn. Decisions we make about the future are based on comparing and weighing potential possibilities and consequences. In that way,

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[56] Gonzalo Frasca, 'Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology', 222.

[57] 'NARRATIVE | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary', accessed 20 December 2020, https://dictionary-cambridge-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/dictionary/english/narrative.

[58] Eileen H. Tamura, 'Narrative History and Theory', *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2011): 150.

[59] C. Behan McCullagh, 'The Truth of Historical Narratives', *History and Theory* 26, no. 4 (1987): 30, https://doi.org/10.2307/2505043.

[60] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliot, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, 1st ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 13.

[61] McCullagh, 'The Truth of Historical Narratives', 31.

[62] Riyukta Raghunath, 'Introduction: The Genre of Counterfactual Historical Fiction', in *Possible Worlds Theory and Counterfactual Historical Fiction*, ed. Riyukta Raghunath (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 4, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53452-3_1.

[63] Raghunath, 4.

we are always busy with counterfactuals.[64] Chapman argues that "counterfactual history aims to understand what did happen by theorising about what did not".[65]

Chapman argues that traditional narrative concepts do not work on games since they are too focused on the spectator's perspective. Games allow the player to watch a game, but they also allow them to play the game. It enables the player to create their narrative. [66] Chapman argues that narratives in games can be divided into two concepts: framing narrative and ludonarrative. Framing narrative is part of the narrative that the developer defines. The narrative produced by the 'players' actions and what fills in the gaps of the framing narrative is called "emergent narrative". This emergent narrative then transforms into the ludonarrative. The ludonarrative is "an active collaboration between developer and player".[67] It is especially the case in EUIV since the game does not have a set objective. The developers provide narrative building blocks, and through play, players construct their trajectory and post-narration.

The ludonarrative consists of the player agency and two structural elements: the lexia and framing controls. Lexia can be understood as the basic narratively charged units that the player can combine with other lexia.[68] In essence, lexia are the elements within a game that the player can affect and manipulate. In strategy games, the user interface represents historical elements or concepts that the player can alter. In the case of EUIV, the technology tree can be viewed as a lexia. The tree enables new abilities or skills that influence the rest of the game. Thus, the virtual presentation allows the player to alter the 'state's state, thus the game's narrative.[69] Framing controls allow the developer to control the narrative within the ludonarrative. They structure the ludonarrative through the use of 'temporal controls'.[70] In the case of EUIV, the production cost of a unit will impact the chances of winning a war. These elements are virtually represented in the military tab. Chapman sees different categories for narratives in games. He places strategy games like EUIV under Open-Ontological Story Structures. This category consists of a weak framing narrative, and it focuses on a player-based narrative. Emplotment in these games are led by the player and can be seen as 'fluid'. The ludonarrative is essential in its narrative construction. The

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[64] Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, Repr (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 2.
[65] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 183.
[66] Adam Chapman, 90.
[67] Chapman, 91.
[68] Chapman, 92.
[69] Chapman, 93.
[70] Chapman, 94.

developer only presents the possibilities for a narrative through the combination of the lexia and framing controls, but it is up to the player to construct their own narrative.[71]

Counterfactual games are historical thought experiments that can provide value because they allow humans to learn about the past. Games are, therefore, especially open ontological games like EUIV, suitable since they provide endless possibilities in ludonarratives. McCall argues that games are suitable for exploring counterfactuals since the past can be represented as a set of systems and interactions. Games are excellent in representing the past that way.[72] Both simulation styles allow for counterfactual scenarios. Chapman and Urrichio agree that the Conceptual Simulation Style is the best genre for playing counterfactuals. Tom Apperley argues that "digital games, especially strategy games, offer a mode of engagement with an alternate historical text that provides an opportunity for the player to consider critical and reflective interpretations of historical events".[73] Scholarly debates have been mainly focused on Sid Meier's *Civilization* game series. The abstract representation of historical processes defines the series.[74] Chapman, McCall, Urrichio and Apperley discuss the problems related to *Civilization* and related games in length. The main concern is that the player only focuses on the "structured logic of the game's rules", and the player will accept the games' ideologies without any critique. The main critiques include that ideologies like the misrepresentation of indigenous cultures are created from a Western perspective and exaggerate the role of the military.[75]

Apperley studied the second instalment of the *Europa Universalis* series. He argues that *Europa Universalis II*'s gameplay is different from *Civilization's* since it can be played on a spectrum: the player can attempt to "complete the game with total historical accuracy" or fully explore alternative history. Apperley argues that the games allow for a wide range of historical representations.[76] EUII allows gamers to explore counterfactual imaginings. It does that in two ways: "by creating a place in which plausibility can be discussed and by encouraging counterfactual imaginings through the freedom that developers allow within the game.[77] Apperley argues that the "critical level of engagement within EUII is driven by the game itself, but

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[71] Chapman, 95.
[72] McCall, 'Playing with the Past', 34.
[73] Tom Apperley, 'Modding the Historians' Code Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination', in *Playing with the Past Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 233.
[74] Tom Apperley, 'Modding the Historians' Code Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination', 235.
[75] Apperley, 236.
[76] Apperley, 236.
[77] Apperley, 239.

also within the online community". According to Apperley, players want to join the online community because of two desires: "the desire to discuss styles of play to make historical events more realistic and the desire to explore counterfactual imagining of history".[78] EUII represents "the official history". It does not question this official representation of the past. Utilising play and engaging with the online community, "the player can produce a version of history that is a dialogue between the official history of the game and their understanding of feasibility and verisimilitude or their counterfactual imagination".[79] Gamers can also achieve the desired outcomes by changing the game's code (modding). Altering the code opens up new possibilities that were not possible due to the game's rules. It allows players to challenge the official version of history. He argues: "by creating their own version of history, players create a dialogue with the official history which contributes to an understanding of the past as plural and contingent".[80]

Apperley describes that one of the products derived from the dynamic relationship between the games and the discussion between online communities is the AAR. He argues that, especially on the online forums, the products of AAR allow for different views of history and play to be discussed and negotiated. They allow the participant to gain multiple perspectives on history.[81] Apperley argues that "notions of historical realism and authenticity are also discussed within these forums, which allows the player to evaluate and critique the authentical historical representation of the past within these games".[82]

Nick Webber and McCall build upon the arguments made by Apperley regarding online gaming culture and history. McCall argues that games play an important part in "participatory public history".[83] Any gamer can access an online forum, publicise historical ideas regarding the analysis and criticism of games and history. In short, the forums present what kind of reasoning goes on within these forums. It allows for investigation and historical learning.[84] Webber agrees with McCall. There are dimensions in which games encourage historical thinking that seem to go far beyond the game's content. Historical communities play an essential role since "historical thinking can be fostered, applied to the community and its engagement with the game as subject

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[78] Apperley, 233–34.
[79] Apperley, 246–47.
[80] Apperley, 245.
[81] Apperley, 12.
[82] Apperley, 14.
[83] McCall, 'Playing with the Past', 38.
[84] McCall, 39.

rather than to the historical content within the game itself".[85] According to Webber, historians should also have an active role in this regard. They can provide not only a knowledge basis for history but also encourage historical discussion. By providing valuable comments and reflections, historians can help the community explore the history of the game and change historical debates around these games.[86]

3.4 Paratext

AARs were described as paratexts in the introduction, but what is a paratext? Gérard Genette first described the concept of paratext in 1997, and it was first used in literary studies. According to Genette, "A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance".[87] Paratexts involve everything related to the book. Paratexts are objects from which a person can form an opinion about the book. Genette also introduces a subdivision of different paratexts.

On the one hand, he sees 'peritexts' as elements related to elements inside the book: the cover, chapter titles or specific notes.[88] On the other hand, epitexts are external objects related to the book: author interviews and book reviews.[89] Jonathan Gray argues that a couple of years after its publication, the term was slowly adopted into other areas of study like film, television and other media.[90] Gray accepts Genette's notion that it is only possible to access a text through the paratext.[91] Peter Lunengeld was the first to take Genettes ideas of paratextuality and apply them to digital media. Mia Consolvo is the principal academic regarding paratextuality in games.[92] Gray argues that paratexts "help us decide which text to consume" and that most texts are consumed through paratexts. Paratexts, therefore, contribute to the "popular interpretation" of particular

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[85] Nick Webber, 'Public History, Game Communities and Historical Knowledge', in *Playing with History: Games, Antiquity and History Workshop* (DiGRA and FDG Joint International Conference, Dundee, 2016), 4, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/WEBBER_PWH1B_1AUG_LT1.pdf.

[86] Webber, 5.

[87] Gerard Genette and Jane E. Lewin, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

[88] Genette and Lewin, 4–5.

[89] Genette and Lewin, 3.

[90] Robert Brookey and Jonathan Gray, '"Not Merely Para": Continuing Steps in Paratextual Research', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (15 March 2017): 101, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1312472.

[91] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2010), 25.

[92] Brookey and Gray, '"Not Merely Para"', 101.

texts. One should also analyse the paratext if one wants to understand the meaning of a text to popular culture.[93]

According to Mia Consalvo, online community involvement tools like chat rooms, bulletin boards, gaming blogs and journalism can also be described and understood as paratext. An online community can be understood as "a voluntary group of users who partake actively in a certain computer-mediated service".[94] The interactivity derived from these communities (like creating an AAR) are artefacts that are related to the game. In this light, the concept of an AAR as paratext is quite helpful and logical. Approaching AARs as paratext is relevant. AARs become an object of study with an active role towards the game. The game is subservient to the AAR rather than the other way around.

Mia Consalvo finds paratextuality relevant for gaming since texts like gaming magazines and strategy guides shape gameplay experiences in particular ways.[95] According to Souvik Mukherjee, Mia Consalvo's book *Cheating: Gaining Advantages in Video Games* was essential in bringing the significance of paratextual material concerning video games to the academic eye.[96]

Mia Consalvo adds an exciting dimension within the analysis of paratexts. In her article *"When paratexts become texts: de-centring the game-as-text",* Consalvo discusses how materials like game guides, Let's Plays (video playthrough of a game), Walkthroughs and After-Action Reports shape the way people understand a video game and how one can best play it.[97] Consalvo's text is fascinating to my research because she turns the concept 180 degrees. The hierarchical relationship between text (the game) and the paratext (the AAR) is reversed. The AAR has become the main text, and the game supports the creation of this text. According to her, there are two situations where the paratext can be centralised. It can happen when one investigates either the world of modding or streaming (playing a game while others are watching it).

The same paratextual 'flip' mechanism can be identified when studying streamers (players who "stream" through online platforms like Twitch). If the streamer decides to play a game, the community views combined with the interactions with the streamer defines the streaming

[93] Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 26.
[94] Martin Kindsmüller, André Melzer, and Tilo Mentler, 'Online Communities and Online Community Building', in *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology* (IGI Global, 2008), 2899.
[95] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mit Press Ltd, 2007), 9.
[96] Mukherjee, 'Shapeshifting Stories', 104.
[97] Mia Consalvo, 'When Paratexts Become Texts: De-Centering the Game-as-Text', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (15 March 2017): 177, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1304648.

experience. The game has again become a supporting actor for streaming.[98] Souvik Mukherjee agrees with Consalvo regarding her paradigm shift.[99]

3.5 After-Action Reports

One of the first and only scholars to study AARs more elaborately is Stefan Droste. In his article "After Action Reports – Zur Narrativierung des Strategiespielens", Droste gives an in-depth empirical analysis of AARs. Based on the analysis of the game *Empire: Total War,* Droste studies "the creative meaning-making process of AARs.[100] The AAR is "a detailed report and analysis of past game sessions usually shared within the community via their relevant internet forums for its respective game.[101]

Droste agrees with Mukherjee's analysis of the origin of the AAR. He also sees that the AAR can be understood as a part of participatory gaming culture.[102] He distinguishes the AARs in three categories: traditional history book AAR, soft narrative AAR and hard narrative AAR. History book AARs primarily retell the course of the game. Soft narrative AARs tell a story that relates to the game. Hard narrative AARs use the game world as a historical setting for the story. Droste often refers to the Critical Quill, a subforum of the official Empire: Total War forums dedicated to research and creating the AAR.[103]

Based on his analysis of different AARs, Droste makes a couple of key observations regarding the connection between the military events within the AAR and the game Empire: Total War. In essence, the AAR reflects the conditions set by the games. The game's AI largely determines the course and sequence of the campaigns and battles.[104] Here Droste agrees with Zimmerman's notions of the rule-based aspects of a game. The more the player knows about the game, the more likely it is for players to achieve the desired objectives of the game. Framing controls and lexia show much information regarding the situation of enemy nations. The player

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[98] Consalvo, 180–83.

[99] Souvik Mukherjee, 'Shapeshifting Stories: Reading Video Game Stories through Paratexts', in *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, ed. Souvik Mukherjee (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 106, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137525055_5.

[100] Stefan Droste, 'After Action Reports : Zur Narrativierung des Strategiespielens', *Militär und Gesellschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* 20 (n.d.): 55.

[101] Droste, 55.

[102] Droste, 58.

[103] Droste, 74-75.

[104] Droste, 61.

can manipulate these elements. Thus, experienced players who know the weaknesses of the rule-based games can achieve victories even though the situation is hopeless.[105]

Droste agrees with Apperley regarding "modding the historian's code". He also sees a trend in the use of images within AARs. Screenshots are often used to give a visual representation of the gameplay. Nevertheless, sometimes writers get even more creative and transform these screenshots into oil paintings with a photo editor. Droste argues that this gives an AAR an even higher level of historicisation.[106] He also observes the male-centric nature of the AARs. Not only within the stories themselves but also in its audience. Most readers and writers are male. Prominent protagonists within AARs are men. Sometimes a woman can be found in the narratives.[107] According to Droste, authenticity within the AAR "appears as an interface to the collective historical consciousness of the readership".[108] It seems that writers do much historical research before writing the AAR. Writers seem to strive for a story that is relatable to the game and would make sense as a story. They do not strive for historical accuracy.[109]

Droste concludes that there is no such thing as a 'traditional AAR'. A good narrative goes beyond the game itself; it should not be understood as a reproduction of the gaming experience.[110] He illustrates this with a quote from one of the Critical Quills issues: "If we just want the game, we can play it ourselves, right? But we don't read AARs for the game itself".[111] AARs offer a space for the creative use of the medium of the digital game. It is one of the reasons why they are so attractive.[112]

4 Sources: AAR narratives

The primary sources for this thesis are a set of After-Action Reports for the game EUIV. For this research, I will only focus on the AARs available on the Paradox Interactive forums. Even though AARs can be found on many different websites, the Paradox forums offer a significant amount. The forums contain a particular subforum called "AARs, LPs and Fanfiction" within the main forum of Europa Universalis IV. The leading thread of the subforums is AARland which functions as a library for all the EUIV AARs without any requirements. The main objective is to discuss how to

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[105] Droste, 64.
[106] Droste, 66.
[107] Droste, 78–79.
[108] Droste, 79.
[109] Droste, 80.
[110] Droste, 74.
[111] Droste, 75.
[112] Droste, 76.

read and write an AAR and tackle historical research for the AAR.[113] For the corpus selection, I will look at the 20 most popular AAR within the forums of Europa Universalis IV. To make this selection, I will use the AARs with the greatest number of views. One can select them through the filter option within the Paradox forums.[114] There are several advantages and disadvantages to this approach. An advantage is that this demarcation will provide a fast and short overview of an AAR's popularity. The more viewers, the more popular it is. Another advantage is that reading material is plentiful; many different AARs consist of many forum posts. This approach does not contain any bias towards any specific AAR. The AARland Choice AwAARds grants an award to the best written AARs in their respective categories. They give a good impression of what people like to read, but it is curated. My approach is uncurated. The list only takes popularity into account rather than elements like categorisation or quality, which seems to be most fair in researching this subject.

The approach also has some disadvantages. I have not used any other criteria apart from forum popularity. Therefore, I do not know if these AARs are a good representation of the medium in general. Only one online AAR collection is considered even though other websites contain AARs about Europa Universalis IV. Does one source represent the whole genre? There might be other valuable AARs on other websites. I am not taking this into account. Another disadvantage is that the age of these AARs has not been considered. Most AARs host pictures and screenshots on photo-sharing sites. After a period, these pictures are not accessible anymore. It can have a significant impact on the research of this subject.

Analysing these narratives will be a unique experience. Fortunately, they exist in large quantities and accessing them is relatively easy. I am not restricted to any historical archive, which is due to the current circumstances (at the time of writing this thesis, 2020-2021, a global viral pandemic has caused country-wide lockdowns) rather fortunate. One of the biggest challenges will be the vast amount of written AARs. As stated earlier, I have decided only to analyse the most popular 20. I do even think that 20 might even be too large of a corpus. Most AARs are not restricted to a couple of pages. Some consist of very long games (called mega campaigns) that span over several hundred years and sometimes over multiple games. These AAR are then written

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[113] 'The FAARq - FAQ for AARland', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-faarq-faq-for-aarland.263220/.

[114] 'EUIV: After Action Reports (AAR)', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/forums/euiv-after-action-reports-aar.816/?order=view_count&direction=desc.

in very long forum posts. An example is the mega campaign *Portugal, an Empire under the Sun Vol 1 +2* by 'hjarg'. The writer has 2 different forum threads that consist of 458 and 555 forum posts, respectively. The most challenging element is to demarcate the studied corpus of AARs further. No two AARs are the same, so I must deal with different writing styles, perspectives, and periods. Some AARs are written as a factual recount of the gameplay, while other AARs cover an extended role-playing 'campaign'. It will be a challenge, but I believe my methods will be suitable for the task.

5 Methods: Analysis of AAR narratives

For my thesis, I will first and foremost carry out a narrative analysis of the selected corpus of After-Action reports. For this purpose, I will use Bordwell & Thompson's *Narrative as Formal System* method. This approach originates from film studies but can be applied to games studies as well. The system aims to use the formal description of narrative elements to understand these narratives on a fundamental level.[115] *Narrative as a Formal System* can be divided into three parts:

- The analysis of the narrative itself: here, I will look at elements such as plot, story, cause, effect, time and space.

- Patterns: Bordwell and Thompson argue that any pattern of development will encourage the viewer to create specific expectations.[116]

- Analysis of the narrator within the narrative. What kind of information does the narrator provide to the reader? Does the narrator address the historical knowledge of the reader?[117]

For the formal analysis, I will use an iterative approach. It means that every AAR will be analysed based on the same elements, using the same steps. The method will first reveal a bare skeleton. Nevertheless, by using this iterative approach, more narrative elements will be revealed with every iteration. I understand that this method will only lay out the bare foundation of the narrative. This method does not consider the relationship of the AAR with the reader or how it relates to the game. Nor does the method deal with the interactive aspect of an AAR.

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[115] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2020), 72.
[116] Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction,* 86-87.
[117] Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 88.

Second, to analyse the patterns within the narrative, I will look at the narrative patterns and templates. The theories by James Wertsch and Eviatar Zerubavel will be used as a starting point. Wertsch distinguishes between "specific narratives" and "schematic narrative" templates. He argues that specific narratives are organised around dates, settings and actions while schematic narratives consist of "general patterns rather than specific events or actors". It means that schematic narrative forms the overachieving template for multiple specific narratives that "contain the same basic plot."[118][119]

According to Eviatar Zerubavel, humans have the unique ability to transform random events into a structured story and see different connections between them. It allows for a highly structural (historical) narrative that is heavily driven by plotlines through the act of emplotment.[120] He distinguishes different types of "plotlines" that allows humans to see different patterns within a particular (hi)story: progress, decline, zigzag in time, circles and rhymes, mountains and valleys and legato and staccato. Thus, it might be that analysing narrative patterns might not be sufficient for the analysis of the AARs. If this is the case, I will assess a critical analysis about why these methods do or do not work.

Third, Chapman's concepts of lexia and framing narratives will be the starting point for analysing the history within EUIV. The concept of emergent narrative will allow me to research the relationship between the game and the player. The latter might also be helpful as a concept of the analysis of interactivity in AARs. To support the concepts of Chapman, I will use the method of *Formal Game Analysis* created by Clara Fernández-Vara. This method is quite like the approach of Bordwell and Thompson since it tries to define specific elements related to gameplay. The formal analysis will only show the basic structure of the rules of the games. Nevertheless, understanding the formal elements and establishing relationships between these formal elements and other building blocks should provide enough insight in understanding the relationships between the rules of the fictional worlds and how the player interacts with them.[121]

Lastly, to define AAR as another form of historical configuration, I will look at the concepts used by Adrienne L. Massanari. She has done an empirical and ethnographic study about Reddit (a

[118] James V. Wertsch, 'Collective Memory and Narrative Templates', *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 140.

[119] Carey Philpott, 'Developing and Extending Wertsch's Idea of Narrative Templates', *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 37, no. 3 (3 July 2014): 311, https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2014.885011.

[120] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps : Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13.

[121] Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 120.

website with specialised forums focused on content sharing) and its online participatory culture. She provides several lenses to study Reddit (an online specialised forum focused on content sharing) as a phenomenon. These lenses can be used to analyse the online activities around AAR. However, there is a possibility that these lenses might not be sufficient for the analysis of AAR. If this is the case, I will look at what kind of lenses might be useful in my specific case. Massanari distinguishes the following lenses:

- Reddit as carnival: a place for everything and where everything is possible, much like a carnival in which the implicit/explicit rules are only concerned with the related subforum.[122]
- Reddit as performance/ritual: community users use a specific language to interact with each other, which allows for confirmation of membership and culture.[123]
- Reddit as play: can be defined as "a magic circle" in which playful interaction and gaming spaces different from interactions of non-play related areas of life.[124]
- Reddit as a community: a sense of identity that only users of the forums share.[125]
- Reddit as a platform: how sites technology shapes the interactions of the users

[122] Adrienne L. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2015), 120.
[123] Massanari, 22.
[124] Massanari, 22.
[125] Massanari, 24.

Chapter 2: History in Europa Universalis IV

To better understand AARs and their relationship to Europa Universalis IV, I first want to investigate how the game represents history. On Steam, an online marketplace for games, the game EUIV is described as follows: "The empire building game Europa Universalis IV gives you control of a nation to guide through the years to create a dominant global empire. Rule your nation through the centuries, with unparalleled freedom, depth and historical accuracy. True exploration, trade, warfare and diplomacy will be to live in this epic title rife with rich strategic and tactical depth".[126] This description partly deviated from the one found on the website of Europa Universalis itself: "Europa Universalis (EU4) is a grand strategy game that will take you in an epic adventure through an alternative history of the earth […] Europa Universalis IV is a game in which you explore, expand, exploit and exterminate".[127]

How does EUIV represent history? That is the central question of this chapter. In this chapter, I will first discuss the history of the game and the developer's vision regarding creating the game. Second, this chapter discusses game play terms that function as the game's core mechanics. Thirdly, the historical elements regarding the introduction of the game will be discussed. Fourth, I will highlight the game's core mechanics and how these mechanics represent history within the game.

1 Historical background and historical research

Europa Universalis IV origins lie in the board game Europa Universalis that was designed by Philippe Thibaut. Bruno de Scorraille provided the artwork. It was released by Azure Wish Enterprise (AWE) on 27 April, 1993. The game is a geopolitical strategy game in which the player will take the role of different kings and "relive 300 years of world history (1492-1792)", while players gain influence through diplomacy, trade, territorial expansions, economic development and war. [128] In the early and mid-1990s, Johan Anderson, a console programmer from Norway. Around 1997, he noticed that a Swedish company called Paradox Interactive was planning on creating a video game based on the board game. That is how he became the lead designer for the

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[126] 'Europa Universalis IV on Steam', accessed 18 February 2021, https://store.steampowered.com/app/236850/Europa_Universalis_IV/.

[127] 'Beginner's Guide - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 24 January 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Beginner%27s_guide#Other_countries.

[128] 'Europa Universalis', BoardGameGeek, accessed 25 February 2021, https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/4102/europa-universalis.

Europa Universalis franchise.[129] Development for EUI began in 1997, and the game sold around 100.000 copies. The development for EUIV began in 2011.

The focus of the fourth iteration of the game was different from its predecessor. EUIV focuses more on historical immersion and accuracy, while EU III focuses on the dynamic gameplay while modelling history within this gameplay. EUIV had the goal to bring these elements together to allow the player to "create his destiny and let each country feel like that country in the history of time".[130] Thomas Johansson, project lead for EUIV, argues that Paradox wants to give the player to "create their history". The biggest challenge for Paradox was that if the player has the freedom to create their own history, then history, like it has happened, cannot ever happen. Paradox did want to model the historically plausible outcomes.[131] It seems that the developer acknowledges that they are providing a platform for people to tell specific stories about the past, and it allows for the recreation of the past.[132] Therefore it can be concluded that EUIV is a product of historical culture. Paradox provides a variation of mnemonic infrastructures for the gamer to create their own history. Paradox seems to be aware that history will be created through the game. They have to carefully balance the possibility of historical plausible outcomes that are derived from official history and the players desire to create counterfactual history. It seems that the game leans more towards the focus of the creation of counterfactual history rather than official history. To deal with this balancing act, Paradox implemented Dynamic Historical Events (DHE). These events allow for a more immersive type of gameplay. The player keeps the freedom to pursue their own history, but the game's rules will result in complex dynamics that can trigger a DHE event.[133] DHEs allow for triggers that could be plausible if certain conditions are met. For example, if the player plays as England, at some point in time, England will end up without an heir. This is a condition to trigger the DHE event-chain of the War of the Roses.[134]

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[129] Paradox Interactive, *Paradox Development Studio - The History of Historical Strategy*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vObN-7dfKOs.

[130] Paradox Interactive.

[131] Paradox Interactive.

[132] Maria Grever, 'Fear of Plurality: Historical Culture and Historiographical Canonization in Western Europe', 2009, 78.

[133] Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 152.

[134] 'Europa Universalis IV - Development Diary #0 - Our Vision', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 24 February 2021, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/europa-universalis-iv-development-diary-0-our-vision.629759/.

2 Historical Research by Paradox Interactive

Paradox Interactive does extensive historical research for the development of EUIV. 'Trin Tragula' (a former EUIV content designer) wrote a developer diary (a weekly blog in which the development team talks about EUIV) about historical research done as a content designer. Most developers at Paradox seem to have an interest in history but are by no means professional historians. The developers acknowledge this fact, and they will always have to balance the game mechanics and historical accuracy.[135] According to 'Trin Tragula': "as a game, it needs to be fun to play and have systems that make sense to interact with as a game. That said, it is a game that takes its setting from history and uses history as an inspiration for both mechanics and many other things."[136] Here the developer acknowledges that they deal with a balanced act of creating a fun game, but that it is also inspired by history. Choices about what kind of history to include in the game will only be possible if it benefits the game's mechanics rather than allowing a multifaceted accurate depiction of history.

According to 'Trin Tragula', historical research can be divided into two categories: database/setup research and background/content research. EUIV contains a large number of minor updates that provide new content called Downloadable Content (DLC). When making a new DLC, the game designers set several game systems which require "fleshing out and to give life through events and other scripted content."[137] It is the content designers job to provide content for these game systems. Here, 'Trin Tragula' highlights that he first focuses on content research through the usage of books. The focus is to "produce an image of a past place and time that tries to resemble that time without reproducing unwanted or outdated stereotypes ."[138] The first focus is to get a general overview for the desired historical period. 'Trin Tragula' consults a large number of books from a university publisher. After the overview, 'Trin Tragula' takes a broader approach by researching both digital and non-digital sources. This approach allows for a general overview of the specific historical period in which certain events are implemented in the game.[139] The player community is also a significant part of creating history within the game. Community members actively provide historical insight through the Paradox online forums. The suggestion forum is

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[135] 'Hisory behind EU4', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 1 July 2021, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/hisory-behind-eu4.1455748/, #9.

[136] Trin Tragula, 'EU4 - Development Diary - 2nd of May 2017', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 24 February 2021, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/eu4-development-diary-2nd-of-may-2017.1018557/.

[137] Trin Tragula.

[138] Trin Tragula.

[139] Trin Tragula.

especially valuable in terms of content, both specific and global topics. 'Trin Tragula' cites that the internet in general, is beneficial in terms of gathering facts and data. The online community gives an extra dimension to the development of EUIV. One can conclude that community members are co-creators of the history in EUIV. In other words, this part of the research process can be seen as a product of historical culture since it allows for a group of history lovers to challenge the underlying conceptions of history set by the developer. This negotiation can alter the developers' approach towards a particular subject. The community gives added value to the history within the game.

To perform historical research for elements of the game's setup and the map, the developers access many databases like historical atlases, books on historical demographics and other (online) sources. Here the input of the beta-testers/researchers is also essential because they might have access to sources that Paradox does not. EUIV is still being developed, Paradox has the will to keep changing and correcting things.[140]

The historical research done by the developers at Paradox Interactive is a prime example of Adam Chapmans concept of the developer-historian. According to Chapman: "the developer attempts to represent through games have similarities to the historian's process".[141] The developers seem to "make meaning of the past through the form of digital games".[142] We can see this clearly in the approach adopted by the game development team at Paradox Interactive. By providing a general overview of world history, the developer tries to scrape the surface for the historical setting rather than a deep dive. Thus, creating a digital space in which the player can play with history. This concept also relates to Chapman's concept of the (hi)story-play-space. Chapmans uses this concept to describe the process of playing a historical game and creating a historical narrative at the same time.[143]

However, it seems that the community around EUIV is a significant source in the history creation of EUIV. It is a community effort. Adam Chapman's notion of the developer-historian is accurate in describing the developers' visions and research approach. However, one can also speak of community-historians since the community has such a significant influence in creating the history within the (hi)story-play-space. Their value should not be underestimated. One might conclude that there is a symbiotic relationship between the community and the developer. The

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[140] Trin Tragula.
[141] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 21.
[142] Chapman, 21.
[143] Chapman, 31.

community wants history to be presented better, and the developer wants to create a more accurate (hi)storical-play-space. Therefore, it is in their mutual interest to work together. This relationship in history creation could be a subject for follow-up research.

There is still a significant difference between a traditional historian and a developer-historian. The difference is related to the usage of sources to create history. On one side, we have the academic historian that performs research to write a source to add value to the academic debate. On the other side, we have a developer who uses history to create a historical simulation. This difference is primarily visible in the usage of historical sources. Academic historians have access to primary sources, and it is their job to create a multifaceted interpretation of the past. Developer-historians use only secondary sources like (academical) historical books that provide an overview of the history. Their approach does not allow for multiple interpretations of history. Also, it seems that the developer-historians of EUIV do not provide a list of their historical sources. They do not discuss why they have chosen certain sources and why they have chosen specific interpretations. An academic historian is expected to back up his/her decisions regarding the evaluations of the sources. In the case of the developer-historian, one cannot determine whether the history is based on historical fact or fiction.

The history in EUIV is therefore inherently limited. The simulation provides historical facts and dates, and it provides one generalised perspective on history. Several authors like Tom Apperley have already demonstrated that the primary perspective of the game is a Eurocentric perspective.

3 Gameplay Mechanisms

EUIV belongs to the grand strategy genre, which is also referred to as 4X games. 4X stands for the game elements of Exploration, Expansion, Exploitation and Extermination. The genre is defined by creating an empire, and the focus lies on political, economic and technological developments.[144] The game is a prime example of the conceptual simulation style since it shows how the past "could have been". [145] A rather simplistic graphical style marks the game world, and the games' rules are abstract and complicated. The goal is not to immerse the player in a fictional world. Instead, the game aims to present a world inspired by the past. The game attempts to simulate how the world functioned in the past through the web of abstraction and complicated

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[144] '4X', Civilization Wiki, accessed 2 July 2021, https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/4X.
[145] Olli Heiniö, 'Europa Universalis IV and Fairly Radical History(Ing)' (n.d.), 16, https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/309100?locale-attribute=en.

rules."[146] The rules of the game allow content to be created procedurally (procedural content) rather than hardcoded. The events in the game are generated based on abstract instructions, which generate content in a dynamic and indirect way while hard-coded data is always the same.[147] Therefore gameplay is always different for every game since many different instructions allow for different outcomes. Another defining feature of EUIV is its sandbox gaming style. A sandbox style of gaming allows the player to freely change and roam the virtual world and access most gameplay elements from start to finish. This style does not place many restrictions on the player.[148] This feature is also in line with Chapman's observation regarding the conceptual simulation style.

Since EUIV has no clearly defined goal, it is up to the player to decide what they want to achieve within the game. EUIV does provide the lexia to help players choose a specific goal through the usage of the *Mission* and *National Idea* tabs. According to Olli Heiniö, the lexia within EUIV is soft and therefore does not determine play flow.[149]According to Adam Chapman the ludonarrative is used to define the narrative flow of the game. Since the game merely provides the tools to create the narrative by providing the limited framing narrative elements. The largest part of the narrative seems to be defined by the objects that the player can modify. Based on these modifications, the game triggers events (framing narratives) that help create the (ludo)narrative.

The interaction between the game and the player is also a significant aspect to understand the game's global workings. In EUIV the player takes on an abstract role within the game. The player does not play a monarch since monarchs are defined as characters within the game. Rather, the player takes upon the role of an invisible force. The player has the power and knowledge over all aspects that cover the game world. The player can manipulate elements like the country's income, power/prestige, influence, economy. The manipulation of these elements is mainly done through the system of monarch power. Everything that can be done in the game is based on them. Monarch points show the ruler's influence and the ability to rule the country. They are generated monthly. The more monarch points the player has, the more the player can influence technical improvements, work on diplomatic relations or invest in infrastructure. There are three types of monarch power:

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[146] Heiniö, 16.

[147] Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 134.

[148] 'What Is a Sandbox (in Gaming)? - Definition from Techopedia', Techopedia.com, accessed 28 February 2021, http://www.techopedia.com/definition/3952/sandbox-gaming.

[149] Heiniö, 'Europa Universalis IV and Fairly Radical History(Ing)', 20.

- Administrative power: This represents the internal organisation and development of a country. Actions related to internal matters will use these points.

- Diplomatic power: These points represent the external influence of a country. Decisions regarding diplomacy, trade, exploration or colonisation will use this power.

- Military power: represent innovation and leadership of the military. All decisions in the game related to the military will use these points.[150]

The time within the game processes linearly. EUIV starts in November 1444AD and ends in January 1821AD. The player can pause the time in the game, but it is not possible to go back in time. The player cannot leap years or centuries. The game also does not contain any possible flashbacks. Time in the game is only used for tracking the game progress.

4 History within EUIV

History within EUIV is complex, and it is visible in different dimensions within the game. In order to provide an overview of how history is presented in gameplay elements, I will first look at the historical elements that are visible before the player starts the game. Afterward I will dive into specific elements within the game itself.

4.1 Historical Scenarios and Introductions

The game starts with an overview of Europe, and the different kinds of countries one can play. Since the number of options is vast, Paradox interactive gives a couple of suggestions that help the players make the starting choice. It is interesting to note that Paradox provides 15 different scenarios called "Historical Start bookmarks".[151] The goal of these bookmarks is "to add flavour to certain areas of the world".[152] It seems that Paradox Interactive did not focus solely on European history, but that European history is the dominant factor within these Scenarios. Out of the fifteen provided scenarios, only three of them focus on starting scenarios in other parts of the world: Africa, the Middle East and North America. The other twelve scenarios are all centred around European history. This shows yet again that history is displayed from a Eurocentric view. All the scenarios have one element in common: an old power is declining, which creates the possibility of

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[150] 'Monarch Power - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 7 March 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Monarch_power.

[151] 'Scenarios - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 21 February 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Scenarios.

[152] 'Scenarios - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki'.

emergent nations to grab influence and expand the empire. All introductions seem to follow the official history and refer to historical events and figures that can be found in encyclopedias like Wikipedia or Britannica.com.

When the player has chosen a country at the start of a game, EUIV first sketches an overview of the historical situation of the country from a geopolitical and militaristic perspective. For example, Castille's introduction focuses on the geopolitical situation on the Iberian Peninsula after the Reconquista. It informs the player about the relationship of Castille regarding Aragon, Portugal and the Muslim sultanate Grenada.[153] The game refers to internal trouble within Castile regarding the powerful nobility. At the end of the introduction, Paradox gives a hypothetical situation "If the kingdom can be united by a strong ruler, and the Reconquista completed, Castile will have a fearsome military force in its hands with a long-standing tradition of fighting for the expansion of the Christian faith".[154] The latter already indicates the possible missions the player can take. It pushes the player into the direction of completing the Reconquista (which is one of the first available missions in the game). It shows that Castile has a strong military tradition and that this can and should be used to play the player game. It falls in line with the idea of Europa Universalis as a 4X game. Paradox aims to create a beginning situation grounded in official history.

4.2 Map Modes

The map is where the player spends most of the time and where most achievements become visible. The map is where most of the historical research becomes visible.[155] The developers want to create a beginning situation that is as historically accurate as possible for the player to start playing the game according to the player's will.[156] The map is based on the map of an older game by Paradox: Crusader Kings. The map simulates the passing of seasons, and it is divided by continents, regions, areas and provinces in which provinces are the smallest unit within this division.[157] Regions are probably the most significant aspect of the map since these regions are an essential aspect of the game. This is because in-game events and decisions must be made based on what happens in a region. The game itself offers 40 different kinds of map modes.[158] Yet, the most crucial map modes seem to be the political, trade and diplomatic map modes. Political maps

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[153] Paradox Developer Studios, .

[154] Paradox Developer Studios.

[155] Trin Tragula, 'EU4 - Development Diary - 2nd of May 2017'.

[156] 'On Top of the World: Ep 43: Playing with Paradox Games', accessed 28 February 2021, https://podhistory.libsyn.com/ep-44-playing-with-paradox-games.

[157] 'Province - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 28 February 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Province.

[158] 'Map - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 28 February 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Map.

show the borders of the nations, while trade maps show an overview of how trade flows through the world, while diplomatic map modes show diplomatic relations between countries. These elements will be discussed in their respective sub chapter.

4.3 Political Map Mode

The most crucial map mode is probably the political map since most of the in-game events and decisions within the game.

The primary function of the political map is to show territories of the nations throughout the world. The colour of a respective area will change as soon as the area is conquered. This mechanic illustrates why 'Trin Tragula' describes EUIV as a "map painter". The political maps give much detailed information about the political situation of the world. The map provides several submap types. It is possible to see rebel groups and political unrest—different types of government and the dynastic lineage of a country. The culture map shows the generally accepted culture of a region. The culture within the game allows showing its local language, customs, nationality or ethnicity. The game groups cultures together that seem to have similar customs,

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[159] Political Map by Paradox Developer Studios, *Europa Universalis IV,* version v.1.30.4.0 Austria (5d62), Windows 10, Europa Universalis (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2020).

language or history.[160] On the map, the selected country will highlight the most accepted cultures. Yet again, it will not show minority cultures within the highlighted area. It does not show relationships between them. Cultures can clash, which allows for in-game events.

Another observation that can be made is that the political map is an anachronism since the information presented on this map is derived from maps that possibly originate from the 19th century onwards. Maps made around 1444 were based on portolan charts (nautical maps that show simple coastal outlines) that are more of a diagram than the kind of maps we know today. A pictorial map is not a workable map for a player to plan strategies and play the game. So the inspiration of the political map based on 1444 is therefore made from maps that were created later.

Based on the choices made by players in terms of starting date, the political map changes accordingly. When browsing the map and changing the date, players can generate a historical timeline. If one selects England as a country and 16 November 1558 as the starting date, players will find that Queen Mary I Tudor is the queen at this time and that England is at war with France. If players select 17 November 1558, Queen Elizabeth I Tudor reigns as England's monarch.

Nicolas de Zamarcózy, analyses in the article *Are We What Way Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Computer Games,* how games represent International Relations. The article looks at five IR assumptions. According to Nicolas de Zamarcózy, historical grand strategy games allow the player to simulate global politics. Based on the presented modifiers, the player gains access to much information that the player would not have access to in real life. It is what de Zamarcózy calls "the assumption of perfect information".[161] The political map shows exactly the borders of each nation and their (contested) areas. It also shows how many units are stationed within a particular area. Therefore, it is quite simple to observe which areas are easier to attack. The map also shows where other wars are fought. Therefore, the player can scan the intentions of the opponents. This, combined with the information shown in the diplomatic & military maps, makes it possible that the player always knows what happens in the virtual world.

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[160] 'Culture - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 7 March 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Culture.

[161] Nicolas de Zamarcózy, 'Are We What We Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Computer Games', *International Studies Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (May 2017): 8.

4.4 Diplomacy & Military

The Diplomatic map shows the relations of the players country regarding other countries. This map mainly shows the diplomatic relations between countries at war with the chosen country or allies at war with other countries. [163]

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[162] The player knows how many units Garnatah has, therefore it is easy to deduce how successful the player will be if the player decides to attack Garnatah.

[163] Light green shows the country that the player plays (in this game, England). Blue shows the countries that are allied with England. Dark green shows the allies in a war. Red shows the countries that England is at war with. Green-striped parts are the provinces that England considers to be part of the core of England. France currently occupies these provinces.

The diplomacy tab indicated what de Zamarcózy means with the assumption of perfect information. Based on the information within the diplomacy tab, players can make assumptions about the enemies' decision making. A player can see the rivals and alliances of enemies, which creates a clear advantage for the player. In the real world, policymakers would have limited access to this information. This process does not allow for any historical authenticity. According to de Zamarcózy, the "assumption of perfect information" is based on every similar framework, and it forces the player to play the game from a top-down perspective when they take action within the game.[165] Since the player has access to the information regarding diplomatic relationships and

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[164] The diplomatic map shows the reining monarch, rivals counties
[165] de Zamarcózy, 9.

military units it is possible to determine the best possible outcome by the player. Combined with the political map, the player has all the tools to set up a perfect strategy. The challenge of the game is in predicting the AI's moves and in the unpredictable chance of unexpected events and modifiers.

If we look at the contents of the diplomatic map, then the contents are purely simulated by the game. The only history-related element that is visible on this tab is the ruler. The ruler provides monarchy points. The monarch can die earlier in the game via war. If so, the rules will allow for custom in-game events to be played out. Here the game goes again towards a counterfactual history. Another aspect of diplomacy and administration is the usage of an advisor. These advisors generate monarch points, and they represent real-life advisors. It is possible to hire Thomas Gresham, for example. Thomas Gresham was an English merchant, financier and the founder of the Royal Exchange. He advised Queen Elizabeth I to recoin the British currency.[166] Thomas Moore is a diplomat in the game. Thomas Moore was the chancellor of England in 1529-32.[167] It is rather impressive that the developers have put in the effort to simulate historical figures within the game that are accurate for the time.

War is exclusively simulated through modifiers within the game and visible through the military map combined with a war animation. War does not contain historical information. The game can simulate historical battles, but the outcomes are not based on historical outcomes but rather on several elements like the numbers, strength and army's morale. The historical interpretations of these wars might be found within the After-Action Reports. The game itself does not provide any historical interpretation regarding the battles.

The simulation of war also allows the player to make certain assumptions that can not happen in real life. De Zamarcózy refers to "the assumption of perfect control".[168] Orders can be carried out flawlessly without any misinterpretation of obedience. Since the player has the information about the army's morale, the player can anticipate and force certain outcomes. In real life, this would never be possible. The same observation can be made about the diplomatic and trade elements of the game since the player can perfectly convey messages to other countries via its diplomats. They also have perfect control over political polities. According to de Zamarcózy,

[166] 'Sir Thomas Gresham | English Financier', Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 9 March 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Gresham.
[167] 'Thomas More | Biography, Beliefs, Books, Utopia, Death, & Facts', Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 9 March 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-More-English-humanist-and-statesman.
[168] de Zamarcózy, 'Are We What We Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Computer Games', 9.

"players can typically assume that their policy will not incite rebellion, resistance, splintering into factions, and so on".[169] EUIV provides a variation to this "assumption" that the player's actions or certain events can trigger civil or independence wars.[170] Thus, the developers try to create some historical authenticity even though the core mechanic is not.

4.5 Trade

Trade is another important feature of the game. Trade, in combination with production and taxes, resulting in the total income of a country. Each province produces a specific trade good that can contribute directly to the income of the country. The world is connected through a network of trade nodes. Each node generates trade activity for provinces that are geographically linked to each other.[171]

The trade map only shows the routes of the world that have been discovered. The unknown grey world (terra incognita) does not provide any further information. Clicking on the nodes will show how trade is regulated within the node and which country gains what percentage. The numbers on the map are generated by gameplay and not by historical facts. The trade map also does not provide any historical information regarding trade through time. Trade is merely there to provide income that can be used to wage war or to explore.

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[169] de Zamarcózy, 9.
[170] de Zamarcózy, 10.
[171] 'Trade - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 7 March 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Trade.
[172] Trade map, Paradox Developer Studios, *Europa Universalis IV*.

To get more information about the trade map, one must look outside the game for the community to provide more information about the map. The Reddit user 'awitzme' has created a schematic diagram of the global trade routes in EUIV. This map provides more information regarding where trade begins and where it ends. The trade map links the whole world through the nodes. The following cities are source nodes: Hudson Bay, California, Patagonia, Katsina, Great Lakes, Lhasa, Siam. Trade within the game leaves these areas and goes through the whole world to specific endnotes: the English Channel and Genoa Venice.
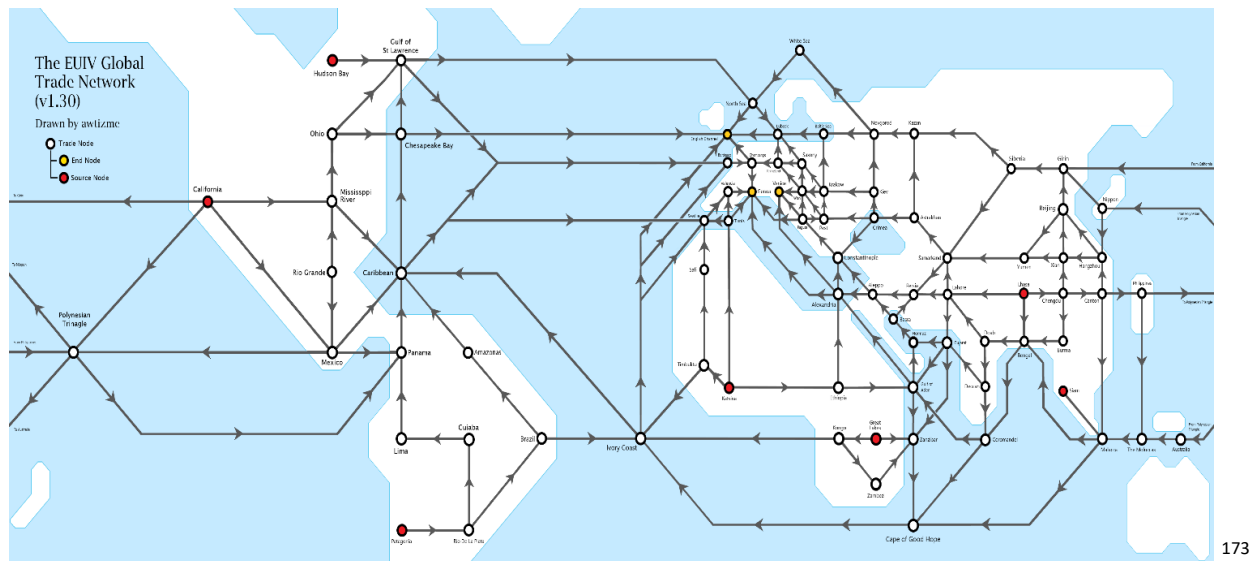
This map clearly shows where the trade comes from and where it is going. On this map, you can see that the trade originates in Africa, Asia and the Americas rather than the traditional/Eurocentric view that trade originates from Europe. Simulations of trade routes through 1750-1800, clearly shows similarities within the routes simulated by the game.

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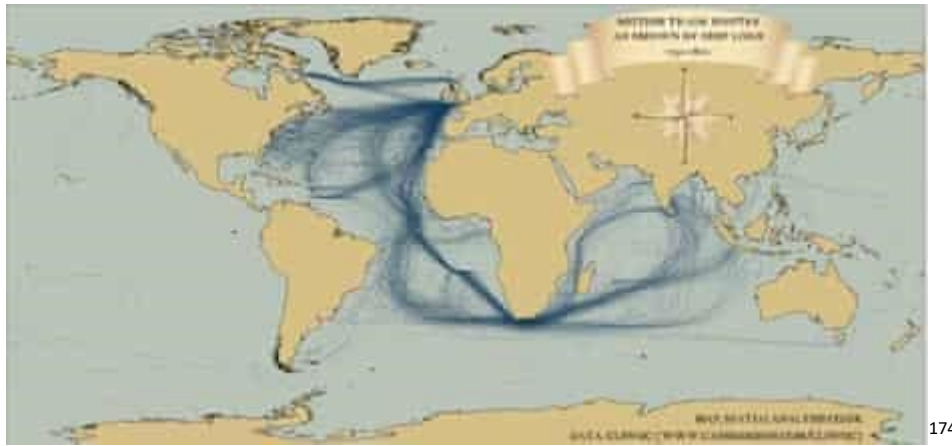
173 awtizme, 'Schematic Diagram of Global Trade Routes in EU4 (1444-1821)', Reddit Post, *R/Imaginarymaps*, 22 September 2020, www.reddit.com/r/imaginarymaps/comments/ixduyu/schematic_diagram_of_global_trade_routes_in_eu4/.

British trade routes 1750-1800 visualised through modern technology by James Cheshire of Spatial Analysis.

Here one can see the major trade routes are in line compared to the historical data. The motivations behind these choices are unfortunately unknown. It would feel more logical from a game design perspective if trade routes begin at their origin rather than their destination. The player needs to explore the world before they can start trading. Thus, it seems logical to start the trade route in the colonies rather than Europe. One can argue that nodes in Asia are created because valuable commodities like silk and tea are in Asia. Slaves were traded in Africa. However, why is the Caribbean not an end hub? The map does not give any historical information about the trade routes. It is just a map that visualises trade to generate income for gameplay purposes.

4.6 Exploration, Colonization National Ideas

When the player reaches the historical age of discovery, the game will allow the player to start exploration and colonisation. It is an essential feature of the game since it allows for higher income levels and better military logistics. It also helps drive the game forward and open up the game for national ideas to help play out the players' wishes.

To start exploring, the player must select a coloniser or conquistador to explore the vast terra incognita. Through sea discovery, the player will uncover more of the world map and might have a chance to discover a new part of the world. When the player selects to attack with the military, the invasion can begin, and the player will fight against the natives. This process seems to be relatively easy for the player since the natives are often lower on the technology rank, which means they have less profitable military modifiers. Once the natives' land is conquered, the player can send settlers who can settle the land. The player can expel the remaining natives or reform

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[174] '18th Century Shipping Mapped Using 21st Century Technology', the Guardian, 13 April 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/apr/13/shipping-routes-history-map.

them through the use of missionaries. The more settlers come to the new land, the earlier the player can make the colony a part of the nation.

The natives in colonisation have the modifier called "aggressiveness". The higher the aggressiveness', the higher the chances of getting random attacks during the exploration and the higher the chances of native uprisings during colonisation. A native assimilation bonus encourages the player to keep a part of the native population for more in-game bonuses.[175] This part of the game clearly shows the critiques formulated by scholars such as Apperley towards the misrepresentation of natives and the exaggeration of the role of the military.

When it comes to historical representation in this part of the game, the framing controls like the military/naval screen or the provinces screen mainly abstractly show the modifiers and options within the game. However, the conquistadors, the explorers and the naval leaders seem to refer to historical figures. For example, it is possible to choose Diago Gomes, Nuño Tristão and Alvaro Fernandes as explorers. These explorers have been essential in Portugal successes in West Africa. Therefore, it is possible to simulate this in the game by assigning Tristão to a ship and explore the West African coast.

4.7 In-game (historical)events

During the game, several events will occur, resulting in either positive, negative, or mixed results. EUIV presents two different kinds of events: triggered-only and pulse events. Player's actions cause triggered-only events while pulse events are random and occur within regular intervals. Triggered events consist of general and nation-specific events that target the nation's stability. Examples of these events are civil wars, coup attempts, religious turmoils and revolutions. A coup attempt will start with a chain of events, first coup rumours, then a plot will be discovered, ... This continues until the coup attempt fails or succeeds. Based on the outcome, it will significantly impact the game.[176]

Pulse events can happen to different game sections, but they seem to be religious, technological or diplomatic in nature. The event *Simony?* is a bi-yearly event that describes an open vacancy in the church and that a young man wants to apply. The benefit: the country gains more income, but it can turn into a negative. Based on the decision of the player, this event will

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[175] 'Colonization - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 9 March 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Colonization#Natives.

[176] 'Coup Attempt - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 5 July 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Coup_Attempt.

have a small impact on the gameplay. Pulse events can also be country-specific and contain many historical references. For example, the first event as Castille will be the *Iberian Wedding*. The event itself describes what kind of effect the royal wedding had on Ferdinand II's life. The player will encounter a chain of events in the Hundred Years War that will ask the player to choose to surrender Maine to France. These country-specific events follow official history at its core. However, based on the player's choices the history might shift in a counterfactual direction.

The mechanics of in-game events add a new dynamic to the game. They allow for decisions made within the game and allow for, as Chapman calls it, historying. The game's UI provides the simulation, the lexia and the framing controls while in-game events allow for immersion within the simulation. The in-game events mainly only touch the surface of a specific historical event, yet they allow for dynamic rules that allow interaction and anticipation from the player.

5 Conclusion

The central question of this chapter was how history is represented in the grand strategy game *Europa Universalis IV*. The developer's goal was to "create his destiny and let each country feel like that country in the history of time". History within EUIV is accurate from a high-level perspective and provides one sided (European) perspective on history. Paradox Interactive tried to create a historically accurate starting condition, an anchor point for the player to start creating his/her history. Historical research for the game is done by analysing secondary literature by the developer and through the symbiotic relationship between the developer and the community.

The lexia of the game are defined by the rules of the game and the player's interaction between them generated through procedural content. History can be found within hard-coded gameplay elements such as commanders, conquistadors, advisors and diplomats. These in-game characters are based on historical figures who filled a similar position in the past. However, they do not play a prominent role in the game apart from generating monarch points or improving relations. The game constantly refers to real-world history even though the player might focus on counterfactual history. While playing the game, the player will trigger in-game events, depending on the player's country, that refer to historical events like the Treaty of Tours or the Spanish Reconquista.

In the literature review, Tom Apperley talked about whether EUIV follows the official history and whether the player can play the game in a counterfactual way or not. I do agree with his notion. If you let the game play by itself, you will eventually notice patterns overlapping with

official history. Yet, it is nothing more than a simulation. Giving meaning to the (counterfactual) history by creating a narrative and do, as Chapmans calls it, historying is up to the player. Paradox Interactive merely gives the player the tools to explore history. A result of this exploration can be found in the player's AAR.

Chapter 3: History in AAR: How they tell stories of the past

In its pure form, an AAR is a re-telling of a player's gameplay. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Europa Universalis IV forms a historical sandbox where the player can create his/her history. EUIV follows official history, and it is most visible in the elements surrounding the game and in-game events. Thus, EUIV forms a historical anchor point for the player to start their (counterfactual) journey. The After-Action Report can be seen as a rendition of the player's journey in exploring (counterfactual) history. AARs. How is it possible to understand AAR's as configurations if they contain different topics, writing styles and goals? The first chapter discussed Stefan Droste three AAR types: traditional history book AAR, soft narrative and hard narrative (see chapter 1, 3.5). It also explained the ideas of narrative plotlines by James Wertsch and Eviatar Zerubavel (see chapter 1, 5). To what extent can we reflect these theories on AARs? This chapter aims to answer the following question: What are the dominant narratives expressed in the After-Action Reports based on Europa Universalis IV?

This chapter will first discuss the general observations about AAR regarding characters, narration, time, space and events by the analysis of Bordwell & Thompson's framework. What kind of characters are there? Which roles do they play in the AAR narratives? Do we gain insight into the inner thoughts of a character? Secondly, I will look at the types of introductions of the AAR. Is the prologue of each AAR rooted in real-life history, or is this counterfactual? Are there any other observations about the prologue that can be made? Last, I will look at the different kinds of plotlines that can be found within the AARs. Do AARs contain similar plotlines and themes? What kind of influence do cause and effect have on the plotlines of AARs? Do the lexia and framing controls of the game influence the story? To what extent are the theories by Zerubavel, Droste and Wertsch applicable to the AAR plotlines? This chapter aims to answer these questions.

1 Characters and Narrator

AARs offer a wide range of different stories that contain various topics, characters, goals and writing styles. Even though AARs are diverse, it is still possible to find common elements in them. When analysing which characters are depicted in the AARs, the following general observations can be made. First of all, particular activities or events might be tied to a specific character during a chapter. Second, most characters mentioned in the AARs are based on historical figures. These characters often hold influential positions in the country. The characters are often kings, military leaders and explorers. The characters are a direct reflection of the lexia, and framing controls

presented in the political, diplomatic and military tabs as discussed in the previous chapter. Another observation we can make is that most of the characters mentioned in the AARs are male. Based on the researched material, only two female characters have been mentioned: Elizabeth Talbot and Queen Joan II of Aragon. In *The Sun Never Sets* by 'delpiero1234' describes an event mentioning Margaret of Anjou as part of the *Women's History DLC*. However, this event was modded since this chapter favoured Elizabeth Talbot as queen.[177]

In the AAR *Italian Ambitions: A Florence AAR*, written by user 'JerseyGiant88', Queen Joan II of Aragon and Naples is explicitly referenced:

"On 17 February, Joan II, Queen of Aragon and Naples, and Gonfaloniere Cosimo de' Medici of Florence, along with their top military commanders, met with the Venetians in the city of Verona. During the month and half that had elapsed between the Hungarian declaration of war."[178]

Joan II of Aragon is mentioned in this excerpt, but she does not have an active participating role. She attends the meetings, but we do not gain insight into the character's inner thoughts and motivation. It is typical for most AARs and can directly be related to the writing style of most AARs: they are narrated from a limited third-person view. The reader has access to the actions and events relating to the characters, but the reader does not have access to the characters' thoughts.[179]

Not all AARs include characters that only have a passive role and limited view within the story. Sometimes the reader can have access through the inner thoughts of the characters. For example, in the AAR *The Sun Never Sets* written by user 'delpiero1234', the reader gets access to the inner thoughts and experiences of Henry VI (who is slowly turning mad) through a journal excerpt:

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[177] delpiero1234, 'The Sun Never Sets', Paradox Interactive Forums, #383, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-sun-never-sets.898294/.

[178] JerseyGiants88, 'Italian Ambitions: A Florence AAR', Paradox Interactive Forums, #27, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/italian-ambitions-a-florence-aar.916434/.

[179] Joe Bunting, 'Point of View in 2021: Guide to 1st Person, 2nd Person, 3rd Person POV', *The Write Practice* (blog), 11 December 2020, https://thewritepractice.com/point-of-view-guide/.

"Life in the palace gets worse every day. I see more and more shadows that I feel are haunting me, no matter where I try to hide. Some look like monsters, others like humans I have met before. Some of those shades resemble my advisors. Shall I not trust them anymore? Do I need new advisors? Do I need any advisors? What if my advisors have been bribed by the enemy? Maybe the work for the French? Just the thought drives me crazy."[180]

This excerpt is one of the few exceptions that I have found that shows the inner fear through a journal excerpt. 'delpiero123' gave his rulers certain traits that influence the story. Henry VI gained the trait of insanity. Henry's insanity is not only limited to his inner thoughts. The madness also influences his actions. It is possible to conclude that EUIV players use the game as a departure point to commemorate and imitate historical actors' (perceived) actions and thoughts. The latter can be seen in the following excerpt written from a third person limited perspective:

"In late February 1450, Henry's paranoia and insanity reached a new level. There were days in which he would lock himself in for hours in fear that someone was going to take away his claim to the throne. When the insanity got worse, he ordered random works of the royal palace to be executed in fear that they might be plotting against him. Nobody was able to prevent this madness, not even his wife Elizabeth. By early March no less than eight innocent civilians had been executed."[181]

The narrator's perspective can also change during the chapter from a first-person perspective to a third person with limited view to a third-person with omnipresent view. We can best compare the three different perspectives in the following two examples:

"John placed a hand on the shoulder of his brother. "I've seen something much greater than Rome. I've seen something absolutely beautiful. My dream...or visions, might have been divine. I feel as this might be the best opportunity for our people, and I sense deep down that ever since

[180] delpiero1234, 'The Sun Never Sets', Paradox Interactive Forums, #383.
[181] delpiero1234, #384.

we found those documents, you believe this as well. Just like Aeneas fled Troy three thousand years ago, I believe that it is the destiny of our people to flee West in a brand-new Odyssey. "[182]

Here we can see that John has a vision and envisioned a better world for his people. User 'Crimson Lionheart' even tries to place the character of John in time, a ruler who only sees despair in Europe and who envisions a new future for his people. It is possible to imagine that John wants to compare himself to the hero Aeneas of the Greco-Roman mythology who fled Troy and had a vision of establishing a great city.[183] Thus, we understand John, maybe even emphasise with John. However, this all changed in the shift in narration:

"John had sharply told them that, despite his best efforts during his reign as emperor, he believed that the Empire simply didn't have the capacity to survive within the next decade. Instead, the emperor used his charm to sell the idea of starting anew, just like the legend of Aeneas."[184]

John pitches his idea to the nobles. However, the reader is not part of the conversation. We know that he uses his charisma to convince the nobility, not how exactly he did it or his experiences. Thus, it further strengthens the third person with a limited view perspective.

2 Time, Space and Events

Within the AARs, time does not seem to have a prominent feature and progresses linearly. Most AAR start in November 1444 and end whenever the authors deem it is time to end the AAR. Dates are indicated to show when a particular event happens and to create a historical timeline. AARs hardly contain flashbacks. In the studied corpus, only one flashback has been described. 'Crimson Lionheart's John encounters a flashback when he is in the imperial library seeking guidance and wisdom.[185]

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[182] Crimson Lionheart, 'The Third Odyssey - An Elysian Tale', Paradox Interactive Forums, #9, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-third-odyssey-an-elysian-tale.1110956/.
[183] 'Aeneas | Myth & Family', Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 11 April 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aeneas.
[184] Crimson Lionheart, 'The Third Odyssey - An Elysian Tale', #9.
[185] Crimson Lionheart, #9.

Space also does not have a prominent role within AARs. Each AAR describes the place of events that happen. However, this is mainly confined to the mention of countries and cities. These locations can be all over the world. Some AAR are focused on Africa while others entirely focus on the New World. The in-game lexia visually show space through the placements of screenshots of the political map that indicated a battle. Sometimes an AAR mentions specific types of buildings like a castle or a library. Authors do not describe what certain buildings look like or how these buildings affect the story or characters. They are mentioned to indicate what happens in the king's castle or the king's chambers.

Chapter 2 describes how events work within EUIV and how they dynamically influence the game. In the AARs, events are featured prominently. Some AARs like 'Crimson Lionheart's are entirely based on the usage of in-game events to tell the story. Most AAR include screenshots to indicate that something has happened in the story. Followed by a description on how the story deals with the event. Just like the game events within the AARs range from events that affect religious, political, militaristic or diplomatic matters. Events are closely tied to the cause and effect within the AAR. The latter can be seen in the following excerpt:

It has been many weeks of good sailing, we were smart to take far more supplies than required. A storm approaches now though, and it looks like we'll get caught by it whatever we do. After a long struggle we passed through it, however...

It took one of the treasure ships!

It took one of the supply ships!

Lose -60.00 Ducats.

""Secure the Fleet" the Emperor told his captains, immediately rushing to raise flags to alert the rest of the fleet. The Emperor realised that this wasn't going to be a mere storm, they were sailing through the eye of it.[186]

The storm influences the journey of John and Constantine to the New World and leaves a part of the fleet destroyed. In the next paragraph the effects of the storm are visible:

"One harrowing night passed and the storm seemed to have ended that morning. Constantine woke up and felt restless, concerned about his brother's well being. The moment he woke up, he rushed outside to see his brother, still standing despite all odds, barely alive.(..) Emperor John VIII Palaiologos passed away at the age of 52 on February 21st 1445."[187]

The death of a monarch is an often-occurring event within AARs. It can lead to succession stories and might add some consequences. These consequences are often resolved in the same chapter. It results in events that are contained in their respective chapters.

3 Prologues

3.1 Prologues based on a goal

In order to analyse sources that are so diverse, it is essential to look at how they start. If we look at the starting posts or the prologues of the studied AARs, several observations can be made. First of all, it is possible to put the type of prologue in different categories. Some AARs begin by stating the overall goal for the AAR and by providing the initial conditions. An example of this is AAR *[1.2] Revoking the Privilegia in 1470 with Austria* written by 'bly08'. The AAR only consists of two pages, and the first post starts with a screenshot with the mission's goal: Revoke the Privilegia. This mission allows the Holy Roman Empire to become a centralised unit and consolidate power. It essentially becomes more like a modern nation-state.[188] 'bly08' starts the AAR by explaining that "this AAR will detail the run from a strategy perspective. I will try to include enough information so

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[186] Crimson Lionheart, #9.
[187] Crimson Lionheart, #9.
[188] 'Holy Roman Empire - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 30 March 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Holy_Roman_Empire#Imperial_reforms.

that similar data can be replicated". [189] Then, 'bly08' states the initial conditions of the game. The description is quite limited. According to 'bly08', Hungary and Bohemia can not have strong allies. But what or who determines what a strong ally is? Some AARs very broadly elaborate on the initial conditions of the world. 'bly08' does not provide this. Therefore, this prologue only focuses on the goal before explaining which steps to fulfil the objective.

'DDRJake' (former Game Designer at Paradox Studios) follows the same pattern. In the opening post of *The Three Mountains: A Ryukyu AAR*, he attempts to obtain the Three Mountains achievement. The player has to conquer the world as Ryukyu, a small island nation south of Japan and Ming.[190] As of April 1, 2020, only 0.7% of EUIV players on Steam have obtained the achievement (players receive an in-game badge when completing an achievement).[191] Two of the studied AARs are about this particular achievement. 'DDRJake' also states the goal of his AAR: "I will attempt to conquer the world in Ironman mode to gain The Three Mountains achievement… again."[192] Ironman mode is a gameplay restriction regarding saved games which makes it harder for players to correct possible mistakes. Unfortunately, 'DDRJake' does not provide much more information about the starting conditions of the world. He provides no more than just a simple screenshot of Ryukyu Island before diving into the AAR.

3.2 Prologues based on the game

We can distinguish another set of AARs that have a prologue based on the game itself. They differ from prologues based on a goal since the goal of these prologues is to set up the narrative. The prologues mostly consist of a narrative that provides a more detailed overview of the starting conditions of the game. For example*, the Amsterdammer Way* by 'delpiero1234' sets up the prologue by stating that the origins of Amsterdam lie in the war between Friedrich III of Austria and his rival Philippe III of Bourgogne. By Bourgogne's defeat, Amsterdam gained independence. 'delpiero1234' provides screenshots to show the current in-game lexia, while he gives a narrative description of the screenshots:

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[189] bly08, '[1.27] Revoking the Privilegia in 1470 with Austria', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/1-27-revoking-the-privilegia-in-1470-with-austria.1123402/.

[190] 'Ryukyu - Europa Universalis 4 Wiki', accessed 1 April 2021, https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Ryukyu.

[191] 'Steam Community :: Europa Universalis IV :: Achievements', accessed 1 April 2021, https://steamcommunity.com/stats/236850/achievements/.

[192] DDRJake, 'The Three Mountains: A Ryukyu AAR', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-three-mountains-a-ryukyu-aar.709144/.

Name	Province	Region/Continent	Big	Light	Gal	Tra
Amsterdammer Navy	Amsterdam	Europe	3	0	0	5
Trade English Channel	Amsterdam	Europe	0	5	0	0

"Amsterdam is much more a maritime nation. Rich merchants have provided the city-state with 5 barques that are patrolling the English Channel to protect Amsterdammer trade interests. The Amsterdammer Navy is formed by three early carracks and five cogs."[194]

Then 'delpiero1234' shows a screenshot of the trade nodes and the national navies to illustrate his story further.

The same kind of prologue can be found in *The Legacy of the Vogelius Dynasty* by 'Groogy'. The AAR is based on an earlier campaign, but the prologue is not a narration based on the earlier game. Instead, the AAR focuses on telling the history of the Kingdom of Skåne. 'Groogy' highlights one of Skåne's national ideas called the Hogting, which Skåne allows for restructuring itself. 'Groogy' places a screenshot with the description of the Hogting while giving it a narrative twist:

"The Kingdom contained so many cultures and so many different factions that all had theirown wants and needs they would demand of the King. Proving to be too much of a

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[193] delpiero1234, 'The Amsterdammer Way - A Mildly Interactive AAR', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-amsterdammer-way-a-mildly-interactive-aar.878302/, #3.

[194] delpiero1234, #3.

task, the kingdom reorganises its own administrational structure with the Thing at its core."[195]

Skåne Ideas +10.0% +20.0%

Implement the Hogting
A ting was a local assembly where disputes were resolved and political decisions was made. As the Kingdom grew, their influence in the farther regions diminished. In order to stay in control of the local populations, a hiearchy of Ting's is enforced with the Högting at the top with the King as its Lawspeaker.
Stability Cost Modifier: -10.0%

[196]

These examples have shown that they combine the first form of prologue and expand on it. Rather than describing the initial values and tactical discussions, these two examples create their own form of historical configuration. They give it a narrative twist. The prologue is integrated in the AAR, rather than prologues that form a separate entity within an AAR. The latter can be seen in the discussions of the next two prologues.

3.3 Prologues based on earlier campaigns

Some AAR are based on earlier games such as *Crusader Kings II*, another historical grand strategy game made by developer Paradox Interactive, which is set during the medieval period. The prologues then contain the (counterfactual) history of the earlier campaign. An example of such a prologue can be found in *Freedom is a noble thing*, written by user 'Tommy4ever'. This AAR is a Scottish 'mega campaign' that spans over multiple decades and multiple games. The writer is originally from Scotland. He aims to write an AAR that spans Scotland's history, starting in *Crusader Kings II* and extending towards both the games *Europa Universalis IV* and *Victoria 2* (GSG

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[195] Groogy, 'The Legacy of the Vogelius Dynasty - Forge of Empires', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-legacy-of-the-vogelius-dynasty-forge-of-empires.877826/, #15.
[196] Groogy, #15.

set in the 19th century). It will finish with the game Hearts of Iron. The span of this alternative Scottish history starts in 1066 and lasts until approximately 1948.[197][198]

 This AAR forms the second part of the mega campaign. 'Tommy4Ever' does not provide a specific goal or achievement in the introduction. Thus, the reader cannot know in which direction the AAR will evolve. The prologue summarises the overall events of Scotland's history between 793-903. The AAR begins by describing the situation in Scotland. Scotland consisted of petty kingdoms and then transformed into the Scottish kingdom by Kenneth McAlpin (who is often referred to as the first king of Scotland).[199] Then the AAR narrates several events and kings who influenced Scottish history. This is most notably in the description of feudal troubles called the Fraticelli Wars. Here, 'Tommy4Ever' references a gameplay mechanic in CKII.[200] 'Tommy4Ever' refers to the games lexia in the AAR. Due to the nature of the AAR and the lack of screenshots of the game, it is impossible to determine what effect this particular game mechanic has on the game itself. No historical sources on the Fraticelli Wars could be found. Thus, I can conclude that the history depicted in the prologue is counterfactual with some historical references.

 The AAR *The Long(er) Lasting Lombards* by user 'RedTemplar' is also part of a more extended narrative that spans multiple games. The prologue provides a narrative for the history of Lombardy, but 'RedTemplar' also provides information about other countries in Europe.[201] His prologue is structured around the events that happened in the Crusades. In the AAR. Here, 'RedTemplar' refers to the game lexia by providing screenshots of the in-game events. It allows for confirmation that the event did happen. The narration on events that occurred in other parts of the world allows the reader to understand better what is happening in the world of this game. It is something we have not seen before in a prologue. It results in a narrative prologue in which the reader knows what happened in the past in the world of CKII, but it is also up to date with the new situation for the game.

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[197] '*Crusader Kings II*', in *Wikipedia*, 19 January 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Crusader_Kings_II&oldid=1001463744.
[198] 'Hearts of Iron IV - Hearts of Iron 4 Wiki', accessed 24 March 2021, https://hoi4.paradoxwikis.com/Hearts_of_Iron_IV.
[199] 'King Kenneth I: Biography on Undiscovered Scotland', accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/usbiography/monarchs/kennethi.html.
[200] 'Fraticellism', Crusader Kings II Wiki, accessed 24 March 2021, https://crusaderkings-two.fandom.com/wiki/Fraticellism.
[201] RedTemplar, 'The Long(Er) Lasting Lombards (Lombard Mega-Campaign Pt. 2)', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-long-er-lasting-lombards-lombard-mega-campaign-pt-2.854113/.

3.4 Prologues based on official history

A final type of AAR prologue is one that provides a narrative based on official history. This type might show similarities with the second type (discussed in paragraph 3.2). The difference is that the second type focuses on in-game (counterfactual) history while this last type is based on official history and does not directly reference the game. An example of an AAR based on official history can be found in *Portugal – an Empire Under the Sun* by user 'hjarg'. Though this AAR has an introduction in which 'hjarg' states what he wants to achieve with the AAR[202], the prologue focuses on a short history of Europe which follows official records. 'hjarg' describes historical events such as the foundation of Portugal, the Portuguese Reconquista, the fall of the house of Burgundy, the rise of House Avis, and Portugal's rise. 'hjarg' includes background on the intricate relationships between royal houses. He even provides excerpts of primary sources related to Portuguese kings:

"Dinis, son of Alfonso III, is one of the most fondly remembered Kings of Portugal. He ruled from 1279-1325. He was called either Farmer or Poet and aside from one little war with Castile, his entire rule of 46 years was peaceful- a rare trait for a ruler of Medieval Europe. He repopulated the war-torn lands, he built new towns, villages and castles, he advanced agriculture (and thus the Farmer callsign). He created the Royal Fleet that is now the foundation of Portuguese power. Also, he founded the University of Lisboa, now situated in Coimbra. And he wrote his own poetry that was quite good."[203]

With this prologue, 'hjarg' aims to create history as one would read in a narrative history book. 'hjarg' further substantiates this point by providing screenshots of paintings of notable rulers and paintings of famous battles. For example, he refers to the Battle of Alubatorra in which João de Avis fought a civil war against Castille and declared Portugal independent again.[204] It is possible to

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[202] hjarg, 'Portugal- an Empire Under the Sun', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/portugal-an-empire-under-the-sun.708120/.
[203] Hjarg, #2.
[204] 'Battle of Aljubarrota', in *Wikipedia*, 7 June 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Battle_of_Aljubarrota&oldid=1027419425.

cross-reference the events described within the prologue to the events found on Wikipedia and Britannica.[205]

The Decline and Fall of Roman Civilisation by user 'volksmarschall' provides a more detailed description of Byzantium's history. It seems that 'volksmarschall' has done some extensive research for this AAR: "The first handful of updates, which will be part of my introduction, are primarily based on primary and secondary sources on the "Byzantine Empire" and are intended to provide all of my readers with an accurate depiction of what happened to the Byzantine Empire from the late 12th century bringing us to where we begin in-game".[206] 'volksmarschall'l often refers to the book *The History of the Decline and Fall of Roman Civilisation* by Edward Lamillar. It is interesting to note that Lamillar's six-volume work was published between 1781-1789. It is therefore possible to conclude that AARs provide a platform for older narrative works to live on even though historians mark these works as old and outdated.

It seems that 'volksmarschall' AAR is somewhat unique because it allows for a historical discussion. Most AARs that focus on a historical prologue are somewhat limited in scope, while 'volksmarschall' AAR has the intention to address, assess and discuss historical sources. It also allows for the question of whether AARs could be a new source for historical learning. Based on my observation, this can only be possible if an AAR focuses on the critical analysis of historical sources. Most of the AARs do not provide any information about the research that has been done. The only notable exceptions are *The Decline and Fall of Roman Civilisation* by volksmarschall and *Italian Ambitions: A Florence AAR* by 'JerseyGiants88'. 'volksmarschall' based his AAR on the book *The History of the Decline and Fall of Roman Civilisation* by Edward Lamillar. 'JerseyGiants88' provides a booklist that formed an inspiration for his AAR. According to him:

"Over the course of writing this AAR, I was informed and inspired by numerous works, both fiction and non-fiction, that I have read over the years. A few I read specifically because playing Europa Universalis IV and writing this AAR actually made me want to learn more about

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[205] 'Portugal - History', Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.britannica.com/place/Portugal.
[206] volksmarschall, 'The Decline and Fall of Roman Civilization', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-decline-and-fall-of-roman-civilization.746149/.

the time period involved. Some I have borrowed from heavily, up to and including adapting their quotes.(..)."[207]

While the question of whether AARs could be a new source of historical learning is beyond the scope of this research, it could provide for exciting follow-up research.

Within the studied corpus, it is possible to distinguish four different kinds of prologues. The first form consists of a prologue based on a goal. The writer states what the desired goal is and describes the initial conditions of the game. The second form is a prologue based on the initial conditions of the game. This type does not provide a goal of the AAR, but it is a narrative description of the initial conditions of the game. The third form focuses on a prologue that narrates history based on a previous game. Writers describe what happened during the last game since the save game can be modified from CKII to EUIV. Thus, the prologue becomes the history of the in-game world itself. The fourth form of prologues is based on official history. This history is not related to any starting conditions of the game, and it can be seen as a separate entity within the AAR.

4 Story Plotlines

When studying AARs, we noticed many variations between different kinds of AARs. Stories include a wide range of themes and topics. Some AAR focuses on the counterfactual history of Scotland while others describe a quest to conquer the world as a tiny nation in the Americas. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some key observations regarding plot. Based on my observations, it is possible to divide the plot's structure into two kinds of categories: progressive (multilinear) and chronicle plotlines.

4.1 Progressive (Multilinear) Plotlines

When we look at the AARs that reference a central goal in their prologue (see paragraph 3.1), we can immediately draw parallels to the type of plotlines these AARs contain. In this category, the most cited goal is to conquer the world with a particular nation. One can argue that the plotlines of this specific AAR move progressively. According to Zerubavel, this plotline depends on

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[207] JerseyGiants88, 'Italian Ambitions: A Florence AAR', Paradox Interactive Forums, #2, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/italian-ambitions-a-florence-aar.916434/.

the idea of progress, that "later is better".[208] This argument is based on the idea that as time moves forward, human development progresses naturally. The empire grows the more time has passed. The expanding influence also means that the realm automatically evolves. This argument is valid if we look at this excerpt in *The Three Mountains: A Ryukyu AAR* by 'DDRJake'. The main structure of the AAR is heavily focused on conquest, which can directly be seen in the first sentences of the chapter:

"Jumping right into the thick of it I vassalise Champa took one piece of land to forge claims on and then further vassalise Lang Xiang, Pegu and Dai Viet. Aggressive expansion penalties don't really mean much to me right now, I feel pretty safe on my island. The drawback is that I had to annex Pegu, I couldn't vassalise them for some reason (they weren't in a PU or already a vassal) so I annexed them and released them. What a fool I was, I forgot that this makes them Animist. For the next 50 years or so, Pegu was in a constant state of revolt, constantly collapsing to rebels."[209]

Here, we can immediately observe what is striking for this kind of AAR. Its structure and writing style are based on a first-person perspective, and it's action-driven. This example also shows how cause and effect are intertwined within the AAR. User 'DDRJake' explains which decisions he makes and what kind of effects these actions have. In this case, 'DDRJake' went for an aggressive expansion without properly integrating Pegu into his empire, which allowed rebels to be in a state of revolt for the next 50 years.

The AAR is strongly dependent on the usage of screenshots, which allows the reader to understand the actions taken by 'DDRJake' and the results thereof. A core game mechanic that is used is called "vassalizing". Whenever 'DDRJake' conquers a territory, it can become part of the territory. In this case, 'DDRJake' first conquers the Americas. He illustrates this with screenshots to show how his influence is growing. The AAR is a description of the actions taken to obtain the achievement. It focuses on finding exploits in the in-game mechanics and optimising the game. Thus, the narrative seems to move linearly until the objective is completed. According to 'DDRJake': "This game has become more of a puzzle, sorting out how I can possibly expand

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[208] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps : Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14.
[209] DDRJake, 'The Three Mountains', #2.

enough without building up so much aggressive expansion with my own vassals. [..]"[210] It is this trend that keeps on going till he finally obtains his achievement. This objective-driven motivation indicates that this kind of plotline is not entirely progressive since the player can encounter a myriad of insurmountable obstacles. It can cause the player to restart the game and reset the narrative. In other words, the storyline first goes into a linear direction before branching off into a new storyline when a particular obstacle causes the story to branch off. We cannot talk about a unilinear storyline that moves forward in time but rather a multilinear tree narrative.

The AAR *[1.2] Revoking the Privilegia in 1470 with Austria* does follow a progressive plotline*.* Here is to complete the mission "Revoking the Privilegia". If we look at the narrative structure, then the AAR also forms more of a description of the actions taken by 'bly08'. If we look at the AAR's narrative structure, we can see that the AAR is action-driven, focusing on expansion and exploitation elements. The AAR concentrates first on the alliance and rivals between the different nations in Europe. Then, once the partnerships are established, 'bly08' focuses on the wars near the Black Sea, mainly the conflicts with Samtshke and Trebizond. Here, we find the expansion and exploit elements of the AAR. The expansion is needed to trigger a specific religious exploit: converting Catholic and Orthodox areas. This exploit allows Austria to grow in size instead of gaining particular development points.[211]

The focus on the description of tactics in this narrative is possible through the kind of information the game's framing controls and lexia present. Chapter 2 discussed the key assumptions in every GGS ad as described by Nicolas de Zamarcózy. In this case, the "assumption of perfect information": the player can know exactly how difficult it is to convert an area or how long it will take to core a particular site. Based on this "perfect information", 'bly08' can either change his tactics when the information does not work out or continue with the same tactic till the desired condition is met. We see this when the focus is on Europe to annex more provinces and generate points until the objective is fulfilled. 'bly08' ends the AAR by summarising the tactics, and he provides a few tricks to maximise the strategy, resulting in a progressive plot line until the goal is reached.

Following Droste's classification, AARs like the Ryukyu AAR written by user 'DDRJake' would classify as a traditional history book AAR since the focus is to complete a particular objective and narrate the actions taken to achieve this objective. Droste does not provide any additional

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[210] DDRJake, #237.
[211] bly08, #4.

conditions to his classification. He does not set any conditions towards how much the story has to depend on the lexia of the game. Therefore, his observation is relevant to this particular type of AAR. There are some common attributes between progressive (multilinear) plotlines. First of all, the AARs focus on a particular goal or objective to tell the story. Second, these AAR heavily rely on the usage of the in-game lexia to tell the story. Screenshots are used to visually show what is happening within these so that readers can understand the player's actions. Third, the storylines move progressively (according to Zerubavels idea) but will branch off in a different plotline whenever the player encounters an obstacle that cannot be overcome.

4.2 Chronicle plotlines

It seems that most of the AARs studied in this thesis do not contain a progressive plotline but are primarily organised around chapters as one would read in a history book. Within each chapter, a set of events happen that are contained within the chapter. Therefore, it would read more like a chronicle, a set of stories that chronically follow each other. Even though these AAR are very different from each other, they have some similar elements. If we look at the AARs *Portugal - An Empire Under the Sun* by 'hjarg', *The Third Oddysey* by 'Crimson Lionheart' and *Freedom is a noble thing* by 'Tommy4Ever' it is possible to make some critical observations regarding the plot.

First, let us look at the writing styles of the AARs. We do see a significant difference between the story and how it is related to the game. 'hjarg's AAR is heavily focused on the usage of in-game screenshots, which allows the reader to closely follow the course of the story that is closely linked to the lexia of the game. 'Crimson Lionheart's AAR also relies on screenshots, but this is limited to screenshots about in-game events. 'Tommy4Ever's AAR is different in this regard. This AAR heavily focused on the story. Pictures and in-game screenshots are used sparingly to give the AAR a history book vibe like the examples we have seen in different prologues. Screenshots are only used to show in-game events or results of battles if they are relevant to the story.

When we look at the main story structure of both AAR, then they closely follow each other. The main plot can be divided into parts that strongly resemble the same set of events. The first couple of chapters focus on local political, diplomatic and militaristic development. The story focuses on the political situation regarding alliances and rivals, and local threads. These threads evolve into small wars that can lead to an easy victory. Once they are resolved, the story focuses on exploration and exploration. Next, the player's country will encounter natives, which will lead to disputes with the natives. Finally, the natives will be defeated, and colonisation will begin. It is

from this point that the stories will diverge and tend to find their creative styles. Some AARs will focus more on political conflicts in the homeland, while others tend to focus more on the exploration and colonisation aspects of the game.

If we look at 'hjarg's AAR, then we see this trend in the first three chapters. In the first chapter, Portugal immediately goes to war with neighbouring Morocco while allied forces join. Instead of narrating the actions of the player, 'hjarg' places the events in an invisible timeline and describes it as one would read in a history book:

"By 11th January 1445, all 13 000 Portuguese soldiers were shipped to Ceuta. Same day, Alfonso V declared war on Morocco, claiming the County of Tangiers. England and Castile joined the war soon. The same day, battle broke out in Gibraltar, where Armada Real, the Portuguese main fleet has been positioned and five Moroccan light ships. By the end of the day, Moroccan ships were at the bottom of the ocean."[212]

Here we see a couple of elements coming together. First, the focus of the plotline is a battle narrative. The AAR strongly emphasises what happened within these battles and what kind of effect this had on the Portuguese military. Second, what we do read are the steps he takes in the game. He presses the button to declare war on Morocco, using Tangiers' country as the 'Casus Belli'. He describes which route the army takes, and he reinforces his story by providing screenshots that show the wins and losses of the battle. 'hjarg' discusses his tactics and ideas in the post after the chapter, which is for educational purposes. It does not interfere with the narrative itself.

'Crimson Lionheart's AAR also begins with a description of a looming local threat. However, instead of Byzantium declaring war on a country, the Byzantines leave their homeland to find a new place to live. As soon as they go, the Byzantines become engaged in several encounters. Incidentally, one of these encounters lead to a minor skirmish with the Moroccans:

The idea of Byzantium no longer being relevant results in the story moving towards exploration and colonisation in the first chapter of the narrative. It is not surprising since the AAR is based on the DLC Third Odyssey: Back to the homeland. The DLC is designed to create an alternative history

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[212] hjarg, 'Portugal- an Empire Under the Sun', #11.

in which the Byzantine emperor flees Byzantium to return later to take back the homeland. Later in the chapter, the Byzantines also enter into a conflict with the Moroccans:

"After a tense stand-off, it would be John that would show the intense power of Greek Fire. The entire Granadian and Moroccan Fleet, being completely taken by surprise by the seemingly harmless and innocent fleet, was completely wiped out to the last ship and sailor in a completely humiliating display, with zero casualties on the fleet's side."[213]

Here the AAR deals with a local conflict, yet we do not gain any insight into the result of the battle. 'Crimson Lionheart' merely posted a screenshot of the in-game event. The reader does not gain insights into the results of the fight. We do see here a cause-and-effect relationship. Earlier in the chapter, the Byzantines encountered an event that allowed access to Greek fire. The cause of Greek fire leads to the obliteration of the Moroccans. Greek fire or the battle or this skirmish is not mentioned in later chapters. It strengthens the argument of the chapters being episodic since cause and effect is confined to their own chapter.

'Tommy4Ever's AAR also deals with the establishment of alliances and local conflicts. In this case, the conflict is triggered by the death of a local king:

"Internationally, during the mid-1440s the balance of power in Europe began to shift in a spectacular fashion. Old King Henri of France was rapidly approaching his death (..), it was unclear which side the Scots would come down upon, supporting the Irish risked creating a regional power in North-West Europe capable of rivalling or even surpassing the, but opposing the union could leave Scotland without a credible ally on the continent. In the end, Ranald agreed an alliance with the Irish in 1444, within months Henri was dead and the War of the French Succession had begun. "

In this example, the reader does not gain any information about related results of the battles or in-game events. 'Tommy4Ever' merely shows a screenshot with the map of Europe before continuing his story, mentioning the subsequent battles the Scots encountered and their

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[213] Crimson Lionheart, 'The Third Odyssey - An Elysian Tale', #9.

successes. These battles have a significant impact on the political position of Scotland before the narrative moves into the exploration phase in the next chapter.

The plotlines of these examples look diverse but can be summarised in the following sequence: The nation finds itself in a natural stage. Then something happens that is a threat to the country, which results in a war. The war is lost, and the nation collapses (influence goes down). Next, a new natural state is established. Then another event happens that threatens the nation. Another war is fought. If this war is a success, then the influence of the country goes up. This cycle/pattern continues through the entire AAR. Following Zerubavel's argument, these plotlines would be defined as a zigzag in time pattern since the AAR's chapters are heavily focused on a battle narrative. Zerubavel's pattern helps to understand the broader structure of the AAR better, but the result is not surprising. Europa Universalis IV's, core game mechanic is to fight in wars and to expand influence through exploration, expansion, exploitation, and extermination elements of the game. Due to the difficulty of the game, it seems logical that not everything goes smoothly. It results in a narrative in which the influence of an empire will zigzag. Zerubavel's ideas about historical time are helpful, but AARs are too limited in scope for this theory to provide any more value to the research.

Can Wertsch concepts of narrative templates provide a more substantial framework for the analysis of these plotlines? Unfortunately, due to the limited nature of the AARs, it is not that useful. When we look at the structure of the AARs, it is possible to argue that each chapter of an AAR is based on a specific narrative because the chapters are always based on certain actions in the game. Thus, we could conclude that the whole AAR forms one schematic narrative that forms an overachieving template to all the individual chapters that are specific narratives. Since the game (and the AAR) is limited to specific game mechanics that determine the game's flow. It developed into a similar narrative that consists of a country that expands its influence through exploration, expansion, extermination and exploitation. The latter is, therefore, the most dominant narrative that can be found in these AARs.

AARs with a chronicle plotline form the majority of the studied corpus. Is it possible to further give attributes to these plotlines to further differentiate between them? Droste's classification has been a great starting point to classify AARs better. However, the classification is too simplistic to understand the complexities of the stories within these AARs. Following the theory, Droste would consider 'hjarg's AAR as a soft narrative since its primary focus is to tell a story related to the course of the game. However, this AAR also includes explanatory forum posts

about the tactics, strategies and steps used in the game. Following Droste's theory, this AAR would classify between a traditional AAR and a soft narrative. We encounter the same problem if we look at 'Crimson Lionheart's AAR. This AAR is structured around in-game events to tell the story of the game. Following the theory, it would classify as a hard narrative because the game's world is used to tell the story of the AAR. The in-game events are not chronologically structured. However, if you know the AAR is based on the Third Odyssey: Back to the homeland DLC, it is a simple deduction to understand how closely linked the AAR is based on this DLC. Therefore, the AAR could classify as a soft narrative as well.

To break this limitation, I would like to propose to place the narrativity of the AARs on a spectrum that ranges from AARs that have a close relationship to the game to narratives that have a weak link to the game. On the left side, we would find AARs focused on re-telling the game based on a goal that goes in a progressive (multilinear) plotline. AARs like [*1.2*] *Revoking the Privilegia in 1470 with Austria* and *The Three Mountains: A Ryukyu AAR* will be placed left on the spectrum. They can be considered as an AAR in its purest form: a re-telling of the gameplay that heavily relies on the games lexia. The more one moves on the right, the more the narrative of the AAR becomes a story that draws its inspiration on the game but might not rely as much on the lexia of the game. AARs like the one written by 'Tommy4Ever' could be placed on the right side of the spectrum. One of the main benefits of placing AARs is that it allows for more nuances in the AARs itself. Rather than limiting the characterisation of AARs to one category, a spectrum allows for the styles to be more fluid. AARs that are focused on telling their own story while also relying on the game to be better presented.

5 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to research the dominant narratives within AARs. It seems that AARs can be divided into two different categories. On the one hand, some AARs are stories in the "traditional" sense, a re-telling of gameplay. These AARs express a goal in their prologue. The plotlines move progressively, describing the action taken to achieve the goal. Sometimes a particular strategy does not work. Then the plotline will branch out. Thus, resulting in a progressive (multilinear) plotline. On the other hand, chronicle plotlines define the majority of the AARs. These AARs include a wide variety of prologues based on the initial conditions of the game or on an earlier campaign. Some prologues are based on official history. The plotlines focus on a battle narrative and characters, cause and effect and events, which are mainly confined to their own chapters. The dominant narrative of AARs with chronicle plotlines are based on a zig-zag in

time pattern. Influence of a nation can go up or down based on the actions taken by the players and the events that the player encounters. This narrative can be seen as a rise and fall narrative.

Since the majority of the AAR include a chronicle plotline, it can be helpful to further differentiate between them. Stefan Droste's classification does not allow for nuances between the proposed categories. Therefore, a spectrum has been proposed which allows for a more nuanced characterisation of AARs.

Chapter 4: After-Action Report as Play

In the previous chapter, I provided a discussion of the narratives that can be identified in the After-Action Reports for EUIV. In this chapter, I will further expand on this discussion by analysing how After-Action Reports can be characterised as a form of historical configuration that goes beyond narration. Here, it is essential to highlight the following element: an essential aspect of these AAR is interactivity. 6 out of the 20 AAR in the studied corpus can be characterised as incorporating some form of interactivity. The game does not take centre stage within these interactive AAR, nor does the story. Here, one can rightfully say that the AAR has become a game of its own. How can we further characterise the interactivity and ludic nature of these AARs? With what kind of lens can we view these AAR? Do these AAR only provide a platform for the play, or can we view these AAR as a platform for a community? This chapter will try to aim these questions. To do so, this chapter will first look at the types of interactivities that can be found in AARs. Second, I will look at how interactivity affects the story creation of the AAR. Last, I will look at the types of lenses that can be used to look at AAR as a tool beyond narration.

1 Interactive AARs (iAAR)

In the studied corpus of AAR for this thesis, a distinct type of interactivity can be identified. These AAR or interactive AAR (iAAR) can be distinguished into three categories: mildly interactive AARs (miAAR), fully interactive AARs (fiAAR) and succession games (SC). Mildly interactive AARs tells a story based on the game and will ask the reader to vote on different options presented by the writer. In a roleplaying AAR, readers create a character and actively join the AAR as their characters. Based on the interaction between the players through letter correspondence, the story unfolds. In Succession Games participants will play EUIV for a specific period and then describe their experiences in an AAR. These different AARs are then combined, resulting in a bundle of stories based on the histories of different countries.

1.1 Mildly Interactive AAR (miAAR)

The first form of interactive AARs can be found in *The Amsterdammer Way* by user delpiero1234.[214] This AAR tells the story of the custom nation of Amsterdam based in the province of Holland. In this AAR, 'delpiero1234' primarily writes the story himself, but the presented

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[214] delpiero1234, 'The Amsterdammer Way - A Mildly Interactive AAR', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-amsterdammer-way-a-mildly-interactive-aar.878302/.

narrative is actively co-configured by other users, who constitute the 'Raad van Amsterdam' (in reference to the Dutch Staten-Generaal). This 'Raad' functions as a virtual parliament that decides how the story will unfold based on a majority voting system. It is important to note that the player cannot debate the AAR. 'delpiero1234 has created two types of assemblies within his AAR. The 'Raad van Amsterdam' can both be called to cast a vote on specific issues, and it can be asked for advice.

First, 'delpiero1234' describes what happens in the first chapter and he introduces the character Sten van Schwelz the Dutch Raadpensionaris (prime minister). At the end of the chapter, the 'Raad' is called:

> *"The Raad of Amsterdam convened in the capital on 30 September, 1453 to discuss two important topics after Raadpensionaris Sten von Schwelz had called for an assembly of the Raad."*[215]

'delpiero1234' tries to recreate the atmosphere of the 'Raad' by roleplaying the characters, and he tries to address the reader through the form of dialogue:

> *"Dear Members of this prestigious Raad, I have called all of you here to the capital because we have to discuss the future of our Grand Republic (..) Now we need to decide which idea group we shall embrace next. Should we strengthen our military and focus Offensive Ideas? Or is it wiser to make our administration more efficient by choosing Administrative Ideas? Alternatively, we could also focus on Plutocratic Ideas. Before you cast your vote, we have three more speakers."*[216]

In this post, each speaker gets his turn, and at the end, there is a poll. The reader can vote for Plutocratic, Administrative and Offensive ideas. A deadline is set, and then the reader can cast their votes. After the deadline, 'delpiero1234' writes another post in which the votes are counted

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[215] delpiero1234, #9.
[216] delpiero1234, #9.

and resolved in *The Assembly of the Raad of Amsterdam on 30 September, 1453 (Part II)*:

> *Honourable Raad,*
>
> *The votes are counted. We have 0 votes for Offensive Ideas and 1 vote for Plutocratic*
> *Ideas. With a strong majority of 6 votes, the Raad has decided that Amsterdam shall*
> *embrace Administrative Ideas as soon as possible.(..) This concludes the official part of*
> *today's session. You are now all free to stay for a banquet organised and sponsored by our*
> *dearest merchant guild. Beer, ale, and fine dishes are waiting for you in the Old Hall.*
> *von Schwelz leaves the stage; the Raad applauds and most of the members stay for the*
> *banquet.* [217]

In this case, the administrative ideas win, and the next chapter revolves around the decision. In the next chapter, 'delpiero1234' describes how Amsterdam advances the administrative, technological idea to national ideas. He reinforces this with a screenshot. When all the conditions are met, and the goal is reached, delpiero1234 describes the following:

> *"von Schwelz is happy to inform the members of the Raad of Amsterdam that the republic*
> *unlocked Administrative Ideas in November, 1459. The decision to take Administrative Ideas were*
> *made by the Raad of Amsterdam a few years ago."* [218]

In this form of interactivity, the reader has limited influence on the historical configuration. 'delpiero1234' is responsible for the creation of the story. The reader can steer the narrative in a particular direction by voting on the polls. Nevertheless, the choices regarding narration, space and characters are based on the creativity of 'delpiero1234'. 'delpiero1234' does get feedback regarding his story. User 'PatriotOfDreumel' provides a list of Dutch words and functions to make the story feel more authentic.[219] *The Legacy of the Vogelius Dynasty – Forge of Empires* by 'Groogy' (a EUIV game designer) is a similar AAR in setup but different in execution. Whereas 'delpiero1234' tries to roleplay more and create an environment where the characters speak

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[217] delpiero1234, #9.
[218] delpiero1234, #9.
[219] delpiero1234, #11.

towards the reader and address them as if they were part of the country, 'Groogy', on the other hand, provides a list with different options linked to the in-game events, decisions and policies. Roleplaying is not the norm within the 'miAAR', and it is based on the writer's preferences. Since the interactivity has limited influence on the historical configuration, these AARs are quite similar to the chronicle plotline AARs in chapter 3.

1.2 Fully Interactive AAR (fiAAR)

In these above-mentioned examples, the reader does have little influence on the story itself. The AAR writer writes the story, but the story can be influenced by providing choices to the reader. It is still different from what writers call a fully interactive AAR or iAAR. *A symphony of influence – a Brandenburg Interactive AAR* by 'Belgiumruler' is an example of a fully interactive AAR. Here, 'Belgiumruler' is the ruler of the absolute monarchy. Players are asked to create a character and provide details like name, religion and character biography. The characters can have different classes like a duke, courtier and general. All classes have different properties and skills. For example, a courtier must make critical decisions like going to war or hiring advisors while a duke is in control of a local area. The different classes allow players to roleplay as a character based on their interests and agendas. A character's introduction can be very short or very elaborate:

> Name: "Sir" John Walpole
> Date of Birth: 21st of October 1415
> Religion: Catholic
> Class: Noble, Claiming Meath
> Biography: John Walpole was born a nobleman's son, his father died at a young age while fighting in France. His mother died of the Black Plague when he has 5. He grew up in a church, and is strongly Catholic. Most of his family is dead. At the age of 9 he started training with the sword, and at 13 he started military academy. When he was 18 he joined the assembly of England. He commanded multiple battles against France, most of which where minor. They owned a lot of land in the Alencon region, but they were all ceded to France. Walpole must profit if possible, for whatever reason. It's just a Walpole thing. [220]

> Name: Gerhard "Strongarm" von Ammendorf, Baron of Horst, Black Ritter of Grabow,
> Date of Birth: 18 January 1413 (32)
> Nationality: German
> Religion: Catholic
> Bio: Born into the ancient Brandenburgian family, that claims legendary descent from the Roman Emperor Florianus, as well as from the Arthurian knights Garel and Daniel, and is known for its military achievements.
>
> A devout Catholic, ruthless and brave soldier, and an Imperial and Brandenburgian loyalist, Otto has spent all his life in the saddle of a horse. Knighted when he was only sixteen by Margrave Frederick I, he very soon became a well-known tourney champion, winning many local jousts. He fought against the Hussite heretics during the Imperial war and participated in various feudal struggles, usually supporting the central authority, while not forgetting his own interests. He also held several administrative positions, acting as a fogt, castellan and a captain, and managing several castles and estates for his sovereign.
>
> Gerhard is a strict, grim and serious man, with a rather short temper. At the same time, he is known for his support for knightly values, his loyalty to his seigneur and the Church. [221]

[220] delpiero1234, 'The Sun Never Sets', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-sun-never-sets.898294/. #6.

[221] Belgiumruler, 'A Symphony of Influence - a Brandenburg Interactive AAR', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/a-symphony-of-influence-a-brandenburg-interactive-aar.732690/, #8.

The AAR *Empire of the Meditteranean: An Interactive Aragon AAR* by 'Michaelangelo' and *The Sun Never Sets* by 'depiero1234' are AARs that take the system of the AAR by 'Belgiumruler' and further expand on it. In this AAR, the Ruler Trait System (RTS) is prominent. The RTS gives each monarch three traits that affect how the ruler can react to a particular situation. These traits affect the administrative, diplomatic and militaristic aspects of the iAAR. In 'delpiero1234's AAR this system is also used for player characters.

Character creation is an essential aspect in the historical configuration of this kind of AARs since a character's biography determines how a player will roleplay their character. An ambitious nobleman will be more inclined to drive the plot towards a war that benefits him, while a diplomat might want to focus on peace to improve political stability. Motivations and roleplaying styles are very diverse. It is the author's job to moderate and function as a game master to keep the pace and flow of the game going. Players are free to choose their own roleplaying style and come up with suggestions for the campaign. These suggestions will be brought up in the voting sessions.

2 iAAR and Story creation

According to 'Michaelangelo', "one of the key features of any iAAR is the ability to vote on issues and decisions".[222] All of the iAARs are structured around a voting system and a parliament. How does the player affect the creation of the story? Both the AARs *The Sun Never Sets* and *Empire of the Meditteranean: An Interactive Aragon AAR* are roleplay AARs that follow a specific set of turn sequences. The game master plays the game for around 1-10 years. The time can change in the case of in-game events like wars, but it can also be stopped if an event requires the players' consultation. The game will then be stopped, and the game master will write a post about it. The post will include some action like a call to vote, or an action of a minister. Once the gameplay is done, the game master will post and update. Then the emperor/game master will consult the court. The court will be addressed in roleplay, and any updates regarding changes in policies will be discussed. It is then up to the players to start interacting with each other from their characters' perspectives. Once all the players are done with the interactions, a vote about policies will be held. Results are gathered, and the game master gives an update. The results of the votes will be dealt with in the new chapter. Finally, the turn sequence repeats itself.

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[222] Michaelangelo, 'Empire of the Mediterranean: An Interactive Aragon AAR', *Paradox Interactive Forums*, accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/empire-of-the-mediterranean-an-interactive-aragon-aar.869752/, #5.

The sequence can be visible if we look at the forum posts by the players in 'Michaelangelo's' AAR. The first chapter addresses the player and provides an overview of the start conditions of Aragon in 1444. Immediately after that, the roleplaying starts. Player '050650403' plays as Arturo de Valencia, a cunning Aragonese who advises the king through correspondence:

"My lord,

I write to you to voice my opinion on the matters of politics in your glorious kingdom. I think that we should subjugate the petty kingdom (if we can even call rulers of that land kings, comparing them to You my lord) of Navarra. Either they will bend the knee or face the wrath of Aragonese armies."[223]

'Robban204' who plays Felipé de Avaro, a farmer's son from a Spanish father and a French mother seems to agree with de Valencia:

"My Great Lord,

It is my humble opinion that the petty "kingdom" of Navarra should be subjugated to increase our power on the peninsula against the castillians, aswell as securing a strategic alliance with the french, altough, I might add, at a time deemed suitable, perhaps when the french are more consolidated?"[224]

Sometimes players can agree with each other, but that does not have to be the case. 'Aristove' plays as Jaume Cristòfor, a military commander who wants to spread catholicism over the world:

"Your Grace Alfons V,

While these nobles may talk about subjugating the Kingdom of Navarra, it is simply foolish to attack such a minor nation! If we truly want to show the Castilian bastards that we are the true power in Iberia, we must subjugate and convert the dirty heathens that still plague the

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[223] Michaelangelo, #21.
[224] Michaelangelo, #23.

Peninsula! The Emirate of Granada must be conquered, and the Reconquista must finally be finished". [225]

Based on these posts, we can make a few observations that affect the story. First of all, all the posts made by the players are in the form of correspondence letters. The player addresses the king, expresses his concerns, gives some advice, and then formulates a call to action. All the forum posts are addressed to the king, and it seems that there is little or no interaction between the players themselves. Only later in the AAR user 'Jcan', who plays as John Kendall, starts offering his congratulations and services to players who got offered prominent positions in court. [226] However, this is not picked up by the other players. The trend is to address the king, and this is in line with the correspondence format.

In these three examples, we also can understand the motivations and perspectives of the different characters. In the case of de Valencia, he is a cunning Aragonese. He wants Aragon to be a strong and powerful nation and gain favour with the king. Using phrases like "call rulers of that land kings comparing them to You my lord" will undoubtedly earn points by the king. Calling Navarro "a petty kingdom" also implies that Aragon is mightier than Navarra and justifies taking over the kingdom. We can see the same trend by Jaume Cristòfor, as a military leader, he would be more inclined to focus on wars that might cost more but also allow for higher gains for the kingdom. In the biography, we could read that Cristòfor is a devout catholic and wants to spread Catholicism throughout the world. Therefore, it is not hard to understand why he presses to conquer "the dirty heathens" of Granada rather than the Castilians or the Navarrans.

Different players give different kinds of input, and this is ultimately addressed in a reaction by the emperor:

"Navarra is of great importance to us. We fear that if we do not act quickly, they will find themselves at the mercy of the Castilians or English. We have considered the possibility of

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[225] Michaelangelo, #24.
[226] Michaelangelo, #64-67.

making it our mission to bring them in under our protection. They have expressed a desire to do so peacefully, but it may be quicker and more expedient to do so by force. "[227]

The same is goes for the possibility of war with Castille, player 'TruePod', who plays as Ioannes Kontostephanos, comes with a bold plan:

" (..) I may have an idea, though it may be a bit bold. Since the Castilians have not managed to secure any alliances and we could ally the French and Portuguese immediately and launch a surprise offensive against the Castilians. (..)Such an ambitious assault would leave the Castilians, who as we know have no allies, alone and sandwiched from both sides as well as facing our French allies who would pour in from the North."[228]

In the voting round, the players can overtake Navarro by either diplomatic means, via war or abstain from a vote. The same goes for the plan by Ioannes Kontostephanos to plan a surprise attack on Castille. In the end, the players voted to deplovassalize Navarra (take over through diplomatic means) and to plan a surprise attack on Castille. It is then resolved within the next chapter. Here Michaelangelo offers a military alliance to Navarro, which is accepted, and the subsequent chapters describe the wars with Castille.

In *The Sun Never Sets,* we see a similar trend in which players create the story through letter correspondence with the king. However, players are also roleplaying as they are addressing the Assembly. It is pretty noticeable in the posts made by forum user 'Istarsamu' who plays James of Huntingdon, the third son of an Earl who serves the English Assembly. In the Assembly gathering of November 11, 1444 the reader can read the thoughts that goes through the mind of James:

"James of Huntingdon kept silent while the others were talking, war was not what he was looking for, not with this young and inexperienced king on the throne. He sighed as he realised that John Walpole was standing up to deliver his speech. This man has risen fast through the ranks in London with his sword arm and military mind favoring him and again he pledged for

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[227] Michaelangelo, #26.
[228] Michaelangelo, 'Empire of the Mediterranean', #55.

war. This time the Irish Dukes where his target."[229]

In this excerpt, we see a couple of things happening. First, we notice that James does not want war with Ireland since a young and experienced king is on the throne and due to this inexperience will cause more problems in the long run. It seems James is fond of the king and that he wants to protect him. Second, one can notice that James is suspicious of John Warpole (played by ThePatriotOfDreumel). These suspicions are confirmed in the same post:

"James looked through the parchments of the latest royal degrees, he has grown suspicious about everyone calling for war without having obvious strong personal objectives (more so with this young and so easy to affect King). And there it was. James pulled forth the Royal Degree, that granted Walpole the Earldom of Meath"[230]

"Knowing this new piece of information James stood up and started to speak:

Your Majesty, Nobles of the Assembly, Friends. Starting an aggressive war in Ireland is not what benefits the crown at this moment. We would have to invest precious troops that are needed to frighten the French from attacking us and mostly it would overstrain the administrative capabilities that our realm can gather to integrate the irish Duchies into the Kingdom. And this is without talking about possible irish revolts against english rule. (..)

Sitting down again James knew that he hadn't made himself a friend in Walpole today."[231]

The post confirms two things. First, not all posts have to be confined to letters written to the king without any player interaction. Second, players themselves can decide if they want to engage in player rivalries or alliances to further personal roleplay agendas.

The post by 'Istarsamu' is an example that is quite typical for posts within online roleplaying. The post contains both inner thoughts of the characters, as well as actions and dialogue. It is possible to make a few observations about the writing style and the structure of the

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[229] delpiero1234, 'The Sun Never Sets', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 22 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/the-sun-never-sets.898294/, #51.
[230] delpiero1234, #54.
[231] delpiero1234, #54.

post that is quite typical for roleplaying. First of all, there is a difference in the format of the post. Most of the post is written in italics. It is done to differentiate thoughts from speech. Speech is written in bold. The post is written from a third-person perspective, past-tense, and this does not change to a first-person perspective. According to ForumRoleplay.com, this is preferred since this writing style is generally quite descriptive and will be more readable. Past-tense writing is advised since it is easier to read and allows for more flexibility in a collaborative environment.[232] That does not mean that writing in past tense is a requirement. The player decides what writing style is suitable if it is consistent, and the player must keep in mind that other players have to get a chance to react to the post.[233]

The question remains, how do players differentiate between posts made by their in-character persona and themselves? Well, by distinguishing between in-game character posts and out of character posts (OOC). Out of Characters Posts have to be marked by double parenthesis markers. It is an essential practice within Roleplay writing since most of the posts are written in character. This divide also strengthened Massanari's notion from play that forms a magic circle.

3 Succession Games

Another form of AARs in which players are involved is the so-called "Quantum Leap"-style games. Here, a player plays a country or a specific ruler and then plays with that country until the person dies or a specific goal is met. Then, that same player saves the file and randomly chooses a character or country to continue playing. An excellent example of this kind of AAR is the *Random World Order* AAR by 'CatKnight'. In this AAR, 'CatKnight' plays a country for five years, saves the file, and randomly picks a country.[234] The result is an AAR that tells history from the perspective of different countries. *Divine Influence – A Quantum Leap Succession Game* by 'PanzerCorps', takes this concept and gives it a new spin. In this AAR, the same mechanic is implemented, but, instead of a single-player campaign, different players play a random country. In this case, the first player lets the game choose five random countries. The player picks a country and starts playing. The player then writes an update about what kind of game-related actions have been taken. Once 15

[232] 'Writing for Roleplay | PbP RPG Writing', Forum Roleplay, accessed 6 June 2021, https://forumroleplay.com/roleplay-guides/forum-roleplaying-basics/writing-roleplay/.

[233] 'RP Styles and How To's', *Daily Life in Gorean Roleplay* (blog), 19 August 2014, https://dailygorean.wordpress.com/rp-guides/rp-resourcesexample/.

[234] CatKnight, 'Random World Order | Paradox Interactive Forums', accessed 21 November 2020, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/random-world-order.720594/.

in-game years have passed and the first ruler has died, the game is stopped, and another player takes the reins.

The first observation we can make is that every player goes through the same kind of performance (stage) process. It is unknown with which country the player will start playing. Every first post of every player shows the results of the country rolls. Some players report their thoughts about the rolls. What is striking is that readers and players discuss which country to choose or what kind of strategies can be used. This results in the fact that players become more invested in the game. Players can and will follow the AAR till the end. Thus, resulting in a small community of people with the same interest in the same kind of AAR.

4 After-Action Reports and Lenses

4.1 AARs and Play

In the preceding paragraph, I demonstrated how writing an AAR can be identified as a form of roleplaying. Apart from this central characteristic of AAR for the game EUIV, other modes of engagement can also be identified. How can we characterise After-Action Reports as a form of historical configuration more broadly? In the first chapter, I discussed the types of metaphors Adrienne L. Massanari uses to define Reddit and what kind of "lens" is helpful to define After-Action Reports. The first lens that one can use to define AARs is AARs as play. If we look at the interactions of the iAAR, then we do see that players first join an iAAR as themselves, then they create a character and then as soon as possible, they start to play as that character. The first observation that can be made is that the relative posts from a user are always done from their avatar (figure player plays). We can argue that the forum itself is like a "magic circle – a liminal, permeable boundary surrounding game spaces where interactions are deemed somehow special or different from interactions in "non-play" areas of life."[235]. The etiquettes of writing thoughts and actions of a character in italics and speech in bold help distinguish the post from the avatar's perspective. It reinforces the idea of a separate space for play. However, the notion of the "magic circle" has been criticised by many scholars, just as Massanari notes.

A common critique is that it is hard to define where play begins and ends in an online space since the game's rules are constantly shifting due to negotiation between the players and the

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[235] Adrienne L. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2015), 21.

"designer" (the game master).[236] One only has to read a couple of posts to understand how play and non-play are interwoven. Some iAARs even put rules to distinguish between on-topic posts and off-topic, or somewhat Out of Character (OOC). In both *the Sun Never Sets* and *Aragon,* it is required to use double brackets to write an off-topic post. Both forums even have set up different Internet Relay Channels (Online chat room) to filter out the OOC chats. However, it is often the case that players mix both on and off-topic posts. These posts can differ from reacting to a rule that has changed or asking about historical clarifications.

Even though we cannot define iAARs as a "magic circle" that creates a separate "world" that is different from real life, it is helpful to look at AARs as play. The interactions between the players have a significant influence on how the story is created. Players can steer the story in their desired direction by smartly reacting to posts by creating rivalries, suggesting new policies, or claiming a land as a noble. By allowing players to take part in the story, more people are invested in the historical configuration. Therefore, more people can become interested in history through these AARs. One can argue that by participating in these iAARs, players have a new way to interact and reflect on history. Thus, it becomes a new form of popular historical culture.

4.2 AAR as stage

Massanari distuinghes Reddit as a performance/ritual. According to Massanari, "rituals reflect cultural values, and cultures are inscribed/enacted through the ritualised performances that its members create".[237] In Reddit, this results in posts containing standard answers, phrases, and memes that allow community members to "reaffirm their culture and membership".[238] While analysing these AARs, I did not find similarities in the words or phrases that players used in their forum posts. It seems that there are not any standard memes to confirm a player's culture or identity. Therefore, the concept of AAR as performance/ritual is not entirely applicable to AARs, but her idea includes elements that are applicable. Massanari points out that interactions between Redditors might be similar to a theatrical performance that has a front and backstage.[239]

The same can be argued for the workings of on-topic and off-topic (OOC) posts. Posts made in character can be seen as the front performance, while the OOC posts are the backstage performances. This is the very core of AARs, therefore approaching AARs as a (virtual) stage for

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[236] Massanari, 22.
[237] Massanari, 21.
[238] Massanari, 21.
[239] Massanari, 21.

players to "perform" on is useful. Every player's participation is organised around a set of practices or rituals required to participate. The character creation allows the player to ask themselves, what kind of character do I want, what are his motives? What kind of influence will the background have on my character? What type of class will affect my part of the story? How does it affect my power in the Assembly? The interaction between players in the form of letter correspondence or being a speaker at an Assembly also attributes to the dynamics and social interaction between players. These interactions can be seen as performative since most iAAR are centred around roleplaying. The player already is involved in a performance. The AAR acts as a stage to perform as these characters. Since the participants go through the same kind of rituals and undergo the same kind of process of preparing the post, reading what others have written, writing the post and then reading what others have posted, these interactions allow for participants to come together and form their own community. AARs as stage form the bridge between AARs as play and AARs as community. Play is the reason for participating in the AAR, the stage is the place where the participants perform/roleplay on, community is a result of people with the same interest that have found a stage to connect on.

4.3 AARs as Community

If we look at both lenses and the nature of the interactive iAAR, then there is a striking resemblance between them. Both lenses deal with AARs as a community. But how does an AAR forum create a community? First, it is essential to look at the target audience that reads and participates in these AARs. Quantitative research regarding demographics and motivations is beyond the scope of this thesis. I did not find a study that focuses solely on the demographics of players of Europa Universalis IV.

Nevertheless, we can make a couple of assumptions regarding the readers with an interest in AARs. First of all, the players have an interest in the game itself and have an interest in history and stories. According to Dunaden, people who play the game and write AAR range from people with little or no historical knowledge to doctorates in history. [240] According to 'DDRJake', reading an AAR is all about captivation. A great story that can twist or turn. He likes when an AAR brings something new to the table. 'Tom D'. reads an AAR because he finds them relaxing and enjoyable to read. [241] 'Stnylan' really likes AAR that brings a "coherent tale-tapestry from the game's

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[240] 'How to Write My First AAR?', Paradox Interactive Forums, accessed 8 June 2021, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/how-to-write-my-first-aar.1449979/, #2.
[241] 'Do You Follow AARs?, #2-3.

event".[242] 'IrishGirl' states that "For me, the engaging story or history is the key. I've binge read entire AARs, starting on the train going to or home from work and then continuing until I finished it. Some of them are very well written, and the authors have taken considerable care to create both interesting stories and nice images."[243] 'SKOTy' is a fan of gameplay AARs because "AARs provide insights on how other people play the game. Many parts of the game can be discovered by reading AARs".[244] Reasons for liking an AAR can vary between people.

It is useful to look at AARs from a community perspective/lens because creating an AAR is not something that a person does alone. Writing an AAR and posting it on the Paradox forums means that someone might read it. Even one response on a forum will result in the fact that people are creating these social interactions and connections. It creates a space for people to read, discuss and participate in stories of a game that readers love. Another important aspect of the AAR community is that interactions between readers seem to be genuine and nice. During my research of this thesis, I have yet to find a forum post that contains some kind of negativity or toxicity. It seems rather unique in a time in which toxic communities are on the rise.

5 Conclusion

The central question of this chapter: After Action Reports can be characterised as a form of historical configuration that goes beyond narration? In this chapter, three different kinds of AARs have been identified that all influence the historical configuration differently. Mildly Interactive AARs are AARs that heavily focus on a voting system. Readers have a limited influence on the story creation. The polls allow the reader to drive the story into a certain direction, but the creative writing is still in the hands of the author. In fully Interactive AARs the reader joins the AAR as a player. The player creates a character and will influence the story based on the motivations and actions of their respective characters. The author functions as a game master and will moderate the flow of the game. In succession games, readers play EUIV themselves. They discuss strategies and then write an AAR about their gameplay experiences.

AARs are not only a place for readers to read about stories based on EUIV. An AAR can become a game itself. Interactions between players allow for a new way to reflect upon history. This results in a new form of historical culture. The AAR as a game motivates the reader to join. The AAR becomes a stage for the player to perform on while playing as their chosen character or

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[242] 'Do You Follow AARs?', #6.
[243] 'Do You Follow AARs? #18.
[244] 'Do You Follow AARs?', #19.

as the AAR writer. As a result of the first two, a community is formed around these AAR where people with an interest in (hi)story and EUIV read, discuss and participate in stories of a game that readers love.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have studied digital games as an expression of contemporary historical culture. More specifically, I have studied a specific paratextual expression of historical digital games called After-Action Report through empirical narrative analysis based on the framework *Narrative as a Formal System* by Bordwell and Thompson. As such, I have tried to answer the following research question: **How is the past represented in After-Action Reports for the game Europa Universalis IV?** Therefore, the first chapter discussed the main concepts of this thesis. It aimed to give an overview of the current academic debate regarding history in games and paratexts. It also discussed the nature of AARs as a source and the methods used to analyse these sources. In the second chapter, we looked at the basic mechanics *of Europa Universalis IV* and how history is represented within the game. Here, I concluded that *Europa Universalis IV* aims to provide a historically accurate anchor point for the player to create his/her history. The game provides a one-sided view on history that is primarily visible in the elements surrounding the game. Some of the elements that were highlighted in chapter two were the countries' introductions, the historical bookmarks and the in-game events. The game's lexia do not present history per-sé, but history visible in specific in-game fields like the diplomatic tab or the military tab. There the player can find references to historical figures like Thomas Moore or Nuño Tristão.

In chapter three, the analysis of the AAR was central. This chapter aimed to look at the dominant narratives expressed in these AARs. Within AARs two different kind of plotlines can be defined: progressive (multilinear) plotlines and chronicle plotlines. Progressive (multilinear) plotlines focus on a specific objective that the player wants to achieve. This kind of AAR starts off with a prologue that states a goal. The story flows progressively until the goal is obtained. While the goal has not been obtained yet, an obstacle could appear that does not allow the story to progress. In this case, the plotline will branch out and progressively move until the goal is met. AARs with a progressive (multilinear) plotline often have a strong relationship with the game and they can be seen as the more "traditional" style of AARs.

The majority of the AARs seem to be based on chronicle plotlines. This kind of AAR contains stories in which the events are often confined to their own chapter. It is therefore hard to determine specific patterns, but it is possible to find common attributes in each AAR. AARs with chronicle plotlines are centred around a prologue in which the player either states the goal, gives an introduction into the country's official history, provides an overview on the history of an earlier campaign or narrates the beginning status of the in-game world. The dominant narrative of AARs with chronicle plotlines are based on a zigzag in time pattern. A nation's influence can go up or

down based on the actions taken by the players and the events that the player encounters. This narrative can be seen as a rise and fall narrative.

In the fourth chapter, I aimed to demonstrate how After-Action Reports can be characterised as a form of historical configuration more broadly. To do so, I analysed AARs as an autonomous form of interactivity. I analysed how the interactions between players lead to the creation of (hi)story. By allowing players to participate in the creation of the story, an extended group of community members became invested in the historical configuration. One can argue that by participating in these iAARs, players have a new way to interact and reflect on history. Thus, it becomes a new form of popular historical culture.

How is history represented in AARs that are based on Europa Universalis IV? First of all, the goal of writing an AAR is a motivator to play EUIV. The motivations behind reading or writing an AAR range from enjoying a story that brings a "coherent tale-tapestry from the game's event" to gaining insight into how other people play.[245] Second, AARs can be seen as a continuation of the player's historical journey. The player plays the game that forms the setting for the AAR, and events that happen in the game form the basis for the events that occur in the AAR. Third, AARs might include references to historical figures or events, but the content is mostly counterfactual. Therefore, AARs can be seen as a form of historical fiction. It is a story written by players, who enjoy history and who like to play EUIV, for readers who enjoy a good story. Finally, the Paradox forums are a platform where AAR readers and writers find each other. It is a place where social interactions are being made. Where members can read, discuss and participate in stories that readers love.

My initial expectation for this research was that AARs would provide a platform for historical learning through play since counterfactual history can provide an interesting thought experiment. However, during this research I have established that, even though AARs are inspired by history and can be seen as historical fiction, they do not focus on historical reflection. This research primarily focused on AARs as an expression of contemporary historical culture. This research aimed to understand what AARs are, how they relate to the game and how exactly they represent the past. It clearly established that AARs can be seen as a form in which history enthusiasts write stories about the past. It is a popular method to express the past, but these AAR are nothing more than historical fan fiction. There is no intent to discuss, reflect or learn about history through AARs.

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[245] 'Do You Follow AARs? What Makes an AAR Good?', Paradox Interactive Forums, #6 and #18 accessed 8 June 2021, https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/do-you-follow-aars-what-makes-an-aar-good.1062605/.

This thesis touched upon a couple aspects that were not researched due to the limitations of this research design. First is the relationship between the developer-historian and the community-historian. In chapter 2, I looked at how historical research is done by Paradox and the fact that the community is essential in providing research/content for the game. It would be quite interesting for a follow-up research to further dive into this dynamic relationship. How does this relationship lead to a more accurate and nuanced expression of history within a video game? Research done by Chapman, Apperley and Webber also touched upon this relationship, but I think this symbiotic relationship provides enough opportunities for follow-up research.

In the fourth chapter, I looked at interactive AARs and how they affect the creation of the story. This research merely touched upon the fact that roleplaying has such a profound influence on the creative writings of AARs. It would be very interesting to get in touch with the community and look at the motivations behind joining an iAAR, what steps they take in order to create a character, and their inspirations for writing posts. Do players perform historical research before they start roleplaying? This thesis briefly shed light upon this subject. I think a follow up research could further illuminate how online communities interact with history and how AAR can be seen as an expression of these online interactions.

AARs might not be an exciting new way for players to reflect and learn about the past, but it is a popular medium for (hi)story lovers to read, write and discuss stories about the past that are inspired by the game they love. AARs might be too limited as an historical source to further research on. Nevertheless, the dynamic relationship between the community and the developer is surely a topic of further research.

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