

Processes and Idleness in Europa Universalis 4

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Introduction

Design of Europa Universalis IV (EU4) is peculiar. It seems that the game is supposed to be played in cycles of idleness followed by activity and the phase of idleness is long when compared to average idle time in other real-time strategy or grand strategy games. My goal is to understand and explain role of idleness in design of EU4. I've decided to use Whiteheadian philosophy of organism as framework mostly for two reasons: it's easy to define a game in this system and to describe how it is played but what is more important I expect that this perspective, unusual for game studies, may be insightful and rewarding.

EU4 as a proposition

Europa Universalis IV is a real-time strategy game where a player retells history of the world from 1444 to 1821. Historical accuracy is not crucial (in fact it's impossible), although correspondence to historical facts is important and the player is required to have some historical knowledge to fully enjoy a playthrough. In EU4 facts implemented accordingly to historical knowledge of game designers have their representation in form of digits and other graphical symbols. The player picks a country in the world and directs its development by reading data and changing those he is allowed to change in return.

A game is developed as set of data, with code, assets and implemented rules. It is created by developers with intention to be executed by the players and to entertain the players. Developers have some expectations how the game should be played and they express them by implementing some possibilities and limiting other, but they don't have further control over process of playing the game. A game is then some sort of potentiality that may become actual by virtue of players actions, but it's not pure potentiality as the game was already made by developers as concrete set of rules and is limited by these rules.

I assume that in Whiteheadian ontology EU4 (like games in general) is a proposition. „It is a hybrid between pure potentialities and actualities. A 'singular' proposition is the potentiality of an actual world including a definite set of actual entities in a nexus of reactions involving the hypothetical ingression of a definite set of eternal objects.”¹ In translation from Whiteheadian to English this means that EU4 is a set of facts inspired by history (actual entities) implemented to imitate historical processes (nexus of reactions) that may be performed in a playthrough one way or another (the potentiality) to allow ingression of eternal objects, that is numbers, some shade of green, the

¹ PR 185-186

Empire, victory, etc., but also emotions, like curiosity or excitement. EU4 proposes some hypothetical situations that may be confronted with actual historical facts in interplay between actuality and fantasy to lure propositional feelings.

In Whiteheadian philosophy of organism reality is a complex system of actual occasions “drops of experience, complex and interdependent”². Actual occasions form complex nexuses and an event is a “nexus of actual occasions interrelated in some determinate fashion in one extensive quantum”³. A playthrough of EU4 is a nexus of actual occasions, an event extended in time, and includes “thinner” events like raise and fall of Ottoman Empire or a pee break. Each actual occasion prehends data from concrete actual occasions, from eternal objects or propositions in process of becoming actual. Prehension is a process of appropriation of data. In this process prehended data becomes objectified for the subjective aim of logical subject of prehension. When an actual occasion reaches its aim in satisfaction, it becomes concrete and may become an object of prehension by other actual entity in becoming. Each concurrent actual occasion mayprehend data from all concrete actual occasions and this process is called concrescence or “growing together”. Concrescence is a vital term for investigating idleness in EU4 because every playthrough on “microscopic level” is a concrescing process of occasions becoming actual. On “macroscopic level” a player experiences moving pictures displayed on the screen and hears music due to transmutation that is transformation of many simple perceptions into perception of one complex object. Talking about a playthrough or a player is abstracting them as objects which is useful, because at some point it’s necessary to explain role of consciousness or discuss if a playthrough without a player exists. But to understand what is happening in a playthrough it’s good to bear in mind “holistic background” behind these terms.

Recreating the proposition

EU4 was created to entertain players. Creating alternative histories of the world and confronting possibilities with actual facts gives pleasure to these players who find that proposition interesting. That allows me to describe playthrough of EU4 it in terms of aesthetic. In *A Whiteheadian aesthetic* Donald W. Sherburne argues that an art object “has ontological status of a proposition” and “performance of a work of art is an objectified proposition.”⁴ Sherburne also argues that: “A work of art is not merely a proposition, it is a proposition capable of exerting a unique sort of attraction. [...] The unique sort of attraction exerted by an art object concerns the subjective aim of prehension of it. The art object is an object intended by its maker, through its propositional character, to serve as a lure which will determine the subjective aim of prehension of it. That subjective aim becomes: to recreate in that process of self-creation, in that concrescing experience, the proposition which is objectified in the prehended performance.”⁵ Following Sherburne’s footsteps I assume that games are not physical entities, nor enduring objects, but like art objects they are ideal entities. They are created by developers as propositions and objectification eliminated in process of making a game is restored in a playthrough when the game is recreated. In case of EU4 the history of the world, a nexus of logical subjects, stops being “factor in the fact”⁶ when it inspires the developers to imitate it in game as set of possibilities with reference to actuality. Proposition is objectified again when a

² PR 27

³ PR 73

⁴ Sherburne 137

⁵ Sherburne 118

⁶ PR 394

player is recreating relations implemented by the developers, choosing between possibilities. There are two sets of possibilities in EU. The first one is set of alternate histories - a player recreates historical relations and facts implemented by the developers in reference to historical events. The second one is set of rules – a player decides what to do in reference actions allowed by the game. Significance of these sets depends on player's attitude. For sake of clarity I'll assume that most of the players will play EU4 to have fun with possible histories, and even if urge to win the game is important factor, exploring the rules just adds more fun to game of recreating the past. Multiplicity of data from sets of alternate histories and rules is integrated for one subjective aim (negatively or positively) and the proposition serves as a connector between possibility and actuality. For every player the proposition is formed by the developers in the same way, but every player has their own history and every player apprehends the proposition in a different way. In addition to propositional feelings lured by the game every player integrates in playthrough unique, personalized set of feelings that come from his memory, attitude, environment the game is played in, etc. Each act of recreation is unique.

But the player is not the only one who makes decisions in the playthrough. In EU4 majority of decisions does not depend on the player and they're unknown to him. Those decisions are made by the algorithm. The player may learn about them but he can't influence them directly. In addition the playthrough is always "on the run", so the player is always referring to past actualities held in memory. All the player can hope is to influence further decisions by entering his own data, but still it's impossible for him to control the whole performance. So for the player the playthrough is a loop of reading previous state of performance and responding with data input to realise new actualities in the future. Then a new actuality emerges and the player responds to it again. Gameplay loop is loop of making possibilities actual and from that actuality new proposition emerges. In one instance of the loop the proposition lures feelings, is objectified as performance and the playthrough creates new proposition to lure feelings again. New instance of the loop is different because it follows previous loop as its consequence, receives different set of initial data and includes new decision. Each instance of the loop - proposition -> objectification -> proposition - is a game within the game. The playthrough starts with proposition called "the game", but later is on its own and the player is constantly invited to participate in the process of creating it as a part of concrescence. Self-creation of the playthrough without the player is possible, because in Whiteheadian system the playthrough (concreasing actual occasions) is experiencing itself even when the player is not perceiving it (for example during a pee break).

All games are self-recreating themselves in a playthrough but EU4 is a specific example because it imitates concrescence in "macro scale". It builds simplified model of Whiteheadian reality on conceptual level of perception by showing large-scale events instead of actual occasions in becoming. What the player is experiencing are events "prehending" data from already finished "concrete" events, "ingression" of conceptualised eternal objects and "satisfaction" when the event ends. For example from player's point of view all diplomatic relations in the world of the game shape relations between countries on Iberian Peninsula and in North Africa and that leads to an event called "the war between Castile and Granada" and in consequence to another event called siege of Granada, with event "the Ottomans send their fleet and break port blockade" that emerges because the Ottomans finished their war with Serbia and accepted call for help in the war, but eventually Granada falls and the war ends. Normally what happens in "micro scale" is illustrated in "macro

scale” via transmutation.⁷ But transmutation is unification of similar, abstraction of an eternal object from plurality, not the magnifying glass for the actual world, so EU4 models reality by virtue of its design or in other words by virtue of how the proposition is formed. Design of the game imitates what is fundamental for nature, that is becoming, perishing, shaping “objective immortality” of past, prehending past occasions as objects for subjective aims of new actual occasions in becoming - creativity and causality. EU4 imitates history not only by relevance to historical facts, but by modeling passage of nature. At first glance it’s not relevant for the experience of the game because at cognitive level the player is not familiar with Whiteheadian metaphysics and can’t see the correspondence between “micro scale” and “macro scale”, but in framework of philosophy of process it matters after all because that correspondence is felt as harmony without cognition, that harmony increases intensity of experience.

Idleness and action

In essay “Form and actuality” Ivor Leclerc writes: “In Whitehead’s doctrine, the actuality not only exists ‘in the acting’ but it exists by virtue of acting. Its acting is its existing. ‘Acting’ is ‘being’ and ‘being’ is ‘acting’. In this identification of ‘being’ and ‘acting’ Whitehead is close to Aristotle.”⁸ In philosophy of organism “being” is “becoming” and “becoming” is an action. EU4 is then full of actions but I will not discuss becoming of actual occasions as actions. I’m interested in idle time and I’ll focus on player’s (and designer’s) perspective, on “macro scale”. So let’s take a closer look at single instance of gameplay loop in EU4 to describe actions and idleness. In a single instance of gameplay loop the player makes observations, then makes a decision and then gives some input using keyboard or mouse. Observation means perception in various modes and the most important for the playthrough is perception in the mode of symbolic reference - contrast of perception in the mode of presentational immediacy and perception in the mode of the causal efficacy. Perception in the mode of symbolic reference is an activity taken by the player to connect a symbol and its meaning, because “Considered by themselves the symbol and its meaning do not require either that there shall be a symbolic reference between that two, or that symbolic reference between the members of the couple should be one way on rather than the other way on.”⁹ That mode of perception is required to understand that patches of colour on the screen are pixels and to connect sounds in sequence to hear music, so it’s fundamental for playing the game.

Perception in mode of symbolic reference includes also cognitive perception and again it is connecting symbols with meanings. The player must actively interpret graphics on the screen and see the map, to understand that it’s the map of early Europe or to imagine armies crossing a border in a snowy day when an avatar is crossing a line or to feel excitement when Poland and Lithuania unite and word “Commonwealth” is displayed on the screen. What I call „idleness” is in fact mental activity required to build up meaningful game world. So what the player is bringing to the table in a playthrough is connection between symbols and meanings. The player is a conscious being, so he is able to apprehend a proposition and allow ingression of eternal objects. The game provides symbols and proposes possibilities, the playthrough is acting to rearrange symbols and possibilities and the player is acting to synthesize physical and hybrid feelings with eternal objects into the game world. In other words when transmuted propositional feelings are contrasted with physical feelings,

⁷ PR 253

⁸ Leclerc 179

⁹ Symb 9-10

imaginative feelings are synthesised. The player and the algorithm are working together to build up the game world out of imaginative feelings. Details of the game world are complemented by other feelings integrated by comparison, contrasts or intellect. Culture, nationality and education of the player plays huge role in it. Some players may connect Spanish conquistadors with abstract adventurousness, some with concrete tragedy of Native Americans, some may stay indifferent and see just a military units. Capable player may recreate something bigger, more interesting than initial proposition because it depends on his subjective aim, feelings he is integrating for that aim and meanings he attaches to symbols proposed by the game. Set of mental actions called "idleness" is followed by a decision. The player clicks on an element of the interface or presses a key. Purpose of this action is always to push the course of the playthrough in desired direction and renew the proposition. The player may choose what he thinks will lead him to victory or what is needed in given situation, or what fits his long term plans. In each case the choice enriches the playthrough because the decision is meaningful. The role of idleness in EU4 is to give the player enough time to create better, more meaningful game for him to enjoy.

Conclusion

In terms of Whiteheadian philosophy of organism game is a proposition, a hybrid of potentiality and actuality, impure ideal entity, objectified and recreated by the player. Process of recreation goes in loops of idleness followed by action taken by the player to give creative input to the playthrough. Phase of idleness is phase of mental activity given to build up meaningful game world. Action taken after idle time is richer with context, so loop of idleness and action helps to construct better "what would be" histories.

Game

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV. Paradox Interactive, PC, 2013

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