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The Role of Religious Buildings in Strategic Games

Rola budowli sakralnych w grach strategicznych

Abstract

Motifs drawing from Christianity are frequently present in digital games. This article examines one of the aspects utilized in this context—namely, the use of religious buildings such as churches, monasteries, or Orthodox churches in one hundred strategic games identified by GRYOnline.pl as the best for the Windows platform. The aim of the study was to identify and categorize the functional features of these buildings in the game space and to determine their roles. This allowed for an understanding of how such constructions are used within the narrative framework of conferring specific benefits. From the perspective of game mechanics, it does not matter whether a given resource is called „faith points” or another commodity, such as wood.

Keywords

digital games, church, strategic games, computer games, religious buildings

Abstrakt

Motywy czerpiące z chrześcijaństwa są często obecne w grach cyfrowych. W niniejszym artykule przyjrano się jednemu z wykorzystywanych aspektów, jakim jest wykorzystanie budynku sakralnego - kościoła, klasztoru lub cerkwi, w stu grach strategicznych określonych przez GRYOnline.pl mianem najlepszych na platformę Windows. Celem badania było wyłonienie i skategoryzowanie cech funkcjonalnych w przestrzeni gry budynków oraz określenie ich funkcji. Pozwoliło to na rozpoznanie jakie zastosowanie posiadają wspomniane budowle na płaszczyźnie nadania zdobywanym benefitom określonej formy fabularnej. Z poziomu mechaniki gry nie ma bowiem znaczenia czy określony zasób zostanie nazwany punktami wiary, czy innym surowcem, np. drewnem.

Słowa kluczowe

gry cyfrowe, kościół, gry strategiczne, gry komputerowe, budowle sakralne

1. Introduction

Digital games have become an integral and continuously evolving component of the media landscape (Bomba, 2009; Filiciak, 2006). By combining imagery, sound, and interactive participation in shaping or progressing through pre-designed content, they serve as a compelling medium for communication, image creation, idea promotion, attitude reinforcement, and narrative construction. This occurs not only due to the immersiveness of digital games (i.e., the user's ability to immerse themselves in virtual reality) but also due to its opposite, emergence, which provides an opportunity to complement the perspective on the poetics of digital games (Kubiński, 2016).

Driven by technological advancements and ongoing convergence, digital games have evolved into a distinct form of media. Their digital nature (Babecki, 2018) enables an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary exploration of their phenomenon. Some researchers even position digital games at the core of media content convergence (Chess & Consalvo, 2022).

The increasing digitisation and technological progress have made digital games widely accessible, embedding them within both culture and pop culture (du Vall & Majorek, 2014). Far from being a new phenomenon, games possess historical continuity, making them a relevant subject of interest for scholars in cultural heritage studies (Garda, 2014).

Digital games have seamlessly integrated into the contemporary media landscape, where virtual and digital realities coexist as equally tangible dimensions of human experience (Siwiak, 2016). The ongoing debate over the benefits and potential risks of digital games can, for the sake of simplification, be framed through Neil Postman's perspective on technology: *„Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but both at the same time”* (Postman, 1995, p. 13).

This discussion does not aim to determine which side of the balance digital games fall on. Instead, it highlights a fundamental characteristic of media: they serve as carriers of information and content, often exerting a profound influence on audiences. This very attribute has positioned digital games as a space for discourse, inquiry, and the construction or promotion of identities, ideologies, social groups, nations, ideas, products, and more.

One recurring theme in digital games is Christianity, broadly interpreted, particularly through sacred architecture. The concept of the Church as a community is evident in the *Castlevania* series (Mercury Steam Entertainment, 2010), where buildings and segments of the in-game society reflect a faith inspired by Christianity. However, in this series, Christianity is portrayed as an adversary—a destructive ideology.

A more prominent role is given to Christianity in the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2009), where the primary antagonists are members of the monastic Templar Order. In the second installment, the story unfolds in a meticulously recreated

15th-century Florence, with pivotal scenes taking place in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Fiore, a landmark that dominates the city's skyline throughout the game.

The presence of sacred architecture in digital games is sometimes linked to video game adaptation – the adaptation of literary content into video game format, much like the process of film adaptation.

Another striking example is the *Diablo* series, which explores the eternal struggle between the Burning Hells and the High Heavens. The game features demonic and angelic forces waging war across different realms, including the human-inhabited world of Sanctuary. One of the most significant locations in the storyline is the Cathedral in the city of Tristram, which serves as a central setting for the game's events.

These examples illustrate how sacred architecture frequently serves as a key setting in digital games, reinforcing their narrative and thematic depth.

The space of church buildings is frequently used as a setting in video games. For example, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky* (GSC Game World, 2008), events unfold inside St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church. A similar case occurs in *Metro Exodus* (4A Games, 2019), where a church serves not only as a narrative setting but also as a location for combat encounters. The use of sacred spaces in gameplay is also evident in World War II-themed titles such as *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2015, 2002), where a battle takes place inside a church.

Additionally, some games introduce controversial themes related to religious conflicts and exaggerated portrayals of stereotypes. A notable example is *Postal 2* (Running with Scissors, 2003), in which the protagonist is tasked with attending confession, only to be caught in the midst of a violent clash between followers of different religions.

In *Mafia: Definitive Edition* (Hangar 13, 2020)—a remake of *Mafia: The City of Lost Heaven*—one can observe a fascinating convergence of different media forms, including literature, film, and digital gaming. In both the novel and film adaptation of *The Godfather*, written by Mario Puzo and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, a key church scene takes place during a child's baptism. Similarly, in *Mafia: Definitive Edition*, a major shootout unfolds inside a church during a funeral in the eighth main mission, *The Saint and the Sinner*. Interestingly, in the original *Mafia: The City of Lost Heaven*, this sequence was divided into two separate missions, with the church segment originally titled *The Priest*.

The presence of sacred architecture in digital games is sometimes linked to video game adaptation – the adaptation of literary content into video game format, much like the process of film adaptation. A prime example is *The Inquisitor* (The Dust S.A., 2024), a game deeply inspired by Christian themes and directly referencing Jacek Piekara's *I, the Inquisitor* series (Piekara, 2003). Piekara's work constructs a pop-cultural fantasy world that engages with Christian motifs (Kulesza, 2014).

While Piekara's fiction incorporates extensive Christian imagery, it also introduces significant doctrinal alterations, reshaped to serve the game's narrative and world-building. Some scholars argue that these modifications provide material for interpretation and doctrinal comparison, while others maintain that such comparisons are unwarranted due to the lack of deeper theological intent (Kulesza, 2014).

The selection of the above examples does not constitute an objective research framework; rather, its purpose is to illustrate a broad spectrum of how Christian motifs are incorporated into digital games. This is particularly relevant given the ways in which representations of Christianity and the Church are disseminated through popular culture, which continues to reach an expanding audience. In 2022, gamers made up 67% of the Polish population (Bobrowski et al., 2022). The report *Different Faces of the Polish Gamer* (HP Inc Polska, 2023) further indicates that over 20 million people in Poland engage with video games.

The portrayal of specific themes, subjects, and entities in digital games has become an area of increasing academic interest. Existing studies have explored the depiction of children (Reay, 2021), time travel (Czyżak, 2023), death (Janion, 2018), Nordic culture (Szymański, 2021), war and the Polish military (Bednarz, 2017), and even zombies (Markocki, 2016; Mazurkiewicz, 2016). This study focuses on the representation of sacred architecture in selected strategy games.

For the purpose of this research, strategy games are defined as those that meet the following criteria:

1. They require planning and resource management to overcome an opponent, typically in a military or economic context.
2. They feature a distinct camera perspective—either top-down or angled—alongside an interface designed to facilitate strategic decision-making.
3. They emphasize *strategic* objectives that lead to measurable victory conditions.
4. This study does not distinguish between real-time strategy (RTS) and turn-based strategy (TBS) games, although such a classification could serve as an additional selection criterion.

The decision to focus on strategy games stems from the genre's frequent engagement with religious and Christian motifs. The primary objective of this research is to examine the role and function of buildings depicted as churches in selected strategy games.

2. Research Methodology

To select the research material, this study focused on the highest-rated strategy games for Windows PC according to the GRYOnline portal, without any time restrictions regarding the game's release year or the date of its rating. The dataset includes 100 titles, ranked by their „game rating” coefficient (GRYOnline.pl, 2024). The analysis of the collected material was conducted through firsthand gameplay or by reviewing playthroughs available on YouTube.

Given the diversity of gameplay styles, subgenres, and narrative structures, a qualitative analysis—incorporating elements of content analysis characteristic of media studies—was deemed the most appropriate approach. The categorization of the collected material was carried out on two levels. First, it was determined whether sacred structures appeared as part of the gameplay in a given title. Games featuring such elements were then further analyzed and classified based on how churches were integrated into the gameplay. Each category was illustrated with examples of games that fit within its framework. In some cases, the role of churches as in-game structures was more complex, leading to certain titles being assigned to multiple categories.

The examples were examined through free-form gameplay or standalone skirmish battles. Consequently, in each case, the construction of sacred buildings depended on player choices and was not a mandatory narrative element. As a result, this study does not specify the frequency of their use, such as distinguishing between fundamental and incidental appearances. Addressing this aspect would require further research on a broader dataset.

3. Research Results

Analysis of the collected material indicates that sacred buildings serve as playable elements in 21 out of the 100 ranked games. The term *sacred building* refers to structures such as monasteries, churches, Orthodox churches, chapels, and cathedrals, all of which share architectural and symbolic characteristics associated with Christian places of worship. However, these buildings are not merely static visual elements within the game environment; rather, they actively influence gameplay when voluntarily incorporated by the player.

The functions of these buildings in gameplay have been categorized as follows:

1. Military function
2. Social function
3. Resource production

Observations suggest that sacred buildings contribute to strategic advantages in two primary ways: either as structures that independently generate specific resources or effects, or as recruitment sites for specialized units, typically priests or monks. Some games combine both of these functions within a single structure.

The table below presents only the verified cases in which sacred buildings were confirmed to have an active gameplay function. This verification enabled their classification into the aforementioned categories. A detailed description of each function is provided, along with selected examples.

Table 1: List of games featuring a playable church building, compiled based the GRYOnline ranking of the best strategy games for Windows PC

Ranking Position	Game Title	Confirmed Presence of Religious Buildings	Military Application	Social Function	Resource Production
1	Europa Universalis IV	1	0	0	1
2	Heroes of Might and Magic III: The Restoration of Erathia	1	1	0	0
15	Sid Meier's Civilization V	1	0	1	0
18	Sid Meier's Civilization IV	1	0	1	0
20	Heroes of Might and Magic III: Złota Edycja	1	1	0	0
22	Heroes of Might and Magic III Complete	1	1	0	0
23	Sid Meier's Civilization V: Nowy Wspaniały Świat	1	0	1	0
32	Twierdza: Krzyżowiec HD	1	1	1	0
35	Napoleon: Total War	1	0	1	0
38	Europa Universalis II	1	0	0	1
47	Twierdza HD	1	1	1	0
49	Sid Meier's Civilization: Beyond Earth - Rising Tide	1	0	1	0
52	This War of Mine: The Little Ones	1	0	0	1
54	Magna Mundi: A Europa Universalis Game	1	0	1	0
58	Against the Storm	1	0	1	0
59	Empire: Total War	1	0	1	0
63	Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings	1	1	0	1
67	Medieval: Total War	1	0	1	0
68	Kozacy II: Bitwa o Europę	1	1	0	0
80	Age of Empires: Edycja Kolekcyjna	1	1	0	1
92	Twierdza: Krzyżowiec	1	1	1	0

An analysis of the results presented in the table reveals that several listed titles are sequels or different editions of existing games, including *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010), *Heroes of Might and Magic III* (New World Computing, 1999), *Stronghold HD* (Firefly Studios, 2012), and the *Total War* series. Notably, in two franchises—*Stronghold* and *Age of Empires*—churches play an equally significant role in both identified categories: military function and social function.

The **social function** refers to the influence of sacred buildings on gameplay through units present in or recruited from these structures. This impact is reflected in aspects such as public morale, population needs, religious expansion, and faith

development. These factors operate as in-game metrics that, upon reaching specific thresholds, affect gameplay by either facilitating or hindering player progression.

The **military function** encompasses both the defensive and offensive capabilities of sacred buildings, as well as their role in recruiting combat units. This includes the direct ability to engage in battle or indirectly influence encounters through mechanics such as healing allied troops.

Additionally, for the purpose of analysing the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, sacred buildings were classified under the social function. However, it is important to note that these games feature a highly developed system for achieving victory through religious dominance, in which church-related elements play a key role.

3.1 Military Application

The collected material indicates that sacred buildings can serve as recruitment sites for unique units, which may be utilised in combat, such as monks or priests. Depending on the game, these units possess distinctive characteristics. They may function as melee combatants, as seen in *Stronghold HD* (Firefly Studios, 2012), where the monk is depicted as an overweight man wielding a long staff and wearing a large pectoral cross on his chest. Alternatively, they may be ranged units, as in *Heroes of Might and Magic III* (New World Computing, 1999), where monks are dressed in long brown robes with hoods that cast shadows over their faces. Their upgraded form, the Priest, dons a navy-blue robe with gold embroidery. The upgrade enhances the Priest's strength, allowing for superior ranged attacks while eliminating melee attack penalties, which were a limitation of the base unit. Additionally, the upgraded Priest gains improved defence and attack statistics but requires approximately 12% more in-game resources—gold, the game's currency—for recruitment.

Military advantages can also be gained indirectly through units recruited in churches or monasteries. A notable example is the monks in *Age of Empires II* (Ensemble Studios, 2000), who can be recruited in a monastery or fortified church and possess two key abilities: healing allied units and converting enemy units to the player's side. However, they do not participate in combat as attackers. Instead, they serve as a crucial tactical element, as, under certain circumstances, they force the opponent to expend a greater amount of resources. It can be observed that units undergoing regeneration require the enemy to deal more damage to eliminate them. Recovering health points during battle prolongs a unit's functionality, which in turn affects the total damage it can inflict—effectively increasing its time in operation. Another example is the conversion of enemy units, which were originally produced using specific resources. Since the cost of these resources has already been incurred by the opponent, they not only lose the benefit of their investment but must also allocate additional units—and, in the event of losses, further resources—to eliminate the converted unit.

3.2 Social Function

Units recruited in religious buildings can influence social order by either increasing stability within their own territory or destabilising enemy-controlled areas. This occurs in *Empire: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2009) and *Napoleon: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2010). What consequences can this have? For example, it may lead to social uprisings, which, in turn, result in decreased production efficiency, hinder development, or cause the emergence of hostile units—designated within the game’s narrative as rebels—that attack cities or player-controlled infrastructure. These elements introduce additional challenges, requiring the redistribution or redirection of military forces. If a complex conflict is ongoing, this can significantly hinder gameplay. Churches can also serve to reduce hostility, functioning as a game mechanic that influences overall gameplay, as seen in *Against the Storm* (Eremite Games, 2023).

A well-developed religious system is evident in *Sid Meier’s Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010). The game allows for the construction of chapels, which become available upon unlocking the relevant technologies, as players guide a civilisation from prehistoric times through historical development. Over time, players choose which technologies to research and which cultural paths to pursue. By recruiting missionaries, inquisitors, and great prophets, they can convert other cities to their faith and diminish the influence of competing religions. Religion serves as a viable path to victory, equivalent to technological, diplomatic, or military triumphs.

But how can one achieve victory through religion? The key lies in converting all other civilisations before any opponent secures an alternative win condition, such as technological dominance, diplomatic superiority, or military conquest.

The analysis also identifies an example in which chapels, churches, and cathedrals increase the ruler’s (player’s) popularity and fulfil a societal need, as seen in *Stronghold: Crusader HD* (Firefly Studios, 2012).

The analysis also identifies an example in which chapels, churches, and cathedrals increase the ruler’s (player’s) popularity and fulfil a societal need, as seen in *Stronghold: Crusader HD* (Firefly Studios, 2012). Constructing these buildings improves public satisfaction, which in turn allows for governance strategies that might otherwise lower morale, such as raising taxes or imposing fear—both of which influence productivity. The overarching objective of these strategies is to establish a robust economic foundation. Through efficient production, financial reserves, and resource

accumulation, players can respond to enemy actions by adapting unit production to counter an opponent's forces or securing victory through superior offensive capabilities, whether in quality or quantity.

3.3 Resource Production

In strategy games, buildings that generate specific resources are a common feature. A classic example is the sawmill, which provides wood—an essential material for constructing buildings and producing units, as seen in *Heroes of Might and Magic III* (New World Computing, 1999). Analysis has shown that sacred buildings can serve a similar function, though their role is often less explicitly defined than that of traditional resource-generating structures.

One key resource in many games is tax revenue. In *Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox Development Studio, 2013), churches can increase tax income, with the effect quantified as a percentage based on the building's level. This differs from the indirect economic impact observed in *Stronghold: Crusader HD*, where churches influence the economy by affecting factors such as population satisfaction. In *Europa Universalis IV*, however, the financial benefit is a direct function of the structure's existence rather than a tool for shaping broader economic decisions.

Sacred buildings may also serve as storage sites for resources that aid gameplay progression. A notable example appears in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (11 bit studios, 2016). In this game, players take on the role of civilians struggling to survive during World War II, making critical decisions about acquiring essential resources. Churches serve as potential supply caches, but accessing them often involves moral dilemmas such as theft, which carries psychological consequences. Unlike typical resource-producing structures, churches in this context provide a one-time supply tied to the game's narrative.

Another significant resource is faith points, which act as a form of currency in games such as *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010). Accumulating *faith points* allows players to establish pantheons, recruit religious units, and pursue a religious victory. Constructing religious districts, chapels, and churches enhances faith point generation, reinforcing their strategic importance in shaping a civilisation's spiritual and political influence.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

Scholars observe that fundamental human experiences can manifest within popular culture, including various media (Majewski & Kokoszczynska, 2020). Rather than opposing popular culture, religion can, in many cases, coexist with and even complement it. Consequently, media—including digital games—serve as a powerful platform for communicating messages and values significant from a Christian perspective. However, the functional use of religious elements in digital games, such as

the sacred buildings analysed in this study, raises questions about their place within the realms of the sacred and the profane. Although this discussion does not specifically focus on strategy games, it aligns with broader debates initiated by M. Eliade as early as 1949 (Eliade, 2020).

As elements of the profane, media such as video games play a substantial role in shaping public perceptions, but they also risk oversimplifying religious doctrine and trivialising faith (Leśniczak, 2023). On the other hand, they may encourage players to engage with religious themes and even deepen their understanding—or perhaps their faith—through independent exploration and reflection.

Regardless of the role that sacred buildings fulfil in strategy games, their inclusion is dictated by game mechanics—the pursuit of specific objectives, resources, attributes, or units. Ultimately, their presence aligns with the measurable victory conditions defined within each game. Put simply, when a player constructs a sacred building, they do so with the expectation of a tangible return on investment in the form of strategic advantages.

Regardless of the role that sacred buildings fulfil in strategy games, their inclusion is dictated by game mechanics—the pursuit of specific objectives, resources, attributes, or units.

The examined examples link sacred buildings to military functions and social mechanics, either reinforcing public order or disrupting it. Religion also emerges as a path to victory, functioning as a calculated balance of competition, gains, and losses. Clerical figures in strategy games are often associated with abilities such as healing and strengthening units—mechanics more commonly found in RPGs. Additionally, certain games, such as *This War of Mine*, introduce moral dilemmas into gameplay. In this case, the church—explicitly identified as “Our Lady’s Church”—becomes a key location in the player’s journey, mirroring the role of religious spaces in non-strategy games discussed earlier.

The presence of Christian themes in digital games presents significant research potential. While this study focuses on sacred buildings in strategy games, this is merely one aspect of a much broader phenomenon. Nevertheless, even within this limited scope, discernible patterns emerge, offering a framework for interpreting games such as *Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Development Studio, 2020) and *Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox Development Studio, 2013), where religion functions as a mechanism for maintaining public order, justifying wars, structuring political organisation, or asserting diplomatic dominance. However, these representations

often omit what lies at the heart of Christianity—its spiritual values and moral dimensions. Within these games, faith is reduced to a numerical or material resource, serving as a means to episodic success or as currency exchanged for strategic advantages.

It is also worth considering how these resources are framed within game mechanics. In gameplay, acquiring specific points is essential, yet their designation—whether as *faith points* or another term—is determined by the narrative context. A striking example is *Total War: Warhammer III* (Creative Assembly, 2022), where different factions collect various resources: gold (human factions), favour (Chaos Warriors), or dark magic reserves (Vampire Counts). Despite their distinct names, these resources function identically, serving as interchangeable currencies of equal value. This raises a fundamental question: why are Christian themes and religious faith compelling enough to be integrated into game narratives?

As a growing and influential medium, digital games warrant closer examination in terms of how they portray the Church and Christianity—not only as a narrative theme but also as institutions, characters, and communities with extensive histories, doctrines, values, and spiritual objectives. Furthermore, fantastical reinterpretations of Christian motifs—whether direct or symbolic—remain deeply intertwined with cultural perceptions of faith, reinforcing their significance within the medium of digital games.

Ludography

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