

Fact and Fiction in Video Games: How much fiction is needed for good design?

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Introduction

"In Rejack's analysis (2007, 413), it is suggested that the act of playing video games has increasingly resembled reenactment. Chapman further discusses how both heritage and reenactment within games can create perceptual similarities between historical agents and players, but emphasizes that reenactment also leverages the interactive nature of gaming environments to present unique exploratory challenges (Chapman 2016, 198). The objective of this presentation is to explore, using a case study, the impact of ethical considerations in reality construction on the narrative design strategy of a historical game. We will present the design process and the manner how the video game can reflect on the historical events with accuracy and authenticity. Kapell and Elliott (2013) distinguish between authenticity, which focuses on capturing the experience and expectations of the past, and accuracy, which involves ensuring historical facts are correct (Kapell and Elliott 2013, 361). Additionally, to this distinction, Mochocki (2021) highlights the close relationship between players' perception of authenticity in heritage sites presented within the game and their sense of immersion which we will also point out in our case study presentation.

About the game design process

The video game *Follow the Crown* (2022) was developed by a small video game developer team from Hungary, as the team received a grant from the US Embassy of Budapest with the aim to develop a video game for the 100th anniversary of the Hungarian-US diplomatic relations. We have chosen a controversial theme that encompasses several decades: the Holy Crown of Hungary (an important symbol of the Hungarian state) was smuggled out from the country at the end of the 2nd World War and was kept in Fort Knox (US) until the seventies when diplomatic relations between the two countries stabilized enough to enabled the return of the Crown Jewels.

The game was primarily envisioned to showcase a story that relates to both the US Embassy and the Hungarians in an interesting way, but also proposed several unique challenges. How do we make the rather dry topic of diplomacy engaging for a younger audience and how do we show a complex political situation that spans decades and needs a significant amount of historical context?

As this was aimed to be an exposition and story heavy game, early on it was decided that some kind of choice based visual novel-esque game will suit the narrative best, as we could delegate information to different characters and involve the player through guided choices. We envisioned that dividing the game into two, separate gameplay types that the player switches between to provide variation and avoid player fatigue, might be more engaging. The first gameplay type works as a real time stealth-tactics game set during WW2 and the player takes the role of a Crown Guard with the objective to smuggle the Crown out from Hungary, while the second gameplay is set in the 60s and we play as the US ambassador. This section is entirely narrative-driven, with the player interacting with a dialogue system and various non-playable characters to find and return the Crown. The stealth gameplay took inspiration from *Partisans 1941* and *Volume*, while the narrative driven aspect was inspired by games like *Gamedec* and *Stasis*.

Our goal was to sacrifice as little historical authenticity as possible, to ensure we remained faithful to the era, but also to make these situations as plausible as possible. The focus was to create gameplay that works both in narrative and gameplay heavy chapters with simple controls, so a top-down player perspective was chosen. Similarly, to any other historical story, we had to figure out which events and elements they could include, which elements need to be combined or omitted for narrative reasons. The narrative had to offer meaningful player experience: the player had to solve challenges to continue the story. The player took the role of a diplomat as a sort of mediator that had to talk to all parties and ensure the best outcome. This happened through the dialogue system which allowed some flexibility and player expression, but ultimately guided the player into one specific outcome. Creating dialogue that feels varied, but also forces the player down a certain path proved to be extremely challenging. The game had over a dozen NPCs, and we used these characters both to tell the story and to provide historical exposition.

On Accuracy and Authenticity – self-reflective approach

Balela and Mundy (2015) lists several concerns in regard of cultural representation, including the one of “hollywoodisation and beautification” - according to which game designers are more likely to have been driven by aesthetics, as much as by game dynamic – resulting in stylized game environments that are also more immersive. Although in order to maintain the desired level of accuracy we had to detour from some aspects of the historical events: we included counterfactual happenings so the game includes a “hollywoodisation” effect, too. Throughout the design process, we explored how the player could exert influence on historical events. We ultimately made the decision not to incorporate this aspect into the gameplay, but we included an authoritative figure who always made orders and makes sure that the player is responsible only for execution.

In order to create an engaging gameplay experience a story that involves both war and political intrigue was created and we added a stealth-puzzle gameplay, which resulted in developing two different games simultaneously – which proved to be a mistake as we did not assess correctly our target audience.¹

Ethical reflection

As mentioned above the video game offered only local agency and there was no opportunity to choose between the various political ideologies, but rather the player had to *live it through*; we did not want to generate political debate, but rather to offer moments of commemoration. The U.S. Embassy did not interfere at any moment with the story or character development.

Conclusion

In our case study presentation, we aim to uncover how the complexity of the historical events had to be broken down in order not to confuse the player. We'll point out specific parts of the development process where the backstory information had to be carefully balanced for the same reason. We will present counterfactual story elements with the aim to make a case for the necessity of some amount of fictionalization pointing out the choices that affects authenticity and accuracy. The video game did not reach a major number of players, but through studying it we can highlight the ethical dilemmas concerning how blurring the line between history and reality can affect historical understanding.

References

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ⁱ Here is important to mention that an essential lesson for us is the necessity of customizing games to cater specifically to their intended audience (also because some audience groups had trouble engaging with certain game mechanics), prioritizing their engagement over historical accuracy.