From Superhuman to Posthuman: Collective action in single-player video games

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INTRODUCTION

Although revolutions are by definition collective actions aiming to replace one governing power with another one, they do allow for the experience of individual heroism and agency – quite in line with many mainstream video games' fascination with the neoliberal ethos (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 69) that it entails. The present paper explores representations of revolutions in single-player video games, based on the assumption that recently a significant shift has been taking place in how collective action is being simulated in single-player games. The paper offers a comparative procedural analysis of two games that address the collective aspect of revolutions in single-player mode: a AAA title, *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft Toronto 2020) and an independent game with a seemingly different subject matter, *Road '96* (DigixArt 2021). The paper focuses on the dynamic relationship between the narrative and gameplay features of the two games, ultimately arguing that in order to formulate political agency, player agency – "as the possibility space for meaningful choice expressed via player action, afforded and constrained by a game's design" (Bódi 2021, 39) – needs to be significantly reduced in favour of what might be called a dispersed, partial, situated posthuman agency.

HEROES

What Sebastian Domsch famously designates as the primary appeal of games at an individual level – the lure of agency; the game's dependence on player choices (Domsch 2013, 3) – is quite in line with the understanding of revolutionary moments, which, at a societal scale, bear the same promise. It is therefore not surprising that revolutions are frequent subject matters of games from any genre and category. High budget-titles, such as a number of elements from the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, the *Dishonored* series or even *Detroit: Become Human* focus on these moments of extraordinary political agency – "the capacity to positively influence the collective future through transformative change" (O'Brien 2015) – and translate them to the level of individual player agency. In most of these games the avatar is presented as the prime mover of social change – usually white men in hegemonic positions (see Tompkins and

Martins 2022), and the games tend emphasise the special skillset and insight of the player's avatar, positioning him as an exceptional, chosen one. Parallel to that, gameplay features such as parkour, stealth, or even the ability to make life-or-death decisions respectively, just as well as the mostly open-world nature of these games that encourage free exploration (see Murray 2017) endow players with a strong sense of in-game agency. Both *Watch Dogs: Legion* and *Road '96* seem to challenge this dominant narrative of revolutions, but to a different degree and with varying results.

LEGION

Set in a high-tech fully explorable version of London in the near future, Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs: Legion* explicitly addresses posthumanism as a theme that appears on the level of plot in terms of body enhancement technologies and of ultimately leaving the human body behind. The game was advertised by a very unique game mechanic feature that gives the player the chance to recruit anyone of any gender, race, age, background, and then swap between the operatives based on their specific, but limited skillsets as needed. Hence the game can also be considered posthuman inasmuch as it challenges "the centrality of Man" (Braidotti 2019, 17) – that is, of the Western modernist male subject – on the level of gameplay. Five minutes into the game, after the death of the first player character, MI5 agent Dalton Wolfe, who happens to be aligned with Braidotti's "humanist" coordinates, the player has to choose from five, distinctly ordinary recruits from all walks of life. Along with that comes the ability to hijack and control any electronic device (drones, CCTV, bots). What Solberg (2022) calls "cyborg vision" – the combination of human and machine seeing – is therefore paralleled with the embodied perspectives of multiple human agents. The finale of the main storyline underlines the same idea: in order to triumph, the player has to alternate between two agents at the same time. The limited, situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) of the characters and hijackable machines, however, still endow the player with an extreme sense of agency and superiority: as she is the one who is capable of manipulating this multifaceted skill set and points of view, even though the playable characters have to cooperate, the player can still win a revolution single-handedly.

THE ROAD TAKEN

Independent games have a long tradition of challenging traditional, heroic visions of individual agency that are often found in AAA titles (Juul 2019, 172). In line with that, *Road 96* radically critiques the significance of the individual in social changes. Set in a fictitious, dictatorial version of the United States, the player controls a name- and bodiless teenager who tries to make it to the border and flee the country. Against the suffocating system, the American dream of social and spatial mobility and the inalienable freedom of choice is put forward, which is epitomised by being on the road (Wallis and Waldmire 2012, xiii). This freedom of the road is simulated by the 146,000 choices that the game offers, the playfulness of inconsequential minigames or the procedurally emerging chapters of the road – despite the strong branching narrative. Once the player helps her avatar through the border, she realizes that the objective of the game was not to help a single teenager at all, but to turn around the impending election of the country.

On the one hand, there is a sense of community and collective action, which is supported by the symbol of the stone cairn that can be built one stone per avatar at a fixed point of their escape route, but it is also present in the game mechanics as acquired skills can be inherited from avatar to avatar. At the same time, the fragmented, situated perspectives of the respective avatars do not promote a sense of expanded player agency, as seen in *Watch Dogs: Legion.* The player is not granted a perspective that exceeds that of the consecutive avatars as she cannot swap between them – her stance,

tied in with that of the avatar, in spite of the incredible number of possible choices to be made, remains incomplete and fragmentary. This idea is further underlined by the fact that the player's avatar is not the protagonist of either the game narrative or the revolution, and even though their fate might vary, it barely affects the narrative that emerges for the player. The game puts forward a clear procedural argument inasmuch as player choices that are geared towards not involving the avatar in collective concerns and "minding our own business" invariably lead to the worst possible scenarios – both for the country and the individuals involved. Even though individual avatar significance and agency is reduced and the game mechanics do not allow the player to transcend this situated perspective, the meaningful decisions that the player can make suggest that the everyman of the revolution can also make a difference: a complex, posthuman sense of agency emerges that is fundamentally reliant on collective action and promotes cooperation and withdrawal instead of individual heroism.

CONCLUSION

Revolutions – just as well as video games in general – engage with the temporary liberation of the imagination (Marcuse 1989) in terms of what is conceivable and what is off limits. As it has been demonstrated, recent revolution themed games considerably reframe individual involvements in collective action. While both *Watch Dogs: Legion* and *Road '96* shift the focus from the singularity of the "humanist subject" to the fragmented, partial, multiple posthuman ones, the former, due to its gameplay features, still bestows an extreme sense of agency upon the player, framing collective action as individual achievement. *Road '96,* in contrast, renders political agency at the collective level imaginable by radically decreasing player agency, hence exploring the shapes political resistance may take.

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