We. The Revolution: Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Authenticity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the game, *We. The Revolution* (2019) and considers how the depiction of oppression and upheaval in the early French Revolutionary period is represented. We specifically consider how the game blends, adapts and utilizes history within its gameplay elements to convey modern-day perceptions of the French Revolution but also the complex, nuanced and shifting interpretations of the historical account. The analysis uses a framework developed by the authors (2020) to consider how decisions made during production shape the historical perspective of the player and therefore how the game negotiates historical representation, prioritizing authenticity and account over accuracy to evoke the atmosphere and moral complexities of the French Revolution.

The concepts of accuracy and authenticity have been extensively discussed in academic literature on historical video games (Champion 2011; Elliot and Kapell 2013; Apperley 2013; Shaw 2015; Copplestone 2015; Chapman 2016; Hammar 2017; Stirling and Wood 2021; Authors 2020; Burgess and Jones 2022; Wright 2022). While these terms are often used interchangeably in public discourse, they address different aspects of historical representation. In this paper we consider accuracy as referring to factual fidelity, including adherence to documented historical events, timelines, and material culture. Authenticity, on the other hand, emphasizes the complex, moral, emotional and thematic resonance, aiming to capture the perceived "feel" of a historical period rather than its precise details. Elliott and Kapell (2013) argued that accuracy in video games involves the representation of tangible historical elements, such as architecture, clothing, and weaponry. Chapman (2016) emphasized the importance of both the player-historian and developer-historian in how historical elements are interpreted and layered. Wright (2024) has demonstrated that there is

an inherent "slipperiness and subjectivity [that] results in the need to understand authenticity not as an inherent property of a game but as a claim made on behalf of it by someone (developer, marketer, reviewer, player, etc.) that might be received positively or negatively." It is these claims and how they are interpreted by each of these groups that this paper focuses on for *We. The Revolution*.

AAA Games like the *Assassin's Creed* franchise or the historical variants of the *Battlefield* franchise can present their authenticity through their high-budget and high-production values. Detailed recreations of historical environments make it easier to allow players to alter historical outcomes or create ahistorical scenarios. They persuade players that the game is accurate and an authentic representation through high-fidelity 3D models, immersive audio and Hollywood-paced game loops, even though they embed clearly fictional narratives within these spaces. For Indie games, such as *We. The Revolution,* where gameplay, art style and audio are not aiming for hyper-realism, game design and storytelling techniques allow players to play with and rewrite history, by prioritizing engagement with the historical processes over chronological fidelity.

We. The Revolution exemplifies the interplay between accuracy and authenticity in historical video games. Developed by Polyslash, the game is set in Paris during the early period of the French Revolution. Players assume the role of a fictional judge, Alexis Fidèle, in the Revolutionary Tribunal, tasked with deciding the fates of citizens accused of crimes against the Revolution. Through its gameplay and narrative, *We. The Revolution* explores themes of justice, power, and morality, offering a lens into the complexities of revolutionary France. The game's narrative climaxes are spread across a multitude of different environments, such as the courtroom, at home, and through arranged conversations. In each space, players assert dominance and influence over important figures as they navigate the delicate power structures in society. The result is a multi-faceted simulation that is loosely reflective of the Revolutionary Tribunal – a court established in 1792 to process politically-driven crimes – and the political and social complexities of French oppression and upheaval on the role of Fidèle as the reflection of the judiciary system. (McCall 2019).

The game's visual and narrative design emphasizes authenticity over historical accuracy. Its distinctive polygonal-inspired art style, combined with a color palette inspired from artwork of the revolutionary period, helps capture the period (Suther 2019). Whereas the gameplay and moral dilemmas presented through the court cases help to present the uncertainty and fear that permeated the era. The narrative integrates historical references, including nods to key figures like Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton, while portraying the political instability and shifting alliances of revolutionary France. This atmospheric fidelity fosters a sense of immersion and plausibility. In doing so, *We. The Revolution* takes significant liberties with historical accuracy. The protagonist's role as a judge blends elements of historical reality and creative fiction. Revolutionary Tribunals were real institutions tasked with trying suspected enemies of the Revolution, but the game dramatizes the judge's influence and agency for narrative impact. Players can manipulate public opinion, navigate political factions, and engage in personal vendettas, all of which reflect the moral ambiguities of power rather than historical judicial processes. This approach prioritizes player engagement and ethical decision-making over adherence to documented historical practices.

The game's portrayal of justice during the Revolution is particularly notable. Players must navigate the tension between individual morality and collective ideology, deciding cases that impact not only the accused but also their relationships with revolutionary factions, the public, and their own family. This dynamic illustrates the precariousness of authority and survival in a revolutionary context, even as it departs from historical realism. By foregrounding these dilemmas, the game captures the essence of the revolution as a period of ideological extremism and human vulnerability.

We. The Revolution demonstrates how historical video games can balance accuracy and authenticity to create compelling experiences. While it frequently sacrifices factual fidelity for narrative and thematic depth, it succeeds in evoking our modern-day perceptions of the atmosphere and moral complexities of revolutionary France. This approach aligns with academic scholarship that view historical video games as interpretive mediums, capable of fostering emotional and intellectual engagement with the past. By prioritizing authenticity, *We. The Revolution* invites players to reflect on universal tensions between justice, power, and survival in times of societal upheaval, contributing to the broader cultural memory of the French Revolution.

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