“Default” Leadership – Critiquing Normative Leader Identities in Single-Player Videogames

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Dragon Age: The Veilguard (BioWare 2024) begins like many role-playing games: on the character-creation screen. Here, players decide their character’s gender, class, professional affiliations, and select one of a handful of fantasy races. These choices alter some aspects of the game, changing the character’s reputation with certain NPCs and opening dialogue options that are only available to characters of specific classes or races. There is, however, a central element that they do not affect: leadership. The player-character will always be installed as the Veilguard’s singular leader figure and, no matter their background – elf or dwarf, member of the Veiljumpers or Antivan Crows – they will always lead in the same way. Consequently, *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*, like many videogames, elides the complexity of how identity and culture influence leadership practice.

Leadership is a common theme in single-player videogames, but little analysis has examined the topic and even less has explored the connections between leadership, identity, and culture. This project builds on a previous DIGRA presentation that advanced the Player-Leader Heuristic (PLH), a conceptual toolkit developed to support the examination of leadership representations in single-player videogames (Maier-Zucchino 2024). Methodologically, I use the PLH as a lens to conduct hermeneutic analysis (Tanenbaum 2011), organizing data according to Consalvo and Dutton’s game analysis toolkit (2006) to perform a comparative reading of three case studies: *Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales* (CD Projekt Red 2018), *Frostpunk* (11 bit studios 2018), and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*. These games feature player-characters that take on an explicit position of leadership, but each presents this character in distinct ways. *Thronebreaker* features a predetermined protagonist, Queen Meve, while *Frostpunk* has players take on the disembodied role of The Captain, and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* represents Rook, a character whose background players create themselves. This provides a useful set of differences to examine how distinct game styles represent, contextualize, and simulate the leader identity. Rather than conducting a deep analysis of each game, I focus on

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examining a small number of key elements from each case study to illuminate overarching trends and relevant distinctions.

Leadership studies scholars emphasize that the practice of leadership is a contingent process that is imbricated with contextual and personal factors such as cultural values, race-ethnicity, and gender (Gram-Hanssen 2021; Ospina and Foldy 2009). Thus, people's intersectional identities inform how they engage with, practice, and relate to leadership. Despite this, many regressive understandings of leadership persist in popular discourse, implicitly reinforcing normative values such as individualism and rigid hierarchy. These "zombie" theories (Haslam et. al 2024) associate leaders with a default identity: white males (Ladkin and Bridges Patrick 2022). In truth, however, there is no "default" form of leadership and no single list of traits that describe a "good" leader. There is no such thing as value-neutral leadership (Dugan 2017, p. 8), but there is also no such thing as leadership that exists outside of culture, whether that culture is national, organizational, or communal.

Despite this research, the case studies discussed in this project rarely, if ever, engage with leadership in this contingent manner. *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* allows players to occasionally access dialogue options unique to their character's identity, but the broader structure of leadership never changes. How relationships form with companions and the types of actions that players perform as the Veilguard's "leader" always conform to well-worn logics of role-playing games, conventions that have been shown to reify neoliberal values of quantification and risk management (Baerg, 2012; Voorhees, 2012).

The city-building management game *Frostpunk*, features a character with a vaguely defined subject position. Identified simply as "The Captain," the player-character is largely disembodied as players take a bird's-eye view of a city whose safety they are responsible for ensuring in a post-apocalyptic frozen wasteland. Securing this safety requires extracting natural resources, constructing beneficial buildings, and making decisions about which laws to enact and how to ensure stable governance. Through this dynamic, I argue that *Frostpunk* encourages players to adopt a paternalistic and utilitarian leadership perspective in which they wield power as a singular authority figure.

In contrast, *Thronebreaker*, a role-playing and strategic card game, features some engagement with leadership as a contingent process. The player-character, Queen Meve is situated as the monarch of the fictional medieval kingdom Lyria. As a pre-written character, the narrative occasionally acknowledges Meve's position, contextualizing her access to power within the cultural norms of medieval monarchy. However, most of the decisions the player makes as Queen Meve affect her access to three key resources: gold, lumber, and recruits. As such, these decisions are often couched in the logics of resource management, turning many of the game's moral quandaries into questions of balancing resource stockpiles. Consequently, although these case studies appear to depict leadership through a variety of gameplay mechanics such as engaging in dialogue with companions, establishing laws in a society, or deciding the fate of NPCs, they ultimately collapse the leader role into a simplistic structure that reifies masculine values of individualism, hierarchy, and utilitarianism.

Embodying a leadership position can be an intoxicating gameplay context, underscoring the player's sense of agency and responsibility as they make decisions that affect virtual worlds. Yet scholars have critiqued the authoritarian values embedded in game design that emphasizes the player's singular agency (Jennings 2022). By consistently replicating commonsense leadership structures and reinforcing masculine values, videogame designers risk limiting players' experience of leadership to a single "default" framework

that relies on hierarchy and the abstraction of game worlds into a collection of resources to be accumulated. There are alternatives to this framework, ranging from the resistance of feminist political collectives (Penha-Vasconcelos 2025) to non-hierarchical communal structures from indigenous cultures (Eyong 2017; Rosile et al. 2018) among others. This project argues that presenting such diverse leadership cultures and identities in single-player videogames is not a burden or a problem to solve, but an opportunity to create subversive, surprising, and pleasurable play experiences. To understand leadership as being inextricably connected to identity and culture is to imagine new futures and possibilities for social interaction in single-player videogames.

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