

Harnessing Interactive Media Ideological Power. *A Disempowerment Model for Video Games*

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ABSTRACT

In the era of participatory culture, the idea of an empowered user, able sculpt its own media experience has been established as the ideal role to be fulfilled by consumers. Through the analysis of video games that deal with controversial subjects, I will question the defense of pop culture and entertainment media depoliticization, contrasting it with this ideal of an empowered user as an ideological position in and on itself. The qualitative approach is extended in the reunion of focus groups, where the discussion moves to the medium potentialities which are left to be activated because of the necessity of agency as empowerment, and the power structures it reinforces. To understand the underlying modulation and what is to be gained from its subversion, we not only had to identify the missing in-game pieces, but also question the tendencies of the industry, thus considering the transformation of the video game experience as well as the transformation of the medium itself with the activation of its poetic potential.

Introduction: Games and Gaming Culture as Systems

For several decades, both scholarly and popular discourses about video games were dominated by technophobic narratives. As the usual reaction to technological novelties and their liminal status on the existing frames of thought, these narratives stressed the hypodermic power of new media and their imagery, especially among younger demographics (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). With their acceptance as an object of a legitimate field of study, there was a shift in the attention of scholars, moving the discussion away from strong effects to weak or non-existing ones (Ferguson, 2014) and, at the expense of a closure of the playing instance, their benefits.

Though necessary to their legitimation as an object of study, the impermeabilization of the “magic circle” boundaries quickly became a hot topic for debate within the field (Stenros, 2012), with critics pointing out the structuralist nature of

the separation (Consalvo, 2009). Despite the turmoil, Zimmerman (2012) himself, whose 2004's book on design brought the concept from Huizinga and Caillois' works on play to video games' studies, denied the closed character of the sphere. Games are, besides "mathematical systems", "social" and "representational systems". Therefore, depending on the approach, they can be seen as closed (considering their purely formal ludic structure, which is refutable), open (as cultural systems) or even semi-open (experiential dimension) (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

This configuration required a more nuanced approach to their power and, in this context, Jenkins' (2006, p. 210) distinction between the focus on "effects" and on "meanings" gained significance. Calling for an "active interpretative effort", "meanings can be analyzed critically", enabling the simultaneous recognition of video games' benefits and their power reinforcing and legitimizing certain ways of thinking and moral values (Bogost, 2007, p.283). Besides, the creation of meaning on a video game doesn't depend only on the technology in and of itself but on a complex of socio-economic interactions and "feedback loops" (Mäyrä, 2014), that precede, accompany and follow their experience, promoting certain choices, judgments, and the crystallization of certain meanings to the detriment of others.

Interactivity as Ideology: The Medium, The Message, The Meaning

There's a clear link between rhetoric and ideology, so much so that one could think of the former as a discursive medium for the latter. Rhetoric, as defined by Sutton Smith (2001 pp.8-9) is a "persuasive discourse or implicit narrative wittingly or unwittingly adopted by the members of a particular affiliation", "popular ways of thought, which construct the meanings of the cultures we live in". Ideology, in turn, may be described as a "set of explicit and implicit, even unspoken ethico-political (...) decisions, choices, which predetermine our perception of facts, what we tend to emphasize or to ignore, how we organize facts into a consistent whole (Žižek 2013).

With a permeable sphere of production and consumption, media images are, thus, inherently ideological, as they contain, in their depictions, certain "constructs" about the world and its "social objects". The frames, concepts and classifications for how to perceive a certain reality will be part of the player's "knowledge store", where they'll be interwoven with those obtained through other means, becoming

more accessible and, as such, more poignant the more the player is exposed to similar content (William et.al., 2009 p.819). They are imbued with “ideas and meanings, that are shaped socially, on their production and use” (Sotamaa, 2014).

Despite the mathematical character of virtualization and the ideal of medium transparency, software procedurality itself will have an “expressive power” (Bogost, 2007). Whether consciously or not, games are a medium carrying messages from those who created it, which reflect, say something about and will act upon the culture they’re in. As possibly unintended and often unperceived, the rhetorical apparatus fueled through and by pop culture is often claimed as non-existent, and its objects coined as apolitical, unbiased, unserious. Contrarily, this occlusion, that leads to an illusion of absence of power, combined with the authority exerted by commercial games over the consumer may work in favor of the persuasiveness and pervasiveness of their rhetorics (Bogost, 2007, p. 49).

Therefore, identifying a certain rhetoric as being dominant in the context of gaming is also recognizing its ideological framing. At the same time, the discourses which dictate its placement within “broader value systems” (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 9) will be in a co-productive relationship with how play manifests itself. This means that the same concepts used to talk about play and games around their “borders” may be used to analyze what happens within, and what happens within may be analyzed in relation to the social dynamics they’re embedded in.

Example of this dynamic, the cleansing of videogames technophobic stigmatization came through their pedagogical framing in a rhetoric of progress, focused on their effects over children’s physical reflexes and cognitive problem-solving skills. Considering the meanings embodied by this rhetoric, we can identify its transition to the adult world through what is called gamification, which refers to the adoption of the goal-oriented action, rewarding achievements and punishing failure, by the capitalist system, either on consumption or production.

So, in capitalism, as in the interactive setting of a game and in the ideal of interactivity itself, the taming of the consumerist subject walks side by side with a carefully crafted illusion that, despite the mass produced and consumed culture, and the dangers of passive indoctrination by capitalism’s power relations and dynamics (Mäyrä, 2014), the individual is not erased, but rather the gravitational point of these economic cycles.

Video Games As A Post-Modern Medium

This desire for interactivity can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the first dwellings into the ideal “open work of art” promoted the reader/spectator/listener to the role of its co-producer. At first referred as such metaphorically, as to highlight the importance of the interpretative effort on the creation of meaning, the role would become more literal through electronic technology. More than to a technological ideal, though, these ambitions were tied to a shift in the concept of meaning itself, which started to be understood as “fluid, emergent, decentered, multiple, unstable”, not only because of the input from the interpreter but also because of the nature of the signifier itself (Ryan, 2001, p.5).

Subjectivity itself started to be questioned, as the “postmodern subject” is seen as the “site of multiple conflicting and unstable identities” (Ryan, 2001, p.7) rather than the ultimate truth to which each individual could be moored. With authors like Nietzsche, the manufactured character of subjectivity is exposed and the existence of the essential self is denied. Truth is seen as a narrative produced as such through “texted mechanisms” and “discursivization” (Žižek, 2008, p. 172) by this fictional central hub that is subjectivity. Through this fiction, we make sense of the world and its events, making the contingency and potential infinity of its “raw” state tangible. The subject also ascertains itself as an agent, whose actions may affect this finite reality, which means it has the power to know the world and to be a cause of what happens within it. The will to know is a will to power, to put oneself as predicate of meaningful action.

If interactivity comes as a realization of postmodern ambitions, video games, and their rhetorics, are strongly linked to this history of the self. On one side, there’s the recognition of its fragmented and constructed character, which virtual worlds help to embrace and explore, on the other hand, there’s a need to recover its unity and affirm the power of the subject over itself and the world around it. Both the goal-paced, victory-oriented ludic system and the textuality may be used to reinforce this illusion. At the same time, this understanding of the subject, the world, and Truth itself, highlights the power of all media on their construction.

The Empowerment Model

Video Games As A Medium For Compensatory Self-Empowerment

Video games not only create a playing subject within its virtual world but will be part of the processes that allow each us to navigate through the real world. Hence, the construction of the importance and central role of the self, reaction to the postmodern attack, is found on the rhetoric of self, which conceives games as “fantasy fulfillment machines” (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 11).

With this focus, play became the individual activity of those who play and, by doing it voluntarily and through it, exercise their freedom. This freedom is often applied to this individual's self realization, which means play becomes an escapist fantasy, serving potential egotistical needs and, consequently, answering no longer a need for reflection but instead a need to dominate and prove oneself (Turkle, 2005 p.66).

These needs closely resemble those lauded by the rhetorics of power, even though in their pre modern manifestations, they were tied to the affirmation of “collectively held community values” rather than to the glorification of individual accomplishments. Still, its “hero-making” ability and ties to agonistic expression of play (Sutton-Smith 2001, p.10;74), when conflated with the self-oriented take on success as self realization often through the defeat and at the expense of others, will allow this rhetoric to keep its relevance and central grasp of games’ imaginary potential.

The unyielding of the rhetoric of play as power reflects the hegemonies that frame, run, and are reproduced through this experience, revealing its position regarding the status quo that starts to be questioned outside of its sphere. Thus, when employed through an hedonistic medium, play becomes closely interwoven with the freudian concept of compensatory power. Through this lens, games are understood as serving as an escape from the chaos of reality, enabling the balance of emotional and sensorial stimuli, and an illusion of having control over events. So, they end up being designed as this “panacea for social disempowerment” of a ruling class (Ryan, 2001 p.9),

Participation: Video Games As Masculinized Power Fantasies

Under the framing of the rhetorics of power, play, its discursivization and manifestations will serve as a way of displaying “the fantasies, anxieties and urges of those who are actually powerful about what do play culture should mean and how its members should behave” (Sutton-Smith, 2001 p.85). So, the inflation of the self as a reaction to its instability and the rapidly changing dynamics of social structures, which became mutable in the post-industrial era, and were understood as a threat to traditional values and institutions, clarify the connection between the two rhetorics and the resulting masculinized medium culture.

There are several reasons for the establishment of video games as a “boy’s space”. From one side of the medium genealogical tree there’s technology, which, as offspring of scientific development and industrial machinery, has been for long a male-dominated field and often “function [in Western societies] as a medium for the reinforcement of the dominant status of masculinity, perpetuating patriarchal gender relationships” (Newman & Vanderhoef, 2014). Another branch is fantasy fiction (from Tolkien novels to tabletop or pen-and-paper games), and the geek culture surrounding it. This culture has been known to simultaneously shun away and idolize women, whose existence outside the constructed ideal is denied. Women supposed lack of interest may itself be justified by how they’re treated when they adopt a more active role in the gaming communities, the lack of representation in-game and how these games are targeted. There’s also, from a very young age, a social acculturation (by family, peers, media, industry) to gendered games, which reinforce women’s traditional roles (Rosa, 2000, p. 166).

At the same time, players are often stereotyped by those outside the gaming culture as “immature, lazy and boyish” (Newman & Vanderhoef, 2014). Calling back Butler’s concept of gender as performative, they, therefore, use the tools within their power to ascertain their worth and regain control, creating through them what was deemed as a place their own where to perform and reaffirm this masculinity. Therefore, in-game representations and discourses by the participants push forward an “idealized version of hegemonic masculinity”. White, heterosexual, young adult, able-bodied males figure undisputed as the most represented demographic, the one most likely to be depicted favorably and, overwhelmingly, to take on the role of protagonists (William et. al., 2009).

Representation: Masculinity, Warmongering And Heteronormativity

Besides being underrepresented, female characters' graphical representation and narrative development are often oriented towards pleasing the target audience ideals, rather than ensure a fair representation. They are sexual objects to be looked at, pursued, or even used and collected, and objects of desire to be saved and to get praise from (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004. p. 526). They are unwelcome as beings with their own prerogative and agency. So, outside the virtual world, women's role is to watch men play and within it is to be played with.

Besides female players, other expressions of femininity or deviant from the hypermasculine standard are also subject to the same (mis)treatment. This ideal of masculinity is often synonym with a male-centered heteronormativity. As such, fair queer representation is even lower than that of women (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Apart from very rarely being given a voice and almost never as a central of playable character, when queer characters do appear they're heavily misrepresented: used as plot devices and framed as a necessary or humorous deviation rather than normalized, legitimate forms of sexual expression, gender identity or expression; used as a titillation of the male gaze; or associated with villainous characters.

As "a militarized masculinity defines much of video games' culture, emphasizing violence and conquest" (Newman & Vanderhoef, 2014), even towards other male players or characters, this centering of the agency around each, so that every targeted player feels as though theirs is a central role in that world's events, leads to an utilitarian mindset, detractor of a deeper emotional experience. In cooperative settings, the player will still keep score, thrive to show the other player's they're better than them, has better items, etc. following the tradition of the arcades, where the best players could register their names on the machine for all to see.

This "militarization" also takes on a literal meaning. Even though technophobic discourses often focus on gratuitous violence and their graphical representations (e.g. *Doom*), often its representation on games, when perpetrated by the player, is in a legitimized form, depicting them, for example as figures of authority, often militarized, as opposed to the criminal "bad guys" and their illegitimate acts of violence.

This is not only supported by their themes and narrativity but part of some fundamental gameplay design conventions, which define and reflect sets of expectations about the experience they're supposed to offer, whether in their formal, ludic or narrative structures. On the side of the structure, there's the ludic empowerment allowed by the interactive character of new tech, on the side of the narrative, the borrowing of tropes of similarly action-packed genres, that awake the heroic morale.

However, despite usually working in favour of their reproduction or reinforcement, each game may position itself differently in relation to this "horizon of expectations". They may as well subvert and question them, thus, enacting changes, however how small, on these expectations and those who hold them.

The Disempowerment Model

Focus Group: The Effects And Meanings Of Disempowerment in Video Games

To discuss the current and potential rhetorics, their effects on the player emotional and intellectual experience of the game, as well as their long term impact outside their boundaries, and what difference the concept of disempowerment could introduce in their discussion and media cycles, two focus groups were formed, gathering a total of 10 people: C, 24 year old, assistant professor, male; J, 20, student, female; M, 20, artist, male; P, student, male; PT, 31, writer, male, R, 22, student, male; RM, 22, student, female; RL, 22, student, male; T, 22, store clerk, male; TK, 22, customer service representative, female. Selecting the participants by proxy, with the main requisite being having some familiarity with the games discussed, the non-structured interviews took place in 2015, on August 24th and September 21st (Filipe, 2016). Their opinions will be intercalated with the following analysis.

The Masochistic Ludic Fantasy: Disempowerment Through Action Atrophy

One of the core gameplay conventions is the maintenance of a steady balance between the skills' development and the difficulty of the presented challenges, the flow (Juul, 2009; Calleja, 2011 pp.57-58). To keep the player engaged in the ludic structure, the game must be challenging all the way through, but not frustrating, that's why an increase in difficulty is often accompanied by the backup of saving points. At the same time, progress and achievements must be properly recognized

and rewarded, especially after the sporadic confrontation with a “stronger, bigger, smarter and harder monster to kill”, a boss, which intersects the killing of the weaker enemies (mobs) and acts as a rite of passage to another level, either symbolically or not. This flow keeps the game fun, and the player invested in their evolution in order to beat it, which is what is required of its emotional experience when only taking the player’s expectations into account as the sole reason for play to take place. However, some games, as is the clear case of the horror genre, also seem to prove otherwise.

This was also noted by the participants of the focus groups, highlighting the indie game *Amnesia: Dark Descent* and its sanity mechanics. As a lesson of action atrophy, in this game the players (trapped in a sort of house of horrors) cannot defend themselves from the creatures that wander around the hallways. Instead, they must run and hide in the shadows, but the sanity mechanics (narratively integrated as nyctophobia) makes the player-character sanity drop if they stay in the dark for too long. Though this doesn’t directly lead to a Game Over, it makes movement harder as one loses control of it when the protagonist faints, the screen blurs and flashes and decoy enemies (hallucinations) pop up, forcing the player-character to hide again, unsure of what’s ludically real and not. Though in retrospective, participants recognized the scripted character of the experience, they recounted the intense anxiety and powerlessness they felt while living through it (Rouse III, 2009 p.20).

As this example shows, the disempowerment in horror games is still centred around their “peak” visceral experiences, as is its masochism tied to the challenge of beating the game, whose thrill should never be overwhelmed by an impossibility of being victorious. Some authors even describe it as hard fun, a “masochistic pleasure, derived from negative emotions and the appreciation of that which inspire feelings of abjection, repulsiveness or shock”(Lazzaro *apud* Järvinen, 2008, pp.184-185) Even so, the techniques they employ, their disregard for the steady flow and for the glorification of the player-character, promote the physiological engagement of the player, calling to the game their organic stability, thus, disturbing the security of the cyborgian ensemble.

This becomes clear when observed in other genres. In the adventure/puzzle-game *Shadow of the Colossus*, besides the lack of information about the mission and

how to succeed, the player is faced with an empty world, rather than navigating through it by slaying mobs. The emotions conveyed by the deserted and immense landscape are also translated by the gameplay of the battles against the 16 colossal - goliathesque creatures who wander the "Forbidden Land".

To R, RL, C, and J, the most relevant aspect about this game is precisely the emotional experience it provides, which they traced back to some key features. For one, the battles are not glorified, depicting with audio and graphic detail the pain of the slain enemy and preceding the confrontation with an introduction which underlines their harmlessness. Whereas "usually, you're not supposed to feel bad for the antagonists" (J), this makes defeating them "not particularly pleasant" (R), as it asks the player to question themselves and their actions". This emotional design, they agreed, added a new layer of meaning to the game, as it introduced an element of empathy, which disturbed the player focus on "their own success, no matter the cost"(J). The subversion of the central hero's role extended to his representation, as "his body", translating graphically "the effects of narrative"(J), gets "more and more tainted as you go forth within the game"(R). Every element is designed to convey an increasing feeling of dread with each Colossus slain. In the end, it is revealed that they were built as organic prisons for a demon, whose voice have been instructing the player all along and, by defeating them, it was released, a resolution which shows and intricate relation between the ludic and narrative layers and the emotional landscape both, in articulation, had created.

The Narrative Dystopia: Disempowerment Through Decentered Agency

So, for a strong interactive context to emerge it's not only about the player being able to act, it's about meaningful action. This means that the player will not only be physically engaged by the machinery of the game's mechanics but that the game experience will take place in a seemingly organic world to which they'll be transported. Without this presence within the world presented, the actions and choices made will be those of an outsider agent externally acting upon a virtual world and its artificial objects. The immersive potential of a video game is, then, tied to its ability to fuel the player "being in the world", a "textual world (...) populated by individuated objects" (Ryan, 2001 pp.14-15). In other words, the textual work is paramount to the creation of an organic virtual world, whose inhabitants are believable enough to become focal points of empathy and are not overwhelmed by

the rules (Turkle, 2005, p.81). As shown with the previous example, the meaning of the game and victory was subverted by creating empathetic enemies through narrativity (visual, not textual).

At an ontological level, the opinion of the participants about the importance of narrative was far from unanimous. But though some (RL, T and C) defended the ability to act as the defining characteristic of the medium, most (except for T) agreed that a consistent narrative, interlaced with the mechanical structure which supports it, is decisive in spurring a deeper connection between the player and the game. To J the dichotomy made no sense, because these are not polar opposites. Rather, "the way we process the narrative" and changes prompted by this processing are part of the interactive context", not detrimental to it. The creation of this empathetic other was also recognized as one of the core aspects for a subversion of the empowerment model and its utilitarianism. So, for example, if a character is lost, it won't be a lost tool, but an equal individual with its own agency, whose existence extended outside the player's sphere.

Narrative Structure And Morality Systems

Narrativity will be both an important part of the strength of the model of empowerment and a key feature for its subversion. Furthermore, there are also narrative conventions that must be subverted in order to truly question the hegemonic model. Another key aspect of the empowerment model criticized by players was the frequent moral dichotomy, lack of depth and futility, both in linear and non-linear stories, even when presented with supposed dilemmas.

Interwoven with the narrative, moral dilemmas are often introduced as plot points that allow a non-linear narrative development, through "a choice between a limited number of charted alternatives" (Ryan, 2001 p.6). Even so, the player will feel as though they're part of the production of the text and, as such, they will abide for whatever the resulting meaning, even though it is still framed by what the designer defined as possible. As such, the illusion of participation will often harness the power of interpretation, as much as there is the danger of the erasure of critical distance by immersion.

Despite the possibilities predefined character, the player can still choose, but choice is not entirely free, but rather what Žižek (2008, p.186) described as a

“choix forcé”, wherein the subject has to power to choose but on the condition that they choose the right thing. Often, there’s a right and a wrong choice, respectively rewarded and penalized ludically, whereas the absence of choice leads to a Game Over or to the system making an automatic choice for the player. This, R elaborated, leads to a certain ludification of the act of choosing, when all moral alignments, respective choices and outcomes are clear and categorized, the player will most likely choose the path that is more rewarding.

More than more options to choose from, they must offer the player different ways of choosing and of how that choice is embedded in their experience of the game. It may be done by acknowledging “bad choices” and their consequences, as is done in the indie game *Undertale*, where by playing the game anywhere between killing all “enemies” (Genocide Route) or none (Pacifist Route) the player will not only unlock different endings and interactions, but also change the way the game and its elements react to them in posterior runs (e.g. if the players go back to a previous saving point because they regret a decision, they will be faced with dialogues telling them the previous action was not forgotten and that “the game” still knows what they’ve done). It may also be done by creating contexts where there really isn’t a right choice nor an evident dichotomy and respective predictable outcome.

The concept of ideology allows us to think not so much on the contents of the choices or actions the game presents to the player but how they’re presented, constructed, how the act of choosing is framed. It’s not only the rhetorics of each possibility presented to the player, but also the ideology present in how the choice is structured, at its minimum promoting a disengaged and morally detached participation centered on what it’s best for ludic progress.

Harnessing Ideological Power: Disempowerment as Meaningful Agency

Understood as meaningful action, “with agency there’s also a personal and moral responsibility” (Kallay, 2013 p. 23). With this and the previously discussed layers in mind it becomes clear that depicting violence, racial tensions, sexuality or female nudity is not necessarily promoting violent behavior, racism or sexism, tokens of the masculinized empowerment model. It entirely depends on how meaning is constructed and meaningful agency, encompassing both action and its atrophy, responsibility and powerlessness of all interacting elements, is created, thus enabling a humane inclusion of problematic themes.

In *Papers, Please*, for example, players assume the role of a border patrol agent, in charge of approving or denying the entrance of applicants. In order to beat the game, they must only let in those who fit the listed requirements and failing to do so will result in a penalty on the players' score at the end of the shift. This would be quite a straightforward gameplay, if it weren't for the effort the game puts in humanizing those applicants, providing them with a backstory and personality traits, designed to promote empathy and persuade players to make the ludically "wrong" but morally "good" choice. Given the flexible character of the rules and the game being intent on making the players break them, the act of choosing becomes harder and the result of a careful reflexion rather than an automatic selection.

Another apparently simple indie game, *This War of Mine* calls to play most layers and techniques explored so far. The ludic goal of this strategy game is for players to ensure the survival of a group of people caught within a military conflict.

Narratively, it mixes linear (unchangeable events) and subtly nonlinear ramifications dependent on player choices. The outcome of each choice is not clear and there's no direct penalty or reward for each, so the players are "free" to choose if they act, for example, with morals (e.g. helping beggars) or survival (e.g. killing them to get resources for the core group of characters) in mind, but that freedom and the responsibility for whatever comes as consequence won't be empowering.

One of the ways each choice affects how the game develops is by affecting the characters themselves. Each has an invisible mental health meter, but without a dedicated interface, the only way for players to get a grasp of their state is "getting to know them", talking to them and paying attention to their stories and personality nuances (e.g. how sensitive are they and which acts they're more sensitive to), humanizing them and avoiding a prioritization of system's rules. As much as physical dangers (e.g. raids, bombings) or deprivations (e.g. hunger), the emotional stress (e.g. the risk of depression) of the survivors is also a real threat, existing as a gameplay mechanic interwoven seamlessly with the game's narrativity and requiring a constant empathetic approach on the part of the player.

With these techniques, *This War of Mine* purposely breaks the flow. Most of the times it is mentioned as a ruthless and frustrating game to play, but here the breaking of games' conventions doesn't result of broken mechanics. Instead, it serves a clearly defined ideological purpose. Its strongest impact comes of a total

subversion of gaming, it forces the player to stop, to “quit” but rather than be consumed by a blind rage towards the game or going back to try again immediately after, it opens the way for a critical analysis of the events that ensued. When trying to identify where it went wrong, the player will face once again the pointlessness of all the losses, which, due to the narrative layer and mechanics designed to create empathy will be felt as broken bonds. This realization is the closing argument of *This War of Mine*, successfully engaging the player not in the graphically realistic representation of warfare, but in a emotional emulation of getting caught amidst a senseless conflict as an uninterested party, a powerless civilian. The futility of the game is the futility of war.

In spite of totally ignoring the horizon of expectations, the game had a very positive reception, both by critics and players, which proves that defying conventions and exploring the medium potential doesn't necessarily shun players away. If the setting is compelling enough and the layers sensitively developed they might engage and transform them and that same horizon both.

Conclusion: Subversion As Counter-Ideology

As we've seen with the mentioned games, and the participants of the focus group stressed, indie studios were already able to create great examples of video games' potential. Their quantity and subsequent diversity may be one of the reasons for it, but their significant freedom from big producers' demands is also key to understanding how they're breaking the mold. As R explained:

In AAA games “even when sensitive themes are included, it's still the industry talking, not the voices of those in need (...) [and] they are conditioned by the free market, they have to work within this set of expectations (...) Above all, it is a commodity, modelled by these economic dynamics.” In conjunction with those of participatory culture, this means that “the most vocal players will be seen as the most legitimate consumers, with the power to demand that this product fits their will”. Meeting this demand, the industry will reinforce these predispositions and they hyperreal character, limiting both the spectrum of possible experiences and their transformative power.

Intending to break this cycle, disempowerment must not be interpreted as a refusal of free will nor a denial of an accountable acting subject. Contrarily, it is

recognizing its place within a humanized setting, among other agents, whom it may impact but also be impacted by, it is recognizing that some actions and choices may have undesirable outcomes that are not reversed through skill or repetition. It is also denying utilitarianism and confronting the player with the underlying meanings of their actions, designing this accountability as something that questions the player and its role, inciting critical self-analysis, and not just as a ludic attribution of a successful action.

Through it, it's possible to both recognize video games' power and criticize it, making use of their role as a tool for political action, to promote critical thinking and put the status quo in check. As such, although the focus of this essay was on in-game mechanics, representations and their rhetorical significance, as highlighted, the proposal of disempowerment as an alternative ideological model strongly overflows the barriers of each game and even those of the spheres of experience which surround their production and consumption. The true power of disempowerment is making games relevant in these broader dynamics, offering a revolutionary, rather than reactionary, contribution to the development of the culture they're inserted in, exploring in full their imaginary potential as a stage to perform possibilities and a platform to enact change. Therefore, the proposed subversive task is meant to, cyclically, enhance video games' power as a medium of experiences and the the medium influence as a cultural object.

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