History from Below:
Representations of common people in historical video games

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1. Introduction

Video games using historical settings have been around for almost as long as video games themselves, from early examples such as *The Oregon Trail* (MECC, 1971/1975), long running series such as *Civilization* (Various, 1991-2019), *Total War* (Various, 2000-2019) and *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-2018), and newer examples such as *For Honor* (Ubisoft, 2017) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance (2018)*. These games span many genres, and many different ways of using and portraying history; *The Oregon Trail* is a text based adventure designed to teach children about the lives of American pioneers in the 19th century, while *For Honor* is an action game set in a historically informed alternative reality in which samurai, vikings and knights do battle.

Which games could or should be defined as historical has been debated, as has their individual and collective use as a means of teaching history, whether in an educational setting or elsewhere (Kapell & Elliott, 2013; McCall, 2016). Clyde, Hopkins and Wilkinson argue that for a game to properly represent history "it must maintain the hallmarks of scholarly history", including "the use and citation of empirical evidence […] and the requirement of a truth attribute (Clyde et al., 2012, p. 5). Peterson et al. note that this disqualifies any simulation, as "the moment the player makes their first decision, they are no longer seeing actual history" (Peterson et al., 2013, p. 37), but rather a *counterfactual*, something that might have happened under different circumstances. The utility of counterfactuals has also been debated, with critics calling it "red herrings", history of "bad losers", and "unhistorical shit" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 2). The counter-argument is that "counterfactuals [are] a vital part of how we learn" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 2), not just about history but about life and the world in general. Because of this "it makes sense to compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done" (ibid.). A cautious division may be drawn between games that use a more static historical setting on the one hand, and games that provide the player with these counterfactual histories on the other. The first can potentially teach the player facts about the setting such as architectural styles, clothing fashion, or historical rulers. The other can potentially provide the player with an understanding of historical processes; of how history came to be what it is, and what it might have been instead. While both can be considered valuable, Peterson et al. note that the unique property of games is "their ability to provide a rich simulation environment to foster necessary conceptual models" (Peterson et al., 2013, p. 35). Arguably, this shifts the question of historical accuracy from accurately presenting facts (e.g. that the printing press was invented by Gutenberg in 1440) to accurately representing processes (e.g. the material, societal, and technological requirements for someone

to invent the printing press). Kappel and Elliott note that games do not aim for, and indeed may not be able to provide, accurate representations of history or historical processes, as compromises and simplifications may need to be made for the sake of playability and fun, as well as because of technological limitations[1] (Kapell & Elliott, 2013). This leads to games having to choose how to abstract historical processes, what parts to include and to exclude, and how to present it.

This is not unique to games, as any presentation of history will necessarily consist of some selected facts, assembled in a way that suits the purpose of the historian (Kapell & Elliott, 2013). Traditionally, the academic study of history ignored the lives and conditions of common people, in favour of those considered 'great' and 'significant' such as kings and generals, a focus that has been significantly challenged from the 1950 onward by historians studying the lives of ordinary people (Brake, 1998). This way of writing the people's history has gained significant traction in the field of historical studies, clearly showing how the process of selecting and assembling facts lead to significantly different histories.

But what of the ordinary people in historical games? How are they, their needs and wants, and their ability to act, portrayed? If some of the central aims of games are to be fun and to provide their player with a sense of agency, as is often argued (Kapell & Elliott, 2013; Nguyen, 2019), it may make sense to favour the perspective of the singular, high and mighty, over the many, and mostly powerless. However, even assuming this does not make the way that ordinary people are presented in historical games unimportant. Indeed, if the player is to take the role of the ruler, it seems critical to study the depiction of those they rule, as well as the depiction of the effects of the player's choices.

2. Methodology

This article examines the depiction of ordinary civilian people in three historically informed strategy games; *Crusader Kings 2* (Paradox Interactive, 2012), *Civilization 6* (2K Games, 2016), and *Anno 1404* (Ubisoft, 2009). Data was gathered through active and exploratory play, with supplementary information from community-driven games wikis (Aarseth, 2007). The analysis focuses on how common people in the game worlds are presented; specifically with regards to the depiction of their mood, their autonomy (whether they behave only through the player's actions, or if they have their own agency), their participation in the game's economy, and their role in systemic growth. The games presented have not been selected as representative of major types or subtypes of historical games, or because they are particularly good or bad in any respect. Rather, they have been selected because they are relatively well-known games that use different approaches to representing historical societies, economies, and the people in them.

[1] We feel the need to note that "technological limitations" (as well as "budget constraints") is sometimes used by developers as an excuse for what may be considered questionable design decisions. While technology doesn't provide unlimited opportunities, developers make choices of what to compromise and what to keep, and should in our view be held responsible for the political implications of those choices.

3. The invisible peasants of *Crusader Kings 2*

Crusader Kings 2 is a strategy game in which the player takes the role of a feudal lord during the middle ages. The game features hundreds of historically informed provinces across a map of Europe and beyond, as well as thousands of characters from history (e.g. William the Conqueror, Frederic Barbarossa). From a fairly historically accurate starting point, the game lets the player and the simulation create a radically counterfactual history.

In *Crusader Kings 2*, common people are almost entirely invisible. Some commoners are given names and portraits, sometimes as representatives for wider movements such as revolts, but commoners are a small fraction of the characters in the game. The game is heavily based around provinces and *holdings* (cities, castles, and temples in the provinces), each presumably populated by people. However, the population itself is not represented, either visual or numerically. The only information presented about the population of a province is their culture (e.g. English, Italian, Berber), religion (e.g. Catholic, Cathar, Muslim), and the risk of a revolt. The risk of a revolt is the only gauge of the population's mood, and the game provides no means of making common people happy, or to see if they are. The risk of commoners revolting is represented by a percentage, between 0 and 100. This risk is increased by factors such as having a different culture or religion from the ruler, or from various randomly triggered events. During these events the player can make choices, but the outcome is only ever to increase or not increase the risk of a revolt, never to decrease it (by, for example, lowering taxes or giving religious freedoms). The only consistent means for the player to directly influence the mood of a province is to assign a military representative to *suppress revolts*; there is no way to make the people happy, only to suppress their anger.

As the population of a province isn't represented, it doesn't change over the course of a game, other than through potential changes of culture or religion. Populations do not grow over time, or shrink as a result of war, disease, or famine (which can, with the exception of famine, occur in the game). Nor do common people have any autonomy in meaningfully increasing the economic or social state of their homes; if a ruler wants to improve a province's economy, they spend some gold to improve a town and in return gain a fixed increase to tax income. Various disasters do impact the economic output of a province, but with no representation of how or why; the effect of the black death, a disease thought to have killed nearly third of the population of Europe in the 14th century, is simply to reduce your tax income for a few years. Should a province have the misfortune of being besieged and conquered, it will lose some accumulated wealth, and some money will be transferred from the ruler of the conquered holding to the conqueror, but there is normally no representation of the loss of life or property of the population. It is possible, on conquering a place, to be randomly given the choice of allowing or forbidding one's army to perform a special instance of looting. Should the ruler allow looting, they receive a relatively large sum of money spawned from nowhere; this money comes not from the place's owner (who loses nothing) but from the invisible commoners.

4. Populations as a resource in *Civilization 6*

Civilization 6 is a game that lets the player build a civilization, from a starting point in 4000 B.C. into the 21st century A.D. While the game's factions are based on historical civilizations and nations (e.g. Greece, Zulu, America), and historical processes are to some extent modelled into the games systems (e.g. a progression of technology and social policies), the game takes place in a randomly generated world with little resemblance to the real one.

The common people in *Civilization 6* are all citizens not only of a civilization, but of a city. While the population of the player's cities and civilization is of great importance in the game, it is highly abstracted. The population of a city starts at one citizen when the city is founded, with an effective maximum of between 20 and 40 citizens, each of which can be understood to represent a large number of people. Some earlier games in the *Civilization* series have included some form of conversion from citizen to actual population, with one citizen in *Civilization 5* representing between 1000 (at one citizen) and 2 000 000 (at 40 citizens) people, and while no such conversion exists in *Civilization 6*, a similar conversion seems sensible. This nonlinear conversion has no effect in the game; all citizens function the same, and there is no distinction between one citizen and another. Each of the citizens works to produce resources for the civilization, most commonly by being assigned to a tile around the city. While different tiles produce different amounts of resources depending on their type and state, all citizens are as effective at working them, in fact, there is no way of distinguishing one citizen from another, there is no way of distinguishing which citizen is working where.

Of the several resources that citizen can produce (e.g. gold, production, science) only one, food, directly impacts the citizens themselves. If a city produces more food than it consumes (two for each citizen) the city grows over time, while if it produces less, it shrinks. If the accumulated food in the city is increased to some level (dependent on the city's size) a new citizen is added. If, on the other hand, the accumulated food decreases enough a citizen disappears. The citizens give no indication of caring whether a city is growing, stagnant, or shrinking; growth only matters for the player. While the citizens only have need for food, the other resources they produce are needed for the player. In this way, citizens are essential to the player in the instrumental value they provide; resources themselves, producing other resources in turn. The player is free to assign citizens to whatever work the player desires, even if this would lead to the starvation of the citizens. Nor do citizens have any affinity for the work they do or where they do it; a citizen placed to farm the same tile for a thousand years will offer no complaint or resistance if suddenly re-assigned to another tile, producing a different resource. The only autonomy given to citizens is that a new citizen will automatically be placed on the most suitable tile (as defined by certain pre-set focuses). Even citizens not placed to do work (literally titled *unemployed* by the game) will find something to do, producing gold for the player's treasury.

One of the reasons citizens in *Civilization 6* don't complain even if pushed to the brink of starvation, is because there is no system allowing them to do so. The closest the game comes

to systematizing the people's mood is through *Amenities*. Each citizen requires a certain number of amenities, mostly produced by acquiring resources or providing entertainment buildings. More amenities may be required if the player is at war, increasing as the war goes on. If this amount is met, the citizens are content, if it is exceeded by enough, they are happy; Happy citizens produce more resources for the player, and happy cities grow faster. Should the player not provide enough amenities, the people become dissatisfied, and produce less resources and slow city growth. Should amenities reach a low enough level, the people may grow angry enough to revolt; this is represented by the appearance of hostile units of *Barbarians* whose only goal is to destroy city improvements, units, and even the city itself.

Similarly to *Crusader Kings 2*, cities in *Civilization 6* can be taken by other civilizations. If a city is taken, the conqueror is given the choice to occupy the city for themselves, or to destroy it; in the former case, citizens will provide some resistance by producing less resources, in the latter the citizens disappear, with no great fanfare. There are no refugees, nor does it affect the mood of citizens in other cities to see it happen.

5. Reductive class representation in *Anno 1404*

Anno 1404 takes place in the late occidental Middle Ages, precisely in the year 1404, and put the player in control of a settlement in a trading-, politically-focused archipelago. The population is the core element as it drives the economy, and going bankrupt means losing the game. The emphasis is on satisfying the people needs to create a bigger territory.

The player can only construct peasant houses, where peasants will move in, and only in the area of influence of a marketplace. This mechanic raises historical questions. *Anno 1404* emphasizes the evolution of a city from the bottom, where peasants ascend to a higher class. It portrays that everyone started as a peasant, shadowing inheritance and family legacy. Moreover, in the game, a city has *ascension rights* that can be given to inhabitants. For a peasant to ascend to a citizen, a citizenship must be available. The amount of citizenships available is a percentage of the peasant population, implying that a city must have a critical mass of peasants for it to evolve: the class repartition is systemic and part of the game mechanic. It is not shown as a social or economic process. A city cannot be homogenous. Also, the player can restrict access to those rights, effectively constraining people from bettering themselves by accessing new needs such as books or clothes. Class ascension is therefore given, not earned. But during medieval times, there were multiple ways of earning citizenship: "by patrimony […], by apprenticeship […] and sponsorship by a guild master, and by redemption, that is, by purchase" (Butler, 2018).

The player decides where the houses are going to be. In the Middle Ages, the city planning was handled by designer families, mandated by the local authority. The design of the streets and where the church would be were carefully mapped. Though it is uncertain if the family was also responsible of implementing the design on the ground (Lilley, 2001), there the player is doing both: designing the city, and order construction. Such a family cannot emerge from

the population, even if it portrays higher class inhabitants that could be in charge of a similar task.

In the game, only peasants move in the city. However, the movement of the population was prevailing in medieval cities. Skilled labourers, for example, were moving to high recruitment areas to prosper (Hammer, 1976). Population moved in and out to acquire social and economic capital carrying with them their social status. By having the marketplace as a neuralgic centre of a city, one could expect that this migration of population with a purpose would be depicted. Furthermore, as the player can only place houses near a marketplace, it is impossible to have a house secluded from the city. If the player is actually playing as a town designer and planner, it makes sense that they won't have agency on the people settling afar. However, as the player is also the landlord, they could control who is willing to live in the mainland. But this process is just not made visible: the active population is only the population living inside the city.

Inhabitants are represented wandering the streets, showing their class-belonging through visual appearance, yet the player cannot interact with an inhabitant specifically. Interaction is made on the whole class with the intermediary of one of the houses. The level of satisfaction of a class is common to all people from it, contrasting with the micro representation of the population in the streets. This confusion is also visible on the impact of satisfaction. It goes from euphoric, which allows houses and their inhabitants to ascend to the upper class if their needs are satisfied and that there are available *ascension rights*, to enraged, which will make people leave the city and sometimes downgrade the houses they lived in. The player can only act on the unnamed male class representative, which will supposedly affect individuals, which will then impact the housing and overall population. But as only the representative and the houses are interactable, the people only serves as visual feedback and not active part of the process.

It is also important to note that each house, implying its inhabitants, has their own needs, essential and non-essential. A peasant house close to a church will see its faith meter satisfied, whereas a peasant house far from it will lack this non-essential need. Yet, the peasant class satisfaction is homogenous. In fact, the level of satisfaction of a class only depends on the taxation the player set; the higher the taxes, the lower the satisfaction. Except from a lack in essential needs which can lead to people moving out, the needs of individuals are not part of this class satisfaction equation.

During the game, beggars can arrive in a city by boat. The player then has two possibilities. Refusing the right to enter, which will result in them returning as bandits seizing and paralyzing the means of production. Or accepting them in the city, and they will then roam the streets, costing gold and increasing the chance of plague. The player has the possibility of constructing an alms house to host them, reducing the impact on the rest of population. This part of population highlights multiple problematic aspects. Beggars can't pay taxes; therefore, their satisfaction is fixed. But it is fixed to happy (green), meaning they won't ever go into

euphoric state which leads to ascending to a higher class, nor they will riot. Beggars remain happy beggars. There is also a strong link between poverty and vandalism, as refusing hospitality turn them into bandits seeking some sort of revenge. This depiction also reinforces the idea of poverty coming by boat in occidental societies. The only advantages of hosting beggars in a city is to have more ascension rights for peasants, which looks like a game design trick to encourage the player as it doesn't seem to serve the narrative and doesn't fit into the historical processes the game tries to show.

6. Conclusion

The representation of the people in historical games is ambiguous. They are often made invisible or abstracted with numbers, and their needs and demands relegated to the background. It can be argued that this representation is voluntary, but it is important to be critical of the representational biases, be they intentional or otherwise. And just as historical writing traditionally reproduced a hegemonic view of history focused on rulers and generals, the three games studied here show that the same tendency may be present in games; to celebrate and focus on the 'great', while ignoring the masses. As they have the unique ability to represent (counterfactual) historical processes, the fact that games downplay or ignore the role of common people as participants, and sometimes drivers, of those processes seems especially egregious.

It could be argued that *Crusader Kings 2*, a game about medieval lords and their struggle for power and prestige, does right to make common people invisible; as invisible as they perhaps were to the (counterfactually) historical lords and kings it portrays. Even if this is true, the game's disenfranchisement of the commoners, and lack of acknowledgment of that disenfranchisement, is problematic, as is its diminishment of the tragedies it portrays.

If *Crusader Kings 2* might be forgiven for a callous disregard for its commoners, the same seems less true for *Civilization 6*, perhaps the clearest example of a game putting playability and fun above all else. While ostensibly about its titular civilizations, it seems to take little or no interest in the people that make up that civilization beyond the instrumental value they bring to the player. It seems unclear what the game actually means the very word of its title, beyond a shared technological progression and predetermined civilization traits. It is certainly clear that it is not referring to the citizens of its cities and their lives.

And in *Anno 1404*, where the needs of the individuals are the cornerstone of all player's actions in the settlement, the people are reduced to their classes and their happiness to tax income. It carries with it the stereotypical representation of the classes: the ignorant peasant, the refined nobleman and the infected beggars, while contradicting itself by showing how a city is built from the peasants themselves.

If history is made up of the lives and actions of common people as much as of the high and mighty, then they ought to be depicted not just as resources being exploited by the player, but as sentient beings with agency of their own. We believe there is an ample opportunity for games to present manifold histories made up of manifold lives, and to simulate history as a process driven by many, as well as the many. We challenge game designers to come up with new ways of portraying history, rather than rehashing the same hegemonic ones, and we urge players, critics and academics alike to be aware and critical of the biases of the abstractions, focuses, and exclusions of historical games.

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