game environments

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We. The Revolution, a Review. Vive la Révolution or Death and All His Friends

Kevin Recher

Abstract
Review of the video game *We. The Revolution*.

Viewing the French Revolution from a pop cultural perspective, various images from historical events and figures leap to mind: We find in Marie Antoinette, who allegedly uttered the famous phrase *Let them eat cake*, a perfect example of an aristocrat, that completely lost touch with the economic realities of the common people and led a frivolous and extravagant life instead. In contrast, at the bottom of the social scale, there are iconic characters such as former prisoner Jean Valjan and Fantine, a woman spiraled into prostitution due to financial problems, singing songs of revolution and bourgeois lifestyle across the barricades in the musical *Les Miserables* (1998). And in between aristocrats and commoners - like the French Damocles sword - is the pre-eminent symbol of the revolution itself: the guillotine.

To this day, French society and popular culture in general have contributed to the nourishing of several myths about the French Revolution. To be more specific, they serve, to a certain extent, as romanticized versions of the real historical events. One of

the myths, for example, foster the belief that once the people regained their individual freedom all problems and difficulties would resolve - no more misery, no more monarchy, no more feudalism. Eugène Delacroix, contemporary witness and artist of French Romanticism, was heavily inspired by the revolutionary movement. As a consequence, he produced a piece of artistry that would gain widespread fame: *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple* (1830). The composition, indicating the dawn of a new era, shows a young woman, personifying the concept of freedom, in an attempt to overcome the corpses of the revolution. Holding the flag – the tricolor – she finally leads the people into freedom – Into the future. This painting is one of the few pieces that does not shy away from displaying all the suffering, all the dirt and all the victims of the upheavals. In contrast, numerous costume dramas about the aforementioned historical period deliberately leave those details aside.

Right or Wrong?

We. The Revolution, released in 2019 by the Polish indie developer Polyslash, transports you precisely to this type of setting that most movies, TV series etc. omit; into the factual heart of the revolution. The player takes on the role of Judge Alexis Fidèle, who, in 18th-century Paris, decides on the defendants' fate. This is, in short, the gist of the game. Each day a new case is presented to the young judge. Will the merchant be released, who, according to the charges, sabotaged the selling stand of his competitor? Could the young man, who is suspected of having violated an aristocrat's daughter, end in jail? And is Louis Capet, also known as King Louis XVI, the last King of France, to be guillotined? On the whole, it is a long and winding path to reach a final verdict in *We. The Revolution*.

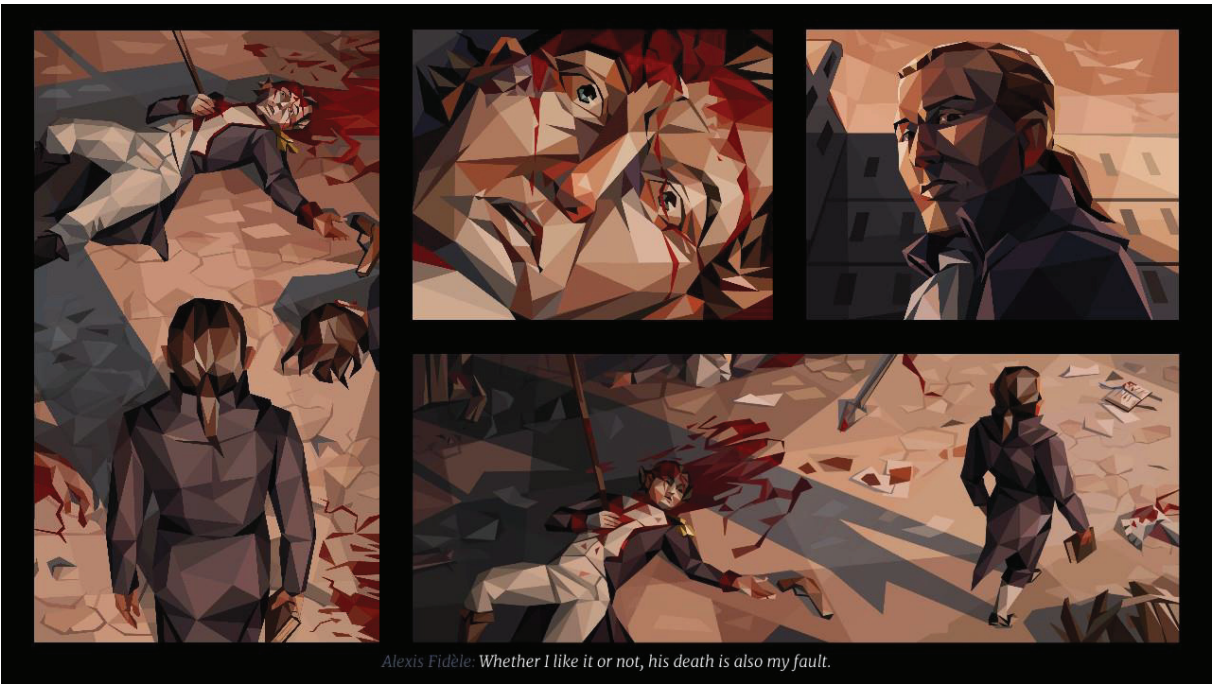*Alexis Fidèle: Whether I like it or not, his death is also my fault.*

Figure 1: The player's path is full of difficult decisions and consequences © Polyslash.

Pamphlets, that include particular hints necessary to solve the case, provide insight into the respective indictment. In a mini-game-like situation, these hints have to be assigned to certain categories, such as *evidence*, *eyewitness* or *course of events* in order to unlock questions for the defendant. Performing well at this point means that you are allowed to ask more questions, which in turn makes it easier to solve the case. However, the courtroom is neither yours alone nor isolated from the outside world: On the left-hand side is the jury, on the right-hand side is a court official, and in the back row there is the cheering crowd, expressing their most heated emotional opinion. Still, the verdict is not carved in stone: Any raised questions could considerably influence the opinion of the jury. On a display you find the final decision of the jury committee. At the end of each trial the judge must pronounce the final sentence: Will he follow the suggestion of the jurors? Nonetheless, ignoring the jury's outcome too often will ultimately result in decreasing support in the courtroom.

Figure 2. The courtroom, a major setting in *We. The Revolution* © Polyslash.

Each judgment might improve or downgrade your personal relations to the various factions of the French revolution: Hand down a verdict against a nobleman and the aristocracy will rise against you. Sending a member of the public to the scaffold might, on the other hand, harm your popularity ratings amongst the bourgeoisie. Throw some of the revolutionaries into prison or, even worse, behead them, and feel their fury turning against you. *We. The Revolution* is always striving for a power equilibrium. In the case of an imbalance, your character, could even end up on the guillotine himself, which means *game over*.

Revolution, in this case, has an impact on every citizen and affects every area of life. Thus, it is obvious that your duties as a judge require more than just sitting in the courtroom. Not only will you pronounce the final verdict, you also have to carry out the death sentence yourself, namely to pull the rope. Standing in front of the cheering crowd your character is given the opportunity to verbally appease or incite, hence, to manipulate the mood of the masses in favor of your own power games. Your working

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day will end if you decide against a death sentence and you are free to leave for home or for gambling. At home, you spend the evening with your wife or two children – the amount of time you are willing to share has a direct influence on the degree of satisfaction of each family member. Playing with your youngest son or preparing yourself for the next case the following day – here again, every decision has its consequences. Unfortunately, you cannot satisfy everyone's needs to an absolute extent.

Further gameplay elements to uncover in the course of the game include strategic campaigns. Which district of Paris will you conquer next? That recalls some interesting parallels with the board game *Risk* (1957). Another gameplay element, in turn, enables the character to carry out intrigues against political opponents. Whether such intrigues include torture or deceit is up to the player.

Figure 3: A symbol of the French Revolution: The blade guillotine © Polyslash.

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Eurocentric and Normative Perspectives

Nonetheless, *We. The Revolution* faces a big problem: The game requires considerable background knowledge of the French Revolution. One is figuratively thrown into the turbulence of one of the most relevant social upheavals in history without getting enough contextual content. Starting in 18th-century Paris, a lot of questions remain unanswered: How long lasted the French Revolution? When did it come to an end? Which events were most important for the country? Who was in power at that time? Where did the revolutionaries originally came from? Of course, my general knowledge of this historical period is modest. But I am sure that numerous players experience a similar feel of disorientation when playing *We. The Revolution*. The game presents terms, persons, alliances and events, giving insufficient contextual information for the player. Consequently, this lack of information does not really contribute to grasp the full meaning of the depicted historical events. This is a serious conceptual flaw of the game, leading to a certain disorientation and making it extremely difficult for one to find a way into the setting of the game. *We. The Revolution* places high demands on the historical knowledge of the gamer, thus players that are not familiar with European history – e.g. people who have not been educated and socialized in a European context – are likely to have a hard time. In other words, to put it differently: By implying that, as a gamer, having almost all the knowledge about the French Revolution is the norm, the game not only solidifies the events' quasi-mythological character, but also reveals a certain underlying notion of Eurocentrism.

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Figure 4: One can quickly get lost in the turbulence of *We. The Revolution* © Polyslash.

Conclusion

We. The Revolution clearly demonstrates the atrocities of social unrest, including all the power struggles and victims that come along with. As a consequence, the game goes a step further than most pop cultural representations of the French Revolution as a mythical birth of a nation. It does so by confronting the player with tough moral decisions and its often bloody consequences. But overall, there is no real immersion happening here. Court negotiations do not go far enough and the gameplay in the courtroom is limited to just randomly asking questions. After all, the gamer's individual influence on the storyline is unsatisfactory. Although there are several manifold tasks to perform, most the action takes place inside the courtroom.

Your character might play a central role in the revolution, when you manage to solve the specific tasks properly. But in the end, the historical context of the game about the French Revolution remains as fragmented as the popular myths about Marie Antoinette and those in *Les Miserables*.

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