"A god without any power":
Exploring player agency and empathetic representation of common people in a historical video game

Authors: Valdemar Ribbing, Joseph Stich, Leo Thyberg

Abstract

The life of common people in historical video games is often obscured and abstracted to the point of invisibility and dehumanisation, to serve a notion of playability and fun. This paper explores how to portray those people by making a game without traditional gameplay compromises, subverting the player-centric approach to game design for player empowerment. Using an iterative playtesting process and semi-structured interviews, we attempted to create a game that would elicit empathy towards the people in it, and critical thinking regarding conventional historical games. We observed that a non player-centric experience with an empathetic representation of common people has the potential to raise questions about the player's role. However, the game's ability to mount a procedural argument is hampered by a lack of feedback. Although the project does not lead to exhaustive answers, it proposes that the subject is worthy of study and exploration.

Keywords: representation of common people; history from below; historical video games; player agency; player-centrism; creation-as-research; game sketching

Introduction

As part of the course Game Research Prototypes and Game Testing at the Master's programme of Uppsala University's Department of Game Design, we set out to challenge problematic portrayals of common people in historical video games. Many historical games, particularly those falling into the genre of strategy games, present abstract depictions of common people in the interest of player empowerment and agency; an approach that often leads to a dehumanisation of the people portrayed. Inspired by the historiographical tradition of people's history, or history from below, we set out to accomplish this by creating a game that would strive to do the opposite; that would show common people as empowered and human, while disempowering the player. The creative process was exploratory, and was allowed to wander, rather than following a rigid plan.

The project is meant to be seen as the beginning of a conversation we feel is important: How characters in games can be portrayed with empathy and respect, rather than merely as backdrops for a player's fantasies. This paper, therefore, seeks to explain the significant design decisions taken during the project, the theoretical background that informed the choices, and the tested outcomes of the project so far.

A note: This text makes frequent mention of *common people*, *the people* and similar. We recognise that these terms are problematic, and deserve to be discussed much more than they are. We generally use them here to refer to (mainly) civilians depicted in historical games, in a broad sense. The use of such a problematic term, especially given its prominence in the text, is an issue. We welcome discussion on the subject, and hope our meaning is clear enough in the context.

Historical games and history from below

Games have for a long time been making use of historical settings. Historical games have been discussed both with regards to their potential use in education[1] and with regards to the term itself.[2] The main problem with describing a game as historical is that, in the academic discipline of history, historical refers to that which has happened, whereas games, being interactive, almost invariably create alternate versions of what has happened; a counter-factual or counterfactual history.[3] The term historical games is further confused by potentially referring both to games that use a historical period as a setting, informing architecture, fashion and equipment, and to games that attempt to create game systems from historical processes, such as technological progress or nation-building. Peterson et al. note that the unique property of games in this context is "their ability to provide a rich simulation environment to foster necessary conceptual models",[3] (p35) thus arguably favouring the latter category.

A previous, unpublished, study by Stich and Thyberg examined the representation of common people in three historical strategy games, and found that common people were generally highly abstracted, sometimes to the point of invisibility. Additionally, the agency of common people in the games was highly curtailed, generally to the point where their only potential autonomous action was to violently revolt. In all games, the player took on a position of power, either somewhat embodied in the narrative of the game or not, but in all cases distinctly removed from the common people. The decision to place the player in a position of power can generally be said to make sense, given that it naturally gives the player a greater agency. While it is difficult to speculate as to the reasons why common people are not more prominently or respectfully represented in historical games, some insight may be gained from developer quotes regarding historical accuracy. Kapell & Elliot[2] quote two developers of Assassins Creed III, both arguing that while historical accuracy was important, "playability and fun" was at least equally important, and making "the game a better game" would motivate deviating from historical fact.[2](pp8-9) It seems reasonable to us to assume that the same may to some degree be true in at least some games; that giving common people

visibility and agency is seen as making the game less, not more, playable and fun, and thus a worse game, borrowing the terminology from developers.

Limited representation of common people is not unique to games, as any presentation of history, including historical games, will necessarily consist of some selected facts, assembled in a way that suits the purpose of the historian.[2] 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 challenged from the 1950 onward by historians studying the lives of ordinary people.[4] This way of writing the people's history, or history from below, has gained traction in the field of historical studies, showing how the process of selecting and assembling facts lead to different histories.

The player-centric approach and game conventions

A central paradigm of commercial game design is a player-centric approach, defined by Adams[5] as anchored by two obligations to the player, the duty to entertain the player, and the duty to empathise with the player, explained as building the game "to meet the player's desires and preferences for entertainment".[5](p32) This player-centric view of game design, and of games in general, has been questioned. Brice argues that "not only do games and play exist without players, but sometimes, it is preferable to purposefully make them auxiliary or absent from craft and interpretation.".[6] This, she argues, is particularly true for games designed to be more or less hostile to the player, as well as for highly personal experiences. Brice also argues that the issue is political; that player empowerment means "gamers are set up to be colonial forces. It's about individuality, conquering, and solving. Feeling empowered and free at the expense of the world".[6]

This empowerment necessarily demands a focus on what the player does, and what agency it affords them. Agency, defined by Murray as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices",[7](p126) seems to inherently go hand in hand with the notion of player empowerment, though Murray's definition certainly offers the potential for other experiences depending on the specific actions and attendant results. In most games, certainly in historical strategy games, the player will be given the choice to take, or not take, a variety of actions. If the 'correct' action (given the state of the game) is taken, the player is rewarded, if not they are punished. The reward is often more resources, and more power; in historical strategy games the resources are often people under the players control, people that exist to create more resources for the player.

But in the interest of the player's agency and empowerment, these people cannot in themselves have agency, cannot themselves be empowered, other than in the ways that serve the player's entertainment. If the people can perform actions on their own, it is to save the player the trouble of controlling them, if they can starve, it is to provide the player with the challenge of feeding them, if they can revolt, it exist for the challenge of keeping them from revolting; or for the challenge of defeating the revolters. If the people have any agency, it is for aiding the player in reaching their goals, or for the purpose of the player's control of that agency; but rarely if ever for the empowerment of the people themselves.

Procedural rhetorics and persuasive games

Procedural rhetorics, as proposed by Bogost,[8] are the means by which games (and other procedural media) mount persuasive arguments through the rules and properties of the rules. While some games make more conscious and intentional use of procedural rhetorics, all games arguably use them to make arguments, intended or not. As an example, the *Civilization* series,[9] if viewed through this lens, can be said to argue that history is a contest which only one civilisation can win. The rhetoric mounted regarding common people in historical games tends towards either disinterest

or strict utility; the people either do not matter much, or they matter only in so much as they are a resource for the player to use. Bogost applies the term *persuasive games* to games that "mount procedural rhetorics effectively", used as a description rather than a genre or style; a persuasive game is a game that is persuasive, though arguably games designed with the intention of persuasion or designed to be overtly persuasive are easier to classify as such.

Research problem

While clearly a political question, we believe that the lack of representation and agency of common people is a problem worth examining and challenging. There are many ways to tackle this, each with their own opportunities and challenges; none of them are complete in themselves, and each hopefully raising new questions in turn.

The project described in this article sought to examine how to more empathetically depict common people in a historical game by abandoning traditional player-centric approaches to game design. Through an iterative game design process, we sought to create a game that strove to give agency to the people, rather than to the player; in order to mount the procedural argument that the lives of common people are worthwhile and meaningful in and of themselves.

The project asked two central questions, which it sought to answer through the making and testing of a game prototype:

- How can games, historical or not, empathetically portray the life of common people?
- Can subverting the norms of player-centric game design elicit critical thinking about the portrayal of common people in games?

The aquarium approach

While the challenge of depicting the lives of common people can be tackled from many directions, and on many different scales, we chose to focus on a small scale approach; a single family unit, living on a farm. This was done partly because a small scale suited the small scope made necessary by time constraints, but mainly because it allowed for a greater level of detail. It also served to subvert the norms of historical strategy games by changing what the game deemed 'significant', from the national or global scales normally favoured to the local and even personal. Building on this core premise, we established that events and actions should be specific and detailed, rather than abstract; and that events and actions in the game should take the time they take in real life, rather than be sped up. Both these points were grounded in the idea that the specific and the detailed is key to deeper understanding, and that this in turn could lead to deeper empathy.

Additionally, we decided that the events should be firmly grounded in the everyday, rather than the exceptional. This is of course subject to a great deal of interpretation; what is after all exceptional in a life? Are accidents, disease, or death exceptional, or very much part of the everyday, or at least every life? Is life, whether today or a millennia ago, a grim struggle, a joyous experience, or something in between? While it may be possible to research material conditions of a period, we feel it is fundamentally a question for the historian-game designer to decide what life they want to show, and what they want to say about the world. Historical accounts on how hard life used to be can be used to argue that life now is significantly better or different than it used to, points that can be argued from many angles. As our intention was to build empathy for the people portrayed, we wanted to focus on aspects of life that are recognisable; work, social interactions, the need to eat. This led us to focus more on the day-to-day, in a manner that would not avoid 'hardship', but which also would not celebrate the struggles of the 'grim dark past'.

In order to connect the design to the games it was meant to criticise, we wanted to adopt certain properties that would make the player think of such games. Most notably this led to a camera

perspective common to many strategy and city-building games, looking down on the scene shown from an elevated position.

Only when the concept of what was to be shown, and how, was established did we start to really discuss the player's role. We knew we did not want to give the player significant power over the people in the game, either direct or indirect, but rather that they should take on the role of a (slightly) active spectator. An early metaphor for this, that ended up guiding the design, was that of the player 'tapping the window of an aquarium'; the tapping may possibly disturb the fish, or make them curious, but there is no notion of control. In fact, there is no way for the tapper to know if the fish's reaction, or the player to know if the character's reaction, was a result of the interaction or not. In practice, this idea first took the simple form of the player clicking on a character in the game, and something happening. Exactly what that something was was left undetermined for quite a while, while other aspects of the design such as where and when then game was set were being nailed down.

Despite the non-player-centric approach to the design, we did not abandon the notion of a player playing the game. In fact we were clear on the idea that we were, in fact, making the game for a player to play, but that that player should read the game as not being for them. This somewhat paradoxical position was an essential part of the design; we wanted a player to care about the people portrayed in the game, and in order to make them do so we had to not care about the player. In a sense, this duality is not dissimilar from the way most games that incorporate a challenge work; it is designed for the player to beat, but in order to be challenging it must pretend to be there to stop the player. This is not to say that our non-player-centric approach was a challenge for the player to beat, necessarily, only that the duality of approaching the player is not uncommon in games.

While the game was designed from the beginning to mount an argument, with the intention that players should understand what the game had to say about the significance of the everyday, the message is one we feel is better suited to a more indirect approach. We wanted the game to read not as a piece of demagogy but as a piece of fiction, which nonetheless has the potential to challenge held ideas.

As for the artistic style of the game, we want something close to the people we are depicting, leaning more towards realism. A cartoony style could be too detached from our characters' reality, as well as potentially distracting with its flashy colors, and exaggerated shapes. We strived for something with less saturation, less flair, and more grit. While we did not strive for photorealism, we still want our players to recognise that these people can be placed in history, which a more realistic approach could achieve.

Methods

The method we chose to approach this research was through an exploratory game design process, falling broadly under the umbrella of *creation-as-research* as described by Chapman and Sawchuk.[10] As the project was very much about exploring the possibilities of the subject, in a limited amount of time, we did not set ourselves a clear target for what the end result would look like, or the scope it would have, and were entirely open to the idea that any final prototype might not be 'complete'. This is in line with Chapman and Sawchuk's view of *creation-as-research* as being as much about understanding and engaging with "the technologies/media/practices that we discuss" as it is about the end result of the creative process. The method drew from our knowledge and previous experience of iterative game design processes, but was also allowed to diverge when such divergence seemed suitable. In our experience traditional game design methods tend to make it difficult to divorce oneself from the idea of the ideal 'completed game', which can both close minds to what could be discovered along the way, and lead to stressful development as goals are chased.

The project was aimed at creating a game prototype, with the process being documented through meeting notes and a wiki.

Game sketching

Our first tangible step was a game sketch, designed to observe how the pattern of dehumanisation of common people in historical games was accepted and brought along to other games by the players. Games sketches are "a way to construct future play potential"[11](p12) and "to be able to preview [the maker's] work in order to make decisions about how to proceed".[11](p12) As animating the characters and coding their behaviours would take time, we sketched the game by taking a screen capture of the scene and narrating characters' actions to the players with a script. It meant that our presence as makers was required during the play, but as Westecott[11] argues, it is what distinguishes game sketches to prototypes. The sketch consisted of premade characters in a game scene, set up in motion as if they were doing physical labour, with houses and trees to their environment, and a script detailing how they would behave if interacted with. This script was read by one of the team-members as part of the game.

Four respondents were recruited from our social circle, based on gender and on how often they play video games. Half of them were playing often, and the other half played less to never. As the game sketch aimed at players' expectations, it seemed sensible to observe whether their frequency of play and their knowledge of games had any impact on how they would see the characters and their relationship with them. The interviews were semi-structured in order to probe for respondents' reflection and critical thinking at every stage. The interviewer guided the respondent during the play, by asking about what they wanted to do and why, and by narrating the outcomes described in the characters' scripts. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. We individually did summative content analysis on each interview, which were merged to create discussion around tendencies, differences and details about respondents' descriptions of the characters, their expectations and their view of the goal.
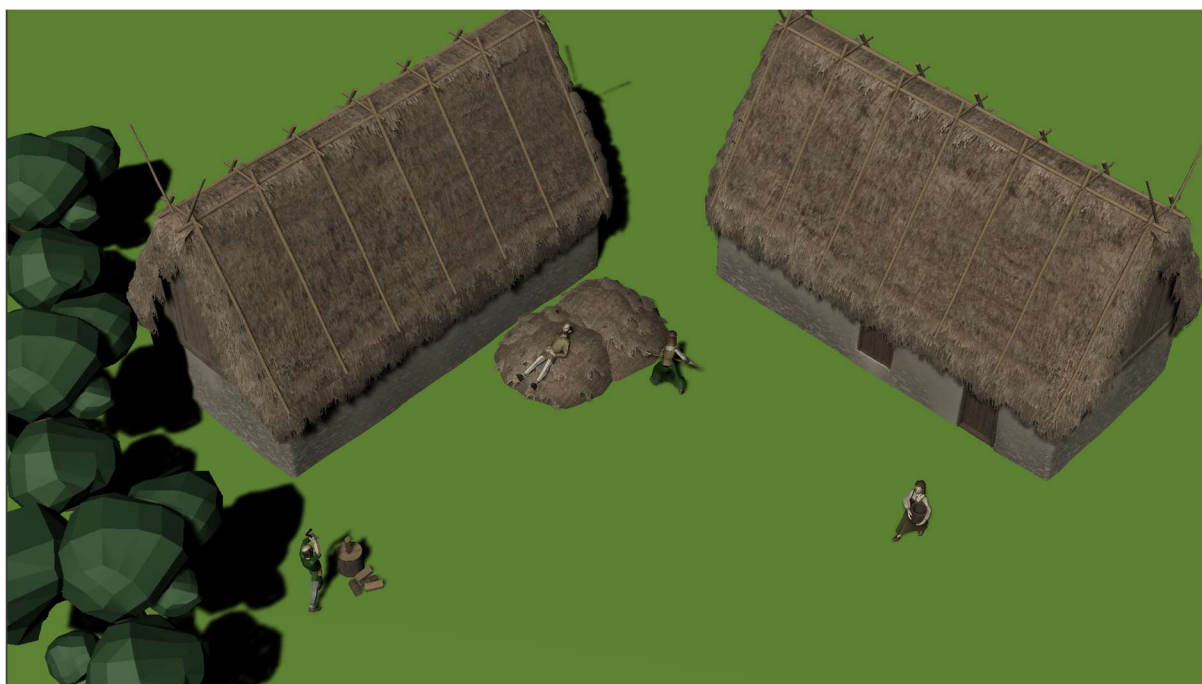

Image 1: Image used in game sketch

Prototyping

As the game sketch had confirmed that this way of subverting expectations could elicit critical thinking, we decided to move on to more detailed prototyping of a digital game that could stand alone. The game sketch, by its nature, was not able to provide enough details which could result in an abstraction of the people portrayed, similarly to the historical games we find problematic. This contradicted our approach of designing with an emphasis on detail, which required characters to be animated, their behaviours to be coded and assets to be embellished. After creating a prototype consisting of three characters and their tasks, along with their environment, a new playtest was set up to evaluate if the design was heading in the direction we wanted; which is to say elicit critical thinking about the role of the player and about what is being shown.

We recruited five respondents from our social circle, this time without giving importance to their frequency of play or their knowledge of games. We had observed that links between game experience and player views of the in game characters were not obvious, and therefore chose to no longer focus on this. The interviews were semi-structured to probe respondents' self-reflection about what the game could be about and what it could be trying to say after they played. We intentionally excluded questions about how they think the game could be improved, as the purpose of our testing approach was to inform our research and design; we did not test whether the players were enjoying the game, but rather if the game was having the desired effect.

As our interviews for both playtests were conducted in English, while none of the interviewers nor respondents were native speakers, we acknowledged potential misunderstanding in the usage of words, and hesitation sometimes due to formulating sentences. We were unable to conduct tests in a controlled lab environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and chose to instead use online technologies, which additionally posed some technical issues that could have impacted respondents' answers. We recognised recruiting within the social circle could lead to biases in respondents' approach to their responses, even though the interviewer leading the interview did not know the respondent before. Recruiting could also have an effect on how respondents perceived the playtest, as if it was specifically designed from them or their profile as a player.

Ongoing design

Characters

Our plan was to have a family of elderly, adults and children; at the time of writing, however, only adult characters have been implemented, a shortcoming we intend to address. We see characters in a wider span of ages as desirable, as the stages of life, from childhood to late adulthood, are often overlooked in contemporary strategy games, which tend to only depict the generic, productive adult. Given the time necessary for the creation of a character, as well as the iterative approach to the process, characters were added gradually.

We created two character models, one female and one male, basing them both on premade low-detail medieval characters and altering them to fit our design and our setting, in order to save us the effort of crafting them from scratch. We prioritised creating a female character, in order to subvert traditional historical strategy games, which tend to predominantly feature male 'workers' as representatives of common people, while the desired outcome was to have both male and female characters in the game. The major modifications we applied to the characters was making them more animation-friendly, giving them detail, changing their clothing, and overall shifting them away from the low-detail style to a more realistic style. Both characters share the same basic structure and animations in order to save time, but also to ensure that any task could be fulfilled by either a man or a woman. We wanted our characters performing relatable tasks of some importance,

as opposed to them performing actions with no discernable purpose or motivation. We had noticed that a male character laying on a haystack in the game sketch drew a lot of attention; the non-working character was distinguished, or even marginalised, from the rest of the characters on the screen. Each respondent tried interacting with him, and some explained that it was to put him to work as the others - which the character didn't. Our design is aimed at deconstructing the idea of the player as ruler, and instead giving the player a small opportunity to give them empathetic breaks. Therefore, having a character that stands out from the others who are working creates a singularity that could confuse the player and clashes with our initial idea. We decided to remove such a character to avoid any ambiguity that could blur our intentions.

A relatively complex task we settled on early was to have characters removing weeds from a cabbage field, which involves them removing the weeds, putting them in a basket and emptying the basket in a compost pile. Another less complex task we created was having a character sitting on a bench peeling a bunch of turnips. Both these tasks involve food, connecting the tasks to their lives in the literal everyday of food preparation, as well as in the day-to-day task of food cultivation. Given the experiential goals of the game, the characters should not seem to be performing their tasks because it's entertaining for the player, but rather because this is their reality, their lives, and their survival. Although our characters' behaviours could be considered simple, we put effort into detailed programming of the behaviours for the characters. It is difficult to say whether this effort makes a difference at this stage; it does however prepare for more complex behaviours in future work. More importantly, the purpose of this relative complexity was to have detailed and granular actions for the characters, falling in line with our method of detail early. Although not implemented at the time of writing, but still a part of the design, is the ability for characters to change tasks, giving them the ability to walk outside of the screen, inside or behind the house; a message that within the game, the characters have a greater degree of agency than even the player. This evolution of character behaviour adds depth to the characters, and also avoids characters being identified only by the task they perform; they are people, not merely 'peelers' or 'weeders'.

Image 2: Game characters performing tasks in game environment. (not actual game perspective)

Player interactions

In line with our initial metaphor of the player 'tapping the window of an aquarium', player interaction and agency was severely limited. Over time, this developed into the idea that clicking on a character would make them take a break, subverting a common trope of clicking to put a character to work; this ended up being the guiding idea for the interactions. It also allowed for the

reading of the player's interactions as interruptions of the work the people were doing, independent of the player; not only are the people capable of taking care of themselves, without the player's help, but the player with their lack of understanding of the character's actual work can only really get in the way. The nature of what a break is for a character was explored as being an opportunity to stretch, to talk to nearby others, or to look at the sky and the weather. To promote a sense of realism, as well as to further limit player control and agency, the characters have a timer starting the moment they are interacted with, during which it is not possible to give them a break again. Throughout our playtest of the prototype, most of our respondents were confused whether they had any impact on the game despite them clicking on characters. When clicked, characters stopped their current work and stood up to stretch before going back to what they had been doing, all shown through the playing of specific animations. We thought that this feedback was enough, but some respondents pointed out they were not sure if those sequences were a result of their interaction or not. This uncertainty, even though in accordance with the aquarium metaphor, was impacting the player's ability to read the game. As the interactions were ambiguous, some of our respondents said they spent the majority of the play-time figuring out if there were any other keys to press, therefore obscuring the reading of the content. However, two respondents engaged critically with the game and their experience of playing it. One interpreted their lack of understanding of the controls as a way to experience how it feels to play a game without any knowledge of games, and that having no control over the game made them feel like "a god without any power". The other interpreted the lack of agency and feedback as intentional and took a more contemplative approach. They observed the characters, and read the game as attempting to convey empathy for the life of the farmers, and appreciation for "how hard it is to live day by day".

We chose not to include any menu or tutorial, as we not only wanted to restrict the player's role, but also make the player themself realise and reflect on this. The only instruction given was an extradiegetic text at the beginning of the game to explain how to start; that is by clicking. This was not only intended to tell the player how to begin the game, but also to plant the idea that clicking was the way to interact with the game. However, all play-test respondents expressed confusion as to how you would interact with the game, showing that this instruction was not nearly clear enough. A solution to this was the mouse cursor changing appearance based on what it is hovering over; a slight glow and a bright colour when above a character that can be interacted with. This allows the player to correlate the change of the cursor with the change of characters' behaviour. The importance of feedback, even in a non player-centric design, was something we had overlooked; even if the game should be read as not being for the player, it should still afford the intention to be readable.

Setting

We set the game on the Swedish island of Gotland, sometime during the medieval period. This was partly due to the familiarity of us being students living on Gotland but also due to the island having a well-documented medieval past. We felt the need to do some basic research about who, what, and when we were depicting, as it was important to us that our design started from the characters and the world they find themselves in. This helped us come closer to the characters and their reality. We performed research using historical sources regarding housing,[12-14] clothing,[15] cultivation[16] as well as the farming year.[17]

We decided to place our game in spring, at roughly the same time of year when we started development; partly because this was both relatable to us, and partly because spring is a season of growth and movement with plenty of options for outdoor activities - as opposed to winter where life is less flexible. We chose to set the game outdoors, without the option to see inside the house. This was partly to keep with the established patterns of games we are commenting on, but also motivated by a desire to not let the player violate the privacy of the characters. The historical sources

not only enabled us to have a more accurate depiction of our characters but also served as blueprints for our assets, aiding the development process. While accuracy was to some degree desirable, we did not strictly adhere to our sources as it is not our ambition to have an accurate description, but to give the characters life. For example, a patch of lavender was implemented with the purpose of wanting the characters to have something nice; an addition not motivated by historical sources.

Image 3: Example of decoration. Lavender along the side of the house.

Framing the experience

Regarding representing the daily labour of common people, we did not want to compress or distort the actual time their tasks would take, as doing so would result in an abstraction and minimisation of what weeding a cabbage field or peeling turnips really is. The effort of those actions should therefore represent the effort actually required. The question of how much we should represent arose: Showing an entire day in real time would be in accordance with the design, but would also be technically demanding if we had to animate and code each of their daily tasks, as well as being a greater demand than we wanted to place on the player. Still, we wanted to keep the notion of the characters living their lives even if the player is not there to observe, while having a beginning and an end to the game.

We framed the start with the camera zoomed in on the house, obscuring the characters but showing grass moving in the wind and clouds casting their shadow as if the day was passing. By clicking, the camera then zooms out to reveal the entirety of the scene with the characters minding their work. After three minutes, rain starts pouring, and all characters take shelter in the house. After 45 seconds, the camera zooms in on the house again, effectively ending the game. While the characters are not visible anymore from the player's perspective, the day still continues for the characters, just not for the player to see. This means the game has a beginning and an end for the player, but what is shown is dictated by the people and their lives which exist regardless of the player.

We used a bird's-eye view to emulate the camera used in city-building and strategy games; a problematic perspective, as it is traditionally associated with power. However, it is our intention that the disconnect between other aspects of our design and the empowering perspective will elicit critical thinking about the player's role, as a being of supposed power. We kept the center of the composition clear of any obstacles as the center was reserved for our characters, which brought clarity to their actions and kept them in focus. We chose to not adopt the orthographic projection often used by games using this type of angle, which essentially warps the image presented from one that would be seen by a human eye to one that adopts an omniscient computer view.
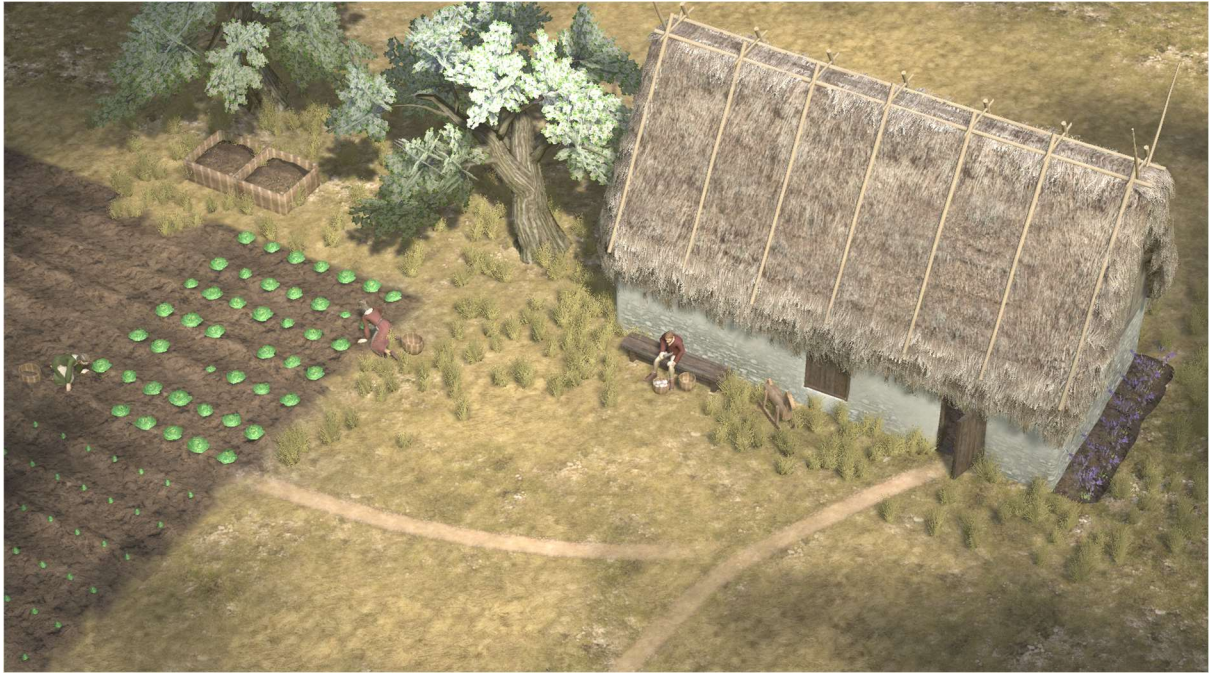
Image 4: Screenshot of full game view when game is running.

We also somewhat decreased the soaring and omniscient sense of the bird's-eye view, by placing the camera at a somewhat lower angle and lower height, to give new possibilities for depth in the composition, and was hoped to give a sense of like-but-not-quite-like typical strategy games. Player feedback suggests that this was not a significant enough change to achieve the goals, as players seem to have read it as identical to the convention, and pushing the angle much further seems necessary to achieve the effects.

Conclusion

At the outset of this project we proposed to examine how to design a historical game with an empathetic portrayal of common people, without dehumanising them. We asked two research questions:

- How can games, historical or not, empathetically portray the life of common people?
- Can subverting the norms of player-centric game design elicit critical thinking about the portrayal of common people in games?

At this stage in the project, we do not feel we are able to give a clear answer to either of those. We do however feel that a number of points have emerged as important learnings from the process.

The decision to focus on more detailed depictions of people and setting allowed us as designers to get closer, and to consider more deeply what we wanted to portray and how. It meant that only a small number of characters were completed in the time available, each with a very limited set of actions, which may have been detrimental to the game as a whole as the game potentially lacks a critical mass. However it is our belief that a less detailed approach would have been entirely counterproductive, in portraying the people in more abstract and less human ways.

This ties together with a larger point regarding game design processes, namely that the way one makes the game impacts what and how the game takes shape. The use of quick iterations, rough prototypes, and game sketching approaches are generally useful tools, but they generally result in the quick, the rough, and the sketchy, which may not be at all suitable to the project. Emphasis on quick passes can also tend to favour quick thought, rather than deeper contemplation about what is being designed, something that is less suited to this type of experimental process.

The data gathered from play-tests suggest that the game is not in its current form reliably successful in eliciting critical thinking about common people, or in engendering empathy and understanding towards them. Most players were simply too confused by what they perceived as a more or less complete lack of response from the game to attempt any deeper reading. As has been stated, the game was designed to provide very limited interaction and agency to the player in order to make them consider what those interactions mean, and to similarly limit the response from the game to make the player consider their agency. Player responses clearly show that simply limiting player interaction and game response is not nearly enough; these limitations must be designed and tweaked to make sure the players understand that they are intentional, and that they are there to make a point. Nevertheless, some players seem to have been challenged by the game to think about their role in it. The fact that one player at least spoke of the game eliciting empathy for the characters suggests that the design has potential, although more work must be done for it to be more reliably successful. Other players drew other conclusions about the game, while still reading the lack of agency as intentional; reading the lack of player empowerment as an experiment in how players learn and understand games. The outcome of these tests also begs the question of what success would look like for a game such as this; does a different reading, that still engages critically with the material, mean failure? And how reliably must the game accomplish its goals for us to consider it a success?

The greatest source of confusion for players stemmed from the lack of clear and readable response from the game to the player's input. While lack of the response the player expected was part of the intention, most players read it as no response, which undermined the game's ability to make it's argument. Viewed in the context of procedural rhetorics, for the game to make arguments through its rules, those rules must be at least somewhat understood for the argument to be heard let alone understood and accepted.

Given the multiple interpretations from our respondents about the argument mounted by the game, we can question whether our design or the context of play needs to more explicitly state our view. The necessity of meta-textuality, in the form of choosing an appropriate title for the game, or explaining our intentions before or after play, is still to explore. Some respondents sought explanations from us and one read the game title, 'InterviewGame', as part of their reflection, which was not something we anticipated.

On the whole, the design and testing of the game tells us that the area is worth further studying. Not only because the game is yet to prove itself successful, but because our testing has shown the lack of critical examination of, and comfort with, the dehumanising patterns of conventional games. This shows the necessity of alternatives, and highlights the importance of tearing down the concept of god-hood in players. Although only true in a minority of cases, the game has shown some signs of being able to break through the patterns established by other games, and elicit not only critical thinking, but even some form of empathy.

Further research

- As noted in the introduction, this project adopted a very simplistic view of the notion of *common people*, which deserves a more thorough discussion; not only as a theoretical concept but also in what it implies for this and other designs focusing on such depictions.
- Even had it been more complete, we do not believe this project is in any sense the final word on how to depict common people in historical games; the issue deserves more exploration from a multitude of angles.
- The approach taken with this project was a radical one, almost entirely rejecting the notions of player-centric design. Such approaches presumably limit the potential to spread the ideas to a greater number of players, which we believe motivates research into how the issue can also be tackled in a more conventional design.

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