

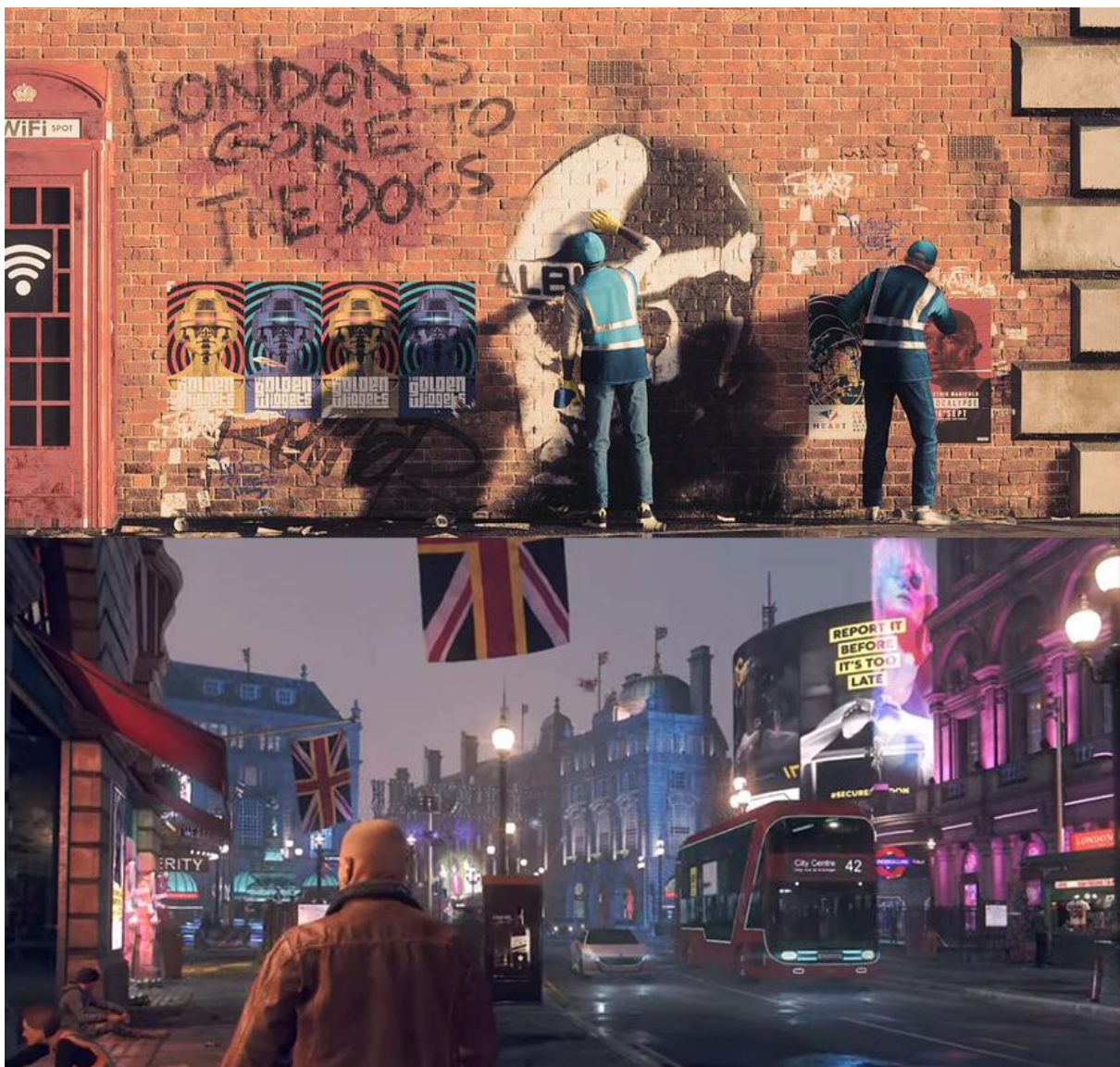
Abstract

This research investigates the figure of the player as a pathogen agent able to impose a propagating form of homologation within the video game *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft 2020). The study involves the analysis of the role of the player according to a multiple configuration: as patient zero, parasite and epidemic agent. The role of the player is potentially expressed through his or her being a starting point of contagion, a parasite that raids the bodies of NPCs and an epidemic agent – a potentially uncontrolled transmission medium. *Watch Dogs: Legion* is set in a totalitarian London of a hypothetical future in which the player can impersonate any NPC in the game world. Since this contagion effect is the fundamental mechanic of the experience, this paper shows how it is not the NPC to represent and be subject to an idea of homologation but how it is the player himself who imposes a propagating form of homologation – with his or her tastes, political, and social behaviours. Regarding the game narrative framework, it is possible to state that the totalitarian form implemented in the game design is addressed by the player across an epidemic process and expression. Compared to the trend of video games to homologate the player to ideologies and mechanics of the product, the analysed text proposes an inverse process. The paper argues that as an epidemic agent, the player both generates and fights (as a network) a process of homologation, creating kindred avatars and tackling totalitarianism.

The dystopia and the avatar

The essay investigates the role of the player within the ecosystem of *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft), a video game that presents forms of ludic experimentation related to the relationship between player and avatar. In the dystopian narrative context traced by the game, this study involves the analysis of the role of the player according to a multiple configuration: as patient zero, parasite and epidemic agent. To understand this relationship it is necessary to acknowledge the narrative context in which *Watch Dogs: Legion* (WDL from now on) is set. A quick look at the recent video game market shows that dystopian settings dominate the video game landscape. Amidst the favourite scenarios depicted in this medium it is possible to identify social collapse and totalitarian repression among the most widely used, “not just as an aesthetic choice or gameplay trend, but as reflective of a *political unconscious* latent in these games” (Johnson and Rowan 243). Not surprisingly, WDL takes place in a carefully reconstructed future London built up as a hubristic surveillance state; in this totalitarian city all police forces have been replaced with a private military-surveillance organization called Albion. The player takes part in an anti-corporate hacking collective called DeadSec, which aims to overthrow Albion. Pérez-Latorre and Mercè claimed that within dystopian narratives, the investigation is often carried out by a character in crisis (the different, the dissident, the heretic), and is usually presented in an implicit, non-didactic way, through their reflections (which are alienated and surprising compared to our reality), through the unusual ways of their thinking and the attempt to discover the secret structures of the world

in which he lives. The intellectual quest of the protagonist does not remain a theoretical quest, but involves himself and violently engages in *praxis*: he lives and acts effectively; moreover, their individual story is intertwined with the destinies of the world, because their intellectual and concrete adventure more or less metaphorically expresses the possibility or impossibility of a rebellion against the status quo.



1. These screenshots describe the state of London from the beginning of the game.

The London depicted in *WDL* matches the definition of *total city*, a city that involves “the acceleration of current cultural logics into all-controlling, totalitarian form.” (248). London is framed as a surveillance nightmare, an Orwellian vision of dystopia that prizes obedience, conformity and social homologation. On a gameplay level, *WDL* is *de facto* an open-world game with a third-person point of view, which normally means that the player controls a single avatar, visualizing the game experience from the back of the avatar, tackling the interactive story by exploring the virtual world in a non-set-on-track dynamic. Diametrically opposed to this configuration, *WDL* populates its world with over nine million playable characters, “procedurally generated with bodies matched through algorithms to animations, voice lines, and backstories” (D’Anastasio). The player can explore the dystopian London and, with the press of a button, switch perspectives to inhabit the body of a spy, a construction worker or an average Joe walking to their office job (Favis).



2. The player approaches NPCs and visualizes their skills to switch perspective.

WDL changes the notion of NPC (Non-Player Character) “by making each and every person in the game playable” (D’Anastasio). This has consequences both on how the player relates to the human simulacra in the game, and on the ontological status of the avatar. NPCs are “characters within a computer game that are controlled by the computer, rather than the player” (Warpefelt 31) whose genealogy extends back to pre-digital role-playing games. Their behavior can be strongly aligned with the narrative role assigned in the game in order to appear believable to the player (33). Warpefelt defines this aspect as NPC Characterhood, a concept elaborated from the notion of *personhood* by American philosopher Daniel Dennett. As NPCs are far from being mere objects of a scenario (34) the manifestation of their characterhood -- behaving rationally and displaying a consciousness -- restructures their status as digital actors in connection with the player, giving rise to a novel phenomenology and a renewed relationship of forces. Since in *WDL* every NPC is controllable, the traditional figure of the avatar falters. Avatar is a Sanskrit term for the manifestation of a deity descending to Earth, a form of reincarnation (Wildt et al. 4). Although scholars have already raised the contradictory nature of the term, the video game avatar crosses over into the virtual, “situating that relationship in the virtual space beyond the screen, and evoking a sense of embodiment and inhabitation” (6). As stated by Gee, “the real-world player gains a surrogate” and the player acts in the game as if the goals of your surrogate are your goals (258). In *WDL*, the avatar is no longer a *chosen one* or an operational tool (Wildt et al. 8), but is transformed into an inhabited and possessed entity, beyond the limits of a framed virtual world. Game designers can generate believable NPCs that persuade the player to enter a state of

presence (Warpefelt 51), and this is relevant for what concerns the embodiment of the player in his active role in *WDL*.

The role of the Player

Farrow and Iacovides state that the meaning of embodiment is often used inaccurately in the game research literature (4). Embodiment is a process by which the game has an active role in harnessing the affectivity of the player and using it to take control of the human body and the physical space it inhabits (Nicoll 27). Furthermore, the player can bridle the game space. The embodiment refers both to the player experience of the game as well as the game experience of the player (23). The latter is not a mere observer but *belongs* to the story and is an operational part of the process: the player is pushed to become the central agent in the system (Muriel and Crawford 148) and exercises control on what is happening (149). Farrow and Iacovides specify that Peter Bayliss was already calling for a distinction between embodiment as a state of being and embodying as an act, and they draw on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on embodied subjectivity to argue that avatars are “inevitably embodied in ways significantly different to our own form of being” (6-7) and since our bodies do not manifest what the avatar experiences, we speak of representational experience, and not an embodied one (8). The virtual character “becomes the player’s surrogate mind and body” (Gee 258) and the player can attribute both mental and physical states to it, in his or her own terms. This is related with the notion of presence, a perceptual illusion of nonmediation (Farrow and Iacovides 3) linked to a “primal mechanism of sensory integration” (Michailidis et al.

4) and elicited when the player feels as being in the game (3). In *WDL*, player, avatar, and NPCs can be seen as a collectivity, a total-body. A collectivized corporeality surrogated for and through the performance of the player. Prior to and parallel to the idea of total-body identified in *WDL*, it is possible to state that video games belonging to the FPS genre – first person shooter, i.e. video games in which the player's gaze corresponds to the one of the avatar – propose their own form of total-body and immersiveness.



3. Screenshots from the FPS game *Battlefield 4*.

Here, the player controls the game avatar by appropriating his or her gaze as if physically replacing his or her sight. In this way, control over the game world is more physical than narratological, and the total-body corresponds to this physicality. In this case, the FPS genre dialogues with an *anatomical* use of immersiveness: a dynamic of visualization and interaction in which the eye is connected to the body according to a human anatomical model. In *WDL*, the total-body is instead directly connected to the role of the player and to his or her influence on the game narrative more than to his or her point of view. In fact, since technology acts as a parasite re-acting on us (Robbins), players can behave as parasitic agents towards technology and its appendages. Being embodied in a total-body as in the game mechanism of *WDL* stands as a new way of looking at the player role in video games.¹

Through its gameplay and narrative context, it is possible to state that the totalitarian form implemented in the game design of *WDL* is addressed by the player across an epidemic process and expression. The expressions of embodiment mentioned above can be traced to different forms of contagion and epidemic transmission capable of further redefining the role of the player in his or her relationship with the network of NPCs. This essay analyses the multiple configurations to which the role of the player can be attributed: as patient zero, parasite and epidemic agent. The term *patient zero* was firstly applied in 1982 by CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) about the AIDS epidemic, “the press accused the supposed patient zero (Gaetan

¹ The last part of this paragraph was missing in the original version of the paper. After the discussion on the Second Day of the IFM Conference, we felt it was necessary to extend the concept of total-body that we had identified and applied to *WDL* by distinguishing it from a similar form applicable to another gaming context – the one of FPS games.

Dugas) to be the cause of the North American continent's contamination" (Armengot 67). Then, the term experienced declinations across media, with particular application in film. Within the genre of science fiction, examples from the 80s use a variety of parasitic organisms to construct allegories of embodied, biological fear. Recently, video games deployed the term as a significant narrative thread. In the ludic and narrative context of *WDL*, the term patient zero is easily associated with the first-game-avatar, with whom the player starts to know the virtual world and to experience it. It is from this first character, imposed by the game, that the player-as-patient zero begins to propagate a form of parasitic and epidemic transmission. Epidemics occur as a result of the interaction of three factors: agent, host, and environment. As an agent, the player chooses his or her first host and, with the narrative aim of creating a network of anti-totalitarian revolutionaries around the city, he spreads the social contagion. In fact, the epidemic transmission of *WDL* is neither medical or biological but social and cultural: whereas an epidemic is a breakout of disease affecting unusually large numbers of people within a population (Goodman), in the case of *WDL* the dominant theme is the "loss of individual selfhood" (Wonser and Boyns 632). Science-fiction-zombie film enlighten the possibility of the extermination of cultural selfhood; such narratives can be traced back to the concept of the *philosophical zombie* introduced by David Chalmers, i.e. a hypothetical being that is identical to and indistinguishable from a normal person but does not have conscious experience, qualia, or sentience. According to his or her social role, the player also performs an act of parasitism, since the infection process produces an over-dispersed distribution of parasites within the host population (Crofton 343). Furthermore, examining the distant etymology of the

word, the origins of the parasite refer to a slightly ambiguous social construct far from its more recent categorization as a biological organism (Bailey 37): the parasite was defined within fifth century BCE Greece as a religious figure who received food in exchange to services in temples and festivals. Within the context of the current ludic and social discourse, it is possible to state that, “the parasite performs a social short game: it agrees to play by the rules of its host in exchange for having its immediate needs met” (Bailey 37).



4. Some examples of NPC controllable by the player in WDL.

This means that the player accepts to play inside-the-body of an NPC, exploiting their game skills for narrative and ludic purposes. In this sense, parasitism is an “anti-strategy for using the conditions by which one is used, performing back the very thing that one is already given to be” (Fisher 2014). Finally, as patient zero, parasite and epidemic agent, the player exercises a form of control over the game

world trying to achieve social and cultural homologation in order to fight the predisposed dystopian homologation.

Conclusion

The dystopian setting of *WDL*, the role of the player, and the ontology of the NPCs are bound together into an homologative dynamic. It is important to state that within this discourse, the concept of homologation is understood as a form of empowerment, hegemony and homogeneity provided both by the player and the game in different ways.² If a video game tends to provide an all-encompassing experience to those who use it, in this case the figure of the player homologates the video game to his or her own ideologies and behavioral dynamics. Also, as Wiley stated, part of the problem of homology “lies in not making a clear distinction between individuals and kinds”. An NPC can be seen as a *character*: a part of an organism with “its own, intrinsic, properties that differentiate the character from the other character parts/properties of the organism”. *WDL* provides the perfect venue for exercising control in a virtual world where it seems like the player never has enough. In fact, the player controls and conducts the myriad of characters as a total-body, fostering his or her own narratives as a sort of demi-god. Comparing this with science fiction and dystopian literature, the hegemonic power exercised by the player through the “infective gameplay” can be traced back to the one experienced by the character of Morel in Adolfo Bioy Casares' novel “The Invention of Morel” (1940): scientist Morel creates a machine capable of recording, archiving and

² During the discussion on the Second Day of the IFM Conference, the need to better define the concept of homologation emerged, due to the multiple interpretations of the term.

projecting human life, leading to a form of immortality that results in the perpetual and infinite repetition of the same actions of a group of characters in a given place. Morel creates a total-body of perpetual simulacra, hegemonizing every single life to his idea of immortality. As debated above, we can state that in *WDL* the narrative of the player, set throughout an homologative agency on the virtual world and characters as a total-body, *plays* a part in structuring the role of the player in multiple facets. On the narrative hand, as a patient zero, parasite and epidemic agent, the player both generates and fights a process of homologation, exploiting the NPCs in order to create kindred avatars and tackle totalitarianism. Also, on the non-diegetic hand, the player, with his or her in-game-actions, imposes a propagating form of homologation, with his or her political and social behaviors, throughout the game world character identities. Compared to the trend of video games to commingle the player to the ideologies and mechanics of the product, *WDL* cleverly demonstrates that it can counter dystopian uniformism through infection and parasitism. As Shakeen noted, dystopian narratives reshape the traditional narratives on human nature and its essence (18), portraying corpocracy, genetic engineering, and biopolitics that alters depictions of culture and society, i.e. representations and mechanisms in game design and game culture.

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