Charismatic Leadership and Digital Games

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Keywords
Leadership, charisma, Weber, popular culture

GAMES AND LEADERSHIP
Meier (2012, n. pag.) has famously described “a game [as] a series of interesting decisions.” This suggests a certain affinity between the medium of the (digital) game and decision-making – and by extension: leadership. Grint (2010, 12-21) distinguishes between command, management and leadership. The commander acts decidedly and without consultation to provide clear solutions to critical problems. The manager organises processes within an organisation and essentially deals with known problems. Digital games have traditionally allowed their player to take on the roles of commanders and managers. More recent games such as Dragon Age: Inquisition (BioWare, 2014) and, to some extent, Fallout 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) simulate storylines and situations where the player takes on the role as leader, that is, someone whose decisions comply with the values of followers. In Etzioni’s (1975) terminology, the commander seeks coercive compliance, the manager seeks calculative compliance and the leader seeks normative compliance. Normative compliance is, for example, simulated in Dragon Age: Inquisition by the short-term reactions (e.g., non-diegetic, on-screen messages) and long-term behaviours (e.g., dialogue nuances and options, and the constantly ongoing evaluation of whether or not to remain a follower) of followers. In some instances, these followers represent factions whose support and compliance the player-leader may be trying to secure.

Previous research has suggested that games can be designed for leadership training (Aldrich 2009, 57-58 and 231-233) and that some players of massively multi-player online games such as World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004-present) acquire transferable leadership skills when organising and executing team activities such as “raids” (Yee 2006). This paper’s object of analysis is, however, not the effects (intended or incidental) of gaming in terms of leadership skills acquisition but the role played by popular culture, including gaming, in maintaining and developing the cultural preconditions for the emergence of a certain kind of leadership, namely, charismatic leadership.

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP AND POPULAR CULTURE
First theorised by Max Weber (2004) as a counterbalance to modernity’s inherent process of rationalisation (Gerth and Mills 1946, 51), charismatic leadership entails the empowering of extraordinarily gifted persons who find themselves surrounded by
devoted followers during times of crisis. Weber never clarified the functional relationship between charismatic and followers (McCulloch 2014, 2), that is, whether the inner circle of followers functions as an amplifier of, or an incubation chamber for, charismatic leadership. Furthermore, not all societies have tradition for this mode of leadership, thus “[c]harismatics appear in societies with traditions of support for them and expectations about their emergence” (Bass and Bass 2008, 594). This paper is part of a larger project, which argues that popular culture plays a role in maintaining and developing traditions of support for charismatic leadership, that changes in the media which sustain popular culture will have an effect on how audiences understand charismatic leadership, and that the media characteristic of early 20th century popular culture – cinema being the predominant – support a concept of charismatic leadership that only allows the charismatic’s inner circle relatively little importance (amplification), whereas the media that gradually grew to prominence later – serialised comic books, TV series, digital games – support formats of representation and enactment where the inner circle is allowed a much more significant role (incubation). The argument is supported by textual analysis of representative cases, including the enactment of charismatic leadership in a digital game: Dragon Age: Inquisition, which will be the focus of this presentation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY