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Learning to Meet Player Expectations for Branching Paths in *Road 96*

Road 96 is a first-person adventure game about road-tripping through a country in its most divided times. The player takes the perspective of 6-10 nameless teenagers road-tripping to the border seeking to flee the building political unrest of your nation. Through their travels the player meets a cast of recurring characters that showcase different ways people are affected and how they respond to tension. Through these characters, *Road 96* tackles the themes of violence, loss, corruption, misinformation, trauma, and vengeance, while also touching on themes of family, understanding, peace, and working towards a better future. Through its use of branching narrative decisions and its procedurally generated story event system, *Road 96* builds a mechanically and narratively unique story with depth to each character and storyline. Though *Road 96* tells a complex political and character-driven story that emphasizes the importance of decision-making, it falls short of providing satisfying outcomes that reflect the morality of the player and the messages of the narrative itself.

Road 96's narrative centers around the country of Petria. Petria is an authoritarian republic with a troubled history ruled by President Tyrax. Under Tyrax's rule, there is heavy corruption, propaganda, and unjust punishment with adults being sent to prisons and any teens causing trouble getting sent to work camps. These actions were made possible by an assassination attempt on Tyrax by a revolutionary group known as the Black Brigades. Tyrax took advantage of their failed attempt on his life to frame them for the deaths of civilians in a

tragedy known as “The Peak Collapse of 1986”. The game takes place 10 years later as tensions rise in the lead-up to election day. Election Day serves as the climax of the game and it’s where all of the players' decisions determine the future of the country in the final moments of the game.

Throughout *Road 96* the player can make decisions that mostly have effects on the player character's safety, the relationships of the central recurring characters, and most importantly the outcome of election day. Though election day can change in content the sequence never changes. The player is freed from imprisonment and brought to a cliffside where a confrontation between 3 major characters occurs. At this moment, either an unlikely family comes together or tensions boil over into violence as one or more main characters can be killed. The player is then prompted with the option to escape on their own or “join the fight,” and after choosing the final cutscene plays. A teen runs towards the police line as the protests build at the site of The Peak Collapse of 1986. There’s a pause before Tyrax gives the order to fire on the crowd and the pictured teen drops dead. The cutscene then quickly cuts back to the main characters from the earlier confrontation before fading to black and back into the narration that precedes the credits.

Road 96’s narrative offers many options for the development and future of the characters but when it comes to the resolution of the political plot line the game falls short in its depiction of the different endings. *Road 96* acts as a mirror to our political landscape and puts the player in a unique position to directly determine social change. As stated by Mariarosaria Nardone in *Videogames Between Ethics and Politics*, “As a reflecting mirror, it offers us the chance to process awareness of who we are; what type of society we are creating; what are our most common fears; what we are running from and where we are seeking refuge; what imaginary enemy prototypes we have built; who represents the alter ego?” (Nardone, 2017). As a “Mirror” of our real world and the complex political issues rapidly dividing us, *Road 96* draws the player

in with the promise of influencing the outcomes of this world. As the player progresses they get more interested in the outcomes of their decision making and the game provides feedback on where they're heading but ultimately the end is bleak regardless. The final cutscene of *Road 96* depicts tensions rising before violent conflict breaks out at the border. In these final moments regardless of your ending a teen dies. In the worst endings, two of the main characters that the player has been helping in their travels may charge to the front of the riots and be killed in the ensuing fight. In what is considered the best ending, they are just replaced with a nameless teen who takes their place in being killed.

While real-world politics don't always come with happy endings, *Road 96*'s narrative makes it hard to feel as though there is a good ending to work towards. Although the player is told through narration the positive effects of their actions in the final moments before the credits roll, even in the happiest of endings violence and death leave the player with the feeling that more can be done in a narrative where the characters strive for peace. This puts the player in an uncomfortable position as the decision-maker for this world. As described in *The Ethics of Computer Games*, "Players act in a game as ethical beings as well as goal-oriented, rational players. There is a responsibility in their actions; they are not passive victims but active moral agents when they play." (Sicart, 2011). As an ethical being involved in this world the death of a faceless teenager carries as much meaning as the death of those we know. The player is thrust into the role of a faceless hitchhiker themselves and in the final moments when exposed to the horrors that those who were captured faced it is impossible to lack empathy for the other teens in Petria. In a moment where the player is expecting to be rewarded for their efforts in remaining morally good, their reward is sparing a named character while dooming another. Though the character has made connections to the named characters in the context of the world, the goal of

moral righteousness is to free the teens of the pain and oppression they face. While saving the characters the player knows may relieve their stress, killing another still comes at the expense of the goal of peace. This empathy makes any ending feel bad regardless of decisions as the player must still watch violence unfold upon teenagers like themselves and those met along the road regardless of their decisions made.

Despite the hope preached in the narration following the final cutscene of the game violence is inevitable in the narrative of *Road 96* and all the player is truly deciding in the end is which characters meet a fatal end in the climax. This lack of change in the outcome makes it hard to tell which ending of *Road 96* is meant to be considered morally good as there is no clear correlation between violence and morality. This kind of correlation between player decision and morality is described well in, “The moral choice of inFAMOUS: law and morality in video games”. Within the paper, it says, “A ‘good’ act/decision affirms the presence of law, while conversely, an ‘evil’ decision indicates an absence of law, yet nevertheless, irrespective of the particular choice made, the player is constantly reinforcing the inseparable nature of law and morality.” (Barnett & Sharp, 2015). In inFAMOUS as described, law and morality are inseparable and the game reflects that through its many systems. *Road 96*’s narrative through its lack of a peaceful ending depicts violence and change as inseparable and although you may be able to work towards preventing the NPCs from committing violent acts the world does not allow for the player to work against violence as a whole. In a political story driven by the player's decisions, they would expect the path of non-violence to mean peace for the whole nation and not just the handful of player characters who were met along the way. As a reflection of the real world, a reflection of the player's decisions, and as a depiction of a “good ending”,

Road 96's final moments and different endings stand out as an unsuccessful resolution to the narrative.

Ultimately if the outcome of a game's narrative fails to accurately represent the morality of the player's choices that brought them there the player will be disappointed in the ending they are given. In *Road 96* this is especially apparent. A player can spend their entire playthrough trying to mend relationships, avoid violence for and with the other characters, and strive for the best ending but once there the player is still faced with an ending cutscene depicting death and violence. This leaves the player feeling like they made the wrong decision along the way even if the ending narration tells a story of a country better off. While a lot can be said by using the sacrifice of a life to represent change there is little done in *Road 96* to show how the deaths of the teens depicted in its final moments shape the world around them and reflect the players' decisions. In a narrative involving politics that mirrors our own, the lack of a positive tangible outcome can paint a rather hopeless image of what message the story is trying to tell. If the player has worked to uphold peace through their actions the final cutscene should show that effort reflected in more than the lives of 3 of the characters.

Another lesson can be taken from the ending narration which is to show don't tell. This is a standard piece of advice for all visual media forms and is extremely relevant here. *Road 96* ends in narration describing the future of Petria. In the best ending the player hears that Tyrax is imprisoned and the new president begins to turn things around. As mentioned the cutscene prior regardless of the election outcome only changes in who is killed in the final moments. The player may be about to hear the bright future ahead but they were just shown the death of a teenager to get there and the lack of an option to prevent said death prevents the ending from feeling satisfying. The inclusion of any visual imagery to show how the country or the characters' lives

had changed following the conclusion of the game would change things drastically. The player would get to see the actual positive effects of the actions they had taken throughout their journey and even that much would provide a far more fulfilling ending than seeing the same cutscene take place while the narrator tells the player the outcomes of their efforts.

Road 96 is a great game that takes a unique approach to storytelling and narrative gameplay. The game's systems create a narrative experience that feels fresh and fun while telling a story almost entirely about NPCs. Its characters are filled with depth and its world is filled with complexity and intrigue. However, the ending of the story does not provide a satisfying conclusion for the players who went the extra mile to ensure the best ending. Although the branching paths allow for multiple endings the positive conclusions to the narrative do not accurately reflect the player's expectations or the themes of non-violence the player can choose to support. Looking at *Road 96* teaches developers how to accurately represent the player's morality through decision-based narrative systems. It also shows developers how to better differentiate player choices through the use of visual components to provide satisfying endings.

Works Cited

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