Commander Kurz

A Short Essay on Videoludic Heroes and Political Strongmen[1]

Eugen Pfister

What does Sebastian Kurz have in common with Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* computer game series? One is currently the democratically legitimated chancellor of the Austrian Republic, the other commander of a spaceship in a fictional future. What purpose is there in comparing two such different characters? The Austrian politician, who, after a hiatus, returned to form his 2nd government in 2020, is often said to have a great talent for staging himself as a political victim and savior. But what if all he is doing is in fact only adopting a narrative already successfully established in pop culture?

"Das Parlament hat bestimmt. Das Volk wird entscheiden!" ("The parliament has determined. The people will decide!"), commented Sebastian Kurz at the end of May 2019 on his resignation as chancellor of Austria (Krieghofer 2019), in consequence of a vote of no confidence, which had been passed by MPs for the first time in the Second Republic's history. Some journalists and politicians were irritated by Kurz's statement (Wolf 2019). After all, the parliament is charged by the sovereign people to represent their will. What is parliament, if not the representation of the people? Surveys however showed that Sebastian Kurz had successfully managed to present himself and his party, the ÖVP, to the public as victims of an "undemocratic" party-political intrigue (Seidl 2019). But how is it possible that a large part of the Austrian population put more trust and hope in a toppled chancellor than in the National Council they had previously elected to

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represent them? I deliberately chose a comparatively moderate case as an example for my thoughts: the Austrian Federal Chancellor, who challenged basic democratic principles when faced with a vote of no confidence. There are, in fact, many more extreme examples of powerful men in politics worldwide today who are undermining basic democratic principles in a much more vehement way, such as Viktor Orban, Donald Trump, Recep Erdogan, to name but a few.

The number of convinced democrats seems to be: "[R]egulative constitutional institutions, such as the judiciary and law enforcement, enjoy considerably more trust than representative institutions." (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2019: 10f.) The idea that one single man (women rarely choose this role) can solve all the problems of a nation and clean up the corruption and sclerosis of inefficient political systems sells a dangerously tempting solution to all possible problems to disenchanted voters (Triffitt 2018). It is literally too good to be true. However, this political idea did not come out of nowhere. Part of the explanation for its success can be found in our popular culture, where we have been learning to rely on these solitary heroes for decades. Because of this, an analysis of the history of ideas of the motif "lonely political hero vs. corrupt system" can help us to better understand this phenomenon.

Allow me, therefore, to conduct a thought experiment. If we analyze the best-selling video games of recent years, the sentence "The Parliament has determined. The people will decide!" (this was the shortened advertising slogan that the ÖVP put on banners) suddenly no longer seems like a contradiction in terms. In digital games we normally do not come across an elected parliament. Instead, we encounter political action almost without exception in the guise of the morally acting individual – usually the protagonist, a figure which, incidentally, also often crops up in most Netflix series and movies. Here, of course, the logic of digital games (meaning maximum agency for the players) and the tradition of the hero in our culture in general, also play a defining role.

Political compromises and consensus apparently have no place in the fast-paced and often dystopian world of digital games. They are "unsexy" in pop-cultural terms. Instead, in games we expect individual characters to save the world: Joel in *The Last of Us*, Gordon Freeman in *Half-Life*, the Inquisitor in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Iron Man, Batman, etc. We are also used to the fact that established political structures in these games are usually either no help to our protagonist or even obstruct the character's attempt to do the "right thing": the Council in *Mass Effect*, the Environmental Protection Commissioner (!) Walter Peck in *Ghostbusters*, Senator Stern in *Iron Man*.

Even more important than the (occasional) discrediting of democratic institutions is, in my opinion, the extreme valorization of the individual in these games.

We have faith in our digital heroes because they never choose their own fate. They were chosen by it, or were simply in the right (or wrong) place at the right time. They dare to speak "uncomfortable truths". They have to make decisions for the good of society – even if it means personal sacrifice and isolation – because no other character is prepared to take action. Unlike the democratic institutions portrayed, they can react immediately and "rightly" when necessary. When the player's game world is threatened by zombie dragons, mass-murdering machines, evil characters such as Bowser from the Nintendo *Super Mario* franchise or other digital alien lifeforms, the game simply allows no time for political compromise and complex decision-making.

Of course, one must never overestimate the "influence" or even the "impact" of mass media on individuals. Players are not blank slates that simply adopt the political ideas presented to them. At the same time, however, we are exposed through our popular culture to new role models every day, who offer us another possible worldview. Here we learn the limits of the "sayable" and the "thinkable": a world in which moral heroes act quickly and correctly.

In doing so, we like to forget how unrealistic it is to expect a single person to be able to solve the world's problems in the real world. Even a brief glance at human history reveals the limits and dangers of political savior figures. And yet it is terribly comforting to believe that we only have to wait for the "right" person to save us. Especially today, many popular autocrats like Trump, Orban and their ilk are happy to adopt the narrative of the "lonely hero". On the other hand, if a party lacks such a charismatic leader, we automatically see it in crisis. And this crisis narrative is often even adopted by the parties themselves. The search for a savior is, then, paramount.

Digital games are not the "cause" of the public's apparent skepticism towards democracy, as illustrated by the Kurz case. They simply reproduce narratives found in popular culture and make use of dominant discursive statements. Or, in other words: successful narratives will be further consolidated. Popular culture also functions here as an amplifier of processes that have potentially originated in political environments, as long as there are no real counternarratives.

But what does all this have to do with the Sebastian Kurz?
1) Kurz has successfully transferred the culturally learned narrative of the lonely hero – the only one who knows what is "right" – to his own person.
2) He can be confident that a large part of the population will understand if he has to stand up against democratic institutions in an emergency because it is "right" at that time.

And, as absurd as the comparison with the game series *Mass Effect* may have sounded at first glance, in the end, Commander Kurz remains at the helm of the Normandy. He was deposed by the Council but came back nevertheless to save the world from a dark threat.

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Games

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The Last of Us, Naughty Dog, Sony, 2013.