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Understanding Politics in Video Game Narratives, Gameplay and Culture

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Declaration

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Abstract

Video games and gaming culture have a varying relationship with politics. The case studies presented in this paper demonstrate a desire by some game creators to separate their works from political discussion, while others will speak candidly about the political intentions of their work. Examining the history of video games and politics reveals hostility towards specifically non-white, non-male creators and works, and a sub-culture among the gaming community who expect apolitical content. It is also shown how games can be used by politicians and government institutions for civic engagement in political dialogue and military enrollment.

This paper uses techniques defined by narratologist Mieke Bal and ludologist Ian Bogost to demonstrate the persuasive power and subjective nature of stories and gameplay within the medium. By using relative concepts, it is possible to understand how video games are perceived differently by the player, leading to various political affiliations. Understanding game narratives and procedural rhetoric, meaning can be derived from works to demonstrate how achieving objectivity in narrative is a difficult task, as works from Bal have previously defined.

With works such as *Life is Strange 2*, a positive relationship between politics and gaming can be discovered, revealing the potential for change in the way such topics are regarded in gaming culture. Previous studies have explored the ludification of culture in social media, which is demonstrated in this paper to have notable effects on how game creators present their works. Further research suggests that the debate regarding the intersection of identity and politics is ongoing but recent examples show a hesitant step towards accepting the persuasive nature of gaming and stronger comfortability with political stories.

Structure

In this paper, I will explore the various ways in which politics intersect with video games and gaming culture. Video games are a diverse medium that have the capacity to tell their stories in a tactile manner and may also border political concepts. In the two case studies presented within this paper, I will explore how politics are perceived by their respective creators in relation to their games, and consider how a game may be viewed differently by examining them under a narratological and ludological framework.

I will begin this paper with an autoethnography. This section will outline my personal experience with the subject and detail my interest in exploring this topic. An introduction will follow; providing an overview of topical political events related to gaming culture. Next, I will detail the methodology that will be used to examine the selected works for the case studies. The case studies will follow before I arrive at my conclusions for this research paper.

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Glossary of Terms

- Autoethnography - Described by Carolyn Ellis and Tony Adams as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience” ¹
- ‘SJW’ - An abbreviation of Social Justice Warrior. Sometimes used as a derogatory term for an individual who holds liberal, feminist or progressive values. ²
- Narratology - Defined by cultural theorist Mieke Bal as “As a field of study is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events of cultural artefacts that tell a story.” ³
- Ludology - Defined by ludologist Gonzalo Frasca as “Ludology is the discipline that studies games” ⁴
- Core Mechanics - The core mechanics concern the primary way in which the player interacts with a game. Defined by researcher Tyler Fullerton as “the actions that a player repeats most often while striving to achieve the game's overall goal.” ⁵
- Persuasive Games - Defined by Ian Bogost as “video games that mount procedural rhetorics effectively”. ⁶
- Moral Disengagement - Defined by Tilo Hartmann as “reprehensible acts

¹ Ellis, C., Adams, T. (2004) Autoethnography: An Overview [online]
Available from <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095> [accessed 02 June 2021]

² Ohlheiser, A. (2015) Why ‘Social Justice Warrior,’ a Gamergate Insult, is Now a Dictionary Entry [online] Available from
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/> [accessed 01 June 2021]

³ Bal, M. (1985). Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. 4th ed.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press

⁴ Frasca, G. (1999). Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)games and Narrative. [online]
Available from <https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ludology.htm> [accessed 31 May 2021]

⁵ Fullerton, T. (2014) Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games. 3rd ed.

Massachusetts: A K Peters/CRC Press

⁶ Bogost, I. (2007). Persuasive Games
Massachusetts: The MIT Press

against others in a way that makes them appear worthy, just, necessary, or inconsequential”.⁷

- Militainment - “State violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption”⁸
- Militarism - Defined by Daniel McCleary and Robert Williams as positive perceptions of the “nobility and efficacy of the military”⁹
- Civic Engagement - Defined by Thomas Ehrlich as “Working to make a difference in the civic life of one’s community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”¹⁰

Abbreviations

BFV - *Battlefield V*

ACNH - *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

DQ - *Depression Quest*

CoD: MW - *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

LiS2 - *Life is Strange 2*

ESA - Entertainment Software Association

⁷ Hartmann, T., Krakowiak, M., Tsay-Vogel, M. (2014) How Violent Video Games Communicate Violence... [online]

Available from

<https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/how-violent-video-games-communicate-violence-a-literature-review/> [accessed 01 June 2021]

⁸ Bal, M. (2017). *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 4th ed.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press

⁹ McCleary, D., Williams, R. (2009). Sociopolitical and Personality Correlates of Militarism in Democratic Societies [online]

Available from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10781910902837248> [accessed 01 June 2021]

¹⁰ Ehrlich, T. (2000) *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, American Council on Education/Oryx Press, p. vi

Autoethnography

Video games have been a passion of mine from a young age, and I have gladly seen this pastime guide the course of my studies, hobbies, and prospective career. As such, it is an art form of significant importance to me.

In a medium that I have seen grow in popularity alongside social media, the intersection of self-identity and politics has seen gaming subculture wrestle with what it means to participate as a player of a video game. This topic has strongly divided the community for some years and led to controversies that paint the medium in a negative light.

It has also been made apparent to me on numerous occasions that a subgroup within gaming culture exists who reject the notion of games as devices for political expression; that play is apolitical and any notion to the contrary was but the player's agenda, not the game itself. This sentiment is expressed regarding identity also. As games grow to become more inclusive and supportive of various genders, ethnicities, cultures, and identities; they risk fracturing the foundations that the art form was supposedly built upon according to this sub-group.

As a prospective game creator, the way in which self-expression can be met with such hostility is of notable importance to understand how identity and politics are presented in video games and gaming culture.

Introduction

“Video game players represent a diverse cross section of the American population spanning every age, gender, and ethnicity. They live healthy lives, are civically engaged, and are socially active.” -

Stan Pierre-Louis, Acting CEO and President, Entertainment Software Association. (ESA)¹¹

This is an excerpt from the foreword given by Stan Pierre-Louis as part of the 2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry; an annual poll conducted by the ESA. In this poll, 59% of respondents replied that they intend to vote in the 2020 presidential election, and even included which party they would vote for.¹²

Among the top 20 best-selling games from the year prior included two titles in the *Call of Duty* franchise as well as *Battlefield V* (BFV). BFV is of interesting note as a game of notable divisiveness among series fans. At the time of writing, the game’s reveal trailer has 359k likes to 569k dislikes on YouTube.¹³

Top comments include;

“Ah yes, it’s just like Grandpa described it. His regiment had over 200 disabled trans women in it.” (4.8k likes)

“Historically accurate says the new battlefield 6 main character A black lesbian woman single mom 3 kids. With no legs in a wheelchair.” (4.1k likes)

BFV’s reveal trailer describes an action sequence following a female amputee; a soldier fighting for the British forces. Her inclusion as a primary focus in the video

¹¹ Pierre-Louis, S. (2019). 2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry. [online] Available From: <https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Essential-Facts-About-the-Computer-and-Video-Game-Industry.pdf> [accessed 10 May 2021]

¹² (Ibid.)

¹³ Battlefield Official Youtube Channel (2018). Battlefield 5 Official Reveal Trailer [online] Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb1MR85XFOc>. [accessed 10 May 2021]

sparked controversy among gamers, who reacted poorly to the prospect of including identity politics in the game, expressing historical inaccuracies among their concerns.

Later, a trailer titled *Battlefield V - Elites: Wilhelme Franke* was published online. In BFV, Wilhelme Franke was depicted as a soldier for the German forces. It was later pointed out to EA, publisher of the game, that this character shared their name with a real-life German resistance member who fought against the Nazis during the second world war. A statement from EA following this revelation would acknowledge the error and seek to correct it.¹⁴ As part of this official statement, the game's publisher went on to express that "In Battlefield 5, we're not making any political statements in relation to the real life events of WW2 and there are no swastikas in the game."¹⁵

The history surrounding BFV illustrates the tension that arises from representation and political expression in the medium; The difficulties that face representation, and the reluctance from developers and publishers to have their productions critiqued for their political framework. It provides a snapshot that informs the discussion within this research paper.

The conversation extends beyond the realm of developer and player, too. It includes the role with which politicians and people in power play in augmenting video games for their own political gain.

In the months leading up to the presidential election in America, the Democratic party engaged with popular video games as a means of reaching out to prospective voters. On October 20th, 2020 senators Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar joined the live streaming platform Twitch to play popular multiplayer game *Among Us*.¹⁶ The live stream proved fruitful in viewership, enjoying an audience of 439,000 concurrent viewers.

¹⁴ Pearson, J. (2019) EA Is Changing the Name of a Nazi in 'Battlefield V' That Belonged to a Real-Life Resistance Fighter [online] Available from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/a3x4y8/ea-is-changing-the-name-of-a-nazi-in-battlefield-v-that-belonged-to-a-real-life-resistance-fighter> [accessed 10 May 2021]

¹⁵ (Ibid.)

¹⁶ BBC News (2020). Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Among Us Game Watched by 400,000 [online]. Available from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-54630330> [accessed 10 May 2021]

Retrospectively, the event was viewed as a success in terms of engaging the audience. In The Guardian, Joshua Rivera wrote that “No matter how earnest Joe Biden is, or how cynically exploitative Trump is, in certain online circles, they will always be tourists simply because they’re too far removed from what young people are doing online to do what Ocasio-Cortez”¹⁷

This is a pointed remark as The Biden Campaign would make its own attempt in reaching out to voters via the medium of popular video games also. On October 18th, 2020 the Biden Campaign utilized the widely successful life simulator *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) as a means of canvassing.

ACNH is a life simulation developed and published by Nintendo in 2020. The Biden Campaign created an island in ACNH, with digital avatars of both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and shared the invite code necessary to visit the island with players online. Director of Digital Marketing for the Biden Campaign, Christian Tom, announced that they would be canvassing through the popular game.¹⁸

This move prompted a response from Nintendo, who updated their usage guidelines for ACNH pertaining to the use of its title for advertisement and political purposes.¹⁹

The events outlined above show the historically divisive nature of identity and politics among the gaming community. Furthermore, video games as a media are seen to be used deliberately by politicians as a method of reaching out to the public as a canvassing method; delving the medium further into the political spectrum. It is with

¹⁷ Rivera J. (2020). AOC Played Among Us and Achieved What Most Politicians Fail At: Acting Cornball columnist at The Guardian [online]. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/oct/22/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ilhan-omar-among-us-twitc-h-stream-aoc> [accessed 10 May 2021]

¹⁸ Elassar A. (2020) Joe Biden Has His Own Island on 'Animal Crossing' Where You Can Learn About His Campaign [online]. Available from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/18/business/biden-animal-crossing-island-trnd/index.html> [accessed from 10 May 2021]

¹⁹ Nintendo (2020). Animal Crossing: New Horizons Usage Guidelines for Businesses and Organizations [online]. Available From https://www.nintendo.co.jp/animalcrossing_announcement/en/index.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_content=20201119&utm_campaign=announcement [accessed 10 May 2021]

these anecdotes that inform the principalities of this research paper; to explore how video games are seen by their respective creators and players, and how they can contribute to the social and political conversations.

The Gamergate Controversy

GamerGate wasn't really about video games at all so much as it was a flash point for radicalized online hatred... The movement helped solidify the growing connections between online white supremacist movements, misogynist nerds, conspiracy theorists, and dispassionate hoaxers who derive a sense of power from disseminating disinformation. This patchwork of Thanksgiving-ruining racist uncles might look and sound like a bad joke, but they became a real force behind giving Donald Trump the keys to the White House. - Zoe Quinn ²⁰

An important topic relating to identity and politics in gaming is the Gamergate controversy that has since influenced the way with which these topics are perceived in the industry. In 2013, Zoe Quinn released a text-based game titled *Depression Quest* (DQ) about the struggles of living with depression. The game was designed using the Twine engine; a tool allowing creators to tell interactive, non-linear stories.

Upon its release, DQ enjoyed positive reviews from game critics but reception from some gamers differed greatly. This came when Quinn submitted DQ for release on Steam through Steam's Greenlight program; a program which allowed smaller independent creators to submit their games to Steam, and for Steam users to then vote on which games would be made available on the Steam store page.

In an interview with VICE, Quinn discusses the reaction she received in submitting DQ to the Steam Greenlight program "When it hit Greenlight, people were leaving

²⁰ Quinn Z. (2017). *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate*. New York: PublicAffairs

foul comments there, and suddenly I started getting stuff sent to my email: Oh I saw your game on Greenlight and I hope you kill yourself.”²¹

DQ’s depiction of mental illness in the form of a first-person narrative, and the politically aware themes that came with it was met with hostility from gamers who believed that the game was too political, and that this form of game was infiltrating and potentially replacing the gamer culture they loved.²²

Quinn was not alone in her experiences of misogyny. In 2012, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter campaign for her video series titled *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. The campaign attracted negative attention from a subgroup of gamers, and the harassment that followed prompted Sarkeesian to write about the extent of the abuse and threats on her website and the Kickstarter page for her project.²³ Further details of the abuse were reported by Huffington Post containing graphic depictions of violence against Sarkeesian.²⁴

In late 2014, a mass movement of gamers formed under the campaign name Gamergate. On the 16th of August 2014, an article was posted to Reddit by Eron Gjoni, an ex-boyfriend of Quinn, regarding their relationship. Within the article, Gjoni alleges that Quinn was unfaithful to him with other men within the gaming industry; specifically journalists including Nathan Grayson - a writer for independent gaming publication Kotaku. The allegations insinuated that Quinn’s success within the industry was augmented by favors to the press rather than raw talent.²⁵

²¹ Kotzer Z. (2014). The Sexist BS Women Who Make Video Games Have to Deal With [online] Available from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/exmxvm/female-game-designers-are-being-threatened-with-rape> [accessed May 10 2021]

²² Salter M. (2016) Crime, Justice and Social Media. London: Routledge.

²³ Sarkeesian A. (2012) Tropes vs. Women in Video Games [online]. Available from <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/566429325/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/posts/242547> [accessed May 10 2021]

²⁴ O'Meara, S. (2012) Internet Trolls Up Their Harassment Game With 'Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian' [online] Available from https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/07/06/internet-trolls-online-beat-up-anita-sarkeesian-game_n_1653473.html [accessed May 10 2021]

²⁵ Murray S. (2017). On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space. New York: I.B.Tauris.

Gjoni would share his article on various social media sites; platforms which already had hostilities toward Quinn after the release of DQ. Gjoni's article helped to validate the position for these gamers that Quinn, and other women within the industry, were seeing success not for their ability but because of political reasons, corrupt journalism, and collusion; A belief that some creators were getting ahead due to political persuasions. ²⁶

Kotaku responded by denying the allegations, pointing to the fact that Grayson never wrote a review for DQ. ²⁷ However, the evidence failed to convince gamers. On August 27th, actor Adam Baldwin shared a link on Twitter to a Youtube video containing conspiracy theories and defamatory statements against Quinn, using the hashtag #Gamergate, thus giving the movement its eventual name. In an interview with Scott Kaufman for rawstory.com, Baldwin would blame the leftists for imposing their "political crap" onto gamers as part of a grander culture war. ²⁸

Those who spoke in support of Quinn also received threats during Gamergate. Phil Fish, the developer of indie game *Fez*, defended Quinn and the subsequent abuse he received from 4Chan users led to having his website and social media accounts hacked, prompting Fish to leave the industry and cancel any future games in development. The users responsible for the hacking referred to the event as a "public execution" for his "feminist and SJW" views. ²⁹

Other victims of harassment included journalist Jenn Frank who was targeted for an article she wrote in The Guardian detailing the harassment of women in games. The abuse she received for writing such an article proved severe enough that Frank quit

²⁶ (Ibid.)

²⁷ Totilo S. (2014). Kotaku's Investigation Into Gjoni Allegations [online]
Available from

<https://kotaku.com/in-recent-days-ive-been-asked-several-times-about-a-pos-1624707346>
[accessed May 10 2021]

²⁸ Kaufman, S. (2014) Actor Adam Baldwin: #GamerGate Defeated the Left, But There Will Be No Parade. [online]

Available from <https://www.rawstory.com/2014/11/actor-adam-baldwin-gamergate-defeated-the-left-but-there-will-be-no-parade/> [accessed 10 May 2021]

²⁹ Romano A. (2020) 4chan Hacks and Doxes Zoe Quinn's Biggest Supporter [online].
Available from <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/4chan-hacks-phil-fish-over-his-defense-of-zoe-quinn/>
[accessed 10 May 2021].

the industry entirely.^{30 31} Game developer Brianna Wu was also targeted for her criticism of Gamergate action. Threats of violence she received intensified to such a level that Wu was forced to flee her home.³²



(Figure 1.0)

³⁰ Frank J. (2014) How to Attack a Woman Who Works in Video Gaming [online] Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games> [accessed 10 May 2021]

³¹ Stuart K. (2014) Brianna Wu and the Human Cost of Gamergate: 'Every Woman I Know in the Industry is Scared' [online] Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/17/brianna-wu-gamergate-human-cost> [accessed 10 May 2021]

³² Hart, P. (2014) Game Developer Brianna Wu Flees Home After Death Threats [online] Available from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/game-developer-death-threats_n_5970966 [accessed 10 May 2021]

The Gamergate controversy highlights a cultural and political divide within gaming culture that could be perceived as a progressive vs. conservative narrative. Feminist critics, marginalized groups and their supporters were targeted for their perspectives, while right-wing figures such as Adam Baldwin and Milo Yiannopoulos wrote in support of Gamergate. Right-wing publication Breitbart.com would report extensively on Gamergate, offering a supporting perspective to the Gamergate movement. Yiannopolous described the events of 2014 by the following “Gamers are the only fandom ever to mount a sustained revolt against social justice warriors riding in to “save” their hobby from “misogyny” and other invented offences”³³

However, the predominantly white male hegemonic nature of technology, the internet and gaming had been documented long before the rise of Gamergate, as has the violence and abuse of marginalized members.³⁴ One early example of misogyny and violence toward women was in the online multiplayer game *MUD* (1993) where a male user virtually assaulted a female user.³⁵ In the case of Gamergate and its members, they would insist upon their apolitical stance and frame their adversaries as the political side. Their perspective was that of ‘common sense’ and a bias against the white, heterosexual male who’s representation has been reported to dominate the industry.³⁶

This notion of apolitical opinion among figures within the hegemony will be examined within the case studies of this paper. As will an alternative perspective; Video games that aim to represent the voice of marginalized groups and confront political ideas in a deliberate manner.

³³ Delingpole J., Yiannopoulos M. (2014) James’s and Milo’s Year In Liberal Stupid, Part One (online) Available from <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2014/12/29/jamess-and-milos-year-in-liberal-stupid-part-one/> [accessed 10 May 2021]

³⁴ Herring S.(2003) Gender and Power in Online Communication [online] Available from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313001298_Gender_and_Power_in_Online_Communication [accessed May 10 2021]

³⁵ Dibbel J. (1993) A Rape in Cyberspace [online] Available from <https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/10/18/a-rape-in-cyberspace/> [accessed May 10 2021]

³⁶ Marks P. (2009). Video Games Need a More Diverse Cast of Characters. [online] Available from <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn17819-video-games-need-a-more-diverse-cast-of-characters/> [accessed 10 May 2021]

Methodology

This chapter will define the methodology with which the topic of identity and politics intersect with video games will be discussed. For this paper, two case studies will be conducted using available approaches defined by industry academics. As video games are a multifaceted medium that convey messages through various artistic disciplines, each case study will be explored in terms of narratology, ludology, and a broader examination of the cultural impact each artifact has had.

Narratology

In her book, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Mieke Bal defines narratology as “A field of study is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events of cultural artefacts that tell a story. Such theory helps us understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives.” ³⁷

Using narratology, messages may be deduced from the particular language, visuals, aesthetics and accompanying audio to draw perspectives from the narratives within.

She continues to expand on several working definitions that will be used when discussing the case studies within this paper.

A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (“tells” the reader, viewer or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings or a combination thereof. A story is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection and “colouring” of a fabula. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. An event is the transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To act is defined here as to cause or to experience an event.

³⁷ Bal, M. (1985). *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 4th ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

For the purpose of this paper, actors may be considered characters within the written narrative or story of a game but also will also concern players as their actions allow events to transition within the game. The narrator will also be defined in accordance with Bal's definition. Here, she says that "The linguistic, visual, cinematic subject, a function and not a person, which expresses itself in the language or images that constitute the text. This agent is not the (biographical) author of the narrative."

It is also important to outline the distinction between narration and the fabula. While the fabula specifies the order in which events unfold, the narrator colours those events. As Bal details "The fact that narration implies focalization is related to the notion that language shapes vision and world view."

Focalization concerns the point of view in which events are presented. Bal writes that Story-telling is "inevitably slanted or subjective in nature, and to deny this constitutes a dubious political act, for it means denying narrative responsibility."

Bal suggests that aiming for objectivity is 'pointless'. As there are many factors that contribute to how a story will be perceived such as, lighting, familiarity with subject, attitude towards the object, camera angles or descriptors of a scene, these all change how the viewer interprets the narrative. Bal then defines focalization as "the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented".

Ludology

Before detailing the importance of ludological examination in regards to video games, I will define what this means in relation to the context it will be used herein. I will define ludology using the words of ludologist Gonzalo Frasca. In his essay, *Similitude and Differences Between (Video)games and Narrative*, Frasca states the following

We will propose the term ludology (from ludus, the Latin word for "game"), to refer to the yet non-existent "discipline that studies game and play activities".

Just like narratology, ludology should also be independent from the medium that supports the activity.³⁸

There is debate among ludologists in regards to how much, if at all, ludology should consider narrative within its boundaries or whether ludology should be held to a stricter boundary that only concerns the realm of mechanics and play. For the purpose of this study, I will be using the works of Frasca and Marie-Laure Ryan as a framework with which to derive meaning from mechanics and game-rules.

In describing the relationship between ludology and narratology, Frasca would suggest this exercise as showing “how basic concepts of ludology could be used along with narratology to better understand video games... not to replace the narratological approach, but to complement it”³⁹

For the purpose of exploring identity and politics in video games, it is necessary to consider what the game-rules and mechanics imply, how and if they allow the player to express themselves, and whether the presence of mechanics or game-rules alter a video game’s narrative. This effort also concerns how mechanics and systems can influence player behavior as a motivator for political involvement or change.

Ludologist Ian Bogost coined the term procedural rhetoric to describe the games that offer a persuasive and expressive practice of using game mechanics to describe real-world occupations and situations.⁴⁰ Bogost says of this term that “procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through process in general and computational processes in particular.” This is useful, he says, for the programmer, the user, the game designer and the player as a “technique for making arguments with

³⁸ Frasca, G. (1999). Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)games and Narrative. [online] Available from <https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ludology.htm> [accessed 31 May 2021]

³⁹ Frasca, G. (2003). Ludologists love stories, Too: Notes From A Debate That Never Took Place [online] Available from <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/ludologists-love-stories-too-notes-from-a-debate-that-n-ever-took-place/> [accessed 20 May 2021]

⁴⁰ Bogost, I. (2007). Persuasive Games
Massachusetts: The MIT Press

computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created”.⁴¹

I will also consider the ludification of culture, how games may encourage political engagement, and how institutions such as the military encourage civic engagement through the act of play. Media theorist Joost Raessens refers to this process as the “ludification of culture”.⁴² He writes how culture and politics have become playful through our use of social media and playing games with themes of cultural and political significance.

Play is not only characteristic of leisure, but also turns up in those domains that once were considered the opposite of play, such as education, politics and even warfare (interfaces resembling computer games, the use of drones – unmanned remote-controlled planes – introducing war à la PlayStation). Such playfulness can also be witnessed in the surge of using mobile phones and the playful communication resulting from this – think of texting and twittering.⁴³

Considering the ludification of culture will provide a better understanding in how games are discussed using applications such as Twitter and Facebook; how they encourage players to engage in civic and political discussion, or potentially participate in the development of military institutions.

⁴¹ (Ibid.)

⁴² Raessens, J. (2006). Playful Identities, or the Ludification of Culture [online] Available from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412005281779> [accessed 31 May 2021]

⁴³ (Ibid.)

Case Studies

In this section, two video games will be presented as evidence of different approaches to identity and politics in video games. The structure of each case study will be defined as follows

- Introduction
 - General information about the video games such as genre, developer and publisher.
- Plot
 - An overview of the fabula, highlighting key events necessary for further examination.
- Perception of Politics
 - How the game's creators perceive their work in relation to politics and outlining the key positions of the game's cast.
- Examination of Cultural Response
 - How the media, gamers or governments responded to the works before and after the game's release.
- Narrative and Ludology Examination
 - An examination of the game's narrative and gameplay; exploring suggested meanings using concepts introduced and described in the 'Methodology' section.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

Introduction

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (henceforth CoD: MW) is a first-person shooter game released in 2019. The game was developed by Infinity Ward and published by Activision.

Plot

CoD: MW takes place in the year 2019 and begins with a monologue from an antagonist named Omar 'The Wolf' Sulaman. The Wolf has formed a terrorist organization by the name of Al-Qatala which aims to reclaim their home country of Urzikstan from Russian occupation. The organization plotted various terrorist attacks across the globe, including the detonation of a bomb in central London.

We meet CIA special agent Kate Laswell who has sent a team of agents to Verdansk, Russia to investigate the activity of Roman Barkov; suspected to be smuggling a shipment of chlorine gas to Urzikstan. Among the group is an agent who goes by the codename 'Alex', who will become the first character that the player assumes control of. Alex finds the gas but he and his team are interrupted when unknown forces reveal themselves and take the chemical weapons for themselves.

The story shifts to a special forces team led by Sgt. Kyle Garrick, who the player takes control of during the London attack. During this mission, Garrick meets Captain Price, who employs him in the quest to find the missing Chlorine gas.

Alex travels to Urzikstan where he meets with Farah Karim, commander of the Urzikstan Liberation Force (ULF) and requests Farah's assistance in finding the chemical weapons. As they negotiate, Farah's lieutenant and brother, Hadir Karim, walks in on their conversation. During their conversation, Farah and Hadir reveal that they wish to remove the Russian occupation in Urzikstan. Alex agrees to help Farah and Hadir in exchange for their assistance in finding the chemical weapons.

Alex, Farah and the team are briefly able to capture and imprison The Wolf at the U.S. embassy but when Al-Qatala forces arrive he is able to escape their hold. Farah deduces that there is only one road that will assist in The Wolf's escape. She is joined by Alex and Hadir in setting up an ambush. The Wolf eludes capture when Russian forces arrive, outnumbering them. To fight back, Hadir uses chlorine gas, which he is revealed to have stolen, to fight the Russian forces. Farah denounces her brother's actions, revealing that she was unaware Hadir was responsible for the stolen chemical weapons.

In a flashback sequence, we learn that Farah and Hadir were once imprisoned by Barkov. The player controls Farah who breaks free of her cell and fights through some of Barkov's forces. Farah and the prisoners are soon pinned down by the Russian forces until SAS troops arrive to provide Farah additional support. Among the reinforcements is a young lieutenant Price who assists Farah in ensuring the escape of the remaining prisoners.

Returning to the present, Farah and Alex take on a mission to find and kill The Wolf. Afterwards, they return to the group to discuss their next move. It is here that they are joined by Marine Colonel Norris who informs them that Farah's group, the ULF, are now marked as a terrorist organization for Hadir's actions in securing the chemical weapons. Defending the ULF's involvement, Alex defies command and joins Farah to assist with the ULF forces.

Price employs Garrick and reaches out to a contact in Russia by the name of Nikolai to help him track down The Butcher, an Al-Qatala lieutenant. They find and capture their target but are unable to gain the whereabouts of chlorine gas from him. For the purpose of interrogation, Nikolai abducts The Butcher's family and threatens them in exchange for information. Finally, The Butcher reveals that the gas is being stored in a nearby theatre, and that Hadir intends to use it against Barkov. They find and arrest Hadir, putting an end to his plans.

Price travels to Urzikstan and tells Farah that if her army assists them in taking out the facility, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would believe Al-Qatala

was responsible. She agrees to help, and so joined by Garrick and Alex, they head to Georgia to find the facility.

In the game's final mission, Alex sacrifices himself so that Farah may complete her mission in taking out Barkov. Afterwards, it is revealed that the Russian government has disowned him and claimed no responsibility for his actions.

Core Mechanics

Call of Duty is a first-person shooter (FPS) game. The player can use the right trigger to fire their weapon and the left trigger to aim down the weapon's sights. Various other actions can be performed such as sprinting, jumping, climbing and sliding to maneuver around environments. The player also carries secondary weapons that include lethal explosives and non-lethal grenades such as smoke and flash grenades.

Perception of Politics

In August 2019, prior to the release of CoD: MW, campaign gameplay director Jacob Minkoff and studio narrative director Taylor Kurosaki of Infinity Ward discussed the game's politics in an interview with Game Informer. In this interview, Minkoff comments that

I don't think it is a political game but the thing is that people read into that in different ways. The question 'is this a political game?' doesn't mean anything... what does the word political mean to you? ⁴⁴

He continues to discuss whether the themes and ideas present within the game's narrative reflect the geopolitical environment of the present day. "Do we touch topics that bear a resemblance to the geopolitics of the world we live in today? Hell yeah. Because that is the subject matter of Modern Warfare." ⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Game Informer (2019). Is Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare A Political Game? Here's Infinity Ward's Answer

Available from <https://youtu.be/87Jb5Qj5JPM> [accessed 15 May 2021]

⁴⁵ (Ibid.)

Kurosaki adds to Minkoff's comments and discusses parallels with existing concepts but ultimately suggests that the game is not connected to a specific or real-world example of these concepts in motion.

We do talk about concepts like colonialism, occupation, independence, and freedom. We don't say those words specifically but that's the realm that we are in. But you could have a game that takes place in revolutionary America and talk about those exact same concepts.⁴⁶

Minkoff finalizes the interview by elaborating on his perspective, and aiming to specify where the label of 'political' lies.

If you wanted a situation where I would say "Yes. It is a political story." I would have to be telling a story specifically; the exact administrations and governments and events in our world today. We are talking about thematic things. We would also have to have a perspective on it. We want to present the different perspectives. We don't want to say that one of them is correct.⁴⁷

While Kurosaki and Minkoff acknowledge that their game parallels political themes, they believe that the game is not political as it is not making deliberate commentary about any current administration or government, nor do they believe that their game takes a stance on the morality of the concepts presented within. Minkoff states that "What we want you to come away with in the end is an understanding of why all these different groups fight and to have empathy for all of them."⁴⁸

To fully understand the nature of CoD: MW's narrative, the influence it has had and how players engage with these ideologies in a tactile manner, we must first detail the roles with which each key character plays. To do this, we can use key events that shape the principals and politics that each of them holds. Additionally, the player takes control of three characters for the duration of the game; Alex, Garrick and

⁴⁶ (Ibid.)

⁴⁷ (Ibid.)

⁴⁸ (Ibid.)

Farah, and in order to progress, the player must complete missions as these characters. Therefore, we can define the player's goals also.

- Player
 - Defeat opposition in combat.
 - Progress to the next stage.
- Captain Price
 - Believes in the 'greater good'.
 - Is willing to use the family of his enemies to get what he wants, and encourages the use of The Butcher's family in exchange for information.
 - He believes in the use of black operations; missions that are covert and generally not authorized.
- Kyle Garrick
 - Expresses discomfort in extreme measures.
- Alex
 - Willing to disobey authority to do what he believes is right.
 - Trusts Farah and her rebel fighters unconditionally.
- Farah Karim
 - Believes freedom for her people means removing Russian occupation from Urzikstan.
 - Does not agree with extremist methodologies and using chemical weapons.
- Hadir Karim
 - Believes freedom for her people means removing Russian occupation from Urzikstan.
 - Willing to use extreme methods and chemical weapons to achieve his goals but not at the cost of those he loves or respects.
- Barkov
 - Desire for power and control over Urzikstan
 - Willing to use any means necessary to achieve his goals.

Examination of Cultural Response

Before examining the specific manner with which CoD: MW's story is presented and the political concepts introduced as detailed by Kurosaki, it is imperative to explore the concept of militainment.

Militainment will be understood using a definition by media theorist Roger Stahl as the following: "We will define the word simply as state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption."⁴⁹

The concept is an inherited label for CoD: MW but to understand how this affects the fabula of the game, we will explore the way in which militainment has been and is actively utilized for political means. This will help us in further answering the question of how games based on war such as CoD: MW may be perceived as political by some individuals.

In the year 2000, The US military were in the process of designing an unnamed reconnaissance robot named the 'Dragon Runner' and its controller had been modelled after the Playstation 2's Dualshock 2 controller.⁵⁰ In this interview with The New York Times, Major Greg Heines says that he believes the controller was designed this way as soldiers would be more familiar with its design by default, and partially trained to use it.

The connection between video game hardware and software continues is an ongoing trend in military technology. The Carmel is a manned armored vehicle equipped with weapons and designed by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Inside the cockpit of the vehicle, touch-screen tablets allow the pilot to adjust the vehicle's speed and change weapons. To steer the vehicle and aim its weapons, The Carmel uses an Xbox 360 controller.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Bal, M. (2017). *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 4th ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

⁵⁰ Hamilton, W. (2003) Toy Makers Study Troops, And Vice Versa [online]
Available from <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/30/style/toymakers-study-troops-and-vice-versa.html> [accessed 15 May 2021]

⁵¹ Smith, N., Dayan, L. (2020). A New Israeli Tank Features Xbox controllers, AI honed by 'StarCraft II' and 'Doom' [online]

In designing the control system, engineers and managers from the Israel Aerospace Industry (IAI) consulted teenage gamers who offered feedback on the Carmel's control stick. With gamers assisting in the development of the weapon, Colonel Udi Tzur noticed how pilots familiar with the control scheme from games were fast to learn and become proficient in controlling the vehicle.

This concept of utilizing video games to influence the hardware used in military weapons is also present in terms of software. Information such as ammo, a map, and a list of weapons is displayed in such a way that it replicates the user interface (UI) of games such as *Call of Duty: Warzone*, the battle royale game mode of CoD: MW. For the US military, it does not end in making the hardware and software familiar to gamers but also actively seeking out new recruits based on their gaming competency.

The U.S. Army Esports is a team sponsored by the United States Army. The team is composed of U.S. military members in the regular army and Army Reserves.⁵² According to the mission statement on their official website, they have been formed to “be part of the Marketing and Engagement Brigade based at Fort Knox. They will operate much like the Golden Knights and the Army Marksmanship Unit to create awareness about the Army and the opportunities it provides.”

The team competes in various games including CoD: MW. They would even take their influence to the world of streaming via Twitch. With an official Twitch channel that regularly streams titles such as CoD: Warzone, the canvassing happens not only at tournaments but directly to the homes of gamers and Twitch users.

The military utilizes the medium of video games to augment their outreach programs, and orient the design of equipment and weapons to better suit the comfort of young males from the age of 18 - 24 but this does not answer the question as to whether the narrative text of gameplay mechanics of CoD: MW specifically encourage

Available from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/07/28/new-israeli-tank-features-xbox-controllers-ai-honed-by-starcraft-ii-doom/> [accessed 15 May 2021]

⁵² U.S. Army Recruiting Command. (2019) U.S. Army ESports Team [online]. Available from https://recruiting.army.mil/army_esports/ [accessed 15 May 2021]

political or military engagement from its players. To answer that question, it will be necessary to look specifically at the narrative from a narratological and ludological perspective.

CoD: MW and its 2007 predecessor (of the same name) depict warfare in Middle-Eastern and Russian environments. Even prior to the game's release, audiences called to attention the parallels between the fictional narrative present in the game, and the real-world Syrian war. Despite attempts to distance itself from any real-world event or politics, many saw the connection between CoD: MW's fictional 'Urzikstan' and Syria.⁵³

In the mission 'Hometown', players assume control of a young Farah. She awakes trapped under the rubble caused by Russian artillery strikes, facing her deceased mother. She is pulled from the rubble by men wearing white helmets and handed over to her father who soon guides her away. The connection between the attack on Urzikstan in CoD: MW and the Syrian civil war is quite apparent, as the white helmeted men reflect the same Syria Civil Defense who were given the nickname 'The White Helmets' for the headwear they used when rescuing civilians from aerial attacks and chemical weapons throughout the Syrian war.⁵⁴

In the same way, Farah's fight against the Russian occupation of Urzikstan can be seen as paralleling the relationship between Al-Asad and Russian intervention in the Syrian war in 2015. It was at this time that Russia began aerial strikes on Syrian rebels and in the Northwest of Syria.⁵⁵

Another potential reference comes in the form of 'The Highway of Death', a mission titled in the game and a name associated with a Persian Highway following the events of the Gulf War. The real-world road is in Kuwait City, and it was used by Iraqi

⁵³ Wilde, T. (2019) Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Angers Russians Who Call it 'Propaganda' (online) Available from <https://www.pcgamer.com/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-angers-russians-who-call-it-propaganda/> [accessed 15 May 2021]

⁵⁴ Syria Civil Defence (2012). 'To Save a Life is to Save all of Humanity' [online] Available From <https://www.syriacivildefence.org/en/who-we-are/an-introduction-to-the-white-helmets/> [accessed 15 May 2021]

⁵⁵ Rosenberg, S. (2015). Russia Launches Syria Air Strikes [online] Available from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-34406364> [accessed 15 May 2021]

military to retreat from Kuwait to Iraq. While they were retreating using the officially named highway '80', the American military dropped cluster strikes over the fleeing troops. Earnest Stroud, a veteran who fought in the Gulf War rememscises on the event and said the following " It was a mess. It's not something I would want anyone to go through; I did it because it was my job." ⁵⁶

CoD: MW repurposes this event but changes the real-world history to reflect that of their own fiction. When Farah and Alex move to stop The Wolf from escaping Urzikstan, Farah guides them to overlook a highway strewn with abandoned vehicles. She provides knowledge on the location, describing a past massacre there as follows: "If they try to escape to the mountains, there is only one road... the Highway of Death. The Russians bombed it during the invasion, killing the people trying to escape."

The comparisons between the fictional setting in CoD: MW and the real-world events of the Gulf War did not go unnoticed, and the game found itself criticized for revising the assault by exchanging the attack executed by the American military to the Russian military. ⁵⁷

As a result of these comparisons, the game was met with bans in Russian and Syria for its close relation to the Syrian civil war. Despite efforts from the team to distance themselves from real world politics, the situation resulted in policies put in place to ensure the game was not sold in certain territories.

When considering Bal's concept of focalization in narrative, we can better understand how perception works in destabilizing an objective story, turning fabula into narrative. As stories are perceived by its viewers, reaching for an objective story where all sides are empathized proves difficult to accomplish as aspects of storytelling and game design can be perceived differently by the individual. To

⁵⁶Howze, R. (2021) 'Highway of Death' Still Stands Out For One Gulf War Veteran [online] Available from <https://eu.theleafchronicle.com/story/news/local/fort-campbell/2016/02/26/highway-death-still-stands-out-one-gulf-war-veteran/80756890/> [accessed 15 May 2021]

⁵⁷BBC (2019). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Faces Russian Backlash [online] Available from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50219739> [accessed 15 May 2021]

understand further those differing perspectives, we will examine the artefact from narratologic and ludological framework.

Narrative and Ludology Examination

The first character to appear in the story is The Wolf, who gives a monologue that expresses his ideology. In this monologue, he says “We fight to remove all foreign power from our soil...”

He is flanked by The Butcher, who adds “We are Al-Qatala. We are the killers.”

The scene transitions away to reveal members of Al-Qatala emerging from a van, armed with guns and explosive vests, into the streets of Piccadilly Circus. Civilians begin screaming as they take notice of the men. We see women and children among the crowd. With the camera facing the Al-Qatala operative’s back, we look out onto the faces of those in the crowd. His arm stretches out, a remote detonation device in his hand. Then the screen cuts to a title card reading ‘Modern Warfare’.

This scene establishes the motivations of the story’s secondary villains and the power dynamics within their groups. While The Wolf and The Butcher are presented directly to the player, facing the camera, the Al-Qatala members that enter the streets of Piccadilly have their faces hidden. Instead, the scene draws attention to the face of their victims. From the composition of the shots within the opening, it could be suggested that the narrator wishes to portray Al-Qatala as a ruthless enemy, and not one that shares the same empathetic thread that Minkoff discussed in his interview with Game Informer.

This also speaks true of how Al-Qatala forces are represented in gameplay. Applying the concept of procedural rhetoric, the player operates as an agent for the CIA or SAS, completing missions by killing nameless Al-Qatala forces in large quantities as they impede the player’s progress. The player is not offered agency in regards to how missions are accomplished; with violence against the Al-Qatala forces being the only solution. This positions the Al-Qatala group as villains exclusively and any justification for their actions is overthrown by the fast-paced action employed by the procedural rhetoric of the gameplay loop.

After this scene, the game cuts to Verdanks in the first playable sequence of the game. Here, Alex is tasked with intercepting a shipment of chlorine gas that General Barkov's men are transporting via convoy to Urzikstan. Among his orders are to avoid firing on Russian military so as to not cause an 'International Incident'. Alex and his team drop into a woodland area overlooking Barkov's facility. Action takes place in first-person as though the player is observing the world through Alex's eyes. Their current weapon is shown at all times during gameplay.

The first combat scenario presents two Russian enemies who are quickly identified by a squad-mate as mercenaries and not military, allowing the player and Alex to fire. The team reach the cliff's edge and lookout over the facility. Here, the player uses binoculars to perform reconnaissance over the military base to confirm that all those within are mercenaries and not military personnel. Once the player has confirmed that enemies within are mercenaries, they are able to command an airstrike to drop on the facility with a button press.

This scenario plays out in first-person from Alex's perspective and defines the nature of the gameplay loop. The player will be provided instructions through character dialogue and will be required to execute those instructions, completing gunfights and navigating environments to reach the next chapter of the game. As such, it could be understood that the goals of the playable character and the player align to the extent that both are required to complete their goals in order to progress. In this instance, it is required that Alex find the chlorine gas in Verdanks, as it is also necessary for the player to do the same.

In terms of procedural rhetoric, this means that the player's concept of success and failure is directly tied to the goals of the characters they play within the story. This is important when considering the notion of empathy among playable and non-playable characters. For instance, as there are no playable characters representing Barkov's army or the Al-Qatala rebels, their only position in both the story and gameplay is as an enemy that hinders the progress of the goals in this character. When considering the positions that Al-Qatala holds, one such conclusion could be reached that

extreme methods and use of chemical weapons are depicted negatively. It also suggests that the Russian occupation of Urzikstan is also seen in a negative light.

However, both the story and gameplay of CoD: MW make further commentary on extreme measures and foreign powers. One such sequence finds the player controlling Kyle Garrick in St. Petrograd. The team have captured The Butcher and are interrogating him for information. When the initial interrogation fails, Captain Price and Nikolai bring in The Butcher's wife and child to add pressure to the procedure. As Garrick, the player must press forward, ushering The Butcher's family along as the anxious mother attempts to comfort her child.

At this point, the player is presented with an option when Price asks whether Garrick is comfortable in joining the interrogation. This is the only option of its kind throughout the game, where the player is afforded the opportunity to choose whether a character participates in a scene within the story.

Should the player choose to join the scene, Garrick will remark "I'm in sir. All in." and join the others in the interrogation. The player will be asked by Price to take up a pistol, waving it between The Butcher and his family to exert pressure. The player can then choose to either shoot The Butcher or leave him for the Russian authorities. The level of agency is not extended to The Butcher's family. Should the player shoot either member of The Butcher's family, this will result in a game over screen that reads "You cannot shoot civilians." and will require the player to replay the scene. Alternatively, the player can choose not to participate in the interrogation.

Regardless of the decision made, in the next scene, Garrick will express doubts over the methods employed by Price. The conversation proceeds as follows

Garrick: "Boss, what the hell are we doing here?"

Price: "We're cleaning up the mess."

Garrick: "With women and children?"

...

Garrick: "Where do we draw the line?"

Price: "Where you need it."

The game allows the player to express themselves in terms of what measures they can accept in war but the narrative is told in such a way that it limits the player's agency within the story, and posits a meaning of its own as a result. For instance, regardless of whether the player is comfortable with civilian casualties as a result of conflict, the game is against this position.

Reflected in earlier scenes where Al-Qatala attack Piccadilly Circus and a scene where The Butcher assassinates a father and his child, civilian casualties are reserved only for the acts of terrorists. Neither Garrick nor the player are allowed to take civilian lives; creating an expectation that members of the British SAS are above such acts. This is an argument made by the procedural rhetoric of the game. That is, how the game rules colour the narrative by means of allowing or disallowing certain player actions. Additionally, the moral pressures presented by The Butcher's family are rationalized through Captain Price and morally compounded by Garrick's reluctance. Even if the player chooses to participate in the scene, Garrick will later voice his apprehension.

All things considered, the scene suggests the act necessary as Garrick's reluctance never returns in subsequent scenes of the game, and the information given from the interview proves fruitful for our narrators (the player included) in accomplishing their goals of stopping a grander war from happening.

We can also see how procedural rhetoric affects the power dynamics that are at play between the different countries in conflict during the story. Barkov's army and his position of occupation over Urzikstan is the primary antagonist for both the characters in the game and the player. Farah's resistance fighters alone are not strong enough to fight back Barkov's army, and so they depend on the intervention of the United Kingdom and United States to overthrow Barkov's occupation. The

sentiment is expressed through the narrative and gameplay of CoD: MW. For instance, in the flashback scene where the player controls an imprisoned Farah, regardless of the player's skill over the game, the mission will eventually lead to a point where Captain Price and the SAS step in to save Farah and her fellow prisoners when they become overwhelmed by enemies. Here, it can be said that it does not matter how talented the player is, the game will interrupt this playable sequence and insist on Farah's need for assistance, breaking its own rules of player skill equals success in the process.

Additionally, the majority of missions that take place in Urzikstan have the player control Alex, an American soldier operating for the CIA. There are implications regarding the choice of having the conflict of Urzikstan told through the focalization of Alex, and it is compounded by the gameplay's rhetoric of success. Providing foreign intervention, Alex's role suggests positive reception towards the concept of United States participation in foreign conflicts. Even when direct orders from his superiors tell Alex to pull support for the ULF, Alex disobeys orders to fulfill his goal in supporting them in their conflict.

While Alex's role shifts from CIA agent to independent fighter, the political message remains the same; that intervention in foreign war can be seen as a positive act. In this instance, when Farah's fighters are mislabeled as terrorists, Alex disobeys command so that he may continue to support Farah and this is perceived by the game as an act of heroism against the injustice of the ULF mislabeled terrorists for acts they did not commit.

There is also Russia's role to consider. The Russian forces are largely represented by Barkov and his army who are, like Al-Qatala, enemies to the player that disrupt their progress. Through the same gameplay loop, Russian soldiers are faceless actors that the player will kill in large quantities to progress through the story of the game. By the end of the story, it is learned that the Russian government has distanced themselves from Barkov's activity but it gives rise to the question as to why the Russian government failed to police Barkov's actions in the first place. The Russian government's role in the story is only revealed after the conflict is resolved by the CIA, SAS, and ULF fighting forces; the same that are the primary focus

throughout the narrative and responsible for solving Russia's perceived political failings in the story.

As there are instances where CoD: MW's procedural rhetoric of playing CIA, SAS agents and resistance fighters position themselves in political territories, the question intuitively follows whether this may lead to military engagement. Research conducted by Toby Hopp, Scott Parrott, and Yuan Wang found that playing military themed games such as *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* supported the notion that these games may facilitate moral disengagement, and as a result, lead to positive association with militarism.⁵⁸ Here, they write that "Commonly, these games require viewers to see through the eyes of a character that is driven by a cause understood to be morally just."

It is possible to argue that the perceived heroism of the focalizer, Alex, or the moral framework given by Garrick suggest that these military institutions are freedom fighters; liberators who fight in foreign battles because it is necessary and morally just. The game could be seen as painting a positive light on certain military institutions while offering the player a moral justification for combat, and reinforces this through procedural rhetoric of its gameplay by binding military concepts to progress, victory and success.

Life is Strange 2

Introduction

Life is Strange 2 (LiS2) is an adventure game released episodically throughout 2018 and 2019. It was developed by Dontnod and published by Square Enix.

Plot

LiS2 takes place in the year 2016 and follows the story of Sean and Daniel Diaz who live together with their father Esteban in the suburbs of Seattle. It is the month of

⁵⁸ Hopp, T., Parrott, S., Wang, Y. (2017). Use of Military-Themed First-Person Shooter Games and Militarism: An Investigation of Two Potential Facilitating Mechanisms [online] Available from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563217305617> [accessed 01 June 2021]

Halloween and 9-year-old Daniel is preparing his costume. 16-year-old Sean is in his bedroom, talking to his best friend Lyla by phone when he hears a commotion outside his bedroom window.

He steps outside to find their neighbor, a teenager named Brett, has grabbed a hold of Daniel after fake blood was splashed on Brett's t-shirt. Sean intervenes, pushing Brett out of the way. The scenario escalates, resulting in Brett accidentally falling and hitting his head off a rock. A police officer arrives to investigate. Seeing Brett on the ground and gasping for breath, he orders Sean and Daniel to lie down, drawing the gun from his holster. They comply but at this moment, the boys' father, Esteban emerges from the house.

The officer trains his gun on the unarmed Esteban, ordering him not to move. Esteban raises his hands and tries to reason with the officer. He makes a step towards his sons to reassure them but the sudden movement alarms the officer and he fires, killing Esteban. While Sean witnesses the shot, Daniel screams in terror, a strange force causing an explosion in the process; the result of which leaves their house desecrated and the police officer dead.

Sean wakes to find Esteban, Brett, and the officer dead with more cops arriving on the scene. He lifts his unconscious brother into his arms and flees before they are caught. A few days later, Sean and Daniel have escaped to the mountains. All the while, Sean has been keeping the events a secret from Daniel, telling him that the pair are going on a camping trip.

The two boys stop at a nearby gas station where they meet Doris Stamper, the gas station's owner, and Brody Holloway, a travelling blogger. The boys step outside the gas station to plan their next route when they are confronted by Doris' husband, Hank. He accuses the boys of stealing and attempts to apprehend Sean. Daniel manages to escape, returning later to free his brother. The two boys flee the gas station where they find Brody asleep in his car. Sean explains what happened at the gas station, and Brody agrees to drive them away from the scene.

As Daniel sleeps in the car, Brody reveals that he knows who Sean is and what happened to him and asks what Sean's plans are. Sean is unsure but believes the best course of action is to head for Puerto Lobos in Mexico, where his father's family is from.

The boys spend more time on the road but as Winter approaches and Daniel grows ill, they risk seeking help from their grandparents; the parents of their estranged mother, Karen. They arrive at Beaver Creek, the home of their grandparents Claire and Stephen Reynolds who take them in. They remain there until risking a trip to the market with local neighbors who Daniel had befriended. A resident of Beaver Creek spots the Diaz brothers and informs the authorities. The police arrive at the Reynolds' home, forcing the brothers to flee.

Some months later, the brothers come across their estranged mother who they stay with at a community for over a month before pressure from law enforcement finds them on the road again to Puerto Lobos. The brothers finally arrive at the wall separating the border of the United States and Mexico. Daniel uses his powers to create a gap in the wall large enough for them to pass through but just as they are about to make their crossing, Daniel's shoulder is grazed by a bullet. The shot comes from a vigilante who hunts Mexican immigrants at the border, and the brothers are apprehended by Border Patrol shortly after.

Now in police custody, Sean is questioned by Border Patrol and separated once more from Daniel as his wounds are treated. Suddenly, a recovered Daniel emerges, using the full extent of his powers to help break Sean free of imprisonment. They start back on the road towards the wall separating them from Mexico. Just as they arrive at the border, they are met by a blockade of police officers. At this point, the ending of the game is determined by the player's choice; whether they make it to Mexico or are apprehended by the police officers depends on the actions leading them to this final confrontation...

Core Mechanics

In LiS2 the player takes control of Sean and makes conversational choices to change how characters react and behave around him, altering the course of the story. The player is also able to navigate around environments and interact with objects in the scene. This can open up potential for further conversations and options to the player.

Choices presented to the player may depend on the current relationship between Sean and his brother, Daniel. For instance, as Sean does not have supernatural powers of his own, options where he asks Daniel to help by using his powers will only present themselves if Daniel trusts him enough to oblige.

Perception of Politics

In a 2019 interview with Paste Magazine, lead writer Christian Divine discusses their approach to identity and politics within the story of LiS2. He states that

It does help bring more empathy to the world because that's what Life is Strange is about—it's about empathy for people that you're not...

Life is Strange is always about dealing with social-cultural issues and dealing with, hopefully, a somewhat diverse cast of characters... Games are diverse, the world is diverse, and games are going to have to reflect that diversity—and it's important to. That's just a natural progression of art.⁵⁹

A year later, Paste Magazine interviews the game's co-director Michel Koch and in this interview, he explores empathy in writing and telling stories that he believes are important.

⁵⁹ Flores, N. (2019) Empathy is the Defining Core of Life is Strange: An Interview with Christian Divine [online] Available from <https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/life-is-strange/empathy-is-the-defining-core-of-life-is-strange-an/> [accessed 28 May 2021]

When you just talk to people with empathy, when you try to be genuinely interested about what people have to say, that's a good way, I think, to write about them—to try to know them, to talk with them, to be interested with their stories, and then that helps you to talk about them.⁶⁰

Koch discusses how he wants his work to be oriented around topics that he believes are important.

When games take, like, four years [to develop], I know that I would be able to make four or five more games in my career, tops. So I think it's important that each of those games, in a way, says something that's important for me ... to try to make a difference, to use the few times we have as creators to make something...I wouldn't say important, because it's pretentious, but to make something that we feel is important.⁶¹

Through LiS2, the team are open about the topics they wish to discuss, perceiving them as important and necessary for the art that they create. Their mission statement is made clear in an interview with gameindustry.biz, Michel Koch establishes where he believes the lines between storytelling and politics cross. He says that

Not talking about something is having a position, because you decide to not talk about it. We've received a ton of great messages from players who say they felt it was important that some of what they suffered was represented in the game. We'd prefer to be wrong and [find out] that those issues aren't happening, but we're hearing people say it helped them understand some real issues.⁶²

⁶⁰ Flores, N. (2020) Storytelling Authority in Today's Political Climate: An Interview with Life Is Strange Series Co-Director Michel Koch [online].

Available from

<https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/life-is-strange-2/life-is-strange-2-story-politics-interview/> [accessed 28 May 2021]

⁶¹ (Ibid.)

⁶² Valentine, R. (2019) Dontnod: "If we didn't talk about politics, that would be a political message" [online]

He continues then to consider why some players may strive for apolitical content in their games.

There have been some players who say they don't want politics in their games... And I understand that. Sometimes you just want to play pure entertainment and not have to think about the world. But there are so many video games you can play! It's the same with movies. Sometimes you want a romantic comedy, sometimes you want to watch a heavy, sad movie.⁶³

Divine and Koch discuss handling cultural issues and embracing political topics. In LiS2, they wish to explore these concepts through Sean. To determine how the narrative builds empathy for Sean and engage in its cultural and political discussion, I will identify traits about Sean and his brother, Daniel and the goals of the player.

- Player
 - Complete Sean's story by reaching the end of the game.
 - Make their own decisions while playing as Sean.
- Sean
 - An artist who specializes in illustrations.
 - Against the politics of building the wall.
 - Illegally smokes cannabis and alcohol.
 - Is a Christian (determined by player choice)
- Daniel
 - Imagines himself as a superhero.
 - Is a Christian (determined by player choice)
 - Young and impressionable to the influence of his seniors.

Available from
<https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2019-10-02-dontnod-if-we-didnt-talk-about-politics-that-would-be-a-political-message> [accessed May 28 2021]

⁶³ (Ibid.)

Examination of Cultural Response

The connections between LiS2's narrative and current United States politics were noticed among many who played it. In the opening of the game, an unarmed Esteban Diaz, raises his arms in surrender. Moving to approach his sons, he is shot by a police officer and killed. Later in the game, it is also revealed of an earlier incident where a party hosted by Esteban at his house was broken up when neighbors called to report a noise complaint. The police officer questions Esteban regarding his car, and whether he was really the owner. The commentary on police brutality and racial profiling found in LiS2 could be seen as a response to research that indicates police brutality and violence is more likely to affect minority male Americans than white male Americans. In 2020, researcher Stephan A. Schwartz writes that

Until this June I don't think most Americans really understood how violent and racist policing in America has become. If you are White like me, professional and relatively affluent, you never have any interactions with the police... But if you are Black or Brown you live in another world. ⁶⁴

A study by the Washington Post found that unarmed black men are more at risk of being shot than white men by a large margin, and that hispanic men were also numbered higher than white men in this statistic. ⁶⁵ Following the death of George Floyd in 2020, serious talks regarding new police reform bills among members of Congress. ⁶⁶

Divisions in society and racial tensions are demonstrated throughout LiS2 and reflect upon contemporary politics in the United States. In one scene, when Sean and Daniel arrive at the gas station following the death of their father, they meet Hank

⁶⁴ Schwartz, S (2020). Police brutality and Racism in America [online]
Available from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7331505/> [accessed 30 May 2021]

⁶⁵

https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/08/09/what-weve-learned-about-police-shootings-years-after-ferguson/?arc404=true&itid=lk_inline_manual_19

⁶⁶ Strauss, D. (2021) US Lawmakers 'Making Progress' on Police Reform – But It's Still Early Stages [online]

Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/26/us-congress-police-reform-bill> [accessed 28 May 2021]

Stamper, the store's owner. He apprehends Sean and phones the police but before leaving Sean alone, he remarks "You're the reason we need to build that wall..."

The wall in question refers to a steel wall bordering the United States and Mexico, which is seen at the end of the game, and may reflect the same wall that former United States President, Donald Trump, promised to build during his presidency which started in 2016; the same year in which LiS2 takes place. This wall was part of Donald Trump's immigration plan, a plan which he promised would "keep undocumented immigrants out".⁶⁷

Writing for Washington Post, Elise Favis says regarding Sean and Daniel's story that

Their story is both difficult and treacherous, not just because they're two young kids on the run, but because they're Latino-American and living in a world that echoes Trump's America, complete with a border wall. It's uncommon to see contemporary politics addressed so directly in video games.⁶⁸

She continues by reflecting on the reception of politics among some gamers and the relationship the medium has with political narratives.

Politics and games seldom intersect in this fashion. As an entertainment medium, video games are often seen as escapism; a way to put aside your troubles and immerse yourself in a different world altogether. The video game community — or at least a large portion of game consumers — often struggle with the idea that video games can be political or incorporate political themes.

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⁶⁷ PBS (2016). Donald Trump Wants to Build a Wall on the Border With Mexico. Can He do it? [online] Available from <https://www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/blog-post/donald-trump-wants-build-wall-border-mexico-can-he-do-it> [accessed 29 May 2021]

⁶⁸ Favis, E. (2019) 'Life is Strange 2' Shows Why Games Should Embrace, Not Eschew Political Themes [online] Available from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/reviews/life-is-strange-shows-why-games-should-embrace-not-eschew-political-themes/> [accessed 29 May 2021]

⁶⁹ (Ibid.)

Favis' perspective regarding the connection between LiS2's story and America during Donald Trump's presidency was shared among many critics and gamers who played the game. Coupled with Dontnod's transparency when discussing their goal to create games that reflect social and political issues that are important to them, it appears clear that the game was intended and perceived to be commentary on Trump's presidency and the culture which derived from it.

To understand what position LiS2's posits, we will look at the way in which the narrative and gameplay explore power dynamics, culture and policies that affect Sean, Daniel, and the people oriented around their lives by using narratological and ludological methods.

Narrative and Ludology Examination

The story of LiS2 is told from Sean's perspective and the player controls him exclusively throughout the game. At the beginning of each chapter, Sean will narrate the events of the previous chapters in metaphorical terms, positioning himself as not only the game's central protagonist but also the narrator of events, colouring the story through his unique perspective, and the perspective of the player controlling him.

Sean and Daniel refer to themselves as the wolf brothers and through this metaphor, Sean recounts his story to the player when each chapter begins. This metaphor is quite significant as it shows that Sean's recollection of events is inherently connected to his identity as being of Mexican descent. Their father grew up in the town of Puerto Lobos, meaning 'Port of Wolves' and it is here that Sean believes it is best to escape from the police, which he labels as 'hunters' in his retelling of the game's narrative.

Placing emphasis on Sean's identity is of important note when navigating the socio-political themes presented within LiS2. Sean doesn't see himself as just a teenager but a teenager of Mexican descent specifically. This point of focalization

determines how various systems such as the justice system, media, and how individuals treat Sean, and by extension: the player, in terms of his identity.

There is also the question of the role the player assumes while interacting as Sean. The procedural rhetoric suggests that Sean is Daniel's mentor as he has influence over the younger brother throughout the game. For example, when an opportunity to steal from the gas station that they encounter appears in the first chapter, the player has the choice as to whether Sean carries out this act. Doing so will teach Daniel that stealing is okay. As a result, later in the chapter, he may steal from Brody and the player will have no direct control over Daniel's behavior. Fundamentally, Sean's role in the story is that of an older brother but also a teenager who finds himself in situations where he may not have complete power or control in a given scenario.

This role defines the procedural rhetoric of LiS2. It is also used to communicate socio-political themes as Sean often finds himself in situations where he cannot influence how he is perceived by others or change the power dynamics of the society he is in despite maintaining player control throughout. For example, when Sean and Daniel first meet Hank Stamper, the gas store owner accuses them of stealing. The player is presented with the choice to flee, discuss the allegations or attack Hank. Regardless of the choice the player makes, the outcome will result in Sean being attacked by Hank and apprehended. Whether the player portrays Sean as defensive, reasonable or aggressive, characters with preconceived notions on who Sean is will stand by their biases.

The scenario with Hank Stamper juxtaposes how the core mechanics usually operate within the game. That is, choices the player makes typically have alternative outcomes rather than leading to the same consequences. What could be understood from this scene is that Hank's views come from a place of bigotry and regardless of how Sean, a Latin-American, treats Hank, he will still hold these views. The player will experience this first-hand through navigating the world as Sean, suggestively placing the player in positions where they learn social dynamics through procedural rhetoric.

By defining the parameters of control Sean has over certain situations, LiS2 can utilize the procedural rhetoric of playing a Latin-American teen to highlight the powerlessness one may feel among a subculture that rejects him. But this commentary may also be extended to the politics of border security and the justice system.

Towards the end of the game, the two brothers arrive at the wall bordering the US and Mexico. Daniel is able to pull the wall apart using his powers, a feat that Sean would not be able to do alone. As the brothers return to their car to drive through the passage created by Daniel, the younger brother is shot in the arm by vigilantes and passes out from his attack. This leaves Sean, and the player, without the assistance of Daniel's supernatural abilities that have been useful aids throughout the game. The player's only options are to try reasoning with the vigilantes who believe they are Mexicans escaping into the US. Confronted by two heavily armed vigilantes, Sean is found again to be powerless in overcoming his situation, and is promptly arrested regardless of the reasoning he gives the vigilantes, calling them 'illegals' and 'terrorists'. By giving the player and Sean a fictional safety net in Daniel's powers, then taking it away, the story demonstrates the harder reality of Sean's situation; that supernatural powers cannot protect victims of discrimination.

Sean soon finds himself imprisoned by border security but is once again rescued by Daniel who uses his powers to break them free. They return to the wall and are confronted by a police blockade. The player is met with their final choice in the game. This choice will determine the ending that the player receives and it is one made by Sean but involves actions that Sean would not be able to commit himself. This choice is presented as giving up to the police or asking Daniel to push the cops away so that they can break through. Depending on Daniel's relationship with Sean, Daniel will either obey or disobey and act on his own.

Without Daniel, Sean's only option in this final scene is to forfeit his freedom to the authorities. Doing so will lead to an ending where Sean spends the next fifteen years in prison. When he is released, he meets up with his brother. At first, it seems like the brothers will be fine but subsequent scenes show Sean suffering from depression following his incarceration. The player can express themselves through

Sean as a positive role model for Daniel, attempting to raise him after their father is killed by a police officer but eventually imprisoned and labeled a criminal for a crime he did not commit. The game's final choice suggest either playing out the superpowered fantasy; giving Sean and Daniel the escape they desire or giving in to the reality of a justice system that may be seen as systematically biased against a person in Sean's position

When Brody reveals to Sean that he knew about their situation in Seattle, the following conversation plays.

Sean: "They killed my Dad in front of me... One second he was alive and then... Fucking cops."

Brody: "I'm really sorry that happened to you, man. Injustice is everywhere and you're taking the brunt of it."

Seeing this play out through Sean's point of view, it may be said that LiS2 asks the player to experience the injustice that some may face within the justice system of America. Although there are characters within the game that trust the justice system such as Sean's grandmother, Claire Reynolds or David Masden, a man that Sean meets in Seattle but as both of these characters are White, they may be experiencing a different justice system than the one Sean would as Stephan Schwartz' commentary suggests.

LiS2 also proposes commentary on the role in which the media plays in establishing narratives and eliciting civic engagement in politically charged events. Throughout the game, the people that Sean encounters call into question the legitimacy of his story, instead they depend on the media to inform them of the events that transpire. When he first arrives at his grandparents' house with Daniel, they take Sean aside to speak with him in private. It is here that Claire asks.

Claire: "Now, if you want us to help you... did you hurt that police officer in Seattle?"

The player is presented with three options. If Sean replied sternly to Claire's question, the following dialogue will take place.

Sean: "No! That's fucking bullshit! I never touched the guy!"

Stephen: "Don't get mad, Sean! We have to ask. We only know what we saw on the news."

Stephen Reynold's reply shows how news coverage itself is not strictly objective but subject to its own colourization. One newspaper article interviews the family of Kindred Matthews, the police officer who killed Esteban, and points the blame on a lack of police funding. It reads:

Family Recalls 'Gentle' Officer Killed in Seattle Shooting

Ashley Matthews, sister of Officer Kindred Matthews, killed in a mysterious and controversial Seattle incident that left two dead, has released a statement regarding the threats she received and online critics of the Officer.

"My brother was a kind man, he was in the force for only six months and shouldn't have been alone that day. My heart is with the Diaz family and all the victims of that terrible accident, including us. The Police Department needs better funding, so no officer goes on patrol alone if their partner is sick or unavailable. "

In this newspaper snippet, neither Ashley Matthews nor the article's author mention that Esteban Diaz was shot and killed by the Officer himself but it does call to attention critics of the Officer. Another newspaper article sheds light on this criticism when it reads

The Seattle Police Department has been accused by civil-rights groups of mishandling the incident, which led to public protests and rioting.

The newspaper articles show the ways in which narratives can be created from the media and how responses to those stories arise as a result. They can change the public perception of those involved such as Sean and Kindred Matthew, as well as motivate civic engagement in the politics that underpin their stories. As Sean, the player will experience the receiving end of the media's influence but may also witness the rippling effect it can have on those close to him.

While Sean is staying at a motel after parting ways with Brody, he has the option to call his best friend Lyla to give her an update on his whereabouts. If the player chooses to contact Lyla, he will later find that she has actively defended Sean online through social media.



(fig 2.0)

Here, LiS2 comments on Joost Raessens's concept of the ludification of culture. We see how the general public can become involved in politics with only information provided by the media. It also shows, through Sean, Daniel and his best friend Lyla, that civic engagement through social media can come from an emotionally charged and bigoted place. This commentary calls to mind the same threats of violence and bigotry which fueled the Gamergate controversy that was discussed in this paper's introduction. Here, the player as Sean is positioned on the receiving end of this abuse. It is a call for empathy in situations where participants may not have all the information required to make a judgement; examining the system of cultural ludification under an empathetic lens.

In conclusion, LiS2's reflections on current political systems positions the player as the victim of injustices and cultural stigmatization in an intentional fashion . By giving the player agency to make decisions, then contrasting this control by presenting powerful systems stronger than the player's character, the game aims to seek empathy for voices that are not often heard in the video game stories. The game affords the player a fantasy wherein power dynamics may shift when the victims of systemic and cultural racism are given superpowers but only provides such options when the player themselves prove responsible enough to influence Daniel to use them, and will take those options away when commenting on the real-life political systems Sean finds himself fighting.

Conclusion

The question of how politics intersect video game narratives, gameplay, and the overarching culture is a debate which continues to this day. As recent as this year, there are games such as *Six Days in Fallujah* which have been dubbed as 'not political' by their creators despite the presence of seemingly political themes. However, the story appears to be shifting as the same creators have adjusted their claims when responses from gamers on social media were critical to these definitions. In an interview with Polygon, the game's publisher Peter Tamte states that

For us as a team, it is really about helping players understand the complexity of urban combat. It's about the experiences of that individual that is now there because of political decisions. And we do want to show how choices that are made by policymakers affect the choices that [a Marine] needs to make on the battlefield. Just as that [Marine] cannot second-guess the choices by the policymakers, we're not trying to make a political commentary about whether or not the war itself was a good or a bad idea.⁷⁰

A month after this statement was made, the game's publisher followed up with a Tweet that redefines the game as political, with the opening line reading "We understand that the events recreated in Six Days in Fallujah are inseparable from politics.". This statement provides further context on how events, topics and political decisions are presented in the game in documentary footage.⁷¹

That the statement was shared on Twitter, and perhaps motivated by civic engagement from gamers through social media, speaks to the power of the ludification of culture and participation in political debate.

When examining a game such as CoD: MW and considering Mieke Bal's comment on the inevitable subjectivity of narratives, we can see how any game can be perceived to be political. When a game creator claims their work has no political intent or commentary, that, as Bal suggests, is a political act in itself. Furthermore, it can give rise to conversations on social media platforms where gamers argue the boundaries of politics and games, ensuring that titles like CoD: MW become associated with conversations in the realm of politics. In itself, this further expands the ludification of culture outside of the games we play and into the way in which we communicate with one another online.

⁷⁰ Hall, C. (2021). Six Days in Fallujah 'Not Trying to Make a Political Commentary,' Creator Says [online] Available from <https://www.polygon.com/2021/2/15/22279600/six-days-in-fallujah-interview-iraq-war-politics> [accessed 01 June 2021]

⁷¹ Victura (2021). Updated Statement Regarding Six Days in Fallujah [online] Available from <https://twitter.com/VicturaGG/status/1368924485676527623/photo/1> [accessed 01 June 2021]

Bal's narrative framework and the concepts of focalization show how games can be perceived differently depending on the active player or viewer but may encourage a particular viewpoint based on who the focalizer is. This is supported by Bogost's concept of persuasive games and procedural rhetoric where gameplay loops and mechanics derive meaning of their own that, when combined with narrative, can persuade a specific meaning to the player. As seen by the response from Russian and Syrian governments, whether the creator's intent is to divorce their creations from political commentary, their games may still be seen as political acts, and result in policies governing such works.

The question is why a creator would desire to distance their works from these political connections by claiming their work is "not political." When viewing the Gamergate controversy or the response to BFV, it could be argued that the divisive nature of the topic would imply negative consequences for engaging with political themes.

Another possible reason may come from Michel Koch, director of LiS2, who suggests that there are many gamers who do not want political intervention in their games; seeking pure entertainment instead. A franchise as big as CoD may want to appeal to as many potential players as possible, and can achieve this goal by reaching out to those gamers who request no political conversation from their games. Though, the subjective nature of narrative, as Bal describes, makes objectivity a difficult task. This may be true of militainment and the way in which military themed video games are augmented for civic engagement through esports, gaming hardware and moral disengagement through narrative; leading to militarism.

Not all games strive for this apolitical label. LiS2 shows that some creators are open to exploring politics and the stories of marginalized groups unapologetically. In doing so, they hope to progress the artform by taking responsibility for the commentary found in their games. By committing to their convictions, creators may in turn have more control over the intended message of their games, and have stories that are more likely to be perceived by players in the way the authors intended. Unlike CoD: MW, this game was more closely connected to the intended concepts and criticism that the creators offered commentary on.

Games like the upcoming *Far Cry 6* (FC6) may suggest a hesitant but shifting tide towards the level of expression that LiS2 aims for. Narrative director Navid Khavari comments that the story of the upcoming game is political and deals with political and social-cultural material but stresses that they are not making a political statement about Cuba specifically.⁷² It remains to be seen how the Cuban government responds when the game is released, and whether FC6's narrative is perceived the same CoD:MW was by the Russian and Syrian governments.

The statement came after online responses to an earlier interview prompted clarification; showing the power that engagement through social media has on the medium. The ludification of our culture means that even when creators desire to actively deny participation in political conversations, this position gives rise to political debate by proxy. Bal describes this non-position as a "dubious political act." which is corroborated by LiS2's director Michel Koch when he states that "Not talking about something is having a position, because you decide to not talk about it."

The conversation is ongoing, and the subjective nature of video games may mean that this discussion is never truly resolved. However, as more game creators acknowledge their works as politically adjacent, as Dontnod have with LiS2, it may be the case that future titles in franchises such as CoD acknowledge the persuasive power of video games and the political implications of their narratives.

⁷² Khavari, N. (2021). The Politics of Far Cry 6 [online]
Available from
<https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/jzZzBMLk8k4XAWgNpXfju/the-politics-of-far-cry-6> [accessed 01 May 2021]

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