PERCEIVED POLITICAL CONTENT IN VIDEO GAMES AND NEWS MEDIA

USAGE

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Lisa, for her unending support of my professional and academic endeavors, as well as for never telling me to stop playing video games and go outside when I was young.

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ABSTRACT

Casual observation reveals that a not inconsiderable amount of video game players object (or at least strongly react) to the presence of politics in video games, sometimes because of specific issues, sometimes simply on principle. This study attempts to better understand what video game players consider political topics and how prevalent they consider these topics to be in several popular games. A survey distributed in multiple online groups, all centered around gaming, revealed significant correlations involving news media usage and perception of political content in games. This thesis explores why these connections might exist, drawing on previous research, events in the larger video game industry and the results of the survey to reach some possible conclusions demonstrating intermediality and the power of the reinforcing spirals model.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS/ABBREVIATIONS/TERMS

M = Mean

SD = Standard Deviation

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

Perception is oftentimes more important than reality. Universal, objective truth does exist, but the way in which it is perceived determines its validity, usefulness and implications. More to the point of this thesis: people often look at the same media content and interpret it differently. In the news media, different networks put partisan spins on objective truths, sometimes creating entirely different narratives. In video games, the interactive element can often cause players to view the contents of the game in a manner that is colored by their own experiences and opinions. The purpose of this study is to look at these two phenomena in tandem in order to answer a few questions regarding political content: What, if anything, correlates with people having differing perceptions regarding the amount and overtness of political content in games? Is it their news media habits? What even qualifies as political? This thesis seeks to answer these questions in some capacity, primarily using, and questioning the implied starting point of, Michael Slater's reinforcing spirals model. Must ideology inform media usage, or could the inverse also be true?

By studying the intersection of interactive fiction and noninteractive nonfiction, we have the potential to gain increased insight into how seemingly disparate types of media interact with one another and influence our own perceptions of the world around us. Reality and fiction do not exist in a state of parallel being, always nearby but never touching; instead, they collide and influence each other in all kinds of interesting and unexpected ways. Comparing news media usage and perceived political content in video games is just one of many ways we can observe this fascinating phenomenon.

The study that forms the basis of this thesis consisted of an online survey distributed in multiple gamer-centric internet communities over the course of several months. Respondents were asked to provide demographic data such as age range and political party affiliation, as well as information about their gaming and news media usage habits. After that, they were asked to rate the prevalence of political content in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Shadow of the Tomb Raider, Control* and *Mass Effect 3*. All of these data were then analyzed for significant correlations, of which many were found.

Before further specifics are discussed, it would be beneficial to narrow down what *politics* refers to in the context of this thesis, as the word can represent a wide variety of different ideas and issues. Defining the exact meaning of *politics* in this study is tricky, as much of this research hinges not on what the researcher would classify as political, but rather on what participants perceive to be political, which will obviously vary. To that end, the following handful of definitions related to *politics* should prove useful: definitions pulled from the *Oxford English* Dictionary, the researcher's definition of *politics* for the purposes of this paper, and what indicates a perception of political content in the survey used for this research.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* website (2020) offers four sets of definitions for *politics* depending on the context the word is used in. The two that are most descriptive and most relevant to this research are: "management or control of private affairs and interests, esp. as regards status or position" and "the political ideas, beliefs, or commitments of a particular individual, organization, etc." The word can also mean "activities or policies associated with government, esp. those concerning the organization and administration of a state, or part of a state, and with the regulation of relationships

between states." This last definition literally refers to the politics of the government, and while some of the political issues to be mentioned in this paper directly relate to the government, this research is more concerned with politics of the interpersonal nature outlined in the first two definitions ("Politics"). Furthermore, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers up multiple definitions for *political*, with the most relevant being "relating to or concerned with public life and affairs as involving questions of authority and government; relating to or concerned with the theory or practice of politics" ("Political"). Again, the connection to government in this research is tangential and mostly relegated to political issues one can easily connect to the government (military interventionism, for example), with the "questions of authority" part of the definition being most applicable, assuming that perceptions of authority and validation are tied to the reinforcement of beliefs that could be called political in the more personal sense.

As for the researcher's definition of *politics*, please consider *politics*, *political* and related terms to be shorthand for ideas and issues that reasonable people might be expected to hold up as central to their personal and political identities (i.e. race, religion, sexuality, policy preferences, political party alignment, etc.). As for what indicates a perception of political content, the researcher posits that a perception of political content can be defined by a strong reaction (positive or negative) to content within a piece of media that might touch on one of the aforementioned examples of what qualifies as political. The researcher acknowledges that this definition might be a bit vague, but asks the reader to consider that different people have different opinions regarding what qualifies as political, how important different types of political content are and how much of a certain type of content must be present to even qualify said content as being political

in nature. Perception of political content exists entirely in the mind of each individual research participant, and as such, specifics regarding what content is widely perceived to be political will become more apparent when reviewing the results of this study.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do gamers interact with and categorize video games in terms of politics?

RQ2: How are these beliefs reinforced through news media usage?

Concept/Variable Explication

Party affiliation, ideology or specific issues

The intent of this research is to match opinions on specific issues to stated ideology; party affiliation is helpful for determining this in the context of a multiple-choice question. Specific issues are exemplified by the answers to questions on the survey (feminist issues, foreign affairs, race, etc.). A more qualitative study could more accurately ascertain ideology (which varies in specific beliefs and intensity among people who share the same party affiliation), but for the purposes of this more quantitative approach, the researcher believes that party affiliation is a close enough indicator. The measurement of party affiliation in this research is primarily concerned with Democrats and Republicans, as these are the two dominant political parties in American society. It is worth noting that although opinions on certain issues are definitely strong indicators of political leanings, they are not 100% definitive, as outliers definitely exist.

Political content

This study seeks to ask participants not *what is political*, but rather *what do you think is political*? Context is, as always, very important here. See the previous section for the researcher's conceptualization of what the word *political* means, as well as what might make something qualify as political content. The researcher has opinions about what constitutes political content, of course, and some of those opinions can be found in the game descriptions later on.

Video game

While it may seem obvious what a video game is, this study focuses on a particular kind of game specifically, even if it still ends up being a fairly broad definition. As one can see from the list of games to be used in this study, the video games dealt with here are generally high-profile releases for gaming consoles and PC. While mobile games like *Cut the Rope* and *Angry Birds* do qualify as video games, they are not the focus of this study. While all the games listed here are/were fairly popular AAA releases (games that received full-price releases on most major platforms), the budget or size of a game (whether one conceptualizes a game's size via breadth or depth is irrelevant) were not factors in deciding which games to be used; titles were simply selected for being reasonably popular video games that most people who identify as gamers would probably be familiar with.

Gamer

A gamer is somebody who plays video games and identifies doing so as an important hobby. While this research could target and is applicable to both casual gamers (mainly plays mobile games, does not play very often, etc.) and core gamers (owns a

game console or specialty PC, plays games often, etc.), the survey being distributed to the MTSU eSports team, gaming subreddits, a gaming Facebook group, and finally a screened sample of respondents who identify as gamers means that people likely to identify as core gamers are the primary research targets.

Game genre/accessibility

The genres of the games picked for this study are incidental, but it is worth discussing the perceived connection between genre and accessibility. A common complaint in gamer culture is that games with lower difficulties/higher accessibility aren't as legitimate as more difficult games, and some genres tend to be more difficult than others. Spohn (2019) offers a fairly compelling breakdown of why this mentality persists, as well as the case for increased accessibility, in his opinion piece regarding the mild gaming community controversy surrounding difficulty options in *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. This is not an academic article, nor is it included in the literature review as a piece foundational to this research, but it does provide useful context regarding the thought processes of some individuals regarding this mechanical concern that carries social implications. Is there a correlation between the politics complaint and this one, since difficulty is derived from mechanics and not story, thus making these players possibly more storytelling-averse?

Literature Review

What follows is a literature review of materials relevant to this thesis and the questions it puts forth. The literature covers a variety of gaming-related topics, some more relevant to this study than others, but all worthwhile when taken together as a foundation upon which an understanding of the results of this study will be built. While it

is important to discuss what is covered in the following pages, however, it is also important to discuss what is not covered. No direct precedent for the study conducted in this thesis was found during the literature review process. Similar studies exist, mainly in terms of structure and dealing with gaming as a primary subject, but this exact subject does not appear to have been a popular topic for research. As such, only certain pieces of certain articles/books may be relevant. For example, if a study recorded how people thought violence in games affected real-life behavior, then that research can be extrapolated upon to ask the broader question: Do games have a tangible impact on behavioral patterns? This question can then be applied to the political content of this study. The fact that this research has no exact, direct precedent keeps these comparisons from being one-to-one, but the reader should find the application of ideas from tangential research to be justifiable and relevant. The content in this literature review covers the basics of the research; applicable theories and justifications can be found later in this thesis.

No discussion of politics in gaming is complete without discussing Gamergate, the event name used to encompass a trend of online harassment targeted at women in the video game industry that began in earnest in late 2014. The problem with discussing Gamergate, however, is that there is quite a bit of ground to cover going in many different directions, although most of the discussion relates to issues of gender-based harassment. Dewey (2014) describes Gamergate as such:

Whatever Gamergate may have started as, it is now an Internet culture war. On one side are independent game-makers and critics, many of them women, who advocate for greater inclusion in gaming. On the other side of the equation are a

motley alliance of vitriolic naysayers: misogynists, anti-feminists, trolls, people

convinced they're being manipulated by a left-leaning and/or corrupt press, and

traditionalists who just don't want their games to change. (para. 7)

Romano (2020) provides a useful examination Gamergate and its continuing

effects, albeit in a popular press publication rather than peer-reviewed, academic form.

Although Gamergate seems to have spiraled out of a single instance of a woman being

accused online, without evidence, of possibly using sex to further her game development

career, several concurrent instances of pushback and doxxing against other people

(mostly women) for similarly unfounded allegations of unethical behavior, as well as a

variety of problems that followed, have served to muddy the waters of what the

Gamergate movement was allegedly supposed to accomplish. This phenomenon goes

beyond the common ideas of what trolling and online harassment typically entail, with

Romano (2020) noting that "Gamergate ultimately gave way to something deeper, more

violent, and more uncontrollable" (para. 7).

Despite the insistence of those involved that the primary objective of Gamergate

was to preserve ethics in games journalism, even a cursory glance at notable incidents

related to Gamergate reveals a clear, widespread, and aggressive issue of gender-based

harassment. The core problem in understanding Gamergate is that even though the

ostensible reason for the movement's existence is to bring attention to unethical behavior,

individual participant's motivations and preoccupations do not always support this

narrative. Obviously, Gamergate has strong ties to issues regarding feminism and gender

parity in the games industry, so given the massive amount of outrage fueling Gamergate,

a higher percentage of participants identifying perceived feminist content as political in nature compared to other issues would be consistent with existing behavioral patterns.

Anable (2018) provides a good, if somewhat broad, starting point for this deeper and more conceptual focus of the present study. In particular, Anable (2018) explains what makes video games unique compared to other media, especially in terms of user interaction. This distinction is succinctly explained by Anable (2018) as such:

> Through technological, aesthetic, and historical affordances, video games offer us ways of being with and feeling machines. A phone resting in the palm of the hand beneath a hovering thumb is a different bodily comportment than shoulders hunched forward, eyes moving across text and images on the screen, a hand resting gently on a mouse. (p. 39)

The interactive element, the user's relation to the device, and corresponding physical adaptations are key to understanding the influence, effects, and perceptions of video games and their content.

What motivates gamers to engage with video game content? According to Dalisay, Kushin, Yamamoto, Liu and Skalski (2015), there are three overarching motivations for video game play, each of which include fulfillment of distinct gratifications. These motivations are social, with subcomponents socializing, relationship and teamwork; achievement, with subcomponents advancement, mechanics and competition; and immersion, with subcomponents discovery, role-play, customization and escapism (p. 1401-1402).

A series of research questions were asked by Dalisay et al. (2015), but the question most pertinent to this study is "What is the relationship between immersion and

trust?" (p. 1407). College students were surveyed, and they were offered credit in exchange for participation. As engagement with political news is a predictor of social capital, this was measured, as well; on a 1-7 scale, students had a median score of 3.41, indicating moderate engagement (p. 1407).

So, how does Dalisay et al.'s (2015) work inform this study? According to the results, participants who indicated a generally average level of engagement with political news were also found to demonstrate a negative correlation between a desire for escapism and overall trust. Viewing this fact in context of the larger picture, a possible question begins to emerge: Is less time spent using news media (which might indicate distrust of news media) a predictor of more time spent playing video games? Whether media usage habits are consistent across multiple forms of media or if they can vary significantly between different mediums is a question worth exploring.

The interactive element of video games provides a unique wrinkle to social, psychological, and behavioral research that is not readily replicated in other media. If this is why video games are the focus of this research, it is still necessary to describe how this occurs. Frome (2007) writes about eight potential ways video games can generate emotion. The article proposes four types of emotion: ecological, narrative, game and artifact. These types of emotion are then split between two audience roles: observer-participant and actor-participant (p. 834). Narrative emotion stems from responses to a game's story, while game emotion comes from responses to gameplay, etc. Artifact and ecological emotions are most relevant to the present proposed research will be explained in more detail below. The distinction between an observer-participant and an actor-participant is the distinction between somebody watching a game and playing a game.

The distinction made between artifact emotions and ecological emotions is the important takeaway from this paper. Artifact emotions occur when an emotional reaction is based in the context of considering the game as a "crafted art object" (p. 832). Ecological emotions occur "when a player responds to a videogame in much the same way [they respond] to the real world" (p. 833). This terminology can be used to more accurately conceptualize the purpose of this study. A response to game content that denotes artifact emotions might indicate a certain level of separation between reality (and, in turn, politics) and the game in the eyes of the participant. Conversely, a response that denotes ecological emotions would indicate that this line is blurrier, if it exists it all, and the participant is more receptive to/wary of the idea that games can reflect the real world. Willingness to acknowledge and accept the presence of real world influences in games lies at the heart of this study, so this is not an additional, novel idea or piece of research to be taken into account; again, it is simply a useful way to categorize behaviors and reactions that were already being observed.

Bogost's (2007) work further explains the rhetorical and persuasive mechanics of video games, illustrating how design choices emphasize and amplify certain behaviors (a slot machine occasionally spitting out a coin to reward a gambler, etc.). Most useful to the present proposed research, Bogost (2007) writes: "Videogames that engage political topics codify the logic of a political system through procedural representation" (p.75). An example follows, showing how a game created by the U.S. Army reinforces behaviors expected of a soldier by punishing the player if they break the rules of engagement. This is an example of a procedural rhetoric, a rhetoric that is reinforced through the repetition of actions, as opposed to a traditional written or visual rhetoric (elements of those kinds

of rhetorical methods are still present, however). This capacity for engaging the player through a procedural rhetoric helps show how existing beliefs might be easily reinforced by games with a procedural rhetoric, and how a procedural rhetoric by itself could potentially influence someone into being more comfortable with certain processes or ideas than they would be otherwise.

Praaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer (2017) provide a useful academic complement to Romano's (2020) work that deals with the misconception that the gamer population is almost exclusively male, and the pushback against those who would dispute this claim (Gamergate gets a mention). Praaßen et al. (2017) note that this belief is dependent upon what one would define a gamer as, and what criteria is used to separate casual gamers from so-called true gamers, if such a distinction is actually made. Previous research demonstrates that the primary difference between casual gamers and hardcore gamers may just be self-identification (p. 4). To make a long story short, there are many outside factors that might prevent women from identifying as gamers, even if they play roughly the same types of games and the same amount of time as men. The entire process turns into a feedback loop: women are underrepresented in gamer culture, leading women to be less likely to identify as gamers, which in turn leads to the perception that there are fewer women gamers (p. 13).

Despite evidence (e.g. Praaßen et al., 2017) to suggest a large female player base, games media and games themselves still seem to be created with men in mind as the primary target audience, with an abundance of male primary characters. As such, some might consider a game that chooses to focus primarily on a woman protagonist or other female lead characters to be some sort of statement about representation, and this study

will entertain the notion that such a conclusion could reasonably be drawn by a participant. This is one reason it is important to include the game *Control* in the present proposed research, as is discussed later.

Furthermore (and finally, for literature related to depictions of gender in gaming), Downs and Smith (2010) discovered in the course of their research regarding gender representation in games that 86% of primary, secondary and tertiary characters that adhered to an easily discernible gender dichotomy were male, with 14% being female (p. 7). Of course, these results beg some further questions about the nature of gender itself, but for the purposes of this research, they serve to illustrate just how disproportionate the balance between male and female representation is. If the mere presence of an important female character is a rarity, the decision to have a woman in the leading role of a video game draws attention to itself by default, which might explain why some people seem primed to view the presence of women (in this case, *the other*) as some kind of statement.

Ewell, Guadagno, Jones and Dunn (2016) focus on links between personality traits and the tendency to play as a normatively good or bad character in a game when given the choice. Ewell at al. (2016) found a link between agreeableness, conscientiousness and the tendency to play as a good character vs an evil one. This demonstrates that real-life tendencies (which are reinforced through the media) lead to in-game actions that build narratives supporting those tendencies. This is a pretty good example of the spiral model at work, and working in a manner that video games best support thanks to their inherently unique interactive element, no less. The vast majority of games are designed to empower and validate the player regardless of their decisions. While one might enjoy a movie or a book with an unsympathetic protagonist, the

common assumption seems to be that few potential players would want to spend dozens of hours where they are repeatedly told that they are doing the wrong thing. The core design of most games being in service of validating the player, regardless of the morality of their actions, contributes to the spiral model of reinforcement in a manner non-interactive media is incapable of replicating.

Ferguson (2008), however, explores the limits of video games/reinforcing effects. Citing data from Childstats.gov and the Entertainment Software Association, Ferguson points to a negative correlation between video game sales and youth violence (p. 33). One can infer from this data, then, that video games do not directly cause drastic behavioral changes; as such, it stands to reason that it would be illogical to assume causality between video games containing certain debatably political themes and a person's real-life political alignment. Media does have an impact on opinion and perception – that much seems reasonably clear. The extent and nature of that influence, though, remains uncertain, and becomes more questionable as influence and behavior become change become more extreme. This study conceptualizes video games and news media as interconnected perceived influences on attitudes and behavior, not two sides of an absolute, direct causal link that exists in a vacuum separate from outside influences.

The researcher hopes that the readings referenced here have provided a solid foundation upon which one can build an understanding of the purpose and reasoning behind the following research and exploration thereof. While some precedent for this research does exist, no existing research that was a one-to-one match for the study conducted here was found during the course of this literature review. However, there are

certainly applicable extant theoretical orientations described in the media and communication literature.

Applicable Theories and Reasoning

Multiple theoretical orientations from media and communication research literature inform this project and provide important perspectives on the topics examined here. These include Slater's (2015) reinforcing spirals, hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985), and uses and gratifications (e.g. Sherry, Greenberg, Lucas and Lachlan, 2006)

The most applicable theory for this research is the reinforcing spirals model. Slater (2015) describes this model by saying "attitudes such as values, ideology, and religion. . . should influence media content choices and in turn such choices should continue to support the accessibility of those central attitudes" (p. 375). An important takeaway from this model is an assumption of sequencing, though. Slater describes reinforcing spirals in a manner that suggests ideology dictates media choices. This is undoubtedly true in some cases, but it is also entirely possible that media choices could influence ideology. Many people might interact with videogames regularly long before they reach a level of maturity necessary for meaningful political engagement, so part of the questionnaire to be used in this study is designed to ascertain which habit formed first. A definitive answer either way would be useful in interpreting the results. Reinforcing spirals would also seem to suggest that those who consume more news would be more likely to perceive greater political content in video games.

Also important is the hostile media effect theory. In their pioneering description of the theory, Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) identify two "mechanisms" central to the

idea of the hostile media effect that were found in their study of divergent reactions to news coverage: participants held differing opinions about the perceived fairness of the facts presented based on their political party, and participants actually recalled that the content of the news was more hostile to their beliefs than the beliefs of those they did not agree with (p. 577). While these statements refer to news coverage, they can be adapted fairly easily to fit this study, with the first statement referring to the presence of perceived or real agendas in games and the second statement remaining largely untouched, just applied to a different subject.

Another useful theory is uses and gratifications. In a somewhat rare example of unique research pertaining to video games, Sherry, Greenberg, Lucas and Lachlan (2006) applied uses and gratifications theory to study genre preferences and reasons for playing in participants, finding that the most common reason for playing was the challenge involved and that the least common was the illusion of strength provided by some games (p. 220). While that study did not incorporate news media usage as this study does, it would be interesting to compare reasons for playing gathered in this study with those recorded in previous research in order to estimate the relative power of outside forces on a similar uses and gratifications question.

As the reader has likely already noted, none of the media effects theories listed above were created with the video game medium in mind, and only one piece of research cited here directly connects to the medium. Some theories are easier to adapt than others, but original research using these theories to study games is hard to find, with most studies focusing instead on aggression and addiction. It is the hope of this researcher that studies like the one conducted here can help broaden the field.

The Role of News Media Usage

  The relationship between game and news media usage was chosen as a primary concern of this study for a couple of reasons. First, it would be interesting to compare the power of interactive fiction and non-interactive nonfiction directly, seeing which has greater potential to shape beliefs. One might assume that nonfiction is inherently more influential by virtue of being fact, but as previously stated, the power of perception, which can be shaped by fact and fiction alike, should not be underestimated.

  Second, the relationship between gaming and news media is important to examine because of the seeming prevalence of individuals in the gaming community who are averse to the idea of politics being present in the medium at all. This is a somewhat surprising phenomenon, given that video games are a form of artistic expression (albeit more transparently mechanically driven) comparable to books and movies and the fact that art in all forms has always had the potential to serve as a form of political expression. Of course, it goes without saying that news media has a wealth of political content, and certain news programs even bring their own political perspective to what might otherwise be considered objective news. By linking the two, this study has the capacity to more accurately determine what content participants believe is political (even if the content itself is objectively nonpolitical) and why they feel the way they do.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted using an online survey.[1] First, the eSports team at a

large southeastern United States university was contacted; representatives agreed to

distribute the survey on their Discord channel. The survey was also distributed on Reddit,

Facebook and to a purpose-selected panel recruited by Qualtrics. A copy of the survey

can be found in Appendix A.

Games and Explanations

The following is a list of games mentioned specifically in the course of this

research. Each title is briefly described, with justification given for why it has been

chosen and thoughts on the unique attributes it brings to the present research.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

Perhaps the most straightforward of the titles in this research, *Modern Warfare* is

a military first-person shooter set in a fictionalized approximation of the Middle East. As

the most recent entry in one of the most well-known series in gaming, most people should

at least know of it. Outside of obvious depictions of U.S. interventionism that could be

applied to the series as a whole, *Modern Warfare* would be useful in trying to ascertain

differences of opinion regarding support for the U.S. military.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

The most recent entry in the long-running series, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* is a

third-person action game. A specific issue unique to this game is that it is somewhat

contradictory in its intended and communicated messages. Early on, the game seems to

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[1] This research was originally designed to include focus group sessions to complement the online survey. This became impractical due to COVID-19, so the research pivoted to an online-only, mostly quantitative approach.

rebuke the great white savior trope as protagonist Lara Croft and her enemies venture into a secluded, ancient civilization, with predictably disastrous results. However, this angle is abandoned almost entirely by the end of the game. There is an interesting question here: is the inclusion of such subject matter too political? Is the eventual dismissal of the issue inconsequential, or is that a political statement in and of itself? The potential for differing opinions on the same issue makes this game a worthy addition to the study.

Control

While *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* could technically fill the same purpose as *Control* in this study, and both are third-person action games, both are included for an important reason: *Tomb Raider* has political messaging that is not necessarily hard to discern, while *Control* has a much more fantastical, outlandish narrative (not that *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*'s narrative is particularly grounded, mind you). The two different narratives warrant comparison, however, because they both cast the player as female protagonists. It may seem ridiculous to ask whether or not players think a game is inherently political because it has a non-male protagonist, but this question may actually hold some value. Take, for example, this question from the game's Amazon page, submitted by an anonymous user: "Is this game implicitly or explicitly political? I cannot deal with inter-sectionalism anymore, nor want to fund it in any way" ("Control"). To be clear, *Control* is a game about fighting back an evil interdimensional force by shooting it a bunch. Having reviewed assorted promotional materials for the game, nothing indicates that the game would come anywhere near the topic of intersectionality. Additionally, the researcher has played the game to 100% completion, and can say with confidence the game does not feature any content remotely connected to intersectionality. Do people

jump to the conclusion that a piece of media is political just because a woman is in the leading role? Anecdotal evidence from this case and beyond suggests that this is the case, but it is worth pursuing a more definitive, statistics-driven answer.

Mass Effect 3

Mass Effect 3 was chosen because it is a well-known role-playing game (RPG), but the specific RPG chosen is almost incidental, as it is really the genre that is important in this instance. RPGs hinge almost entirely on player choice, acting as digital Rorschach tests upon which players can imprint their own beliefs. The *Mass Effect* series is set in a distant future, distancing itself somewhat from overt comparisons to modern issues (although some parallels would be easy to make), and in doing so provides a blank enough slate to allow for individual expression. Although it has been a few years since the last game in the series was released, and even longer since the last well-received entry, the series was popular enough that those who played it probably still remember it clearly.

Research Procedure

The survey was first posted on June 8 in both the MTSU eSports Discord and r/videogames. By the next day, it had received 20 responses; it was then distributed in r/twobestfriendsplay. The survey gained a bit more traction there, and within a week, it had received 92 responses. On June 16, it was posted in r/truegaming, where the response count ballooned to 170 in just a few days. On June 19, it was posted to r/ign, the last of the available subreddits. The survey was first distributed in the Gaming Facebook group on June 27 after receiving 221 responses so far. Despite paying to promote the survey post, it only garnered a meager 21 responses between June 27 and July 25. At this point,

the researcher contacted Qualtrics. After some back and forth, the survey began

distribution through them in early September. Distribution concluded on September 22,

with the total number of responses ending up at 274.

Data Quality Filtering

This entire study is about perception and opinion; obviously, there are no correct

answers to the survey questions. That being said, some responses that seemed low-effort

or disingenuous (274 in all, and yes, that is the same number as the usable responses; it is

quite the coincidence) were filtered out of the data. These responses might have repeated

the same answer for every question, repeatedly provided contradictory answers, or just

been straight-up gibberish. To be clear, though, responses were not tossed aside because

they did not line up with the majority opinion, contained spelling errors or contained

isolated instances of seemingly contradictory responses. People have complex thought

processes, and they can only express themselves so clearly through a multiple-choice

answer. People can also make mistakes, but that does not invalidate everything they have

to say. Responses were only discarded if they showed a clear disregard for the study or

serious, repeated mistakes; responses containing smaller errors were given the benefit of

a doubt at the discretion of the researcher.

Data Analysis Methods

Answers to survey questions were coded as such for data analysis: A = 1, B = 2, C

= 3, and so on. Because of this, some of the data required an extra step of interpretation to

discern its meaning. Here is a simple example: expressing the number of respondents

belonging to each political party is easy, as one must simply match the letter of the

answer choice the number that represents it. A more convoluted example would be some

like determining the average age range: Answer A is ages 18-21, B is ages 22-25, C is ages 26-29 and D is 30 or above. If A = 1, B = 2, etc., and the mean answer is found to be 2.61, then the average age range is found by rounding to the nearest whole number and finding its matching answer; in this case, three, which represents C or 26-29. This kind of coding was also applied to questions regarding news media and video game usage. When means were calculated, standard deviations were, as well.

A second kind of scaling was also present in the survey. When asked to rate the prevalence of political content in a game, respondents were given a slider that ranged from 0 to ten. The instructions specified that on this scale, 0 meant they had not played the game, one meant that the game was not political at all, and ten meant that the game was extremely political.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

After analyzing the data in SPSS, many types of descriptive statistics were available to the researcher, and bivariate analysis revealed several significant correlations. To make this section clearer, the results of the data analysis have been divided into four tables dealing with related chunks of data. Note that M = Mean and SD = Standard Deviation.

When the means taken from the data are rounded to the nearest whole number representative of an answer choice, several similarities emerge. Strikingly, respondents across all games and distribution sites had the same average age range (26-29), the same average hours gaming per week (8-15), the same average years gaming (5-10), the same average hours per week using news media (2-8) and the same average years using news media (5-10).

Several significant, positive correlations were found in the preliminary, non-game specific questions. Older respondents reported using news media relatively more (r = .320, p < .05). Likewise, respondents who play games more hours per week also use news media relatively more (r = .299, p < .05). Somewhat predictably, more hours per week using a given medium also corresponded to a greater number of years using that same medium for both games (r = .374, p < .05) and news media (r = .374, p < .05). Finally, respondents who have spent more years gaming have also spent more years using news media (r = .302, p < .05).

Several significant correlations emerged on a game-by-game basis as well. Respondents who reported more hours per week using news media tended to give *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* a higher political content score (r = .144, p < .05).

For *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, higher political content scores were given by respondents who were older ($r = .200$, $p < .05$) and respondents who used news media more per week ($r = .171$, $p < .05$). Additionally, respondents who had been gaming for longer tended to give the game a lower political content score ($r = -.181$, $p < .05$).

Older respondents tended to give *Control* a higher political content score ($r = .238$, $p < .05$), while respondents who had spent more years gaming tended to give it a lower political content score ($r = -.316$, $p < .05$).

Finally, the results showed that respondents who spent more hours per week gaming tended to give *Mass Effect 3* a relatively higher political content score ($r = .173$, $p < .05$).

Table 1

Demographic Data by Game

Game	Age		% Democrat	% Republican
	M	*SD*		
Modern Warfare	2.90	1.196	41.0	18.9
Tomb Raider	2.95	1.204	38.0	21.6
Control	2.89	1.234	37.3	19.8
Mass Effect 3	2.89	1.181	34.9	19.3

Table 2

Mean Hours Per Week/Years Gaming by Game

Game	Hours/Week Gaming		Years Gaming	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Modern Warfare	2.91	0.921	3.37	0.857
Tomb Raider	2.89	0.882	3.35	0.843
Control	2.79	0.906	3.22	0.929
Mass Effect 3	2.95	0.907	3.36	0.889

Table 3

Mean Hours Per Week/Years Using News Media by Game

Game	Hours/Week News		Years News	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Modern Warfare	2.24	0.965	2.80	1.019
Tomb Raider	2.23	0.941	2.83	0.994
Control	2.23	0.939	2.72	1.001
Mass Effect 3	2.23	0.934	2.79	0.997

Table 4

Overall Political Content Score and Notable Political Content Observation Percentages by Game

Game	Political Score		Noteworthy Content
	M	*SD*	
Modern Warfare	6.03	2.949	Foreign Affairs 72.4%
			Economic 28.6%
Tomb Raider	4.41	3.058	Feminism 42.1%
			Foreign Affairs 24.0%
Control	4.57	3.120	Not Applicable 34.1 %
			Foreign Affairs 18.3%
Mass Effect 3	5.53	2.749	Foreign Affairs 48.2%
			Racial 46.4%

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Discussion of Distribution Sites

One quick caveat before this discussion: Most of the larger gaming subreddits have rules against survey distribution. For example, r/gaming, the largest gaming subreddit by far, has a rule that states that "surveys are no longer allowed due to frequent misuse and other concerns" ("Index"). As such, data was gathered from subreddits with more relaxed rules on the matter that still cater to the same target population.

The survey was first distributed in the MTSU eSports Discord. This distribution site was recommended by Dr. Stephanie Dean, who was involved with this thesis in its early stages. As eSports are entirely reliant upon videogames and the researcher is an MTSU student, the line of thought here should be self-explanatory. The same self-explanatory reasoning extends to r/videogames, where the survey was posted simultaneously.

After making use of the most obvious options, r/twobestfriendsplay stood out as a potential distribution site. While this subreddit is not exclusively about games, it was formed around discussion of the let's play group of the same name (later Super Best Friends Play). Although the group disbanded in late 2018, all of their subsequent projects are still video game-related, so discussion on the subreddit stays fairly focused on that topic. This subreddit was chosen because of its relevance to the subject matter and relaxed rules about surveys.

After that came r/truegaming, which is a smaller gaming subreddit, but a decent distillation of what the larger alternatives offer, with relaxed survey rules. The r/ign subreddit is comparatively small, but since IGN is one of the world's largest sources for

gaming news, reviews, etc., the subreddit about the site seemed like a logical place to distribute the survey.

After the available Reddit options were accounted for, the survey was posted in the Gaming Facebook group. This group was chosen for its large size and the ability to pay to promote a post, an option the researcher took advantage of. Despite the group's large size and the prominence of the post, the survey garnered few responses here.

Finally, after all reasonable avenues for self-promotion were exhausted, the researcher secured university funding to have Qualtrics distribute the survey. The researcher worked with multiple Qualtrics representatives in order to ensure that the survey reached the desired target population.

Discussion of Survey Results

Before this discussion moves to theoretical models and significant correlations, it is important to make an observation about the data set itself: Most of the data points measured remained remarkably consistent. This would be worth pointing out in any case, but what makes it especially interesting here is how consistent this data was across multiple distribution points, methods and times. As previously stated, this survey was distributed in a Discord server exclusive to members of the university eSports team, multiple subreddits, Facebook, and eventually through Qualtrics, all over the course of several months. That the data did not vary more suggests that the dominant demographic in this study is potentially representative of the self-identified gamer population as a whole.

On a theoretical level, the results of this study support the idea that Slater's reinforcing spirals model does not necessarily have to adhere to the starting point he

envisioned. The mean scores of hours per week/years spent gaming were consistently

higher than the mean scores of hours per week/years spent engaging with news media,

indicating that people predisposed to play video games often begin to interact regularly

with the medium before they are willing or able to do so with news media. As such, this

study supports the notion that individuals begin receiving guidance/influence on

formative beliefs related to core societal and political issues from fictional media before

these beliefs are later reinforced through news media. While this conclusion is most

likely unsurprising to those familiar with media effects research, the reinforcement of the

idea that perception gleaned from fiction has the ability to shape the mind before

objective, nonfictional reporting does is nonetheless fascinating to consider. Of course,

perception and opinions are not solely defined by media, as parental guidance and lived

experience help shape opinions at a young age, as well. In strict media usage terms,

though, the results produced here are consistent enough to indicate a clear answer to the

question of whether interactive fiction or non-interactive nonfiction has the potential to

influence young minds first.

The positive correlation found between hours spent engaging with news media

per week and higher perceived political content scores, as demonstrated by *Call of Duty:*

Modern Warfare and *Shadow of the Tomb* Raider, is worth discussing, even if the reason

for this connection seems fairly obvious. Those who spend more time immersed in real-

word issues will naturally be able to pick out similar topics and themes in fiction far more

readily than those who are not as informed. What is interesting to consider in this case is

the hostile media effect theory. Given the aforementioned largely negative tone regarding

the discussion of politics in games, are people more predisposed to resent political

content in games if they actively consume a greater amount of political content? A more

qualitative study could help discern the answer to this question, but at least the strength of

the connection between these two variables is clear. This connection also presents an

argument for the prevalence of ecological emotions over artifact emotions, as in this case,

the way the respondents viewed the content of the games is directly tied to the world

these products exist in.

Next, we should address the positive correlation found between age and higher

perceived political content scores, as demonstrated by *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* and

Control. This connection can be explained using the reinforcing spirals model. As people

grow older and spend more time with the media they have chosen, their beliefs constantly

being reinforced in a cycle by said media, they grow to have stronger, more consistent

opinions. Additionally, they also have had extra time to gain additional context regarding

how political content is presented in media, so it is likely that said content is easier for

older respondents to pick out. Lastly, age typically brings with it an increased familiarity

with all the topics listed as political content options, which explains the higher

score/intensity and certainty of belief regarding a given issue.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider and *Control* also share a negative correlation between

years gaming and political content score. While this seemingly stands in opposition to the

positive correlation between age and political content score, further consideration reveals

that this is not necessarily the case. While age likely brings with it an increased likelihood

to identify political content, a greater amount of time immersed in a medium that has

such a deep capacity for escapism through immersion could bring about an increased

resistance to these perceived intrusions. The more familiar someone is with what a video

game fundamentally is and how they are usually structured, the easier it is to view the medium through an artifact lens instead of an ecological one.

Moving on to individual games, the results are mostly consistent and easy to explain. Many respondents indicated that *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* contains some amount of political content regarding foreign affairs, a reasonable conclusion to draw about a game primarily concerned with conflict in the Middle East.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider also had a notable amount of responses mentioning foreign affairs, but these were dwarfed by the responses indicating that the game contains some kind of feminist content. While the researcher does not personally believe there to be any significant amount of this kind of content in the game, the *Tomb Raider* series has continually sparked discussion regarding its depiction of the titular tomb raider, Lara Croft, who started out as a particularly well-endowed set of polygons and was later rebooted into a more realistic (read: still a supermodel) form for the new series which *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* is a part of. Even if this specific game does not deal with this content, discussion of feminist values (or lack thereof) has been tied to this series for almost as long as it has existed. This also supports the prevalence of ecological emotions over artifact emotions in video game discourse.

Mass Effect 3 displayed multiple high-percentage responses, confirming the hypothesis that it would serve as a reflection of the user's experience and beliefs more than the developer's intent. This can likely be attributed to the open-ended nature of the RPG genre, filled with optional dialogue and missions as it usually is. In contrast, the other games on this list are at least somewhat linear, leaving little room for player input beyond the core mechanics of gameplay.

At this point, we need to discuss the odd one out of the bunch: *Control*. The researcher would have guessed that this game would have the lowest political content score overall, but that distinction actually goes to *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, if only slightly. Strangely, the most common answer choice for *Control* indicated that there was no significant political content, but the average score does not reflect that. Many respondents indicated that the game deals with foreign affairs, a suggestion that is, frankly, baffling, unless you want to classify an invading interdimensional force as a foreign nation. It is worth noting that *Control* is the least-played game in this survey (only 46.3% of respondents played it), and as such, individual responses carried more weight, which might explain some of the strangeness surrounding the results related to this title.

To summarize, and to more directly address the research questions that served as the impetus for this study: The surveyed population of gamers, despite having consistent demographic data, categorized political content in many different ways, some falling outside the anticipated results. Correlations between game-centric variables and news media usage further support the reinforcing spirals model and the conclusions of previous media effects research that indicate that all media is interconnected, regardless of vast differences in the form and function of said media.

Like all academic studies, this one has its fair share of limitations. By virtue of being a quantitative study instead of a qualitative one, the exact reasoning behind some of the responses cannot be ascertained; while the multiple choice answers provided are varied enough to allow respondents to express themselves clearly, a qualitative component could help further clarify the collected data and ascertain whether respondents

had positive or negative emotional responses to the content. Additionally, there were limits placed upon where the survey could be distributed. It would make sense to distribute the survey in the largest online gaming communities possible, but at least in the case of Reddit, most of the larger subreddits have rules prohibiting surveys of any kind (as previously mentioned). Furthermore, questions regarding the race and gender of the respondents were not included in this survey; while one's race and gender are not necessarily prerequisites for noticing issues regarding race and gender, adding these questions could have supplied an extra layer of analysis (for instance, the likelihood of white respondents vs nonwhite respondents to identify a game as having political content dealing with race, etc.). These questions might be especially pertinent in future research if the lasting effects of Gamergate are a primary topic of discussion. Lastly, one respondent noted that they had not played any of the games, citing the violent content found in all of them. Specific titles were chosen for this study based on their usefulness in a research context and their general popularity; the ESRB rating was not taken into account, as all respondents were over 18 by default. This issue did not appear to be widespread, but it is possible that the game selection provided could have alienated some respondents.

This study presents a few opportunities for future research. As previously mentioned, the results of this study support the structure of Slater's spiral model, but not necessarily his implied origin point for the spiral; a similar study could analyze news media in comparison with other forms of entertainment media in order to ascertain whether or not the chosen medium could serve as the starting point for behavioral patterns. Both *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* showed significant positive correlations between hours spent engaging with news media per week

and the perceived political content score for the game, so this study could be replicated with different games in order to further test the significance of this correlation. Likewise, both *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* and *Control* showed significant positive correlations between age and the perceived political content score, as well as significant negative correlations between years gaming and the perceived political content score. Both of these sets of correlations could, again, be tested with other titles; these possible tests might be even more useful than the ones previously mentioned, as *Control* turned out to be a bit of an odd duck, statistically speaking. Finally, since significant positive correlations were found between hours per week gaming/hours per week engaging with news media and years gaming/years engaging with news media, this study could be used to reinforce future research about the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate media under the umbrella of general media usage habits.

Conclusion

It is the researcher's hope that the research results and discussion provided in this thesis have contributed in some manner to the ongoing discussion regarding games as outlets for political expression and the interconnectivity of all forms of media, regardless of their vast differences. Through comparing and contrasting seemingly disparate forms of media, we can find the common threads that lead us from one interest to another, threads that spiral into a cycle of reinforcement for our preferences and belief systems. Fiction is not inherently less influential than objective reality, and as such should not be discounted or given secondary importance when discussing media effects across the fact/fiction divide. The answers provided here are not definitive, but such is the nature of research. They are, at least, well-reasoned, and by discerning connections between video

games and news media and attempting to find some sort of link between the two affecting one's beliefs, the researcher hopes to contribute to further studies of this subject matter.

Furthermore, the researcher hopes that (at the risk of sounding like he thinks he's more important than he really is) this thesis might inspire someone else to seek out research-based answers to questions they harbor regarding media they care about. Overanalyzing something one enjoys is a surefire way to cease enjoying it, but engaging with a favorite subject in an unexpected way can provide new and fascinating insights into why one cares so deeply about said subject in the first place. This research and subsequent thesis were born out of the researcher's acknowledgement of the increasingly pivotal role of news media, lifelong obsession with video games, and, frankly, some amount of frustration regarding the reluctance of some to engage in meaningful discourse about games in the same manner that is afforded to every other artistic medium. One does not need to parse every line of dialogue for deeper social or political meaning, nor examine every game mechanic as some kind of interactive analogue for a real-world process, but discussions of how fiction and reality intersect and interact with each other are nonetheless potentially valuable and absolutely worth having.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A (THE SURVEY)

1. How old are you?

   A. 18-21

   B. 22-25

   C. 26-29

   D. 30 or above

2. What is your political affiliation?

   A. Republican

   B. Democrat

   C. Independent

   D. Other

3. About how many hours per week do you play video games?

   A. Less than two

   B. Between two and eight

   C. Between eight and 15

   D. More than 15

4. About how many hours per week do you consume news media (TV news, websites, etc.)?

   A. Less than two

   B. Between two and eight

   C. Between eight and 15

   D. More than 15

5. For how long have you played video games on a regular basis?

   A. Less than a year

   B. Between two and five years

   C. Between five and 10 years

   D. More than a decade

6. For how long have you actively consumed news media on a regular basis?

   A. Less than a year

   B. Between two and five years

   C. Between five and 10 years

   D. More than a decade

7. What game genres do you typically play? Check all that apply:

   -Action-adventure

   -Puzzle

   -Role-playing game

   -Shooter (first- or third-person)

   -Simulation

   -Sports

   -Strategy

   -Other

8. What is your favorite game genre?

    A. Action-adventure

    B. Puzzle

    C. Role-playing game

    D. Shooter (first- or third-person)

    E. Simulation

    F. Sports

    G. Strategy

    H. Other

9. What are your primary news sources (channels, websites, etc. If social media, please provide specific examples)?

    _____

10. What traits do you look for in a video game?

    _____

11. What traits do you look for in a news source?

    _____

Please rate the following games based on their amount of political content and messages, with 1 being "not political at all" and 10 being "extremely political." Also, please indicate how much you have played each game with the given choices. If you have not played the game in question, simply mark "N/A." After rating each game, please select all significant examples of political content in the game. If you feel that the game contains political content that is not reflected in an answer choice, please write what that content is in the space below each question. For the last question, fill in the blank with the most recent game you have played and rate it accordingly.

12. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

I have played this game: A little Some A lot

N/A 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

-Economic issues

-Feminist issues

-Foreign affairs

-LGBT issues

-Race

-Religion

-N/A

-I have not played this game

-I would prefer not to answer

13. *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*

I have played this game: A little   Some   A lot

N/A   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

-Economic issues

-Feminist issues

-Foreign affairs

-LGBT issues

-Race

-Religion

-N/A

- I have not played this game

-I would prefer not to answer

14. *Control*

I have played this game: A little   Some   A lot

N/A   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

-Economic issues

-Feminist issues

-Foreign affairs

-LGBT issues

-Race

-Religion

-N/A

-I have not played this game

-I would prefer not to answer

15. *Mass Effect/RPG Title*

I have played this game: A little   Some   A lot

N/A   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

-Economic issues

-Feminist issues

-Foreign affairs

-LGBT issues

-Race

-Religion

-N/A

-I have not played this game

-I would prefer not to answer

16. _____

I have played this game: A little   Some   A lot

N/A   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

-Economic issues

-Feminist issues

-Foreign affairs

-LGBT issues

-Race

-Religion

-N/A

-I have not played this game

-I would prefer not to answer

Note: The "I have not played this game" and "I would prefer not to answer" options were added partway through distribution after the researcher turned on the "force response" and "request response" features on certain questions. Beforehand, participants were simply instructed to skip questions about games they had not played.