Video Games and Politics: An exploratory analysis of how narrative frames in video games can influence political perception.

Emma Gene Robertson
187432250

Abstract

The telling of stories is an ever-evolving method of communication which can convey messages of morality, ethics, and politics. The development of video games has created a new method of communication which is both active and entertaining. This study will argue the validity of the medium of video games for understanding how they may affect one's political perceptions. This is an exploratory study to guide future research on the medium of video games. The scholarship on communications and the effects it can have on political opinions is lacking, with no study having considered video games in this way. However, the use of key literature has been utilised to inform the hypotheses which drive this research. To develop and progress existing theories within current literature, this research will be a qualitative analysis of six video games and the frames which exist in the narrative. The qualitative analysis is conducted in three steps, the first being the gathering of data and the subsequent analysis thereafter. The analysis of the themes present has been conducted both within each video game and then comparatively to distinguish the nuance of gameplay, narrative differences, and the type of framing employed. The last step of analysis is to infer how the video games can impact the opinion of the researcher through use of the hypotheses. The key findings of this study have inferred that video games have the capacity to influence the political perceptions of its audience. This methodical and in-depth analysis of themes from the six video games provides a group of ideas to assist in the advancement of existing theories when tested on a wider magnitude.

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank both markers and anyone who takes the time to read my thesis.

When I first began researching this topic in 2020, I thought perhaps some might think it is a silly area to focus on, video games are only a form of mindless entertainment which is a common thought around the importance of this medium. When I discussed my idea with my supervisor, Dr. Stephen Noakes, that is not the response I was given. He has been the best guidance for ensuring that not only my work was well done, but also when I was facing doubts about my project. His support has been amazing and his wisdom even more so. I also need to thank my family, in particular my Mum and Dad who have been some of the best editors and soundboard for not only this year, but my entire academic career thus far. Your support, advice and dedication has been a blessing and I do not think I could be where I am today without the endless phone calls and visits. To my sister and brother, Jessie, and Carl, you can be my hardest commentators and biggest critique, in a good way, challenging the way I have written a paragraph but also ensuring it is easily readable. To my partner, Rayo, to always be there in times of stress, putting up with monologues on topics you aren't too familiar with and knowing when to pull me away. I could not have survived the endless hours of data collection without your humour and your wonderful coffee. To the High Above studio for letting me have a place I can be free to be without judgement and a space I can completely forget about stress. Finally, the support given by my employer and fellow employees.

Thank you to everyone for the support given throughout this journey, it has been invaluable.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Let's Play	A visual walkthrough of a video game or game series conducted by a third-party.
Gamer	A gamer is an individual who plays video games.
Voidout	A voidout is a cataclysmic event which is the result of a BT consuming a human.
AAA	An informal classification for the standard of video games. AAA terminology for video games is used to define games that are the top tier of technological features like graphics and audio design and contain a limited number of bugs which can disturb gameplay.
Protagonist	The leading character in the storyline.
Cut Scene	A cinematic section of a video game.
Plot	The sequence of events in the story.
Storyline	The narrative.
Video Game	A type of digital entertainment where the player interactively controls an aspect of the environment in some form of digital device.
Genre	A style of expression in storytelling e.g., horror, role-playing, simulation, survival.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
PVP	Player versus Player
NPC	Non-Playable Character
AI	Artificial Intelligence (Detroit: Become Human Section, 4.1)
BT	Beached Thing (Death Stranding Section, 4.4)
BB	Bridge Baby (Death Stranding Section, 4.4)
UCA	United Cities of America (Death Stranding Section, 4.4)
QZ	Quarantine Zone (*The Last of Us* Section, 4.5)
WLF	Washington Liberation Front (*The Last of Us* Section, 4.5)

Chapter One: Introduction

The Evolution of Storytelling

The process of storytelling has progressively evolved as humans advance their understanding of the world around them. It first began through the telling of oral history, legends, and mythology, transforming into written text and pictures. Storytelling is how humans can communicate morals, beliefs, and various understandings of the world. At the dawn of the twentieth century, new mediums such as radio and film were introduced creating a new space for entertainment and news media to be distributed (Inglis, 1990). After World War II, television, movies, music, and news became more widely available, and the progression in technology began to shift (Magoun, 2007). The latter period of the twentieth century saw the introduction of the internet and video games, both of which grew in consumption rapidly as the world entered the twenty-first century. Video games such as *Super Mario Brothers, Pong, The Legend of Zelda*, and many others slowly became household names, creating a generation of gamers. A gamer is an individual who plays video games (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). The relationship between political science and media has steadily increased in importance as globalisation has created a world in which humans can easily seek knowledge. This will be further expanded upon within the literature review in the following chapter.

Significance of Research

As technology has continued to change, the methods humans use to tell stories, inform themselves on current affairs, and communicate have shifted away from traditional platforms. Social media is a prime example of a communication platform taking political communication and simplifying it as short-form content. While recent research on social media examines its role in political opinion formation, video games remain overlooked.

This thesis proposes a much-needed amendment to the existing theoretical framework by arguing that video games have the capability to inform and influence political perceptions. Video games frame political concepts through use of game play narrative designs which can stimulate a shift in how the consumer understands their socio-political world. These frames, over time, subtlety change how one perceives their surroundings. This will be demonstrated throughout this thesis as key frames are analysed from six video games. Video games are a medium which remains to have significant growth in market share. Market research data in 2020 showed the growth in video games sales to have increased over 20% resulting in revenue close to $180 billion USD (Witkowski, 2021). In comparison, the global film industry had only just surpassed $100 billion USD in 2019 (Witkowski, 2021).

Current Literature

Video game technology has advanced and can now be enjoyed on many different devices, whether it be a console, PC, smartphone, or laptop. As seen within the study of entertainment media such as movies and television, these types of soft media can influence how the consumer views politics (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Mulligan & Habel, 2011; Green & Brock, 2000; Slater et al., 2006; Strange & Leung, 1999; Delli Carpini, 2005; Baum, 2002; Street, 2011; Gray, 2005; Zhang & Min, 2013). However, video games have not been a focus within this scholarship. The research on entertainment media identifies that the storylines created within can manipulate the consumers opinions (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Mulligan & Habel, 2011; Green & Brock, 2000; Slater et al., 2006; Strange & Leung, 1999; Delli Carpini, 2005; Baum, 2002; Street, 2011; Gray, 2005; Zhang & Min, 2013). The primary finding within this research is based on value versus attribution framing with the caveat that each culture and individual has their own values they see as more important (Zhang & Min, 2013; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014). Entertainment media and soft news can increase the motivation of the audience to reflect on political issues (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014). Much of the research on video games and the influence they have on individuals has primarily come from a health science understanding either as a reason for an increase in violence (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Huesmann, 2010, Anderson et al., 2010; Smith & Donnerstein, 1998; Krahé et al., 2011), encouraging a gambling addiction (Plante et al., 2019; Brunborg et al., 2014; Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010) or as an

advancement of technology that can become life-changing for both doctors and patients (Primack et al., 2012; Tarakci et al., 2016; Kato, 2010; Thompson et al., 2010). The research conducted on video games and politics is small and primarily focuses on how it fuels consumerism and capitalism (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009). However, Hong (2015) analysed how the interpretation of history, rituals and myths can be impacted by the way developers use it within storylines. This study argued that they recalibrate the modes of engagement of the consumer on these topics in the real world (Hong, 2015). With the expansion of the video game community, there is a gap in the literature on how this form of media may impact consumers. This medium is unique to others as it is a long-from narrative and it demands active participation of the player who controls the protagonist. As a result of the symbiotic relationship between player and video game, the time investment to "level up" the character and progress the game increases emotional involvement within the medium. What it means to "level up" the character can be a variety of improvements to the character or the tools they utilise. For example, in typical role-playing games, the player would need to gain experience points to increase the strength of the character and find more advanced weapons to defeat higher level enemies. This could be likened to any form of sport where a person must improve their speed, stamina, and skill to reach higher levels.

Research Question

The purpose of this research is to understand if and how video games can affect the political views or knowledge of the researcher. This provides an in-depth exploratory analysis to infer video games' impact on political opinion. This study will utilise existing scholarship on media framing that inform the hypotheses used to analyse the data collected. These hypotheses are informed from the studies discussed within the literature review. The use of these hypotheses assists in the structure of analysis and allows for a more informed understanding of the frames present within these video games. The hypotheses are as follows:

People play video games as a form of entertainment.

The framing of issues within video games may impair the player's opinion externally through means of perceived importance shown within the game.

The framing presented within video games employ emotive and value-based framing to elicit an audience reaction which boosts engagement within the video game and externally in the consumer's world.

People play video games as a form of entertainment to escape their reality, thus allowing their mental defences to relax, which may allow for messaging to take effect on a more subconscious level.

These hypotheses have been established from the existing literature and are expanded on within the scope of the literature review.

Method

A qualitative analysis approach will be utilised to answer the research question. This approach should provide a basis to inform future studies in political sciences. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to undergo an in-depth analysis so that we can begin to grow an understanding of the phenomena and develop appropriate theories. The qualitative analysis is conducted in three steps: the first is the gathering of data and the subsequent analysis thereafter. The frames within the video games have been individually and comparatively analysed. This ensures that the nuance of gameplay, narrative differences, and framing is appropriately discussed. The last step of analysis is to infer how video games can impact the researcher's opinion using the hypotheses derived from scholarship examined in the literature review. Qualitative analysis was the preferred method for this research; it focuses on an in-depth examination of human experiences and human behaviour (Onwuegbuzie & Denham, 2014). This method provides an opportunity to understand a phenomenon that has received little attention from the research community.

As the medium of video games has become much greater in genre and standard of gameplay since their inception, this study will focus on AAA video games. AAA terminology for video games is used to define those that are the top tier of technological features like graphics and audio design and contain a limited number of bugs which can disturb gameplay ("Best AAA games - Everything you should know about Triple A", 2020). When selecting the video games for analysis, other factors for consideration will be based on critical acclaim, accessibility such as language and disability, sales distribution, and genre. The following video games will be utilised for this study: *Detroit: Become Human, Final Fantasy VII Remake, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *The Last of Us Part I and II*. These video games have been chosen as they fit the selection criteria. The selection criteria for this study will be further discussed in detail within the methodology.

Each of the six video games have their own section, which will provide a summary of the narrative, followed by an individual analysis of the how political themes are framed. The study will be conducted as follows; the six selected video games being used to understand the power of video game framing will be consumed via let's plays online to gather data. A let's play is a visual walkthrough of a video game or game series conducted by a third-party (Merriam, 2021). This pathway has been chosen for data collection over playing video games as it allows for better collection of data and is more time efficient. The methodology chapter will address the ethical implications of using third-party online video content. This method for data collection ensures an in-depth identification and gathering of the political frames present.

Once data had been collected, an analysis of the frames present within that video game was identified and discussed. This was done individually, except in the case of *The Last of Us Part I and II* which was combined. The discussion on the frames present within each video game highlights the intricacies of how narratives are created within these video games and their impact. In some instances, this discussion will include outside sources which provide further clarification.

When all video games had been completed, a comparative analysis was drawn on the most common frames present in each case to understand the different types of framing used.

This section also considers the different elements of gameplay mechanics, plot focus and the different ways a consumer can engage with video games. The final step in analysis was applying and analysing these frames to the four hypotheses to determine how video games influence political perception.

Key Findings

The findings of this study infer that video games can influence and change the political perceptions of their audience. This is demonstrated throughout the discussion and analysis of the six video games used within this study. They contain not only value-based framing, which is proven to be an effective framing tool within entertainment media, but they also actively employ the player's participation. This research argues the effect of video games to be one which is a subtle manipulation of one's perception of how they understand their socio-political world. As this research is a systematic assessment of the themes within these video games, this study provides a set of ideas based on the framing present, which will assist in advancing existing theories when tested on a broader level.

Overview of Study

This study will first review the existing literature on video games across the disciplines to demonstrate the importance of this platform and the shortfalls within the current literature. The literature review will also be a comprehensive overview of the scholarship of media frames in traditional news media and its counterpart in entertainment media. This section informed the hypotheses drawn for analysis later in this study. The following chapter will outline the specifics of the methodology, including the reasoning for video game choice and how the analysis has been conducted. After which, the study will detail each video game, advising of a summary of the narrative and an analysis thereof. Finally, the sections will converge to comparatively analyse the video games before analysing them against the hypotheses. This study will close with a summary of the findings, advising further of the limitations discovered, recommendations and the implications this research has for political science.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will review the current literature on video games, the common theories on media framing, and their political effects. The first section will define video games and explain how different scholarships have understood their impact. This will highlight the importance of video games and the gap of knowledge within political science. The second section within the literature review will define what framing is and how it can alter the political opinions. This will provide in-depth descriptions of essential studies undertaken to demonstrate this effect, both in news media and entertainment media, which assisted in informing the hypotheses used within this research.

2.1 Video Games History, Development & Context

The History and Development of Video Games

Firstly, what exactly is a video game? A video game is a form of digital entertainment where the player controls a character through an environment or themselves, depending on the perspective. However, video games differ from traditional games as a physical person does not enforce the rules; instead, they are enforced by a computer program (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2013). The medium of video games first originated in 1958 when Physicist William Higinbotham created a simple tennis game to increase interaction and enjoyment at the Brookhaven National Laboratory open house (Tretkoff, 2008). However, it was not until the release of Atari's Home *Pong* that this form of entertainment was readily available for consumption in households, bars and taverns (Kuo et al., 2017). Thus companies such as Nintendo and Coleco released their first home consoles, which was a revolutionary turn for the computerisation of home entertainment consumption (Dillon, 2011; Kuo et al., 2017). A recent report conducted in July 2021 shows there are over 227 million video game players within the United States alone: 67% of adults and 76% of under 18-year-olds who regularly play video games (Electronic Software Association, 2021).

Previously, video games were thought of as digital entertainment targeted toward children and adolescents. However, as demonstrated in the statistics from the study undertaken by the Electronic Software Association (2021), gamers and those who consume them are a mixture of old and young. The platforms available for video games expanded with technological advancements for accessibility, allowing them to be played on home and handheld consoles. Whilst this study will only focus on AAA video games, it should be noted that many indie games, smartphone applications and computer flash games have genuinely expanded in both their quality and quantity. AAA video game are created by a game studio with a high level of production value and time ("Best AAA games - Everything you should know about Triple A", 2020). Typically, these video games have large marketing budgets resulting in a larger audience than the indie game sector, which can be likened to that of the film industry ("Best AAA games - Everything you should know about Triple A", 2020). Video games have progressed further as those who play them can enter e-sport tournaments and compete similarly to sports competitions (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). People can become professional gamers by creating online content for an audience to watch either through streams or let's plays for those who prefer to watch gameplay (Merriam, 2021). As the medium's audience grows and video games playability becomes more accessible, there is genuine discussion among the community of developers and creators on how video games can become a technological tool for the future (Pollack & Pierre-Louis, 2019). Video games have been used as tools in philanthropy, engineering physical improvements to the livelihoods of those who suffer from disability or illness, and even as a method to educate (Pollack & Pierre-Louis, 2019).

As video games gained popularity, as seen in high grossing games such as the *Super Mario Brothers* series, academia picked up on the medium to study so more can be understood about this complex form of entertainment. The main area of scholarship which has an increasing interest in the medium is the health sciences. This literature review will give an overarching analysis of the main areas of focus concerning video games and how this platform impacts negatively or positively on humans. This is broken down into three key areas: politics, psychology, physical health, and other scholarships.

Politics

Politically, video games are not heavily researched, and the few scholars who have done in-depth studies on the realm of gaming have presented quite negative implications of the medium for political life. Dyer-Witheford & Peuter (2009) wrote a book on video games, which focuses on the growing market of products fuelling consumerism and capitalism. The idea of "empire" is used not only in the sense of geographical reach but also in social scope to analyse video games and their impact (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009). Throughout the book, the physical side of video games is unpacked by understanding how the medium was used as a corporate means to capture new forms of cognitive capitalism, which relies on the ownership of intellectual and affective creation (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009). What is found is that the enterprise of video games is an extension of global capitalism; however, as players become better versed with programming, they can fight the capitalist nature threaded through the medium (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009). This book provides an extensive insight into the external world of video games and how they perpetuate capitalism. However, there is a lack of focus on the storylines the player is experiencing. There is also a strong focus on video games that hold relevance to a particular area of players rather than a broad scope which is where the most significant limitation exists. Hong (2015), however, focuses on the social impacts which video game storylines may have on the player's interpretation of history, myth, and ritual. Hong (2015) argues that the interpretation and enactment of history, myth, and ritual within the confines of video games is recalibrating how modes of engagement in these matters occur with the real world. The reappropriation of human history through storytelling in video games directly inflects how the past is thought of and, as a result, the real world (Hong, 2015). This article encapsulates how video games can influence the players understanding of present and historical matters. This study describes how video games can influence the player and their understanding of historical and cultural traditions.

Psychology

The field of psychology scholarship primarily views video games, particularly those that include violence of any sort, through a negative lens. This is not a new school of thought as

this perspective has been thoroughly studied and researched since the 1980s (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Huesmann, 2010, Anderson et al., 2010; Smith & Donnerstein, 1998; Krahé et al 2011). A meta-analysis conducted in 2010 reaffirms this belief that video games with violence result in increased aggression in those playing them (Anderson, et al., 2010). However, the duration of the increased aggression found in players is for a short period, not long-standing, and it does not increase the likelihood of an individual developing an anger disorder (Huesmann, 2010). As research in this area became further nuanced, what was discovered is that when only looking at the relationship between violent video games and violence, there was a clear correlation (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). However, when considering other variables, such as parental presence and gender, the results were completely different (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). The debate of violent video games and their correlation to an increase in youth violence has been studied repeatedly.

However, what appears to be clear is that there is no consensus amongst researchers. Jenkins (2000) argues that the conclusions drawn are commonly simplistic, and the links drawn between studies do not reflect how media is used in real-life scenarios. One of the primary issues with the way video games are studied by the school of psychology is the focus on children rather than adults. A few studies have focused on an adult's perception of video games; however, these showed the limited understanding adults at that time had of video games (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). As a result, this leads to adults preferring to censor video games in an attempt to continue the persistence of idealised children's play (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). This type of study needs to be re-visited as those who were "children" at the time now would be adults and may shift the conclusion as they are now the generation which grew up with video games. Olson (2010) argues that video games, compared with other forms of entertainment, provide and serve a large number of emotional, social and intellectual needs of the player. Whilst there is a significant focus on violence in video games, she argues this reflects a long-standing tradition within the market of toys and the preferences that already exist within the gender stereotypes (Olson, 2010). While this is a more nuanced understanding of video games and violence, this is still focused on a stereotypical understanding of males.

The other lens that the school of psychology offers is framed around addiction. With the rise of micro-transactions, King and Delfafabbro (2018) argue that micro-transactions in video games can lead to problems with gambling. Micro-transactions are a form of trading online by exchanging money for in-game advancements, for example, buying "levels" for the character being played to be more powerful (King & Delfafabbro, 2018). The study conducted focussed on the concept of "loot boxes" which are a way to potentially unlock a particularly desirable item within the game through purchasing something akin to a lucky dip found at a local fair. Video games that have this mechanism use the element of luck for these, which King and Delfafabbro (2018) found promoted a form of gambling for the player as there is a less than 1% chance of a player obtaining a rare and valuable item through this means. This shows a connection to the concept of perpetuating capitalism through video game mechanics and messaging. Addiction to video games are most prominently acknowledged in those who lack coping mechanisms in dealing with stress, anxiety, depression or social ineptness (Plante et al., 2019; Brunborg et al., 2014; Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010). In a similar school of thought, other research also identifies addiction to video games as a direct result of the frequency played, paired with low social skills and a trait for impulsivity being a large contribution to an individual's risk for addiction (Gentile et al., 2011). This study suggests that the relationship between addictive gaming and psychological disorders is reciprocal to one another and reinforces potentially negative behaviours (Gentile et al., 2011; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013).

The literature present within the school of psychology often ignores the positive implications of video games. Understandably, the need to know if video games cause harm is important. However, it does not offer a balanced understanding of the nuance in this field of new media. It is concerning that there is a huge focus on the negative consequences rather than also researching the positive side this platform can offer.

Physical Sciences

The scholarship present from the physical health sciences shows a rather flipped perspective to that of psychology. Many academics and researchers within the field argue that with the advancement of technology, video games can become life-changing for both

doctors and patients alike (Primack et al., 2012; Tarakci et al, 2016; Kato, 2010; Thompson et al., 2010). The two main avenues of the research focus on patient outcomes and the education of doctors. There is a sub-genre of video games that are classified as specifically "serious games," which are developed for the sole purpose of treatment, rehabilitation and teaching (Baronowski et al., 2008; Ledoux et al., 2016). DIAB and NANO are the two main "serious" games that focus on health sciences. DIAB was developed to create a fun and educational means to deliver nutritional information to youth (Tarakci, et al., 2016; Thompson, et al., 2010; Kato, 2010). The primary focus was to reduce obesity rates, reducing the number of individuals developing type 2 diabetes (Thompson, et al., 2010). The results of this were extremely successful in the youths it was trialled on as it encouraged real-life goal setting and created a storyline encouraging the player to make healthy choices (Thompson, et al., 2010). However, a key concern from this type of game would be that it may lead to youth developing an eating disorder, primarily being orthorexia, which is an eating disorder that restricts an individual to "healthy and clean" eating patterns (Cena et al., 2019). This has not been investigated yet, nor is this form of video game widely available, so the risk of this as a consequence is extremely low.

Concerning video games that have not been specifically developed for health reasons, researchers found that the use of Wii-fit in children who have mild cerebral palsy shows substantial benefits (Tarakci, et al., 2016). Not only was the rehabilitation enjoyable for the child and parent, but it improved the balance and functionality of the children who were undergoing the trial, more so than the rehabilitation programmes developed in a clinic (Tarakci, et al., 2016). However, in many cases of the use of video games for use by patients, there still needs additional innovation in order to further the benefits (Kato, 2010; Gao et al., 2018; Primack, et al., 2012). The same conclusion is drawn about the use of video games for the training of doctors. Whilst video games are in their infancy of development, unbiased data has not been seen yet (Kato, 2010). The field of medical research demonstrates a promising use of the new medium for the treatment and rehabilitation of patients and the training of doctors.

Other variants of "serious" video games include those used as tools of learning for educational purposes and political games. Video games designed for education are usually targeted at those situated at the school-age level of learning (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013). These games focus on making subjects like mathematics, history, science and English enjoyable for the student and therefore the student is more engaged (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). Within studies testing the efficacy of learning through video games rather than traditional forms of learning, the results were relatively equal with one another (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005). However, the students who participated in learning through video games felt it was more engaging and motivating than traditional learning (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005). As more studies delve into video games for educational purposes, the nuance of results will most likely align with current understandings of how individualistic learning is.

Inherently political video games are created to inform players through illustrating current issues that exist within public debate (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). Historically, these video games have not seen much success due to an overwhelming political agenda; examples of these video games are *Nuclear War, Balance of Power, Hidden Agenda*, amongst many other games (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013). The content seen within these games closely resembles propaganda leaflets rather than gameplay (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). Academics who have researched these games argue that the time lag between creating political games used for educational reasons and current affairs is too large to be effective (Bogost et al., 2010). For these games to have the opportunity to educate gamers, they would need to be made fast, such as through a plug-in through journalistic websites (Bogost et al., 2010). There are other forms of political games which have been much more widely discussed and debated, these being video games based on warfare, particularly the game *America's Army. America's Army* is a controversial game as it is inherently a promotional tool for the United States Army to recruit soldiers (Foust, 2021). There is some debate that this is the game that allowed the United States to continue the war in Iraq as it encouraged players to recruit (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013). Many video games were created to inform the player of political events and potentially alter their opinion of real-world scenarios such as the Iraqi War. However, these video games can employ real-world

war techniques, rules of engagement and combat techniques to provide a much more realistic experience. This is further discussed within the analysis of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* in later chapters.

With the expansion of the video game community, there is a gap in the literature on how it may impact consumers' political perceptions. Thus, as a form of new media, video games need to be addressed. The following sections will discuss the media concept of framing, which is used to analyse the narratives in video games to discover if they can affect the consumer's political views.

2.2 Framing and Media

Framing as a Concept

Framing is used to communicate complex issues in a lay manner to ensure the public can understand (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). It provides a perspective so people can interpret issues, political happenings, and entertainment through a particular theme (Bennett, 2016). Framing can be used to build and expand upon an individual's knowledge and their perceived reality (Goffman, 1974; 1986; Armoudian, 2011; Borah, 2011). However, it can become the only reality the public knows without balanced frames, affecting how they respond to ideas psychologically (Armoudian, 2011) and realities of perceived importance (Clawson et al., 1997). The idea of "frames" was first developed by Erving Goffman in 1974 and was divided into two core distinctions; natural and social. These frames assist in individuals organising how and what they see in everyday life (Goffman, 1974; 1986). He argues that these frames, which he termed "schemata of interpretation," turn seemingly unimportant events into something more meaningful (Goffman, 1974, pp.21). Many academics support this understanding of the concept of framing within the scope of communication studies (Tuchman, 1978; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; 1989). However, there are other more specific applications to framing, such as Gitlin's (1980), where it is defined as a device that journalists use to organise information, packaging it to be the most effective for their specific audience. How he interprets frames is through a persistent pattern of cognition, interpretation and presentation with which the selection

and emphasis create an organisation for the journalist and the audience to interact (Borah, 2011; Gitlin, 1980). In addition to this use, Entman (1993) perceives framing as a mechanism used to select some aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in communicating text. By selecting specific aspects of reality, the frame allows for promoting a particular problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and potentially a recommendation to the information framed (Entman, 1993). Through this thought pattern, framing can result in significant connotations through highlighting some aspects of reality and excluding others resulting in people within society understanding issues and events differently from one another (Borah, 2011). As the scholarship grows in understanding the implications framing has on society, scholars track the frames being used in media to see the trends in the way issues are presented across media outlets and examine the variations which occur across these (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In political and social life, the media have a much more active role than originally perceived. This is where the concept of media and journalists being gatekeepers was created (Delli Carpini, 2005).

Framing has two main conceptual foundations, sociological (Entman 1991, Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; 1986; Borah, 2011) and psychological (Domke et al., 1998; Iyengar, 1991; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Borah, 2011). These two conceptualisations can be further interpreted as the effect on the individual and the frame, psychological, and the effect in the news sphere, sociological (Scheufele, 2006; Borah, 2011). The psychological sphere refers to the individual and how they frame their reality and how the frames present within media affect individuals (Borah, 2011). The sociological foundations refer to how the media uses frames to present issues, events, politics and news (Borah, 2011). When used in combination, one might determine whether frames from both the psychological and sociological foundations can truly impact how society and the individuals within society can be influenced into a different understanding or interpretation of events. Scheufele (2006) argues that this combines the strong and weak effects of mass media. Mass media has a strong impact as it constructs social reality through "framing images of reality" in a patterned and predictable way (Scheufele, 2006; McQuail, 1994, pp. 331). However, the media effects can also be limited due to the interaction between mass media and recipients (Scheufele, 2006). This is because the discourse within media is a part of how people construct meaning and vice versa; public opinion is part of the process

journalists use to develop and solidify the meaning within public discourse (Scheufele, 2006; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). This presents the suggestion from Kinder and Sanders (1990) that frames serve as both a means within political discourse equivalent to media frames and the internal make-up of the human mind and individual frames (Scheufele, 2006). However, the issue present within media studies and framing is that there is not one unified meaning of what framing truly is, thus taking away from the contribution the research may have (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 2006). The psychological and sociological foundations are also referred to as independent versus dependent variables presenting an inconsistent concept and understanding of framing within the scope of scholarship (Entman, 1993). Should a common understanding be developed, Entman (1993) argues that the school of thought would add to social theory in a much bigger way.

Framing within News Media

The relationship between media and politics can be examined through the media effects of the public's opinion on public and foreign policy. Entman (2007) argues that framing, alongside two other media concepts, priming and agenda-setting, can be used as tools of power as they can organise a concept to create the phenomenon of bias. He argues that this is done through a "process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007, pp. 164). Through this method, media can direct their audience to areas of what they should be thinking about and what is important for their attention (Entman, 2007). By combining the use of framing, priming and agenda-setting, one can build a conceptual umbrella that enables a more advanced understanding of the media's role in distributing power and the implications on politics and further, democracy (Entman, 2007). Common hypotheses within the scope of politics and framing are the following. Scholars argue that frames motivate action or inactions of the public, thereby influencing the structure of society (Armoudian, 2011; Jamieson & Waldman, 2002). Framing can lead to life-changing events, in both positive and negative ways, such as the genocide in Germany or positive social change (Armoudian, 2011). Frames can also interfere with elections; the dramatisation of polls can result in voters backing the "frontrunner" rather than their preferred choice as polls do not truly indicate the true leader (Drier & Martin, 2010;

Bennett, 2016). However, it is argued that the active public will have its own framing rather than absorbing the frame in mass media (Bae et al., 2014; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Kovach & Rosentiel, 2001). This is a result of mediums growing to vast numbers, as individuals can decide, unconscious or conscious, as to what frames they buy into by producing and consuming iterations of these through social media (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

The following will look at one case study that demonstrates the effect framing can have on individuals and their perception of political issues or policy. Nelson et al., (1997), conducted a study on the framing of media and civil liberties, one of the most influential experiments on media framing and politics. This has also been an integral experiment in developing the hypotheses for this research.

On a random basis, participants were assigned to watch different television news stories about the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) activities to measure the effects of framing; they then expressed their tolerance for the KKK, with a measured response of the psychological processing of media messages. The study involved 222 participants who were undergraduate students subjected to two manipulations:

- The news story frame of free speech versus public order.
- The cognitive processing task, reaction time task versus importance rating.

The experiment began with participants watching the same five-minute warm-up segment with an alternate final story concerning the KKK rally. Each story featured a reporter on location, with video of KKK speakers, crowd scenes, and interviews through two frames; free speech and public order. The former stressed the right of KKK members to speak to the public and the right of their supporters to hear what they had to say. The public order frame highlighted the disturbances that erupted during the rally and included images of police officers in riot gear. Participants then answered two questions; The first asked if they would support or oppose allowing the KKK to publicly hold rallies in our city? The second asked if you support or oppose members of the KKK having free speech in our city? Answered using a seven-point scale, from "strongly support" to "strongly oppose," to indicate their tolerance

for the KKK. After this, participants were separated, half undergoing a reaction time task, measuring the cognitive accessibility of such concepts as freedom and disorder. The other half completing an importance rating task, which measured their perceptions of the importance of free-speech and public order values concerning tolerance for the KKK. The results of this show a higher tolerance toward the KKK speeches and rallies within the groups who had viewed the free-speech framing content. Framing effects are not mediated by accessibility. However, framing effects are mediated by perceived importance; participants in the free speech condition rated free speech values as more important than participants in the public order condition, and vice versa. This experiment exemplifies how frames impact an individual's perceived importance and how that can then be used to generate support (Nelson et al., 1997).

This study demonstrates the power of media framing on public and foreign policy. Many other studies research the effects of media framing on news media, demonstrating the power it can hold (Drier & Martin, 2010; Armoudian, 2011; Jamieson & Waldman, 2002; Entman, 2007; Bennett, 2016). These studies generate similar results, showing how important these elements are on how individuals in society get affected by how information is portrayed.

Framing within Entertainment Media

News media is a powerful tool that can guide those unfamiliar with political issues and topics to reach an understanding. On the other side of news media is the entertainment industry, which spans many types of platforms and engages consumers across most interests. The main purpose of entertainment media is to occupy and spread enjoyment to its consumers (Sayre & King, 2010). It is typically consumed through movies, television shows, fiction books, games, video games, music, among other forms. When communication platforms were first being researched for their influence on politics, entertainment media was ignored as it was not considered a media form that could impact political opinion. However, this form of media can provide information and stimulate social and political debate (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). Graber (2011) argues that those who do not actively seek out political information, such as "entertainment buffs," are political dropouts who

lessen the effectiveness of democratic states as they are unable to participate in a meaningful manner. However, Baum's (2002) investigation on the coverage of foreign policy in soft news and entertainment outlets uncovered that even through minimal attention to politics through this medium, those who consume it still learn about current issues. However, the knowledge procured is limited and may have negative implications for public policy decisions (Baum, 2002). While entertainment media is typically understood as an escape from an individual's current reality, the messaging presented within entertainment may be just as influential to one political stance as news (Gierzynski, 2018). Entertainment media is not just a means to bring pleasure to the consumer; whilst this aspect is not to be ignored, the act of consuming this media is not just a mindless activity, It can inform one's political values (Street, 2011). How popular media such as movies and television shows frame political narratives within the stories is important and has been shown to influence the ways people develop their own political opinion. Research investigating the eudemonic processing complements the already existing heuristic processing approach (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014). Bartsch and Schneider (2014) wanted to understand and explore the assumption that this form of processing can trigger a more elaborate and intense cognitive response to politically relevant content. This study found that in both trials, fictional films and soft news, motivation of the audience to reflect on political issues increased (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014). By extension, this motivation heightened the interest in that audience member to seek out hard news and information addressed within the fictional and softer content presented prior (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014).

The following case studies will demonstrate how the messaging within this platform has impacted its viewers. These case studies also assist in informing the hypotheses used within this research.

John Street (2011) analysed mass entertainment media and how they can be used to understand its effect on those who consume it. Firstly, he delves into political satire and the various ways it is used in states such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Political satire is typically a humorous form of entertainment that puts political leaders on the table to make jokes about the way they act, the policies they make or the way they might avoid certain issues (Street, 2010). He found that the political satire found within the UK primarily

focuses on a frame of disdain for politics and the arrogance of politicians (Street, 2010). This type of framing used for comedic purposes can fuel deep suspicion and questioning of the order in which a citizen lives, albeit even if the commentary can show rather radical notions within it (Street, 2010). On the other hand, US satire is shown more to locate its politics through populist opinion and put institutions against politicians (Street, 2010). While political satire is a form of comedic entertainment, its usefulness has a place as it can unsettle the convictions of the viewer and potentially shatter the illusions by raising doubts and questions without the ability to provide an answer (Griffin, 1994).

Street (2011) also delves into conspiracy entertainment, such as movies which express great mistrust in politics similarly as political satire, however, through a different avenue. Conspiracy films typically present politics, particularly political institutions, through a lens of deception and deliberate scheming (Van Zoonen, 2005). They suggest to the audience that behind a democratic state, there is a reality wherein everything which occurs is a direct result of corruption (Street, 2010). In the study, examples such as *James Bond* films, *The Matrix* (1999), *The China Syndrome* (1979), among others, are used to demonstrate this as corruption and lies are some of the main narratives throughout these films (Street, 2010). Much the same as satire content, conspiracy films in this research present democracy cynically. This is another exemplar of a genre that can give rise to a particular opinion of politics. Both forms of this type of mass media explore a mistrust in politics itself, which may spread that same ideology to those who consume the media (Street, 2010).

On the other side of the spectrum, soap operas demonstrate the subtle ways in which entertainment can have an impact. Soap Operas are commonly misconstrued as media that has no political content or value; however, this is an incorrect notion (Street, 2010). This form of entertainment media is a unique index of the society it is produced in (O'Donnell, 1999). The value of soap operas, from a political standpoint, associates individual rights and the principles of social democracy (Street, 2011; O'Donnell, 1999). The characters created in soap operas demonstrate the importance of familial values, but not perfectly (Street, 2011; O'Donnell, 1999). This allows for a deeper connection between the viewer and the content. The audience can identify with the struggles of a familial unit and the individual (Street, 2011). Many television shows such as these touch on political issues such as sexuality, racial

identity, and other social movements (Gray, 2005; Street, 2011). The representation of political issues within an entertainment platform can allow for political questions of importance to grab the audience's attention (Street, 2010). This investigation of entertainment media demonstrates the importance of a form of media which is understood to be for viewing pleasure rather than a platform for information.

Zhang and Min (2013) researched the effects of framing gay-themed entertainment media within China. This study sort to understand how the mechanisms within attribution framing and value framing would influence the test subjects' perceptions of the controllability of homosexuality and what their emotional responses were (Zhang & Min, 2013). They had two groups of 100 participants wherein one group would be subjected to attribution framing and the other value framing (Zhang & Min, 2013). The group exposed to media containing attribution framing with content advising of the controllability of homosexuality expressed anger and were unlikely to support the rights of homosexuals (Zhang & Min, 2013). The group exposed to value-based framing demonstrated a change in their perceived importance for value-related beliefs (Zhang & Min, 2013). This group were more inclined to support the human rights of homosexuals. Zhang and Min (2013) acknowledge that the study was undertaken in a society that values collectivism and family. Therefore, value-based framing is ideal for the public as it resonates with the existing value system. However, within already existing research of the effectiveness of attribution framing, it is found that perceived controllability does not offset the exposure to the frame (Zhang & Min, 2013; Greitemeyer & Rudolph, 2003; Harder-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Weiner, 2006). Compared to media such as news media, entertainment programmes are more inclined to elicit an effective response from their audience as it draws on emotions rather than cognitive reasoning (Zhang & Min, 2013; Kim & Vishak, 2008).

Another study conducted by Mulligan and Habel (2011) utilised a similar technique but limited participants to only consuming content from a single movie. In this project, they sought to understand the effects of fictional entertainment media and how agenda setting and priming can use the same engagement as news media with a similar result of influence. The movie chosen for this project was *The Cider House Rules* (1999). *The Cider House Rules* follows a narrative that focuses on a case of incest and the decisions of abortion in a pro-

choice framing. The focus of the framing present is a highly contentious topic that demonstrates the morality of these decisions and how they may impact one's conscience. Mulligan and Habel (2011) uncovered that the framing within this movie was powerful enough to influence the audience's opinion on pro-choice abortion, which is consistent with the current studies on framing within news media and political media. They emphasise that an individual's understanding and opinions on particular topics such as abortion tend to be entrenched in one's moral values. However, this study challenges the conclusions drawn from the study on gay rights in China as it demonstrates how fictional narrative framing can penetrate the moral values of the individual.

These studies demonstrate how framing within entertainment mediums can affect those who consume them. Entertainment media presents information and ideas in a way that engages the emotions and cognitive functioning of the individual. The argument made that stigmatise those who watch such content being lesser for a democratic society is neglecting the nuance of this type of media. Those who have sought to understand in much greater detail advise that audiences who consume entertainment media narratives tend to interpret the issues and characters in a manner that is implicitly directed by the narrative within the medium (Zhang & Min, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000; Slater et al., 2006; Strange & Leung, 1999). When the audience is exposed to these narratives, there is a significantly positive effect that they will value various issues presented to them and have greater acceptance of potential proposed legislative initiatives that may be around to indemnify these issues (Zhang & Min, 2013; Nabi, 2002). Delli Carpini and Williams (2001, p. 161) elegantly state how entertainment media is impactful and an important medium to understand:

> "Politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are embedded in the seemingly non-political aspects of public and private life. Entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant. "

If entertainment media can assist in engaging a person who previously did not engage in politics to think about politics, then this medium assists in expanding one's mind. The

content within these facets may not be optimal, but it may allow a pathway to form to allow them to seek out better alternatives. On the other hand, if one is not motivated, it could result in those individuals being persuaded to believe the political framing of a television show.

This chapter has provided a review of the current literature on video games, the common theories on media framing, and how they can affect consumer political opinions. The scholarship on video games demonstrates the influence and the importance of this medium. As seen throughout the health sciences, video games have a lot they can offer both now and in the future. The data which already exists on video games and the propensity to encourage violence, according to psychologists, is concerning, particularly from a political perspective. If the narrative frames within video games can increase violence, then the possibility of the narrative encouraging either positive or negative political influence is extremely important. The literature review has given a brief overview of the communication concept of media framing and how the scholarship is divided. The core theories and research studies conducted by academics have informed the development of the hypotheses for this research. The key contributors are the effect of framing on perceived importance for individuals and the understanding of attribution and value framing. Through this review, the gap in the literature has been identified, and core theories recognised to inform the development of hypotheses. The next section will provide an in-depth methodical research design used to conduct this study.

Chapter Three – Methodology

The focus of this chapter is to explicitly unveil the methodology utilised to conduct this research on video games. This research aimed to understand if and how video games can impact the political perceptions of those who consume them, either by playing or watching the content.

Firstly, this chapter will discuss and advise on the mode of analysis chosen to conduct this study. It will provide a full description of use, purpose, limitations, and solutions of qualitative comparative analysis. It will then describe the three-step process used to analyse the frames present within the video games and how the applicable hypotheses relate. These hypotheses were informed from the literature discussed in the previous chapter. Secondly, the conduct of data collection is described to include the intricacies and the time taken to complete. After which, the case selection of both the video games and let's plays is advised, followed by any limitations, considerations, and relevant ethical issues.

3.1 Research Design

Approach

The mode of analysis for this study was an empirical qualitative analysis that focussed on conceptualising the political frames within the narrative of the six video games. As this research was conducted using existing theories in the communication space, the frames from the six video games have been contextually analysed against hypotheses derived from the current research discussed in the literature review. The use of qualitative analysis for this research allowed for the examination of the relationship of these frames to be understood against existing theories. Qualitative analysis was the preferred method for this research as it is an in-depth examination of human experiences and human behaviour (Onwuegbuzie & Denham, 2014). This method provides an opportunity to understand a phenomenon that has received little attention from the research community. Due to the

many steps which exist within a qualitative analysis, the researcher can identify any patterns and themes to develop relationships and explanations to critique existing theories and advance them (Onwuegbuzie & Denham, 2014). The steps used within this research are outlined and described throughout this methodology. Qualitative data analysis has been criticised as it focuses on smaller sample sizes for analysis. However, the smaller sample sizes allow for better quality detailed data to use to understand human behaviour (Onwuegbuzie & Denham, 2014). To ensure transparency and replicability of this research, steps were implemented as there is no requirement for predictive measures (Closa, 2021). This process was completed as outlined by Closa (2021); throughout the planning stage, research protocols assisted in mapping prospective actions within the implementation section. The research protocols followed in planning stages are outlined throughout the data collection discussion further in this chapter, along with the University of Auckland code of conduct for research. Secondly, a research notebook was kept, which ensured that a record of all decisions, deviations and events which may have affected research outcomes were noted (Closa, 2021).

Analysis

The first step included analysing all data points to locate the distinguishable political themes that played an important role within the narrative of each game. The key political themes were identified within each video game, ensuring that the analysis had the correct components to understand if video games can contain enough substance to bear weight on one's political perception. Using this as a first step in the analysis ensured that political themes present within the video game were appropriately discussed. This has been done on a game-by-game basis and primarily focussed on the data collected within the video game. However, in the cases of a few video games, an outside perspective was utilised where appropriate to enhance discussion and ensure everything was recognised. Whilst the data collection and initial analysis of individual video games were done in segments, these analyses had been reviewed systematically throughout the research to add or elaborate on the initial analyses conducted.

After the video games were individually assessed and analysed, the next step compared the framing of political themes within the narratives against each other. This process included a discussion on the impact narratives have on different consumer types and the structure of storyline. These areas contribute to the nuance of video games and the ability to engage the audience, which was an important consideration in the third step of the analysis.

The third part of the analysis drew on the existing understanding of how media can influence the political opinions of an audience across mediums. The process of analysing them against hypotheses informed from existing scholarship allowed a clearer set of ideas on the influence video games can have on an individual's political perception. As the way people consume media and news changes, the way it can influence may as well. The media effects present in traditional media may show how framing political themes within video games can lead to the opinion formation of those consuming it. The following variables have been used to measure the influence of video games on already existing hypotheses. The most common within the study of media is how it is framed to the public. Framing can influence the perceived importance of those consuming the information (Clawson et al., 1997). Not only that, but as people begin collecting information from new forms of media, like social media, they are more likely to only see part of the picture rather than the full story (Appel et al., 2019). When headlines are written in a divisive way, this can lead to very uninformed decisions by the public if they choose to only read from the surface level (Pew Research Center, 2020). The following concepts were utilised to analyse the video games within this study to understand if video games can affect the political perception of the audience. The definition of framing used for this study is the understanding that framing is a mechanism used to select some aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in communication (Entman, 1993). Framing allows for the selection of specific aspects of reality to promote a particular problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and potentially a recommendation of information or message framed (Entman, 1993).

The following are hypotheses that have been applied to this research on video games. These have been informed from existing theories within the communication scholarship previously discussed in the literature review. These have been adapted for the medium video games and the complexities of how narratives and gameplay work.

People play video games as a form of entertainment.

The framing of issues within video games may impair the player's opinion externally through means of perceived importance shown within the game.

The framing presented within video games employ emotive and value-based framing to elicit an audience reaction which boosts engagement within the video game and externally in the consumer's world.

People play video games as a form of entertainment to escape their reality, thus allowing their mental defences to relax, which may allow for messaging to take effect on a more subconscious level.

By using hypotheses developed to incorporate existing theory within the communication scholarship, this study has comprehensively analysed if and how video games impact those who consume them. This has been narrowed down to four broad hypotheses as the contents within video games is typically very individualistic. Leaving the hypotheses broad allows for further exploration into the nuances present in each video game.

Case Selection

There are two elements of selection for this study: the video games to be studied and the let's player used to gather the data required for analysis. This will be further explained throughout this section of the methodology.

The Video Games

In this study, six games have been selected. Due to the time restraints, this is the most feasible amount to conduct a thorough analysis across a broad number of games available. To ensure there is no inherent bias in selection, the following selection criteria have been applied. The games need to be of a AAA status. The terminology "AAA" is not a formal

classification; however, it is used to define games that are the top tier of technological features like graphics and audio design and contain a limited number of bugs that can disturb gameplay ("Best AAA games - Everything you should know about Triple A", 2020). These games also typically come from large studios, which have a high production value due to large teams and large budgets for their marketing campaigns ("Best AAA games - Everything you should know about Triple A", 2020). AAA games are comparable to blockbuster movies due to high consumption across groups as they are easily of accessible. They will typically have multiple language options, global availability, and ease of use for people with disabilities. They are not just played by those who identify themselves as "gamers." They are consumed on a much larger scale which takes us to the second selection criteria, popularity. By utilising games that are popular, it allows for a broader understanding of how these games can be considered influential as they have a much larger fan base. Larger fan bases also call for better narrative, audio design, and gameplay development as there is a demand to create.

This research aimed to include a broad range of types of games in the study. For this purpose, there have been some limitations included in this. Only video games that have an end to the narrative were captured. This narrowed down options of games quite drastically, as many games incorporate the ability to continue or are based in a player versus player (PVP) universe where no narrative is required. This is an important element for selection as the study is focused on the narrative rather than gameplay mechanics. The representation of all relevant genres within video games was an important feature of this selection criteria. There are ten game genres: sandbox, real-time strategy, shooters, a multiplayer online battle arena, role-playing, simulation, puzzles and party, action-adventure, survival and horror, and platformer (Pavlovic, 2020). Many of these genres do not fit the "narrative" and end criteria already in place. The following genre types fit the already established criteria: shooter, role-playing, action-adventure, survival, and horror, and finally platformer. The only one not included in this study is a platformer out of these genres. This is due to the less complex narratives platformers typically have; video games such as *Super Mario Bros* or *Crash Bandicoot* are quite simplistic rather than having a complex narrative structure. These games may have implications for this study; however, due to their restrictions and the confines of this thesis, they have not been included.

To narrow down further the games to be chosen, research was done into the award's history of games in recent and past years, along with the popularity of games. This was especially important when considering video games which are part of a franchise, so that the most suitable were selected. The video game selection is as follows:

Detroit: Become Human

- AAA Game.
- Action-adventure genre.
- Five awards won, 22 nominations in its release year.
- Reception, Metacritic Averages: Critic rating 80/100 and User rating 7.7/10 (Metacritic – Detroit: Become Human, 2021)
- Sales: 6 million copies by July 2021 (Makuch, 2021)

Final Fantasy VII Remake

- AAA Game
- Role-playing genre
- 16 nominations, seven awards
- Reception average: Metacritic Averages: Critic rating 87/100 and User rating 8.1/10 (Metacritic – Final Fantasy VII Remake, 2021)
- Sales: 3.5 million copies sold worldwide in the first three days (Sheridan, 2020). Over 5 million were sold by August of the same year (Square Enix Team, 2020).

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

- AAA Game
- First-person shooter genre
- 11 nominations, three awards
- Reception average: Metacritic Averages: Critic rating 92/100 and User rating 8.5/10 (Metacritic – Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, 2021)

- Sales: 19.84 million copies sold as of 2019 (Clement, 2021)

Death Stranding

- AAA Game

- First-person shooter and action-adventure genre

- 38 nominations, 13 awards

- Reception average: Metacritic Averages: Critic rating 82/100 and User rating 7.3/10
  (Metacritic – Death Stranding, 2021).

- Sales: Over 5 million copies sold as of March 2021 (Robinson, 2021)

The Last of Us Part I and II

- AAA Game

- Action-Adventure, survival horror genre.

- 557 awards in total, TLOU2 makes up 300 of those awards.

- Reception average: Metacritic Averages, *The Last of Us Part I*: Critic rating 95/100
  and User rating 9.2/10 (Metacritic – The Last of Us, 2021). Metacritic Averages, *The
  Last of Us Part II* Critic rating 93/100 and User rating 5.2/10 (Metacritic – The Last of
  Us Part II, 2021).

- Sales: TLOU: Approximately 20 million copies as of October 2019 (Reeves, 2019).
  TLOU2: Over 5 million copies sold in the first week (Robinson, 2020).

Let's Play Justifications:

To ensure data from each game was collected equally and fully, let's play content was used
to ensure data could be collected in a timely manner due to resources and time constraints.
Let's play content allows for in-depth notetaking on the games' progress, storyline, and
atmosphere individually. This often included pausing to take notes or playing back to
capture a quote being said within the video game. The choice of who the content creator of
the let's plays was simple. The content creators chosen for this study have completed a full

playthrough and show all the available narratives. This was informed by the researcher's knowledge of video games and let's plays.

Data Collection

To effectively collect the large amount of data contained within these games, let's play content was chosen. This not only ensured that the time spent was minimised as much as possible, but also allowed for a comprehensive collection of the various nuanced narratives and character arcs implicit in creating the atmosphere of the video game and, therefore, the playability. The nature of this form of data collection was a continuous start and stop of the play through to ensure no area was missed.

Each game has its own length for playability, and this can vary among players as they can choose to take on additional side content or completely skip the exploration of the environment. For this analysis, the let's plays chosen were those which underwent more thorough playthroughs. The time spent on the collection of data for these games was as follows, this includes the time spent writing up notes, but not including any analysis:

- *Detroit: Become Human*, 23 hours.
- *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, 50 hours.
- *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, 9.5 hours.
- *Death Stranding*, 60 hours.
- *The Last of Us Part I and II*, 74 hours.

The overall time spent per game was approximately one month to dissect and analyse the individual narratives within these games. The data collection times vary as video games playability differ from each other. This is shown throughout each of the video games own sections.

3.2 Considerations, Limitations, and Ethics in the Research Design

Limitations

Firstly, the design of this research is limited as a direct result of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, time and word limit constraints prevent this study from covering a more diverse spectrum of video games available on the market, which is why the case selection criteria were imperative to this design. Lastly, the methodology chosen, qualitative research, as the extrapolation of findings is limited. As it relies on the researcher's perception, the potential for bias is recognised. However, this has been combated by regular academic and non-academic peer support and academic supervision. This thesis will open pathways for further research into this form of media in the twenty-first century.

Considerations

The main consideration for video games' impact is the barrier to entry in playing them. In all cases for AAA games, the player needs to have either a console or computer to play. They also need the funds to be able to purchase the video game. Other smaller considerations for those to play video games are age ratings, language restrictions, and some older video games' region lock. Region lock is when the digital code and formatting can only be used in conjunction with a device from the same region, e.g. A PlayStation from the Oceania region would only be able to play Oceania games available. However, as the rise of let's plays become more and more popular, those without these access points can still engage and see these games through someone else who is playing.

Ethics

I will need to adhere to both the Association of Internet Researchers and the University of Auckland Code of Ethics in terms of ethical considerations. The study will be conducted in a manner that will be replicable and transparent. To ensure this, the full methodology is present, along with all references fully detailed. This is to ensure against the falsifiability of the conclusions of this study. Other considerations are the ethics of using the let's play

content selected for data collection. The channels that have provided the gameplays create content for their subscribers and promote their channel (Evans, 2020). The content within these let's plays contains no other subject besides the YouTuber and the gameplay, ensuring no privacy breach (Evans, 2020). The content is freely available for any person able to access YouTube. Another area of consideration is that the researcher is a student within the school of political science and, as a result, is more informed of political messaging which exists within society. However, this makes the researcher more suitable for this study.

This chapter has unsheathed how the research has been conducted, providing a transparent and explicit research design to provide the opportunity to be replicated. The following chapters will examine each of the six video games individually, followed by analysing the frames against the hypotheses advised within this section.

Chapter Four - The Video Games

The following chapter will provide a summary of the video games and an analysis of the narrative frames present in each. This section is intended to give a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the storyline within these video games and how influential they can be. These sections will inform the analysis and allow the frames to be assessed against the working hypotheses used for this study. As discussed in the previous chapter, an in-depth data collection was undertaken to ensure no sections or narratives were missed in each video game.

4.1 *Detroit: Become Human*

Video Game Details

Release Date: 24th April 2018	Director: David Cage
Developers: Quantic Dream	Publisher: Sony
Gameplay time: 10 – 15 hours	Let's Player: Jacksepticeye

Summary

The let's play by Jacksepticeye (2019) has been used as the primary data source throughout this section.

Detroit: Become Human is a video game based in the year 2038, a time when artificial intelligence (AI) became so advanced that humans were able to create androids. The androids are depicted in human form and designed to make human life easier and more enjoyable. However, androids have started awakening from their programming, fighting back to save themselves and their freedom. Within this game, these androids who have become salient are called "deviant," as they act against their programming. The player will navigate this choice-based game as three separate android characters, all of whom play important roles in the story. Though the players choice influences this game, there is an underlying theme of civil rights and the android's right to be treated as equals. The choices

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the player makes helps to determine the manner of how this civil rights movement will progress. The summary of *Detroit: Become Human* will discuss the overview of the atmosphere within the game first and move on to individual summaries of the three storylines.

The video game follows three separate androids, Kara, Markus, and Connor, on their journeys. As the player makes their way through the story, they must make choices that influence how the game progresses and how characters will interact. The beginning of the story of these three androids is intended to evoke empathy within the player to encourage them to maintain interest and keep going. An important aspect of the gameplay is that the player can decide to kill off characters early or have them react in specific ways that change the outcome of events. The overview of the characters' journeys below is based on the let's play which was used for data collection, the individual who played this game also took it upon themselves to show the alternative options in many significant areas as well which will be discussed separately.

The video game title screen opens the player to the android, Chloe, who assists in the set-up of the video game, commenting on the player's background. As the player makes choices, she will judge why you did things, particularly if a player gets characters killed off. She also makes the player survey their feelings toward technology development, particularly how it would affect human life. Chloe plays an important role at the end of the game by requesting to be free from her position so she can find herself. The player can decide whether to relieve Chloe of her duty to the game or make her remain on the title screen.

Connor

The android Connor is a prototype model used by Cyberlife, the company responsible for inventing the android technology, for investigating the rise of deviancy in androids. Being the first detective android created, he can reconstruct events transpired by analysing the evidence available at the scene. He is assigned to Lieutenant Hank Anderson, an officer who hates androids, to investigate all reported cases. Connor's story demonstrates how much disdain and lack of empathy humans have for androids. In almost every case investigated,

the android had been beaten and abused by its owner whilst they served their needs. In these cases, the androids who killed their owner did so to protect themselves. As tensions rise within the game, Connor faces situations that truly challenge his programming, thus showing his growth into deviant behaviour. For example, the player can choose for him not kill another android in the Kamsky mansion over obtaining valuable information to further his investigation. Much of Connor's story is unpolitical; this game element is primarily on player enjoyment. However, the mistreatment of androids in these cases can be reflected in past injustices of minority groups and slavery.

Kara

The model of android Kara is used for is housework maintenance and cleaning. Her story begins being picked up from a repair shop after Todd, her owner, had badly beaten her. As she's taken home from the store, the player is taken through the landscape of Detroit, showing the degradation of human life in the city, incomplete housing projects and the rise of homeless humans who can no longer support themselves. In the home, there is a little girl called Alice, who at this time, the player is unaware is an android. The treatment of Kara could be likened to slaves of the bygone era as she is yelled at, abused, and forced to do everything her owner wishes her to do. This is, of course, what she is programmed for; however, as Todd becomes violent toward Alice, she can break free of her programming and become a deviant. Once she has become deviant, she seeks out Alice to run away from Todd to be safe. From here, the player follows Kara and Alice through the struggles of finding a safe place for them to live.

Kara and Alice experience one of the worst scenarios with a human out of the three androids. They fall victim to a trap wherein a human takes in androids to experiment on creating atrocities to play with. The player can add to the party when escaping by allowing another android to come with them after the events transpired. From this point forward, the three set off to find an individual who has been known to assist in getting androids across the US/Canadian border. If the player is successful in the following events, this can happen, and the three are kept safe.

Markus

Marcus is another prototype android given to its owner to assist in day-to-day life. However, unlike Kara, he has been treated by his owners with the utmost care and respect. Just like with Kara, as the player first steps into Marcus's shoes, they are confronted with the reality of what has happened to humanity since androids became commercially available. Androids are taking the jobs humans previously did, which contributes to the mass economic instability and civil unrest among humans as they can no longer financially support themselves. The segregation for humans and androids in the public space is highlighted through the bus system which has a separate compartment for androids to stand in away from humans. This strikes a comparison to days gone by. After a fight between himself and his owner's son, he is shot and taken to rust in the junkyard. Once he powers back up, he struggles to replace missing parts of his bio components to restore himself. Once restored, Marcus is given information from another android about Jericho, where other androids like him are congregated. This is where the beginning of the civil rights movement for androids begins.

The civil rights movement is centred around how the player chooses to proceed with Marcus. As the player is strictly on the android side, they can see the true terror inflicted on the androids by humanity. When Marcus explores Jericho for the first time, he sees androids there who have shut down or who have been discarded, trashed, beaten and tortured. As the player continues down the path of Marcus, they can choose between being openly violent and hostile in response or to go down a peaceful route. In this playthrough, Marcus is chosen to go down the non-violent path, peacefully marching and sending messages out to support their cause.

The civil rights movement is the more obvious political connection within the video game. In this playthrough, public opinion and support is important for a positive outcome in this storyline. However, as the protest escalates to peaceful assembly, the President orders all androids be collected and destroyed at a camp to eradicate them from society. At the final stand, the androids are given a moment of reprieve as the media surrounding them keeps the situation in check. But after a conversation with Agent Perkins, Markus is advised they

have a minute before the army will open fire on the peaceful androids. When the shooting begins, the androids retreat, still not fighting back. In what would seem the final moments, the player must choose to either sing, kiss North, who is another android, sacrifice themselves or detonate a dirty bomb. The options of sing or kiss North demonstrate an act of humanity, which shows they are alive. This results in the President calling off the attack and retreating from the city. This marks the end of the game, leaving it with a peaceful outcome. There are, of course, other endings which will be discussed further on.

Detroit: Become Human has a clear narrative focus on the concept of human rights or, in this case, android rights and the choice of civil rights movement within the game. The next section of this chapter will discuss how the narrative frames options within the game and how it may influence the consumer's perception of reality.

Analysis of Frames

The narrative in *Detroit: Become Human* explores the frame of civil rights movements, sharing similarities to slavery abolishment and minority rights in the United States. The director of this video game was halfway through writing the storyline in 2015 when the terrorist bombing and violence broke out in France (Farokhmanesh, 2017). Throughout the video game's story, even though the player can choose to go down a violent route, he wanted to emphasise the importance of non-violent action (Farokhmanesh, 2017). This is exemplified throughout as the choices for a violent response are so chaotic. The violent ending essentially detonates a "dirty" bomb in central Detroit, leaving the city in ashes. *Detroit: Become Human* emphasises the importance of free speech, free assembly, and the right to be an individual amongst other social ideas of familial and companionship bonds. This is exemplified throughout this video game strongly within the framing of each character's narrative. As the storyline covers a narrative that can be likened to the civil rights movement, it can ignite concern over current issues of inequality. Whilst this video game was released in 2018, should it have been played around times of civil unrest, much like the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, it could enhance those feelings within a player of the inequalities in the real world. The framing in this video game truly focuses on the consequences of the player's actions. At the same time, there are moments where if the

player makes the wrong choice, the game can be forgiving and allow them to still pursue the direction they prefer. If you fail or make a negative choice, some elements will either end that character's involvement or block off an avenue the player may have preferred.

Magazines in this video game are scattered around the environment for the player to find. These give further background into the video game's world and the current socio-economic environment throughout the video game. Many issues are present even in today's discussions around political concerns. The player will see an insight into the effects of climate change throughout these magazines on a world discerned in 2038. Whilst these are truly dramatic changes, some of these narratives are being advised of within our news now. In the video game, sea levels are rising to the point where coastal cities must build sea walls to protect the land and society. The loss of wildlife in the ecosystem led to Cyberlife is opening a museum wherein all extinct animals will be remade as androids. Another key area shown in these magazines is the rise of surveillance in *Detroit: Become Human.* As android become a popular item to have in the household, reports of Cyberlife abusing access and selling information was seen. In the current world, as technology evolves, humans face a loss of privacy through data tracking. As we can see today, this is already in discussion, as privacy is a human right that is currently being sold to the capitalist economy.

Detroit: Become Human is a video game that pinpoints areas of concern in the current political life and places importance on them. Whilst it is highly possible for a player to leave the game and not affect how they view their political landscape, the narrative and framing in this video game make them play through these issues. As the world becomes increasingly smaller through globalisation, information has become easier to obtain, the intricacies of how different mediums can penetrate and influence how one views politics is important.

This chapter has provided an overview of the narrative within *Detroit: Become Human*. The political frames which can be experienced and seen throughout the story have also been analysed to further understand the impact this medium can have. The following section will explore the narrative in *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and the frames within.

4.2 *Final Fantasy VII Remake*

Video Game Details

Release Date: 10th April 2020

Director: Tetsuya Nomura

Developers: Square Enix

Publisher: Square Enix

Gameplay time: 40 hours

Let's Player: Gab Smolders

Time taken to do data collection: 50 hours

The *Final Fantasy* series by Square Enix is a massive franchise that has been ongoing since 1987, with the beloved franchise having over 95 different games, 15 of those games being a core games (Byrd, 2021). The remake of *Final Fantasy VII*, released in April 2020, embellished the character arcs involved and expanded the storyline. With an increase in the number of people who are playing video games and the ease of accessibility of this now re-released game, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* was the most appropriate game to choose out of the massive franchise as it is one of the most popular (Byrd, 2021).

Summary

The let's play by Gab Smolders (2021) has been used as the primary data source throughout this section.

Final Fantasy VII Remake is set in the city of Midgar. Midgar is a capitalist society where the biggest corporation, Shinra Power Company or known as the Shinra Corporation, is in charge. The video game begins by showing the bleak environment of Midgar. Midgar is a unique city as the Shinra Corporation has built an entire city on top of the one on the ground. The main city now sits above on eight plates suspended by pillars where there are eight Mako reactors to power each area and one more Mako reactor underneath the Shinra Corporation building. Those who live on the top side of the plates are middle-class and higher citizens, with low-class citizens beneath the plate.

Cloud Strife, the main protagonist of the game, an ex-SOLDIER of the Shinra Corporation, is seeking mercenary work in the slums of the Midgar as he seeks to move on from his past life. SOLDIERS of the Shinra Corporation have been exposed to mako, making their eyes appear different and increasing strength and endurance, thus giving them tremendous battle capability. For accepting the mako, the SOLDIER accepts a shorter life in exchange.

His first job as a mercenary is working as a guard for his friend, Tifa Lockhart, whose group's mission is to destroy the Mako reactors in Midgar. The group is a branch of another corporation called Avalanche fighting to protect the planet from those draining it of its life force. The Midgar branch comprises of Barret Wallace, Tifa Lockhart, Wedge, Jessie, and Biggs. The group seeks justice and conservation of the planet as its mako is being drained in excess. Mako is essential to the planet's survival, it is the essence of the planet, and as a result of its overuse, the environment is being destroyed.

Once the first Mako Reactor has been destroyed, the accusation of Avalanche being a terrorist organisation begins. The group plans their second attack on the Mako reactors and successfully destroys another one whilst egging on President Shinra. However, this attack will result in dire consequences for those who reside in the slums of Midgar. The group gets split up after the explosion of the second reactor. In the blast, Cloud is separated, falling into Sector Five where he meets Aerith. Cloud and Aerith accomplish missions throughout Sector Five to make their way back to Sector Seven. In this chapter of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, the player learns of Turks, who are soldiers of the Shinra Corporation tasked with handling their "dirty work." The Turks, Rude and Reno, have been ordered to capture Aerith, an Ancient that will allow them to get to the "promised land."

Cloud leaves in the middle of the night to make his way back to Sector Seven. He travels through Sector Six, an area that suffered, as a plate was destroyed in the war prior to that time. The sector now houses the Wallmarket, a town modelled around sin and greed. Wallmarket is the town to gamble, enjoy fighting, nightlife and see wealth in excess. However, at this point, Cloud and Aerith's aim is to get to Sector Seven so Cloud can re-group with Avalanche. When they reach the gates to Sector Seven, they see Tifa in a Chocobo carriage being taken to the auditions to be Don Corneo's next bride. A Chocobo is a large bird-like creature used similarly to a horse. Don Corneo is the leader of a group of violent men and regularly changes his brides as he sees fit.

In Wallmarket, Aerith and Cloud complete side quests and key missions to gain access to the auditions to save Tifa. When they arrive at Corneo's mansion, they meet Leslie and two

other lackeys. Leslie advises them that if they want to get into the audition, they need approval first from the trio, Chocobo Sam, Madam M, and finally Andrew Rhodea. To gain approval, Cloud and Aerith must complete the tasks assigned by the trio. After completing the tasks assigned, Aerith and Cloud gain entry on the caveat that Cloud has to dress up as a woman.

Once inside, they locate Tifa and fight the guards. Tifa advises that Corneo knows something about Avalanche and the Shinra Corporations plans, so she joined to get information. Corneo advises that Shinra is setting up to drop a plate on Sector Seven, then drops them down into the sewers.

The group make their way back to Sector Seven, along the way encountering the ghost-like creatures interfering with fate. The battle to protect the plate is well underway, and the group begin to fight their way up. Reno talks about himself being a pawn in the hands of the Shinra Corporation and are expendable even at an elite level as they disembark their helicopter to disengage the plate. The plate drops on Sector Seven, leaving only rubble and ruin. Most of the inhabitants had already fled to Sector Five, along with Barret, Cloud and Tifa. Aerith had been kidnapped by Shinra while rescuing Barret's daughter.

In Sector Five, the group meet back up with plans to save those left behind in the rubbles of Sector Seven. They find Wedge stuck inside an underground testing facility. Within the facility are creatures who have been modified by the Shinra Corporation. Fearing for Aerith's life at the hands of Shinra and develop a plan to get inside and rescue her.

Through a covert mission and the assistance of Leslie, they manage to enter the Shinra Corporation and locate the floor Aerith is on. When spying on a meeting of the Shinra Corporations Heads, they find out that Shinra is seeking another land through Aerith as they know this planet is on the brink of destruction. They follow Hojo to the entrance of his laboratory, and Barret angrily confronts him. Hojo escapes and puts the group through many tests as they find their way out with Aerith and their new companion Red XIII. Red XIII is an experimental entity that Hojo has kept locked away to develop. However, throughout the confines of the laboratory there are many chambers where Hojo is testing on creatures.

Glimpses of war hero, Sephiroth, long thought to be dead, are seen as he terrorises Clouds mind. Aerith advises that the Shinra Corporation is not the real enemy here anymore. It started with them, but there is now a greater enemy.

The group escaped to the President's Office, where they should be extradited by helicopter. At this point, they are in a constant battle as they attempt to escape. When they finally escape, they are faced with a portal that will take them elsewhere to fight Sephiroth. Sephiroth has become the enemy, seeking to annihilate the planet.

The narrative ends as the group manage to fight the behemoth monster that Sephiroth has become. They awaken back on earth on the outskirts of Midgar, seeking their next steps.

Final Fantasy VII Remake has a complex narrative that derives storylines from both a fantastical angle and some which can be seen in the real world. The next section will discuss these frames in greater detail and how they can impact a player or consumers understanding of the political world.

Analysis of Frames

The Anthropocene is the foremost important narrative in the game and throughout dialogue and action. The reactors in Midgar, runoff mako found within the planet, are used to create the power for this city. However, unbeknown to the public, mako is a limited resource and is the planet's life source. As the Shinra Corporation drains the planet of its mako, the consequence is the environment dying. Avalanche's mission is to stop the Shinra Corporation from draining the planet of its essence to ensure the continuation of the planet and the life of those living on it. The concept of the Anthropocene is also tied in closely with capitalism as the Shinra Corporation is the foremost company of the city and the sole provider of power to all sectors. The Shinra Corporation knows of the limitations of mako and the effect that this will have should they continue, yet they care only for the profits and control they have over the city rather than the consequences. The Shinra Corporation already has a plan in place for themselves once the planet has been bled dry, to go to the promised land of the ancients and continue their business plan of generating further riches

for themselves. Barret has a powerful sentence in this game that frames the Anthropocene in a way that reflects the climate change crisis earth is currently experiencing; "Beautiful... But every little light burning bright runs of her blood. And bit by bit, they bleed her, never stopping to think how it'll end for them" (Gab Smolders, 2021, Part 12, 1:25:56).

Final Fantasy VII Remake was released at a time of fear across the planet as the world went into lockdown from the spread of COVID-19. The discussions and debates about the climate crisis the world is currently experiencing have begun to intensify as wildfires and ocean warming become even more concerning than in previous years (McGrath, 2020). When the world's population receded into their homes, the planet saw immediate relief from the draining of its resources and a massive reduction of Co2 in the atmosphere (McGrath, 2020). The framing of the climate disaster in *Final Fantasy VII Remake* could make the player reflect on their environment and how their actions and large corporations can negatively impact the earth and those living on it. As seen in many articles written when this game was released, those who played it said it was impossible not to view the Mako Reactors through the lens of the current climate crisis (Bailey, 2020; Petit, 2020; Henley, 2021; Placido, 2020; Evans-Thirlwell, 2020; Hirst, 2021).

Another theme present in the game is the overflowing slums in the undercity full of poverty and lack of resources. The framing of the slums in *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is not as obvious. This is portrayed through the graphics and the physical features of the game more than anything. The slums, which is the ground level of Midgar, are a dirty, broken-down city with a lack of fortified infrastructure, barren lifeless land, no real sunlight and no clean water. To combat the living situations, the communities in these areas work with one another to keep the people safe from the monsters that appear and help one another. Besides the side quest to deliver filters to ensure safe drinking water, there is little narrative focus on the conditions lived in. There is only one moment in the main storyline where it is discussed as Cloud says that people can leave at any time to seek out a better life; however, Barret counters that not everyone can afford that luxury. Conversations such as these are important as there is a constant stream of thought that if somebody is in a position that is not ideal, they should leave, but that is not always an option. Throughout dialogue is heard whilst the player runs through the streets as Cloud completes side quests which can be

done. Through this, the player can experience the lack of resources in the communities of the sectors of the slums. One set of side quests focuses on the Angel of the Slums, an individual who robs the wealthy to give back to those in the slums. Whilst much of the game is played in the slum areas, the poverty experienced correlates to many of the systemic issues seen throughout large cities worldwide and the lack of resources. However, given that this political theme lacks focus within the video game, it would be difficult to argue that this would have a substantial enough effect to impact the view of a player's perspective, especially if they have not experienced that themselves or studied it.

Terrorism, counterterrorism, and war are a few themes that can be placed with one another for the narrative of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. The telling of these begins at the start of the game as Avalanche is coined as eco-terrorists by the Shinra Corporation throughout public service announcements and news broadcasts. The concept of media framing within the video game itself is clear, the Shinra Corporation owns all news outlets, and it is known by those in the slums that the information spouted from these services are primarily a form of propaganda. How Avalanche is portrayed to the player and how they are portrayed to NPCs are very different. Avalanche is an eco-terrorist organisation that is understood from both standpoints; however, they are framed in a positive light to the player, fighting "bad guys" for the good of the planet. Whereas in the video game, they are portrayed as a group who are targeting society, not just the Shinra Corporation. The concept of terrorism within the narrative of this game is interesting because it follows the argument of freedom fighters or terrorists. As the player is playing on the side of the eco-terrorists, it may perpetuate the idea that certain types of terrorism are positive rather than negative. However, it would be tricky to determine that the player may perceive real-world terrorism, or specifically eco-terrorism, this way.

The concept of terrorism within this narrative carries over to how the Shinra Corporation addresses threats and war potential. After the first bombing of a Mako Reactor, the perpetuation of Avalanche being terrorists was evident in the broadcasting narrative. Amongst this, they also fuelled the fear seen throughout the crowds of people crying out about the damages. Once the second Mako Reactor was destroyed, the process was broadcast by President Shinra to fuel the image of Avalanche he wanted the public to see.

The last battle at the Mako Reactor was extremely intense and fear of an oncoming war spread throughout the communities. The retaliation through public media by the Shinra Corporation is relatively like that of the current day news broadcasts.

However, in the West, there is not a greater fear of war in their states rather overseas. The retaliation to the second Mako Reactor having been blown and Avalanche escaping was extreme, having dropped an entire plate down onto the slums of Sector Seven. The impact of how a player views war on terror may seem extreme as this is all concentrated on one area rather than being relatable on a global level. However, it may seek to lead to questions about the repercussions of Western States engaging in operations to disband terrorist organisations in overseas states. A classic example of this from the 21st century would be the collateral damage of the wars in the Middle East. The amount of innocent lives lost is immense and perpetuated the state of instability in the Middle East. The final element of war from *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is the expendability of soldiers in wartime, the testing on humans and the development of new war machines. However, they are not the focus of the narrative.

The final political theme is the right to privacy. In *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, there is no privacy for the civilians. The technology for scanning and getting all the information required on an individual is simple, and tracking their whereabouts and spending habits is easy given the technology. This is particularly highlighted on the public transport where there is ID checking at certain points which scan for all elements of an individual's personal information; date of birth, criminal history, residential status, and more is then automatically cross-referenced in their databases for public security. Privacy as a human right in the real world has become a topic of debate. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, privacy in an online setting has become questionable, and transactions have increasingly changed from cash to electronic. The contact tracing application created by governments and now highly debated electronic vaccine passports have further created a stir on privacy. As technology continues to be updated, the fear of no privacy is a real concern, and futuristic games such as these may truly encourage debate on this.

Final Fantasy VII Remake explores some extremely challenging narratives and presents political themes that may challenge or highlight the problems in the political society today.

However, some of these themes have a minuscule role to play within the game, resulting in a complete lack of thought. When the game ends, its focus is a battle with Sephiroth to save the planet. What can be taken away from this game is the main political narrative throughout the game, which is the Anthropocene. The importance placed on this frame can encourage the player to contemplate their own world's climate crisis.

This chapter has provided a summary and analysis of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, a game with many similar narrative frames to others in this study. These can be seen throughout the video game sections and discussed further in the final chapter. The next chapter will provide an overview and analysis of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

4.3 *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

Video Game Details

Release Date: 5th November 2007   Developers: Infinity Ward, Treyarch, n-Space and Aspyr

Publisher: Activision and Square Enix

Gameplay time: Six – seven hours   Let's Player: TmarTn2

The *Call of Duty* series is a first-person shooter game heavily based on war. Though the series popularity has grown primarily into a PVP and multiplayer map experience, the campaigns included have narratives that have been loosely based on real-life historical events. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* has one of the most highly rated campaigns in the franchise, which has been remastered to fit technology's graphics and system capabilities better. However, the changes made within the remastered version have been more tailored toward PVP gameplay than their campaigns which is why the original has been used for this analysis.

Summary

The let's play by TmarTn2 (2014) has been used as the primary source of data throughout this section.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare is set in 2011, where a radical leader of insurgents has executed the President of an unknown state in the Middle East. Simultaneously, in Russia, a civil war unfolds as the Ultranationalist movement continues to ignite. The storyline follows two perspectives, a U.S. Marine Force Recon Sergeant Paul Jackson and a United Kingdom's S.A.S. commando, Soap Mactavish. The video game is set across multiple locations in the United Kingdom, Middle East, Azerbaijan, Russia and Ukraine. The video game developers separate each segment of this video game through the use of missions. The player will interchange between both protagonists and experience frames of two types of warfare. To introduce a new mission, the player will be taken through a debrief view that appears to look like a digital world map outlining news headlines relevant and the mission objectives.

There are 18 missions throughout the campaign of this video game that provide the narrative to the player. Generally, the missions for Soap Mactavish follow a covert operation where he is seizing information or attempting a rescue mission to save fellow soldiers. Sergeant Paul Jackson's missions follow a soldier in the heat of a warzone. The narrative

throughout this campaign follows the U.S. Marines and the U.K. S.A.S. forces as they undertake their missions. The two units operated separately until a nuclear bomb was set off in the Middle East.

The US Marines are stationed in the Middle East to bring peace to the region. A terrorist organisation led by Khaled Al-Asad controls the area after executing the President on television. The United States sent in a full-scale invasion of troops to take down Al-Asad regime. However, throughout this campaign, the invasion to capture Al-Asad is unsuccessful. As a result, the marines head further into the Middle East to track Al-Asad into the capital city. Sergeant Jackson and his team make their way into the capital city while assisting other teams on the ground. In between the missions, the audio from news broadcasts is heard:

> "Heavy fighting continues throughout the night as U.S. marines continued to push towards the capital in pursuit of Khaled Al-Asad. Sporadic fighting can be heard as the bulk of Al-Asad's forces fall back toward the Presidential Palace." (TmarTn2, 2014, Part 4, 0:11)

As Sergeant Jackson and his team get closer to the target location, it is advised that Al-Asad controls a nuclear device and for all teams to fall back. Another chopper goes down as Sergeant Jacksons leaves. However, the team descend to save their comrade from certain death. When they save Deadly, a comrade, they re-board their aircraft to set off; however, they are too late.

News broadcasts advise a nuclear weapon has exploded in the Middle Eastern city, showing the rising mushroom cloud. The player is then taken back to Sergeant Jackson as he crawls slowly out of the aircraft and can see the carnage caused by the explosion. In this section, he is now noted as killed in action along with 30,000 other U.S. soldiers.

As the missions are underway in the Middle East, Soap, Captain Price and the rest of the S.A.S. go off to Russia. There are less than three hours until code-name Nikolai will be

executed in the Caucasus Mountains. Nikolai is the American informant in the Ultranationalist camp who supplied the intel for a previous mission.

As the group successfully rescues Nikolai, they get trapped in a small village before returning to the landing zone. The player then engages in a mission where they control the AC130 war machine, which is an aircraft that fires missiles down on targets. The player is advised to "Light 'em up" without little regard to any civilians who could be in the range of fire (TmarTn2, 2014, Part 6, 1:36). Once the player has successfully taken out the enemies in sight, they go back to controlling Soap and head toward a location where they believe Al-Asad is hiding. This is after the nuclear warhead had just been set off in the Middle East. Captain Price goes to torture Al-Asad for information; however, when Al-Asad's phone rings, he finds out it was Imran Zakhaev all along. The video game then takes the player back to a mission 15 years prior when Captain Price was just a lieutenant sent to Ukraine to eliminate Zakhaev as an enemy.

When the player gets brought back to reality, a joint operation between the U.S. Marines and U.K. S.A.S. begins. They are focused on Zakhaev, who they now think has gone underground, but they may be able to use his son, the commander for the Ultranationalists. Unfortunately, as the plan unfolds to take hostage of his son, the son shoots himself in the head before the allies can get any information out of him.

At the start of the following mission, the player hears Zakhaev speaking out on the radio to the Ultranationalists:

> "Our so called leaders prostituted us to the West.. Destroyed our culture… Our economies… Our honour. Our blood has been spilled on our soil. My blood… On their hands. They are the invaders. All U.S. and British forces will leave Russia immediately. Or suffer the consequences" (TmarTn2, 2014, Part 14, 0:07).

At this point, the U.S. Marines and U.K. S.A.S. realise there is a missile launch facility that needs to be taken over before Zakhaev deploys the ballistic missiles at the U.S. The missiles are launched, and the troops successfully make their way into the control room,

reprogramming the missiles to go off mid-air. They see Zakheav taking off through the security feed, and they follow. As they chase down Zakhaev, an RPG is fired at the bridge forcing the team out of the vehicle. Zakhaev says he was the mastermind of the Russian insurrection and the leader of the entire Middle Eastern conflict. He had created the conflict as a way to draw attention away from his plan to seize Russia. Zakheav shoots Captain Price, however, Soap headshot's Zakhaev.

The video game ends on a news broadcast that advises:

> "The Russian government released a statement today confirming a series of nuclear missile tests in Central Russia. Although world leaders will denounce the action, Russian officials maintained that the missile tests fell well within established U.N. protocols. No comment was received from the Ultranationalist party, where rumours of a possible leadership struggle have just begun to surface. In other news, the search for a ship lost in the Bering Strait due to a major storm has been called off…" (TmarTn2, 2014, Part 17, 7:27).

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare has a clearer connection to politics and international relations. By extension, the game takes the inspiration for the campaigns and even the world maps from real-life historical events. The frames presented within this narrative will now be discussed.

Analysis of Frames

This video game, and many in the series, have a powerful wartime narrative within the campaigns. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, there is the Middle East occupation by the United States and the narrative of a terrorist cell taking control. There is a strong connection to the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom campaign in which the U.S. military was the leader. This section shows the terrorist cell having control over the capital and then shooting President Al-Fulani after they learned he was divulging information to the U.S. Throughout

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the mission "crew expendable," the player is exposed to the lectures of Khaled Al-Asad, the leader of the terrorist cell, which is mostly just condemning the President and the invasion of the West. Once the President is killed, the U.S. begins infiltrating the area quickly to capture Al-Asad. On learning there is a nuclear weapon held at Al-Asad's palace, they seek to send all US Marines out of the danger zone. The moment when the nuclear bomb is set off is the most graphic in terms of imagery for the player as they can witness through the last moment of Sergeant Jackson the rising of the mushroom cloud and the destruction which surrounds the character as they drag themselves out of the fallen air carrier to die. The way this moment is portrayed in the narrative is powerful, but it is framed poorly with a huge focus on the loss of soldiers rather than the civilian loss or infrastructure. This ties in with the simplification discussed in the following paragraph.

As with most video games, particularly first-person shooters, there is a strong undercurrent of "good vs. evil" framing. The player is naturally on the "good" side, and the enemies are "evil." As a more oversimplified narrative approach to Middle Eastern instability and war, those who play these sorts of games may be subject to having an oversimplified opinion on war rather than understanding the nuances that exist. As the game progresses through the narrative, there is a complete lack of recognition for the loss of soldiers unless they hold a key position in the narrative, and there is almost no recognition of the loss of civilian life. Whilst adding in these may take away from the "fun" of these video games, which is usually around possessing weapons that are high-powered and high damage, it would increasingly add to the narrative and the perception of war in general. Creating oversimplified war games and creating joy for players who are fictionally defeating "evil" may reinforce the negative connotations of war. Joshua Foust, a researcher in communications, explained that games are a powerful persuasion platform as they encourage the player to create abstract mental models for how systems work and form judgements about those through playing the game (Foust, 2021). This becomes increasingly important as there previously were video games, primarily *Americas Army*, which was used to recruit soldiers (Myers, 2019). Video games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* can be sponsored by militaries and even have militaries consult for design purposes (Foust, 2021). Whilst not the game being analysed in question, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, released in 2004 and originally intended to be developed to be a training simulator for the U.S. Army, was modified for commercial release (Foust,

2021). This game featured only Arab men to shoot, with the biggest goal to ensure the protection their comrades over civilian life (Foust, 2021). The over-simplification present in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and other games such as *Full Spectrum Warrior, Battlefield*, among others, is the lack of morals, lack of complexity and an extremely biased view of the military unit played. The games are not intended to sway or direct the player's opinion, but given the range of ages who play them, there is the question of how much oversimplification should be allowed. It has been studied profusely how important framing is concerning mass media or news media, then what of understanding a war-based video game. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* frames war around the destruction of the enemy and the protection of the West at all costs.

Video games such as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* play an important role in narrating current and historic wartime tragedies. The popularity of these games among all age groups necessitates better game design and narrative. They have become a signature video game within the industry and will continue to grow. Understanding how the framing of this nuanced topic is presented in such a popular platform is imperative.

This chapter has provided an overview and analysis of the narrative frames present within *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and the importance of how political issues are framed. The following chapter will delve into *Death Stranding*, a video game that presents an intentional narrative frame by the director.

4.4 *Death Stranding*

Video Game Details

Release Date: 8th November 2019   Director: Hideo Kojima

Developers: Kojima Productions   Publisher: Sony & 505 Games

Gameplay time: 41 – 115 hours   Let's Player: Jacksepticeye

Summary

The let's play by Jacksepticeye (2019) has been used as the primary data source throughout this section.

Death Stranding is a standalone post-apocalyptic action-adventure game focused on bringing a divided state back together. The concept of the narrative for this game came from Hideo Kojima wanting to encourage positive communication between fractured communities due to the current political climate domestically and internationally (Gault, 2019). He specifically chose to set the video game in the United States to protest the prolific division that the Trump administration had caused amongst US citizens and worldwide (Gault, 2019). When creating *Death Stranding*, Kojima insisted upon only encouraging positive communication for the player by allowing them to only "like" the structure and items that have been placed in the world.

Death Stranding allows for gamers to work with one another to meet the video game's goal and help each other along the way. The online network for *Death Stranding* allows players to place travel devices, charging stations, recovery areas and words of encouragement to boost each other. While every player is still completing the video game's storyline technically alone, they are doing so with the help and providing reciprocal help to other players.

Death Stranding is a future-looking game based on predetermined extinction events brought on by extinction entities. The time at which the player experiences the game is just after a death stranding occurs. The main storyline within this game is to reconnect America through creating a chiral network enabling. This would enable those who remain after the death stranding to connect, creating a unified community focussed on survival and uniting the country.

The game has an interesting focus on package deliveries using human porters who navigate the difficult terrain, overcoming interactions with Beached Things, which are called BTs, and MULES. BTs are the embodiment of a dead soul that has not moved forward from the

Beach. The Beach could be considered purgatory, the place between the living world and the world of the dead. The BTs will appear in areas that have heavy time fall where they will come out and seek to attack any human. If a human is successfully attacked and killed, a voidout occurs, which results in a cataclysmic explosion taking out a massive area. Time fall is like rain but will age anything it touches, meaning that humans and other living organisms will be affected should it touch them. MULEs are people who live out in the terrain rather than in a shelter, and they will seek out porters and attempt to claim the cargo carried. However, it is not explained the benefit they get from stealing cargo except that it is an addictive behaviour.

The story introduces Sam Porter-Bridges, a man who had outcasted himself after his wife had died in a voidout. Sam is a repatriate, which means he can come back from the Beach if he is killed without the assistance of a Bridge Baby, BB. To repatriate is akin to being resurrected. The BBs were a governmental experiment that used still-mothers and their babies as a way for humans to resurrect themselves from the Beach. Sam is the adoptive son of President Strand and has a sister called Amelie. As President Strand lies on her deathbed, she summons him to beg that he complete the chiral network Amelie was trying to put in place. Once President Strand dies, Sam must deliver her body to an incinerator, so she does not necrotise, causing a voidout. From this moment forward, Sam reluctantly carries out the extension of the chiral network whilst delivering essential packages to those who live within America. He can connect them to the network or join with the United Cities of America (UCA), it is their own choice. Sam travels from the East of America to the West to create this chiral connection. Whilst he is a repatriate, Sam has a BB, which allows him to detect BTs so he can avoid them. However, this BB, later called Lou, shows Sam the history of a Soldier who was wronged by the American government by using his baby as the first Bridge Baby. Sam learns at the end of the game that he was this baby, which is why he can repatriate.

Throughout the journey, Sam encounters a terrorist organisation who are against the unification of America. These terrorists can control BTs that they use to further their goal. At the ending of the game, Sam learns Amelie is the head of the terrorist organisation. Sam

learns that Amelie is President Strands Ka (soul), and she is an extinction entity whose purpose is to bring the Last Stranding, the final extinction event.

As the player reaches the end of the story, not only have they played through Sam creating bonds with the people around him, but they have completed the game with the assistance of other players as well. The storyline in *Death Stranding* ends as Sam delays the Last Stranding and the unification of America is complete.

The story of *Death Stranding* is extremely complex, with a large portion reliant on the lore inside the video game. This summary has provided the essential knowledge of key terms within the video game and how these correlate to the narrative frames. These narrative frames will now be examined in the next section.

Analysis of Frames

The main frame present within this video game is the reconnection of humanity through assisting both the characters within the game and players through positive communication and reinforcement. The video game only features the ability to "like" objects and structures within the environment that other players or the game itself have created to share. As a result, those who actively place objects and structures receive positive reinforcement from other players and NPCs. As Sam travels from the East side of America to the West, he will encounter all types of terrain that the player must navigate either by foot or vehicle. Those who have come before can go out of their way to assist others by placing ladders or ziplines. To negate the effect of making the game too easy for those who started later than most, these structures will degrade, and unless connected to the chiral network, they may not exist at all. The whole purpose of this feature to "like" things without the ability to "dislike" was to reinforce positive communication and not to perpetuate the hateful way people interact with others more frequently in the twenty-first century (Gault, 2019). This mechanism can be abused to cause other gamers to fail, such as an incorrectly placed ladder that would force someone to fall down a waterfall. Without the ability to dislike, it may impede others on their journey through the narrative of *Death Stranding*. The director of the game, Kojima, intentionally made the game the way it was to emphasise the lack of

connection that people in the real world have with one another. How interactions, online and offline, have become increasingly negative with "cancel culture," bullying and streams of negative and divisive news media. This is one of the reasons he chose the US to be the focus for the video game, Trump was further dividing an already divided state (Gault, 2019). Kojima wanted to only allow positive reinforcement throughout the game, which is why the player can only "like" things and not "dislike" them at all (Gault, 2019).

The feature of positive discourse and uniting players together is well-paired with another key frame in the video game of rebuilding America. As Sam makes successful deliveries, recycles, and connects those living outside of cities on the same network, messages play, thanking the player for their work to make America whole again. Before the President dies in the beginning, she says, If the people don't all come together again, humanity cannot survive. This is a precursor of the events that transpire after discovering Amelie is President Strands Ka and an extinction entity. The Bridges corporation is responsible for uniting the cities of America and those outside of the cities. When President Strand died, they kept her death a secret from everyone as she was essential to completing the chiral network and establishing the UCA. She was the symbol of American Reconstructionism. Even with the country shattered and its people scattered to the four winds, she never stopped believing they could be reunited. People held onto their hope that America would rise again because they believed in her.

As previously mentioned, this game drew on the current political discourse within the United States and the division in society. Kojima framed his message through a broken state that was attempting to reconstruct itself. This framing was an attempt to make players see the division in their own life. The world in *Death Stranding* is very isolated, and the communication is also primarily through the chiral network rather than face to face. Politically, social media consumed in real life can be curated to the point of an echo chamber of thoughts that do not challenge understandings or beliefs. The ease of influencers or political leaders to share their thoughts, positive or negative, is huge. Whilst *Death Stranding* focuses on the one network for communication, it does highlight how fragmented society has become. However, a detractor to this frame's impact is the focus on the United States. It may create a disconnect for players in other regions due to specificity.

At the end of the video game, the UCA has been reborn as a nation. This solidifies the messaging framed through the positive connections made amongst the characters the player experienced.

As the player progresses further through the game, they encounter more and more information about the government prior to the death stranding. The BB, used by porters to circumvent voidouts, was originally a government testing operation that society deemed to be wrong after a doctor delivered a baby from a brain-dead mother in an emergency C-section, the particles of the dead and living collided, resulting in a voidout which decimated New York City. However, it continued as a secret operation by Bridget Strand before her presidency. When terrorists began using BB technology to trigger voidouts, it was released to the public for porter use. The use of BBs for porter use was a means to conceal their true purpose. BBs were originally conceived as catalysts for the operation of the chiral network. They were integrated into the infrastructure of knot cities to bring them into the chiral network. Amelie installed them as she moved West carrying out the grand plan. President Strand told the people what they wanted to hear and then did what she thought had to be done so America could be whole again.

The story of Cliff is an emotional story of a father who had not only lost his wife but was at risk of losing his son as well. Cliff had intentionally put his child under the care of the scientists conducting the experiments. However, he was completely unaware of their true intention, and he believed that they would help his child. When Cliff was told of the true intentions behind the scientists' plans for his child, he tried to take him out of the facility and failed. The video game depicts a different light to President Strand, who hid herself behind a mask, as she ordered for his immediate death when captured. The implication of this story is one which can encourage conspiracy theories on governments in the real world, increasing further distrust.

Other political themes present within the video game have a relatively smaller focus. These are on terrorism and poverty. In this video game, terrorists are framed as the "bad" guys causing intentional chaos and destruction to those still alive. They are fighting against uniting the state again. The other frame on poverty is very nuanced as MULES could be

interpreted as those who live in poverty and are addicted to stealing packages from porters. The state looks down on them and does not offer any support. However, the lack of focus on these characters removes their impact. These frames are more implemented to create a challenge within the video game for scaling the terrain.

This game was released prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns. It is not used as a predictive tool, but the civilians within *Death Stranding* are stuck inside their shelters and afraid to leave due to the time fall and BTs who threaten their lives, like the lockdowns that forced everyone to mostly stay inside their homes worldwide. The porters in *Death Stranding* can be likened to courier drivers connecting people through parcels and packages. The chiral network is like the internet and has allowed so many to come together. Many parallels can be drawn from *Death Stranding*, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 lockdowns; however, they are unintended and unprecedented.

Death Stranding has an obvious key narrative frame implemented intentionally by the video games director. This is important to be aware of as not all frames are intentionally implemented to encourage the consumer to absorb the message. The following chapter will explore and examine *The Last of Us Part I and II*.

4.5 *The Last of Us Part I and II*

Video Game Details

The Last of Us Part I

Release Date: 14th June 2013   Director: Neil Druckmann

Developer: Naughty Dog   Publisher: Sony Entertainment

Gameplay time: 25 – 30 hours   Let's Player: Markiplier

The Last of Us Part II

Release Date: 19th June 2020   Director: Neil Druckmann

Developer: Naughty Dog   Publisher: Sony Entertainment

Gameplay time: 25 – 30 hours   Let's Player: Jacksepticeye

Summary

The Last of Us Part I

The let's play by Markiplier (2014) has been used as the primary data source throughout this section.

The Last of Us is set in a post-apocalyptic world after the cordyceps fungal infection spread across the Americas after many crops in South America became infected with mould and were sent across Central America and Mexico for distribution. Cordyceps is based on an already existing fungal infection that affects insects, resulting in the growth of the fungus within, causing deformities until the host dies (Lu, 2019). In the United States on the 26th September 2013 infected overrun civil services causing mass destruction, chaos and death. This is when the story of the protagonist begins.

Joel Miller, the protagonist, is awoken in the night by his brother Tommy calling him. One of the neighbours is infected and tries to attack Joel and his daughter Sarah. When the outbreak occurred, Joel's daughter was brutally shot by a soldier commanded to when they were reaching out for help. Fast-forward 20 years after Outbreak Day to Joel in a Quarantine Zone (QZ) run by the remanets of the United States military. The QZs were established as a way for humans to survive, however, they are incredibly militaristic regimes where those living inside are controlled with ration cards, mandated service for the military, curfews and forced labour. Outside of the government-sanctioned QZs, there are other survival groups, those who mind their own business, those who steal and kill other survivors, and then what the government deems "extremist groups" called the Fireflies.

In the first game, the player is exposed to the militaristic-style zones and rationing cards at the beginning, where there is no room for deserters. Joel has a companion named Tess, with whom he completes side jobs with. They made a trade for weapons that went awry when they were traded to the Fireflies. To get the weapons, they now needed to smuggle a girl, Ellie, who had been bitten with no signs of infection, to another Firefly group. The Fireflies are attempting to develop a vaccine that will combat the effects of the disease.

On this journey, they encounter many groups, outlaws who attack people trying to survive on their own and cannibals. They come across Tommy in the town of Jackson, who assists in getting them to the Fireflies. The end of the first part is Joel saving Ellie, killing the surgeon, Jerry, the only man capable of developing a vaccine. He then escaped with Ellie fleeing back to Jackson, where Tommy is. The main story is about a flawed man who has lost almost everything in his life, saving the one person who has given him joy and something to live for again.

The Last of Us Part II

The let's play by Jacksepticeye (2020) has been used as the primary data source throughout this section.

The Last of Us Part II is set five years after Part I, and the player controls Ellie rather than Joel. After settling down in Jackson, Ellie and Joel's relationship is strained after discovering what happened five years ago. Ellie is sent off on patrol with Dina, a friend, to clear any infected they come across. However, whilst out on patrol, Jesse, a friend, finds them as Joel and Tommy are not at their post. The catalyst for part two is Joel being ruthlessly killed by a group from out of town. Ellie and Dina set out to find Tommy, who went off alone to hunt them down and avenge Joel's death.

The Last of Us Part II gameplay is similar in experience; however, the developers chose to have the player control both Ellie and Abby. Abby is the one who killed Joel as Joel had killed

her father to save Ellie. However, the player does not know that this switch will occur halfway through the video game.

Ellie and Dina make their way to Seattle, where Joel's killers were suspected to have come from due to the Washington Liberation Front (WLF) merchandise. They encounter many challenges and obstacles whilst navigating Seattle to locate the WLF. During this time Dina begins to show signs of illness, however she later tells Ellie she is pregnant. After learning of Dina's condition, Ellie forces Dina to stay in their hideout while she attempts to track down Tommy and Abby. The hideout was previously a theatre, inside they find a radio which Dina uses to listen in on the WLF broadcasts.

After Dina hears about a location where Abby might be from the radio, Ellie sets off on her own. The hospital is ground zero for Seattle where all infected were taken prior to the civil services being overrun. The lower floors are considered to be too dangerous to venture due to the spores and infected which reside below. Spores are the fungus from the infected, which cause healthy humans to turn. When Ellie arrives at the hospital, she finds Nora, a person from the group who killed Joel. She chases her to these lower segments and slowly beats the information about where Abby is out of her. At this moment, Ellie also realises that this group of people were from the Fireflies, who disbanded after Joel killed the entire faction five years ago. When Ellie beats Nora, it is intensely graphic, and the developers make it so the player controls Ellie as she did it, challenging typical video games that usually turn these violent scenes into cut scenes.

After Ellie returns to the hideout she is terrified about what she had just done. However it does not stop her venturing out once more. This time, she runs into Jesse, who came to help the two girls get revenge for Joel's death. After a close call with WLF soldiers, Jesse and Ellie return to the hideout where Dina's illness is progressively getting worse. On the radio, they hear of a man in the area who they suspect to be Tommy. They make a plan to go out and find him so they can then make their way back to Jackson.

During this outing, Ellie hears more about Abby and sets off to the aquarium. When she makes it there, she finds only Owen and Mel, who were there when Abby killed Joel. To get

the information she is after, she accidentally kills both. In a state of shock, she leaves a map of her hideout in Seattle. This section of the narrative ends when Ellie, Dina, Tommy, and Jesse get confronted by Abby and her accomplice in their safe place.

The player now controls Abby as she completes her assigned tasks designated by the leader of the WLF. The WLF is a survival group that works similarly to the military. They are in a constant battle with the Seraphite's, otherwise known as Scars. When Abby hears of Owen going missing, she seeks to find him as he has been accused of killing one of their own. This is considered treason, and he would be killed on sight. As she makes her way toward the aquarium where she knows he is hiding, she gets captured by Seraphite's and strung up, only to be saved by Lev and Yara, a pair of Seraphite's outcasts. Lev is a transgender character who had cut their hair to better match how they identify. They were sentenced to death for breaking laws. However, Yara protects her brother, leaving them to survive independently. Abby saves both from death when the Seraphite's attempt to kill them as well. From the attack, Yara is left with only one arm.

When they get to the aquarium, Abby seeks medical assistance for Yara from Mel. Mel advises that they need proper medical equipment to sever the rest of the arm so she does not die from blood poisoning. When at the hospital, Abby is spotted by the WLF and marked as is a traitor for disobeying orders.

As the timelines cross over with Ellies, they do not encounter each other at the aquarium as Abby goes off to the Seraphite's island to save Lev. Lev ran off to try and save their mother. The island's environment is like that of old tribal lands, with cult messages written everywhere. Yara is killed as they escape from the island, which is now under attack from the WLF. The death and destruction show the extent of the two groups' hatred as they annihilate each other.

When Abby returns with Lev to the aquarium, she finds Owen and Mel dead, leading her to hunt Ellie. Abby kills Jesse and takes out Tommy's leg. However, she leaves Ellie with the threat that she would be dead if they crossed paths again.

This ends the Seattle section of the narrative and fast forwards a few months.

Abby and Lev go off on a boat to seek refuge elsewhere to hunt for the Fireflies, who are rumoured to be regrouping. They get caught by a group in California called the Rattlers, who capture people to be enslaved.

Still haunted by Joel's death, Ellie lives in an old farmhouse with Dina and her baby boy. She has constant panic attacks of seeing Joel being beaten in front of her. When Tommy visits advising a rumour of where Abby is, Ellie is compelled to go, driven by her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In California, she locates the Rattlers hideout, killing all she sees on sight. When she makes her way to the jail cell, she is told Abby is down on the docks.

This moment is surreal as Ellie is broken and weak from injuries she sustained. She limps over to the docks, which have massive poles standing where people have been strung up by their hands. When she spots Abby, Abby is weak, undernourished and at the brink of starvation. Ellie cuts Abby down and allows her to take Lev down. Abby carries Lev and shows Ellie toward the boat so they can leave. Ellie trails after and says, "I can't let you leave" (Jacksepticeye, 2020, Part 13, 1:23:08). At this moment, Abby and Ellie begin fighting, exhausted and physically weak. This fight is gruesome. When Ellie begins to win by drowning Abby, she flashes back to a moment with Joel, and she stops crying. She lets Abby go and stays sitting in the shallow waters, grieving.

This video game ends with Ellie back at the farmhouse, picking up a guitar.

The Last of Us Part I and II contain intensely emotive storylines with authentic characters. These characters create a highly captivating world for the audience, enhancing the gameplay and playability. The narrative within these video games is not overly complex and is demonstrated within the way the narrative is framed. The following section will discuss these frames in greater detail and how they may impact how a player or consumer may understand the political world.

Analysis of Frames

To understand how the framing of the narratives within *The Last of Us* world may impact those who consume the content, both games in the series have been used to ensure an accurate representation of this world. One can make many comparisons with this game and the world as it is known now. The most overarching theme across these two games is the associations that can be made with understanding the social contract theory within political philosophy on the State of Nature. The State of Nature, whilst not necessarily a concept that most of society understands, is based on human beings who either do not have a political association or are without knowledge of political association (Bailey et al., 2008). This is a concept that some in society might deem as anarchy, which is well-known and typically feared by most (Bailey et al., 2008). The school of thought developed by Thomas Hobbes on the State of Nature is the most cohesive with the world within The Last of Us as there is little to no political leadership. There are militias, groups, and communities. However, the leaders of these groups align with Hobbes theory that the strongest human will be the most powerful (Bailey et al., 2008). These groups in *The Last of Us* are not only violent and unforgiving but are constantly at war with other groups in their area. In part I, the player experiences this with the military in the QZ and the Fireflies. The Fireflies based in Boston would bomb and attack the military in the QZ as they disagreed with the military. As the player moves through these games, they are constantly reminded that not only are the infected a hazard to avoid and kill, but humans are as well. The groups called hunters trick travellers into approaching them, only to be killed for their supplies, and the cannibal community kidnaps people to feed those within their camp. The second game demonstrates the sheer brutality of these groups even more as the WLF and the Seraphite's aim to annihilate each other from existence. Both groups will also kill anyone in sight who is not a part of their group without considering if they may be friendly. The landscape of *The Last of Us* demonstrates the worst in humanity and, as a result, may further the negative connotations of anarchy and basic human decency.

Whilst the State of Nature, as explained by Hobbes, is present, the concept of totalitarianism exists within these communities. All groups promise safety from infection,

food, survival, and leadership. The leaders of these groups send their soldiers out to pillage and kill any in their local area to better their communities survival. They are constantly filled with the idea that what they are doing is best for humanity, that their choices make a difference, even if they kill other humans for being different. Those who begin to disagree with the leadership's messages and decide to leave these groups are called deserters and usually killed.

As *The Last of Us* is a heavily character-based narrative, the player is directed to feel more compassion toward the video game's protagonist. In the first game, Joel is very likable, and the choices he makes toward the end of the video game result from a flawed character. However, as seen in the first game and further in the second, the morality displayed by the Fireflies is questionable. When they found Ellie and Joel just outside the hospital unconscious, they immediately took Ellie, put her under anaesthetic, and ran medical tests. When her immunity was confirmed, instead of waking her up to discuss the implications of developing a vaccine, they decided she would die. The Fireflies took away the freedom of choice for Ellie when they kept her asleep, justifying that they were saving the world by not allowing for her to take that away from them. While inherently, this has no political implications on the player, the Fireflies represent a group fighting for survival and the best possible life for humanity. Whilst unlikely to have any real-world connotations, it could result in those looking deeper into the moral practices of those who demonstrate advocacy for rights and causes in the world.

In *The Last of Us* sequel, Naughty Dog presents the narrative through Ellie and Abby. This is a crucial characteristic of this game for framing as they show both parties' reasoning for the actions that transpire. From the beginning, the player is naturally set against Abby as the woman who brutally killed Joel. This set up the violent storyline for Ellie. There would be no remorse for the collateral damage she caused to get her revenge on the woman who took Joel away from her. Ironically, this is very similar to the reasons why Abby killed Joel. Joel was the man who killed her father and took away the chance of developing a vaccine for the Cordyceps infection. By forcing the player to experience both sides of the narrative rather than living in the echo chamber of Ellie. The intense emotional framing of this narrative confronts the common misconception that one side has the right motivations. Lessons like

these depicted in such a visceral experience may encourage the development of critical thinking about how groups are depicted in real life. It can challenge the understanding of what is right and wrong. As Ellie's adventure continues, the player can see how far she goes and the amount of pain it causes her to do so. Naughty Dog even makes the player carry out the most violent killings, such as when Ellie beats Nora to death slowly to get information on where Abby is.

On the other hand, Abby believed that killing Joel would help her move forward with her life. However, it only made her life more miserable as Ellie killed all those she loved. Abby saw redemption when she saved Lev and Yara from the Seraphite's. Lev and Yara were on the verge of being killed by their group, and Abby went out of her way to ensure their safety, bringing her peace.

Lev, previously a member of the Seraphite's, was forced to run with his sister for fear of their lives after they cut their hair in preference for their identity as a transgender person. Lev, previously known as Lily, is the transgender character in the game. The hardships could somewhat represent the hate the LGBTQ+ community endure from the close-minded individuals in society. For the Seraphite's, just the mere act of shaving his head was enough to constitute death.

The Seraphite's, also known as Scars by the WLF, is a religious cult wherein members are forced to have their mouths scarred in a Chelsea smile and follow strict laws. The leader of this group is called the Prophet. She initially saved an entire neighbourhood from the infected and gained her title. The saying "feel her love" is seen in graffiti throughout the streets of Seattle. However, the Prophet was killed when the WLF captured her. The Elders, the new leaders of the Seraphite's, took this opportunity to create a much more sinister environment. The Elders decide your role in their community, whom you can marry, and when you can have children. Whilst there was not much information on what else they could control in the community, it is clear there was probably more. Lev discusses the writings of the Prophet when Abby mentions that the Seraphite's are just as violent as the WLF. Lev says that it was not until the Prophet died that the Seraphite's took on violent methods. They did not stone, hang or torture anyone prior to her death. They took her

words and twisted the meaning to justify the acts they were committing. This is quite parallel to how groups can work in the real world. Many religious texts bear no meaning or justification of violence but are used to justify violence. One real-world comparison for such a group would be ISIS. Zarqawi, the original leader of ISIS, had learnt the teaching of the Qur'an in prison and had been taught an incorrect version (Gerges, 2016). For ISIS, they quote the Sword Verse in the Qur'an to justify the treatment of the Shiite and any other person who does not follow Sunni Islam practices (Gerges, 2016). The Sword verse does not exist in any version of the Qur'an and has been made up to support insurgent activity (Gerges, 2016). The discussions on the Seraphite's may open the eyes of the player to how people get persuaded into committing such crimes against humanity.

This video game emphasises how violence is not the way to heal past transgressions and, even further, usually makes it worse. The loop that the characters are stuck in demonstrate this. Joel was Ellies closest companion who had never given up on her, which is one of the reasons she has been so adamant about revenge. This is not intended to be a story on revenge, but what desperation, constant fear and anguish can force a person to do and become. Someone can commit horrendous acts in the name of what they love and for their survival.

When *The Last of Us Part I* came out, the Anthropocene or climate change was not discussed in the same manner it is today. However, the method of spreading the infection can be likened to modern-day viruses humans now experience. The Cordyceps infection in the game is based on one which already exists in insects called Ophiocordyceps unilateralis fungus (Lu, 2019). This fungus hijacks an insect and starts controlling the insect's muscle movements to reach an optimal location, allowing for self-propagation and dispersal (Lu, 2019). In *The Last of Us*, the Cordyceps infection is spread due to the fungi infecting farmland crops and being sent across the continent, thereby infecting the human host and taking control of their brain and body. Within scientific understanding, such a virus or infection affecting humanity is not uncommon and is seen through the various epidemics and pandemics throughout the world in recent history (Everard, Johnston, Santillo & Staddon, 2020; O'Callaghan-Gordo & Antó, 2020).

Zoonotic pathogens have been found to be twice as likely to be connected to emerging cases of disease within the human population (Taylor, Latham, & Woolhouse, 2001). These viruses have been more noticeable within recent history due to wildlife farming, similar to that of the domestication process of livestock (Volpato, Fontefrancesco, Gruppuso, Zocchi & Pieroni, 2020). As humans continue to grow in population, the intrusion and impact upon wildlife habitats increase the chance of contracting these diseases (Wood, Leach, Waldman, MacGregor, Fooks, Jones, Restif, Dechmann, Hayman, Baker, Peel, Kamins, Fahr, Ntiamoa-Baidu, Suu-Ire, Breiman, Epstein, Field & Cunningham, 2012). Currently, 95% of the land on the planet shows signs of modification by humans, and 85% of this has experienced multiple human changes (O'Callaghan-Gordo & Antó, 2020). The encroachment on the wildlife habitats has led to wildlife moving into urban areas as the environment is depleted. The result of this is a reduction of barriers between humans and wildlife, leading to a closer cohabitation (O'Callaghan-Gordo & Antó, 2020). This impedes the planets ability to be resilient and assist in maintaining those barriers (O'Callaghan-Gordo & Antó, 2020).

The Last of Us is truly the worst-case scenario for a zoonotic virus or infection to cause damage in the video game. However, the timely release of part two in the middle of a worldwide pandemic may impact their perceived importance and understanding of the Anthropocene. The release of this game was not intended to bear any semblance of reality. However, it may invoke fear in those who are particularly vulnerable.

The reactions from *The Last of Part I* were positive, and people thoroughly enjoyed the game, which is seen in online reviews (Metacritic – The Last of Us Part I, 2021). However, *The Last of Us Part II* had a much different reaction from many who anticipated the video game. In an interview with Neil Druckman, Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson, Greg Miller discusses the critique and backlash received (Kinda Funny Games, 2020). Many were heartbroken and disappointed at Joel's death and how he had died (Kinda Funny Games, 2020; Trumbore, 2021). This led to many using social media to express extreme hatred to the actress who played Abby. She experienced death threats, constant abuse and even threats against her family (Kinda Funny Games, 2020; Trumbore, 2021). Her character was also criticised for being depicted as a very masculine woman (Kinda Funny Games, 2020; Trumbore, 2021). The depiction of Abby contrasts hugely with the typical female character

depiction in video games which is usually highly sexualised (Kinda Funny Games, 2020; Trumbore, 2021). Another area that got a fair amount of critique was the portrayal of Lev being a transgender character. Not only were transphobes unhappy, but also the transgender community were also unhappy with the depiction of Lev, and the developers were accused of trying to make people happy (Kinda Funny Games, 2020). This exploratory video game presented a story different from usual, demonstrating how far humanity has to go in accepting people for being different. The feedback and criticism resulted from such an emotive reaction to a video game. This demonstrates how much people are affected by the narratives created in this medium.

This section has provided a summary of both *The Last of Part I and II* storylines. It has also examined the political frames present within the narrative across these video games and how they can influence the consumer. The next chapter will examine all six video games and their narrative frames. This will also provide an argument for the effectiveness of this medium in communicating frames that impact the political opinion of those consuming them.

Chapter Five – Analysis

The previous five chapters have provided an overview of the video games and an individual analysis of each. *Detroit: Become Human, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Final Fantasy VII Remake, The Last of Us Part I and II, and Death Stranding* represent a variety of AAA video games across multiple genres. Each video game has a narrative focus; however, they use

different methods to take the consumer through the narrative. This section of the comparative analysis will be split into two segments; one for comparing the video games through understanding the different methods used for storytelling and comparing how each video game has framed a common political theme. The second section will explore how the hypotheses informed by the literature review correlate to the frames present within video games and their impact.

5.1 Comparative Analysis: Gameplay, Narrative, and Consumer Type

Complexities of Gameplay and Genre

All these video games have strong similarities in terms of the structure in which they are made, as this was a key distinction of the research design for selection criteria. The requirements were to have a key narrative, have an end to the game, be AAA, easily accessible worldwide, popular, and award-winning. However, to ensure diversity within the study, various genres were used. The genre is an important element as it informs the consumer's decision as to whether they will spend their time and monetary resources on a video game. The following genres are present within this study, and these can present different types of narratives: shooter, role-playing, action-adventure, survival, and horror. The different genres can allow for different play styles and how a player can interact with the game. For example, a shooter game or first-person shooter like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* generally sets an atmosphere of the player killing NPCs with no remorse. This element is relatively common in most genres of video games as the protagonist usually has enemies they need to dispatch. However, role-playing and action-adventure genres typically have elements of regret when killing other humans. Shooter games, typically based in a war-like environment, do not share this same element. *Final Fantasy VII Remake, The Last of Us Part I and II*, and *Death Stranding* all demonstrate the innate emotional toll of killing humans to achieve their mission. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* uses the characters Tifa and Aerith to display the emotional dissonance of forcibly killing the soldiers to save their friends and accomplish their mission.

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In The *Last of Us Part I and II*, this is portrayed differently. Part one does not demonstrate much remorse for the killing. However, part two shows this by making the actions so visually violent that it transcends to the player instead. *Death Stranding* utilises the narrative of the voidouts to maintain this balance. *Detroit: Become Human* does not display much in terms of human life lost unless the player chooses to use the dirty bomb, which would result in the absolute decimation of Detroit. As video games do typically contain violence, understanding how it is used in the narrative is important for identifying its impact.

Player Versus Watcher

Before analysing how common political themes have been woven and framed into the narrative of these video games, there are a couple of other important considerations for how impressionable the narrative may be on the consumer.

As the consumption of video games evolves and grows, the enjoyment is not just limited to those who own the necessary hardware to play the video games. As YouTube grew as an entertainment platform, individuals began to create content known as a let's play that shows gameplay of someone playing a video game. This allowed video games to grow further as entertainment as there is less of a barrier to entry. Naturally, the role of player and consumer can influence how the framing of the narrative can be perceived. Those who choose to play a video game for themselves may not pick up on the subtleties within the game as they must control the character, which can distract them from the frame being presented. In most video games, this is negated through game design and the developers choosing to have a mandatory cut scene that the player can watch through. However, in games such as *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and *Detroit: Become Human*, the developers have chosen to have live conversations and events occurring throughout the playthrough, adding to the atmosphere within the worlds created. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* has commentary from NPCs throughout the street of the slums, which discuss the attacks on the Mako reactors and life in the slums. This environment creation can easily be missed by someone engrossed in progressing the story and getting from A to B. However, those who consume the video game content through watching a let's play can pick up on these, heightening the impact of the frames present.

Nonetheless, there are video games that explore more visceral playability of content, such as *The Last of Us Part II*. The player is forced to torture someone to gain information. The visceral gameplay involved would resonate a much more in-depth reaction from those who are pressing the buttons over those just watching. As the technology in video game production continues to advance, the gap between the player's experience and the consumer will widen as virtual reality becomes more common in the AAA video game space.

The other two video games, *Death Stranding* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, do not have the type of focus shifts in the same manner that the three previous games do. They create the environment through impressive sound design and graphics, which promote the dangerous atmosphere that exists but do not hold a similar weight on the player or the watcher. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* has one scene which uses this extremely well where the player takes control of Sergeant Paul Jackson in the fallen aircraft and drags himself out over the bodies of his dead comrades to see the mushroom cloud of the exploded nuke before he chokes to death looking out at the destruction. Most of the progression of the narratives within these two games has no difference in a framing effect for the player or the watcher. Players and watchers can share the comradery in *Death Stranding* as visually they experience a similar thing. The player may feel more gratitude in places where structures have been placed for ease of travel by others playing. However, this message is seen strongly in most areas of the video game.

The Narrative Drive; Plot, or Character

Another distinction on how these video games can cause a shift in the understanding of political perception is seen within how the narrative is focussed. In storytelling, this mechanism will either be plot-driven or character-driven narratives. Of these five video games, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Final Fantasy VII Remake*, and *Death Stranding* are plot-driven. *Detroit: Become Human* and *The Last of Us Part I and II* are character-driven.

Naturally, within any plot-driven narrative, elements of characters are revealed, however, the biggest impact from the narrative will be the overarching story and vice-versa. Character-driven narratives will be most captivating and demonstrate the frames with more clarity. Whether either of these is more powerful is still questionable. Intrinsically both mechanisms rely on the consumer's own personal values and understanding of the world (Zhang & Min, 2013). However, this research argues that character-driven video games provide a much more visceral experience for the player as they enact the character's wishes or fears. Whereas, in the narrative-driven plot, the player is just experiencing the environment through the character. The learning from these two types of environments differs quite drastically as one is more focused than the other.

5.2 Comparative Analysis: Common Frames

Throughout these video games, the political themes can be seen across narratives, portrayed in various ways. The following section will provide a comparative analysis of those most common across the six video games. Please refer to table one below that displays the various frames present within each video game:

Table One

Overview of frames present within the selected video games

Detroit: Become Human	*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*	*Final Fantasy VII Remake*	*Death Stranding*	*The Last of Us Part I and II*
Civil Rights Movements

Anthropocene and Climate Change | Terrorist Cells

War | Anthropocene

Poverty

Terrorist vs freedom fighter

Government Testing

Soldier Expendability

Privacy Rights and security | Positive human connectivity, combating division

Patriotism

Government Testing

Briefly
- Terrorists
- Poverty.
- Privacy. | The State of Nature

Totalitarianism

Morality and ethics

Violence

LGBTQ+ Religion and cults

The Anthropocene |

Of the political themes present within these games, the most common are the Anthropocene, terrorism, war, violence, and soldier expendability

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is framed in multiple ways within these video games, however, using different facets. *Detroit: Become Human* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* share a similar view

on the Anthropocene, which presents itself through the loss of life on the planet. *Detroit: Become Human* drew on real-world climate change catastrophes such as the extinction of animals and sea levels rising. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* truly touched on the importance of holding capitalistic corporations accountable for their actions as the planet is dying in a fantasy universe. *The Last of Us Part I and II* both emulate not only the destruction humans inflicted on the planet as it reclaims itself from the capitalised society which fell to ruins, but primarily the health implications of the Anthropocene. This framing is relatively nuanced, as without knowledge of how zoonotic diseases are spread, it is unlikely to impact the consumer's political knowledge. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic may have allowed this to have a greater understanding as it is a zoonotic disease. The way these video games have explored and framed the narrative of the Anthropocene are different to one another with various focal points. However, they subtly show this message through the magazine articles in *Detroit: Become Human* or through a mind-controlling fungal infection like *The Last of Us* series. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* makes the message very loud and clear, particularly through the character Barrett. This is most likely why this video game had the most commentary by online reporters regarding this frame (Bailey, 2020; Petit, 2020; Henley, 2021; Placido, 2020; Evans-Thirlwell, 2020; Hirst, 2021).

Terrorism

Most seen in the shooter genre of video games is the use of terrorism to create a plotline. However, it can be seen in different lights throughout other genres. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Final Fantasy VII Remake, Death Stranding* and *Detroit: Become Human* share elements of this throughout their gameplay. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* has one of the most standard understandings of terrorism as the gameplay and narrative reflect the Iraqi war from 2003 onwards. This framing of terrorists within the video game is troubling as it was a very popular game among young men. The oversimplification of the definition of terrorist and utilising real-world events to create the narrative is irresponsible as it does paint a very biased picture of a very complex topic. This will be discussed in the next paragraph on war.

Final Fantasy VII Remake, however, poses a different frame for terrorists as the protagonist and their friends are the ones who are being accused of eco-terrorism as they blow up the Mako Reactors. This narrative challenges the existing narrative even within mass media. The lens has been shifted, and the consumer is more sympathetic to the ones accused of terrorism. It exposes the video game's consumer to an understanding of media and news media biases in the real world and how damaging these can be.

Terrorism in *Detroit: Become Human* is shown along a similar line of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. This is less impactful as there is more focus on the rise of civil rights within this game which the director intended. *Detroit: Become Human* allows for the creation of the thought, but it is challenged as androids are not seen as human, which contests the definition of terrorists. Despite the nuance of definition, the androids fight for a political aim through peaceful protest or a dirty bomb, which is of the players' own volition. Death Stranding has a very similar demonstration of terrorism as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, the separatists cause chaos to ensure the unification of the UCA is unsuccessful.

The framing within *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is more impactful as it does demonstrate the nuance of terrorism. The developers truly set the scene for this by showing the destruction, remorse, and intricacies of the group Avalanche.

War, Violence, and Soldier Expendability

This category has been put together as elements of each are seen throughout these frames and are very interrelated. All the video games within this study have elements of this within them. However, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, The Last of Us Part I and II* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* have the most profound framing of these narratives. The narrative within *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is obvious as it is based on a war in the Middle East and one in Russia. The oversimplification of war within the video game is usually intended to create an enjoyable experience for players who are fictionally defeating "evil." However, as a result, this can negatively impact the player or consumers opinion of war and how they may interact with news media going forward. Foust (2021) argues that video games can be a powerful persuasion platform as they encourage the player to create abstract mental

models for how systems work and form judgements about those through playing the game. This video game, along with the others within the series, has a strong undercurrent of "good vs. evil" framing. The player is naturally on the "good" side, and the enemies are "evil."

Along similar lines, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* also has the "good vs. evil" frame within its narrative. The Shinra Corporation, the government for Midgar, is the propagator of evil in the universe. However, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is based on a fantasy world, whereas *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is based on the real world. Thus, resulting in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* having a higher likelihood of manipulating the player's perception. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* briefly touch on soldier expendability. Within the scope of the fantasy game, the Shinra Corporation is not averse to losing even its top-ranking soldiers in battle. This is shown when Tseng and Reno are forced to jump onto the battle stage at the top of a soon to be collapsing plate. However, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* demonstrates the comradery between the soldiers across the U.S. marines and the U.K. S.A.S. demonstrating the importance of looking out for one another.

The narrative within *The Last of Us Part I and II* is centred around violence and different survivalist groups within the world. In part one of this video game, the player controls Joel for the most part as he takes out not only infected but also humans to get Ellie where she needs to be. In this narrative, it is seen that the protagonist is on the "good" side. In part two, the narrative frames violence differently. Whilst the violence still exists and is key to telling this narrative, the frame it holds is very much against it. The lesson depicted through such a visceral experience may encourage the audience to critically think about how violence in the real world is seen through the media. This challenges how the consumer understands what is right, wrong, or unclear. Naughty Dog even makes the player carry out the most violent killings, such as when Ellie beats Nora to death slowly to get information on where Abby is. Ellie has Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and her violence is something she needs to learn how to control. Abby, however, believed that killing Joel would help her move forward with her life, however, it only made her life more miserable. Abby saw redemption when she saved Lev and Yara from the Seraphite's. This video game emphasises how violence is not the way to heal past transgressions and, even further, usually makes it

worse. This is not intended to be a story on revenge, but what desperation, constant fear and anguish can force a person to do and become.

These three video games depict war and violence through different lenses, whilst incredibly subtle, the framing of violence in *The Last of Us Part II* encourages additional thought to understand violence. However, this thesis argues that the frame that would create a more obvious shift in political views would be *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, as it is set the real world inspired by an already transpired war.

The findings of this section demonstrate the nuances within gameplay perception and how frames can be absorbed differently by players and consumers. This section provides the information which will inform the discussion of the usefulness of the hypotheses and any critiques on existing theories.

5.3 Analysis within Hypotheses

This section will compare the analysis findings of these video games to the hypotheses drawn from existing theories discussed in the literature review.

Hypothesis One

People play video games only as a form of entertainment.

The first hypothesis is focused on video games having no impact on an individual's perception. However, it contradicts what is understood within the communications scholarship on the power of entertainment mediums. While video games that have fallen outside this project's scope are likely to prove this hypothesis to be correct, these games typically have little to no narrative components. These video games are sandbox, real-time strategy, a multiplayer online battle arena, simulation, puzzles, and party games (Pavlovic, 2020). However, there are exceptions to this rule wherein video games, such as *World of Warcraft*, have narratives that largely get ignored by those who play them due to the nature of these games (Lefebvre, 2020). Regarding the six video games studied in the scope of this project, whilst players and consumers of let's play content are typically consuming for entertainment, it would be short-sighted to place this form of media under the scope of something which has no impact.

Hypothesis Two

The framing of issues within video games may impair the player's opinion externally through means of perceived importance shown within the game.

Video games create a space wherein the player or consumer is taken into another world whilst they engage with the medium. Many of the worlds created are far from the reality we currently live in and are relatively fantastical. The distinction between fantastical and realistic is an important factor to consider, as it is unlikely that a narrative based in a fantastical world will have an impact on the consumers perceived importance. However, in video games that frame real world issues, consumers may leave the experience and considering their reality. This is shown through video games *Final Fantasy VII Remake, Detroit: Become Human* and loosely *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. These three games all have key frames that highlight topical issues within society shown through reports from online entertainment channels, which leave an impression on those consumers.

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Final Fantasy VII Remake has two focus frames within the narrative that touch on the consumer's reality. These focus on the Anthropocene and terrorism. The Anthropocene is the foremost important narrative within the video game, and it is perpetuated as such through how the developers have used characters, such as Barret, to voice loudly about the destruction caused by the Shinra Corporation. As the player, or consumer, makes their way through the environment in Midgar, there is no plant life and a small portion of animal life which allows the consumer to visually see the impact of climate change. The framing on the Anthropocene is powerful and many of the journalists have commented on the significance of the frame and the effect it has had on how they see the climate disaster outside of the video game (Bailey, 2020; Petit, 2020; Henley, 2021; Placido, 2020; Evans-Thirlwell, 2020; Hirst, 2021). *Final Fantasy VII Remake* was released at a key time for the narrative framing. Not only had the climate worsened with more uncontrollable wildfires, warming oceans and rising sea levels, but the world was also forced to stop as the COVID-19 pandemic had most of the population stay at home. The framing of the climate disaster in *Final Fantasy VII Remake* could change the importance of how the consumer understands the environment and how their actions and those of large corporations can negatively impact the earth and those living on it.

The second frame within *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is terrorism. The framing within this video game presents the protagonists as terrorists as they bomb the Mako reactors across Shinra to save the planet from the draining of essential resources. This is then perpetuated throughout the storyline through the news media outlets where the player and consumer can overhear the way Avalanche is being framed. As this frame is a by-product of the Anthropocene frame, which exists already, the effect on perceived importance is questionable. However, the Anthropocene frame is powerful and can make the consumer more aware of the bias within news media on the topic of terrorism.

Detroit: Become Human

Detroit: Become Human has a narrative that explores civil rights from the perspective of an android who has reached consciousness. This video game emphasises the importance of free speech, free assembly, and the right to be an individual amongst other social ideas of familial bonds. This is exemplified throughout by using the storyline arcs of Connor, Kara, and Markus, with the three having individual focus points that converge at the game's climax. The player can choose how they would like to fight for the rights either through destruction or peace. The framing in this game truly focuses on the consequences of a player's actions. At the same time, there are moments where if the player makes the wrong choice, the game can be forgiving and allow them to still pursue the direction they prefer. There are sections that, if failed or a negative choice is made, will either end that character's involvement or block off an avenue the player would have preferred. The director of *Detroit: Become Human* had purposefully emphasised the importance of non-violent action as he had been halfway through writing the storyline in 2015 when the terrorist bombing and violence was breaking out in France (Farokhmanesh, 2017). It was a calculated thought to frame the narrative of this video game to hopefully change the way the consumer viewed violent action as a way forward. This video game draws on the likeness to the American Civil Rights movement in the twentieth century, it reflects on the history of mistakes to encourage progress peacefully.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare and the role its framing may have on the perceived importance of the consumer is negligible. These types of video games typically have a simple narrative, as exemplified within *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. However, this is the key concern with the impact these games may have on individuals' perceived importance of wartime and the problematic perception of "good vs evil." As a more oversimplified narrative approach to Middle Eastern instability and war, those who play these games may be subjected to an oversimplified demonstration of war rather than understanding the nuances. Whilst the purpose of these games was not to educate gamers on current foreign affairs, there is a lack of ownership of this simplification within a platform that has extremely powerful persuasion capabilities (Foust, 2021). A game that focuses only on death if it is situationally important for the narrative, such as Sergeant Jackson's death, can change

the perception of wartime civilian casualty rates and frontline soldiers. Should important storyline considerations such as these be added into the game, it may be beneficial for those who consider the importance of perception of war.

The other video games, *The Last of Us Part I and II* and *Death Stranding*, have demonstrated framings that can impact perceived importance. However, these two are situationally less realistic when considering the likelihood of these occurring within the world. *The Last of Us* has a narrative frame on the Anthropocene and the spread of zoonotic viruses and fungi but is not the main frame within the game's narrative. The current knowledge base on zoonotic viruses and their transmission is also not widely known, making it difficult to impact a consumer's perceived importance. However, as *The Last of Us Part II* was released mid-pandemic in 2020, this frame may have more influence. *Death Stranding* has a narrative frame that focuses on a value-based rather than a change of perceived importance.

Hypothesis Three

The framing presented within video games employs emotive and value-based framing to elicit an audience reaction boosting engagement within the video game and externally in the consumer's world.

Much like entertainment media, video games present a space where a player or viewer experience a fictional storyline wherein, they assist in playing out the character's choice or make the choices themselves. To keep a player engaged, the storyline, gameplay, level design and graphics must be carefully curated, particularly for AAA video games. To achieve a gripping storyline, the framing of the narrative presented typically targets the emotions of those who consume the video game. This is to achieve longer gameplay time which corresponds to better ratings and sales. Video games are first and foremost intended as an entertainment platform, much the same way that movies and television are seen today. However, as shown throughout the literature on soft mediums, these are the platforms that can use emotive engagement, which can change how the consumer feels about certain issues (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Mulligan & Habel, 2011; Green & Brock, 2000; Slater et al., 2006; Strange & Leung, 1999; Delli Carpini, 2005; Baum, 2002;

Street, 2011; Gray, 2005; Zhang & Min, 2013). The emotive technique calls to the concept of value-based framing, which targets areas of life which humans will place above others (Zhang & Min, 2013). Five of the video games presented within this study demonstrate the use of emotive techniques, albeit relatively different from one another.

Detroit: Become Human

As mentioned earlier, this video game has a civil rights movement frame that focuses on peaceful movements over violent ones. However, the developers have used the storyline of the individual androids to create an emotional connection to direct the player to make "right" choices. The Kara storyline is more family oriented as she saved what she thought was a little girl from an abusive environment. The Markus storyline focuses solely on androids right to life without slavery or being destroyed. Finally, Connor's story shows the human side and the reactions to both Markus's and Kara's stories. As this is a video game that has the main narrative frame of civil rights, the use of these storylines can touch on the values of those who play. Kara and Alice's story expresses the right to family, a safe home and protection from harm induced by others. The Markus storyline mirrors the civil rights movements, which have been seen throughout history as the marginalised seek to have the same liberties other humans already have. Both storylines are powerful and emotive and should elicit responses from those who engage with the video game, especially as society has come to acknowledge on a larger scale the racial, cultural and classist structure issues which exist today.

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Final Fantasy VII Remake is primarily a storyline that has a world focus, however, there are smaller frames over the main two which demonstrate value-based framing. The two main frames of the Anthropocene and terrorism have relevancy in the argument for value-based framing. The Anthropocene frame is particularly shown to be an emotive technique when employed with the character Barret as he is the loudest commentator on the destruction caused by the Shinra Corporation. He comments on the beauty of the city above the plate and the negligence the corporation has for the future of the people of the planet:

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"Beautiful... But every little light burning bright runs off her blood. And bit by bit, they bleed her, never stopping to think how it'll end for them" (Gab Smolders, 2021, Part 12, 1:25:56). Barret is the character who carries this frame effectively as he is so vocal about the damages it causes to the planet, but also the life that resides on the planet. A smaller frame within this video game that is presented through the visual environment is poverty. The layout of Midgar is vertical and sectioned off from one another. There is the top plate, where those who are middle-class or higher reside and then beneath on earth, the slums. The slums, which is the ground level of Midgar, are a dirty, broken-down city with a lack of fortified infrastructure, baron lifeless land, no real sunlight, and no clean water. Besides the general talk outside of the main storyline and the environment, there is one key moment where the slums are mentioned. Cloud says that people can leave at any time to seek out a better life; however, Barret counters that not everyone can afford that luxury. While much of the game is played in the slums, the visualised poverty correlates to the systemic issues in large cities worldwide. The emotive and value-based framing shown in the slums is subtle and not particularly obvious. In the case of a video game setting such as *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, where the main storyline goal is a world-based one, the value framing argument is insufficient for *Final Fantasy VII Remake*.

The Last of Us Part I and II

In both part one and part two of *The Last of Us*, the narrative framing utilises strong emotive and value-based framing. The series is based on the character arc of Joel and Ellie in the first and the second being Ellie and Abby. As mentioned in the video game analysis in section five, much of the narrative is shown from a value-based perspective. Many of these frames focus on moral dilemmas; Joel's decision to save Ellie over creating a vaccine and a story perceived to be on revenge. The choice made by Joel in *The Last of Us Part I* demonstrates a value frame of family and loved one's importance over the good of the world. The frame is seen again in the second game as Ellie loses herself in seeking revenge for the ruthless killing of Joel. There is an intense emotional framing in *The Last of Us Part II* through the way the developers force the player to engage in actions that previously video games left to be done through a cut scene. By creating such a visceral experience, the developers have created a value-based frame on protecting those closest to you. However,

they challenge the idea of violence by forcing the player to navigate both storylines and, as a result, challenging the perceptions of the depiction of "right" and "wrong" in society.

The series emphasises the way violence does not solve problems, even at a personal level, in much the same way as *Detroit: Become Human. The Last of Us Part I and II* contain value-based framing, demonstrating how desperation, constant fear and anguish can manipulate a person's behaviour. From a reactionary point of view, *The Last of Us Part II* triggered an interesting response from those unhappy with the way the director chose to take the story (Kinda Funny Games, 2020; Trumbore, 2021). Not only did the actress who played Abby receive death threats due to her character's role, but also voices of disdain toward a less than feminine female character (Kinda Funny Games, 2020; Trumbore, 2021). From the perspective of value-based framing, this reaction demonstrates how previous video games framing and the environment around those players has resulted in such an inhumane reaction. Through its exploratory gameplay structure, *The Last of Us Part II* demonstrates how far humanity must go in accepting people for being different and the human rights they deserve.

The narrative within *The Last of Us Part I and II* are centred around violence and different survivalist groups within the universe. In part one of this video game, the player controls Joel for the most part as he takes out not only the infected but also humans to get Ellie where she needs to be. In this narrative, it is seen that the protagonist is on the "good" side. However, in part two, we see how the narrative frames the violence within it in a different light. Whilst the violence still exists and is key to telling this narrative, the frame it holds is very much against it. The lesson, depicted through such a visceral experience, encourages the audience to critically think about how violence in the real world is seen through the media. By challenging how they may understand what is right, wrong, or is unclear. This video game emphasises how violence is not the way a means to overcome historic abuses.
Death Stranding

While the other video games have elements of value-based framing, the narrative and motivation of *Death Stranding* encompass value-based framing in its entirety. The overarching narrative of the end of the world is not the biggest focus of this video game. It is

the message intentionally framed by the director within the narrative and gameplay. The main frame in *Death Stranding* is the reconnection of humanity. This has been implemented by assisting both the characters within the game and players through positive communication and reinforcement. This video game promotes collaboration between players through the ability to assist each other by building structures for ease of travel, dropping ammunition or health kits in battle and even completing a delivery for someone who had lost cargo. Kojima is attempting to promote positive collaboration. He intentionally removed the ability of players to "dislike" structures that other players have put in place to keep a positive atmosphere (Gault, 2019). The framing of narrative and gameplay is intrinsically obvious and speaks to the value of human connection. The purpose of this feature to only be able to "like" other players additions to the game was to reinforce positive communication. This was an attempt not to perpetuate the negative interactions in society which has become more frequent. As negative behaviour has increased as "cancel culture," bullying and streams of negative and divisive news media have become more common (Gault, 2019). The framing of connection is woven within the narrative of rebuilding America, now fractured, and disconnected. Loosely based on the then-current political discourse of the fracture between Trump supporters and the rest of society, this framing was an attempt to make players see the division in their own lives (Gault, 2019). *Death Stranding* shows a world that is isolated for fear of the outside world, and people truly only communicate through a digital network. This reflects on our society which is seeing an increase in social media consumption, the difference being that, unlike our society, *Death Stranding* only has one mode of communication. The mass number of current platforms allows the content to be curated to the point of an echo chamber of thoughts that do not challenge understandings or beliefs. The ease of influencers or political leaders to share their thoughts, positive or negative, is huge. Whilst *Death Stranding* focuses on the one network for communication, it does highlight how fragmented our globalised society has become.

Hypothesis Four

People play video games as a form of entertainment to escape their reality, thus allowing their mental defences to relax, which may allow for messaging to take effect on a more subconscious level.

Video games are an area that is mostly served for entertainment purposes, how an individual might unwind for the day. However, this hypothesis serves alongside the first, with the recognition that the framing within may have a subtle impact on an individual through their subconscious. Studies that exist on understanding subtle messaging using language within the scope of news media, movies, and advertising suggests that subconscious intake is more powerful than inherent political frames and opinion on the individual in question (Feick et al., 2021; Schafer & Bennett, 2022; Sourina et al., 2015; An, 2015). The subconscious mind can capture an immense amount of data, combined with the permanent interaction it has with the conscious mind, it can impact the way an individual's process of perception occurs (Schafer & Bennett, 2022). The messaging within these games, whether targeted in a manner such as perceived importance or from a value-based standpoint, can change one's perception of the reality in which they live. This is an area that needs further attention by the research community to explore fully.

Findings

By utilising the existing scholarship on the relationship between narrative framing in media and how it affects an individual's perception of politics, video games as a medium are influential. The hypotheses which have been used to further understand the depth of the frames analysed form a set of ideas for the impact these narratives have. Video games can remove the barrier between people and the themes that exist, however, the emotional narratives brought on by the story can impact how an individual makes choices in the real world (Hirst, 2021). The physical and mental sciences discussed within the literature review demonstrate the ability for video games to inform and manipulate those who engage in this form of entertainment (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Huesmann, 2010, Anderson, et al., 2010; Smith & Donnerstein, 1998; Krahé, et al., 2011; Primack, et al., 2012; Tarakci, et al., 2016; Kato, 2010; Thompson, et al., 2010). This research argues that the effect is a subtle manipulation of one's perception of how they understand the socio-political world. This is a direct result of the frames present within video games and how well-woven these are into the storyline the consumers participate in. Narratives in a consumer's life can impose structure and a compelling reality on what and how we experience it, they can even provide

a philosophical stance (Bruner, 2002). As the age ranges for playing video games vary significantly, those who play in their childhood are much more susceptible to carrying the impressions and emotions into adulthood (Hirst, 2021).

As shown by the analysis, existing theories used to develop the hypotheses cannot account for video games' demands concerning the capacity to intake the game narrative. They are focused primarily on entertainment media which does not require the consumer's full attention. There are no existing theories in this space to understand how a medium that requires full engagement can impact political opinion. As discussed within the section comparing the video games and the properties of consumers versus players, the medium demands more engagement from those who play. This thesis argues that the current theories on media framing need to advance to understand how the intricacies of actively playing the narrative out can negatively or positively encourage the development and evolution of political thought. This research has highlighted the nuance of video game narrative frames and has evidenced that they can affect the political views of the consumer. These frames can be more influential than those seen within passive media, such as films or television, as video games are a long-form medium that requires active participation by the player. As previously mentioned, this medium can encourage the player to develop abstract mental models for how systems work, therefore creating judgements on those throughout gameplay (Foust, 2021). This can then transcend into the player or consumers' everyday lives, affecting their perception of the socio-political world.

This section has provided a comparative analysis of all six video games, encompassing both the mode of communication for the narrative and how common frames compare to one another. It has also considered the difference in consumer, that being a player or consumer of let's plays. This allowed the nuance of gameplay and design to be analysed, which was imperative when considering existing theories in communication and politics. The second section explored the hypotheses informed by existing theories and how the political narrative frames within each video game do or do not align. The findings of this analysis have shown that video games have the capacity to influence political perception through narrative frames demonstrated in these video games. This thesis provides a valuable set of ideas to be used for future research to advance theory to include this unique medium.

Following this chapter, a full overview of this research and the findings will be discussed in the conclusion. This includes any recommendations for future research and the contributions and implications this study has made within political science scholarship.

Chapter Six - Conclusion

This research has argued the significance of the manipulation and influence that video games can have on political perception.

Overview of Thesis

This research has explored the literature on what video games are and how they are already discussed within the academic community. This section provided the contextualisation of the medium and its continual rise in popularity worldwide. Through this exploration, a lack of knowledge was identified. Current political understandings of this medium focus on capitalism (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009) and how video games may recalibrate the way the consumer engages with history, rituals, and myths, in the real world (Hong, 2015). The other most common research has been conducted in the scholarship of health science. The school of psychology argues that video games not only increase violent tendencies amongst youth (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Huesmann, 2010, Anderson et al, 2010; Smith & Donnerstein, 1998; Krahé et al., 2011), but they also can encourage gambling through the mechanism of micro-transactions (Plante et al., 2019; Brunborg et al., 2014; Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010). Another perspective is that video games are an upcoming technology that will assist and improve the lives of patients and doctors alike (Primack et al., 2012; Tarakci et al., 2016; Kato, 2010; Thompson et al., 2010). Throughout the second section of the literature review, the concept of framing within media is discussed from both a news media perspective and an entertainment media perspective. This section provided the theories which have informed the hypotheses used throughout the analysis of this research. The two core understandings are perceived importance (Clawson, et al., 1997) and value-based framing (Zhang & Min, 2013).

To understand how video games can affect the political views of the researcher through narrative frames, six games were analysed. This was done individually, comparatively, and then against hypotheses. The six video games selected fit the criteria outlined within the research design and allowed for a comprehensive analysis across applicable genres. A full data collection of these games identified the key frames which were then analysed. After, the video games were comparatively analysed, and an understanding of the nuances of gameplay perception was discussed. This is important for the consideration in the critique of existing theories of media framing. What was identified throughout this section of the analysis was that comparatively, the player would be more susceptible to the framing effect

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over the person who is just consuming let's play content. This is a direct result of the player being more involved within the storyline and invested in the arcs within the game. This is an important point of difference to consider as the existing scholarship has not considered the active participation video games demand. By locating and comparing the common frames seen across the six video games, value and attribution frames were identified to further analysis. This was a key distinction for the last section of analysis directed by informed hypotheses from the existing scholarship.

The last section of analysis drew together the individual and comparative analysis conducted, assessing them against the hypotheses' validity. It was essential to use existing theories to address the effects of framing in news media and within entertainment media. Both have been shown to influence the viewer's opinion of the political issues presented within the media in question. The qualitative analysis has shown a clear argument on the impact of video games and the narrative frames they hold. However, it is not clear which hypotheses generated would be more applicable. These hypotheses were:

People play video games only as a form of entertainment.

Whilst it cannot be ignored that those who consume video games do not engage with the medium to inform their political opinion, it would be short-sighted to dismiss video games as a passive form of entertainment.

The framing of issues within video games may impair the player's perception externally through means of perceived importance shown within the game.

The effect of video games on perceived importance analysed three of the six video games. A few of these can also be attributed to value-based framing, which is summarised in the next hypothesis. As video games are primarily based in a fantastical world, the political frames that exist may have less effect on perceived importance. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

demonstrates the most realistic worldview for a player as it is based within the real world. The frames present within this game may have more of a substantial impact on perceived importance due to the frames being communicated on a powerful persuasion platform (Foust, 2021). *Detroit: Become Human*, whilst based within a futuristic world, has solid foundations of the world today and touches on many of the socio-political issues present. This video game has a very focused frame on civil rights and the implementation of peaceful protests. The impactful and intentional manner this frame is presented in would shape the perceived importance of the consumer. Within *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, the Anthropocene frame magnifies the negative impact corporations' have on the planet. This frame is direct and powerful, therefore leaving a strong impression on the consumer of how damaging corporations can be.

The framing presented within video games employs emotive and value-based framing to elicit an audience reaction boosting engagement within the video game and externally in the consumer's world.

Value-based framing and its impact on shaping one's perception of politics is the most likely hypothesis informed by the existing theories. However, it is determined based on the individual absorbing the frames and their values. Of the six video games examined, five demonstrate strong value-based framing. The frames presented within these video games touch on core human values and human rights. Emotive engagement through value-based framing targets core areas of life that humans place above other areas (Zhang & Min, 2013). *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, as mentioned before, contains the frame on the Anthropocene, which is related to the frame on poverty within the video game showing the slums and the poor standard of living for those below the plate. *Detroit: Become Human* uses core human rights as a frame from the angle of right to family and right to life. These create the emotional correlation for the player making the choices in this video game, enhancing the absorbability of the frame. Within *The Last of Part I and II*, the frame of familial connection and protection is propagated throughout as the characters' motivations to protect or avenge those closest to them. *Death Stranding* presents the value frame differently, rather than relying entirely on the narrative to employ the concept of companionship, they utilise the player to further the development of the frame with other players.

People play video games as a form of entertainment to escape their reality, thus allowing their mental defences to relax, which may allow for messaging to take effect on a more subconscious level.

This hypothesis correlates with the first hypothesis, however, it recognises that the political framing within a video game narrative may have an impact through the subconscious. This if a finding that needs further exploration.

Findings

This research has identified that video games do affect how a consumer of this medium perceives their socio-political surroundings. This is a subtle manipulation of one's perception because of the frames present within video games and how intertwined these are within the storyline. Video games can remove the barrier between people and the existing themes; however, these emotional narratives can impact how an individual makes choices in the real world (Hirst, 2021). What has been demonstrated throughout this study is that video games contain powerful narratives with value and attribution frames which can impact political views. Video games are a medium that needs further attention by the academic community. This has been outlined below, where future studies are discussed. Video games present a worldview to the player, which they envelop themselves in for a long time. The world created by the developers and writers can inform a player of their own beliefs, whether they be explicit or not. Video games cannot just create a fantastical world for a consumer to enjoy, but they are a space that can be creatively used to present framings of political discourse and send messages about society.

This research set to find out if the narrative framing within video games can impact the way the player and consumer view and understand politics. Video games are a powerful platform as it demands the engagement of the players to control the protagonist resulting in active participation within the storyline. However, as the platform has grown, the capacity for video games to be watched more passively through let's plays on the internet is another form of engagement. The perceived effect found within this study considers both types of

consumers. However, the player's engagement would provide a more visceral experience over the consumer of let's play content. The findings of this study have argued that video games can influence and change the perception of a consumers political understanding. Due to this research being a systematic assessment of relevant themes within these video games, this study supplies a set of ideas on the framing present to assist in advancing the existing theories when subject to a broader test.

Contributions and Implications

This research has contributed and developed upon existing theories within the social sciences on the impact of media on the political perceptions of consumers. The messages and frames within video games have been overlooked by the academic community, which leads to a lack of knowledge. By conducting this research, the findings have evidenced and argued that the frames present within video games can influence how consumers interact and perceive the political world around them. The inferences drawn from this study provide a valuable base to build upon the study of video games in the sphere of socio-political scholarship.

Future Studies

This thesis suggests that future research continue within the qualitative space for further exploration. Future research should analyse a broader scope of video games to explore and test against these hypotheses. Ethnographic research is also highly recommended to build a solid base of the opinion of players. This would further the understanding of the value-based framing according to cultural and religious heritage. A fuzzy-set qualitative analysis that considers the statistical occurrence of political frames within video games would enhance the understanding that this research has provided on the impact of this medium.

Concluding Statements

This research has demonstrated the influence of narrative frames within video games on understanding political perceptions. Most video games aim to tell a story through gameplay

and character development. They show a new world, engage the player, and allow them to experience a different reality. This is a result of engaging gameplay and storyline which has led to the continual growth in popularity.

Communication channels continuously evolve, and so does the understanding of these mediums. The academic community has already considered novels, newspapers, radio, television, film, and social media. This study set to understand video games and has demonstrated how this medium can influence political perception. The stories in our lives impose structure, a compelling reality on what and how we experience it, even providing a philosophical stance (Bruner, 2002). Video games present new ways for a consumer to experience a story, and therefore a new way to interpret their political reality.

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