



THE UNDERLYING MESSAGE

VIDEO GAMES AS MEANS OF POLITICAL PROPAGANDA

Bachelor's Thesis

Video Game Design and Development Degree

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Index

Summary	5
Keywords	5
Table index.....	6
Figure index	7
Glossary.....	9
1. Introduction	10
1.1 Motivation.....	10
1.2 Problem formulation	10
1.3 Research questions	11
1.4 General thesis' objectives.....	12
1.5 Specific thesis' objectives	12
1.6 Project range.....	13
2. Project planning	14
2.1 Procedure - GANTT.....	14
2.2 SWOT	15
2.3 Risks and contingency plan.....	16
2.4 Initial cost analysis	16
3. Methodology	17
3.1 Thesis development.....	17
3.2 Resolution of the objectives	18
4. State of the Art	20
4.1 The opinion of the academics.....	20
4.1.1 Statesmanship makes its way unstoppably.....	20
4.1.2 A new tool	20
4.1.3 Should video games studios express their point of view?	21
4.1.4 Drawing a distinction between games and other entertainment.....	25
4.2 Our starting point	27
5. Theoretical framework	28
5.1 Main concepts	28
5.1.1 Politics.....	28
5.1.2 Propaganda	30
5.2 Video games as vehicles of transmission	31
5.2.1 The use in advertisement.....	31
5.2.2 Representing an ideological tendency.....	32
5.2.3 Influence on warfare.....	35

5.2.4 Political campaigns	38
5.3 Censorship.....	42
5.3.1 Hindrances to publishing specific products.....	42
5.3.2 Controversies.....	43
5.4 Propaganda on transmedia entertainment.....	47
5.4.1 Music.....	47
5.4.2 Cinema	51
5.4.3 Literature	55
5.4.4 Roleplaying games	59
6. Case analysis	60
6.1 1979 Revolution: Black Friday	60
6.1.1 The story.....	60
6.1.2 The world	65
6.1.3 Gameplay mechanics.....	67
6.1.4 The message	69
6.1.5 Reception from the audience.....	70
6.2 Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	72
6.2.1 The story.....	72
6.2.2 The world	75
6.2.3 Gameplay mechanics.....	78
6.2.4 The message	78
6.2.5 Reception from the audience.....	80
6.3 Bioshock.....	82
6.3.1 The story.....	82
6.3.2 The world	86
6.3.3 Gameplay mechanics.....	87
6.3.4 The message	88
6.2.5 Reception from the audience.....	90
7. Conclusions	92
7.1 Video games have always been political.....	92
7.1.1 An invasion of one's private space.....	92
7.1.2 The video game industry is growing and evolving	93
7.2 A double-edged sword	94
7.3 Future investigations	95
8. Bibliography.....	97
8.1 Book chapters and essays.....	97
8.2 Articles	97

8.3 Blog entries	99
8.4 YouTube videos	100

Summary

One of the latest hot topics in the gaming industry is the discussion about the inclusion of political messages in video games that, presumably, should be unbiased and limit themselves as fun providers. On the one hand, some despise it and claim it is ruining the media, and on the other hand, there are those who defend it is inevitable and necessary for the media to progress.

In this thesis, specially oriented to the hardcore gamers and video game academics, we have inquired on the reasons behind this discontent comparing video games with other types of mass media. This debate is not happening in other entertainment spaces, or at least at this scale, and we wanted to understand what makes them be judged differently. At the same time, we have investigated up to what actual extent are video games spreading ideological propaganda and whether it is only detrimental or it can contribute to our growth as a society.

We have worked on this research creating a theoretical framework through study and documentation, and we have made an extensive analysis of three different titles. As a result, we have come to the conclusion that politics have always been part of our culture -and video games as an extension-, and that the only reason some people is starting to realize it now is that they no longer agree with some of the outlook of the authors. Besides, we have discovered video games can be a powerful tool to teach and to learn, but it is vital that we as developers take responsibility every time we decide to deal with a delicate subject.

Keywords

Video games, Political message, Propaganda, Persuasion, Ideology, Inclusion

Table index

Table 1: SWOT analysis Pag. 13

Table 2: Risks and contingency plan Pag. 14

Table 3: Initial cost analysis Pag. 14

Figure index

Figure 1: In-game image of <i>Six Days in Fallujah</i>	Pag. 22
Figure 2: White phosphorous bombing in <i>Spec Ops: The Line</i>	Pag. 24
Figure 3: Units besieging a city in <i>Sid Meier's Civilization VI</i>	Pag. 26
Figure 4: Denying the entry to a citizen in <i>Papers, Please</i>	Pag. 29
Figure 5: <i>Tapper's</i> cover and in-game images	Pag. 31
Figure 6: <i>NATO Commander's</i> cover and in-game images	Pag. 32
Figure 7: <i>Balance of the Planet's</i> cover and in-game images	Pag. 33
Figure 8: <i>Desert Storm's</i> cover and in-game images	Pag. 36
Figure 9: Last version of <i>America's Army</i> (2015)	Pag. 36
Figure 10: <i>Special Force, Solution's</i> cover and in-game images	Pag. 37
Figure 11: <i>The Howard Dean for Iowa Game</i>	Pag. 39
Figure 12: <i>Take Back Illinois</i>	Pag. 40
Figure 13: Kamala Harris and Joe Biden in <i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i>	Pag. 41
Figure 14: Desolate landscape in <i>Liyla and The Shadows of War</i>	Pag. 42
Figure 15: Jade's and Skarlet's outfit design comparison	Pag. 43
Figure 16: Senseless camera angle during a dialog with Miranda	Pag. 44
Figure 17: Elves getting revenge on a human in <i>The Witcher III: Wild Hunt</i>	Pag. 45
Figure 18: <i>BattleTech's</i> character creation screen	Pag. 46
Figure 19: Music posters	Pag. 48
Figure 20: Chanteurs sans frontières' vinyl disc	Pag. 50
Figure 21: Film posters of Rosellini's <i>Città Aperta</i> and Siodmak's <i>Die Ratten</i>	Pag. 52
Figure 22: American soldiers stand next to a poster advertising a film	Pag. 53
Figure 23: Chart showing French citizens' perception about the end of the war	Pag. 54

Figure 24: Moon landing on <i>First Man</i>	Pag. 55
Figure 25: Cover and Stan's Soapbox on <i>Avengers</i> #74	Pag. 56
Figure 26: President George W. Bush addresses Joint Session of Congress	Pag. 58
Figure 27: <i>DragonRaid</i> and <i>The Price of Freedom</i> 's rulebook covers	Pag. 59
Figure 28: Members of the revolution arguing about their ideals	Pag. 63
Figure 29: Hossein strangling his brother Reza	Pag. 64
Figure 30: Hossein confessing his betrayal	Pag. 65
Figure 31: Explanation regarding a picture we have taken	Pag. 67
Figure 32: Reza taking cover from SAVAK's bullets	Pag. 68
Figure 33: Choosing Reza's first words when joining the revolution	Pag. 68
Figure 34: Babak urging Reza to act	Pag. 70
Figure 35: Nuclear bomb explosion seen from Jackson's vehicle	Pag. 74
Figure 36: Zakhaev and their men	Pag. 75
Figure 37: Brown filter on Arabic city	Pag. 76
Figure 38: Using a Javelin to destroy enemy tanks	Pag. 78
Figure 39: Pilot praising your aim	Pag. 79
Figure 40: Satellite view of the Middle East	Pag. 80
Figure 41: First impression of Rapture	Pag. 83
Figure 42: Lone Big Daddy on the forest of Arcadia	Pag. 84
Figure 43: Little Sisters terminating Fontaine	Pag. 85
Figure 44: Ryan's statue with Rapture's motto	Pag. 86
Figure 45: Player deciding the fate of a Little Sister	Pag. 88
Figure 46: Anti-Parasite propaganda	Pag. 89

Glossary

AAA: Classification used for video games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher, typically having high development and marketing budgets.

E3: The Electronic Entertainment Expo (or E3) is an exhibition organized so that video game companies can showcase and demonstrate their latest products. It is one of the most important annual events of the video game industry.

Grinding: In video games, especially in Massive Multiplayer Online games, grinding is performing repetitive tasks, usually for gameplay advantage or some kind of loot.

Product placement: Practice in which manufacturers of goods or providers of service gain exposure for their products by paying for them to appear in a certain entertainment product, such as a video game or a movie.

Point and click: Genre of computer games that can be played only using a mouse, where the only mechanic or the most predominant one is clicking in different zones of the screen to interact with them.

Roleplaying games: Usually abbreviated as RPGs, they are games in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting. Players take responsibility for acting out these roles within a narrative.

Tactical shooter: Subgenre of shooter games that simulate realistic combat, thus making tactics and caution more important than quick reflexes like in other action games.

Walking simulator: Video game genre where the player must simply traverse throughout different scenarios while experiencing the action in the background from a spectator perspective, without directly interacting with it.

1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation

We have been playing video games our whole life. While at the beginning we only did it for the fun and the immersion they gave us, every day we grow more interested in the narrative and the philosophical implications that lie inside some of them. There are a lot of titles that handle real-world conflicts or that use them as an inspiration to enrich the fictional world the game is settled on, but there is a part of those which clearly serves a persuading purpose, too.

If we start from the assumption that it is inevitable that a huge amount of video games ends up containing some kind of propaganda, it is incredibly interesting yet frightening at the same time how something, that might appear at first as an innocent product, can be used to manipulate its audience or at least route them towards specific opinions.

From what we have found, this is a topic that has only been partially addressed in a minority of books, articles, blogs or videos. That is why we want to inquire in this matter and try to deliver rightful research about it, to provide the gaming community more awareness about the titles we play and because we think it has a lot of uncharted potentials.

1.2 Problem formulation

Video games are an incredibly enormous industry. The impact they have on our culture and in our society is huge, especially on the people of young and half ages. That is why there are companies that may use that influence to transmit certain messages or to spread their point of view. Video games can be great, entertaining and fun, can be used to show passion and to tell whatever stories the developers want to tell us, but they can be extremely useful with propaganda as well.

It is no secret that a great sector within the gaming community claims that video games should not take any bias in ideological issues at all, that should be limited to thoughtless

enjoyment¹. Nevertheless, even though we think that those are completely valid opinions, we believe they are quite naïve since it is nearly impossible to isolate a whole media from the grasp of politics. Besides, not all political titles are criticised or generate controversy, but some of them are praised precisely for such. Furthermore, there is a group of people who only complain about those ideologies they do not share or that brand as political agenda some of the design decisions they do not agree with.

Either in the film industry, the music, the theatre, on podcasts, on stand-up comedy or even throughout the different artistic movements, politics have always been present. While many of the works may not have had any relation with them, each of those fields is filled with ones that have. This is part of what makes it human, what makes it alive.

We have grown used to it, and in most cases, we simply enjoy or ignore those productions. However, when it comes to video games, a big part of the consumers obstinately stands against them for some reason. It is fine that a game contains politics, as long as it does not give any opinions and remains fun. What is interesting, though, is that most times they only look at the explicit parts, paying no attention to the underlying implicit factors.

1.3 Research questions

If we as consumers usually let any other type of entertainment play around with those topics, what makes us pretend for video games to be excluded or evaluated differently? We live in a society that becomes more inclusive and aware every day. Unfortunately, we are also developing in a vertiginous way a susceptibility towards almost everything, which makes that in many cases people feel the right to cancelling or forbidding something just because they do not approve of it². Having that in mind, we can ask ourselves a series of questions.

Do politics have a real effect on video games? Which video game genres could be more prone to be used for ideological propaganda? Which are the most recurrent political

¹ One example of this is the polemical reviews regarding *Company of Heroes 2*, written by angry users declaring it made an apology for Nazism. Currently, the game has a user score of 2.1 on [Metacritic](#), whereas it has a Metascore of 8.0 and quite remarkable reviews on [Steam](#). Another example is this post on [Reddit](#), where one of the users criticizes the “stop bringing politics into video games” argument.

² When Electronic Arts showed their [reveal trailer](#) of *Battlefield V*, a game set during World War II, we could see there were soldier women in it. Some [people complained](#) because it was not “historically accurate”.

messages on video games? And what are the motivations behind those? How are the messages transmitted? Do they use any tools or particular procedures? In which cases do they succeed? Can politics be purely limited to giving depth and enriching the world of a game? Or will it always end up inevitably influencing its other aspects?

1.4 General thesis' objectives

The main objective of this thesis is to define the actual role politics play inside the video games industry and to determine whether ideological propaganda is completely harmful or can be used for good purposes. Bearing in mind that every product has been developed by a human team, where everyone has their ideas and way of thinking, it is inevitable that some of their ideas end up filtered within the project. We aim to examine those products which have specifically been designed having the intention of touching a political issue since the beginning.

During the elaboration of the thesis, we will also intend to understand the reasons behind the “no politics on video games” sentiment. That entails we will need to learn to discern between what the crowd mistakenly calls political propaganda and what really is, in order to bring the most professional work we are able to. In the end, what we want above all is to shed some light on this matter, since it often causes debate but a common opinion or agreement is rarely reached.

1.5 Specific thesis' objectives

To perform this project, we have established a set of objectives we will take into account during the whole development.

1. Investigate which genre or type of video game is more predisposed to be used for ideological propaganda.
2. Identify the most recurrent messages and analyse how they are transmitted.
3. Identify the tools and procedures used with this objective and check as well those cases in which they succeed, and why.
4. Delve into how politics can enrich a video game, even if it is not its main goal.

1.6 Project range

This project is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of every single politics-related videogame there is, but small-scale research. We want it to be concise, accessible and rigorous enough at the same time so it can be appealing but reliable for everyone interested in reading it. Since we plan to talk about how politics can be used either to enhance a video game or to transmit a message, the contents of the thesis are partly addressed to game designers, people with interest in game development or video game studies, and we believe it will also interest the video game academics.

Even so, these contents are mainly aimed at the gamers, who will be their final benefactors. By expanding the knowledge about the topic, we do not pretend by any means to stop consumers from buying or playing certain products, but allow them to be more aware of what are they playing or planning to buy, so they can make a proper judgement and then make consistent choices.

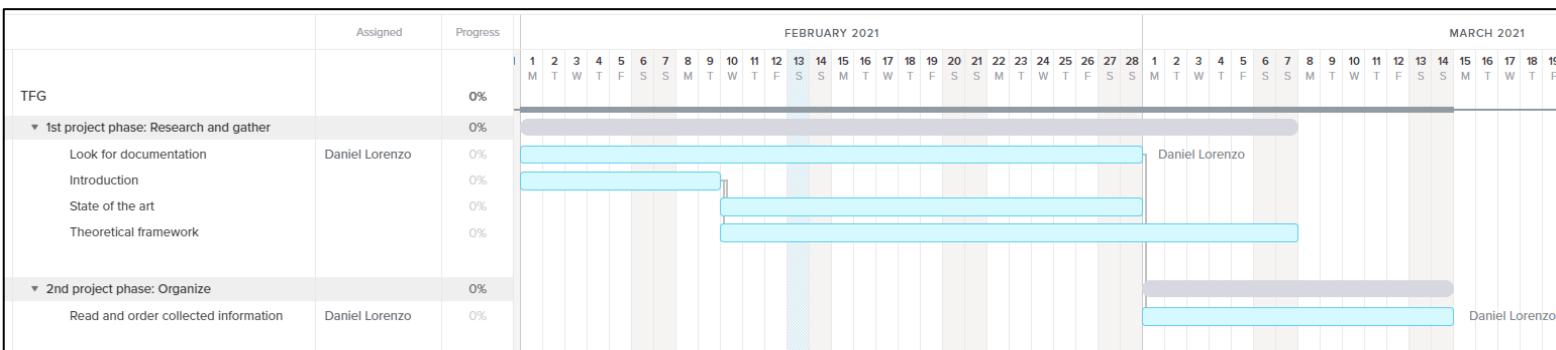
2. Project planning

2.1 Procedure - GANTT

In the following segment, we present the different phases this project will go through, with their dedicated time, with a more detailed explanation of each phase in the Methodology section.

1st project phase: Research and gather

We will start by outlining and shaping the thesis at the same time that we are collecting pertinent information. We plan to allocate a month to this phase.

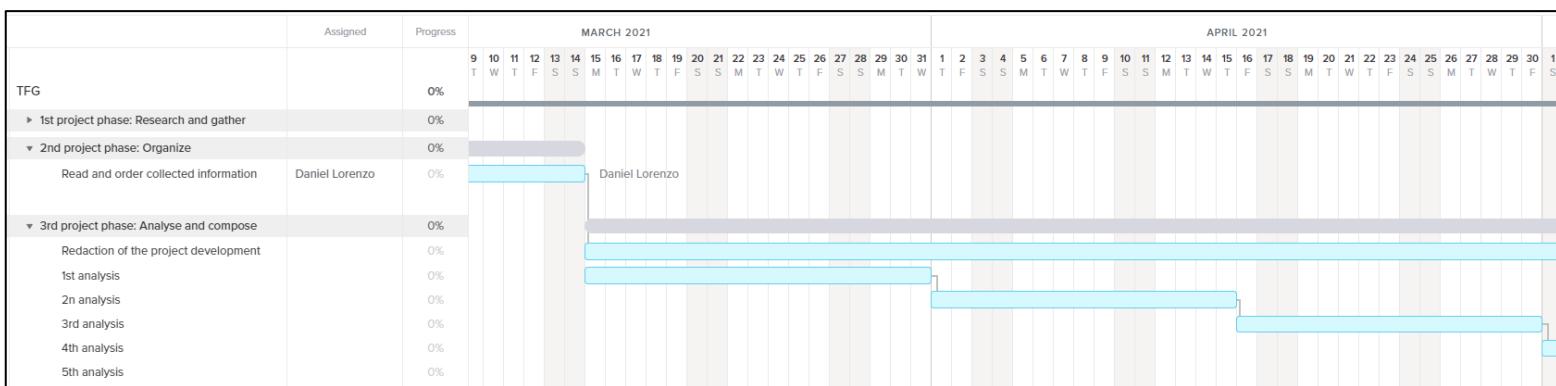


2nd project phase: Organize

This phase will persist for two weeks, during which we will complete retouching the theoretical framework and reading and categorizing all of our data.

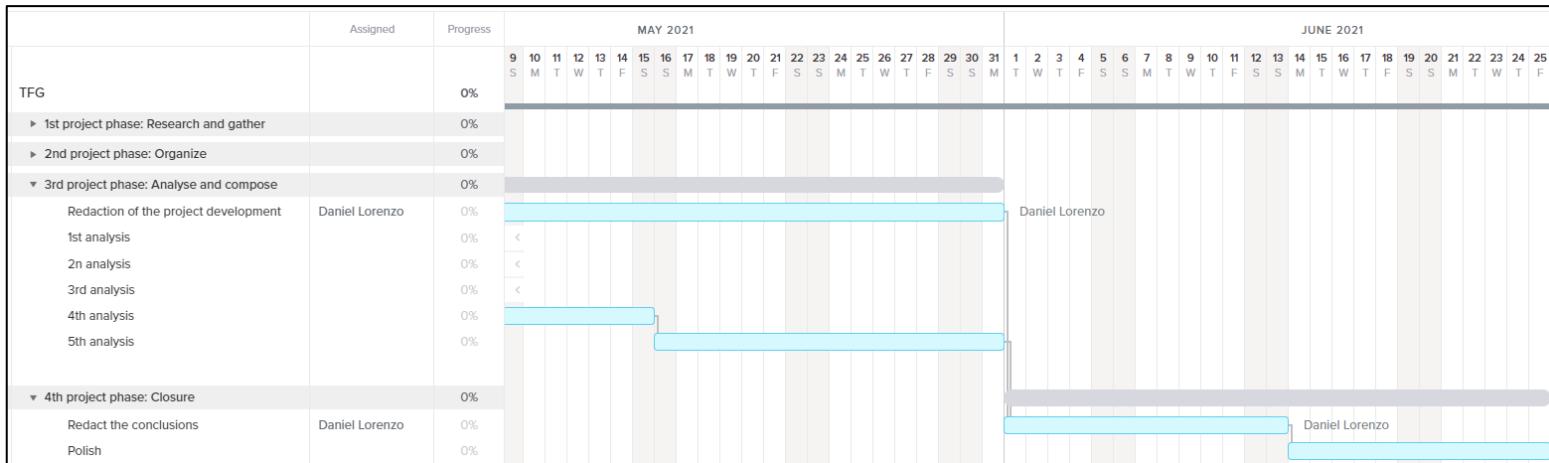
3rd project phase: Analyse and compose

This will be the longest phase. Until the end of May, we will analyse two games per month while we continue redacting and expanding the thesis.



4th project phase: Closure

The last month before submitting the thesis we will do its fine-tuning.



2.2 SWOT

	Positive	Negative
Internal Origin	Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Considerable training in game design and video game narrative. - Good organizational skills. - High interest in the subject. 	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inexperience in political sciences and psychology.
External Origin	Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide to the gaming community extensive work and a useful tool of a topic that has not been extensively addressed. - Learn. 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not enough information to work with. - The games we choose to analyse can end up not being as adequate as we thought.

2.3 Risks and contingency plan

The following risks can negatively affect the project's work and the solutions are those we will take if the problems happen. The risks and their possible solutions are ordered from higher to lesser importance.

Risk	Solution
Due to taking two subjects and doing an internship, we may only have a few hours every week to dedicate to the thesis.	<p>Solution 1: Start working in advance and try to be as organized and constant as possible.</p> <p>Solution 2: If we still see ourselves in dire straits, we will limit the scope of the project, probably reducing the amount of analysis.</p>
The information we find may be useless or not related to what we are looking for.	<p>Solution 1: Work to maximize the efficiency of our information gathering techniques.</p> <p>Solution 2: Invest more time in the research phase of the development, which will inevitably affect the other phases.</p>
We may not be able to reflect the theoretical framework on the analysis of the chosen games.	<p>Solution 1: If we find it early enough, change the games to analyse.</p> <p>Solution 2: Relate however we can the results of the analysis with the rest of the thesis and write the conclusions aware of that fact.</p>

2.4 Initial cost analysis

This thesis will be entirely developed for academic purposes, and the resulting document will not be used to gain any monetary compensation or profit. Our sole objective is to provide knowledge to the community about this topic. All the prices shown in the following table have been checked either on Amazon or Steam.

	Subject	Price	Units	Total price
HARDWARE				
	Personal computer	1.089,99 €	1	1.089,99 €
	Keyboard	54,99 €	1	54,99 €
	Mouse	69,99 €	1	69,99 €
	Monitor	149,99 €	2	299,98 €
SOFTWARE				
	Microsoft Office Family	79,99 €	1	79,99 €
	Google Drive	0,00 €	1	0,00 €
	TeamGantt	0,00 €	1	0,00 €
ANALYSIS: GAMES				
	Bioshock	4,99 €	1	4,99 €
	1979 Revolution: Black Friday	8,19 €	1	8,19 €
	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	19,99 €	1	19,99 €
TOTAL				1.628,11 €

3. Methodology

3.1 Thesis development

For the development of this research, we will follow the typical methodology structure of preproduction, production and postproduction.

1st project phase: Research and gather

During this first phase of the project, we will start by making the Introduction and Project planning. We will also be reading blogs, articles and papers and watching videos, collecting information and corroborating it, educating ourselves on the topic to later elaborate the document. Once we consider having enough data, we will make the State-of-the-Art part of the thesis.

2nd project phase: Organize

In this second phase of the development, we will dissect and summarize the most important pieces of all the collected information, ordering them in different sections to prepare the first draft:

- ➔ The meaning and implications of propaganda.
- ➔ How can propaganda be applied to video games?
- ➔ The role politics play in specific video game titles.
- ➔ Different purposes that politics have been used for on video games.

Besides, during this phase, we will choose the works to analyse, which will quite probably be between three and five.

3rd project phase: Analyse and compose

After having selected everything we want to work with, and when we feel instructed and prepared, we will be ready to get into this phase. This will be the longest one, where we will be fully dedicated to the redaction of the Project development section.

Once we have finished all the theoretical framework of the thesis, we will proceed to analyse the chosen videogames, where we will put into practice the knowledge we have been acquiring. Every analysis will follow the same order:

1. The story: What is happening in the game? What role develops the player? Who are the main characters? What are their motivations?
2. The world: How is the world the video game is settled on? Is it based on a certain place or historical epoch? How do their inhabitants live? Is there a civilization? How is it organized?
3. Gameplay mechanics: What are the main mechanics of the game? Do they contribute to the message the game transmits? Are they coherent?
4. The message: Which is the unifying thread? What does it communicate to the player? Does the game have implicit messages?
5. Reception from the audience: How did the world react to this product?

In each of these steps, we will try to find any relations with whatever we have explained before about how propaganda works on video games, attempting not only to analyse the purely political sides of said propaganda but the ideological ones too.

4th project phase: Closure

During the last month before delivering the thesis we will tie its remaining loose ends and finish it. Reuniting the results of the game analysis with the main work and comparing them, we will extract our conclusions and redact the corresponding section of the document.

Then, we will dedicate ourselves to polish the research. We will be fully focused on redoing and changing whatever is needed, proofreading, revising mistakes, assigning properly the references and, in the end, ensuring it has the desired quality.

3.2 Resolution of the objectives

Once we have defined the methodology we will follow for the development of the thesis, we must specify how will we solve the proposed objectives. The main objectives, which will drive research from the beginning until the end, are three.

Why are some people so upset with video games dealing with politics?

For this first objective, we will make an in-depth study on video games to find if there is any compelling reason which makes them worthy of being judged separately from the

rest of the entertainment. In the absence of such a reason, we will investigate what is causing so much debate.

After that, we will switch our focus and we will make a dissection about how the mass media generally handles politics, and we will observe how the audience tends to react. We may inquire on music, cinema and literature in particular if we feel we lack precision on the subject.

What is the actual role politics play in video games?

This second objective virtually encompasses the whole thesis. To perform this task, we will follow the methodology previously explained, using the specific thesis' objectives as guidelines. The answer to this question will be determined by the resulting theoretical framework.

Is ideological propaganda completely harmful or can it be used for good purposes?

Being quite tied with the previous one, this third objective will be the last to be fully solved but will be more reflected on the document as we progress. We are aware that the answer to this question will never be objective, but we will use our accumulated learning and the case analysis to support the final reasoning we end up getting to. What we hypothesise is that ideological propaganda can be both harmful or beneficial depending on the intention of the developers.

4. State of the Art

4.1 The opinion of the academics

4.1.1 Statesmanship makes its way unstoppably

A conclusion reached by the majority of the scholars is that, as time goes by, we will be confronted more and more often with politics and ideology in video games, be it covertly or overtly. The scholars concede they have become an accessible political tool whose usage boundaries have yet to be established.

One of such academics is Vít Šisler. In his paper *Videogames and Politics* (2007), he wrote that although the political aspects of video games needed still to be recognized by the community, these games have great potential and are already used to spread persuasive messages.

The shift of political struggle from mass media to computer games, which during a considerably large amount of time was mistakenly associated with children or teenagers, is something that worries many (Šisler, 2007). According to the specialist Gonzalo Frasca, this shift reflected the fact that video games were no longer just a toy for kids. He argues that taking into account that children learn a lot about the world through playing there is no reason why adult people should stop as we get older. Furthermore, he ensured political campaigns would continue experimenting with video games.

“They represent a new tool of communication that can reach a younger audience in a language that can clearly speak to them. It will not replace other forms of political propaganda, but it will integrate itself on to the media ecology of political campaigns” (Quoted on Belo, 2004).

4.1.2 A new tool

Video games can challenge existing stereotypes and can be used as means of critical development and socio-political change, as interactivity can often convey certain points more effectively than traditional means of communication. Players are not just passively viewing it: they are in the thick of things making choices that have a lasting impact on

how the story plays out and experiencing the consequences of those choices. Interactive experiences will always have the ability to affect players more thoroughly than passive experiences (Tshabalala, 2013).

Bogost (2006) speculates that while we might consider it disturbing at first glance, video games can be an enhancement to political awareness. Being such a culturally relevant medium, they offer a promising way to bring the complexities of political issues to the foreground without the risk of overwhelming the user. In his opinion, video games afford a new perspective on political issues and are particularly effective when it comes to the representation of complex systems. Therefore, he endorses its use for this purpose.

“By understanding how games express rhetoric in their rules, we not only gain a critical vantage point on videogame artifacts, but also, we can begin to consider how to design games whose primary purpose is to editorialize, teach, and make political statements” (Bogost, 2006).

Following this same line of thought, we have also a commentary about the impact of the internet on the U.S. presidential elections in 2004, made by the political scientist Michael Cornfield (2005). He affirmed that the internet (and video games by extension) had become an essential medium of American politics, and outlined some online campaigning innovations that came out of the Dean campaign, like decentralized decision-making or gatherings organized through the net.

Another opinion we have on the subject is the one Ubisoft’s CEO Yves Guillemot gave in an interview on the E3, where he said video games are an important medium to debate where culture, society and technology are heading, “like a way of testing big societal ideas and preparing us for real-life possibilities” (Stuart, 2018).

4.1.3 Should video games studios express their point of view?

In the February of this very year, it was announced that the development of the tactical shooter *Six Days in Fallujah* (Highwire Games, 2021) would be resumed. The title consisted of telling the stories of American troops and even civilians who fought in Iraq against Al Qaeda. It was cancelled a decade ago due to the complaints of the families of service members who had died in the conflict.

Despite being quite a prickly subject, Peter Tamte, CEO of Victura (their publishing company), commented that they would not consider trying to make a comment about whether the war itself was either a good or bad idea: “I don’t want sensational types of things to distract from the parts of that experience” (Quoted on Hall, 2021).

This debate has been on the grassroots of the industry during a lot of time, but the wake of these news poked the bear and have caused commotion around the network, and well-known voices within the industry have spoken about the topic. Guillemot has constantly mentioned that when Ubisoft handles political themes, they choose to remain impartial, since their main goal is to make people think, instead of giving their take. They simply want to make sure that, once the users finish, they are more aware about the issues the game is exposing.

“We want to put them in front of questions that they don’t always ask themselves automatically. [...] Our goal is to give all the tools to the player in order for them to think about the subjects, to be able to see things from far enough away” (Quoted on Stuart, 2018).



F1: In-game image of *Six Days in Fallujah*

With a political game comes a social duty

There are, on the other hand, a large group of developers who differ from Tamte’s and Guillemot’s words. The most forceful criticism was expressed by the indie developer Rami Ismail, a remarkably important representative from the middle eastern video game

community, saying it presented a “strongly sanitized version of the battle” and that it omitted the war crimes and atrocities that were committed during the confrontation. Furthermore, he made a long statement where he firmly objected to Tamte’s declarations:

“War is political machinations. That's the entire thing about war. It's politics that leads to people killing each other. The entire point is political gain or the diminishment of the other party's political power. [...] We need you to stop saying you're going to portray the real Fallujah if you're just making propaganda that won't even touch documented war crimes.” (Ismail, 2021).

Ismail (2021) denounced as well how over the years there has been a dehumanization and erasure of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim cultures, and complained about the overwhelming lack of Iraqi voices in news coverage of *Six Days in Fallujah*. In computer games, conversations about the stereotyping and treatment of these ethnicities have come up repeatedly in many military and strategic games like the *Call of Duty* (Activision) or *Battlefield* (Electronic Arts) series.

The designer Enrique Colinet (2021), claims the type of representation that you are going to make of a certain conflict has a lot to do with how will your audience perceive it. To what extent are you going to make an accurate representation of a situation that occurred? It is a great commitment to try to represent an armed conflict reliably because it is incredibly difficult to narrate it objectively.

He made parallelism with his involvement during the development of *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) and how his team struggled to decide how would they handle the usage of white phosphorous inside the game. They wanted to make a comment on its devastating consequences, and he talked about the different set of ideas they had to discard until arriving at the definitive one.

“The first idea was that your colleagues [your squad] would carry a white phosphorous mortar on their backs and you could use it as you wanted, but what comment would we be making with that? How are you going to represent the horror of dying like this, the damage it does, how wrong it is, if you represent it as one more weapon?” (Colinet, 2021)

Colinet (2021) conceded it is risky to do something like that as a developer, since you know you are going to alienate a sector of the people, and you may lose them along the way due to the discomfort of such messages. However, their team understood they had responsibility.



F2: White phosphorous bombing in *Spec Ops: The Line*

We need to be treated as adults for the industry to grow

Naughty Dog's copresident Neil Druckmann made also a statement through his personal Twitter account. He said that if a game deals with a serious subject, that makes said game inherently political, and that if that is a problem for the developers they should make a different game. "You owe it to your game to lean into it, doing your damnedest to treat as honestly, completely as possible. Warts and all" (Druckmann, 2021). In a response to this same post, Santa Monica Studios' creative director Cory Barlog exposed his accordance, encouraging the fearlessness and the passion in video game storytelling. Thus, exposing both the goodness and the ugliness of the characters and the world they live in upgrades the overall experience of the story³ (Balrog, 2021).

The challenge this creates is that playing such games may be shocking at the beginning because they allow players to embody positions and engage in actions many will never have previously experienced. Nevertheless, they make it possible for players to deepen

³ Seen in [two tweets](#) from their official accounts.

their understanding of the multiple causal forces that affect a given set of circumstances they quite possibly would have never experienced otherwise.

Journalist Erik Kain strengthens this message. He thinks that if we ever aspire to have video games treated as a mature artform and entertainment medium we need to accept that political, ethical, spiritual and other heavy topics will be part of those games. Some AAA titles are glaringly political, albeit their developers insist they are not. “Dancing around politics doesn't do anybody any good. Simply saying that an obviously political game isn't about politics won't suffice” (Kain, 2019). Likewise, Colinet (2021) concludes that “we need to start filtering the information we are offered, not being so alarmed and trying to understand what developers want to convey to us with each video game”.

4.1.4 Drawing a distinction between games and other entertainment

When it comes to how they explore and present political themes, Guillemot seems to find a distinction between games and other forms of narrative entertainment. He states that movies and novels tend to present a particular viewpoint on a political situation because they are explicitly authored and structured by a lone visionary (the writer or the director). Video games, though, are interactive, hence they must distance themselves from overt messaging.

“The player is the person who is going to take decisions within the game, and our job is to make sure you feel free to go one way or the other, to make actions and to experience the consequences. [...] The long-term goal is, why not simulate other ways to live and to work and behave together in video games so that people can experiment with them?” (Quoted on Stuart, 2018).

This is similar to what Frasca (2001) says. He believes that developers do not represent a particular event, but a set of potential events. That makes them think about their objects as systems and consider which are the laws that rule their behaviours, so the players can analyse, contest and revise such rules according to their personal beliefs. Under this rubric, games become rhetorical opinion texts that the users can explore rather than merely read or view.

Despite this, the journalist Tom Faber declares that he believes the real reason the industry is nervous about speaking out is the substantial amount of hostility directed towards any company decision that could be deemed political. There are cases where the most extreme community members may label as political any game that has a woman or minorities as playable characters, while they overlook many seriously political titles. “They tell stories of colonising new worlds, stealing and gathering resources, rebels attacking social systems and armies defending them. Most pertinently, countless titles compel you to exact justice with violence” (Faber, 2020).

In a lot of strategy games, for example, the most common way to win is to improve technology and increase resource production to then immediately proceed to annihilate the other civilizations, rather than simply being the most prosperous one. This is almost hardwired into you if you play enough strategy games. That mindset actually represents a very modern social and political perspective, but we frequently apply it to periods of time where it was not true and where political stability was a much greater factor in determining which civilizations triumphed in a conflict (Krol, 2017).



F3: Units besieging a city in *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2016)

These games may not always be explicitly persuasive, but they do invite the player to participate in their representation. Bogost (2006) says that when games leverage procedural expression to represent, communicate, or persuade the player towards a particular biased point of view, they exhibit what he calls “procedural rhetoric”.

To end, Faber (2020) notes that while a novel about a political ideology is regarded as exploring, rather than condoning that viewpoint, video games are not granted the same laxity. The main argument is that “we play them to escape from the problems and monotony of the real world, so there is no reason to drag the interminable misery of politics into our fantasy”.

4.2 Our starting point

Throughout the short life of the video game industry, there has been a wide range of journalists who have published articles, redacted essays or created debates about how politics are or should be involved in video games. Unfortunately, the attention that academics have paid to the matter has not been alike at all, and the few rigorous studies that we have date from more than a decade ago.

As we have seen, mass media has been used for propagandistic purposes of all kinds, and video games are not the exception. During these years, their impact and influence on the public have increased enormously and have not been fully evaluated; it requires further research. Nevertheless, the fact that governments and political parties are increasingly using them in their campaigns (explained later in section 5.2.4) indicates that all those institutions are quite aware of the power that lies hidden in the medium.

5. Theoretical framework

5.1 Main concepts

5.1.1 Politics

Purely speaking, politics are the endeavours carried by the government, the members of judicial organizations, or people who try to determine and guide the way a country or an area is governed, especially the debate between parties having power. When we apply this term outside its area, the concept acquires a considerably broader meaning, and it boils down to the activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization.

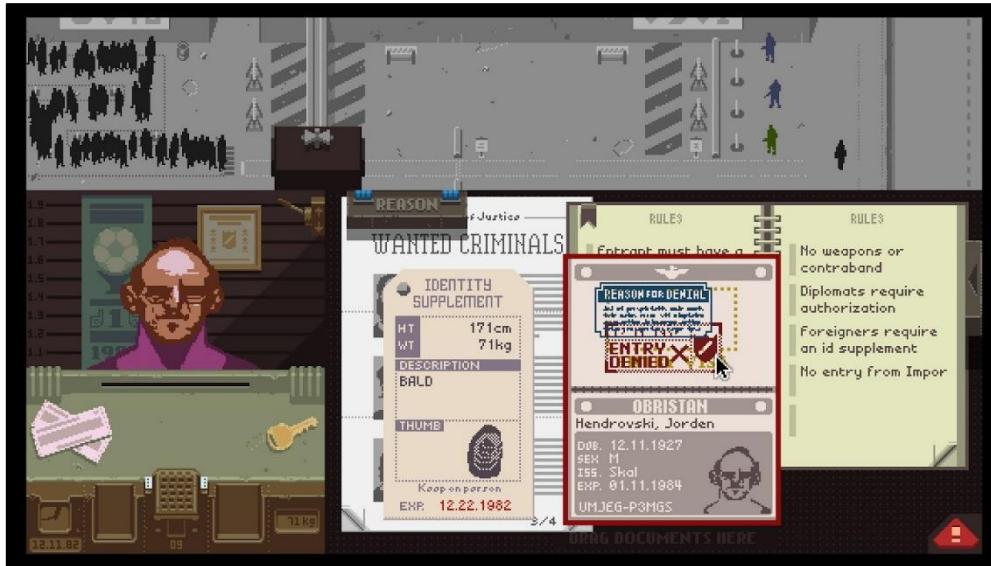
Either way, it seems at first that there is no space under this umbrella for most of the games which usually trigger this debate we aim to take part in. For this reason, we have concluded that, if we talk about politics in games, it can be approached with four different interpretations.

First of all, there are those works that are entirely based on real-world political issues but that have no particular perspective on them, nonetheless. What exemplifies this the best is the famous competitive game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012), a first-person shooter where players take positions as terrorists or counter-terrorists. The sole objective is to eliminate each other's team and plant a bomb if you are a terrorist or to avoid it if you are a counter-terrorist.

Secondly, we find video games based on real-world political situations that have a clear opinion on the content they are providing. In the saga *Wolfenstein* (MachineGames) the player's main purpose is to shoot, kill, blow up and annihilate Nazis because they are undeniably heinous and deserve no other fate. They are filled with humour, science-fiction and enjoyable combat, and deliver a crystal-clear message.

Afterwards, there are games with their own fictional in-game politics that can be related to the real world by analogy. This category has less defined margins and can blend with the previous ones, but we believe it is different enough to be considered apart. To illustrate this, we can make a look at *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), a title that portrays a

fictional communist state where the players work as a customs inspector that must choose who may and may not enter the country, at the cost of losing their job if they let in whoever does not deserve it.



F4: Denying the entry to a citizen in *Papers, Please*

Finally, we should close with products that are not particularly based on politics at all, but that can be considered to contain political statements. Even though it happens with all four approaches, this former case is the one that generates controversy more often. The developers of the title *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), an arcade first-person shooter, specified some of their characters to be gay months later of being published.

Situations like this give raise to the foresaid argument some gamers have been constantly repeating during the last years: that the inclusion of women and minorities in some products are just political marketing strategies to pander a division of the customers. That automatically generates two questions: is having a particular design or a gender political? Is it political to specify the sexuality of a character later on? Our answer is no. As far as we are concerned, adding representation of a collective is not political, but enriching.

Notwithstanding, and taking that into account, we have decided that during this research we will treat as politic any game which presents or reinforces a version of some ideology, or that gives a tendentious interpretation of a topic, instead of closing ourselves to the governmental definition of the word, since it will allow us more flexibility and will allow us to tackle the matter better.

5.1.2 Propaganda

The concept of propaganda refers to the images, ideas or information, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing the opinions of a precise target. It constitutes, besides, a method of communication that implicates not only a mobilization of means but also a mobilization of discourses, places or acts.

This has been used in numerous senses and contexts, albeit nowadays it bears a pejorative connotation or it is mostly reserved to describe the persuasive mechanisms of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. However, the evolution of modern methods of propaganda influenced liberal democracies too, which have continued to use them throughout history to constitute their power.

In this sense, we could establish that propaganda is laid by agents and institutions which aspire to legitimize or contest a social order and to cause identification and the want to support it. Said support, according to the sociologist Max Weber (1922), is based on shared beliefs that may have legal, traditional or charismatic motivations.

“These beliefs are part of an ideology, a system of representations (ideas, images, feelings, opinions, beliefs) held to be true by an agent in the position where these beliefs allow him to give meaning and value to his practices and to the reality which surrounds him” (Quoted on Velasco-Pufleau, 2014).

In non-democratic countries, propaganda continues to flourish as a means to indoctrinate citizens, and this practice is unlikely to cease in the future. Nowadays, the term is used in journalism, advertising, and education mostly in a political context, and it may be used positively, for example with public health campaigns. Bearing in mind the latter, for the development of our thesis, we will consider to be propaganda any measure implemented by the creator of a work, be it a core part or an addendum, with the intention of persuading the recipient of such work concerning an ideology or a political outlook.

5.2 Video games as vehicles of transmission

Video games have dominated popular culture for some time. In his book *Trigger Happy*, Steven Poole exposes that by 1999, U.S. citizens had named computer games as their favourite home entertainment for three consecutive years. That implied that twice as many people preferred video games to watching the television, three times as many preferred video games to going to the movies, and six times as many preferred video games to renting movies (Ottosen, 2004).

5.2.1 The use in advertisement

After the birth of the video game industry, the first advertising games started to appear. A good example is *Tapper* (Bally Midway, 1983). In it, the user plays as a bartender that serves Budweisers to their customers. In most of the stages of the game, a large advertisement of the beer company is hanging on the wall at the same time one is playing.



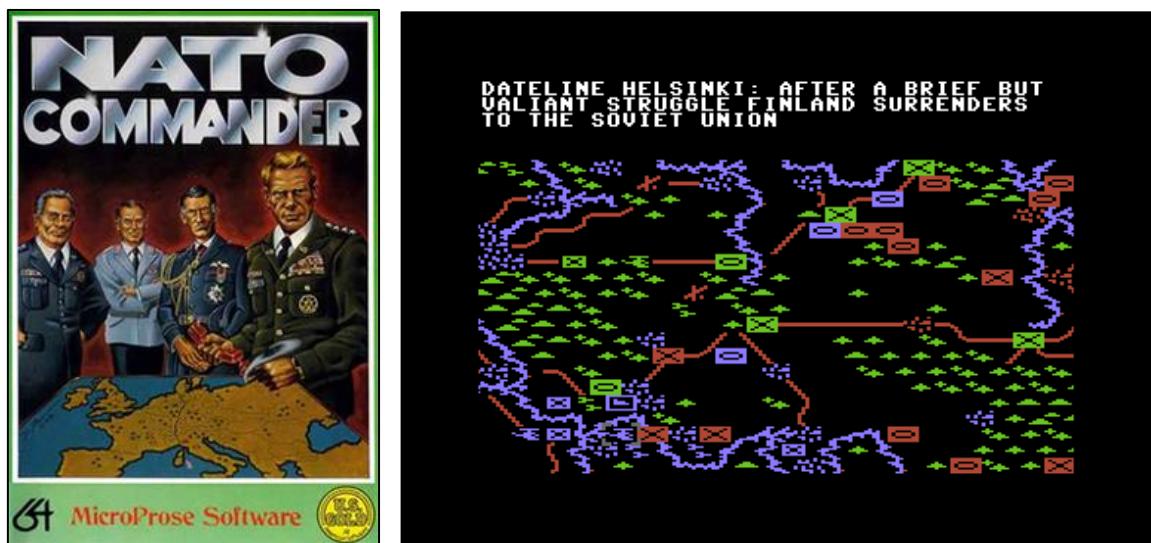
F5: *Tapper*'s cover and in-game images

Nowadays marketing companies sometimes use computer games as an advertising medium using "virus campaigns" or in-game product placement. That enables the companies to target better and reach more effectively a specific and already engaged audience for the product⁴.

⁴ The paradigm of product placement in video games is Fortnite and his constant [brand partnerships](#).

5.2.2 Representing an ideological tendency

One of the first games to present an ideological point of view was *NATO Commander* (MicroPose, 1984). In this strategy game, the player takes the role of the Supreme Allied Commander of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces in Europe as they respond to an attack from the members of the Warsaw Pact. The main goal is to slow the advance of their troops and to inflict as many casualties as possible, hoping to force a diplomatic end to the war. “The technical details and the unit’s deployment are based on reality, giving the game a strange feeling to play, especially for kids from Eastern Europe, when their task could often be to destroy their home city” (Šisler, 2007).



F6: *NATO Commander*’s cover and in-game images

During the ‘90s, the majority of video games with a propagandistic objective were used by neo-Nazi and racist groups to spread their messages of hatred and to promote their rotten ideas, even though this use was minimal, almost negligible. During the 2000s there were also videogames developed with those same purposes. Examples of that are *Zog’s Nightmare* (2006) or *Anti-Japan War Online* (2008), a “Patriotic MMO” made by the communist youth league set in a conflict between Japan and China where the mobs you grind are Japanese men (Krol, 2012).

Collaboration with the government

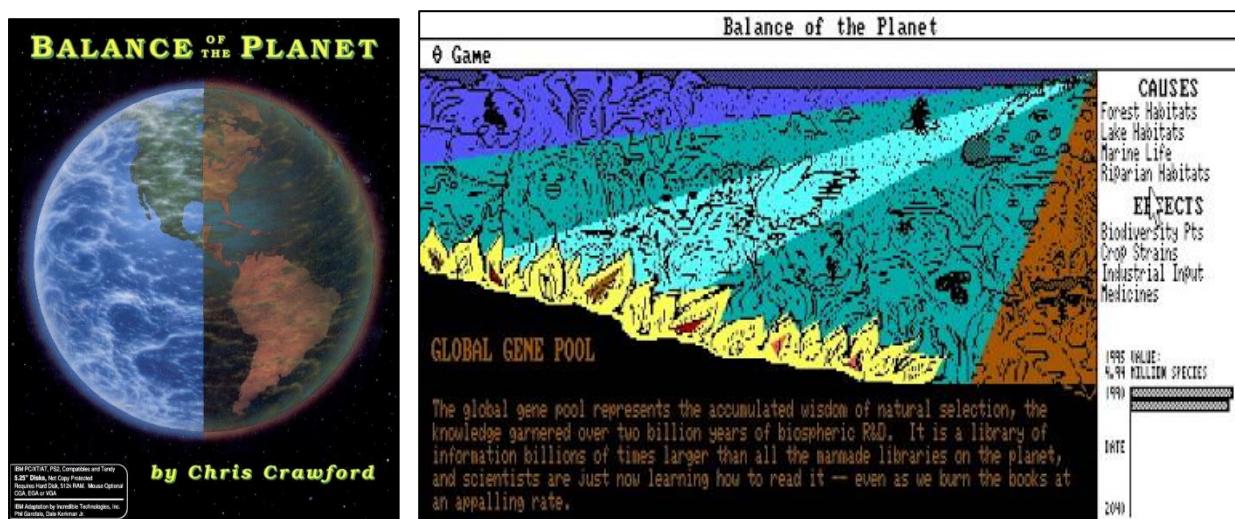
With the dawn of the new millennium, senior officials in some countries started to show interest in the industry. In 2004, the Russian government announced its plan to inculcate

"a sense of patriotism in the country's youth by dint of an ongoing series of sports events, rallies, clubs, military training games, and even patriotic video games". In a combination of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education they requested a consequent program with a budget of 23 million dollars called *Ready for Work and Defense of the Motherland* (Šisler, 2007).

China was the next country to do something similar, with the *China National Online Game Publication Project*, a plan which consisted of publishing around one hundred different independently-developed titles between 2004 and 2008. There were 16 different online game publishers involved and the content of those games had to be related to the Chinese culture, such as its history or literary classics (Business Alert - China, 2005).

Environmentalist messages

Another example of how games have been used to deliver a particular viewpoint is *Balance of the Planet*, which takes on a social challenge through gameplay as well. Released on Earth Day 1990, the game was a simulation that modelled environmental issues and their consequences. Its author, Chris Crawford (2003), expressed the complexity of environmental issues and their entwinement with each other and with economic issues. "I wanted to demonstrate that everything is connected, that simplistic approaches always fail" (Quoted on Bogost, 2006).



F7: *Balance of the Planet*'s cover and in-game images

The game allows the player to simulate an adjustable value system, to witness the effects of said system, and carry that perception beyond the gameplay experience. In it, the player can make a series of different choices about a group of variable settings, like lake acidity, radiation or oil spills. The game even requires the player to place a value on human lives, establishing a separate value for third-world lives versus urban industrial lives (Bogost, 2006).

Harpooned (Torque Game Builder, 2008) is a video game that explores Japan's whaling program and questions its government claim that it is scientific in nature and without profit motive. You play the role of a Japanese scientist performing research on whales around Antarctica, controlling a Japanese whaling vessel with the instruction of "performing research on the whales by shooting them with your explosive harpoons", while avoiding icebergs, protestors and news helicopters.

Every time a whale is killed, the ship collects its meat, and at the end of each stage that meat is brought onto a research vessel. The vessel then performs research on the meat, producing various whale-meat products such as pet food and cosmetics. Additional discoveries are then announced highlighting the hypocrisy of killing vast numbers of whales in the name of science. The game does not have an ending, but after about fifteen minutes of play there are no more whales remaining.

Condemning social injustices

There are video games that have targeted contemporary social issues, among which we can find *Escape from Woomera* (2004). This unfinished adventure point-and-click, developed by former members of Atari's Melbourne Studio, intended to criticize the treatment of mandatorily detained asylum seekers in Australia and the government's attempt to impose a media blackout on the detention centres. In the game, the player assumes the role of Mustafa, an Iranian asylum seeker being held at Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre. Mustafa's request for asylum has been denied, and, fearing that he will be killed by the Iranian government upon his repatriation to Iran, he decides to attempt to escape Woomera. The player must explore the place and speak with other individuals at the centre to devise and execute an escape plan.

Resembling this kind of approach there is *Homeland Guantanamos* (Breakthrough, 2008), a game designed to spotlight the inhumane conditions suffered by around 300,000 people in immigrant detention due to unfair policies of the United States' Department of Homeland Security. Players assume the role of an undercover journalist doing an investigative series who must uncover the true story of Boubacar Bah, an immigrant who died in the Department's custody under dubious circumstances in 2007. The user experiences a 3D walkthrough tour of the facility led by a guide, during which they encounter video stories about actual situations as experienced by former detainees, and gradually uncovers different clues that will help them solve Boubacar's case.

5.2.3 Influence on warfare

Evan Wright, the author of the book *Generation Kill*, lived for two months with a squad of 23 U.S. Marines from First Recon, the elite unit that led the attack on the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Wright mentions a Marine soldier who talked about the game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* at the same time they were about to attack a unit of alleged insurgents.

“I was just thinking one thing when we drove into that ambush: Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. I felt like I was living it when I saw the flames coming out of windows, the blown-up car in the street, guys stealing out around shooting at us. It was fucking cool” (Quoted on Ottosen, 2017).

Wright also describes in his book how violence in video games can be related to experiences on the battlefield. He compares the war in Iraq with earlier wars and concludes that the soldiers seem to be more trigger-happy than previously. Moreover, Wright makes the point that in past generations only 15%-20% of soldiers were willing to fire weapons, whereas he saw almost no resistance to fire on his unit, arguing that this change of attitude is partly related to the experience of violence in entertainment.

In 2002, the game *Desert Storm* was launched, more than ten years after the Gulf War and one year before the next war on Iraq. To be a winner in this game, you have to act as the American soldiers did in 1991. If you are on the Iraqi side, you lose and get killed.

“It could be argued that the timing was not a coincidence; it might be helpful to recreate the sense of winning the war of 1991 in the same country where a new war was going to take place requiring new recruits” (Ottosen, 2017).



F8: *Desert Storm*'s cover and in-game images

The success of *America's Army*

On the 4th of July of 2002, the U.S. Army released its official game under the name of *America's Army: Recon*, which is still available nowadays on Steam. It had been previously presented at the E3 in Los Angeles on the 21st of May at the same time it was announced free of charge so everyone could play. A new version was launched in the E3 of 2003, the same year the invasion to Iraq took place, introduced as a tool to recruit soldiers. The Army showed a considerable deployment of media on the Expo, combining real and virtual events.



F9: Last version of *America's Army* (2015)

Aimed at people still in high school, by November 2003 it already had from 2 to 3 million users, and by spring 2007 the users had passed 8 million, making it rank among the most popular games on a global scale (Løvlie, 2007). The game both teaches things a soldier needs to know and reinforces military ideals, but never once does it really question the moral dilemmas that anyone entering the army will have to face. “It actually does a remarkable job of teaching things like medical training, and still manages to be pretty engaging at the same time” (Krol, 2012).

America's Army acknowledges the physical danger of the situation, but carefully avoids the larger questions that come with holding a gun. In addition, all issues are seen from an American perspective. Depending on the current deployment of U.S forces in the real world, the enemies are often depicted as Middle-Eastern people, a fact that has been occasionally criticized. Until now, it has been through 36 different versions⁵.

The counterpart: *Special Forces, Solution*

Although it was the first, *America's Army* would not be the only game with recruiting purposes. In the very 2003, the Central Internet Bureau of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement published a similar product called *Al-Quwwa al-Khasa* (Special Force, Solution) in which you take the role of the Arab fighter for Hezbollah (a Shia Islamist political party and militant group based in Lebanon) fighting the Israeli Defence Force. It plays like any modern War FPS, but with the roles reversed.



F10: *Special Forces, Solution*'s cover and in-game images

⁵ From the page of *America's Army* on the [Wikipedia](#).

The beginning of the game consists of the classic training tutorial. In this case, it includes shooting the portraits of Israeli officials. The walls of the room are covered with Hezbollah's flags and real photos from the war. In every loading screen, the countdown timer is replaced by burning Israeli flags. In the webpage of the game, which is no longer accessible, the authors uttered that the game was based on events that took place in Lebanon when it was invaded by Israel in 1978 and 1982, with the purpose of creating an educational game for the coming generations (Šisler, 2007). The authors say:

“The problem behind electronic games, especially those designed for computers, is that most of them are foreign-made, especially American. Therefore, they bear enormous false understandings and habituate teenagers to violence, hatred and grudges. In addition, some enfold humiliation to many of our Islamic and Arab countries, where battles are running in these Arab countries, the dead are Arab soldiers, whereas the hero who kills them is – the player himself – an American” (Quoted on Šisler, 2007).

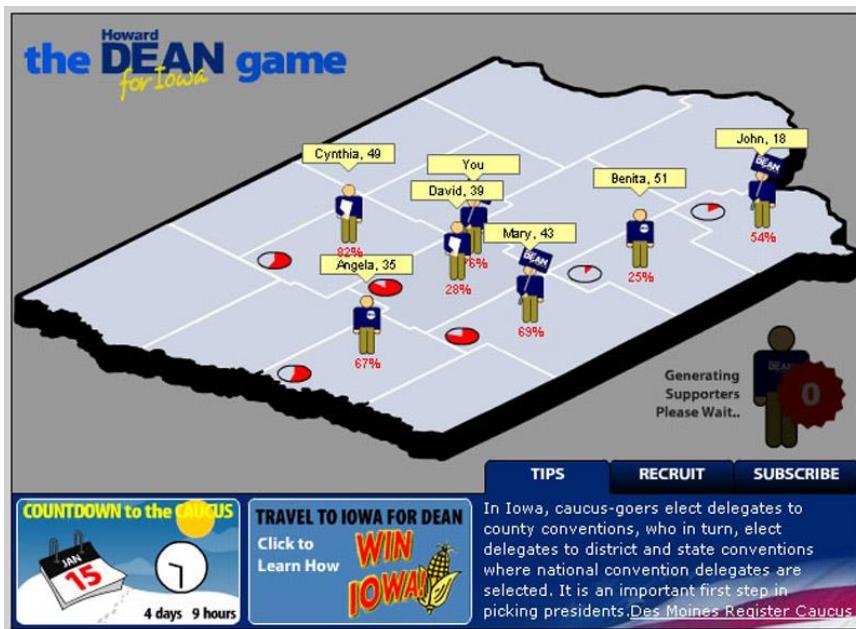
5.2.4 Political campaigns

During the U.S. presidential election of 2004, video games were introduced for the first time as a campaigning tool. The studio Persuasive Games, founded by the university teacher Ian Bogost, designed *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (2003) for the Democrats and *Take Back Illinois* (2004) for the Republicans, who were interested after seeing the success of the previous (Šisler, 2007).

The Howard Dean for Iowa Game

In this first product, players made a virtual trip to Iowa, which was represented with a simplified map split into different regions, to campaign for the Democrat candidate. Among other activities, they had to pass out pamphlets or recruit friends and colleagues to join the aforementioned campaign. At the start of the game, the players themselves appeared as the only supporter unit available, which could be placed anywhere on the map. Then, the supporter worked non-stop, enacting “virtual outreach” to win over other Iowans (Bogost, 2006).

The progress was shown through a circular gauge. When the gauge filled, a new supporter spawned, ready for the player to place, which would load one of the possible mini-games, that deployed extremely simplified representations of each of these outreach activities. “By creating simplified patterns of action to represent each of these activities, we hoped to create a coherent understanding of what it meant to get involved” (Bogost, 2006).



F11: *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*

Nevertheless, an analysis of the responses to the game showed it had failed to distinguish Dean from any other candidate. While it did emphasize a lot grassroot supporting, it did not highlight enough the policies that represented the Democrats (Bogost, 2006).

Take Back Illinois

This second product offered four games in one. These sub-games were interrelated, the performance in one affected the others, and each one provided a goal for the player to reach. One of those was the Medical Malpractice Reform mini-game. In it, the player had to raise the public health level above 80%. A small calendar served as a timer for the game, starting on January 1st and counting up one day for every few seconds of game time. To beat that mini-game, the player had to reach the goal before the calendar arrived at the end of the year (Bogost, 2006).

Furthermore, to play the game successfully, the player was forced to acknowledge the campaign's position on the issues it represented. "In playing the game, the player is not brainwashed or otherwise fooled into adopting the candidates' policy position, but rather he is afforded an understanding of that position for further inquiry, agreement, or disapproval" (Bogost, 2006).



F12: Take Back Illinois

Watching the impact of these two games and in an attempt to mimic it, the British Conservative Party launched *TaxMan Gordon* (2007), which was an adaptation of *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980). In it, the player had to pick their coins while fleeing from Gordon Brown, the candidate of the Labour Party, who had been turned into the villain.

A vehicle to reach voters

During the U.S. presidential election of 2008, Barack Obama and his campaign team placed the first presidential ads in video games. Virtual billboards flashed his likeness in 18 different titles through Microsoft Corp's Xbox Live service to promote his online voter registration, among which were included *Guitar Hero III* (Neversoft, 2007) or *NBA Live 08* (Electronic Arts, 2007). Later surveys found that gamers who saw political ads were 120% more likely to have a positive reaction towards him, and 50% more likely to consider casting a vote for him. Aware of the situation, he tried to replicate this success in the 2012 election and held an esports tournament in 2016 intending to gather signs and raise awareness for the Affordable Care Act (Thiele, 2020).

The most significant cases, nonetheless, occurred during the campaign for the last U.S. presidential election (2020). It was made an effort to acquire the voting power of gamers, a group that includes a vast young demographic that had stayed away from the polls in past elections. The video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) held a very important role, becoming a platform for politicians and activists. The candidate Joe Biden partnered with the gaming news program KindaFunnyGames to provide a tour of a themed island in the game. Even before that, the campaign produced a set of signs, advocating for the Democrat candidate and his running mate Kamala Harris, so gamers could distribute them around their virtual front yards (Breitenbach, 2020).

However, Nintendo did not like to have one of their games performing such a role and issued a series of guidelines to regulate it. These rules allowed business and organisations to provide custom designs and upload screenshots of the game to social networks, as long as they did not obtain monetary benefits nor use it to direct people towards activities or campaigns outside the game (Kerr, 2020).



F13: Kamala Harris and Joe Biden in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

Around that same period, Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez made the first appearance on her newly created Twitch channel, playing the game *Among Us* (InnerSloth, 2018) with a group of famous streamers. She reached a viewership peak of 438.000 people, and “while the stream was largely free of political commentary, she did take time to appeal to young voters on behalf of the Democrat party”, says reporter Noah Smith (2020). “The close-knit relationships formed between streamers and their audiences [...] help establish a level of access and trust most fans can’t achieve with Hollywood, sports or musical celebrities who are often cordoned off by velvet ropes”.

5.3 Censorship

Releasing a video game in nowadays society can be a titanically laborious process since developer teams have no only to fulfil the ever-increasing expectations and strict judgements of the consumers, but also to fit through the conditions established by its distribution platform.

5.3.1 Hindrances to publishing specific products

Liyla and The Shadows of War (Rasheed Abueideh, 2016) is a minimalist, story-driven platformer where the players must avoid drones, bombs, and other hazards while trying to guide a family to safety through a highly stylized Gaza Strip, influenced by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.



F14: Desolate landscape in *Liyla and The Shadows of War*

On its publication date, Apple rejected it from App Store saying its political themes meant it was not a game, as it carried a political statement, despite its obvious gameplay mechanics. After a week of discussions, the game was finally accepted. Interestingly enough, a game reflecting the 'other side' of the Gaza Strip dispute, *Israeli Heroes*, remained available on those very devices during that same time and was not even close as strictly analysed (Kamen, 2016).

5.3.2 Controversies

During the last decades, our society has started to become more self-conscious about social gaps, marginalized collectives and oppressed groups, and we have started to work to make up for past mistakes and ensure they are overcome. This evolution has been inevitably reflected in video games, which have started to suffer conception changes on character designs, narratives or graphic representations. And, as always happens when something is changed, this reaction has caused some stir.

Objectification of female characters

In the eleventh edition of the *Mortal Kombat* (NetherRealm) fighting games saga, the developers decided to dress the female characters adding more layers of fabric, in order to get more mature and respectful. In the words of Brendan George (2019), character lead of the studio:

“You’re not going to wear a bikini to a fight. You’re not going to be showing so much skin. I think it’s just what the game is about: You’re going in to fight for your life, and you’re not going to be wearing such scantily clad items”
 (Quoted on McGloin, 2019).



F15: Jade's and Skarlet's outfit design comparison

In earlier versions, they used to wear swimsuit-like clothes or open suits, instead. The reception was that this decision was only catering to a few undergrown niche complainers, and that they should not be doing this. The fact that male characters were unaffected contributed to emphasize this anger.

Talking about sexualization, we must not omit the recent polemic generated with *Mass Effect Legendary Edition* (BioWare, 2021), a collection that compiles the three games of the saga. In a recent interview, BioWare's project director mentioned the team was fixing some aspects of the original games which had not aged well, starting with a set of some gratuitous camera shots to the butt of the secondary character Miranda Lawson. It was also intended to partly modify her model and that of other girls in the game since some of their elements appear designed simply to please the male audience and do not really make sense to them (Byrd, 2021).



F16: Controversial camera angle during a dialog with Miranda

Due to these changes, some players felt that the series was being censored and ruined. Some commentaries were about “beautiful women being removed from video games”, and victimizing themselves saying they felt treated as if “gamers are evil”, ignoring the fact that those alterations were precisely considered to remove features that should have never existed in the first place.

Race-related issues

The title *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (CD Project RED, 2015), is an action roleplaying game placed in a fantasy setting, in a world where various races are forced to coexist. We can find and a lot of different creatures that wonder the map, but the plot revolves around humans, dwarfs, and elves and their quarrels. It was, in fact, praised throughout several reviews for the job it does handling racism between them, portraying it as a problem.

Nevertheless, the video game does not feature a single person of colour, a fact which was overlooked in most analysis. When this was mentioned, the most recurrent reply was that *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* used Slavic mythology as an inspiration for its world and that such mythology is predominantly white. The problem is that we do not live in an equal world, and creating digital representations of people who are not white indicates a culture and industry that acknowledges them as people. Why do we find plausible the existence of magic but draw the line on human race variety? “It is incredibly unwelcoming to be shown the door by the same people who open it for fantasy creatures” (Moosa, 2015).



F17: Elves getting revenge on a human in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*

Another game with a race-related controversy was the multiplayer medieval slasher *Mordhau* (Triterion, 2019). When it was first released, it had only the possibility of creating white male characters. Then, its developers announced they were planning to implement the possibility of creating a woman or a dark-skinned knight, and a lot of the members of its community -which had already gained fame for being remarkably toxic- claimed that it would subtract realism from the product. As we can see, like with mythology, “historical accuracy” is another common defence used to justify questionable actions in fiction (Horti, 2019).

In response, and instead of addressing the disgusting sexism and racism these protests exuded, the team began to consider the possibility of adding an option to toggle off non-white and female characters for every player who wanted them removed from their personal experience, in an attempt of being compliant to everyone. Fortunately, this idea did not come to fruition and was discarded in a posterior revision.

Inclusion of minorities

In the field of LGBTQ+ inclusion, there are also some titles that have provoked some friction. In the character creation screen of the tactical wargame BattleTech (Hexbrained Schemes, 2018), players can choose between their pronouns: he, she or they, which affects how the other characters address you, your backstory and how do you understand and interact with the world. Besides, most of the features are not gender locked, but available to every kind of character (Barasch, 2018).

In the wake of this decision, Steam's forums were spammed with a minority of choleric folks claiming it was purely an economic decision to look appealing for “social justice warriors”, arguing it was an unnecessary implementation. For such a minor element, which does not affect your game at all and might potentially improve others’, it truly seems an overreaction. We should point out that -even though it is not the same- no one ever complained about when genders were added to *Pokémon* games (Nintendo), nonetheless, and when genderless Pokémons like Ditto were implemented.



F18: *BattleTech*'s character creation screen

When the team behind *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020) announced the possibility of making a transgender playable character some complained arguing that they would have to allocate too many resources to just satisfy a few whiners, even though the developers had already announced they were considering to do that prior to any drama. Moreover, they said that it was going to politicize the game, which is quite an ironic request for a product set in a dystopic future where international corporations dominate a planet ruled by anarcho-capitalism.

5.4 Propaganda on transmedia entertainment

5.4.1 Music

Music has always played a major role in popular culture. Political ideology is often spread through media, and the use of music reaches an extremely wide and diverse audience. A variety of genres are constantly being used to portray a political view, shed light, or bring validity to a subject the author or artist feels is worth venturing. Propaganda through modes like advertisement and campaign, while still effective, may only reach a small group of the desired targets.

However, in his paper *Reflections on Music and Propaganda* (2014), the musicologist Luis Velasco-Pufleau asserts that although music is not always the first media we think of when contemplating propaganda, it is an extremely effective channel that has proven to influence popular culture throughout human history. Each musical genre can reach a specific demographic within a few minutes. Political meaning is hard to pin down in a song, nonetheless, even when focusing on lyrics, because people react as much or more to the sensation given by a song as to the manifest meanings of its words.

A musical piece can contain several meanings, depending on the historical context of its creation, the aesthetic and ideological discourses surrounding the piece or how was it supposed to be received and for whom, as well a set of signs formed according to the author's intention. Velasco-Pufleau (2014) says that by recognizing these signs, the listener is induced into a specific reading of the world, which might lead to the feeling of certain proximity or distance, and ultimately to the listener's intervention into the situation staged by the author. Moreover, in the case of dedicatedly propagandistic purposes, the efforts of the interested political powers are also involved to fix or to maintain at least one of the possible meanings, in a discipline where products are inherently polysemic.

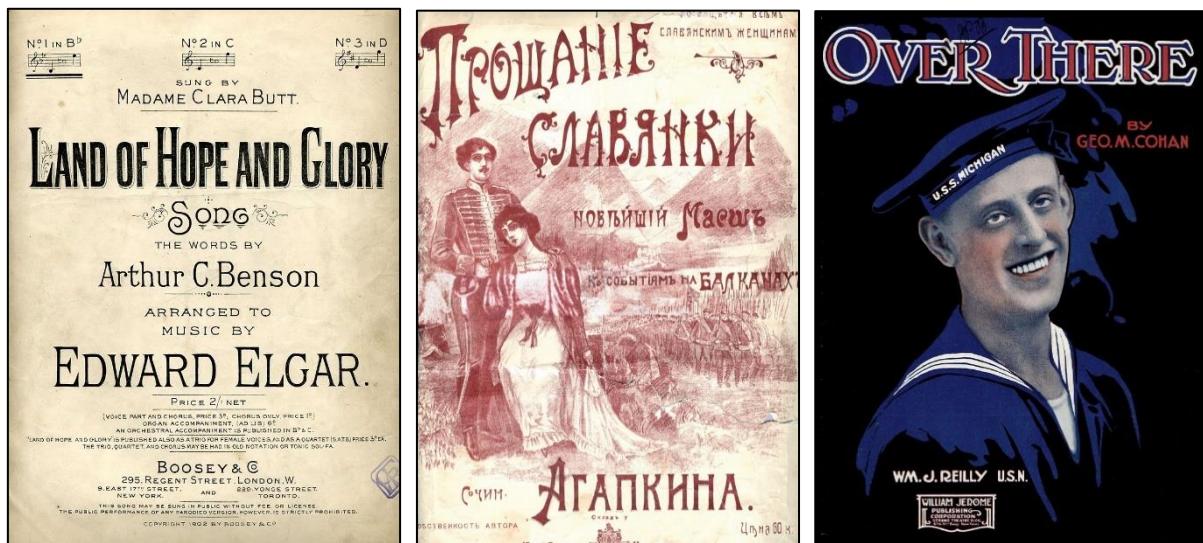
“Controlling music’s polysemic nature is a primary concern in its use for the purposes of propaganda. To be effective, propaganda must remove from music, or any art, what Rancière calls the aesthetic distance. It means the capacity of actors to interpret musical works differently from what the artist originally intended” (Velasco-Pufleau, 2014).

Exaltation of patriotism

A form of music that focuses the most on propaganda is patriotic and war music from any country. Patriotic songs are supposed to boost our morale in times of crisis and rekindle pride in what every nation represents.

Land of Hope and Glory (Elgar, 1902), is a song composed for the coronation of King Edward VII of the United Kingdom, that is still played in some national homages. *Farewell of Slavianka* (Agapkin, 1912) was a Russian march dedicated to honoring the wives of Bulgarian men who went to fight in the First Balkan War. *Over There* (Cohan, 1917) was designed to brainwash young American men to make them enlist for World War I. All these songs and all of this same type, together with the several covers of each countries' anthems performed by famous artists, are designed to provoke an emotion of either respect and patriotism for one's country.

“They make us feel good about our country, even when our country does something we believe is wrong. [...] It's no coincidence that patriotic music has accompanied virtually every war the U.S. has been involved in, save perhaps for the Afghan conflict” (von Rhein, 2010).



F19: *Land of Hope and Glory*, *Farewell of Slavianka* and *Over There*'s music posters

Notwithstanding, if we extend the term “patriotism” and consider it as whatever generates a sentiment of belonging to a society, an institution, or an organization, we can assert not all patriotic songs are about the praise of one's land. These other anthems find use as focuses to unite people with the same cause, to strengthen their links in times of

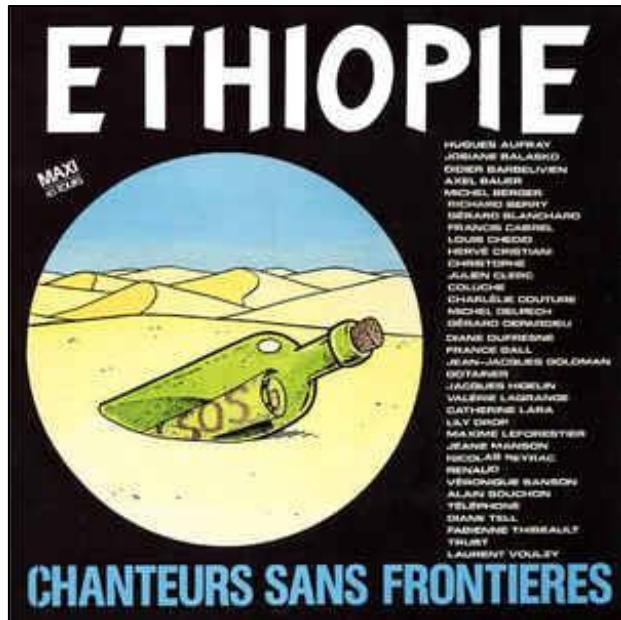
revolution, or to give meaning to the actions and objectives of the sides of a war, among others. *Bella ciao* (1800), a popular Italian song that was adopted as the symbol of the resistance against fascism, or *L'Internationale* (de Geyter, 1888), an originally French song considered nowadays the official hymn of the labour movement, are the most famous pieces within its type.

The politicization of humanitarian causes

Humanitarian songs and their videoclips have been repeatedly accompanied since their beginnings by what Velasco-Pufleau (2014) calls the same discourses (the construction of victim figures), moral injunctions (the need of saving them), and mediatized rituals (concerts or events). Its effectiveness is dependent on transforming political issues into moral issues. They hide the historical and geopolitical root of the problems and present their intentions as morally good, mandatory, and urgent. “The ritualization of musical works, [...] constitutes one of the most powerful means of using music as a source of propaganda through its capacity to trigger emotions and to construct imaginary scenarios”, he writes.

Humanitarian songs encourage help for the less fortunate overlooking the responsible in conflicts or the management of crises while generating a fiction that paints the affected people as powerless subjects of neoliberal charity. Political powers maintain the illusion that citizens can do something to change the world through the spectacle of the media, and donors become consumers of other's poverty, converted into benign saviors through the commercial exploitation of moralistic music (Velasco-Pufleau, 2014).

A proof of the supposed Western moral superiority is the charitable aid during the hunger caused by the Ethiopian civil war between 1983 and 1985. In late 1984 the singer Manu Dibango gathered a group of African musicians to record *Tam Tam pour l'Éthiopie* and in early 1985, the French singers Renaud and Valérie Lagrange formed the association Chanteurs sans frontières. Their goal was to help victims of famine in every corner of the world, with no consideration whatsoever of political or social order. As we can ascertain, music played an important role in the symbolic legitimization of this humanitarian action and the vision of the world that it promoted (Velasco-Pufleau, 2014).



F20: Chanteurs sans frontières' vinyl disc

This victimization transformed the donor public's view of the armed conflict in Ethiopia from a political one to a moral one and the unforeseen consequences of humanitarian action into a moral issue. That is the reason why many individuals have raised concerns about the way the aforementioned works reduce recipient populations to the status of martyrs who are destitute of all individuality and ability to act.

These kinds of songs and concerts have been used as well to raise funds and to legitimate philanthropic action as a response to political and economic issues in other mediated catastrophes, including Hurricane Katrina (2005), the Haitian earthquake (2010) or the Philippines Haiyan typhoon (2013).

Addressing social problems

There are also musical works with an assumed political and ethical dimension that are not associated with a propagandistic purpose, but plainly with the artist's desire to voice their opinion and concerns or to tackle a certain social situation they are living.

Where Is The Love (Black Eyed Peas, 2003) is a piece that targets the issues of gun violence, racism, and discrimination, where they ask their listeners why the love has disappeared, everyone only cares about money and their selfish desires and do not want to help each other. *This is America* (Childish Gambino, 2018) is also a powerful take on

gun violence, racism, and police brutality in America. Its music video represents some of the issues which had happened during news recent to its release.

Same Love (Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, 2012) celebrates LGTB culture. Macklemore tells the tale of his uncles who struggled because of their sexuality, and how he wanted to stop the homophobia in the hip-hop community. Through the lyrics, both rappers say that just because you are straight does not mean you cannot support homosexuality.

As a last couple of samples, *Mother's Daughter* (Miley Cyrus, 2019) or *Nightmare* (Halsey, 2019) are a commentary on the challenges of being a woman in today's society, expressing the anger their singers feel. They promote empowerment and talk about the oppression they feel and the long battle for actual equality we have yet to keep fighting as a society.

5.4.2 Cinema

As present as music in our daily lives, there are cinema and television, which can be even more powerful when it comes to delivering a message. Since their creation, films have been the perfect vehicle for shaping popular opinion, largely because seeing a movie provides such a stimulating, shared experience. As the political science professor Dan O'Meara says:

“We tend to forget [...] the pre-television age [...] when movies were the most important aspect of public entertainment that you would go, sit in the dark surrounded by hundreds of others seeing the same films across America at the same time, and all of the emotions evoked on screen were shared communally” (Quoted on Weikle, 2020)

Mixed with the constant exposition to these media we have experienced, which has become an internally ingrained part of our everyday lives, cinema has contributed greatly to the formation of our thoughts. We are audio-visual creatures, and we configure our world -whether we like it or not- through the image.

For decades, we have been sold plentiful ideas that have made us assimilate most of the historical occurrences through the lens of a camera, altered by the lenses of propaganda, which at the same time has been reproduced by the rest of the iconography in toys or

pamphlets. In this way, we as a community have created a vicious circle of manipulated information. We have assumed certain truths about history, and by repeating them over and over again we have ended up believing them because they sound convincing, and now it is incredibly difficult to get out of that framework (Altozano, 2019).

Revitalizing the identity of a nation

Cinema was highly relevant to popular culture after the war in both Germany and Italy. The German film at the end of the 1950s needed reappraisal. New light could be shed on the topic not only by dint of a careful revaluation but especially by taking a comparative and transnational perspective. Italy, on the other hand, became recognized internationally for its cinema around 1945, and despite financial and political difficulties, it developed an independent film industry of much broader scope in terms of content and aesthetics than Germany (Zimmermann, 2021, p. 4).



F21: Film posters of Rosellini's *Città Aperta* (1945) and Siodmak's *Die Ratten* (1955)

Italy also regained its national independence, and its audiences obviously appreciated engaging with national events of the most recent past. This conformed to the developing political master narratives, and cinematic events were a vehicle for political identity formation, placing the Italians on the side of the victorious powers. They appealed to the audience too, through realistic dialogue and their comic or melodramatic elements (Zimmermann, 2021, p. 5).

Still, in both countries, the Church and conservative middle-class environments met the growth of the popular sphere with reservation and resistance. Directors were also controlled by means of moral pressure and sometimes in direct legal control. In Germany,

film production, which was growing slower, was completely controlled by the respective Allied Power, in particular in the Soviet Zone, and with less regard to moral than political issues.

How the United States shaped the popular opinion

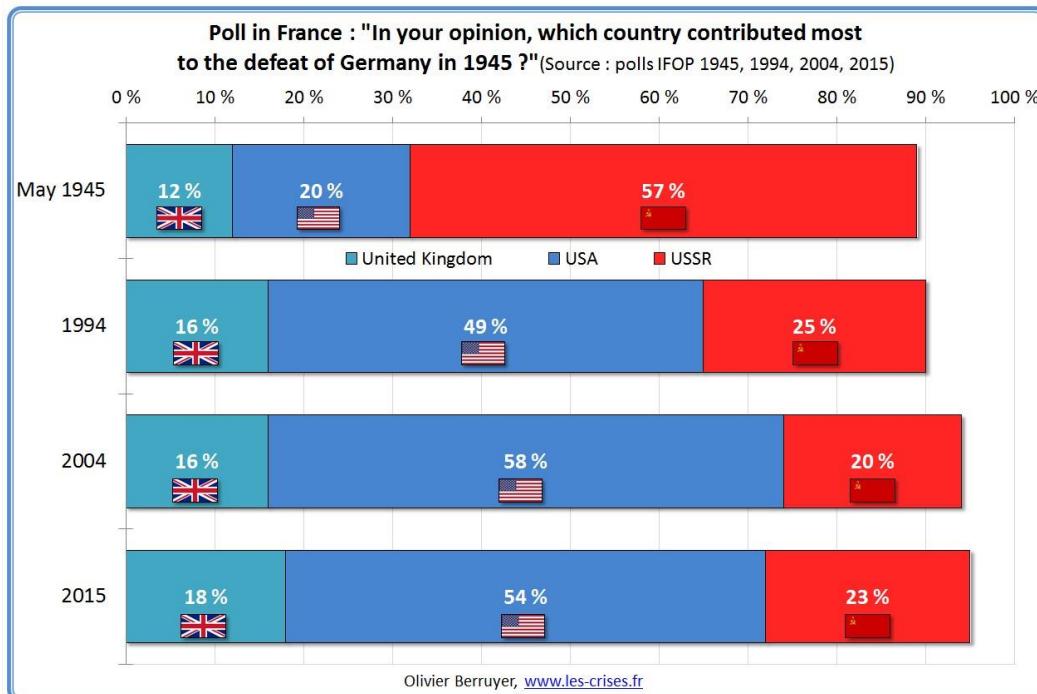
When the U.S. entered the Second World War, Hollywood also signed up. At that time a flourishing movie town, it had previously been producing trivial films made to distract and entertain. The onset of war meant that it would get into the business of persuading Americans to support the war effort of their country. Thus, the Office of War Information created a unit dedicated exclusively to Hollywood, called the Bureau of Motion Pictures.



F22: American soldiers stand next to a poster advertising a film

Historians and other academics have noted that such an arrangement was the beginning of a uniquely American mission that has continued until these days. The relationships forged between the U.S. government agencies and Hollywood during the Second World War and Cold War traced how stories about the military were and are still being told, made to glorify the American military. In the words of, Tanner Mirrles, critical political economist: “no country in the world churns out as many images of itself as the military hero [...] like the United States does. That is a unique cultural phenomenon” (Quoted on Weikle, 2020).

A shocking example that proves this is the perception we have from which were the key factors that contributed to the defeat of Hitler. The soviet side developed their own movies about that topic too, but almost nobody from the West saw them. A poll carried in France during a broad period of time, developed by the French actuary Olivier Berruyer (2019), shows how the opinion of the people has drastically changed in just half a century.



F23: Chart showing French citizens' perception about the end of the war

That narrative continued with Hollywood's approach to later conflicts, including the Vietnam War. There are many complexities in history, but the film industry often manages to find ways of making Americans the good guys and their enemies the bad guys. They will tell these stories in a way that makes them feel good about themselves, and that can be turned into a very bankable narrative for them. Not to mention, propaganda in the form of popular entertainment helps to supplant panic and doubt with pride and heroism.

Contemporary movies and series

Nowadays, political messages may be present in films as the result of either intention by the film's creator or largely unintended reflections of political and social realities, or perhaps both. Films that originate in an individual artistic vision are more likely to contain

overt or intentional political messages than big-budget, major-studio projects (Haas, Christensen and Haas, 2015, p. 26), even though research suggests that movies are most effective when they let us reach our own conclusions or at least let us think we have (Haas, Christensen and Haas, 2015, p. 31).

Modern products have opened to a wide range of genres, and while the creator's viewpoints can be -and are- expressed through any type of those, some of the works specifically deal with factual situations or use them as inspiration. These kinds of films almost always contain mistakes, historical inaccuracies, embellishments, or omissions in order to reinterpret history and package it for popular consumption or give it a personal bent. Among the most famous we could find *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976), *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008), or the fictional series *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013).

This is not only limited to those titles that fit in the political-based category. An example of these creative licenses is the movie *First Man* (2018), where its director Damien Chazelle decided to omit a scene of astronauts planting the U.S. flag on the moon. This arose some controversy, and film's star Ryan Gosling intervened in Chazelle's defence responding that the moon landing had been a "human achievement" (Barbour, 2019).



F24: Moon landing on *First Man*

5.4.3 Literature

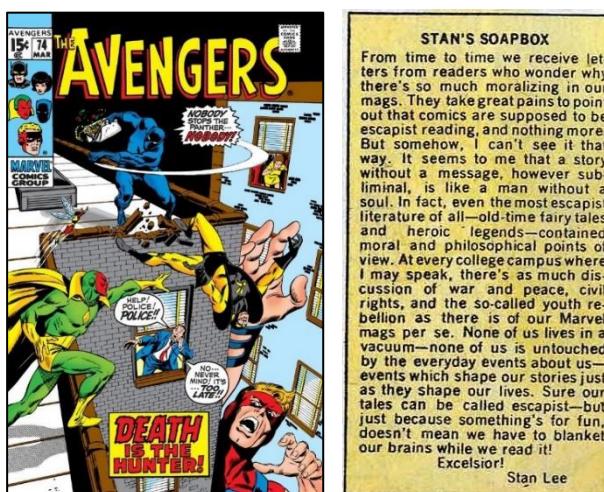
As we mentioned when talking about cinema, any work of literature is partly a product of sociological political factors, to the extent that the writer's personality has been shaped by the sociological and political environment of his time. Conversely, important works of literature or whole literary movements have had profound effects on society by setting

up or destroying taboos, conventions, and social prejudices, contributing to changes in values which in turn have brought about social and political change. John D. Lindberg puts it as “the relationship between literature and politics is a multilane freeway with traffic flowing freely in both directions” (1968, p. 163).

Using books to communicate a certain concept is one of the oldest methods in human history, and not only as a purely expository mean but also as an exercise with an artistic and subjective intention. A manuscript is the work of a single consciousness that speaks and expresses its experience of the world in an individual, inimitable manner. Throughout the years, great thinkers and philosophers of our world have published manifestos or redactions that captured their notions and beliefs. The most iconic examples are perhaps *The Republic* (Plato, circa 375 BC), *The Social Contract* (Rousseau, 1762), or *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848). All these documents reflect the suggestions of its respective authors on how to rule a society or handle its economy.

Complaints on mainstream literature

Products of a more casual nature are may also contain an ideological lesson. Similar to what is happening to video games these days, disappointed comic book readers would point out to Marvel that their magazines were supposed to be escapist reading, and nothing more. In the pages of *The Avengers* #74 (1970), the scriptwriter Stan Lee answered them stating that in his opinion, a story without a message was like a man without a soul. He then highlighted that even the most escapist literature, like old-time fairy tales or heroic legends, contained moral and philosophical points of view.



F25: Cover and Stan's Soapbox on *Avengers* #74

“None of us lives in a vacuum -none of us is untouched by the everyday events about us- events which shape our stories just as they shape our lives. Sure, our tales can be called escapist -but just because something’s for fun, doesn’t mean we have to blanket our brains while we read it!” (Lee, 1970).

Representing the excluded

In his essay *Literature and Politics*, Yong Jie (2015) tells us how politics lean towards the macroscopic, and consequently, how the individual voice is often reduced to the background by the louder cry of the collective. Literature, on the other hand, actively listens for the voice of the individual. It seeks to portray humanity in all its endless variations, and those at the margins of society are those to whom writers have tried to depict most of the times. And thus, by placing the individual at its heart, literature prevents the marginalization of some segments of the population.

Furthermore, literature is able to mobilize action in a way that political pamphlets or journalistic articles, for all their eloquence, cannot. It can restore graspable reality to abstract terms, familiarizing people with the human consequences of universal afflictions like civil war or poverty which had been barely comprehended until then.

Among the social novels written by Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837) outraged the British public in its depiction of the impoverished Victorian underclass and prompted the closure of the horrific slum of Jacob’s Island. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was a best-seller in America and Britain right after its publication. It awakened in the citizens of that nations the moral reprehensibility of subjugating persons who were human too, who could possess (like Uncle Tom, the protagonist of the book) a nobility of spirit unmatched by their masters. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) was hugely important in generating momentum for the campaign against King Leopold’s murderous regime in Congo. All these works, in naming and portraying the world, succeeded finally in changing it, by providing emotional urgency to what was abstract intellectual apprehension.

“To know one should do something is quite different from feeling one must do something. [...] Literature provides images to political captions, bringing the plight of the marginalized firmly into sight, making it much harder to cast them out of mind” (Jie, 2015).

Literature keeps us vigilant

There is a deep link between language and thought. The clarity of thought in a society is directly linked to its clarity of language. This is why the role literature plays in vivifying language is of absolute importance. It is necessary for the continued civic participation in politics, and it takes on even greater significance when one considers the tendency of politics to distort language. This, satirized in George Orwell's *1984* (1949) by the slogans "War is Peace", "Ignorance is Strength", is shown in the present reality. An example was the insistence of Bush's administration that "enhanced interrogation" was different from torture.

If we cannot name the world anymore, we can no longer understand it, criticize it, or work to change it. The decline of language entails a decline of our critical faculties, an incapacity for political debate. "It renders us ripe for conformity with the will of the politicians who wield power", says Jie (2015). Emphasizing the independence and vibrancy of thought, literature plays a key role in the continuation of democracy.

Last but not least, we must talk about the tendency in politics towards a bipolarity of vision, a view of the world in black and white. Does one belong to the right or the left? Should abortion be legalized or not? In a 2001 Joint Session of Congress and the people, Bush declared "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists". That predisposition to reducing the world into black and white lives without the need to wrestle with the scale of greys. Literature, repudiates this vision, seeking instead to perceive and portray human reality in all its complexity (Jie, 2015).



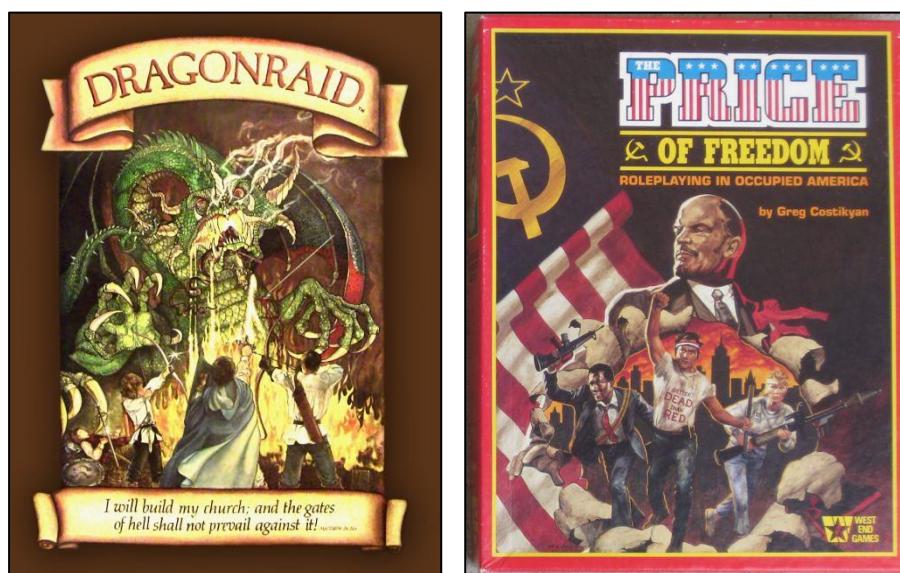
F26: President George W. Bush addresses Joint Session of Congress

5.4.4 Roleplaying games

To a lesser extent, indoctrination has also seen some space on tabletop games. An example of this is *DragonRaid* (Dick Wulf, 1984), with the primary focus to help Christians to become discipled in the teachings of the Bible, being particularly pitched towards evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity. It was not the only role-playing game of its sorts, since a Swedish diocese called Västerås Stift actually commissioned a whole series of RPGs.

It increased its notoriety within the hobby due to one of its mechanics, which consisted of memorizing and reciting Bible verses to call down powers in times of need. The game was criticized both by secular role-players (for its overtly proselytizing content) and by some well-meaning but mistaken Christian organizations that condemned it as “having evil content” (Appelcline, 2021).

Another example is *The Price of Freedom* (West End Games, 1986) a militaristic RPG that received considerable criticism in Europe, where it was seen as a high tide of American jingoism and insensitivity. The way that Soviets are depicted is questionable, and only American resistance members have Hero Points while only Soviets and collaborationists endure panic. “A conservative game designed by a non-conservative designer wishing to sell games to conservatives. [...] It] is clearly and explicitly meant to be played by conservative U.S. players living in 1986” (Pettersson, 2015).



F27: *DragonRaid* and *The Price of Freedom*'s rulebook covers

6. Case analysis

6.1 1979 Revolution: Black Friday

6.1.1 The story

Synopsis

1979 Revolution: Black Friday is a very brief yet shockingly intense video game, released in 2016 by the company iNK Stories. Along the gameplay, which lasts between two or three hours, depending on how thorough is the player, we experiment a representation of part of the events that took place during the Iranian Revolution, where its citizens overthrew the last Shah (king) and his government was replaced with an Islamic Republic.

Main characters

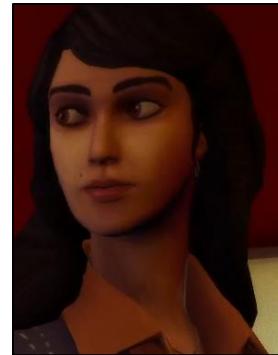
At the beginning of the game, we are informed that the protagonist of the title, Reza, has been charged with treason and conspiring to carry out a series of attacks against the Islamic Republic of Iran, and is forced to hide.



Reza Shirazi

Reza Shirazi is an eighteen-year-old Iranian photographer. He has recently arrived in Tehran, its natal city, after spending a year living in Germany. Reza descends from a well-connected and wealthy family who are loyal to the Shah, and he does not want to be implicated or take sides. He discovers his photos are used to rally the revolution against the Shah, nonetheless, and sees himself inevitably dragged to the revolution without really wanting it and against his family's wishes.

Bibi Golestan is the leader of the student front and is also the voice of the revolution. She sees every citizen of Iran as equal, and wants a country in harmony, without quarrels of people with different ideologies. She believes in the strength of a united crowd, that only if they put aside their differences, they will beat their oppressors and bring about real change.



Bibi Golestan



Hajj Agha

Asadollah Lajevardi, renamed as Hajj Agha by the inmates of Evin Prison, is Reza's interrogator, and the warden of the place. He is a man who used to work for the same cause as Reza, but now his duty is to ensure the prevalence of the doctrine of the Islamic Republic. He spent seven years in prison because he killed one of Shah's officials.



Babak Azadi



Ali Shirazi

Ali Shirazi is Reza's cousin and is an integrant of the Mujaheddin, a violent revolutionary branch that are considered terrorists by the government. He is the counterpart of Babak and continually encourages you to use violence, arguing it is the only way to achieve one's objective, since peaceful movements will not get Iran anywhere.



Hossein Shirazi

Hossein Shirazi is Reza's older brother, and also a member of SAVAK, the service of intelligence and interior security of the Iranian government. Everything he does is with the objective of taking care of their family and its reputation because he thinks revolutionaries do not

stand a chance and the only opportunity of survival is to obey. He thinks Reza is disrespecting the family and putting them at risk.



Abbas is a man who has endured persecution and torture for his vision of a free Iran, an Iran that does not kowtow to the Americans, the Soviets or even Allah. He is the leader and the brains of the revolution, and his ideals are that he does not want Iran to trade one master for another. According to Hajj Agha, who claims he used to be his friend, Abbas is a master of manipulation.

Abbas

From what we can observe, the game avoids stereotyping its characters, which makes them more vivid and real, and focuses on taking inspiration from actual people who lived the events or at least plausible profiles so it can deliver a better and more immersive experience.

Plot

The prologue of the game is very short. We can see the protagonist, Reza, revealing photos hidden in a safe house in 1980. Suddenly, Bibi opens the door of the room and they must grab plans and flee, but the police appear sooner than expected and Reza gets arrested.

In the first act, we observe that Reza is being subject to an interrogation, where Hajj Agha is asking him to tell everything he knows, starting with Babak. There, we have the first flashback to 1978, where we can see Reza talking with Babak, who is giving Reza a cassette with revolutionary propaganda about a new Iran for everyone. Reza does not want to take part in Babak's endeavours, and we can choose if we want to take or reject the cassette.

In the next scene, we are transported to a demonstration, where the game shows us the problems Iran is immersed in and how palpable the tension is. When we get to the front, we find Ali, and then meet Bibi and Abbas, who talks about how the Shah came to the power illegitimately. On stage there are also representatives of all the factions of the revolution, supporting Abbas on an agreed truce.

In the middle of the speech, soldiers appear to disperse the crowds and beat Abbas up, who also gets stabbed by a traitor of the men on the stage. After that, you must flee and help cure Abbas' wounds. After that, the flashback ends and we return to the prison where Hajj Agha appears with Hossein, wounded and tied up, and starts to torture him as the questioning continues.

The second act starts with another flashback, where Babak is guiding Reza to the place the revolutionaries are hidden: Radio City Cinema. There, we know that Bibi has been publishing Reza's pictures for the revolution without him knowing, and Reza claims that his pictures have not agendas.

Once inside, Bibi brings you to Abbas, who asks you to investigate who was the traitor who stabbed him, while everyone is packing to flee from the place and change since it seems they have been discovered. We have to walk through the theatre talking with people and looking for clues and create a fake ID, and we can see the disputes within all different parts interested in the fall of the Shah. In this act, the player sees the inevitability of being dragged into the conflict, and the game slowly instils in them the necessity of taking part.



F28: Members of the revolution arguing about their ideals

Suddenly, the police attack the place and everyone has to evacuate and destroy all evidence. Abbas compels you to accuse someone as the traitor, and you must choose without enough evidence. The flashback ends and we see ourselves again in Evin Prison, where Hajj Agha shows us a picture of the corpse of the man we just accused and we are told he was not the traitor. He tells Reza, who saw himself as an innocent man, that his pictures are what justified the killing of this person.

In the third and last act, we retake the story on Radio City Cinema, where Reza has been arrested and is being checked by some officers who ask for his cousin Ali. There appears Hossein, who takes him, reprimands and hits him and then brings him home to their parents.

Once we are at Shirazi's residence, we see the position of Reza's parents towards what is happening on the streets. His mother Shirin, opposed to everything that is happening, is very worried about what people may say if they discover Reza's actions, and wants him away from Ali. His father Homayoun, instead, understands it and vouches for Reza, and we discover he used to be protesting on the streets in his youth.

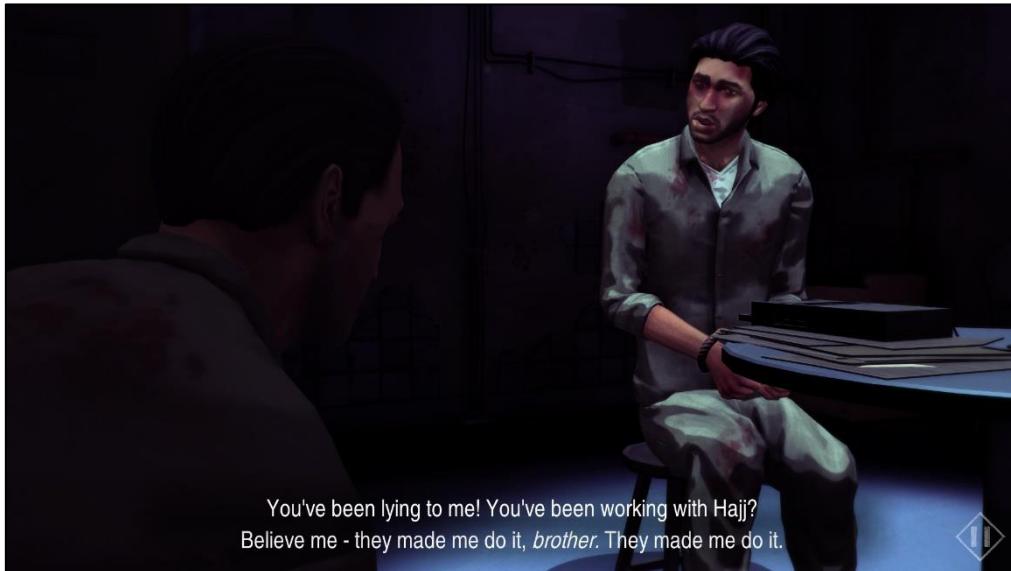
The next day, we find Ali, who tells us the Shah has declared martial law. After that, we find ourselves inside a huge demonstration, and we get to the front while taking some photos, at the same time we can observe people are becoming more bellicose. Once we get to the front, a lot of soldiers' trucks start to appear, and they claim protesters are on the streets illegally. Soldiers start throwing smoke grenades and when they see people do not move, they start shooting and massacring people.

When trying to run away with Babak, Bibi and Ali, who has been seriously wounded, you find Hossein. He points a gun to Ali, who points his against Hossein. On a moment of hesitation, you end up in a crossed fire and must choose who you save. If you choose to save Ali, Hajj Agha reveals Hossein has been collaborating with him in the questioning, cuts his ropes. After Reza refuses to keep talking anymore, Hossein strangles him and the game ends.



F29: Hossein strangling his brother Reza

If you choose to save Hossein, he still reveals he was collaborating with your captor, but starts yelling that he cannot keep doing it and begs for him to stop. The reaction of Hajj Agha is to shoot Hossein and point a gun at Reza's head, asking for Bibi's location. Reza refuses, and the game ends.



F30: Hossein confessing his betrayal

Whatever option the player chooses, Ali ends dead anyway, and Babak receives a bullet and dies as well. Reza flees with Bibi and manages to find a hideout, from where they will keep procuring plans and masterminding the revolution. The start of the game where you get arrested is set two years later after this incident.

6.1.2 The world

Environment

The whole story of *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* happens in the city of Tehran, the capital of Iran, and is inspired by the real events which happened one the Iranian Revolution, during the years comprised between 1978 and 1980. The game shows us a repressed Iran, where people are suffering and are sick of its corrupt king, the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, considered a western puppet.

It mentions that in the 1970s, Iran's income inequality gap was the widest in the world. The economic recession had devastating effects on the working class as the rate of unemployment ballooned. Besides, they are one of the biggest exporters of oil in the

world yet their people had to stand in line to fill up their tanks, due to United States' engagement in its management.

On the other hand, the game exposes that free speech was punishable by imprisonment or death, even if it was expressed metaphorically through means of entertainment such as movies. The Shah demanded anyone who questioned his rule to be imprisoned, tortured or sentenced to death, and made a lot of political prisoners. Not only that, but the newspapers were corrupt and untruthful, so people started doing their own journals and spread pamphlets their own pamphlets, in the case of the game using Reza's photos.

As the tension increases, burnings and indiscriminate destruction of government institutions and property became a rampant form of expression. Public spaces start to become the battleground for free speech between the governing regime and the people, and we start to see people burning the portrait of the Shah, which the game tells us was ever-present and on mandatory display at every government office, textbook and business establishment.

Factions of the revolution

The citizens who wanted Iran under an Islamic Republic supported Ayatollah Khomeini and fostered a strong anti-American sentiment. At the time of the revolution, Khomeini supporters were intolerant to the United States' cultural influences and its endorsement of the Shah's reform policies and they supplied high weaponry to the regime that was used to repress the masses. Over the years, they became a symbol of the West's stronghold on Iran, and when protests turned violent rioters started to destroy the U.S. made products.

The citizens who wanted a free Iran followed Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who did not believe religious leaders should be involved in government affairs and condemned the occupation of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. He also criticized Khomeini's regime for perverting the nature of Islam and hindering the progress of the Iranian people and believed that no government could ever be forced upon the people, no matter its moral agenda.

The People's Mujaheddin of Iran was an organization formed by some members of the Freedom Movement of Iran, who left their party believing it was too moderate and ineffective. The Mujaheddin was heavily influenced by the approach of Ali Shariati, a

political ideologue that wanted to combine modern socialism with traditional Shiism. They had a radical political conception of Islam, and opposed the rule of the Shah and accused him of corruption and oppression.

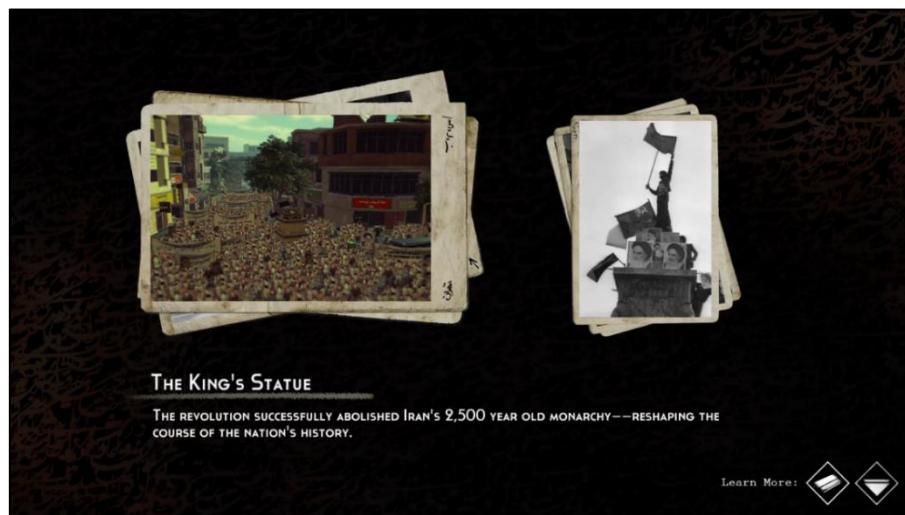
The Tudeh Party, the Party of the Masses of Iran, originated as a Marxist-Leninist party with nationalist ideals to appeal to the masses. They fought for democracy, constitutional and individual rights and judicial integrity. They were anti-fascist, anti-imperialist and anti-militarist.

The National Front of Iran was formed as a political coalition that strongly opposed the Western domination of Iran's oil assets and sought to nationalize Iran's natural resources. They wanted the reestablishment of a constitutional monarchy, freedom of political prisoners, freedom of speech and free and fair elections.

6.1.3 Gameplay mechanics

1979 Revolution: Black Friday is basically a mix of a walking simulator and a point and click, so the gameplay is pretty simple and the real weight falls on the story it is telling us. However, the game makes use of some mechanics which are worth exploring.

Since Reza is a journalist, one of the main mechanics is photographing. In some chapters of the game, we are driven through a lot of crowded demonstrations and we have the chance of taking shots at different situations occurring on the streets. Every time we capture something of relevance, a screen showing the photo we just took pops up, comparing it with the actual photo that inspired the developers.



F31: Explanation regarding a picture we have taken

This screen gives us a little bit of information about what the image contains or represents, progressively giving bits of knowledge about the Iranian Revolution. These images can be accessed at any time during the game, and provide more information about their matter.

Another mechanic we can observe are quick-time events. Even though it is the less relevant one, in some scenes of the game we have to perform a series of movements to overcome some problems, like running away from the soldiers, taking cover from shots or providing medical aid to our friends



F32: Reza taking cover from SAVAK's bullets

The last and most important mechanic is decision-making. From the beginning, the player must make a set of choices, which will compose Reza's personality along with the narrative. With Ali and Babak as its paradigms, the game is repeatedly making you choose between violence or pacifism. You can hit the police to help other demonstrators, respond with violence to aggressive people or confront whoever disagrees with you.



F33: Choosing Reza's first words when joining the revolution

In prison, you can be submissive, resilient or combative against your captor. Each of these elections, to a greater or lesser extent, will contribute to a variation on some parts of the story and will affect the ending of the game. Moreover, they serve as implicit transmitters for the point of view the developers want to convey and make subtle marks as the player is unconsciously merging with the story.

6.1.4 The message

1979 Revolution: Black Friday is, without a doubt, a game developed to expose the problems Iran had on the times of the revolution, and what motivated it. It takes the player by the hand and guides them throughout the main events that drove to the horrifying events that took place on the streets of Tehran. Acting as a sort of documentary that intends to keep its objectivity, it addresses concerns like inequality, theocracy, and the causes of anti-Americanism. On their website, iNK Stories state the product is based on first-hand testimonies of freedom fighters, witnesses and casualties that experienced those events, as well as of prisoners of the terrible Evin Prison.

Nevertheless, it serves as well to give visibility to the Iranian culture, showing us some of their traditions, typical foods of their gastronomy or giving us some knowledge of its history in brief pieces of text. In its quick walkthrough, the title not only does an astounding documental job but also sets us out an extensive number of moral dilemmas.

One that is emphasized over and over during the story is the relevance of taking part in situations of injustice, and the game does it from the eyes of a man who has always lived a comfortable life and has no personal reason to do so, especially since it may result on harm to his family. Reza is happy with his lifestyle and mentions he feels the discourses as just propaganda, just words. However, Babak advises him he will have to pick a side, even if he does not realize it at the moment. Reza must acknowledge his photos are helping the revolution. He could make them cease, but decides to stop behaving equidistantly, at the cost of putting his loved ones in danger.

Another of such dilemmas is posed to us when the soldiers break into Abbas' speech on the first demonstration in the game, where you can choose to either throw them a rock or remain still. Ali considers them enemies of Iran's people. At the same time, Babak proclaims they are workers as well, who did not have another alternative rather than enlist,

and highlights that they are all part of the same group. In the end, the game advocates for the mantra that violence generates more violence.



F34: Babak urging Reza to act

This is related to the last main message, the importance of achieving peace, respecting different perspectives and stop disputes in a society where everyone is allowed to have their unique ideology. The union creates strength, because nothing is mightier than the will of the people, and it is only by putting aside our difference that we can bring about real change. Each and every side from the revolution needs to come to terms with the others, so they can begin to suppose a problem for their oppressors, which in this title are not only the Shah and their followers, but every party that intends to rule Iran tyrannically instead of giving the power to the citizens.

6.1.5 Reception from the audience

Occidental accolades

1979 Revolution: Black Friday was well received by the critics. The review aggregator Metacritic⁶ calculated an average score of 80 out of 100 based on 25 critic reviews, and a 7.5 user score based on 76 ratings. Reviewers liked the narrative, the characters and the historical representations of the game, despite some flaws were pointed out when talking about the quick-time events and the visual quality.

⁶ See *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* on [Metacritic](#).

The video game press praised the game's depiction of violence, and how it deals with the different issues it lays out. They also found the narrative's moral ambiguity refreshing and felt that the development team being primarily Iranian added to the game's authenticity.

In November 2016, the title was featured in a UNESCO report by teacher Paul Darvasi, who has a master's degree in Educational Technology, about the impact of video games on learning about conflict resolution. He stated that the game "might be studied to determine if it can be used to support the production of historical empathy, global empathy, and ethnocultural empathy, all which contribute to the acquisition and development of intercultural understanding".

Wrangle in Iran

When *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* started gaining popularity, Iranian conservative newspaper *Kayhan* published articles branding the project as "pro-Western propaganda", and accusing its director Navid Khonsari of espionage, who as a result felt afraid to return to the country. Members of the development team were also prompted to use aliases to protect themselves, and the game's concept artist fled from Iran due to his involvement in the development (Narcisse, 2014).

Following its release, the Iranian National Foundation for Computer Games (NFCG) blocked all websites distributing the game in Iran and began an operation to gather all copies illegally distributed in the country. NFCG director Hassan Karimi stated the game has "hostile intentions and objectives", and that it may "poison the minds of the youth and young adults [...] by means of false and distorted information" (Tehran Times, 2016).

6.2 Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

6.2.1 The story

Synopsis

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare is a first-person shooter released in 2007 by Infinity Ward, and is the fourth video game from the *Call of Duty* saga. Alongside the gameplay of its single-player campaign, which lasts around five hours and a half, we experience the ultranationalism arising in Russia and the execution of the president of an unnamed country of the middle east by a radical military leader. Put in the shoes of occidental soldiers, we will have to stop the advance of these movements.

Main characters

The playable characters on the vast majority of the missions are either John “Soap” MacTavish, a sniper and demolitions expert sergeant of the British SAS, or Paul Jackson, a sergeant of the U.S. Marine Corps. Although the character of Soap has been developed in further instalments of the saga, in this one we do not know their face, their voice or their ideologies, since the camera of the game is always situated in their eyes perspective and they do not utter a single word during the whole plot.



Imran Zakhaev, called the Hero of the New Russia, used to be a weapon dealer in the Soviet Union, but now is the leader of the Ultranationalist Russian Party and the main antagonist of the title. He helps Khaled Al-Asad in his coup on the Middle East and is the mastermind behind both Russian and Arab troops.

Imran Zakhaev

Captain John Prince, with the nickname Bravo Six, is a middle-aged man who commands Soap’s squad. He follows the classic archetype of the grumpy and foul-mouthed yet charismatic and caring military officer. It was him who, as a lieutenant, shot Zakhaev and left him one-armed.



John Prince



Khaled Al-Asad

Khaled Al-Asad is the commander of the revolutionary forces in the Arabian Peninsula and, as we end up deducing, is also a pawn of Zakhaev. Al-Asad takes the power of its country after assassinating the president, alleging he was corrupt and a traitor to its people. We do not really get much more insight into him, but we can identify a few patterns similar to other Arabic villains in video games.

Plot

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare is divided into a total of eighteen missions (if we do not count the tutorial), that are performed either by a Soap or Jackson's respective teams, even though they join forces as we get close to the end.

The game starts with a short training that we as Soap must go through to demonstrate his abilities to Captain Prince, who has just recruited him. The training serves as a tutorial where we are exposed to the principal mechanics of the game. After that, they sent to retrieve a package from a cargo ship in the middle of the sea, where we face for the first time Zakhaev's men. The squad discovers a nuclear device written in Arabic, and an explosion is triggered, but they manage to escape with a helicopter when the boat is sinking. The prologue ends with Al-Asad assassinating Al-Fulani, the former president of a small but powerful Middle Eastern country, while you see it all from his perspective.

The next operation we must carry on with this soldier is an assault to a Russian village to save Nikolai, an informant of the SAS. There we are introduced to the loyalist Russian forces, which will collaborate with us during the rest of the plot. Once we save our man, we must run away from the town evading ultranationalist patrols until we successfully arrive at our extraction vehicle. In the last mission of this act, we fulfil the role of a pilot on the controls of an AC-130 plane, from where we must provide cover to captain Prince and his people.

At the same time, an attack is being performed by the U.S. Marine Corps on the aforementioned Middle Eastern country. Sergeant Jackson and their comrades assault a television set in the capital city, thinking Al-Asad is hidden there because there is a constant speech echoing on the streets. Some missions of this act involve breaking the

enemy lines to get to a stuck Abrams tank and escort it safely to the highway, but it ends with a final attack on Al-Asad's presidential palace. Despite this, the soldiers are unable to find him, and when they are about to leave a nuclear bomb is detonated and 30.000 U.S. men are blown up with it, Jackson among them.



F35: Nuclear bomb explosion seen from Jackson's vehicle

Refusing to believe Al-Asad died with the explosion, Prince, Soap and the rest of their regiment use the intelligence they have about a supposed safe house in Azerbaijan and launch one last operation there, where they finally capture and kill the terrorist. Seconds after, Prince receives a call from Zakhaev, who was supposed to be dead, and it is revealed he was the one behind everything.

The story cuts with the current timeline and transports us to the city of Pripyat, in Ukraine, in the year 1996. We find ourselves controlling a young Jhon Prince, then a lieutenant, at the side of Captain MacMillan, his superior. Dressed with camouflage uniforms, we infiltrate the city and climb to the top of a hotel from where we have an eagle's nest from where we shoot Zakhaev as he is participating in a trade. On the run from the site, MacMillan is wounded and you have to carry him, but finally both leave safe and sound.

The last act begins with an ambush to Victor Zakhaev, the son of the Russian dealer, on a joint operation with the Marine Corps and the SAS. They believe if they get him, he will provide his father's hideout. When Victor acknowledges he is going to be captured, he kills himself, and his father retaliates by taking control of a nuclear facility.

That gives rise to the next mission, where we must rescue sergeant Griggs, who has been captured near such installations. After that, they try to cut the installation of electricity but it unavoidably ends with the ultranationalists launching missiles to the United States East Coast. That is why we must infiltrate the nuclear installation to cancel the launch, and after a fierce battle the occidental soldiers arrive in the control room on time to stop the disaster, but there are no signs of the leader of the ultranationalists.

Finally, on our way outside the establishment, we must face a bloody persecution. When we think we are about to lose them, the road explodes and the plan gets screwed up. Imran Zakhaev enters the room and their soldiers begin murdering everyone but taking advantage of a momentary distraction you manage to kill him and save the day before passing away. The last image we see is loyalist Russians arriving to provide aid.



F36: Zakhaev and their men

6.2.2 The world

Environment

The story of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is set in the year 2011, and while it takes ideas from actual conflicts and the clash of the featured armies is something that has occurred several times, the events are situated over a completely made-up scenario. For this reason, we will not consider it to be portraying a historical moment.

The different operations take place in various locations. Soap's training is set on the United Kingdom, but we quickly move to the Bearing Strait for the cargo ship mission. Notwithstanding, they could be set anywhere since these locations do not affect at all the outcome of the events. It happens something similar with Azerbaijan or Russia. We see forest and countryside landscapes, but we can only recognize where are we based on what we are told.

The part of Jackson happens completely in the nameless country in the Middle East. We do not know which is it, but we could assume it is either Saudi Arabia or Yemen if we rely on the locations shown on the cinematics between levels. While the action is being developed there, we can see that the screen has applied the typical sandy filter American movies always put when they show an African or Arab country. Military shooters tend to use this colour palette, but even the other locations have a little bit more vibrant hue.



F37: Brown filter on Arabic city

The most relevant localization on the game is Ukraine, where we have the flashback in Pripyat, a ghost city in the outskirts of Chernobyl. It is the only mission that is set in a real place, which gives an interesting turn on the plot because connects it to our world through a historical event and allows the game to acquire some realism.

Something interesting to point out is that even though we are continuously visiting populations, let it be small villages or big cities, we never see citizens. They are just combat scenarios stuffed up with soldiers, devoid of life or ambient, so they look more like battlefields than anything else. In general, all the environments are pretty militaristic

and focused to provide a full soldier-like immersion, so avoids intertwining with anything that could distort this atmosphere.

Armies taking part in the dispute

Middle eastern revolutionaries are a separatist group that we see seizing the power through a coup at the beginning of the game. Led by Khaled Al-Asad, they have extreme anti-Western views and want to reclaim their prosperity and freedom, which they say to be in the hands of the foreign oppressors. They are reckless and religious zealots that believe in their cause and are convinced they are doing the right thing.

Russian ultranationalists seek to restore Russia to its Soviet-era glamour. According to the plot, Zakhaev took advantage of the turmoil to profit from nuclear proliferation and used his new wealth to lure soldiers from the Soviet Army to form his ultranationalist party. Combining forces with the Arabs, they are the antagonist forces of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, the most recurrent U.S. enemies, with the shift that this time they are working together.

Russian loyalists, instead, want ultranationalists to fall and cease their violent activities, and that is why they are allied with the West. Apart from that, the title itself does not give us a lot of information about these factions it introduces, but we do know quite a bit about the two playable ones.

The Marine Corps 1st Force Reconnaissance Company is one of the United States Marine Corps' special operations capable forces and supplies essential elements of military intelligence to the command element of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force. They are responsible for operating independently behind enemy lines performing unconventional special operations, in support of conventional warfare. Their missions and tasks have a focus on primarily supporting Marine expeditionary and amphibious operations.

The 22nd British Special Air Service Regiment specializes in several roles including counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, direct action and covert reconnaissance. Much of the information about the SAS is highly classified, and the unit is not commented on by either the British government or the Ministry of Defense due to the secrecy and sensitivity of its operations. They are under the operational control of the Director of Special Forces.

6.2.3 Gameplay mechanics

Since *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is of the purest first-person shooter type, the predominant mechanics are running, taking cover, throwing grenades and firing a varied repertoire of firearms, that go from simple handguns to thermal-imaging TV operators. There are some stages that require the usage of stealth techniques, such as crawling, using silenced guns or a pair of night-vision goggles, but they are not developed further enough to be analysed on their own.



F38: Using a Javelin to destroy enemy tanks

We believe it is safe to say that, in the end, the mechanics in this product do not bear much narrative or political impact. At least, besides the fact you must kill a great number of people in order to overcome each level, which is true that ends turning what initially were people into faceless shooting targets.

6.2.4 The message

We may not detect it at a first glance, but apart from being designed to create a thrilling and dynamic experience, this title bears a great number of political implications, which go unnoticed due to its warlike nature.

The main one we have identified is the effort it takes to distinguish the American and British soldiers from Arab and the majority of Russian soldiers. In other words, the game

clearly states who are on the “good” and the “bad” sides, and takes advantage of all the cultural influence we have been receiving in the last decades to give drive to this discourse. “It is a worldview where we base our moral judgements of actions completely on the pre-determined morality of the person carrying those actions out” (Geller, 2019).

The speech pronounced by Al-Asad talks about him wanting freedom and prosperity, that their former governors were slaving them, and that their cause is fair. In the beginning, they look like sensible words. Nevertheless, Al-Asad makes a twist and starts talking about how cooperation with foreigners is what brought the country to disaster, somehow it is turned into a threat: Arabs are vengeful, want to attempt against what we as a society has built and their fanatic leaders want to snatch our well-being. They have been blinded by their hate and the only thing we can do is to strike them before they are too powerful.

Furthermore, it does not simply stop there but executes a brutal task of generalization and dehumanization of the enemy. We see this for the first time on the cargo ship mission, just after the tutorial, which is called “Expendable crew”. We are talking about people, but they are enemies, hence they can be killed without consideration whenever it is needed, and the only casualties that matter are the ones in your army. On another mission, where we cover our allies bombarding their persecutors from a plane, we are praised with laughs or jubilant expressions, such as “Wow!”, “Nice death!” or “You got him!”.



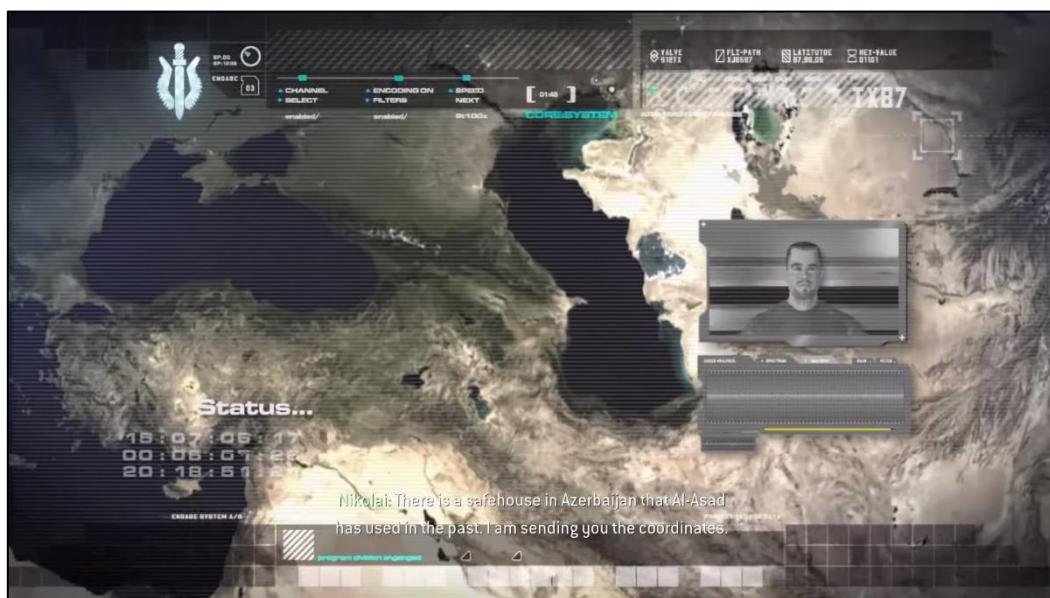
F39: Pilot praising your aim

This connects with a second idea the game is constantly emphasizing, a praise of the glory, patriotism and the camaraderie of the field, seen only on the ally lines. War is so cool and occidental soldiers are so tough, and everything they do is for the greater good

and to protect their beautiful nations. With the premise “we take care of our own”; they devastate whole hamlets looking for someone in specific, but they present it as if it is the most logical option.

One thing that makes it stand out from the generic military-based entertainment is that in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* an army of Russian allies does not only make an appearance but also play a very important role. They are a key factor when it comes to defeating Zakhaev and surviving their attack on the last part of the story, and that brings a breath of fresh air to the genre.

Not everything has to be subject to criticism, though. We must not forget that this video game takes most of its inspiration from actual warfare, so it is normal that some of the classic messages we have seen in recruiting propaganda to end up expressed in the gameplay that romanticizes these horrible experiences. It is quite sure the developers did not want to present some of the aforementioned ideas but simply provide a fun time. However, the resulting product drips pro-westernism and falls back in the usual tropes.



F40: Satellite view of the Middle East

6.2.5 Reception from the audience

An average campaign with an amazing multiplayer

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare was acclaimed universally on the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC versions and according to Metacritic⁷, who gave it their Must-Play badge. In

⁷ See *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* on [Metacritic](#).

general, its story got a considerable amount of praise, with critics giving favourable opinions about the high quality of that campaign. It was said to be too linear but that it contributed to part of its charm (Howarth, 2007). People agreed it had contributed to perfecting the shooter genre, and despite some of them considered its brevity one of its biggest flaws, but where they made special emphasis on its terrific multiplayer (Moses, 2007).

But not everything was appreciation. The British magazine *Xbox World 360* stated it was smoke and mirrors and a host of cheap tricks, commenting on the notion that the game did not revolutionize the genre at all. The Finnish magazine *Pelit* remarked that the structure of the single-player game should have been improved and that barging from one presumed checkpoint to the next throughout the whole campaign was becoming an obsolete method. Very few people talked about the message of the game, with the exception of GamesRadar, which put the game in a high position but did not fail to mention how incongruous and vague is the presentation of the enemies you are facing (GamesRadar, 2007).

An astounding welcome

The title was a contender on a lot of awards galas and won the prize in remarkably important categories. The most significant was Game of the Year by the Game Awards 2007, but we must highlight the Console Game of the Year, Action Game of the Year, and Overall Game of the Year by the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences. Among other competitions, the BAFTA gave it Best Gameplay of the Year, Best Story and Character of the Year, and People's Choice Game of the Year (BBC, 2007).

Overall, it may be because we have only focused on the single-player section or because we have failed to notice some important features other critics caught, but we have not got at all the feeling most players appear to have obtained from this experience. It is a solid product, that decently accomplishes its purpose, but as far as we are concerned it might be slightly overrated.

6.3 Bioshock

6.3.1 The story

Synopsis

BioShock is a mix of an action and horror first-person shooter published in 2007 by Irrational Games, and it is the first of its saga. In it, we control an unnamed character that arrives at a desolate city under the sea called Rapture, who has to look for any vehicle that can bring him to the mainland. The problem is that it seems all of its citizens have been driven insane. Through its ten-hour campaign, we get to visit the most important places of the city and we uncover bit by bit the history behind its creation and its fall and all the political and economic intrigues behind it.

Main characters

The protagonist of the game is Jack, a man whose only words we hear are a sentence at the beginning of the game. Apart from that, and since the perspective is always the first person, we do not know his appearance, and do not have any hint of his personality either. As the plot progresses, we are revealed that he has been genetically modified to be a super-human and that he is the son of Andrew Ryan.



Andrew Ryan

Andrew Ryan is the founder and ruler of Rapture, a man with controversial yet firm ideals that believes in a society based on the work of the men and the merits achieved with the sweat of their brow. He is the main antagonist of the first half of the game because he is convinced that you are an agent of the CIA or the KBG that has been sent to retrieve his secrets and interfere with his plans.



Brigid Tenenbaum

Brigid Tenenbaum used to work on concentration fields alongside doctor Mengele, without ever bothering about the moral implications of her experiments. Upon arriving in Rapture, she helped with the discovery of the ADAM, and she also created the Little Sisters. After involuntarily taking part in the downfall of the city, she starts experiencing remorse for her acts. She represents the archetypical amoral Nazi scientist.

Frank Fontaine is the main antagonist of the game. He is a crime lord who was presumed dead and the main reason behind Rapture's collapse. He used to be an important smuggler and a hustler, who took advantage of the freedom the city offered to accumulate power and influence, which converted him into Andrew Ryan's archenemy. Using Atlas as an alter ego, he heightened the displeasure of the masses to provoke a civil war.



Frank Fontaine

Plot

BioShock starts with a short cinematic where we see Jack sitting on a plane that crashes into the Atlantic Ocean. Weirdly but luckily enough, and being the only survivor, he manages to swim towards a nearby lighthouse that contains a small submarine. Considering there is nothing more we can do, we take the vehicle, which activates its automatic pilot and transports us to the spectacular city of Rapture.



F41: First impression of Rapture

When the vessel is arriving at the end of the journey, Jack receives a call on the radio it has attached, from a man who identifies himself as Atlas. Guiding you through the streets and nooks of the place, he requests your help to save his family, who have been captured by Andrew Ryan. In this first contact, we start getting immersed in the world presented, and we see it is filled with crazy beings called Splicers that try to kill you at first sight, with little to no humanity remaining. From that, we get the sensation that Atlas is one of the few people who has not succumbed to madness.

Traversing some iconic places of the town, such as the port and the medic pavilion, we begin to understand what the city was and how it operates now. We are told about the ADAM, a substance that can genetically rewrite the human DNA, which gives superhuman abilities to its user. We encounter the Little Sisters, the creatures assigned to harvest it from the corpses; and the Big Daddies, the ironclad warriors of Rapture whose only job is to protect these girls. The first time, Atlas advises Jack to kill the Little Sister to harvest her ADAM for himself, but Tenenbaum, who has begun to develop a maternal instinct, overhears this and begs him to spare all children he finds.

Eventually, we work our way to the location where Atlas' family is kept, but Ryan destroys it before Jack can reach it. Infuriated, Atlas' only goal becomes for Jack to murder Ryan, and we have to go to his mansion fighting through Ryan's army of Splicers. Again, we are shown key zones for Rapture's functioning, like its underwater forest or the cultural centre. There we meet some of those who were once its most important personalities, which have now become deranged, who disclose the player pieces of the story and force Jack to overcome different challenges.



F42: Lone Big Daddy on the forest of Arcadia

When we manage to arrive at Andrew Ryan's office, he is casually playing golf. Through a cinematic, he assures he was fully aware of Atlas' plan and explains that Jack is his illegitimate child. He was taken from his mother by Fontaine, who placed him out of Ryan's reach on the surface. He was genetically modified to age rapidly and mentally conditioned to be manipulated through some specific techniques. Using him as a trump

card in his war with Ryan, Fontaine brought him back to Rapture when the time was right, using his genetic compatibility to access the systems Ryan had locked out long ago.

Willing to accept death by his own free will, Ryan quotes one the quintessence of his principles: "A man chooses. A slave obeys", and asks Jack to kill him with the golf club using the sentence "would you kindly", making him irremediably compelled to do so. That makes Jack aware that such phrase preceded many of Atlas' commands as a hypnotic trigger, that forced him to blindly following the orders. Atlas reveals himself as Frank Fontaine, who used the alias to hide his identity so he could carry on with his dealings undisturbed.

Fontaine takes control over Rapture's systems and leaves Jack to die releasing a swarm of security drones, but he is saved by Tenenbaum, ashamed for her past actions, in a last attempt to redeem herself. Following her indications, Jack is able to get rid of Fontaine's conditioned responses, including one he activated as a last resort that was trying to stop his heart. We make our way to Fontaine's lair to face him. Finding himself cornered, Fontaine undergoes massive recombination using a large amount of ADAM and becoming an inhuman monster. In a strangely anticlimactic boss fight, Jack ends killing Fontaine by draining the substance from his body, assisted by the Little Sisters.



F43: Little Sisters terminating Fontaine

The final cinematic depends on the choices you made every time you found a Little Sister. If you spared them, Jack takes them back to the surface and they live a normal life. If you harvested them, Jack becomes the ruler of Rapture and his Splicers capture a nuclear submarine that had come across the plane wreckage.

6.3.2 The world

Environment

The whole story of *BioShock* is set in the year 1960, but besides affecting the aesthetic of the scenario it has no further influence. All the events take place in Rapture, a majestic city built on the seabed of an unlocalized zone of the Atlantic Ocean.

According to the creative director Ken Levine, many of the characters of Rapture were all people who were oppressed once before in their lives and now free of that oppression, turned around and become the oppressors. Moreover, Levine also said that Andrew Ryan and his city are inspired by John D. Rockefeller's story (Edge Staff, 2012).

When we arrive, we see what without a doubt is an unliveable and devastated space. Nevertheless, while we advance, we get hints of what was a mix of a utopia that rapidly turned into a dystopia. The game makes an excellent job of the use of environmental storytelling and there are collectable tapes with recorded audios of different people that contribute to paint the whole picture and make us understand the backstory of this site.

The streets of Rapture are loaded with speakers that are constantly bombarding its citizens with pre-recorded propagandistic messages, imposing dogmatically Ryan's ideals and spreading hate towards the surface and everyone not willing to obey him. There are also banners and signs with such ideals, but the work makes itself clear that in the end, everyone ended breaking this sort of rules, even the founder himself.



F44: Ryan's statue with Rapture's motto

A civilization under the sea

As a spectator, we receive the impression that Ryan's creation started being an alleged paradise. People from all around the world came to the place, seduced by his promises of glory, with the goal of forging a reputation and gaining a status without the bonds of the laws and the moral. This freedom is what allowed Frank Fontaine, the entrepreneur who created the plasmids, to amass power and influence.

No matter how filled with great minds a Rapture was, though, there would always be the need for someone to scrub the toilets. A chunk of the citizens who lived there had humble jobs, in an economic system and social environment that treated them very harshly, almost as if they were not human. Fontaine built Fontaine's Home for the Poor and gave them shelter and food, and channelled their rage against the wealthy class of the city provoking a civil war that brought an end to everything Andrew Ryan had created.

6.3.3 Gameplay mechanics

BioShock is a first-person shooter, so the main mechanic is using a plethora of weapons, each one with up to three different types of ammunition, and killing with them the waves of enemies we face on each level. This is combined with the introduction of plasmids, a varied magic system fuelled by the ADAM that allows us to handle each threat with very interesting interactions with the scenario or the entities it features.

The title takes also some touches of horror and stealth and implements elements from role-playing games. There is a crafting system for tools, gadgets or bullets, and we can hack turrets, cameras and drones through a minigame of the style of *PipeMania* (The Assembly Line, 1989). We are also given a camera with which we can investigate the enemies we confront so they become easier for us to fight.

The last relevant mechanic is the intrinsic moral compass, affected by each decision you make regarding the Little Sisters. They are the bearers of the ADAM, and the more you can obtain, the more you will improve your powers or strengthen your resistance. However, to get this precious essence you must first kill the Big Daddy that walks alongside each of them. The more interesting thing is that as long as you do not interact with them, Big Daddies are neutral, and they may even help you fight Splicers if they get on their way.

If the player kills one of them, they unlock access to his companion, and the game presents then the choice of rescuing the girl and sparing her life or harvesting and killing her to get a higher amount of ADAM. This enforces the rules of the game that say “it is best if I do what is best for me without consideration for others”, at the same time it makes us feel a cold detachment from the Little Sisters, making us embrace the social philosophy of the place. It is a choice about your character, a choice that is not about how you will play the game, but about who you will be as you play it.

From a picky perspective, nonetheless, the sole fact of attacking a Big Daddy is an act of greed, because they do not present a real danger and it means you just want to get the ADAM of his Little Sister. It is true that the campaign will be slightly more difficult if you do not get those genetic improvements, but can be beaten anyway. Whatever you choose, it will have its consequences.



F45: Player deciding the fate of a Little Sister

6.3.4 The message

BioShock is a fierce critique of savage liberalism, with Andrew Ryan as its standard-bearer. As Levine worked on the story, he started to incorporate the ideas of Ayn Rand, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, which shaped the outlines of the environment. He brought in the ideas of Objectivism that Rand primarily outlined in the book *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), that men should be driven by selfishness and not altruism, and used this to form the philosophy behind the city of Rapture. He considered the ideas quite absurd

and primed to be applied to an antagonist, relating it with his previous observations on Rockefeller and his writings (Edge Staff, 2012).

Andrew Ryan believes that “a man chooses and a slave obeys”, so in Rapture, you will become whoever you want as long as you work the hardest for it. If you want rights, you will have to earn them. For the ruler of the city, there are no human beings, only men and slaves. It does not matter the luck or the circumstances that brought created you. Rapture embodies the meritocracy and liberalism taken to its most extreme consequences. “[The game] says, rather explicitly, that the notion that rational self-interest is moral or good is a trap, and that the ‘power’ we derive from complete and unchecked freedom necessarily corrupts, and ultimately destroys us” (Hocking, 2007).

Throughout the title, we are constantly perceiving ridiculously exaggerated comparisons between the Man, the exemplary citizen of Rapture, and what Ryan calls “the Parasite”. A Man creates, invents, is self-sufficient and classy. A Parasite is a brute that worries about others’ opinions and believes and relies on the charity of a solidary society.



F46: Anti-Parasite propaganda

Listening to the audio diaries we are spectators of the evolutionary arc of Ryan and its personal project and his madness, which contribute to the overall message of the game. In the beginning, he was confident and trusted his ideals, accepting his small failures. But as time went by and he saw his power put at risk, he started making use of brute force. He nationalized part of the industries of Rapture, applied regulations to the rest and even privatized the forest of Arcadia, the lung of the city, implementing an entrance fee.

6.2.5 Reception from the audience

A recognised classic

Similar to what happened with *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, *BioShock* received universal acclaim on Metacritic⁸, with an average review score of 96 of 100 for PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. As of May 2021, it is still one of the highest-rated games on the website and has the Must-Play badge as well. Furthermore, it is considered for some people to be one of the first video games that proved they could be art (Suderman, 2016).

Reviews from the mainstream press, such as The Boston Globe, The Chicago Sun-Times, Los Angeles Times or The New York Times, praised the immersive qualities of the game and its political dimension. Overall, they described it as a beautiful, brutal, and disquieting computer game, one of the best in years. A redundant topic was the quality of the plot and the audio. They also highlighted 2K Games' ability to create an engaging and entertaining video game around the fiction and philosophy of Ayn Rand, a product that succeeds in making you think while you play.

Still, not everyone was as compliant as these newspapers. Some well-known developers pointed out some of the flaws of the title. The designer Jonathan Blow claimed that the "moral choice" the game offered to the player was faulty because, to him, it had no real impact on the game. That ultimately lead him to think that it was just a mechanic of no real importance (Boyer, 2007). The former LucasArts developer Clint Hocking coined the term "ludonarrative dissonance" in a noted essay he wrote where he claimed there was a discrepancy between the message of the story and the mechanics.

"Under the ludic contract, if I accept to adopt an Objectivist approach, I can harvest Little Sisters. If I reject that approach, I can rescue them. Under the story, if I reject an Objectivist approach, I can help Atlas and oppose Ryan, and if I choose to adopt an Objectivist approach – well too bad... I can stop playing the game, but that's about it" (Hocking, 2007).

An everlasting legacy

After the game's release, the 2007 Spike TV Video Game Awards selected *BioShock* as Game of the Year, Best Xbox 360 Game, and Best Original Score (Jenkins, 2007). The

⁸ See *BioShock* on [Metacritic](#).

game also won the Best Game of 2007 award at the BAFTAs, and the magazine GameInformer named BioShock its Game of the Year for 2007. The next year, it won the "Best Visual Art", "Best Writing", and "Best Audio" awards at the Game Developers Choice Awards (Thorsen and Sinclair, 2008).

Over the course of these last decade, *BioShock* has been included in several top video game lists of very influential mediums like Time, IGN or GamesRadar, where it occupies positions worthy of consideration. And that is for a reason: objectively talking, it is a work that, whether you enjoy playing it or not, has influenced greatly the video game industry and that has opened the doors for both the developers and the players to explore new ways of interacting with the medium.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Video games have always been political

As we have seen in the transmedia analysis, all media could be categorized as political, and even though in some cases that has provoked some problems with popular opinion, almost everyone has understood and accepted it. This is because we cannot simply extract politics from media: it affects our culture, our culture affects our society, and political views are a product of this society. Media is created by inhabitants that participate from this loop, so be it intentionally or unintentionally, they are going to express their views through the channels they have.

This is not a bad thing. We must take into account that many of the best creative works are the ones that leave us with something to think about, and those deal with political ideas. They present ethical questions or portray an idea of how they conceive our society. In this sense, games are unique in their ability to allow the audience to explore ideas, rather than having a writer or a designer expressing their ideas at you. However, we have also seen that this presents a conflict with the approach a lot of people have towards the entertainment media, and such conflict appears magnified in the field of video games.

7.1.1 An invasion of one's private space

We have explored the reasons behind this general discontent, and we found there are principally two. The first one is that a considerable group of people consumes video games, movies, books or other entertainment as a way of escaping the problems of our modern world, and they claim that when politics are interjected into these realms it ruins the entire experience. Besides, this goes hand in hand with the fact that currently, we have any kind of news outlet -that includes YouTubers and streamers- reporting how things should be according to them, which serves to enliven this discussion.

However, we believe that, as Stan Lee wrote to his readers, even though that the main objective of an entertainment product is for the customers to have a good time, not only is it possible to do it at the same time you are thinking about a specific problem but it can also be a greatly nourishing experience.

The other reason, and the most significant one, is a great portion of the gamers has grown up being the nerds, the weirdos. Now that video games have become a part of the popular culture and they should play adult games without being judged anymore, these players cannot enjoy them as much as they feel they could because the new releases are changing their bases. Hardcore gamers feel they are being pushed aside from what used to be their safe space, now invaded by the casual audience, and it is normal that people who have been marginalized get angry if they consider they are taken the videogames away.

7.1.2 The video game industry is growing and evolving

So far, we can comprehend why this sector of the community is so upset. Nevertheless, it is somewhat strange that the majority of the most recent polemics are principally related with inclusivity, with the fact that including women or minorities is a political act itself. A lot of times the argument points out only the fact that there are women or minorities instead of what is made with them. There is where we believe it lies the root of the problem. Instead, warlike games that put the western armies in the spotlight do not receive even a sliver of this criticism, yet they are considerably more propagandistic.

Classic video games tended to have white male protagonists, so now that some new characters do not fit in this standard some may consider them to be out of place. They resort to the argument that they are not historically accurate or that their gender, race or sexual orientation do not contribute to the story or the game itself, so why bother including them? Because these people exist, and they deserve to receive representation and be given visibility. The issue comes when introducing these characters means acknowledging how we have been contemplating the world until now.

Throughout the theoretical framework of this research, we have made an in-depth study about how video games have borne an ideological load since their beginnings, and how we can extract patterns that will reflect that from almost every game. Unfortunately, and similarly to what happened with Hollywood's manipulation of our conception about the Second World War, video games have cloaked our vision of the world. While playing, we have been acquiring political philosophies and internalizing ways of viewing the world, and it is only now that we are starting to confront our lifelong assumptions that we realize how ingrained they were in the back of our minds.

This is a really annoying realization, since observing problematic elements in something you love is painful. For example, if we return to the controversy with Mortal Kombat 11, it is very possible most of us considered it normal that those characters wore their ludicrous clothing, but now that they have changed it demonstrates that the former was sexist. We were accustomed to that because it coincides with what we believe or with what we were taught was the standard. If you accept this new perspective, you are going to start to see the sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia that consciously or unconsciously has been permeating our culture, and that is scary.

In the end, a video game is created with the aim of providing a pleasant experience to the player. If someone does not want to play a particular title because they disagree with its statements or they make them feel uncomfortable, they can ignore it, the market is enormous and new products are published every week. Notwithstanding, we believe it is the option of the coward. On the one hand, it is a completely respectable and valid position not to play a game if you consider its message or its background collide with your own ideology. On the other hand, putting aside a game you admire only because you refuse to open your mind and try to understand why the developers proceeded with specific decisions may turn out in a lost opportunity.

We should welcome works that spark discussion. It is okay to think that the politics expressed in a piece of media are great and show your support to them, or to think that they are heinous and fight them, but after having willfully undergone throughout the laid-out proposal and having formed a solid judgement. We are mature enough as a medium to explore those topics.

7.2 A double-edged sword

Video games not only invite people to let their guard down but also to wear different shoes, travel into other worlds or strange circumstances. They allow us to experiment with ideas and actions in a place where failure has almost no consequence, to take risks and have fun while doing so. They have an incredible ability to shift perspectives and challenge assumptions. Still, its strength as a tool for exploring who we are can also make it a powerful instrument for indoctrination.

One of the greatest aspects of video games is how they provide us with a choice. They allow us to believe we are in control, that we are picking and forging our own destinies. It is vital to let the players make choices rather than manipulating them with choices that are not really choices at all.

Of course, no game gives us truly unlimited decision-making, and many games only include an illusion of it. There are also games whose choices are carefully crafted to exist from a specific mindset or a specific outlook on life, that get you so absorbed in making these choices that you do not evaluate the perspective you are making these choices from. This happens in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, for example, where you are killing Russians and Arabs because they are in a war against your nations but you do not really know why aside from some brief and insufficient justification.

Game mechanics sometimes try to lead the player to a specific way of thinking. There is an incredibly high volume of video games that use Muslims as the default enemy. When our targets swapped from Nazis to middle eastern looking people, that almost certainly was not an intentional political statement by the designers of that moment, but those games depicted a shift in culture and a shift in politics at the same time they helped reinforcing them. Mechanically incentivizing actions in a game without thinking about what those actions mean can be really dangerous. That makes us ask ourselves how many times we have played a title and not questioned anything it offered.

The entertainment industry is a loudspeaker, which can be extremely beneficial or extremely detrimental for our society. Sadly, this loudspeaker has taught us several times the wrong version of history. That does not necessarily mean they are telling us a lie, but we cannot be sure to what extent are they really distorting reality. Perhaps if there was a strong video game industry in Russia or the Middle East things would be different.

Finally, we can reckon that this conclusion coincides with our initial hypothesis about this matter. Propaganda can be both harmful or beneficial depending on the motives of the developers or how invested and careful they are, doing a conscious game design.

7.3 Future investigations

Unfortunately, we have not been able to dig deep into some of the topics we laid out in the introduction, but we firmly believe they deserve further research. While we have

extended ourselves on the causes behind the ever-growing bickering and controversies and the effects of politics in the video game industry, we have neglected some other objectives we initially contemplated in our introduction. This is why we propose them as future investigations.

It would be interesting to inquire if video games use any tools or particular procedures to transmit a political message, and in case they do, investigate when they do succeed. We also believe it can be very interesting to give a glance to which video game genres could be more prone to be used for ideological propaganda because we think we would have to analyse some more examples if we want to exert a proper conclusion.

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